

# Pride and prejudice at high altitude

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Recent tragedies on Everest have exposed growing resentment felt by some Sherpas towards foreign climbers and the foreign companies profiting from the mountain. One source of dispute has been Sherpa

concern that some climbers are not fit enough to cope with the altitude.

Now Cambridge historian Lachlan Fleetwood has found evidence of closely-related friction going back to the early 1800s. In an article published in *Itinerario*, he shows that altitude sickness undermined British imperial expectations that white bodies would outperform those of their new Himalayan subjects.

Having studied dozens of rare journals, letters and reports written by British surveyors, explorers and travellers, Fleetwood shows how this fuelled distrust between British travellers and Himalayan peoples in some of their first encounters with an expansionist British India. He also reveals that both Europeans and locals exploited uncertainty about altitude sickness for personal gain.

Today, the causes, symptoms and treatment of altitude sickness are common knowledge but in the early nineteenth century, this invisible force was poorly understood. Recent scientific research has shown that Sherpas, an ethnic group from the mountain regions of Nepal, have evolved to become particularly efficient at producing energy even when oxygen is scarce.

Fleetwood, a historian of science and empire, explains: "The British struggled with two competing aims—they wanted to describe their physical trials to secure heroic authority at home. But in doing so, they didn't want to upset racial hierarchies by suggesting that white bodies suffered more than Asian ones."

This tension is palpable in the writing of the Bengal infantryman Alexander Gerard. In the 1820s, he described how he and his brother James overtook their Himalayan porters and "had infinite trouble in getting them to go on." But he then admitted: "we could not have walked much faster ourselves, for we felt a fullness in the head, and experienced

a general debility."

Even more telling, while ascending towards the frontier with Tibet, Alexander wrote: "we were so completely exhausted at first, that we rested every hundred yards; & had we not been ashamed before so many people, some of whom we got to accompany us after much entreaty, we should certainly have turned back."

This striking admission of shame appears in an unpublished report to the East India Company and in a published version of the same incident, a remarkable additional sentence was inserted: "we observed the thermometer every minute almost, in order to show the people we were doing something."

Fleetwood says of this: "It's fascinating to picture these brothers pretending to do Western science to mask their physical shortcomings. This is a far cry from the popular image of heroic Victorian explorers."

"The narrative shifted in the late nineteenth century so that Sherpas came to be valorised as heroic in their own right. This involved a growing acceptance that their bodies are better adapted to high altitude. But recent events on Everest show that comparisons of physical performance remain a major source of tension."

Much of Fleetwood's evidence comes from East India Company employees, especially Bengal infantryman seconded to surveys in the mountains. In the late eighteenth century, travelling to very high altitudes was something largely new for European travellers and then as today, their progress in the Himalaya relied on extensive pre-existing routes and co-opting Himalayan people (especially Bhotiya, Tartar, Wakhi, and Lepcha) to show them the correct paths, carry their supplies, and take on significant risk. This forced British travellers to compare their physical performance with that of the indigenous population.

Nineteenth-century attempts to conceal vulnerability to altitude sickness could be embarrassingly unconvincing. After reaching the Bamsaru Pass, the Scottish artist James Baillie Fraser remarked: "It was ludicrous to see those who had laughed at others yielding, some to lassitude, and others to sickness, yet endeavouring to conceal it from the rest. I believe I held out longer than any one; yet after passing this gorge every few paces of ascent seemed an insuperable labour, and even in passing along the most level places my knees trembled under me."

Measuring pulses and rates of breathing added a new dimension to the 'politics of comparison,' as European travellers tried to make sense of wildly differing symptoms. While in the Pamirs, the naval officer and surveyor John Wood took the pulses of everyone in his party and noted with surprise that his was the slowest. Fleetwood is skeptical about this data and Wood admitted that his comparisons were not entirely fair, not least because the men had been carrying different loads.

While Fleetwood's focus is on the behaviour of Europeans, he suggests that guides and porters may have attempted to exploit the uncertainty around altitude using the idea of a poisonous plant to resist unpleasant and perilous labour. Himalayan people often told European travellers that their suffering was caused by Bis-ki-huwa, or simply the Bis, which was translated as "Wind of Poison." Most European observers dismissed the idea mainly because the plant rarely appeared where [altitude](#) sickness was felt.

From the 1850s, scientific knowledge about [altitude sickness](#) significantly improved thanks to more systematic scientific studies of respiratory physiology, but European travellers continued to play down their vulnerability.

**More information:** Lachlan Fleetwood, Bodies in High Places: Exploration, Altitude Sickness, and the Problem of Bodily Comparison

in the Himalaya, 1800–1850, *Itinerario* (2019). DOI: [10.1017/S0165115319000573](https://doi.org/10.1017/S0165115319000573)

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