

SACRED MOUNTAINS OF THE WORLD

SECOND EDITION

From the Andes to the Himalayas, mountains have an extraordinary power to evoke a sense of the sacred. In the overwhelming wonder and awe that these dramatic features of the landscape awaken, people experience something of deeper significance that imbues their lives with meaning and vitality. Drawing on his extensive research and personal experience as a scholar and climber, Edwin Bernbaum's *Sacred Mountains of the World* takes the reader on a fascinating journey exploring the role of mountains in the mythologies, religions, history, literature, and art of cultures around the world. Bernbaum delves into the spiritual dimensions of mountaineering and the implications of sacred mountains for environmental and cultural preservation. This beautifully written, evocative book shows how the contemplation of sacred mountains can transform everyday life, even in cities far from the peaks themselves.

Thoroughly revised and updated, this new edition considers additional sacred mountains, as well as the impacts of climate change on the sacredness of mountains.

Edwin Bernbaum is a mountaineer and scholar of comparative religion and mythology whose work focuses on the relationship between culture and nature. The first edition of *Sacred Mountains of the World* won the Commonwealth Club of California's gold medal for nonfiction and the Giuseppe Mazzotti Special Jury Prize in Italy for literature of mountains, exploration, and ecology, as well as being shortlisted for the Boardman Tasker Prize for Mountaineering Literature in the United Kingdom. His book *The Way to Shambhala* on Tibetan myths and legends of sacred hidden valleys was originally published by Anchor Doubleday in 1980. He holds an AB from Harvard College and a PhD from the University of California at Berkeley.

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EDWIN BERNBAUM



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*For my wife, Diane, and our son, David,
and in loving memory of our other son, Jonathan, whom we deeply miss*

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PREFACE TO THE SECOND EDITION

Just as various routes of ascent converge at the top of a mountain, writing this book has brought together diverse interests that have shaped the course of my life. Some of my earliest and most influential memories are of magical views of snow-capped peaks in the Andes, where I lived as a young child and where I began mountain climbing as a teenager. Later, the Peace Corps offered me the opportunity to live in Nepal, within sight of the highest mountains on earth. As a result of my experiences climbing and trekking in the Himalayas, I wrote a book on Tibetan myths of hidden valleys and their symbolism and completed a doctorate in Asian Studies in the area of comparative religion and mythology. Emerging as a natural extension of my interests – physical, intellectual, and spiritual – *Sacred Mountains of the World* grew out of seminars I gave at the University of California Berkeley Extension and the Smithsonian Institution.

Because of the broad appeal and fascination of the subject, I have written this book for a general audience, as well as for specialists. Readers intrigued by myth and religion, art and literature, mountaineering and travel, wilderness and the environment, or cross-cultural studies and spirituality may find something that touches on their interests in this book. The book will also prove useful to scholars in diverse fields – from art history, comparative literature, and anthropology to geography, environmental studies, and the history of religions.

Drawing on experiences of people in both traditional and contemporary societies, the Introduction examines the physical and spiritual qualities that give mountains their extraordinary power to awaken a sense of the sacred. Part I explores the rich, diverse significance of sacred mountains in cultures throughout the world. Each chapter gives an overview of the mountains in a particular region and what they mean to the people who revere them, then focuses on a few representative peaks. Some of these peaks – such as Olympos, Fuji, and Sinai – are well known. Others were chosen for a variety of reasons: religious and historical importance, geographic balance, themes illustrated, availability of information, mountaineering significance, bearing on environmental and cultural issues, and my own personal interests. Part II begins with a chapter on symbolism, identifying the major themes found in traditional views of sacred mountains and establishing an approach to understanding the ways they awaken a sense of the sacred. The next chapter draws on this

approach to take a fresh look at well-known works of literature and art to see how they use mountain imagery to transform our perceptions of the world and ourselves. The following chapter explores the spiritual dimensions of mountaineering. The final chapter examines the ways in which the study and contemplation of sacred mountains can help us to appreciate the value of wilderness, promote conservation of the environment, and live deeper, more meaningful lives.

To my regret, I have had to leave out a number of major regions and mountains. Korea deserved a chapter to itself, but I did not have the space to do it justice. Because of such limitations, I could only mention sacred mountains such as Chomolhari in Bhutan and Mount Diablo in California, near where I live. To make room for new mountains and research in the second edition, I had to shorten and remove some older material. If the number of chapters devoted to Asia (five out of the eleven chapters in Part I) seems disproportionate, the reader should bear in mind that the continent holds more than half the world's population as well as the greatest land mass and highest peaks on earth.

Since the original publication of *Sacred Mountains of the World* in 1990, I have visited and done field research on many mountains that I had not been able to visit previously. The second edition draws on that research, adding new material and personal experiences to sections on various mountains ranging from Tai Shan in China to Mount Athos in Greece. In addition, I was able to return to peaks I had previously visited, such as Mount Kailas in Tibet, where I completed the ritual circumambulation of the sacred mountain. The second edition includes a number of new mountains, such as the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta in Colombia, Burkhan Khaldun in Mongolia, and Devils Tower in the United States. The new format of the second edition focuses on the text with only a few photographs, all black and white, most of them new images taken by me since 1990. I have added material based on events since the publication of the first edition, including controversies over placing telescopes on Mauna Kea in Hawai'i and over making snow from grey water on the San Francisco Peaks in Arizona. The second edition makes extensive use of research published in articles and books that have appeared since 1990.

I have also drawn on work I have done on projects that came out of writing the first edition of the book. An invitation to give a keynote on the policy implications of sacred mountains at an international conference led to participation in an innovative project at a pilgrimage shrine in the Himalayas that motivated pilgrims from all over India to restore a sacred forest for reasons coming out of their religious traditions. Noting parallels in the way that National Parks function as secular shrines drawing visitors from all over America, I initiated a program working with interpreters at various parks,

such as Yosemite and Hawai'i Volcanoes, to develop interpretive materials based on the inspirational meanings and associations of features of mountain environments in mainstream American, Native American, Native Hawaiian, and other cultures around the world. Writing *Sacred Mountains of the World* also led to work on a project to nominate Mount Kailas in Tibet and the pilgrimage routes leading to it as a World Heritage site. In addition, I have been working on an international program to integrate the cultural and spiritual significance of nature into the management and governance of protected areas in general. Along with discussions of these projects, the second edition includes a new section on climate change and its impacts on mountains and their sacredness.

Since the first edition of *Sacred Mountains of the World* appeared in 1990, there has been a growing interest in sacred places and a deepening recognition that they provide a sustainable basis for programs of environmental and cultural preservation. When people revere a mountain or other natural site, it acquires for them a special value that makes it worth protecting at all costs – an ultimate value that may, in fact, transcend all cost. To be effective in the long term, environmental programs require the kind of respect for nature found in views of sacred mountains. Without an underlying sense that nature possesses something of deeper reality or significance, conservation efforts lack the bedrock of commitment needed to sustain them. To this end *Sacred Mountains of the World* provides a wealth of useful information and background material for scientists, environmentalists, protected area managers, policy makers, and others who recognize the need to take the spiritual and cultural significance of nature into account in doing research and protecting the environment.

A few matters regarding terminology, style, and content bear mention. First, this book recounts a great number of myths about sacred mountains. I use the word *myth* to refer to stories, ideas, beliefs, and assumptions that express what people in a particular culture or tradition take to be ultimately real. On a superficial level, myths may be factually true or false. At a deeper level they embody deeply held views of reality – the basic, often unconscious, but necessary assumptions that guide people in their lives and interactions with the world around them.

For simplicity and ease in reading, I have avoided the use of unusual diacritical marks, such as the ones used to transliterate Sanskrit and Japanese terms. Those who know them will recognize the words and be able to supply such marks for themselves. To streamline the text and highlight primary sources, I have put much of the scholarly apparatus with references to informants and scholars in the endnotes. Since many readers in the United States, including myself, have a more visceral feel for feet and miles, I have used them rather than meters and kilometers for altitudes and distances. For those who prefer the metric system, computers make conversions between the two

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systems very easy. Finally, a book of this scope is bound to contain mistakes, and I apologize for any errors found in these pages.

The writing of *Sacred Mountains of the World* has been a personal encounter with sacred mountains that has enriched my life, elevated my gaze, and broadened my horizons in ways I could never have imagined. I hope that the reader will have a similar experience in reading this book.

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I am grateful to the many people who have helped me with the research, writing, and publication of the first and second editions of *Sacred Mountains of the World*. To my delight some of the greatest rewards of working on this project have been the friendships that have come out of it. The interest and enthusiasm that others share with me have confirmed my view that the subject of this book has as much to do with people and their relationship to mountains as with the mountains themselves.

Thinking it was a detective novel about a teenage girl named Annapurna, my sister Marcy checked Maurice Herzog's mountaineering classic *Annapurna* out of the library. When she discovered it was about the first expedition to the Himalayan mountain of that name, she tossed it aside. I came across the book, and it inspired a boyhood interest in climbing that led me ultimately to the subject of sacred mountains. Years later, in Nepal, I had the fortune to spend time with Annulu, an extraordinary Sherpa who exemplified many of the values associated with sacred mountains. Raimon Panikkar encouraged me to devote myself to writing *Sacred Mountains of the World*. Lynne Kaufman and Edmund Worthy arranged seminars I gave at the University of California Berkeley Extension and the Smithsonian Institution, out of which this book grew. Larry Hamilton and Jane Pratt played key roles in getting me involved in programs relating sacred mountains to environmental and cultural conservation.

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