

**Mountains Figured and Disfigured  
in the English-Speaking World**



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Edited by

Françoise Besson

**CAMBRIDGE**  
**SCHOLARS**  

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**P U B L I S H I N G**

Mountains Figured and Disfigured in the English-Speaking World,  
Edited by Françoise Besson

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*To my parents and grandparents who showed me the beauty of mountains, the wonder of a bird song and of a flower on the paths of stone and dust.*

*To my mother whose steps are printed in the Pyrenean paths, and who showed me the life of wild mountains, who introduced me to English mountaineers, travellers and artists who had loved the Pyrenees; to my mother who, together with my father, made me aware of the beauty of the world. Thank you for teaching me how to look at this world and to fight for it. Thank you for this life you gave me and taught me in a burst of laughter whose echo is kept by our mountains.*

*To Barbara, my friend, whose beaming smile is inscribed forever in the caves of Gargas and the meadow of Gavarnie, whose voice is carried forever by the Pyrenean winds.*

*To Emmanuelle and to all those who seemed to leave us.*

*To Michel Baridon who talked with us about the mountains of the world in a small town of Southern France and guides us forever in the gardens of the world.*

*To all those whose life was taken by mountains, whose life is eternally mingled with the mountains they loved.*

*To all those who placed cairns on my path.*



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Since the beautiful days of the conference, some have gone beyond those blue mountains. To all of them, to Michel Baridon, who threw light on the gardens of the world, to Emmanuelle, to Barbara and to my mother, so present, I dedicate this volume.



## INTRODUCTION

Everywhere in the world, in every century, mountains were figured by artists, writers and poets. Everywhere in the world, in our modern age, mountains are disfigured by the will of power and money.

Fifty-six papers evoke the representation of mountains in the English-speaking world as poets, painters, philosophers or mountain climbers have represented them from the sixteenth to the twenty-first centuries. Some of them show to what extent the desire for profit and excessive tourism may change that beautiful wild space into an empty barren park.

From the Alps to the Pyrenees, from Mount Fuji to Mount Shasta, from the Scottish Highlands or Pacific Heights in San Francisco to the Himalaya, from Ikere in Nigeria to Devils Tower in the United States, from Uluru in Australia to the most northern mountain in the Arctic, the shapes of the world speak the same language and tell the world its own story.

Joseph Hardy's "Défilé near the Bridge of Sia", the symbol of the conference that was held in Toulouse from 4<sup>th</sup> to 7<sup>th</sup> October 2007 and that is at the origin of this volume, is a beautiful nineteenth century landscape painting and at the same time it shows all the dimensions of the mountains as landscapes figured by artists and as a part of nature disfigured by the tracks of modern civilization. The perfect division of the aquatint engraving into two equal parts reveals the sunny barren mountain side on the right and the mountain side covered with dark trees in the shadow on the left side. Fertility and sterility, light and darkness, vegetation and rocks draw a huge natural sand-glass, the basis of which is the living water of the torrent and the top of it, the blue mountains, emerging from that open triangle, revealing the matter through the sunlight and shadow. The image of time passing is drawn by the perspective and the viewer thus sees time as the emergence of mountains out of living water. Those blue mountains, which seem so remote, impossible to reach, are the image of man's dreams and expectations. That small aquatint engraving, the dimension of a vignette, seems to draw the story of Creation while figuring the passing of time.

And in the middle of the picture, dividing the engraving as it breaks the unity of the mountain side, a road introduces human history into that representation of wild nature. The road is the human construction allowing man to progress from the torrent in the foreground to the other part of the

mountain and perhaps to those apparently unreachable blue mountains in the distance. The road is a wonderful human creation allowing man to be united with the mountain. And yet, in the picture as in the landscape, it appears as a scar in nature. Can we say that this unique narrow road drawn by Joseph Hardy in 1825 disfigures the mountain? It is a track bearing men's steps and men's hopes and symbolically, it cannot disfigure a landscape as it allows men to enter it. But when the road multiplies into a network of artificial lines, when constructions emerge on mountain tops or near glaciers, does that "Défilé near the Bridge of Sia" not appear as a warning suggesting that the road must remain a path towards the blue mountains and not a scar in the living mountain?

The papers in this volume, written by writers, mountain climbers and academics, all of them mountain lovers, tell the story of man's relationship with mountains. Robert Macfarlane presents us with the *Great Stone Book of Creation* and lets us hear "the language and imagination of geology"; he teaches us "how to read a landscape as a history book" before letting us hear the voices of several writers. As in the Creation of the shapes of the world, the continents are united through their voices and their perception of mountains. Niyi Osundare's mountains of the mind start from the rocks near his Nigerian village to tell us the story of the mountains in man's imagination. N. Scott Momaday sends us back to Kiowa history, and the mountains of America unite myths and history to open onto poems and plays suggesting the close relationship existing between the landscape and writing. Rick Bass prolongs the journey to mountainous landscapes revealing the link between landscape and imagination. Finally Rudy Wiebe and Thomas Wharton show us two very different experiences of mountains through their Canadian voices.

Mountains are a link and unite all forms of literature. Mountain literature is not only composed of mountaineers' accounts and travel books but also of novels, plays and poetry; and all types of literature use the mountains of the world as their settings. Mountains have often been essential places in the history of the world, being either a place of conquest or a path to freedom. And all over the world they speak the language of spirituality in nature.

Mountains are indissociable from bears, who stand for wilderness and also look so much like human beings. From Rick Bass's meeting with a grizzly bear to N. Scott Momaday's strange dialogue between Yahweh and Urset and to Rudy Wiebe's Arctic bear or Thomas Wharton's relation of a woman wounded by a bear, from the Arctic to Lebanon, sixteen texts bear the prints of bears scratching an essential story between the lines of this book.

Writers' voices are the echoes of the spirit of the mountains whose poetry is revealed on all continents. The poets are the translators of the shapes of the world and allow all languages to meet in a dialogue of place-names in which

mountains and mountain people allow travellers to hear Welsh, Yoruba, Kiowa, Inuktitut or the language of Australian Aborigenes in the places they see. The numerous languages the place-names allow us to hear sound like an invitation to listen to the world.

Visions of mountains are interwoven in this volume. Natural, political, fictitious and artistic landscapes cross the world of the law or the sacred world. Revealed by aesthetic representations or mountainer's memories, or disfigured by tourism or exploitation, mountains speak about creation and destruction. The poetry read in the shapes of mountains, from Macfarlane's "Great Stone Book" to N. Scott Momaday's "spiritual mountain", Niyi Osundare's mountains seen as "silent griots", Rick Bass's "imaginary landscapes", Rudy Wiebe's essential wealth found in a stone ring in Ellesmere Island, leads us to the awareness that "we are [...] as old as the universe", as Rudy Wiebe said, and "we are as much *nature* as rocks and trees and water", as Thomas Wharton puts it. It reveals man's lifelong quest expressed by all poetic forms, from Andrew Marvell's lyrical poetry (Jean-Pierre Mouchon) to the romantic interpretation of mountains (Marc Porée, Michel Morel) and Scottish poetry, from the Border Ballads (Roland Bouyssou) to modern Scottish poetry (Stéphanie Noirard) and Irish poetry (Michel Dufour).

The perception of mountains has evolved from the terror they inspired to the awareness of the need for their preservation. The aesthetic mountains revealing sublime landscapes and generating the aesthetic theories of Gilpin and Burke open onto what Malcolm Andrews calls "The Emotional Truth of Mountains". He explores that truth through Ruskin, Turner and Brett's painting, while Marie-Madeleine Martinet throws light on the emotions conveyed by technical representations. The Alps are constantly reshaped under the artists's brushes or pencils; and Laurence Roussillon-Constanty shows Ruskin's perception of the mountain through his representation of Mont-Blanc.

Visual representations do not only encompass painting and drawing, but the cinema also uses the symbolic dimension of the mountain, as Raphaëlle Costa de Beauregard shows in her analysis of the celestial symbolism of the mountains of Tibet in Powell and Pressburger's film, *The Black Narcissus*.

The awareness of the beauty of mountains is the essential step leading to the necessity of their preservation, and environmental literature plays a great role in that field. Thoreau's vision of nature is very present, and the American writer showed how mountains were double: distant mountains where the spiritual quest can be read and places of a contact with the elements opening onto a questioning on the body (Michel Granger). Rick Bass's constant fight for the Valley of Yaak and more widely for wilderness is echoed throughout

his work. François Gavillon shows how the mountains are place, time, force and art whereas Yves-Charles Grandjeat suggests that in one of Rick Bass's novels, *Caribou Rising*, scientific, political and lyrical speeches interweave. Far from Montana, Robert Laxalt's father's return to his native Pyrenees is the beautiful experience of a lifelong quest achieved thanks to the mountains of Nevada and the Pyrenees, not so far from one another. Scott Slovic reveals that beautiful story, throwing light on the role of mountains in the awareness of life. Mountains may also give birth to a geography of pathos as in a novel by Russell Banks, in which they write a multi-faceted text (Claire Omhové).

Mountains are an essential space in writers' imaginations, from Shakespeare's plays (Milagro Ducassé-Turner) to modern and postmodern novels. Some peculiar peaks, like the Peak of Tenerife, are present from John Donne to Marvell, Milton or Daniel Defoe (Tomas Monterrey). Mountains are inspiring landscapes for writers, particularly for gothic novelists, for it is in gothic novels that they play the largest part in the creation of anguish and terror, and the anguishing scenes of *The Monk* are the image in the landscape of that gothic imagery that we find in so many novels (Maurice Lévy). Places of terror, the mountains are also sanctified in those novels where they become places of "rebirth and epiphany" (Françoise Dupeyron-Lafay) and also constitute a pictorial framing as in *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (Alice Labourg). Those steep and dark abysses are very present in popular novels as in Wilkie Collins's *Basil* (Laurence Talairach-Vielmas). Later on, modernist novelists will also use mountains, like D.H. Lawrence whose "hypertextual mountain" allows him to build up his literary speech (Philippe Birgy) or E.M. Forster whose "poetics of ascent" reveals a "yearning for transcendence" (Catherine Lanone). Places of quests and dreams, mountains also play a great role in children's literature as for instance in Philip Pullman's *His Dark Materials* (Susanne Voogd). Being at the core of much world mythology, they may be myths as in American author Neil Gaiman's novels and comics (Cyril Camus). Mountains inhabit the imaginary space of the world, from English and American novels to Canadian and Australian ones, from African literature to Lebanese novels (Jacqueline Jondot).

Mountains are sometimes a setting allowing a text to be built up around a particular space and very often they appear as texts. Mountains can be read since they write a text in the space of the world. The rocky landscape telling the story of the Creation in the "Great Stone Book" evoked by Robert Macfarlane, sometimes lets us read the myths of the world in its shapes. Everywhere in the world landscapes become storytellers. In Wyoming, Devils Tower tells a Kiowa legend where N. Scott Momaday finds his roots, whereas in Niyi Osundare's poetry, mountain emerges from a consonant. Myths are written in the rocky landscape and the world becomes an alphabet. Climbing becomes a form of thinking and writing in Canadian poet Liliane Welch's

poetry (Harry Vandervlist). Glaciers contain the memory of the world, and its history is written in their layers, as is suggested in Thomas Wharton's *Icefields* (Gautier Sanz). American mesas are a place of preservation where the history of a civilisation can be read in Willa Cather's work (Aurélie Guillain, Céline Manresa). The top of the mountain may reveal both human failures and an experience of transcendence as in T.C. Boyle's short stories (Caroline Roussel), whereas its paths may reveal individual stories, as is the case with Holmes and Stevenson in the Cévennes (Ellen Lévy).

The essential role played by mountains in the imaginary space of the world shows that from time immemorial there has been a dialogue between men and mountains.

The most direct dialogue is that of the mountain climbers whose direct contact with the stone and paths of mountains for many centuries reveals both men's fates and the fate of the earth that the evolution of mountaineering or the mere presence of men in mountains can reveal. Their close contact with the stone makes them more aware than others of the life of the earth, of its mingled strength and fragility. Climbing is listening to the rock and speaking to it. Kev Reynolds guides the reader from the beauty of the mountains of our dreams to the awareness of their life. From the Himalayas to the Pyrenees he takes us to the realm of dreams in nature, dreams perceived in an acute listening to the world, which allows a blind man to see beauty better than he who merely thinks he sees acutely. Tim Youngs leads us to the ascent of F6 as it is represented in a play by Auden and Isherwood, in which a story of mountain-climbing becomes the pretext for a "critique of heroism and nationalism". Reality and imagination mingle around mountains. Mountains stand for beauty and sublimity, but they also generate human behaviours which disfigure them. Brady Harrison thus evokes mountain refuse and the problem of "rescue and responsibility in alpine sports".

British mountaineers played a great role in the knowledge of the mountains of the world, particularly the mountains of Europe. Henry Russell, who climbed the mountains of the world but was in love with the Pyrenees and invented pyreneism, is an essential figure of the history of mountain climbing in the Pyrenees. Gilles Duval, one hundred years after the mountaineer's death, analyses his vision of climbing, showing how his writings reveal that violence is negated. Michel Tailland evokes more than a century of British visions of mountain scenery. The Alps can be discovered in the ascensions of the mountaineers of the past and of the present (Christine Geoffroy). And mountain names appear as a way of telling us the relationship between men and landscapes. Naming a mountain is a way of appropriating wild space; it is also a way of starting a dialogue with it. Shobhana Bhattacharji evokes the debate of the 1930s about naming the Karakoram.

The dialogue between men and mountains has also been historical whenever mountains played a part in important events of the history of the world. From the national sentiment they reveal in twentieth-century Scotland (Camille Manfredi) to the notion of the “racial mountain” evoked by Langston Hughes and appearing in two Ghanaian novels (Marie-Jeanne Gauffre) or to the Border reivers and Afghan Highlanders after the first Anglo-Afghan war (Irina Kantarbaeva-Bill), historical mountains speak about men. Texts, from poetry to popular magazines, may evoke the link between history and mountains. Chris Williams evokes that link in the literature of Raymond Williams whereas Daniel Decotterd speaks about the “heuristic power of mountains in historical and mythical Scotland” as seen in *The Scots Magazine*.

A last aspect of the dialogue between men and mountains is the spiritual vision of mountains. There are sacred mountains all over the world and from time immemorial mountains have played a role in men’s religious constructions. The Bible is full of mountains as Jean-Louis Breteau shows before evoking “the representation of the mountain in religious English literature from the sixteenth to the seventeenth century”. From Mount Shasta, making the American territory sacred (Bernadette Rigal-Cellard), to mythical mountains like Devils Tower inspiring N.Scott Momaday, mountains appear as a sacred space in their physical reality and in the stories told around them. Mountains write men’s history and reflect men’s aspirations: men who constantly try to conquer new spaces, men trying to find sacredness in the shapes of the world and mountaineers living vertical adventures while penetrating into the unreachable.

Mountains are at the core of our modern societies as they are at the centre of philosophical or legal problems (Susanne Berthier-Foglar). For beautiful or sublime mountains are also torn landscapes raped by mining exploitation, disfiguring the wild spaces of Australian mounts, like Mount Uluru (Colette Selles). Tourism may also disfigure mountains where roads and motorways cross them like a new modern writing barring the natural landscape and changing nature into amusement parks as in Thomas Wharton’s *Icefields* (Gautier Sanz).

Sacred mountains are linked with traditions and reflect collective spirituality while speaking about every man’s deep experience. They sometimes arouse ambivalent feelings, like Mount Fuji arousing both veneration and over-familiarity, an ambivalence depicted by Todd Shimoda whose vision of the ellipses of Mount Fuji is analysed by Marie-Lise Assier. Mountains speak about personal experiences and are a healing space allowing artists to develop resilience. The blue mountains that are simply an element of all landscapes in the world become a symbol of dreams in which suffering



artists find peace and the answer to their innermost questions (Françoise Besson).

Sometimes in wild nature man sees a garden: on the slopes of the Pic du Midi d'Ossau in the Pyrenees, the "English Garden" speaks about the strange relationship of man with nature, linking admiration and appropriation. Why did men give that wild place the name of a garden, a man-organized place? Why did they give the open space of the mountain a name etymologically meaning "fence"? Man wants to see the image of his perception of the world in wild nature. Gardens are works of art using nature as their material. As Michel Baridon said:

It is the only art painting reality through its very elements. It creates its own space. Its colours are the true colours, its shapes are the true shapes, its life is the true life of trees, waters, flowers and leaves. The wind, when it blows, does not become a draught. Nor does light become lighting. It does not put together shapes that would be made geometrical beforehand as in architecture, It does not imitate things as in painting, but directly places volumes and colours. The great, inexhaustible paradox is that that simplicity, that direct relationship to the real world is the effect of a double picture: in a garden nature makes its self-portrait but it is man who conceives the picture<sup>1</sup>.

Man's double perception of mountains, fear and admiration, respect and exploitation, perhaps comes from those paradoxes inhabiting his soul from time immemorial: admiration in front of something that is beyond his own conception of the world and his will to make a garden with it. Instead of seeing nature's self-portrait he tries to see his own. Yet artists' deep vision of mountains and mountaineers' direct contact with it are new paths leading all men towards a true understanding and acceptance of nature as nature.

Mountains are no simple geographical relief. They are the image of creation and their textual or iconographical representations lead us into the interior world of all those who have climbed them or have simply dreamt of them and loved them. If all the temples of the world, like Egyptian, Maya or Celtic pyramids, spires and minarets, have the shapes of mountains, it is

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<sup>1</sup> "[Le jardin] Lui seul, en effet, nous peint le réel par ses éléments mêmes. Il crée son propre espace. Ses couleurs sont les vraies couleurs, ses formes sont les vraies formes, sa vie la vraie vie des arbres, des eaux, des fleurs et des feuilles. Le vent, quand il y passe, ne se change pas en courant d'air. Ni la lumière en éclairage. Il ne procède ni par assemblage de formes préalablement géométrisées comme l'architecture, ni par imitation, comme la peinture, mais par disposition directe des volumes et des teintes. Le grand, l'inépuisable paradoxe, c'est que cette simplicité, ce rapport direct au monde réel est l'effet d'une image double : dans un jardin, la nature fait son autoportrait, mais c'est l'homme qui conçoit le tableau." Michel Baridon, *Les Jardins* (Paris: Robert Laffont, 1998) 5-6. Translation mine.

because men have always seen in them a link between earth and sky. Mountains have always been for them both roads and messengers. Mountains are the places of all quests and they are first wild nature.

As messengers, they may also save man from himself and his constant tendency to try to widen his vital space by destroying it. The building of more and more roads in the mountains “breaks the [mountain’s] back”, to paraphrase the sentence of a character in Wole Soyinka’s play, *The Lion and the Jewel*.<sup>2</sup> And for Demoke, the sculptor in *A Dance of the Forest*, the construction of a road leading people to the totem he has carved, which has demanded the destruction of the wood, is “as if the road had disfigured his sculpture and wounded the forest, as the taming of nature is the creation of a new cultural landscape with all its positive and negative transformations”, as Christiane Fioupou put it.<sup>3</sup>

Joseph Ribas wrote: “the mountain is the last stronghold that may still stimulate another way of living, working and entertaining”<sup>4</sup>. A small gesture may save wild spaces. A few years ago, in 1995, when there was a project to construct a trunk road in the Valley of Aspe in the Pyrenees, several thousand people from all over Europe decided to buy small plots of land to delay the expropriations. Several years ago letters sent from all over the world to a government prevented an oil company from settling in the Amazonian forest and from destroying the vital space of an Indian tribe. Several years ago, letters from all over the world sent to a government prevented a car company from settling in Siberia and destroying the forest where the Udeges lived. In the United States, Rick Bass’s fight for the Valley of Yaak and wilderness in general widely participates in the protection of wild spaces. Small gestures are the materializing of man’s awareness of his belonging to a natural space he must live with and not only live on.

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<sup>2</sup> To describe the felling of trees, Lakunle explains that “the workers were brought [...] to break the jungle’s back”, Wole Soyinka, *The Lion and the Jewel* (1963), quoted by Christiane Fioupou in *La Route. Réalité et représentation dans l’œuvre de Wole Soyinka*, Amsterdam, Atlanta: Rodopi, 1994, 150.

<sup>3</sup> “Pour lui, c’est comme si la route avait à la fois défiguré sa sculpture et blessé la forêt puisque domestiquer la nature, c’est créer un nouveau paysage culturel avec tout ce que cela implique comme transformations, à la fois positives et négatives” (Fioupou 150). (Translation mine).

<sup>4</sup> “La montagne est [...] le dernier bastion qui puisse encore impulser une autre manière de vivre, de travailler et de se distraire”, Joseph Ribas, “Pyénées, montagnes d’Europe. Vers un pyrénéisme sans frontières”, *Pyénées. Bulletin pyrénéen*, (n°240. October 2009), 13.

The modern man sometimes reads in the mountains' resources, in their mines and parks, a page to be torn off, whereas poets read an alphabet and mountaineers try to meet a dream. Mountains are a natural space still partly preserved giving us a message and uniting people from all over the world, allowing them to undergo or participate no longer in the destruction of wild nature but to be the actors of its preservation. From the smallest village to all the big cities of the world, like mountaineers and poets, we must listen to those silent messengers.



**Joseph Hardy, “Défilé near the Bridge of Sia”, 1825.**  
**”, (*A Picturesque and Descriptive Tour in the Mountains of the High***  
***Pyrenees*, aquatint engraving, London: Ackerman, 1825).**  
**Private collection**



## **PART I**

# **POETRY IN THE SHAPES OF THE WORLD**

