Peter L. Bayers. ***Imperial Ascent: Mountaineering, Masculinity, and Empire.*** Boulder: University Press of Colorado, 2003. 174p.

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Peter L. Bayers' *Imperial Ascent: Mountaineering, Masculinity, and Empire* is a critically provocative and historically informative, if somewhat inappositely presented book that undertakes to analyze how mountaineering expeditions and accounts of mountaineering expeditions have been used to define, promote, and challenge certain characterizations of the imperial and the masculine. The book's title seems to suggest a broader geopolitical and theoretical compass than such a slim volume—a mere 141 pages of text—can comprehend; the text engages critically significant issues that merit more extensive treatment. Bayers' primary topic is mountaineering and while he does contribute significantly to the theorizing of mountaineering-in-general, the scope of his discussion is actually quite circumscribed. He addresses in his book only half a dozen mountaineering expeditions to only two mountains, Mount McKinley and Mount Everest. The "empires" Bayers has in mind are the British and United States empires of the twentieth century. Bayers' discussion reaches into masculinity studies, and into globalization studies and ecocriticism as well, but his dominant theoretical interest is in calling the institution of mountaineering to account from postcolonial cultural studies perspectives. He draws upon a general familiarity with postcolonial theoretical texts, citing in his discussion the works of such critics, for example, as Bill Ashcroft, Homi Bhabha, Terry Eagleton, Paul Fussell, Fredric Jameson, Alan Lawson, Edward Said, and Chris Tiffin.

Bayers' basic argument is that during the twentieth century, mountaineering expeditions directed at climbing Mount McKinley in Alaska and Mount Everest on the Nepal/Tibet border were appropriated by popular forces in the United States and Great Britain that were eager to promote nationalistic and imperialist ideologies and activities. Climbers' conquests of mountains were custom-made to represent and propagandize for broader geopolitical and cultural conquests by American and British proponents of imperial ideologies. Bayers further argues that mountain climbers depict themselves or lend themselves to being depicted as masculine heroes, powerful, competent, brave, strong, self-sacrificing, undaunted in the face of danger, eager to master the unknown. These same "masculine" characteristics, Bayers points out, prove useful for sustaining efforts at imperial conquest and colonial appropriation. Bayers is clearly disapproving of the conscription of mountaineering expeditions and accounts of mountaineering exploits to

advance imperial aims. Although he is intrigued by mountaineering and although he admits to being a climber himself, Bayers regrets that the climbing of remote mountains must exact a toll on the natural environment and on the indigenous peoples and cultures of mountainous regions.

In support of his historical analysis and theoretical arguments about the cultural impact of mountaineering, Bayers pursues readings, at times very close readings, of seven classic mountaineering accounts. The strength of Bayers' work is in his selection and analysis of these mountaineering accounts. He discusses Frederick Cook's 1908 *To the Top of the Continent*, Belmore Browne's 1913 *The Conquest of Mount McKinley*, and Hudson Struck's 1914 *The Ascent of Denali*, all three of which are concerned with the climbing of Alaska's Mount McKinley. Bayers also considers four books which chronicle the climbing of Mount Everest: Sir Francis Younghusband's 1926 *The Epic of Mount Everest*, Sir John Hunt's 1953 *The Ascent of Everest*, Tenzing Norgay's 1955 autobiography *Tiger of the Snows*, and John Krakauer's 1997 *Into Thin Air*. Bayers devotes a chapter of *Imperial Ascent* to each of these classic books and he does an effective job of analyzing the individual texts and of showing how subsequent mountaineering accounts may challenge their precursors with regard to their justification or questioning of imperial enterprises.

Some elements of *Imperial Ascent* may not have been as well considered as they should have been. Bayers restricts his attention to the mountaineering histories of two mountains, to which he refers a number of times as "Everest and Denali." Bayers explains that the highest mountain on earth, which lies on the border between Nepal and Tibet, was named "Everest" in 1865 by the British, despite the fact that Tibetans and Sherpas of the region denominate the peak "Chomolungma or Sagarmatha." He further explains that the highest peak in North America was named "McKinley" in 1896 by the United States, despite the fact that "'Denali,' among other Native names, had long been established as its name by Tanana-speaking Alaska Natives" (6). And Bayers insists that the "naming of these spaces was a powerful gesture that effectively usurped the mountains from the indigenous populations" (6). Should Bayers, concerned as he intends to be with issues of imperialism and postcoloniality, denominate the two mountains "Everest and Denali"? As a matter of principle, he might refer for example to "Chomolungma and Denali," rather than splitting the difference between indigenous and colonial nomenclature.

To study American imperial enterprise, Bayers investigates the history of the conquest of Alaska's Mount McKinley, which was climbed by a series of United States citizens at a time when Alaska was a territory of the United States. As a study of British colonial enterprise, Bayers discusses the climbing of Mount Everest by

Sir Edmund Hillary, a New Zealander, Tenzing Norgay, a Nepali, and John Krakauer, an American. Mount Everest, which straddles the border between Nepal and Tibet, has never been a British colonial possession. Bayers argues nevertheless that Everest should be viewed as an "aesthetic" part of the British Empire. Are the British and American imperial situations Bayers generalizes from parallel, as he assumes?

Masculinity, in Bayers' analyses, often appears to be essentially a function of being on top. Mountains are feminized when male climbers surmount them. Native peoples are feminized when they are portrayed as being physically, ethically, intellectually, technologically, and culturally inferior to imperial mountaineers. Climbers are feminized when superior climbers outperform them in mastering the slopes or in writing on the printed page. Is this concept of masculinity adequate to sustain a successful critical analysis of mountaineering and its relation to empire?

As such questions suggest, Bayers' *Imperial Ascent* is a thought provoking and revealing tentative analysis of mountaineering's relation to empire and the masculine. The book may be regarded as a reconnoiter that should excite further productive exploration of a challenging critical terrain. ❋