

Everest Calling: Ascent of the Dark Side: The Mallory-Irvine Ridge. Lorna Siggins. Mainstream Publishing Company, Edinburgh, Scotland. 1994. 191 pages, color and black-and-white photographs. £14.99.

Everest books tend to emphasize one of several themes, usually along the lines of individual or team heroism, or national heroism. When Dawson Stelfox became the first Irishman to climb Everest in 1993 via still seldom-climbed Mallory-Irvine (or north ridge) route, he became a hero in his homeland as Everest “conquerors” often do. But Stelfox hails from Belfast in Northern Ireland, which prompted a rival southern-born Irish mountaineer months later to claim that an Irishman, “from the south,” still had not climbed Everest.

This book chronicles Stelfox and his teammates’ fine effort in becoming the first British mountaineers to climb the route upon which George Mallory and Andrew Irvine perished in 1924. Their story mixes a curious, yet intriguing blend of journalism, fine prose, and Irish nationalism. This because the principal author, Lorna Siggins, is a non-climbing journalist from the expedition-sponsoring Irish Times, while the Boardman-Tasker prize-winning writer and expedition member Dermot Somers contributes a string of fine diary entries.

The nationalistic thread running through the book I found remarkable because, as is stated on page 155, the climbers felt compelled to leave not an Irish tricolour, “not a Union Jack on Everest’s summit . . . national flags, national anthems were not in the spirit of this expedition.” Yet the Irish hometowns and ancestral connections of each team member are dutifully noted, along with the Irish ancestry of additional cast members such as Sir Edmund Hillary and John Barry. Oddly, the book was printed in Scotland—but it was most certainly written for the Irish market.

Everest Calling ultimately stands out because of Siggins’ and Somers’ contrasting writing styles, from her tight journalism to his flowing, eloquent prose. Siggins’ newspaperly text improves and gathers speed as you progress; Somers writes beautifully about Buddhism, Tibet and the Chinese occupation, paralleling their long-standing history of political violence with his own country’s. Only an Irish mountaineer would dare make an analogy to a bomb alert in a climbing book! His talent now widely praised, Somers is a gifted writer able to capture the rapture and agony of climbing with succinct phrases and delightful coloring (page 80):

Just ahead, the valley threw out its arms
like the nave of a cathedral in awe before
Everest, and there in the flattening was the
Rongbuk Monastery, the highest on earth; only
Buddhism could live that high, and probably
makes more sense here than it does in Dharamsala,
Berkeley, CA, or at Hyde Park Corner.

“Ascent of the Dark Side” though. Why, I wondered? Because the route is north-facing, I suppose, cold and shaded—or was there some deeper, darker

mirror here reflecting the Irish soul? There are few other shortcomings. Messner is called “an Austrian mountaineer,” and unfortunately the Spanish photographic reproduction is sometimes blurry. Four photos are also printed backwards. The best reasons for tracking down this book, however, are Dermot Somers’ excellent writings, and the array of fascinating closeup photographs of the upper section of Everest’s North Ridge, including the Second Step—a route I, too, would one day like to climb.

ED WEBSTER

At the Rising of the Moon. Dermot Somers. Baton Wicks, London. 208 pages. Paperback.

Most climbing literature comes from climbers who write. Dermot Somers, however, sounds like a writer who also happens to climb. The distinction turns on two factors, both of them easy to find in this collection of ten short stories. One is his relation to language. Of course, fiction allows for a freer play of language than non-fiction. But Somers displays such relish for the surprising metaphor, the vivid but unusual image, and the right word that the genre seems to matter. Even when this delight, this urge to *write*, leads Somers to risk excess, it seems more a foible than a fault. Perhaps one example from the longest story, “Lightning in the Dark,” will serve to make both points.

Tony woke to the sound of Kathmandu rasping like a glass-cutter at the hotel window. The last traces of darkness were being scraped from the city releasing the exact cacophony sleep had drowned the night before, as if day were a nonstop affair in the street which never actually ceased, but was subdued by bouts of darkness. . . . The torn window-mesh was designed to let mosquitoes in and sieve sanity out.

This sense of playing with the materials at hand frequently extends beyond the words themselves to the level of the scene. In “A Tale of Spendthrift Innocence,” the narrator and his partner are following an independent (and marginally competent) French duo up the north face of the Dru. When Henri is on the verge of a giant uncontrolled pendulum into the side of a pillar, Somers momentarily sees

Laurel and Hardy mullocking the piano up the thousand steps all over again. There was something simultaneously disastrous and invincible about this pair—the rubber-bones of roughhouse comedy. I felt that if Henri took his hundred-foot swing and pancaked onto a rock he would simply raise his little bowler hat of a helmet, measure the lump on his head, stalk up the rope, and punch Jacques on the nose, who would promptly somersault a hundred feet down the north face only to spring back like a Jacques-in-the-box, and . . .