

## Mountain symbolism and geographical imaginations

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# review essay

## Mountain symbolism and geographical imaginations

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**Mountains of the mind: a history of a fascination.** By Robert Macfarlane. London: Granta Books. 2004. 306 pp. £8.99 paper. ISBN 1 86207 654 5.

**The artificial horizon: imagining the Blue Mountains.** By Martin Thomas. Melbourne: Melbourne University Press. 2004. 340 pp. AU\$49.95 cloth. ISBN 0 522 85072 3.

Mountains stand tall in the quest for understanding nature–society interactions. To study this mountain symbolism without a careful consideration of how mountain literature reflects and shapes geographical imaginations would only tell part of the story, much like evoking a tale of Sir Edmund Hillary without Tensing Norgay, or George Mallory without Andrew Irvine. *Mountains of the mind* and *The artificial horizon* embrace the mystique of mountains fervently, as they each quote liberally from epic tales of mountain lore.

Readers of *Mountains of the mind* also experience the vicarious thrill of armchair mountaineering – the next best thing to a personal alpine jaunt. Whether through Robert Macfarlane’s lyrical exposé of what sent Mallory and Irvine into the Everest death zone or tales of his own climbs in Britain, the Alps or the Tian Shan, *Mountains of the mind* synthesizes the experiences of numerous key individuals over the past four centuries who have helped shape the ways in which the nature of mountains has become intertwined with human imagination. Martin Thomas also offers a highly personal account of the inseparable myths and geographical imaginations of the Blue Mountains, a range familiar to Sydneysiders on the western horizon. The Blue Mountains are also an artificial horizon, since the sandstone plateaus were first conceptualized as mountains and then alternately re-imagined through discourses of

colonial, postcolonial and Aboriginal myths as barrier, gateway to riches, beauty or death.

Although both books can claim to be cultural surveys of mountainous landscapes that move fluidly between the past and present, neither author is a cultural geographer, and only a few geographical works appear in the sources. Macfarlane offers a highly readable, creative nonfiction narrative to tell the history of imagining mountains through the slow accumulation of geological knowledge, the study and allure of glaciers, the thrill of climbing and tempting death in the mountains. *Mountains of the mind* is, however, told solely from the perspective of Western civilization, as is evident when the story begins with Thomas Burnet in the 17th century. European mountain literature is the nearly exclusive focus as mountains are placed in the context of such evolving theories as catastrophism, uniformitarianism and Darwinism, but Macfarlane has a journalist's knack for making this 'intellectual warfare' easily comprehended. It helps that these mystic heights are brought to brilliant clarity with descriptions like the one of Everest as a gargantuan, tawdry Taj Mahal with its slopes studded with frozen corpses. Macfarlane makes only a few slight errors, as when Mexico's Popocatepetl is included in a list of Caucasian, Andean and Himalayan peaks (p. 16). Likewise, I am still trying to imagine how a lamp roars quietly (p. 21).

*The artificial horizon* is a more theoretical treatment than *Mountains of the mind*, with a reading of landscape and literature contextualized within colonial imperialism and its legacies. As Australia's postcolonial society still reaches toward the myth and reality of the Blue Mountains to satisfy desires for belonging, the tension in historic colonial-Aboriginal relations is manifest even today in Thomas's investigations of land tenure and Native rights. Eschewing any disciplinary code but trained in history and cultural studies, Thomas's volume will have some popular appeal due to its engaging metaphors and attractive reproduction of art and historical photographs, but it is a denser read than Macfarlane's. Yet Thomas also offers some engaging passages, such as his examination of the myth that China lay just beyond the Blue Mountains. The expedition across the range that dispelled this myth was, oddly, lost in the mists of time, and a later expedition was elevated in popular lore as the 'First Crossing'. And although *Mountains of the mind* carries the reader to mountains across Europe and Asia, *The artificial horizon* is able to lift a greater diversity of valuable voices to the light by probing deeply into a multicultural landscape with thousands of years of myth and history layered upon it.

Ultimately, then, it is not the theoretical context or scholarly tone of *The artificial horizon* that accounts for its lesser appeal when compared with *Mountains of the mind*. Rather, it is that the narrative style of *The artificial horizon* is modelled upon the labyrinth, an attempt to echo the deeply dissected terrain. But an erudite passage is often preceded or followed by sharp twists in Thomas's labyrinth, and the problem is that too many of these turns take the reader into dry, repetitive or otherwise confusing passages. We only need to read once, not twice, about the possible source of the mountainous blue haze (eucalyptus oil vapour) or about the snake and Aborigine symbolism in a painting of Wentworth Falls. Of course, there are bound to be some parallel notions in themes of fear, discovery, climbing and death. Even Macfarlane

awkwardly repeats the same Mallory quotation on pages 20 and 225, yet the key is not to get trapped in a cave of one's own making, as Thomas does in relating the story of Vere Gordon Childe's suicide in an interminable 60-plus pages. Although this mysterious death occurred in the Blue Mountains, mountains are not always central to the story; apparently, another landscape altogether could have been the setting for a study of the mystery of mortality. The illustrations of *The artificial horizon* greatly help to communicate the essence of the labyrinth, but Thomas is at his best when sticking to his understanding of the dreamwork of colonial imperialism in the Blue Mountains, especially when contextualized in Friedrich Nietzsche's ideas on the role of myth and reality in history.

In probing the cultural history and landscape of mountain symbolism and geographical imaginations, Macfarlane and Thomas find that the myths, images and imagining of mountains are inseparable in the same way that our responses to landscapes are predetermined by what we think of them. Cultural memory is never left behind, even when exploring a new land, and all landscapes are a product of myriad decisions, each mediated by place imagery. Macfarlane also offers a thoughtful treatise on why people climb, one that is much more satisfying than Mallory's infamous cliché, 'because it's there'. Mountains, whether sharp icy peaks rising into the heavens or knobs barely protruding above the horizon, have a hold over the human imagination. Mountains possess some people, including Macfarlane, Thomas and writers of mountain literature over the past 300 years.

A mixture of pride in achievement and fascination with oblivion is one hallmark of the evolution of mountain symbolism since the early 1700s. As Macfarlane notes, 'the qualities for which mountains were once reviled – steepness, desolation, perilousness – came to be numbered among their most prized aspects' (p. 18). But is this a new idea in mountain symbolism literature? Nearly 50 years ago, Marjorie Hope Nicolson, a professor of English, produced a seminal work of mountain symbolism in which she traced "the development of the aesthetics of the infinite" through the intersection of science and literature in the era of romanticism.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, the basic premise in the evolving geographical imaginations of mountains in *Mountains of the mind* and *The artificial horizon* is aptly captured by Nicolson's examination of the shift from 'mountain gloom' to 'mountain glory'.

Macfarlane and Thomas have, though, added both substance and style to the study of mountain symbolism. The personal narrative and examination of recent mountain images by both authors builds upon Nicolson's work and expands the concept of how mountains become central to cultural memory. Macfarlane updates the connections between mountain literature and science that Nicolson begins, and he adds mountaineering literature to the mix. And while the British have exerted an influence on mountain exploration, adventuring, tourism and climbing that is disproportionate to their numbers and the topography of their native landscape, Thomas departs from Macfarlane and Nicolson with his realization that the non-Western world likely views even the same elevations at the same time in ways distinct from that of Western Europe. Both authors place more value on the interpretation of art than did Nicolson, yet I wish

more of the photographs in *Mountains of the mind* had captions and that the excellent colour plates in *The artificial horizon* were referenced by number in the text.

Both authors also provide continuity with Nicolson's study of mountain symbolism by focusing on the interplay of death, myth and meaning in landscape. The prospect and reality of death in mountains is inescapable, but not unique in the symbolism of landscapes, as Niagara Falls illustrates.<sup>2</sup> A common theme in the cultural reaction to nature is a sense of fear at the expansive unknown, the great void stretching beyond human knowledge and into human imagination.

Studies of mountain symbolism like the ones reviewed here are a reminder that in cultural geographical studies of nature we disregard time and landscape at our peril, for the attitudes toward mountains are as complex and evolving as the landscape itself. Tempting as it is to think that the summit cone symbolizes the mountain, for example, the meaning and myth of mountains actually goes far deeper and broader than the immediately visible peak. Each mountain massif is better conceptualized as its own region, complete with a character that comes not only from its height but also from snow, ice, wind, geological history and composition, topography, flora, fauna, human occupation and imagination. It is this sort of complexity that leads humans to envision ideal mountains.<sup>3</sup> *Mountains of the mind* and *The artificial horizon* illustrate the multiple layers of meaning that accrue to mountain landscapes, from something as simple as the mountaintop sighting of a snow hare during a blizzard or as complex as the contrasting perceptions of mountain sounds heard by Aborigines and colonizers.

Macfarlane and Thomas do not provide any universal models of mountain symbolism in their exploration of crags and crevasses, high peaks and caves, and summiting and death, but in the ways that their mountain perspectives differ they remind us that place matters. An Australian can, of course, relate to the geographical imaginations of mountains presented in *Mountains of the mind*, yet Thomas could no more ignore colonial imperialism and the Aboriginal world-view than Macfarlane could ignore his youth in the Scottish Highlands. A study of mountain symbolism in China would likely probe greater depths of time than the European view, as well as including symbols of karstic landscapes. The centuries-old traverses of the Alps compared to the more recent challenges of mountain transportation in Australia or America make the theme of mountains as barrier more significant in New World mountain literature. Studies of American mountain symbolism must also consider the strong influence of indigenous geographies and the intertwined images of rivers and mountains, as does *The artificial horizon*, as well as the role of government protection of mountainous lands – particularly as national parks, since these are central to shaping the ideals of American heights.<sup>4</sup>

In cultural studies of mountains what is most needed now is not just a history of who climbed what and how and when, but of what cultural constructs motivated, sustained and valued these efforts to such a degree that some people go into the mountains willing to end life on that terrain. In such a study a cultural geographer would be more likely than Macfarlane to examine the role of class, race, ethnicity, identity or gender. Even if we could assume certain universalities, like the allure of standing on top of a mountain (which is not an absolute), the geographical imaginations of mountains have

different dimensions for those unable to climb, or even armchair mountaineer, because of lesser income, occupational demands or another stricture of body or society. Also, those of similar income and background are likely to react somewhat differently to similar stimuli; thus individual experience and agency must be privileged as much as culture in studies of mountain symbolism.

Why are there not more books like these? Pondering that leads one to ask, why do most cultural geographers look more toward the material landscape and cultural processes than to the ties between culture and environment? Why is there little dialogue today between cultural geographers and geomorphologists or other physical scientists? These books do not address how the answers to these questions have critical underpinnings in the turn of geography away from environmental studies in the wake of shedding environmental determinism, and in how culture traits are the recent mainstays in cultural geography. They do, however, point to the promise of a cultural geographical perspective on the physical landscape – it can be engaging, illuminating and popular, as witnessed by *Mountains of the mind*. Macfarlane often re-tells what is already known, but it also sounds familiar because the Western cultural mindset toward mountains is explained so well. By infusing personal experience into a fluid yet deeply informed narrative, the mountain symbolism product can please scholars and laypersons alike. If this type of writing is a new genre, as one commentator gushes in a publicity blurb for Macfarlane's book, then it is one that cultural geographers should recognize and enliven, blending as it does science, humanities and the fruits of personal fieldwork into a literary illumination of geographical imaginations.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> M.H. Nicolson, *Mountain gloom and mountain glory: the development of the aesthetics of the infinite* (Ithaca, NY, Cornell University, 1959).
- <sup>2</sup> P. McGreevy, *Imagining Niagara: the meaning and making of Niagara Falls* (Amherst, University of Massachusetts Press, 1994).
- <sup>3</sup> L.W. Price, 'Images of mountains: a search for the ideal', *Yearbook of the Association of Pacific Coast Geographers* 48 (1986), pp. 7–40.
- <sup>4</sup> W. Wyckoff and L.M. Dilsaver, *The mountainous west: explorations in historical geography* (Lincoln, University of Nebraska Press, 1995).