
Since the discovery of George Mallory’s body in 1999 high on the flanks of Mt. Everest, a firestorm of media has refueled the mystery and debate over whether he and Sandy Irvine achieved the summit before perishing. Compared to other recently published books about Mallory, The Wildest Dream conjectures less directly about whether Mallory and Irvine did or did not summit the mountain. Instead of dissecting every possible detail of the evidence found to date, this book gives the reader a much broader perspective and context, providing rare insight into Mallory’s abilities, drive, determination, accomplishments, and psychology. The Gillmans thereby shed as much light on how high Mallory and Irvine may have climbed as any detailed, hypothetical thesis has. These intangible aspects of Mallory’s personality—illuminated so expertly in these pages—are what make a great climber out of an ordinary athlete, what squeezes triumph from disappointment, and what makes Mallory, the man, as compelling as speculation about his success on Everest.

The Wildest Dream is a wonderfully done biography, and just might be the final word on Mallory. In exhaustive and sometimes painstaking detail, it chronicles Mallory’s ancestors, early childhood as a pastor’s son, life through adolescence, and finally coming of age at Cambridge University. We come to know George Mallory not as the impersonal “Mallory” but simply as “George,” and his wife as “Ruth” (as they are referred to throughout).

Great attention is paid to Mallory’s friends, mentors, and teachers, and how they influenced his life. Mallory’s youthful homoerotic experimentation is carefully inspected, for Mallory’s sexuality has been of interest and discussion from early on. Certainly for his time, he presents a vexing dichotomy between an image of stoic, turn-of-the-century masculinity and a man of softer, delicate features exploring his sexuality first with other men. At times, I found myself asking why I should even care about such details, but as the biography followed Mallory’s character development through his life, this information filled the seams of the aggregate picture of him.

Where many other books on explorers and adventurers minimize, or even ignore, all that is left behind during an expedition—loved ones, careers, responsibilities—this book takes time to explore the impact of Mallory’s many extended absences. He left behind his wife, Ruth, and their children for numerous climbing excursions, for World War I, for work, and for his three lengthy attempts on Everest. Through letters, poems, and anecdotes, we are kept in touch with the brave Ruth, who keeps a sturdy upper lip each time Mallory leaves. Left home to raise their children alone, she wishes only for George what will make him happy.

Captivatingly, The Wildest Dream details the vortex of spiraling obsession that so often consumes climbers (and others) as they pursue their cherished goals. This, even in the face of minimal chance of success or grave danger, is as true today as it was then. Like an addict pursuing a fix, Mallory goes back to Everest yet a third time, in 1924, spurred by his and his family’s rationalizations that it is his duty to finish the business that was started. However, the Gillmans—experienced climbers themselves—shine light into motives less frequently discussed: competitiveness, pride, ego, financial reward, class status, and recognition, motives that are commonly acknowledged in today’s world, but were not always ascribed to adventurers of the early 1900s.

Mallory famously told a reporter on an American lecture tour in 1923 that he wanted to climb Everest “because it is there.” But his rationale was surely more complicated and interesting than that. The Wildest Dream shows us that Mallory was keenly aware of a grand opportu-
nity: he knew that success would bestow all manner of rewards. However, throughout, Mallory’s ever-shining spirit and unwavering love for the grand adventures of the day is revealed.

The Wildest Dream, meticulously written, adds considerably to what we know about a complex, remarkable man whose body—remarkably well preserved—was found 75 years after his death, 26,760 feet above sea level. This book gives us a much greater appreciation of the detailed expedition record of 1924. It is not the definitive 1924 expedition narrative, but with this book, Peter and Leni Gillman have given us much more than another opinion about “did they or didn’t they.”

NEAL BEIDLEMAN


John Rawlings’ history of the Stanford Alpine Club offers readers an inspiring connection to the past. The large-format book details the rich history of the club by way of lively stories, revealing quotes, and an impressive collection of mountain photographs. Rawlings traces the origins of Stanford alpinism to the university’s first president, David Starr Jordan, who made an early ascent of the Matterhorn in 1881. Bolton Browne, a professor of drawing, recorded the most difficult climb of the day, soloing Mt. Clarence King in the High Sierra in 1896. The club itself was formed in the late 1940s by a few World War II veterans who adopted the motto, “No Guts, No Glory.”

From the beginning, women were active participants in the club, which functioned as a social engine as much as an athletic opportunity. In fact, “Fearless” Freddy Hubbard, an early female club member, believes the club to have begun as an offshoot of a hiking club organized by women in 1945. Climbers enjoyed day outings at local crags and pooled resources for weekend Yosemite trips. Steve Roper, in his foreword, calls the book “a testament to an era when young, enthusiastic college kids went out and had good fun in the mountains.” Among those enthusiasts were some of the most important climbers of the day. John Harlin mentored Henry Kendall, who taught Tom Frost the ropes. Nick Clinch and Jim Collins join others on the long list of climbers who honed their skills while at Stanford. Of the many achievements of this exceptional group, Henry Kendall’s 1990 Nobel Prize in physics may eclipse them all.

The book overflows with rich anecdotes, and Rawlings’ exhaustive research is evident throughout. Details of early fatal accidents are tempered by stories of building hijinx and creative tall tales. Each chapter in this well-constructed volume is enlivened by black-and-white photos. Additionally, portfolios representing the work of Leigh Ortenburger, Tom Frost, Henry Kendall, and others—keenly selected by photography editor Glen Denny—enhance the beauty of the book. Ortenburger’s pictures, taken exclusively from his Peru collection, offer a remarkable look at the Cordillera Blanca. Frost’s group includes a healthy number of El Capitan shots that document big wall climbing in its infancy.

By the early 1980s, the club had petered out. Why this happened it difficult to say. Rawlings quotes former club president Roger Gocking, who plausibly surmised that the steep rise in climbing standards may have had something to do with it. Instead of joining group outings where new climbers were taught to belay, serious climbers were doing harder and harder climbs with accomplished partners; achievement may have displaced cama-