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Abstract:

This thesis examines how economic pressures reshaped British mountaineering in the decades following the first ascent of Everest. Between 1953 and 2000 the sport was transformed, beginning with the dismantling of amateur pressures by which it had previously been defined. This allowed entrepreneurial ideas to flourish as some individuals began pursuing the opportunity to earn, turning climbing from leisure into a form of work. Their efforts relied on the specialist and mainstream media which they harnessed to successfully expand interest in them as personalities, and in mountaineering more widely. As the sport became increasingly well-known, it attracted corporate interests in the form of sponsorship and branding, which facilitated grander expeditions. These adjustments expanded mainstream interest, and eventually combined to create a new form of guided climbing focussed on the Himalaya. Although British mountaineering has often been analysed from a perspective of national identity, this thesis demonstrates how economics was responsible for the modernisation it experienced, with financial imperatives becoming a prime motivation for climbers. Indeed, it became increasingly individualistic as careers came to depend on climbing success. The process of change led to debates about what it meant to climbing ethically, and there was resistance to the shift which ultimately adjusted the wider portrayal and understanding of the sport. The study uses extensive archival materials, magazines, expedition reports and other contemporary literature to examine how professional, entrepreneurial and commercial pressures combined to increase the mainstream appeal of mountaineering. Analysis of key expeditions, as well as the experiences of key figures such as Chris Bonington, Joe Brown, Alison Hargreaves and others, illustrates how the realities of being an elite British climber were transformed in the post-war years. In doing so, this detailed economic history of mountaineering demonstrates a new understanding of post-war sports commercialisation. It shows that some of the factors commonly associated to this change in other sports, such as governance, were not always prerequisites for such modernisation.

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