



History repeating itself?

First Briton to climb Everest without oxygen, president of the Alpine Club in its anniversary year and now a history of mountaineering to his name – just don’t ask Stephen Venables what he’ll do next, as **Ed Douglas** discovered.

“Those who have failed on Everest are unanimous in one thing: the relief of not having to go on. The last 1,000 feet of Everest are not for mere flesh and blood.” That was F. S. Smythe’s view, after coming close to the summit in 1933. The effort left his body exhausted and his mind shredded. Descending alone, he found himself offering mint cake to an imaginary friend. Later, Smythe saw two strange shapes pulsing in the sky, a vision embraced by UFO enthusiasts down the years but memorably swatted aside by Raymond Greene as “Frank’s pulsating teapots”.

Smythe makes a number of appearances in Stephen Venables’ new book, *First Ascent*, a colourful and impressionistic sprint through the history of mountaineering. But it would be fun to see the tables turned, to see what Smythe or even Greene would make of the modern incarnation of a leading British mountaineer. I suspect they’d regard Venables, who reached the summit without oxygen in 1988 after climbing a new route on the mountain’s East Face, as the sort of ‘flesh and blood’ they would recognise.

Almost every profile on Venables mentions his background: educated at Charterhouse, where George Mallory taught, and New College, Oxford; the early job at Glyndebourne; the distracted, donnish air. He must get bored of being typecast in this way, but it’s hard to resist comparisons. There’s the rich hinterland, the music, the gardening, passions Smythe shared. Both men lean towards the spiritual, although Smythe was often accused of sentimentality by his contemporaries.

Smythe is also described as the first professional mountaineer, publishing a couple of dozen books before his untimely death from a combination of malaria and food poisoning, aged just 48. (He hasn’t lasted as well as Eric Shipton or H. W. Tilman, and he doesn’t have the gossipy charm of Greene’s classic *Moments of Being*, but a useful compendium of the Alpine and Himalayan books was reissued a few years ago by Bâton Wicks.)

First Ascent is Venables’ twelfth book and like many of Smythe’s, it is designed to catch the eye of the general enthusiast rather than the hardcore

history buff. (If you want the latter, then I’m afraid there is only meagre fare in Britain these days; the best work appears on the Continent, by writers like Rainer Rettner. One day we’ll wake up to this.) But there the comparisons should end. Venables has a wry sense of humour, and is less self-absorbed than Smythe. And for a professional mountaineer, Venables can be engagingly mocking about both himself and the project.

With *First Ascent*, he could, he says, have concentrated on a series of mountains, as he did when picking up Andy Fanshawe’s project, *Himalaya Alpine-Style*, after Fanshawe’s death in 1992. “But it suited my style more to make it linear and discursive,” he tells me. “Also, I decided not to limit myself to the first ascents of big mountains. A hundred-foot rock climb can be just as interesting and often, if we’re honest with ourselves, a lot more enjoyable. So I decided to embrace the whole gamut.”

But like *Himalaya Alpine-Style*, which quickly became a cultish and deeply influential success, there was a campaigning edge to his approach. “I was keen to focus not just on what you get up but also how you get up it, the quality of the journey. I touch on first free ascents and mention people like Livesey; first ascents of sea cliffs by climbers like Fowler and Littlejohn; and first free ascents of the Nose. It’s how they’re done that makes them valuable.”

Venables may appear pukka but can be delightfully subversive. Hence the opening to a chapter titled ‘The Golden Age of Alpine Climbing’. “Brits invented most things, including mountaineering,” he begins, before an amused swipe at our complacency. “Or so we like to think.” Of course, he points out, the Swiss were climbing mountains, like the Jungfrau, decades before the Alpine Club was formed. “We were clearly a strong force in the development of mountaineering, but we weren’t the only ones doing it,” he says.

Similarly, he quotes the sixteenth-century physician Konrad Gesner, who wrote: “The soul is strangely rapt with these astonishing heights.” So much for the paradigm, recently restated in Robert



▲ Stephen Venables.
Photo: Joe McGorty.

◆ “Take a matchstick. Change it into Dolerite. Multiply it 1,600 times. Stand it upright in a heavy swell, then swim away before it topples over.” John Ewbank’s description of Tasmania’s Totem Pole. He made the first ascent, using artificial aid, in 1968. Here Steve Monks and Simon Mentz make the first free ascent, by a new route. Photo: Simon Carter/Onsight Photography. Image courtesy of First Ascent / Cassell Illustrated.



▲ Photo courtesy of *First Ascent* / Cassell Illustrated.

Macfarlane’s best-seller *Mountains of the Mind*, that an appreciation of the Alps only emerged with Romanticism.

When I suggest that he enjoys undermining the edifice, he says with wry self-deprecation, “Well, how many potted histories of mountaineering have there been? You’ve got to try and add some sparkle.” There’s plenty of that in *First Ascent*, and he is catholic enough in his tastes to include most forms of our increasingly diverse game, from bouldering to deep-water soloing, finishing with the electrifying ascent by Steve House and Vince Anderson of Nanga Parbat’s Rupal Face.

He is rather let down by some tooth-sucking-bad proofreading: Nick Clench, for Nick Clinch, is one heading; Ankar for Anker is another. And the monks at St Catherine’s in the Sinai might be shocked to discover that they now live in a convent. (Or perhaps not. I was once nearly run over outside St Catherine’s by a monk racing off in a jeep, mirror shades

clamped over his eyes and a fag on. He had the air of a man who had seen much.)

If the book is largely what the French might dub an Anglo-Saxon take on world mountaineering, it is far from chauvinistic. There’s plenty of eastern European flavouring, and more than a pinch from the Continent. I was miffed to see no mention of Voytek Kurtyka, or even Jerzy Kukuczka, who did almost all 14 8,000ers either as new routes or first winter ascents. But as Venables says, it’s not supposed to be definitive, just exemplary.

“It’s a bit of a lucky dip,” he tells me. “It’s aimed at a broad market, but you hope that climbers will find something that resonates. There was an element of messianic preaching to the masses about what this climbing is all about. We’re up against so much publicity about things which have very little to do with mountaineering.”

If you take from that Venables has a dim view of the modern obsession with celebrity, and wants nothing to do with it, you might be surprised. For a start, he is not unknown to the television community, and when I ask him about whether he’d like to join the current crop of TV adventurers, there’s no sharp intake of breath. Far from it... “No such luck,” he grumbles. I’m amazed. He really wants all that?

“Yes, because television guarantees an income. It sells books. But you have to make a big sacrifice in terms of personal control. You become a stooge for some quite powerful manipulators. These days no one has heard of our best mountaineers. They’ve heard of our television performers.”

Being a snob, I ask without thinking: “Does that matter?”

“I think it’s a shame that talented people aren’t recognised,” Venables says, and then with a nod to his self-employed insecurities: “It’s the earning power that comes with that.”

He has a high regard for Mick Conefrey, having worked on his series Mountain Men. “Those were a joy to work on. I’m always looking and pushing for ways to do more of that kind of thing.” But I rather suspect that in Tarquin-land he falls between two stools, the overtly literary shtick of a Macfarlane, where his excellent climbing record might actually get in the way, and yet too clever for the adrenaline set, the egregious world of the chest-thumpers and willy-wavers.

Which is a pity, because Venables is a great public communicator. Some years ago Jim Perrin described Chris Bonington as the public face of mountaineering, someone who had authority within the climbing community and the profile to be heard in the wider world. Venables seems a natural to inherit that mantle, although he responds modestly to the notion, perhaps unsurprisingly.

“I have neither Chris’s climbing record, nor do I work as hard as he does,” Venables says quietly. “Nor have I had his level of exposure. I’ve never been that single-minded. If you think what he achieved

in so many different fields of mountaineering.” Nevertheless, the Alpine Club instinctively turned to Venables to be president for its 150th anniversary last year.

“My dread was meetings,” Venables says, when I ask if he had any misgivings. “My hope was to set the record for the shortest ever committee meeting. But it was a great honour to take it on during the anniversary. I had hoped we might have a few more high profile expeditions or big climbs but we did have some jolly parties. Zermatt was a great success.”

The most thrilling moment, he adds, was when Walter Bonatti agreed to come. “Someone said afterwards that Walter was rather dreading it and was there out of a sense of duty but it turned out that he enjoyed himself enormously.” He is conscious, however, that the world’s oldest mountaineering club is looking its age just now.

“The great thing would be to treble or quadruple the membership, because that would give us more money to do things with.” But he found his own enthusiasm tempered by the volunteer’s perennial handicap: lack of time. “The reality is that unless you have a private income, or you’re retired, or you don’t need to sleep, or have colossal energy, you don’t have time to do all that stuff.”

He has in the past had quite radical views about reforming the Alpine Club. In 1988, when the club left its digs in Mayfair, he was keen to move north. “The idea was squashed. London is a wonderful city, and there’s a lot to be said for having a national club in the capital.” But Hoxton, he points out, despite its cool, is a hard place to get to unless you live in Essex.

Still, he’s lukewarm on the move north now. “The club relies heavily on volunteers, and there are these amazing people who put in vast numbers of hours maintaining the place and keeping it all going. If you suddenly upped-sticks you run the huge risk that all your volunteers have disappeared.” And while Venables was interested in examining the proposed co-operation with the BMC on sharing premises, he seems relieved that the project is now on a very chilly backburner.

When I ask him what he’s doing next, he groans. It’s a question he dreads. Now finished with the Alpine Club he has returned to the curious life of a professional adventurer, selling a kind of freedom, meeting deadlines in a world marketed on spontaneity. The contradictions are obvious. “If you want people to read your books they don’t want this-is-where-I-put-the-peg-in talk. On the other hand, I do get very depressed with the whole disaster, death and suffering thing. All that ignores the fact that mountaineering is a wonderfully joyful experience and tremendous fun.”

First Ascent, By Stephen Venables
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▲ Stephanie Bodet leading pitch 4 of Surveiller et Punir – one of the classic modern routes in the Verdon Gorge, Provence. Photo: Simon Carter/Onsight Photography. Image courtesy of *First Ascent* / Cassell Illustrated.

