

**Simon Bainbridge, *Mountaineering and British Romanticism: The Literary Cultures of Climbing, 1770-1836*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020. Pp. xiii + 300. £60. ISBN 9780198857891.**

In this informative and original study, Simon Bainbridge reminds us that the word ‘mountaineering’ used to describe a recreational pastime was coined by S.T. Coleridge in 1802. Challenging the view that locates the rise of British mountaineering in the Victorian period, Bainbridge convincingly demonstrates that major romantic writers like William and Dorothy Wordsworth, Coleridge, Ann Radcliffe, John Keats, Lord Byron and Walter Scott were all central to its invention. Given the currency of mountains in Romantic literature, this is perhaps hardly surprising – all students of Romanticism are familiar with the mountain aesthetics of ‘vision, insight, elevation, revelation, transcendence, and the sublime’ (1). But Bainbridge is keen to qualify the exclusive connection of mountaineering with vision and imagination, by underlining the ‘role of embodiment and movement in the creation of Romantic-period texts’ (1). In particular, he argues that the physically exacting practice of ‘climbing’, alluded to in the book’s subtitle, ‘enacts an extreme version of the hands-on engagement with the material world’ (134), although climbing does not always equate with ‘mountaineering’, as in chapter 8, where Scott’s usages more often refer to scaling coastal cliffs rather than mountain crags. As Bainbridge demonstrates, nearly all of Britain’s mountain summits could be ‘conquered’ without doing any climbing at all: some even on horseback, as demonstrated by Ann Radcliffe, whose ‘account of her ride up Skiddaw derives from its presentation of a British fell ascent as if it were an Alpine mountain experience of the sort that Radcliffe herself had described in her Gothic novels’ (207). Complicating Marlon Ross’s linkage of romantic mountaineering with performative masculinity, Bainbridge dedicates a whole chapter to women mountaineers, showing that ‘women participated keenly in the climbing of British mountains from as early as the 1770s’ (200), well exemplified by Radcliffe’s ascent of Skiddaw.

A decade in the making, this book resonates with the author’s personal passion for mountains, a feature shared with Robert Macfarlane’s *Mountains of the Mind* (2003): both are seminal contributions to what Paul Gilchrist denominates as ‘a vibrant and vital strand of research currently being conducted on the cultures and practices of mountain climbing’ (10). Yet impressively, Bainbridge deploys his expertise on the current scene to illustrate the very different romantic culture of recreational ‘mountaineering’, respectful of historical contrasts as well as continuities (for example, the excellent discussion of the role of the mountain guide in chapter 6, a figure who has virtually vanished, at least from Britain’s mountains today). There is an irony though that the core texts of Romantic mountaineering by Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Keats discussed here were hardly known (if they were known at all) during the romantic period itself.

Bainbridge’s thoughtful study of these texts in relation to the aesthetics of viewing, sublimity and embodiment are a major addition to the considerable secondary literature on romanticism, even if the discussions of Byron and Scott are perhaps less persuasive. Impressively, the book engages with a copious body of lesser-known mountaineering literature from the period, mainly contained in travel accounts, either published or in manuscript. Highlights include the first chapter’s focus on the ‘pre-recreational’ writings of Horace Bénédict de Saussure in the Alps and Thomas Pennant in Wales (*Journey to Snowdon* was published in 1781, as the second volume of his *Tour in Wales*, and is shown to have had an enormous influence on the subsequent literature of mountain ascent, including Wordsworth’s *Prelude*). Chapter 2 presents case studies of three ‘inventors of mountaineering’: Joseph Budworth, William Bingley, and the egregious John MacCulloch, Scotland’s first ‘peak bagger’, who certainly justifies Ross’s remarks about performative masculinity and an imperialising discourse of conquest. In chapter 7, it is instructive to learn that Radcliffe’s

chapter 'Skiddaw' from her *Observations during a Tour to the Lakes* (1795) was 'one of the best-known ascent narratives in the Romantic period, perhaps second only to Rousseau's Letter XXIII in *Julie*' (206); other popular works in this genre were John Stoddart's *Local Scenery and Manners of Scotland* (1801) and Thomas Wilkinson's *Tours to the British Mountains* (1824). Apart from a brief excursion to the Alps, Bainbridge's focus is on North Wales, the English Lakes and the Scottish Highlands. Although this is already a long book packed with examples, it would have been interesting to consider the fascination with more exotic peaks in an age of exploration and empire: for example, Alexander von Humboldt's high-altitude ascents of Pico del Teide in Tenerife and Chimborazo in Ecuador, or James Baillie Fraser's *Tour through...the Himālā Mountains* (1820). The latter in particular resonates with Bainbridge's conclusion to this excellent book, George Mallory's quotation from Keats's 'Bright Star' in evoking Mount Everest, seen during his Himalayan expedition of 1921: "in lone splendour hung aloft the night", a watcher of all the nights, diffusing, it seemed universally, an exalted radiance' (274).

*Nigel Leask*  
*University of Glasgow*