
Buxton, W. (2003). Review: Dougal Haston: The Philosophy of Risk by Jeff Connor. *The Canadian Alpine Journal*, **86**, 167-168.

**Review: Connor, J. (2002). *Dougal Haston: The Philosophy of Risk*.
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Review by Bill Buxton

He looked like he had walked out of an Egon Schiele painting. He had the longest, knarliest fingers that I had ever seen, attached to a body sporting a pair of haunted deep-set eyes. And these eyes, to the extent that they were open, were totally focused on the task at hand: keeping his drunken body erect while slowly negotiating his way up the steps of the bar. The time was the winter of 1973-74, the place the Club Vagabond in Leysin Switzerland, and the eyes, leading the man struggling up the steps in what was a nightly ritual, were the same eyes that were to lead the body up two of the greatest face climbs in the Himalaya. The eyes belonged to Dougal Haston, and to the man belonged the reputation of being one of the leading mountaineers of the time.

I was in Leysin, staying at the Vagabond, and had been introduced to him by my sister-in-law. At the time, as far as I was concerned, mountains were for skiing. But I knew Haston by reputation, having devoured many of my college roommate's climbing books. What I could not reconcile then, or after, was how someone who could manage such extreme levels of performance on the mountain, was apparently so incapable of control or discipline in "civilian life"? How was I supposed to reconcile the man who, as far as I know, never broke anything while climbing, with the one who broke his ankle falling off a bar stool in the Vagabond?

Given how brief my acquaintance with Haston was, none of these questions should matter. But they did - to me at least. Understanding the relationship between extreme performance in any discipline (the arts, science, business or sports), and "regular life" has always intrigued me, both in the abstract, and in practical terms.

Consequently, it was with great interest that I took up Jeff Connor's recent biography of Haston. I wanted to understand. And if I am honest, perhaps I wanted to recover some of the respect for the man that I had gained from reading of his climbs which I had lost in meeting him in person (fully realizing that this, at least, was my problem, not his.)

To recap, Dougal Haston was one of the best-known climbers of the late '60s and early '70s. He established his early reputation as a rock climber in Scotland, primarily at Glencoe, where he was one of the regulars. However, his first international renown came as a result of his role in the first ascent of the “Eiger direct” in the winter of 1966, (Gillman & Haston, 1966). Haston’s Himalayan experience included a successful expedition to the Changabang in 1974 (Bonington, *et al.*, 1976). However, this expedition was framed on either side by two expeditions that redefined Himalayan climbing. These were two great pioneering Himalayan face climbs: the 1970 first ascent of the south face of Annapurna, (Bonington, 1971), and the Sept. 1975 first ascent of the southwest face of Everest (Bonington, 1976). (This successful 1975 attempt on Everest’s South Face was Haston’s third attempt on the route.)

The Annapurna and Everest climbs were both led by Chris Bonington. I would argue that they had as much impact on establishing new standards and style in Himalayan climbing as, for example, Messner and Habeler’s 1978 oxygenless ascent of Everest (Habeler, 1979).

On both Annapurna and Everest, Haston was part of the first summit team: with Don Whillans on Annapurna, and Doug Scott on Everest. And, besides being the first to scale Everest’s southwest face, Scott and Haston established another record of sorts: the highest bivouac in history. Having reached the summit late in the day, on the way down, they were forced to spend the night in the open on the South Summit, at 28,500 feet (8,760 metres). These are climbers worthy of being spoken about in the same sentence as Buhl, and his 1953 bivouac on his solo descent of Nanga Parbat. This is mountaineering of the first order.

Haston and Scott were to team up again in 1976, and do the first ascent of the southwest face of Mount McKinley (Scott, 1992). This time, the ascent was pure alpine style, a style that was far closer to Haston and Scott’s taste than the siege tactics that dominated most of their earlier expedition climbing.

Given the extreme nature of his climbing history, it is ironic, then, that Haston died not while climbing, but in 1977, at age 36, when caught in an avalanche while skiing a not overly extreme slope above his home in Leysin, where he was director of the International School of Mountaineering.

That is the simple story. But a simple story rarely sheds much light on a complex man. Nor, unfortunately does Connor’s book.

What it does do is bring together, for the first time, a well-written overview of Haston’s life. I have read most of what Haston has written, as well as most of that written by others who climbed with him. Nevertheless, I found a large amount of new material. Connor did his homework, which included well-conducted interviews with key people who knew and climbed with Haston, not

the least of whom was that great Canadian mountaineer, Chic Scott (who, early in his career, taught at Haston's mountaineering school).

But what really left me feeling dissatisfied, despite all of his research, was Connor's seeming inability to know or understand his subject. The book sheds a lot of factual light on the details and chronology of events in Haston's life. But, I finished the book informed, not enlightened.

As Chic Scott recently said to me, "What I really wanted to know however, was why Dougal was so bitter and withdrawn, why he was so anti-social considering that his mother, father and brother seemed quite nice people. Where did this nastiness come from?" On this topic, you will get few answers, much less insights from Connor's book.

To be fair, having leveled this criticism, Haston was an enigma even to those who were close to him. Chris Bonington, through his numerous climbs with Haston, had as good of a chance to know him as anyone, yet he wrote, "I have never come to know Dougal closely – I doubt if anyone ever could, he has so strong a reserve ..." (Bonington, 1976, p. 33). But in this, Bonington was being somewhat disingenuous, as is shown repeatedly in other things that he wrote.

But how hard did Connor try? To me, at least, he did not ask what seemed like obvious questions, much less answer them. For example, he tells us that as a youth, Haston changed his name. It turns out that he was born Duncan, not Dougal. This may be a nickname that stuck, or it may have been something deeper. The point is, having pointed this out, I would assume that a biographer interested in knowing the subject might think it worthy of more than a reported fact.

The book's bibliography makes it clear that Connor read Haston's rather extensive body of writing. But again, what he wrote about it has more to do with facts than understanding. Connor points out how little Haston mentions his wife Annie in his 1973 autobiography, *In High Places*, but draws little of substance from it. At the same time, he seems to miss other revealing aspects of Haston's writing, such as its tendency at times to approach sheer poetry. Examples would include, "A View from Camp VI", the preface to *In High Places*, or the following:

"The winter dawn comes slowly. A weak sun drags a centuries-weary head from the joys of the south into the white northern hemisphere. The valleys lurk; caves full of sleepy people reluctant to part with the stale artificial warmth of humanly created heat. The mountains, however, in this season seem to regain their primitive virginal pride. No more do the howling, littering summer masses tramp their more accessible flanks. There are still the skiers but they only scratch the lower limbs. Haston (1973), p. 84

And then there are the musings from Haston, the philosopher, such as the following description of a winter bivouac on the Matterhorn Nordwand:

It had been a night ripe for bitter dreams, but it is better to have bad dreams than good on a bivouac: waking up to harsh reality is less disappointing. Haston (1973), p. 85.

But perhaps the part of Haston that is most missing from Connor's biography is his sense of humour. Now I am not suggesting (and I suspect that nobody else would either) that Haston had a future as a stand-up comic. On the other hand, there are few writers in the mountaineering literature who have caused me to crack up out loud. Perhaps I just like sardonic, understated humour, but how can you ignore someone who would write something like this:

Mostowski must have been very anxious to get down as he slipped and fell 500 metres, almost to the foot of the face, ending up in a snowdrift with only a twisted knee! This was certainly the fastest descent of this section to date. Haston (1974), p. 9.

Or when during an attempt at a new winter route on the Grandes Jorasses, he describes an accident where he caught himself just before he would have plunged 1,500 feet as, "Too long for a normal jump!" (Haston, 1974, p. 98).

While this aspect of Haston is neglected by Connor, it was certainly noted by those who were close to him, such as during the Annapurna climb:

It was very noticeable how quickly everyone's use of the wireless improved, and by the end of the expedition it was a really swinging wireless net. Even the taciturn Dougal lent a certain dry humour to the evening's wireless conversation. Bonington (1971) p. 101

In short Connor seems to have read the literature for facts rather than understanding. I wanted an intelligent exploration of the contrast between Haston, the prolific and eloquent writer, and Haston the man of few spoken words. Likewise, I wanted more than a superficial discussion of the contrast between the extremely sensitive man exposed in Haston's writing, with he who in day-to-day life, more often than not was insensitive to others feelings, ambitions and/or property. And perhaps most dissatisfying, Connor never comes to terms with Haston the man who seemed willing and able to face anything on a mountain, but when confronted with killing someone while driving under the influence, chose to run, rather than face the consequences.

But am I expecting too much of a biographer? Life is just not that simple, and expecting to understand Haston after the fact may be as naive as most of us expecting to duplicate Haston's climbs. Perhaps. But again, some of the

answers (or at least keys) can be found in Haston's writing, as I hope some of the examples above show. Connor just does not adequately explore them.

As for shedding light on the "big question" that drew me into all of this in the first place - the contrast between Haston the mountaineer and Haston the civilian - Haston himself comes closest to the point, in *In High Places*:

Life on a mountain is basically unemotional, you are too used to seeing the other person in strict control. That is perhaps why, in the emotional free-for-all of normal living, you act as, or in fact are, different persons.
Haston (1973), p. 80.

For those interested in Haston, this book is worth reading, as it introduces new information on the subject. But even this information is not always reliable. There are factual errors such as saying that Boardman and Tasker disappeared on Mount Everest in 1978, when it was 1982. And better editing would have removed needless repetitions, such as saying that Chic guided a client up the Brenva Face of Mont Blanc in two different passages. Due to its shortcomings Connor's book is just not adequate on its own.

While not a criticism, it is also worth noting that Connor has written a biography of the man, and not a detailed description of his collective climbs. There is not even a chronological listing of Haston's climbs. For the mountaineering history, interested readers must go to the actual expedition accounts. The good news is that excellent books on the major climbs are available, most notably those listed in the bibliography of this review.

As to the book itself, I have to mention what may seem to many to be minor quibbles. How can anyone publish a book in this day and age of computers without an index? It is just downright frustrating for anyone who wants to read a book twice, or use it as a reference. I was also struck by the low number of photographs, illustrations and maps included in the book. Again, for these the interested reader should see the individual expedition accounts, and especially, Doug Scott's, *Himalayan Climber*. All of this compromises the book's value for what seems to be minimal cost to the author or the publisher.

After all these years, reading all of these books, and what I have written above, the inevitable questions arise: "Why should anyone care?" and "Why is any of this relevant today?" All that I can offer is that Haston had the ability to strongly affect those who came in contact with him, to instill strong sense of awe, matched only by a sense of frustration due to his not being what they wanted him to be. As I acknowledged above, this is our problem, not his. But we are of today, and hence the relevance persists, and perhaps most significantly, the underlying questions are not unique to Haston.

Perhaps the best way to capture what I mean by this is to quote a note that Chic Scott sent to me:

I long pondered the idea of writing a biography of Dougal Haston myself, and in the end decided not to. I was not sure why at the time, but after reading Connor's book I know why. Dougal Haston was a mentor and friend who I loved and admired. He gave me an opportunity to be a mountain guide and to enter the closed society of hard core mountain climbing. That is the way I want to remember him. Reading this biography, I realized that Dougal was not a very nice man. I don't think he would really have wanted this biography to be written. Dougal and I got along so well because I didn't know all these nasty stories about him and I admired him simply as a great mountaineer. I think that is how he would like to have been remembered. (Chic Scott, private communication, 2002)

Does this mean that we should remember the climber and let the rest be? Of course not. For not letting the other side be swept under the carpet, we can thank Connor's book. Having done so, for not following through on the consequences, I think that it can justifiably be criticized.

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¹ This reference was added later and did not appear in the published version of this review.

² Ditto

³ Ditto..

⁴ Ditto.

Douglas Haston - The Philosophy of Risk Jeff Connor Canongate Â£16.99, pp212. There is a climbing book I would like to read. Call it 'The Joy of Climbing'. It would be an optimistic book about pleasure, not pain; about companionship and beauty.Â Indeed, I've always regarded Nietzsche as a laughable poseur with a philosophy of the extreme, who talked the talk but never walked the walk. The value of his cartoon philosophy was properly summed up by its employment in the title credits for the film Conan the Barbarian. So it bothers me from the start to see his morbid and moribund philosophy name-checked in Joe Simpson's and Jeff Connor's books, different though they are in both quality of writing, intelligence and intent.