

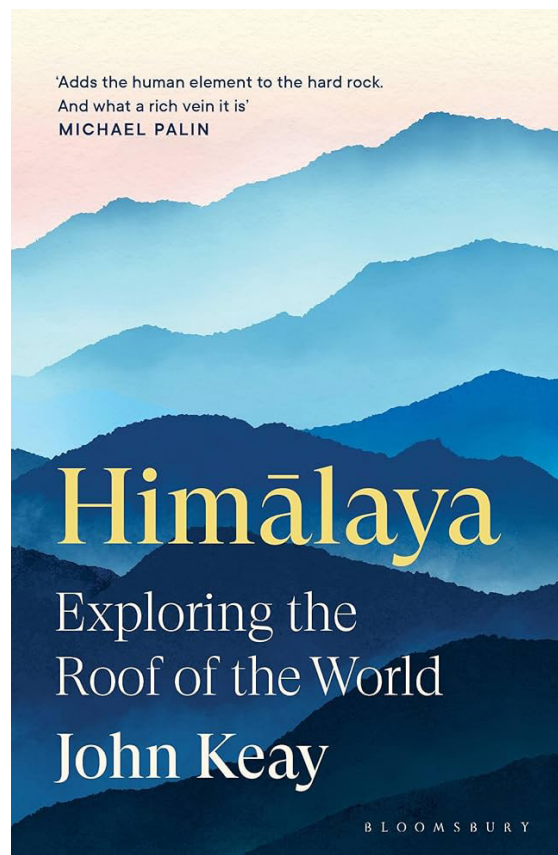
Book Review

Review of *Himālaya: Exploring the Roof of the World* by John Keay

London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2022. 432 p. ISBN: 9781408891155

Reviewed by Vineet Gairola

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.2218/himalaya.2023.9277>



Recommended Citation

Gairola, Vineet (2023). Review of *Himālaya: Exploring the Roof of the World* by John Keay. *HIMALAYA* 43(1): 193-195.



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John Keay, a notable Scottish historian, is renowned for his extensive writings on the Himalayan world. Keay traveled to India's Kashmir region for the first time in the mid-1960s. *Himalaya: Exploring the Roof of the World* is an awe-inspiring literary expedition based on long-term ethnographic experience that takes readers on an extraordinary journey through the majestic Himalayan range. This comprehensive and meticulously researched book, released by Bloomsbury Publishing in 2022, offers a captivating blend of history, geography, culture, and adventure, leaving an indelible mark on all interested in this iconic mountain region. With a deep understanding and evident passion for the area, Keay effortlessly makes the reader feel like a fellow companion accompanying him on his explorative quest. For example, Keay's striking observation on the Zaskar Valley in India's far north reiterates research in the geosciences, highlighting how its breathtaking landscape and fossil patterns still offer glimpses of an ancient connection to the African subcontinent. This insight resonates strongly with anyone who has experienced the region and provides a tangible context to earth's subterranean movements and plate tectonics.

Within the pages of this extraordinary book, the rich tapestry of history is intertwined with vivid hues of biography. Keay's creativity takes the reader on a mesmerizing journey through the enigmatic realms of the Himalaya, where the echoes of colonial expeditions reverberate and the mystiques of Tibet unravel like a captivating tale. Through this unique and, at times, romanticizing lens, Keay breathes life into the forgotten whispers of those who dared to conquer the untamed heights of the Himalaya in earlier times.

“Keay fearlessly addresses contemporary environmental challenges faced in the Himalayan region, including climate change, glacier melting, and the impact of tourism on a fragile mountain environment.”

- Vineet Gairola on *Himālaya: Exploring the Roof of the World*

In his work, Keay combines a variety of disciplines, encompassing geology, politics, biology, and religion, each contributing to a comprehensive understanding of the Himalayan mountain range. Based on thorough research, Keay sheds light on a fascinating array of individuals whose lives intertwine with the mountains, adding a human dimension to the splendor of the Himalaya. Among these personalities were Englishmen strategically positioned due to their empire's colonial rule over India. Notably, figures like Francis Younghusband and Cecil Godfrey Rawling, who served as army officers, ventured into uncharted territories, participating in the Great Game rivalry between the British Empire and Tsarist Russia. This high-stakes competition aimed to redefine territorial boundaries and regulate trade within vast expanses of land. Originally intended as a diplomatic mission, Francis Younghusband's expedition took a violent turn when Tibetans resisted British incursion. Despite being ill-equipped with matchlock rifles, Tibetan defenders faced difficulties against British forces armed with machine guns and cannons. As a result, British troops advanced to Lhasa, leaving behind a tragic trail of hundreds of slain Tibetans. This violent campaign notwithstanding, the British achieved minimal advantages beyond securing trading rights and preventing Russian encroachment, thus reconsidering their own ambitions in Tibet.

Despite the Himalaya's challenging landscape and relatively modest economic importance (centered on wool, salt, and musk deer scent glands as primary export products), the region has long been a battleground for clashes between empires. Various invaders, from Mongols to Maoists, have been drawn to the mountain range throughout the ages. As a crucial strategic

crossroads between India, China, and the Islamic world, disputed areas within the Himalaya remain hotspots for ongoing conflicts today, elevating the region's

significance as a focal point for (geo)political tension. The fertile valleys attracted the attention of researchers like Frank Kingdon-Ward, a botanist seeking to deepen his knowledge of the region's plant life. Similarly, a cultural historian, John Vincent Bellezza traveled extensively in Tibet, compiling a comprehensive database of heritage sites. Keay also draws attention to the impacts of the increasing numbers of mountain climbers and trekking tourists on the sensitive ecosystems of the Himalaya, where base camps have turned into dumping grounds and waste pollution has tainted once-clear rivers. Scaling peaks of high mountains, like Mount Everest in Nepal and K2 and Nanga Parbat in Pakistan, have become focal points of nationalistic pride for the British, Italians, and Germans respectively, leading to triumphs and tragedies on their slopes.

Keay does not promise his book to be smooth and polished: "Transitioning from geology and paleontology to mysticism and mountaineering by way of archaeology, monastic warfare and exotic commodities cannot be expected to be seamless." His work is not shaped like an academic monograph. Despite this caveat, Keay's multidisciplinary approach creates a captivating narrative that offers readers a comprehensive understanding of the Himalayan landscape, its people, and the various forces that have shaped its remarkable history. The book incorporates quotes from colonial sources which, while being informative, must be approached with some skepticism, as they tend to present the history of the Himalaya from a colonial perspective. Although the book's vast scope may seem overwhelming to newcomers, it presents an enriching experience for those familiar with the subject matter, revealing new dimensions in each chapter. Additionally, it serves as a powerful call to protect the sensitive balance of high alpine ecosystems. Keay fearlessly addresses contemporary environmental challenges faced in the Himalayan region, including climate change, glacier melting, and the impact of tourism on a fragile mountain environment. His balanced approach leaves readers with a sense of urgency to appreciate and safeguard the natural beauty of the Himalaya for generations to come.

In conclusion, *Himalaya: Exploring the Roof of the World* is a remarkable work that attempts to explore various facets of a grand mountain range. John Keay's passion and expertise shine vividly, taking readers on an unforgettable journey filled with history, culture, and awe-inspiring landscapes. This enthralling and informative book is a must-read for anyone seeking to grasp the importance of the Himalayan region as a symbol of natural beauty and a testament to various human endeavors. It will be of interest to scholars, students, and readers of Himalayan studies and South Asian religion alike. Rather than focusing on conflicts and atrocities, I hope that the Himalaya continues to be a region where spirituality and transcendence greet all things living with a much-needed stillness in today's times.

Vineet Gairola is a Ph.D. Candidate in Psychology at the Indian Institute of Technology, Hyderabad. His research focuses on ritual practices and processional journeys of devī-devtās (Hindu deities) in India's Garhwal Himalaya. Most recently, Vineet Gairola received the 2023 APS Student Grant from the Association for Psychological Science, the 2023 Student Diversity Award of the American Psychological Association, the Psychoanalytic Research Exceptional Contribution Award of the IPA, and the Student Research Award from the Division 36 of the American Psychological Association.