

# LITERARY GEOGRAPHIES

## **Lithanamnesia: Isolation, Memory and Longing in Mountaineering Narratives by POWs in World War Two**

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I wasn't expecting the surge of nostalgia during lockdown. Someone created a 'vintage' Facebook page for my old university mountaineering club. Facebook kept telling me that I had been tagged in photographs. I would click on the links to find a younger version of myself, vertiginous, impossibly young, holding on above the void of time. I posted a tribute to a friend who had died in a fall in the Alps. There he was, looking up at the camera with a smile, suspended on an abseil above a shimmering sea. I felt the rope go tight and the sounding tug of loss.

To climb is to move through space attuned to unseen coordinates, an augmented wayfinding. It starts by touching rock and is laid down in muscle memory. In isolation I found myself remembering sequences of moves on routes from thirty years before; the roughness and rightness of holds, the qualities of the rock. Granite, gritstone, limestone, slate – something to hang on to, always there, getting the measure of you. Curiously this sense of haptic nostalgia that climbers feel has no name. Let us then call it *lithanamnesia*, remembering stone.

This longing for the hills brought on by isolation has always been a productive source of mountaineering literature. During World War Two, this form of nostalgia was particularly acute amongst one group of non-combatants: mountaineers who had become prisoners of war. A variety of different narrative responses to the experience of incarceration and to the

representation of incarcerated masculinity emerged in the post-war period, their subject matter and mode of composition all determined by the very different carceral geographies and regimes experienced by Allied and Axis internees.

Two books produced by Allied P.O.W.s were written in secret whilst interned. Scott Russell, a botanist, mountaineer and explorer from New Zealand, published *Mountain Prospect* in 1946. The Scot W.H. Murray's *Mountaineering in Scotland* was published in 1947 and became an instant classic that has never been out of print. Both texts were written entirely from memory with no recourse to diaries, notes, photographs or other *aide memoires*. As mountaineering literature, they represent a form of imaginative escape from the very harshest forms of confinement experienced by Allied servicemen. Published after the war they were marketed as pre-War mountaineering memoirs. Murray made no mention of the circumstances of the book's production in *Mountaineering in Scotland*, the details only becoming known in 1979 (Lloyd-Jones 2013: 120). Further detail only became available with the publication of his posthumous autobiography (Murray 2002). Russell's *Mountain Prospect* contains a few paragraphs that mention the circumstances of the book's production during Russell's three and a half years' incarceration in Changi prison, Singapore. Apart from these brief passages, these books were silent about the P.O.W. experience.

In complete contrast, the mountaineering texts produced after the war by Italian, Austrian and German P.O.W.s in Africa and India are situated firmly within the wartime P.O.W. experience and frequently celebrate the 'archetypal hero of post-war popular literature', the escapee (Pattinson et al. 2014: 181). Written by authors who were not active service personnel, their wartime mountaineering was to some degree enabled by the British approach to internment throughout the empire, which relied on geographical remoteness to contain enemy aliens and consisted of different levels of imprisonment, internment, parole and forms of house arrest.

The Italian colonial official Felice Benuzzi was captured in Abyssinia in 1941 and interned in P.O.W. Camp 354 Nanyuki, Kenya, from which he escaped with two colleagues in January 1943 to climb Mt. Kenya. Undertaken as a diversion from the crushing boredom of prison life, Benuzzi and his two colleagues planted the Italian *Tricolore* on the summit, broke back into camp and spent seven days in solitary confinement, after being commended by the camp commandant for their sporting effort. In 1947 Benuzzi published *Fuga sul Kenya – 17*, published in English as *No Picnic on Mount Kenya* (1952), with the subtitle *The Story of Three P.O.W.s' Escape to Adventure*.

The Austrian Heinrich Harrer was arrested in India in September 1939 whilst attempting to reach Persia. An elite German mountaineer, Harrer was also a member of the S.S. He was initially interned at Ahmednagar near Bombay but ended up interned at Dehra Dun in the Garhwal, not far from the Tibetan and Nepalese borders. Harrer made several unsuccessful attempts to escape before finally managing it on 29 April 1944, eventually reaching Lhasa in Tibet. Leaving Lhasa during the Chinese Communist invasion of 1951, Harrer returned to Austria and published *Sieben Jahre in Tibet* (1952), published in English as *Seven Years in Tibet* (1953). This text, with its blend of wartime escape and adventure travel in

high places immediately became a runaway success, providing an unprecedented account of a Tibet closed to outsiders (Lopez 1998: 5-6).

In contrast to Harrer, the Austrians Fritz Kolb and Ludwig Krenek had strong anti-Nazi credentials. Kolb wrote about his experience of internment in India and his Himalayan mountaineering experiences whilst under house arrest and parole both during and after the war in his book *Einzelgänger im Himalaya* (1957), published in English as *Himalayan Venture* (1959). As enemy aliens they were held at the main internment camp at Ahmednagar, eventually being moved to Dehra Dun. Kolb founded a mountaineering club at Ahmednagar and used the rough stones of the barrack walls as a climbing wall. Kolb was released from Dehra Dun in the Spring of 1944 along with Krenek and they took up teaching appointments in India. They immediately began planning Himalayan mountaineering expeditions (Kolb 2001: 62-66).

For all these P.O.W. authors, the process of writing became a form of escape, and expression of personal liberty, an act of defiance. Both Allied and Axis P.O.W.s linked reading, writing, drawing and creativity to personal freedom but only the Axis accounts provide significant testimony within the text of the context and experience of these activities in the camps. Benuzzi noted that sketching, drawing and painting were extremely popular in the camps, facilitated by the Y.M.C.A. of East Africa (Benuzzi 2016: 23). Harrer records that he learnt a little Hindustani, Tibetan and Japanese 'and devoured all sorts of travel books on Asia, which I found in the library, especially those dealing with the districts on my prospective route' from which he made extensive notes (Harrer 1997: 4).

In contrast, Russell and Murray's texts provide few clues to the embodied act of writing as a P.O.W. Their subject matter is retrospective and consolatory, the act of writing a form of distanciation. Russell recorded that 'I began this book as soon as I could find paper – thick pads of military forms' (Russell 1946: 242). His notes had been destroyed in the siege of Singapore, 'so he had to work harder from memory. He informed the Japanese officials that gardening called for much list-making, and therefore much paper, and in this way he collected enough to keep two copies of this book going, in case one should be confiscated' (Russell 1946: vii).

Both Russell and Murray seem to have survived through heroic forms of retrospection and writing. As Russell concludes:

For the body there was no escape, for the mind only that which each could make for himself. The present and the future were alike blank, but the past remained in memory and the mind turned to it, to the experiences one had enjoyed most. It clung to them, seeking some record more tangible than memory. To these circumstances my instinctive reaction was to write. (Russell 1946: 242)

Murray, imprisoned in Italy from 1942 started writing in 1943 but there was no paper: 'a diet heavily subsidised by local fruit meant that toilet paper, the only paper available, was urgently needed for its intended purposes'. However, his mother had sent him 'William Shakespeare's *Complete Works*' via the Red Cross. 'He realised immediately that the fine India paper of this

volume would make excellent toilet paper, thus freeing his ration of Italian toilet roll for writing on' (Lloyd-Jones 2013: 121). Murray was subsequently moved to other camps where the manuscript of his book was confiscated by the Gestapo. In his autobiography he records: 'Our hunger intensified. I no longer believed that I would climb mountains again but felt impelled to get the truth of them on paper,' (Murray 2002: 100), finishing the second draft of the book in March 1944.

These texts provide us with a unique perspective on the relationship between war, incarceration, mountaineering and travel literature, a literature predicated on human mobility. If travel is the 'very condition of a modern consciousness, of a modern view of the world – the acting out of longing' (Elsner & Rubies 1999: 5), it is perhaps the mountaineer as prisoner in wartime who surveys most keenly the topographies of desire through acts of longing and escape, real and imagined. For the mountaineer in isolation, memory combines with writing in a lithographic process - the art of making impressions from stone.

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