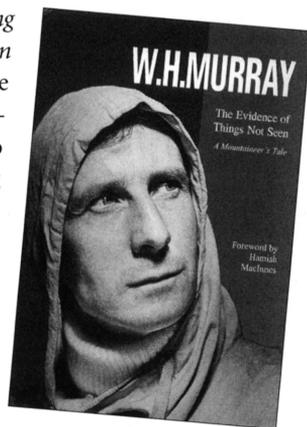


BOOK REVIEWS

EDITED BY DAVID STEVENSON

W.H. Murray: Evidence of Things Not Seen: A Mountaineer's Tale. W.H. MURRAY. FOREWORD BY HAMISH MACINNES. LONDON: BATON WICKS, 2002. 352 PAGES, HARDCOVER. £ 20.00.

In 1947, W.H. Murray created an instant classic with his *Mountaineering in Scotland*. Four years later, he published *The Scottish Himalayan Expedition*, which remains one of the more prized books of the expedition genre. Initially, as one reads the expected British understatement and erudite observations, it would be tempting to conclude—particularly if you haven't studied Murray's wry writing or frosted-over routes—that he was another gentlemanly author from the shoulder-belaying, tweed-jacketed, and siege-styled slogs era. Yet Murray wore nylon cagoules, shortened his ice ax, and deplored large expeditions. His whimsical self-deprecation inspired and defined a whole generation of understated, sandbagging British hardmen. Then Murray came into a league all of his own by writing about soaring birds, the beauty of forests, and through unsentimental and subtly turned prose, the transformation that climbing made upon his soul.



No surprise that his recent autobiography, *The Evidence of Things Not Seen*, has won awards, right? After all, the central flaw of climbing autobiographies is that their authors are unable or unwilling to show how climbing has influenced the rest of their lives. Marriages are relegated to mere paragraphs, families—children, death of parents, and home life—are invisible behind the essential community of climbing partners, and we are often left to wonder how most climbers sew the incongruent threads of climbing into the clothing of a full life. Yet, based on *The Evidence*, the author succeeds in this regard.

Unlike Murray, many climbers write the so-called autobiography before midlife. The truth is that book contracts come with epic achievements crafted by authors still in their physical prime. While such books deserve a following among collectors and readers passionate about mountains, as art, the climbing autobiography remains the *enfant terrible* of the genre. Such abbreviated memoirs comprise the bulk of climbing literature, and more than a few standouts (including a few ghosted narratives) exist, but none are true autobiographies, commonly defined “as an account of a person’s life.” In the uncommon example of true climbing autobiographies—written when climbers become long of tooth—these memoirists earn a living through anything but writing. So by necessity the long-practiced skill of constructing a written narrative is overshadowed by career and/or climbing. Here again, Murray (author of 20 books) proves an exception.

It seems remarkable then—given the author’s craftsmanship as a writer and the book’s awards—that *The Evidence of Things Not Seen* is disjointed. And unless you count Murray’s

ironic fall, taken while fixing his roof in 1995, the disrupted narrative is not the author's fault.

The beginning of the book shows us how Murray was born into the tragedy of World War I, resulting in a national circumspection against adventure. For Murray, whose rock and ice routes would place Scotland on the map of run-out climbing, this only gave him more vertical terrain to explore.

By page 47, just as the reader has begun to piece together Murray's coming of age on the crags, a chapter from *Mountaineering in Scotland* is tacked on like an old patch on his brand new knickers. While diehard students of Murray might find this an interesting digression to the author's earlier writing style, "The Winter Ascent of Garrick's Shelf" does not fit. This chapter lacks his keen descriptions of companions, or the context of how this climb impacted his life, and the book loses narrative drive as if his otherwise capable editor (Ken Wilson, formerly of *Mountain Magazine*) had mistakenly sewn the knickers' legs shut with a patch job.

Ten pages later, the narrative recovers when Murray reluctantly enters World War II. Some scenes in Africa and the various prison camps are terribly understated—as if Murray could not fully probe these painful memories or visit some injustice on his dead companions. For instance, his platoon is machine-gunned down in front of him, while he makes a miraculous escape, but he never speaks of or any personal feelings for the men or a sense of loss. While it's easy to imagine most new millennial journalists expanding this 100-page "Fortunes of War" into a major opus of its own, Murray seems to have been gathering himself for a greater literary mission.

There's no question that he was crafting something apart from the aforementioned faulty climbing autobiography. Through his initial forebodings about war, his capture, and his internment in prisoner of war camps, *The Evidence* shows how climbing gave Murray hope and a reason to live. Through these page turning and concisely written war days, we learn of how the author spent two years finding a narrative voice while scribing *Mountaineering in Scotland* on stiffened toilet paper—wryly describing how he substituted the Red Cross volumes of Shakespeare, written on much softer paper. The Gestapo eventually found the manuscript hidden in his overcoat, interrogated Murray, then destroyed the manuscript, believing that the Scottish officer's carefully worded work about mountains had to be coded intelligence information. Over the next two years of imprisonment, Murray describes how he forced himself to rewrite the book.

The autobiography is not diminished by war's end. Murray returns to climbing and rediscovers his center—one of the most joyful and carefully delineated pieces of climbing prose ever written. A fall in the Alps kills one of his partners and fractures Murray's skull. In all of these anecdotes, the author drops in the bons mots of his carefully observed life, about how accidents are caused and the fallacy of mountains "building character" and what women give to men—conclusions that only a wise, mature man could embark upon. As if this isn't enough, his descriptions of family, home, and career illuminate a world that most climbing autobiographers have steadfastly neglected.

Here at mid autobiography, six chapters are again stitched in, this time from *The Scottish Himalayan Expedition*, along with several disparate essays that feel more like unpublished magazine articles: the pratfalls of a writing career and how Hollywood stole his biographical book about Rob Roy, a recounting of his conservation work, and chapters about more provincial Scottish climbers and places that are scarcely placed in the greater context of his life. So the promise of what Murray was up to with this beautifully initiated autobiography ended when

his wife, on that roofing day in 1995, “heard a slither and a fall and found him on rocks at the edge of the loch. Not being in the habit of falling he was more concerned about this aberration than about his injuries.”

There are brief passages in the latter part of the book when his narrative voice returns with full insightfulness. He wrote (obviously from old age): “The expeditions to Garwhal, Almora and Everest had convinced me that the richest Himalayan experience comes in exploratory travel and climbing, not in the siege of a big peak.”

Taken as an incomplete and posthumously compiled autobiography, *The Evidence of Things Not Seen* may be without peer. Or at least less stitched together than Tom Patey’s delightful *One Man’s Mountains*. If a publisher in North America chooses to market this book (hopefully with a less garishly retrograde dust jacket than British publishers seem so fond of), more than a few readers will be drawn to Murray’s out of print classics, deserving the anthology treatment given to that of Shipton and Tilman. Despite *The Evidence’s* disjointedness, at the height of Murray’s narrative powers, we see that climbing is not a thing apart, but a tapestry on which to weave a whole life.

JONATHAN WATERMAN, AAC

***Fatal Mountaineer: The High-Altitude Life and Death of Willi Unsoeld, American Himalayan Legend.* ROBERT ROPER. NEW YORK: ST. MARTINS PRESS, 2002. 306 PAGES. HARDCOVER. \$25.95.**

I will begin this review with a disclaimer. As far as I can remember, I never met Willi Unsoeld. Our paths might have crossed in 1967, when I went to Nepal as a correspondent for *The New Yorker*, and Unsoeld was finishing what appears to have been a not particularly successful interlude as the director of the Peace Corps there. I have also, as far as I know, never met any of the other principals in the book such as John Roskelly, Peter Lev, Lou Reichardt, and the rest. I feel obliged to say this, because this book has raised hackles among the True Believers—the Unsoelders. After reading it, I can understand why, but this may not make the portrait any less valid. Let a thousand blossoms bloom.

On the other hand, I can give my own views, including some that are purely literary. Let me start off with two. Mr. Roper belongs to the school of mountain writing that calls a turd a turd. In his account, no bowel movement goes unreported. There is no point in trying to contrast this with the writings of people like Eric Shipton or H.W. Tilman who, in 1934, were the first people to approach Nanda Devi—the mountain in the Indian Garhwal that is also a vivid character in the book. (In the name of full disclosure, I was able to study this remarkable peak from the Tibetan plateau. It is magnificent.) Reading Shipton and Tilman one would get the impression that neither of them had an intestinal tract. Shipton once told me that it was on this trip that he suggested that he and Tilman address each other by their first names—“Bill” and “Eric.” Tilman agreed, adding, “But it sounds so silly!” That era is gone. There is, however, a middle ground between discretion and diarrhea.

My second literary criticism concerns Mr. Roper’s dreadful habit of interrupting the narrative with pointless asides about people like Hemingway or Melville. The worst is a multi-page divagation on John Muir just at the place where he is about to describe the death of Unsoeld’s daughter “Nanda Devi.” It is tedious beyond belief. A firmer hand on the editorial tiller was called for.