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'This is the sort of book that restores confidence in the travel genre. Erudite, full of information you didn't know you wanted to know, and charged with the author's singular passion for his subject' Robyn Davidson

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'A marvellous, distinguished book that jolted my heart. Adventurous, passionate and intensely romantic, it simply fizzes with insights into the sublime madness of mountaineering' Roger Deakin

'A magnificent book ... Macfarlane is a splendid writer about all this. *Mountains of the Mind* is a tumult of delights all the way' *New Scientist*

'Extremely elegant and compelling ... he potently conveys the hostile beauty of these places. This is a book which comes very much from the heart, and is informed throughout by Macfarlane's own passion, fastidiously refined ... it will be interesting to see which peak he tackles next' Tom Fort, *Sunday Telegraph*

'*Mountains of the Mind* is an imaginative, original essay in cultural history – a book that evokes as well as investigates the fear and wonder of 'high places' William Fiennes

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'The transformation of mountain landscapes in the European imagination was an astonishing reversal and that process has rarely been explored so effectively as Robert Macfarlane does. He performs for mountains the service Francis Spufford did for the polar region ... his commentary, always crisp and relevant, leavened by personal experience is beautifully related' Ed Douglas, *Observer*

'Just my type of book. A compelling meditation on what draws man to risk himself to be on top of empty, dangerous crags ... Robert Macfarlane is for me the perfect mountain guide through blue crevasse fields, ice walls, prayer flags, Sherpas and Shangri La. He's been up there, and come back down through the foothills to offer us his thoughtful and gracious elegy, telling us eloquently the secret of it all, which is that no one can ever truly conquer a mountain' Benedict Allen

MOUNTAINS OF THE MIND

A History of a Fascination

Robert Macfarlane

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dark that morning. There was no movement. It seemed an enormous basin of space and stillness into which, briefly, I wanted to dive.

Altitude has one effect which even the most fervent fan of the horizontal can't deny: you can see further. From the tops of mountains on the Scottish west coast you can look out towards the Atlantic and see the curvature of the earth, can watch the dark rim of the sea's horizon bending at either end. From the summit of Mount Elbrus in the Caucasus you can look into the Black Sea to your west and to your east into the Caspian Sea. From the top of a Swiss Alp you begin to discuss the world with an uncommon largesse – Italy is to my left, Switzerland to my right, France straight ahead. Your topographic units are suddenly countries instead of counties. Indeed, on a clear day, the only limits to how far you can see are the mechanical limits of your vision. Otherwise you are panoptic, satelitic, an all-seeing I: simultaneously thrilled and terrified by what Marshall McLuhan called the 'vast, swallowing distances of visual space'. And that is an unforgettable sensation.

Great height gives you greater vision: the view from the summit empowers you. But in a way, too, it obliterates you. Your sense of self is enhanced because of its extended capacity for sight, but it also comes under attack – is threatened with insignificance by the grand vistas of time and space which become apparent from a mountain-top. The traveller-explorer Andrew Wilson felt this keenly in the Himalaya in 1875:

At night, amid these vast mountains, surrounded by icy peaks, shining starlike and innumerable as the hosts of heaven, and looking up to the great orbs flaming in the unfathomable abysses of space, one realises the immensity of physical existence in an overpowering and almost painful manner. What am I? What are all these Tibetans compared with the long line

of gigantic mountains? And what the mountains and the whole solar system as compared with any group of great fixed stars?

This is the human paradox of altitude: that it both exalts the individual mind and erases it. Those who travel to mountain tops are half in love with themselves, and half in love with oblivion.



The adoration of the summit, which intensified over the eighteenth century, reached its peak in Europe in the early decades of the nineteenth. There is a painting from 1818 by the German Romantic artist Caspar David Friedrich, usually called *The Traveller above a Sea of Clouds*, which is now, thanks chiefly to the greetings-card industry, familiar to almost everyone. Friedrich's *Traveller* became, and has remained, the archetypal image of the mountain-climbing visionary, a figure ubiquitous in Romantic art. He now looks implausible to us, ridiculous even: the little rock hummocks protruding from the nimbus at his feet, his absurdly clichéd stature – one foot raised; a big-game hunter with his foot upon the cavernous ribcage of his dead beast. But as a crystallization of a concept – that standing atop a summit is to be admired, that it confers nobility on a person – Friedrich's painting has carried enormous symbolic power down the years in terms of Western self-perception.

Two years before Friedrich painted his archetype, John Keats started worrying that he was suffering from writer's block. He decided that altitude might relax his mind, and took to imagining himself at height when he wanted to write: a Romantic version of counting sheep to get to sleep. It worked – or at least it gave him a subject to write about:

I stood tiptoe upon a little hill,
 ... I gazed a while, and felt as light and free
 As though the fanning wings of Mercury
 Had played upon my heels: I was lighthearted
 And many pleasures to my vision started ...

Height, at least in its imaginary form, was the laxative which Keats's blocked mind thought it needed: the 'mountain-top' again proved to be a spiritual vantage-point as well as a physical one.* Shelley, too, was profoundly affected by the qualities of altitude. 'Wind, light, air,' he declared, 'stir violent emotions in me.' Air is the distinctive element of his poetry (as water is of Byron's). Vaporous and ethereal, his writing returns again and again to the 'upper air', to the 'keen sky-cleaving mountains', the 'érmine snow' and the 'cold sky' – his poetry sublimates itself into gaseousness, spirals exultantly up into nothing. On first looking up at the Alps in 1816, as he rode in along the Chamonix-Servoz road, Shelley was overwhelmed. His hands were fortunately not in charge of the reins, and he was free to goggle at the mountains. He described his reaction in a famous letter. 'I never knew – I never imagined what 'mountains were before,' he wrote. 'The immensity of these aerial summits excited, when they suddenly burst upon the sight, a *sentiment of extatic wonder, not unallied to madness.*'

It isn't hard, with the benefit of hindsight, to see why altitude was so attractive to Romantic artists such as Friedrich, Keats and Shelley. As a concept it coincided perfectly with the Romantic glorification of the individual. A summit was somewhere one could stand out –

* When Keats came to climb actual mountains, he found them not as amenable to inspiration. Of an attempted ascent of a Lake District peak in 1818, we have this account: 'I should, I think, [have got] to the summit, but unfortunately I was damped by slipping one leg into a squashy hole.' This is one of the more harmless disjunctions between mountains of the mind and real mountains.

could be outstanding. The mountain-top also provided an icon for the Romantic ideal of liberty: what could more obviously embody freedom and openness? 'Men are not made to be crowded together in ant-hills ... the more they congregate the more they corrupt each other,' Rousseau had noted, an observation which would gain in potency and relevance as urbanization increased over the course of the nineteenth century. Cities teemed with merchants and thieves, but the mountains! – the mountains were devoid of sin. The mountain-top became a ubiquitous symbol of emancipation for the city-bound spirit, a crystallization of the Romantic-pastoral desire to escape the atomized, socially dissolute city. You could be lonely in a city crowd, but you could find solitude on a mountain-top.

And of course it was upon a summit, in solitude, that the Romantic fondness for meditation could be both indulged and encouraged. Time and again in Romantic documents we find the traveller exclaiming at the inrush of lofty thoughts induced by height. 'What great spectacles fill the soul of the philosopher who is on top of a peak!' declared Pivry de Senancour in 1800. Horace-Bénédict de Saussure had been even more ecstatic two decades earlier: 'What language can reproduce the sensations and paint the ideas with which these great spectacles [mountains] fill the soul of the philosopher who is on top of a peak? He seems to dominate our globe, to discover the sources of its motion, and to recognise at least the principal agents that effect its revolutions.' Romanticism fused into the imagination of altitude a new element of attractiveness: that one was almost guaranteed enlightenment – spiritual or artistic epiphany – by getting high.* The mountain-top and the viewpoint became accepted sites of

* The last word on the creative power of the Alps should probably go to Wagner, who included alpenhorns in the score for *Tristan und Isolde*. '[The works] I conceived in that serene and glorious Switzerland, with my eyes on the beautiful gold-crowned mountains,' he bashfully declared after the first performance, 'are masterpieces, and nowhere else could I have conceived them.'

contemplation and creativity: places where you were brought to see further both physically and metaphysically. From the Victorian family eating their picnic on the North Downs and casting their eyes over London to the pioneering alpinist toiling upwards towards a virgin summit, all visitors to altitude were drawn in part by the conviction that they would be rewarded both with far sight and with insight: that mindscapes as well as landscapes would be revealed to them.



In 1836 Charles Darwin could claim with some confidence that 'Everyone must know the feeling of triumph and pride which a grand view from a height communicates to the mind.' What a change that was from Bishop Berkeley's displeasure at the 'horrible precipices' over which he passed in 1714. In little more than a century, height had come to connote a host of attractive characteristics. It equalled escape, it equalled solitude, it equalled spiritual and artistic epiphany. Height was also held to have physically hygienic properties: at altitude, the air was thought to be cleaner – and to be a cleanser. 'There is assuredly morality in the oxygen of the mountains,' announced John Tyndall in 1871. From the 1850s onwards, numerous high-altitude sanatoria were established in the European Alps, at which tubercular or asthmatic patients – among them Katherine Mansfield and Robert Louis Stevenson – resided, absorbing the mountain sunlight, breathing the mountain air and thrashing out big ideas over dinner. When my great-grandfather was diagnosed with chronic bronchitis, he was advised by his doctors to move to Switzerland. The air was no help; he died in 1934, and was buried in a mountain cemetery with a view of the peaks. But it was because of this that my grand-

father was brought up in Switzerland, and it was there that he contracted his love of the mountains, which I in turn would catch from him.

By the closing decades of the nineteenth century, the veneration of height was almost automatic. For those inhabitants of Europe who didn't care to run the risks of stepping on to a hillside, or couldn't afford to, the experience of being at height was available in a multitude of forms. Books of landscape photographs and engravings, expedition journals and knockdown editions of Romantic poetry all provided stay-at-homes with at least second-hand versions of the facts and the feelings about altitude. Following the lead of earlier continental mountain painters such as Salvator Rosa and Josse de Momper, nineteenth-century artists including Philippe de Loutherbourg, J. M. W. Turner, Alexander Cozens and John Martin filled their canvases with precipitous scenery, using distorted scales, unconventional viewpoints and disrupted horizons to unbalance their viewers and pull them into the vertiginous worlds of their images. At the Leicester Square Rotunda or the Panorama Strand in the 1820s and 1830s, spectators could wander in the darkened central circular platform, while around them for 360° stretched a multiple vanishing-point painting of the Mont Blanc massif – an 'alporama'. There for an hour or two they could fill their heads with the startling geometries of the mountainscape: the glint of snow and ice, and the black ribs of rock. The ambition of the alporama was hyperrealism, and it was successful – visitors had been known to experience acute disorientation, and even vertigo. And after the 1850s, what one passenger called the 'delightful velocity' of the railways hastened the return journey to Zermatt from sixty-six days to fourteen, and the entrepreneurship of one Thomas Cook – dubbed 'The Napoleon of Excursions' – brought the masses to see the Matterhorn: such a bracing shock after the low-altitude skylines of Britain's cities.

A common heritage of feeling was passed down through the generations and spread across a swathe of people. The difference between those who died on the mountains, those who took a Thomas Cook tour to the Alps and those who merely read about mountains or gazed at their representations was one of degree and not one of kind. All were susceptible to the spell of altitude, and all were part of its casting. There was a near-perfect marriage between the attention-seeking mountaineers and the ascension-seeking public. A new kind of altitude sickness had come to grip the common imagination, for so long antagonistic to the mountains: one in which the nausea came from *not* being at height. John Ruskin alluded to it when he confessed that in a totally flat landscape, he felt 'a kind of sickness and pain'.



In 1827 a young man named John Auldjo, fresh out of his degree at Cambridge and enthused by the descriptions he had heard about the Alps, arrived in Chamonix with the intention of becoming the seventh Briton to summit Mont Blanc. Soon after reaching the town, he was sought out by a local who had survived a badly fractured skull from rockfall on Mont Blanc in 1791. The old man pushed his dentured head close to Auldjo's face, and warned him not to attempt the ascent. Auldjo scoffed – though he did take the precaution of hiring six guides to ensure his safe passage up the mountain.

A battalion of guides could not have saved Auldjo from the afflictions he suffered on the mountain, however. Altitude sickness, hypothermia, snow-blindness and narcolepsy were visited upon him on the way up; heat-stroke, dyspepsia, loss of motor control and eventually total collapse were added to those ailments on the way back down. He made the summit, but it was due only

to the concerted efforts of his six guides that Auldjo survived. When Auldjo was at his hypothermic worst, and utterly incapable of movement, his guides huddled round him and heated him up using their own body warmth. Thus thawed, he was able to descend the final few hours of the mountain. He staggered back to a hero's welcome in Chamonix, spent two days recuperating, then bid a tearful farewell to his guides and set off for London.

On his return to England, Auldjo wrote up an account of his ascent which divided its time between describing his extreme suffering and describing the extreme beauty of the mountain. On the debit side, Auldjo noted manfully, the climb had been exceptionally arduous, and 'the cold excessive'. However, he declared, all in all his suffering had been worth it for the view from the summit of Mont Blanc had revealed to him scenes 'of dazzling brilliancy, too much almost for the eye to encounter and such as no powers of language could adequately portray'.

Concluding his story, Auldjo observed that 'perhaps will it not be decreed presumptuous in me to say that this brief narrative may be consulted with advantage by all those, who influenced by a congenial spirit of adventure, may be disposed to engage in a similar undertaking.' Presumptuous it certainly was not: Auldjo's mixture of derring-do and sublime sensibility proved popular, and his book sold very well. Not only did his account help to enhance the fascination of Mont Blanc in the public imagination, it also familiarized the idea that a view – that 'dazzling brilliancy' he had seen from the summit – might be worth risking one's life for. The number of summit attempts from Englishmen described a steep upwards curve in the years following 1828 – Auldjo's book had caught the imagination of the country.

Among those who read it was a young Londoner called Albert Smith, whose imagination was so inflamed by Auldjo's description that he was moved to travel to Chamonix himself and attempt the

mountain. In 1851 he climbed it successfully, and with considerably less discomfort than his hero, Auldjo. Smith's ascent, as we know, became the subject of his best-selling show, which opened in London in March 1853. News of the mountain also spread to America, and among those who read the account of Smith's ascent, and his theatrical descriptions of the incomparable view from the summit, was Henry Bean, who, on 5 September 1870, accompanied by his American friend Mr Randall, a Scots Reverend named George MacCorkendale, three porters and five guides, started his ascent of Mont Blanc.

It all began so well. After an easy climb in pristine weather, the group overnighted at the Cabin des Grands Mulets. Having set off again in warm sunlight the following morning, the group were observed from the telescopes of Chamonix to have reached the summit of the mountain at 2.30 p.m. and they turned immediately to begin their descent. Then, with a terrible swiftness, a thundercloud closed around them and they were lost from view.

Were we able, twenty-four hours later, to start off up the mountain and follow the path taken by Mr Bean and Mr Randall, we would leave the town of Chamonix and ascend steeply through the dense pine forests that texture the piedmont, over the ruptured ice of the Glacier des Pèlerins. Here we would enter the lower cloud of the storm which still wrapped the mountain, pass quickly and nervously beneath the echoey couloir of the Aiguille du Midi, which is sending down irregular fusillades of rockfall, and finally we would enter the blizzard which has enfolded the top of Mont Blanc, and which is so severe that once within it there is only whiteness in every direction.

And here, somewhere on the expressionless snowscapes of the Col du Dôme, we would find Mr Bean. He is hunched in a snow-hole that he and one of the porters have dug using their alpenstocks and their stiffened hands as shovels. Mr Bean is on the outside facing

inwards, barely grasping the stub of a pencil. His fingers are white and violet with frostbite, and rigid. His clothing is frozen into a herringbone-tweed carapace, which makes movement of any sort difficult. Leaning on the back of the porter, who is hunkered in the snow-hole with him, Mr Bean is writing a few words to his wife in a notebook that he has carried up the mountain. His pencil moves slowly and stiffly across the page. The *scratch scratch* of coarse lead on coarse paper is inaudible against the raving of the wind. He adds to the words he has already written:

TUESDAY, SEPT. 6. I have made the ascent of Mont Blanc, with ten persons – eight guides, and Mr. MacCorkendale and Mr. Randall. We reached the summit at half past 2. Immediately after quitting it, we were enveloped in clouds of snow. We passed the night in a grotto hollowed in the snow, which afforded us but poor shelter, and I was ill all night.

SEPT. 7 – MORNING. The cold is excessive. The snow falls heavily and without interruption. The guides take no rest.

EVENING. My Dear Hessie, we have been two days on Mont Blanc, in the midst of a terrible hurricane of snow, we have lost our way, and are in a hole scooped in the snow, at an altitude of 15,000 feet. I have no longer any hope of descending.

At this point Mr Bean's handwriting becomes larger, looper, less steady:

Perhaps this note-book will be found and sent to you. We have nothing to eat, my feet are already frozen, and I am exhausted; I have strength to write only a few words more. I have left means for C's education; I know you will employ them wisely.

I die with faith in God, and with loving thoughts of you.
Farewell to all. We shall meet again, in Heaven . . . I think of
you always.



What is both fascinating and macabre about this sequence of events is how clearly it allows us to see certain seductive, dangerous ideas about altitude being passed on from person to person – like the Black Spot in Robert Louis Stevenson's *Treasure Island* – until at last they result in tragedy. It illustrates how emotional attitudes about concepts as indeterminate as height, views and summits are transmitted. John Auldjo is stirred by the accounts he has read by others who have seen or scaled the Alps, and decides to climb Mont Blanc. His own narrative inspires Albert Smith to emulate the feat, and Smith by means of his celebrated Piccadilly Show inspires tens of thousands of people to see Mont Blanc first-hand. Among those influenced by Smith is Henry Bean, who is moved to leave his wife and embark on his awfully big adventure. Auldjo and Smith survive; Bean, MacCorkendale, Randall and their eight nameless helpers die. All of these men were attracted to the mountains by two intertwined ideas: first, the abstract notion that reaching the summit of a mountain was a worthwhile end in itself; and second, the belief that the view from a great height – the 'scenes of dazzling brilliancy' which Auldjo described – could be sufficiently beautiful to merit risking one's life to see it.

Like everybody else who has perished in the mountains – the Russian Buddhas frozen on the top of Pik Pobeda; the father and son whose memorial my grandfather walked past on his way to school – Bean was sent to his death by ways of feeling set in motion many years before his birth. Because in the ways we perceive and react to

forms of landscape we are prompted, primed and reminded by those who have gone before, no death in the mountains is isolated from historical circumstance. Although we might like to believe that our experience of altitude is utterly individual, each of us is in fact heir to a complex and largely invisible dynasty of feelings: we see through the eyes of innumerable and anonymous predecessors. The unexpected pleasures which Evelyn discovered at height; Friedrich's iconic image of the traveller on his rocky promontory; Shelley's aerial poetry; Auldjo's ecstatic vision from the top of Mont Blanc – all of these played a part in transforming the way altitude has been imagined. Now, at the start of the twenty-first century, the imagination of millions is susceptible to what the mountaineer and writer Joe Simpson calls the 'beckoning silence of great height': the inverted gravity of mountain-going – the attractive force that pulls you ever upwards.

