

Boardman Tasker Award for Mountain Literature 2019

JUDGEMENT 2019

Speech made by Roger Hubank, Chair of Judges 2019, on Friday 15th November 2019 at the Boardman Tasker Award for Mountain Literature event at Kendal Mountain Festival.

Some years ago Jim Perrin wrote a piece for *The New Welsh Review*. It contains a paragraph that might recommend itself to anyone who hopes to submit a book for the Boardman Tasker Award. This is what Jim wrote:

‘ If the writing life is the life you profess then you must be prepared to swim up whatever rat-infested culvert you’re required to navigate.’

Well, that’s the business. I have myself swum up some of those culverts. And been gnawed at by the rodents. And spat out. But now, unaccountably, I find myself cast as one of the rats. King Rat, in fact. But I will say one thing for the Boardman Tasker rats. We don’t go in for slush piles. And in case there’s anyone here who doesn’t know what that is, a slush pile is that heap of poor neglected books tossed out unloved, unread, by whoever makes the tea in some publisher’s back office. No! Everyone who climbs, or walks, or runs, or rides a bike, or camps in the hills is a member of our mountain community. Should they enter a book for the award, then that book is treated seriously and properly read... Then it’s thrown on the slush pile.

Now to business. This year we had 32 entries, slightly down on last year. As usual they came from a wide variety of sources: 16 from Britain, 11 from the United States, 3 from Canada, and 1 apiece from New Zealand and Italy. Three of these entries were ruled out for various reasons: Grant Farquar's *The White Cliff*, an excellent compilation relating to climbs on Gogarth, because it is multi-authored; Ben Tibbetts' *Alpenglow*, a lovely book of climbs on the 4000 metre peaks in the Alps, because it was considered to be essentially a photographic record, and Ilaria Tuti's novel, *Flowers over the Inferno*, which falls short of a crucial requirement for any submission for the Award - namely, that its central theme should be concerned with the mountain environment.

This brings me to the matter of the rules to which the judges are required to adhere.

The rubric states that the Award recognizes and rewards outstanding literature concerned with the mountain environment. And there is a rider – and I quote –

'..books which will in turn challenge and inspire their readers, perhaps to climb or explore the world of mountains, perhaps to write or perhaps to look at the world in a different way.'

My colleague, Katie Ives, suggested at the outset that what she was hoping for was 'something that would re-envision or reshape the genre

of mountain literature in some way, to take more creative risks, or to expand possibilities in some unexpected fashion'. It was a principle we were happy to adopt.

So now to the short-listed books. It wasn't easy. I think I may fairly say that our discussions took place in an atmosphere of – how shall I put it – 'profitable disagreement'. In the end though, we hammered out a final short list of six.

I shall take them, as usual, in alphabetical order.

First comes Mick Fowler's *No Easy Way*.

It's customary, in introducing them, to say something about the background of each of the writers. But Mick Fowler needs no introduction from me. *No Easy Way* is his third volume of mountaineering memoirs, and his publishers tell us that it's a best-seller. So I trust Mick's income tax inspector has taken note of that fact.

It's written in Fowler's inimitable style; self-deprecating, understated, never taking himself too seriously while at the same time conveying that what he is engaged in is very serious indeed. He knows how to win us over by revealing he can be just as incompetent as the rest of us - a rope badly coiled in the face of an approaching storm, the loops dropping off your shoulders as you hurry away - or jumaring with the

lengths of the slings wholly misjudged, and the sac pulling you backwards. Sometimes, though, his misadventures really are extreme: hanging in a crevasse, in snowshoes, ski poles dangling from your wrists, with the axes and crampons you desperately need still strapped to the back of your sac. Well, I thought - your move, Mick...

But that wasn't the worst of it. He goes on to describe, in the most graphic detail – no, I won't spoil it for you – what it really means for climbers to get themselves in the shit.

2. Now for something completely different.

Kate Harris is a Canadian who has won many awards for her travel writings and, in *Lands of Lost Borders*, she has produced a remarkable and compelling piece of work. Readers of mountain books of my generation were brought up on the great epics: the Germans and Austrians on Nanga Parbat, the French on Annapurna, the Americans on K2, the Brits on Everest. *Lands of Lost Borders*, which has nothing to do with the great 8000 metre peaks, nevertheless reads like an expedition epic. It offers a gripping account of a challenging journey, fraught with many difficulties and dangers, following the old Silk Road. Each day a plunge into the unknown. As one of my fellow judges said, 'the writing is suffused throughout with a sense of exuberance and joy in

the present moment, and illuminated with such keen-eyed observations that its images linger long in the reader's imagination'.

I myself was put in mind, again and again, of the question put by the great 19thC. explorer Sir Martin Conway:

'What truth is it lies behind those mountain walls that is a lie here in the world beyond ?'

Certainly '*Land of Lost Borders*' might very well, in the words of the rubric, 'challenge and inspire readers' to look at the world in a different way.' It's a truly life-affirming book.

Next comes Geoff Powter's *Inner Ranges*:

Geoff was for thirteen years editor of the Canadian Alpine Journal. *Inner Ranges* represents the work of a journalist who has kept a watchful eye over the mountain world and its various communities for many years. Geoff has won many National Magazine awards. He is also the recipient of a Jury Award at the Banff Mountain Book Festival where he regularly hosts interviews with celebrated mountaineers. I have myself heard him in relaxed and illuminating conversation with the late Royal Robbins.

Described as 'an anthology of mountain thought and mountain people' the collection is alive with insightful observations. It's of such continual

interest that one of my colleagues read the entire collection at a sitting. The prose adapts itself with great professional skill to whatever the subject might seem to allow, from sober truthful writing on serious matters - the senseless killing of wild horses, the commercial exploitation of Everest, the tragic death of a young couple, this last a piece offering a timely warning of the dangers of carbon monoxide poisoning within the closed confines of a tent or snow-hole. There are pieces on mountain education, and the training of guides, a richly comic account of an attempt on the Shield on El Capitan and a wildly extravagant and very funny evocation of the kind of 'Hard Man' bullshit many of us will be familiar with. Its breadth of subject matter, the standard of presentation and the assurance of the writing makes *Inner Ranges* a more than worthy candidate for our short list.

In turning now to David Smart's *Paul Preuss* I can't but remark that this has been a very good year for Canada, since David is the third Canadian to have a book on the short list. He's also the recipient, just two months ago, of the Banff Mountain Festival 'Summit of Excellent' award - a recognition to which I add my own congratulations. He's had a prolific career as climbing writer, publisher and editor - and indeed novelist. Last year he submitted a very readable novel, *Cinema Vertigo*, which I for one greatly enjoyed. This year he offers a

scholarly work on a great Austrian mountaineer of an earlier era. Paul Preuss was an outstanding practitioner of the very purest Alpine style. He rejected anything that smacked of any kind of aid. His on-sight solo ascents of the big rock walls in the Eastern Alps were way ahead of their time.

In tying together the various influences of the era – the rise of piton use, of technical rock climbing in Austria, the cultural movement of the Wandervogel, and the legacy of anti-Semitism (for Preuss was Jewish) - David Smart's book represents, in the words of one of my colleagues, 'a very valuable contribution to climbing history, as well as to ongoing debates..' For Paul Preuss fought to preserve something that he perceived to be in danger of vanishing: "If alpinism has a future', he wrote, '..then it lies, not in pitons and other aids, but in the *alpine* sport we uphold because we love it."

His struggle on behalf of a pure style of climbing foreshadowed the fierce controversies that dominate our next short-listed book, Jeff Smoot's *Hangdog Days*.

Jeff's book has a clear objective - to trace the evolutionary changes that were taking place in American rock climbing in the 1970s/80s. Though its concern is with climbing history '*Hangdog Days*' reads rather like an engaging novel, related to us by a first-person narrator. He's

rather like the narrator of 'The Great Gatsby', keeping a relatively low profile himself while remaining at the heart of the action. The 'Gatsby' character, who leads us through the 'story', is supplied by the irrepressible, hugely charismatic and immensely likeable Todd Skinner. We follow him through what Jeff calls 'that incomparable era of tricksters and traditionalists, great debates and bolt wars that erupted.. in a period of revolution against the traditional ideals of free climbing as a purist, moralistic pursuit.'

What Jeff chronicles for us is in fact the birth of 'sport climbing'.

The book is filled with splendid characters, from obnoxious Australians to cocky young Brits, from died-in-the-wool bottom-up traditionalists to top-down rap-bolters. Jeff Smoot brings them to life with great verve. At the same time he convinces even an aged former trad climber like myself how inevitable and necessary those changes had to be if young climbers of a different generation were to set new standards of difficulty. It's an immensely enjoyable book. Though the narrative ends, - and it's with regret that one begins to see it that will - as inevitably as did Gatsby himself.

Now we come to the sixth and last of our short listed entries, David Wilson's 'The Equilibrium Line'.

It's particularly welcome because it's the work of a poet. Born a Londoner, now seemingly a Yorkshireman by adoption, David Wilson has written short stories and a novel, but is now primarily a poet. In 2015 his poem *Everest* won the Poets and Players prize. A pamphlet, *Slope*, appeared the following year, and now we have his second collection, *The Equilibrium Line*. Some are what we might call, if it doesn't offend him, 'homage poems'. Celebrations of climbs and climbers. 'Praise for the power of names', as he puts it – Stanage, Cloggy, the Ben, the Buchaille, Snell's Field, the Bar Nationale, Mallory, Bonatti.. and so on.

But poetry also goes deep. It makes things accessible that lie beyond the range of most climbing books. A great writer, as it happens not a poet but a novelist, wrote in one of his Prefaces, 'My task by the power of the written word is to make you hear, to make you feel, it is above all to make you see.' That's what poetry does when it's working properly. And it's what David Wilson does. He makes us see. He puts us in touch with our own unique experience, concentrated in all its particularity. Take just a few lines from his poem 'Gritstone Solo, Sudden Rain'. There you are, on your own, with the hard move coming up;

“ Now the climb demands you be
the self you always sought.

Calm legs that want to tremble,
dry each shoe against your jeans,
then commit to one small edge,
your life balanced on its tip..'

Sometimes the words of a poem will point beyond themselves. They do so here, with a resonance that suggests there are more important things than mountaineering. For there comes a moment in the sombre seasons of every life when the hard move looms up. At such times we can only hope that we will measure up to it.

So there we are – our six hostages to Fortune. Any one of them might have won the prize. In the end though we were unanimous in choosing as the winner what is in our opinion a quite unique book . The Boardman Tasker award for 2019 goes to the author of *Lands of Lost Borders*, Kate Harris.

Roger Hubank