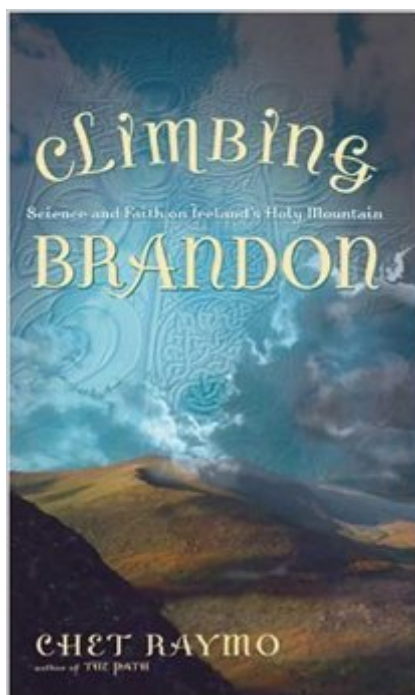


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Climbing Brandon: Science And Faith On Ireland's Holy Mountain



Synopsis

An acclaimed science writer celebrates an enduring symbol of Ireland's Celtic past, Christian tradition, and love of nature. Mount Brandon is one of several holy mountains in Ireland that attract scores of believers and secular trekkers from around the world. For thirty-two years, Chet Raymo has lived part of each year on the Dingle Peninsula, near the foot of the mountain, and he has climbed it perhaps a hundred times, exploring paths that have been used for centuries by pilgrims in search of spiritual enlightenment. But the history and geography of Mount Brandon are what drew Raymo to it and offered him a lens through which to view the modern conflicts between science and religion. When Ireland converted from paganism, it became home to a kind of Christianity that was unique in Europe; intensely intellectual yet attuned to nature, skeptical yet celebratory, grounded in the here-and-now yet open to infinity. In this rich celebration of Mount Brandon, Raymo weaves together myth and science, folklore and natural history, spiritual and physical geographies. He takes us to a time on the wave-lashed edge of the Western world when Mediterranean Christianity ran up against Celtic nature worship and the Irish, with their fondness for ambiguity, double meanings, puns and riddles, forged a fusion of knowledge and faith that sustains us today.

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Customer Reviews

Climbing Brandon by Chet Raymo was a little bit of a disappointment to me. The last book I read by Raymo, *Walking Zero*, felt like being in a college science class with a great, enthusiastic instructor. This book just wasn't as engaging. While Raymo does a good job with his descriptions, they tend to

be a bit dry. If ever a book called out for pictures or illustrations, this is it. I'm not familiar with all of the terms for parts of mountains so when he talks about a corrie or a moraine, I'm lost as to what I should be picturing in my mind. The book is supposed to trace Irish faith with the history of Mount Brandon, and I felt that Raymo wandered from that goal a bit often as well. He says over and over that the Celts infused their brand of Christianity with their naturalistic beliefs, but he never gives any examples of it. Ultimately it seems that the book is about Raymo's own search for faith and God, and I ended up feeling a little sad for him. He decries the belief in a transcendent God who answers intercessory prayer and cites double blind studies proving that it doesn't work. But then he offers prayer himself to a immanent God who exists in all of nature and is worth of praise and thanksgiving for the beauty of creation. Raymo is missing the most important part of God: the personal relationship and joy of talking to a God you know is listening. I get the opinion that Raymo isn't done with his search, and I hope that he finds what he's looking for.

It's probably inevitable that, given the thousands of people who travel to Brandon for pilgrimages and who have mystical experiences there, that the skeptics and reductionists feel the need to "explain it all away." That seems to be the underlying aim of this book. The author weaves all kinds of fascinating historical and archaeological detail, but repeatedly and with increasing frequency, he feels the need to cast aspersions on his former Catholic faith, judging it to be just as far fetched as leprechauns and fairies. After awhile it starts to get annoying. The skeptic's persistent longing to dismiss and explain away. At one time in my life I might have been sympathetic... I'm an electrical engineer and I've made a career of empirical results. But I've had too many real-life experiences that I can't ignore. At my first trip to Brandon, one of my friends Pam Stryker wasn't sure how she was going to get up the mountain because she had fear of heights all her life. When she would look at ground tilted at 15 degrees, to her eyes it would seem like 75 degrees, because of her phobia. But she decided to put one foot in front of the other anyway. When she came back down she suddenly realized she had lost all her fear of heights on the mountain. This, at age 50+ years. Obviously unlike any other mountain or hill she'd attempted. Also - she lost her fear of spiders as well. Suddenly, just like that, on mount Brandon. That fear never came back. A permanent seismic shift in her life. My brother, who is an agnostic, felt a long-standing anxiety dissolve and disappear while he was leaning against cross #7 on the way up the mountain. Brandon has that effect on people. There are MANY stories like this. Thousands. This is why people go. This is why it's different from other mountains. In 2008 in Lakeland Florida I was sitting about 100 feet from a guy named Brian Burgee when the minister said

There's someone here who's been deaf in one ear 34 years, who is it? It was Brian. He'd lost his hearing in one ear due to a loud gunshot. That night he got his hearing back in that ear. The story was reported in a story in the Charlotte Observer. In 2012 in Moravian Falls NC I was sitting right next to a woman named Deirdre when, after 40 years of severe hearing loss in her right ear (from swimming in icy cold water), got her hearing back. So I've seen deaf ears happen twice, up close and personal. The mystical. The miraculous. I've seen far more, but this is already getting long. No one could possibly tell me the mystical isn't real. Or that it's all just my imagination. At the end of the day, I sigh because some people have no room in their belief system for things they don't understand. So, like Chet Raymo, they reduce them and offer "just-so" explanations (which themselves are pure conjecture, presented with no substance or proof). Ultimately, the person who misses out is them.

Raymo does it again! As in his book: "Skeptics and True Believers", his continuing search for harmony between religion and science leading to universal admiration and awe of God's creation, he writes a compelling argument for removing the detritus of dogma and the sterility of science- not that easy for a person who was brought up on Catholicism and schooled in science (physics, astronomy) where he started to articulate his personal misgivings about strict dogma and contradictions. Climbing Brandon was written at his part time home in Ireland on the Dingle Peninsula near the foot Mt Brandon where pilgrims/tourist come from all parts of the world to walk the paths and visit the contemplation centers of long passed saints and monks, i.e., St Patrick, Brendan, et al. With geographical descriptions, especially those garnered from various view points in the surrounding mountains where past contemplatives meditated/prayed, poetical/prayerful/anecdotal/scholarly treatments of Irish/Celtic religious history, including numerous citations, this beautiful book comes off as part: Travel Guide (and watch out- after reading this book, one might be compelled to drop everything and go tour the region!), a crash course in Irish/Celtic cultural history (Paganism, Pantheism, Christianity, etc.), Religio/Science dissertation, etc. The premise that God is in all and not the exclusive property of humans (anthropomorphism) is cited in an early Irish poem attributed to one of the "Milesian" princes, Amergin: "Song of Amergin" or "The Mystery". Think of everything that exists and the poem covers it- this is God. Same notion as in the sermon of St Columbanus which ends with: [Those who wish to know God, he says,] "must first review the natural world". This same notion is put forth with citations from: Thomas Berry, E.O. Wilson, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin and many others. Thanks again to Chet Raymo for another

beautiful, thought provoking book!

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