Book Reviews

The Wildest Dream: The Biography of George Mallory

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Much is known about the well-documented British expeditions to the north side of Mt Everest (8880 m) in the early 1920s. This is particularly true of the ill-fated 1924 expedition during which George Mallory (37 years old) and Sandy Irving (22 years old) were last seen high on the mountain. Some 75 years later, climbers discovered the body of Mallory near the present high camp at 8300 m. Many of us who have since climbed the same route feel it would have been suicidal for Mallory and Irving to actually attempt to climb and descend the famed vertical second step at 8600 m. This is inferred from the hardest grade of rock climbing that Mallory was capable of during his many trips to North Wales. Thus, it is improbable that he had reached the summit that tragic day. We now know Mallory had died descending the mountain, but no evidence has ever been found to declare just how high the pair had ascended.

In contrast, very little has been brought forward over the years about Mallory himself. *The Wildest Dream: The Biography of George Mallory* is a very detailed thesis relating an intimate portrait of George Mallory: the child, the student, the young man, the schoolteacher, the husband, and, of course, the climber.

Extreme-altitude climbers have much weighing into the balance of the decisions they make. A life of competing desires characterizes extreme climbers. The stakes are very high for the choices a climber must make throughout life. What fuels such desire? The authors bring a well-researched study of 1 brief life, cut short by the pursuit of a very risky dream. Mallory, like Hillary some 29 years later, found the personal fame and fortune of the first ascent a compelling draw to Mt Everest. Mallory and team faced even greater commitment and sacrifice in the age before commercial flights and modern equipment and techniques. The full account is historically interesting while tragic and sad.

As an 8000-m mountain guide, husband, father, and physician, I found the book a fascinating glimpse into the life of an early extreme-altitude climber. There are several critical elements active in such lives that pull in remarkably different directions. Indeed, little of the internal conflict has changed. To readers with a curious interest in Mt Everest and the 8000-m mountains, the

book uniquely delivers an impression of the people who climb in extreme environs. The book was fashioned to be an authoritative biography of George Mallory. The resulting detail demands enduring effort on the part of a general reader. However, one may skip along the pages and settle into sections that are of individual interest.

For any mountain, there is much more to the story than whether a climber has reached the top. The authors do an impressive job of telling us the rest of the story in *The Wildest Dream: The Biography of George Mallory*. The reader learns of the youth, the person, the companions, the place, and the time in which Mallory lived and fatally climbed.

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