Book Reviews

Ghosts of Everest

Jochen Hemmleb, Larry A. Johnson, and Eric R.

Simonson (as told to William E. Northdurft)

Seattle, WA: The Mountaineers Books, 1999

US \$29.95, 207 pages, hardcover

June 8, 1924, may not be a date that most people associate with any significant historical achievement. Nor do most associate George Leigh Mallory or Andrew Cournyn Irvine with Mount Everest in the same way that Edmund Hillary or Tenzing Norgay are linked to this mountain, the latter two reaching the summit of Everest on May 29, 1953. However, the question remains: Did George Mallory and Andrew Irvine first reach the summit of Everest?

After 75 years of speculation, one of the great mysteries in the annals of exploration comes to a head. On that fateful day in 1924, photographer, geologist, and fellow climber Noel Odell caught a glimpse of the men 600 feet below the summit at 12:50 PM, “still going strong” above a rock outcrop called the Second Step. Soon afterward, a storm blew over Odell, and he saw nothing more. Mallory and Irvine never returned.

On May 1, 1999, in a clandestine effort to find the remains of the climb, the 1999 Mallory and Irvine Research Expedition found something that would forever change climbing history. Conrad Anker, one of the expedition’s climbers, came across the body of none other than George Mallory, remarkably intact. The letters and effects found on Mallory, in addition to oxygen bottles and an ice axe found earlier, give a rough idea as to the fate of Mallory and Irvine. Unfortunately, the 1999 expedition was unable to find the camera that Mallory borrowed that could demonstrate whether or not the 1924 expedition reached the summit.

Odell was the sole eyewitness to Mallory and Irvine’s summit bid, and much of the subsequent conjecture about their fate has rested on precisely where Odell saw them. The 1999 expedition did not stop after finding Mallory; rather, they attempted to verify what Odell saw from his vantage point, and even retraced the possible route taken to the summit. Anker and his summit partner, Dave Hahn, shed more light on the possibility of Mallory and Irvine’s fate, based on their climbing experience and the climbing standards and equipment known to exist in 1924. Anker himself attempted to free climb the Second Step to determine if it could have been overcome in 1924.

Jochen Hemmleb, one of the authors who has exten-

sively studied Everest history, nicely compiles some of the facts with the disparate bits of data gathered during the past 75 years, including those of the current expedition. The authors compare and contrast both expeditions to give the reader insight on how organized expeditions have changed over the years. After a good introduction, the book continues in a somewhat jumbled fashion, becoming initially difficult to follow, yet the authors are able to pull the mystery and the end of the book toward a good finale. They also do a fairly good job of giving the reader insight into the personalities of the climbers on both expeditions, although it is weighted more toward the 1999 expedition (no doubt understandable, considering that record keeping was not as detailed 75 years ago). Although one cannot assert that these 2 men peaked on Everest 33 years before Hillary and Norgay, one does certainly appreciate the nature of their daring endeavor, considering the limited clothing and protection climbers had in the 1920s.

Overall, the text is well written and researched, with many references. The historical insight into those times is captivating, and quotes from the 1924 climbers and organizers add to the story’s personality. The photographs also augment the flow of the text. Although some argue that the authors may have sensationalized Mallory and Irvine, the treatment is not entirely unfair when one considers the ways these early pioneers attempted to push the standards of the day. I heartily recommend this book to anyone interested in climbing, high altitude, or expedition medicine, or to anyone who likes a good mystery.

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High Life: A History of High-Altitude Physiology and Medicine

John B. West

New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1998

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Our understanding of the effects of hypoxia on the human body continues to grow. Fueled by curious minds inspired to observe, investigate, and record this body of expanding knowledge, a path has been worn. It is this historic trail that *High Life: A History of High-Altitude Physiology and Medicine* documents.

Beginning with the first known description of the del-