

DENNING, Andrew – *Skiing into Modernity: A Cultural and Environmental History*. Oakland: University of California Press, 2015. Pp. 236.

It is difficult to think of the Alps and not envision skiers schussing down well-manicured slopes, or quaint alpine villages full of winter tourists. Such visions, as Andrew Denning explains in *Skiing into Modernity: A Cultural and Environmental History*, are products of what he terms “Alpine modernism.” Centring the sport as part of an ongoing negotiation in Europeans’ relationship with nature, from the late nineteenth century through the 1970s, Denning argues that skiing embodied modernist understandings of technology while providing an escape into nature from the increasingly industrialized and structured modern world.

Like similar works on environmental and tourism history, *Skiing into Modernity* explores how changing technological and economic realities shaped cultural understandings of nature. Yet Denning places skiing in the cultural context of fin-de-siècle Europe’s embrace of modernism. Observing tautly, “In the Alps, modernity arrived on skis” (p. 9), he traces how the sport combined technological innovation with romantic views of mountain landscapes in creating a distinctive “Alpine modernism” that was at once “reflective of the dynamics and velocity of modern times and uniquely suited to counteract the stresses of these very same modern conditions” (p. 11). In this sense, modern tourism, sport, and leisure were not simply acts of capitalist consumption, but also active, critical pursuits that placed individuals in contact with nature.

Beyond using modernism to ground skiing, and hence Europeans’ changing views of the Alps, he challenges the notion that the two world wars and the Cold War alone structure our understanding of European history by linking skiing’s late-nineteenth-century emergence as a recreational pursuit to the 1970s’ rise of winter tourism. European ski resorts, as well as the modern Winter Olympics, emerged from modernist understandings of mountain landscapes. But Denning emphasizes the Second World War’s impact on European culture, particularly skiing.

Denning explains crucially how skiers embraced modern notions of objective technology and idealized notions of nature. Skiing, as a product of modernism, relied on technological innovations, which in turn allowed skiers to connect with the Alpine world at a visceral level. This innovation both created a distinctly Alpine culture and drove the sport’s popularity through the first half of the twentieth century, after which skiing became more democratic, profitable, and significant in defining European culture.

Denning divides the book into three roughly chronological sections. Part one traces modern skiing’s Scandinavian roots and early introduction to the German and Austrian Alps. Part two moves the story firmly into the twentieth century with continental Europe’s embrace of modernism through Alpine skiing. Lastly, part three explores skiing’s meteoric rise in popularity and the completion of the Alps’ modernization by 1970.

While chronological, each section of *Skiing into Modernity* differs thematically. The first part—the book’s strongest—provides a rich history of both skiing’s emergence and of Europe’s modernization in the late nineteenth century.

Denning's discussion of skiing's roots in Norway and of the Norwegians and Austrians' passionate debate about the sport's definition reflects nationalism's broader influence throughout Europe. He shows the schism between "Nordic" and "Alpine" styles as reflecting both cultural understandings of very different landscape and different interpretations of modernism, thereby enriching the sport's history.

Part two first discusses the roles of mobility and technology in crafting skiing's culture in the 1900s and 1910s. Modernity, Denning explains, was mechanical and artificial, yet Alpine skiers sought to "reestablish the organic harmony between humans and nature by reviving forms of mobility" (p. 86). Skiing's physicality and speed combined with modernist ideas of order and control to create an Alpine culture that spanned from Vienna to Sestriere. In this manner, Alpine skiing embodied the Olympic movement's motto of "*Citius, altius, fortius*" (Faster, higher, stronger). The emergence of the Winter Olympics, especially the 1936 Games in Garmisch-Partenkirchen, Germany, confirmed skiing's growing popularity as both spectator sport and leisure activity.

The third part—the book's shortest—looks at the final stages, after 1945, in the modernization of the Alps and the emerging tension between the sport's increasing commercialism and its roots. Reflecting the seismic cultural shifts in postwar Europe, skiing's rise in popularity led to new ski resorts throughout the Alps, and critics saw a sea change in attitudes as skiers became "unthinking consumers of an inauthentic sport and an artificial landscape" (p. 173). The construction of ski lifts, snowmaking, and other amenities further divorced them from the natural world, ending Alpine modernism's idealized relationship between skiers and the mountains. The sport came to represent progress rather than modernization, Denning concludes convincingly, setting the stage for the sport's next evolution.

Skiing into Modernity joins a growing number of works in environmental and cultural history studying mountain landscapes. Denning's "Alpine modernism" cleverly links modernism with changing ideas of mountain landscapes, adding depth to the historiography of tourism, environment, and leisure. His conclusion that Alpine modernism was not just a discourse about the relationship between humans and nature, but an ideology that kindled the modernization of the European Alps, places skiing, and by extension recreational tourism, at the centre of the region's economic and cultural transformation and adds insightfully to the conversation.

Expanding those insights to Alpine modernism's global influence would have been a great addition to the volume. For example, the emigration of European ski instructors such as Hannes Schneider, Otto Lang, and Friedl Pfeifer to North America before 1939 began to globalize skiing and, by extension, Alpine modernism. Like other tourism scholars, Denning also fails to fully explore the implication of class on early recreational tourism. Specifically, how did affluence define the sport's culture and proliferation? These suggestions aside, *Skiing into Modernity* offers a rich addition to the bookshelves of scholars of modern Europe, tourism, sport, and of course skiing.

Michael Childers
University of Northern Iowa