

Detectives on Everest is a sequel to Ghosts of Everest, the expedition account of the 1999 discovery of George Mallory’s remains. (Ghosts was reviewed in AAJ 2000, pp. 403-404.) The 1999 team, largely intact and with deeper appreciation of mountaineering’s grandest mystery, returned in 2001 to see what else it could find. This book, bountifully illustrated in the style of its predecessor (though in black and white), reports on the expedition’s activities and examines the puzzle’s remaining pieces. It also consolidates knowledge of climbing on Everest’s north side in a valuable chronology and a particularly useful array of photographic and cartographic route maps. For any enthusiast of the subject, these and the bibliography will fully justify the price of the book.

Unlike 1999, there were no headlines in the spring of 2001. So is there anything new and significant to be learned here? Yes, there is, and some of it is quite surprising. This is largely because of Jochen Hemmleb, and his approach to the task. Over the years others have studied the Mallory/Irvine mystery closely, but none of them have gone about it like Jochen Hemmleb.

Hemmleb’s tools and methods have come to include anything he figures could shed light—even the tiniest glimmer—on the mystery. Take, for example, his keen interest in refuse heaps. Among the discarded supplies of past high camps there might be…what? He doesn’t know, but he wants to have a look at anything and everything that can be retrieved. His enthusiasm for this kind of sleuthing seems to be infectious. Even the expedition’s climbers, who have to do the digging, are more than willing to chip away in frozen debris at 27,000 feet. This has a nostalgic interest of its own, as when a tin of well-preserved 1933 biscuits is found (and sampled), or when one of Norton’s socks from 1924 is discovered. The yield of this scavenging has been skillfully art-directed into the book so that readers can view the relics too.

Hemmleb’s use of history turns out to be more productive than the high-altitude archaeology. He looks beyond 1924 to all expeditions climbing via the North Col/North Ridge/Northeast Ridge, and probes for new information. We know that Irvine’s ice axe was discovered by Percy Wyn-Harris on the Northeast Ridge in 1933; and that in 1979, the day before he was lost in an avalanche, Wang Hongbao told the tantalizing story of seeing an “English dead” in 1975 near Chinese Camp VI. Hemmleb wants to find out what else may have been noticed, but not recorded, by post-1924 climbers. This is where the investigation becomes especially fascinating. As a matter of fact, it takes Hemmleb and expedition leader Eric Simonson
on a special trip to China for meetings with members of the People's Republic Everest teams of 1960 and 1975.

From the visit to China we learn that the 1999 American team was not the first to discover Mallory's body. It was the Chinese in 1975: Wang Hongbao's "English dead," lately presumed to be Irvine, must have been George Mallory. That is because—and this is Detectives' really big news—northeast of Mallory's resting place in a gully some 150 meters higher is another body, which could only be Sandy Irvine's. Xu Jing, deputy leader of the 1960 Chinese expedition, told Hemmleb and Simonson that he found the corpse lying face up, arms at its sides, wrapped in what he thought was a sleeping bag. As the revelation sinks in and one begins to imagine grim pictures of what may have been a bivouac, the book ends. But with the prospect of locating Irvine's body—and camera—now beckoning more insistently than ever, we may assume the story is not over.

When it comes to the enduring question of whether Everest was climbed in 1924, those who care about it seem to divide into Realists, Optimists, and Believers. Realists offer a variety of sensible reasons why Mallory and Irvine could not have made the top. Optimists point to circumstances that would have made it possible. Believers feel intuitively that the deed was done. Neither success nor failure can yet be proved. Jochen Hemmleb is definitely an Optimist, and he may be a Believer. He is also a young man. Given his methods, his tenacity, his zeal, and time, one must allow that some day he might make believers of us all.

Reinhold Messner thinks the post-1999 Mallory/Irvine industry misses the point. In The Second Death of George Mallory, he laments that modern climbing has lost the spirit that animated George Mallory. It has lost the spirit of amateurism, the willingness to pursue the goal with one's whole being "because it is there." Like the 1924 accident, this loss is tragic; Messner thinks of it as Mallory's "second death." And though he does not believe Mallory and Irvine reached the top, it doesn't diminish his esteem for what they did: he says their climb "overshadows all subsequent mountaineering achievements, my own included."

This remarkable salute, from the greatest Himalayan climber of the 20th century, comes early in the book. What follows is an evocation of the spirit Messner so admires, developed via an interweaving of Everest history and a selection of Mallory's own words—plus something else, which is bound to raise eyebrows.

"I felt Mallory's presence during my solo ascent of the north-face route," he writes. "Sometimes, when looking at photographs from his era, I can hear his voice. I know of course that it is my own. Yet I believe that only by trying to see events through Mallory's eyes can we truly rediscover him." Messner then explains that he has imagined what Mallory might have thought about various things and has introduced these conceptions into the book. Here they take on the voice of George Mallory. So reader beware: in Second Death, Mallory's actual words are in Roman type, indented; Reinhold Messner's ideas of what George Mallory would think or have thought are in italics, also indented. This visual cue is not announced in the text. For example:

...I was ready. I can still remember how my mind skimmed over the various preparations and told itself that everything was in good order, just like God after the creation.

...I do not want to make myself seem as ridiculous as my countrymen Haston and Scott who in 1975 took photographs of the aluminum tripod left by the Chinese on the summit, to convince the many critics at home that the Chinese had indeed got there before them.

...Perhaps if they searched their hearts, they might see that they do not really want to know
everything. Some things should remain untouched and unmeasured. There is no further reason to disturb me, Simonson says. But still I wonder, will they truly leave me in peace?

More than 50 such examples occur in Second Death, along with 62 genuine quotations from George Mallory. It will not take a Mallory scholar to see that these represent two very different people. However, for the sake of clarity and the written record, it would have been better if Reinhold Messner had given us his own ideas straight and let George Mallory speak for himself.

Note to readers: Several discrepancies in facts will be noticed between Second Death and Detectives. Where these occur, I found that Hemmleb’s version is the more careful, and in some cases has the advantage of newer information.

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Through the lens of the repeated German attempts on Nanga Parbat between 1932 and 1953, as well as some of the early Everest expeditions, Jonathan Neale scrutinizes what can only be called the character of both Sherpas and sahibs. He provides sensitive portraits of individual Sherpas, as well as an intimate look at Sherpas’ attitudes toward and experience of their work in Himalayan mountaineering. Neale clearly has enormous respect and affection for Sherpas, and the point of the book is to give them as much credit as possible for all they have done in this historic enterprise. At the same time the book is equally revealing of the Western mountaineers; Neale provides some very insightful takes on sahibs at their best and worst.

Several things contribute to the strength of Tigers of the Snow. First and foremost, Neale spent long periods of time in both Darjeeling (in Himalayan India) and Khumbu (the Sherpas’ home region in Nepal). He made an effort to learn the Sherpa language (a dialect of Tibetan) and to get a feel for Sherpa society and culture. While the book does not add anything new to our understanding of that society and culture (nor was it meant to do so), this background work clearly helped Neale with his main objective, which was interviewing older climbing Sherpas.

The most important of these interviews were with Ang Tsering Sherpa, one of the survivors of the 1934 Nanga Parbat expedition, who was about 95 or 96 years old at the time of the interviews in 2000. Neale also interviewed about 20 other retired climbing Sherpas and sirdars, as well as in some cases their wives or widows. He was able to get people to open up to an unusual degree about their feelings with respect to climbing—the danger, the money, the sahibs. He also learned certain hitherto unknown details of Sherpa experience on the early expeditions, and especially on the 1934 Nanga Parbat expedition which is his main focus.

The other major strength of the book derives from Neale’s critical perspectives on the sahibs. In the first place he has, refreshingly, no qualms whatsoever about assigning blame for accidents to specific sahibs and their bad decisions. For example, “Mallory’s ambition had led to errors of judgment that killed Lhakpa, Nurbu, Pasang, Pema, Sanga, Dorje, Pemba, Shamsher, Pen Bahadur, Sandy Irvine, and Mallory himself” (p. 57). Or: “Ten people died on Nanga Parbat in 1934 because Willy Merkl led too many men up too quickly” (p. 122). Most strikingly, Neale gives a no-holds-barred account of two of the strongest sahibs on the 1934 expedition, Erwin Schneider and Peter Aschenbrenner, abandoning several colleagues and Sherpas high on the mountain and then, because the three struggling Sherpas they were with were