Reviews

EDITED BY DAVID STEVENSON


If God is in the details, Brad Washburn’s first book based entirely on his own mountain photography is sacred art. Why he waited until his 90th year to publish it is also in the details. H. Bradford Washburn is without a doubt the most singularly exacting human being I have ever known.

Though many obsessive perfectionists never realize their potential, Brad is not among them. This book chronicles eight decades of knowing exactly when to go for it, whether climbing mountains, doing science, taking photographs, or writing books. It has a special emphasis on Alaska, but an accompanying chronology sums up the global breadth of Brad’s work and play, which seem to always be one and the same.

More than 75 years ago, Brad began writing books. Just after he climbed Mont Blanc, Monte Rosa, and the Matterhorn at 16, Travels with Bradford was commissioned by G.P. Putnam, who later married Amelia Earhart. By the time this book was published the following year, Brad’s guidebook, Trails and Peaks of the Presidential Range, was already in print.

At 20, Brad lectured for the National Geographic Society and embarked on making a feature film about the Alps. He soon graduated cum laude from Harvard and entered the college’s Institute for Geographical Exploration, where Alaska caught his lifelong fancy. He made first ascents of some of North America’s highest peaks while engaged in exploring, photographing, and mapping. Many decades later, he produced the most exquisitely detailed map of Mount McKinley ever made, based on his aerial photography.

At 24, Brad got his pilot’s license and soon interviewed to be Amelia Earhart’s navigator on her attempt to fly around the world. After carefully considering the radio navigation situation over the Pacific Ocean, he withdrew. Within the year after Amelia vanished over the Pacific, Brad became the first director of the Boston Museum of Science, a position he held for nearly 40 years. His close relationship with top figures in both science and industry got him into aerial field testing of films for both Eastman Kodak and Agfa, often in flights over remote parts of the Alaska Range.

At an early age, Brad was inspired by the images of the great Italian photographer/mountaineer Vittorio Sella, who accompanied the Duke of Abruzzi to K2, the Ruwenzori, and Alaska’s Mount St. Elias, perhaps accounting for Brad’s urge to make the first winter crossing of the St. Elias Range, which he photographed for a National Geographic story when he was 25. Brad began shooting with a Brownie box camera at 14, but followed his mother’s advice in spades when she said he needed to use larger format cameras to obtain the optimum image quality that he desired. Brad first graduated to the same Vest Pocket Kodak that Mallory had on Everest in 1924, moved up to a four-by-six-, and then to seven-by-nine- and eight-by-ten-inch formats for serious aerial photography.

The hallmarks of Brad’s imagery are bold compositions in the style of Sella, combined with a clarity not coincidentally reminiscent of Ansel Adams’, a friend who coached him in
darkroom techniques. By themselves, the 100 full-page, large-format mountain photographs in this book would have a limited audience, despite their exquisite quality, were it not for the addition of a visual narrative of smaller images of people, activities, and Brad at different ages in the field. This is what gives the book a personal, biographical flavor, fully justifying an open-ended prophecy Ansel Adams made before his death in 1984: “One never knows what next to expect from this roving genius of mind and mountain, but whatever it is, we know that it will be excellent and effective.”

The Mountaineers have impeccably reproduced the flawless visual power of Brad’s work in a stunning book that exceeds the quality of many of Ansel Adams’ books—but why shouldn’t it, given modern advances in printing and Brad’s perfectionism? Like some of the retrospective books of Adams’ works, this one displays a lifetime commitment and enduring dedication to photography. The two Alaskan images juxtaposed on pages 51-52 show wonderfully aesthetic banding patterns of two different glaciers, yet one is dated 1938 and the other is 1994 (taken at ages 28 and 84). To my trained eye, the quality looks similar, though Brad might well debate that and mail me two original prints to prove his point, along with a cordial, but directly worded, cover letter.

Throughout his career, Brad has generously shared all he knows with other photographers and mountaineers. As a young climber in the early 1960s, I voraciously devoured Brad’s heavily illustrated articles in this journal, which often included stunning aerial photographs of remote peaks that were unclimbed or had unclimbed faces. When young climbers such as myself wrote for more information, we often received original prints to contemplate before embarking on our own expeditions. When we succeeded, a congratulatory note from Brad was sure to arrive soon after.

In 1974, David Roberts brought a Washburn original print of the southeast face of Mount Dickey on our attempt to climb the virgin 4,500-foot wall. I thought I had the route scoped out well enough in my head until a blizzard hit us a thousand feet from the top. David pulled out the folded eight-by-ten print and navigated us up the final pitches by reference to its fine detail.

Sometime in the mid-1970s, Brad had an exasperating experience that many a mountain photographer has shared. He saw the perfect vision for a mountain photograph appear through a horribly dirty airplane window. Mount McKinley emerged between two parting cloud banks in fantastic light. Instead of cursing his luck, Brad thought up a brilliant solution. The dirty window happened to be in the emergency exit of a British executive jet, on which he had hitched a flight back from the North Slope of the Brooks Range. He thought, “Why not make a special emergency exit window of optical glass?” And while he was at it, why not make it fit a personal jet more commonly found in the United States? (Got a Lear Jet? I’ve got a window for it....) And why not ask his old Boston friend, Edwin Land of Polaroid, to procure the perfect optical glass? Yes, three-quarter-inch fused quartz of optical quality would do just fine. Now he wouldn’t have to fly over McKinley in a bush plane with the door off in −70°F temperatures ever again.

Brad arranged a Lear Jet to fly over Mount Everest with his camera and door, producing incredible images on nine-inch film shot from 39,000 feet as the basis for creating the finest-ever map of Mount Everest. Brad was 78 when National Geographic published 10.6 million copies of the map to insert in every copy of a special Himalayan issue. The project was a tour de force of diplomacy for permissions to overfly the border between Tibet and Nepal, as well as of cartography involving the best Swiss mapping experts interpreting information from his stereo photographs. Though none of those incredible photos appear in this book, one hangs in a special place in my office, signed by Brad and the late Barry Bishop, who assisted with the project.
At the 1980 AAC annual dinner, Brad motioned me over to his table and asked what I was up to the following year. I mentioned that I had a *National Geographic* assignment to climb and trek around Amne Machin, once thought to be higher than Everest. Brad’s eyes lit up as brightly as the lasers he later used to pinpoint the exact height of Everest. He grabbed a napkin and sketched the area around the peaks in eastern Tibet, marking each summit’s height in meters. He talked about his aerial reconnaissance there in 1948 as if it were yesterday.

When I returned from Tibet, I noted that Brad’s sketch did not conform well with the features on the classified U.S. Defense Department map that I had been permitted to view by special permission from Secretary Caspar Weinberger, who served with me on an environmental board. Cap had stressed that no copies were to go to Tibet with me, because national security would be compromised if the map got into the wrong hands and the Chinese found out just how much ground information we really had from those U2 overflights. Thank God they never confiscated the napkin I took to Tibet with Brad’s sketch. It held far more accurate information than the best official map.

Though some of Brad’s photographs have been exhibited in prominent art galleries, he clearly states that he never took them for art’s sake. He was merely making images of aspects of the natural world that fascinated him, such as mountains, glaciers, and rock formations. That Brad was able to complete and guide the production of this beautiful book in his 90th year is yet another addition to the voluminous chronology of his accomplishments that appears on the final pages.


Figuratively, the dichotomous title of Ed Webster’s book tells a lot about what’s inside. The first phrase, “Snow in the Kingdom,” is wonderfully transcendent and enigmatic, hinting at something both heroic and humble, powerful yet serene. The second half, “My Storm Years on Everest,” made me grind my teeth just a bit the first time I read it. There is something self-absorbed here, like we’re soon to find out a lot more about Ed Webster than we might have otherwise chosen to know. And so it goes with this book: the full spectrum is represented, from the quite nearly sublime to something else resembling the narcissistic. Constructed around a tumultuous four-year period of Webster’s life, this 580-page autobiographical tome takes us from the life of a talented itinerant rock climber to one of the greatest Himalayan climbs ever, and covers quite a bit in between.

Webster completed the bulk of this book in 1990 during the trying aftermath of his final Everest climb, “...typing out the words in agonizing taps with my black mummified, frostbitten fingertips.” Whew. Unable to find a big book publisher interested in an Everest story or a mountaineering book publisher with a deal worth the trouble, Webster, after a further ten years of incubation, resolved to take the daunting path of self-publishing.

A predominant characteristic of this book is Webster’s urge to tell us, fairly intimately, what’s going on inside him. Truly expressing one’s emotions and fears in written word takes courage. There are multiple layers around that true core of honesty that look like the real thing, but aren’t, and it’s exceedingly difficult to pierce through them. Webster doesn’t shy away from trying, and my sense is that he wanders amongst these various layers, often almost gratuitously telling us about the time he had a certain feeling, yet on other occasions, more