Book Reviews

EDITED BY JOHN THACKRAY


For the past several decades, we have been subjected to a plethora of Himalayan expedition accounts. In this genre, even today Maurice Herzog’s _Annapurna_ has not been surpassed. Only rarely, as with Kenneth Mason’s _Abode of Snow_, has an author provided the historical perspective that is so necessary to illuminate, beyond the merely immediate, the activities of those climbers who have sought the challenges of the world’s highest peaks. Walt Unsworth fills this vacuum with his _Everest: A Mountaineering History_, a book that will surely be regarded as the definitive treatment of Mount Everest.

Transcending Mason’s classic work on the Himalaya as a whole, Unsworth has assembled a voluminous, but highly readable and cohesive chronicle of the events on Everest from the first close assessment by Captain C. G. Rawling during the Younghusband mission to Lhasa in 1905 to the difficult new routes done in the 1970s—anticipating Reinhold Messner’s astounding solo, oxygenless climb from the north in 1980 (after press time).

In his preface, Unsworth sets his task as follows:

> As any mountaineer will tell you, Everest is not technically the hardest climb in the world, and certainly not the best. It is, however, the _highest_—and that’s what makes it so special, what sets it apart from all other mountains and makes its story much more than a catalogue of daring feats by brave men. It has the power to arouse both the best and worst in human nature; a theme which previous writers have tended to ignore.

“To have simply recounted yet again the climbing annals of the mountain,” Unsworth goes on, “would have served no useful purpose except that of bringing the story more up to date.” Most important is his effort, successful for the most part, of taking the Everest story away from preoccupation with pure climbing exploits. Not only does Unsworth disclose the frequent obstacles of “bumbling officialdom, international rivalry and plain double dealing,” but he weaves perceptive character sketches of the main actors into the Everest drama.

Unsworth spends ample space in tracing the initial attempts to reach Everest, let alone climb it. For most, the climbing history of Everest commences with the famous reconnaissance of 1921. Yet, we learn of much effort from the start of this century on. His account of the political complexities of entering
Tibet in those days strikes a common chord with modern-day experiences in piercing the bureaucratic veils of the host countries that guard access to Everest and the other giants of the Himalaya.

The author’s treatment of the 1921 reconnaissance and the two expeditions that closely followed is fascinating for its intricate weave of the mountain events with what transpired in the hallowed halls of the Alpine Club before, during and between the expeditions. George Mallory, who with Hillary and Tenzing, is one of the most famous names in mountaineering history, does not emerge untarnished. According to Unsworth, Mallory had greatness thrust upon him, but had little actual talent. The most telling comment comes from Longstaff who described Mallory as a “very good stout-hearted baby, but quite unfit to be placed in charge of anything, including himself.” Unsworth submits the Mallory-Irvine disappearance to exhaustive analysis. Other than Odell’s sighting of them on the First or Second Step, their failure to return to Camp VI, and the finding of one of their ice axes nine years later near the crest of the Northeast Ridge, there still are no hard facts to answer the question whether they reached the summit. After the book went to press (1979), there have been unconfirmed rumors that Chinese climbers sighted a body high on the Northeast Ridge clad in nonmodern climbing garb. Even the discovery of the remains of Mallory or Irvine would not necessarily end the speculation; their disappearance undoubtedly will continue as one of the most tantalizing mysteries of mountaineering.

I have always wondered why it took the British so long to return to Everest after the 1924 attempt. Unsworth provides the answer in the person of Major F. M. Bailey, who served as political officer in Sikkim during the 1920s. Bailey, who had earlier solved one of the great riddles of exploration in tracing the course of the Tsangpo River around Namcha Barwa to prove that the river was the same as the Brahmaputra, unaccountably acted to frustrate subsequent attempts to enter Tibet. Among Bailey’s papers found at the time of his death was a note providing a strong clue: “[Everest] must be climbed one day and I hope I will be one of the men to do it.”

The British made four more attempts on Everest in the 1930s, but Norton’s 1924 altitude record of 28,126 feet was not surpassed. What is interesting about these expeditions is the sharp contrast between the large, heavy approach of the 1933 and 1936 attempts and the lightweight tactics of Tilman and Shipton in 1935 and 1938. As Unsworth correctly observes, had Shipton converted the 1935 reconnaissance into an actual attempt and succeeded, the whole concept of Himalayan mountaineering would have been tipped in favor of small, highly mobile teams instead of the usual massive expeditions of the next thirty years. Aside from a few exceptions, such as the ascent of Nanda Devi in 1936 and the attempts on K2 in 1938 and 1953, led by Charles Houston, this practice did not wane irrevocably until the Messner-Habeler two-person ascent of Hidden Peak in 1975. Tilman’s 1938 team was even better positioned to succeed with the “small is beautiful” approach but was unlucky enough to face an exceptionally early monsoon that kept the climbers from going above 27,500 feet.
Although we are familiar with the bizarre activities of Maurice Wilson and Earl Denman, the would-be adventurers who tried to climb Everest alone, Unsworth breaks new ground with his account of Klavs Becker-Larsen’s amazing sorties to Everest. In 1951, Larsen, a strong, young Dane with no climbing experience, journeyed up the Khumbu glacier with a small contingent of Sherpas to the site of the present-day Everest Base Camp. Only Tilman and Houston had been there ahead of him. Ignoring the Khumbu Icefall, Larsen tried to reach the North Col by climbing up the steep and dangerous slopes of the Lho La. He made it halfway up before retreating. Undaunted, Larsen next crossed the Nangpa La into Tibet. Making his way up the traditional British prewar route to the base of the North Col, he nearly succeeded in reaching the col itself before his Sherpa companions compelled him to descend after experiencing rockfall off the flanks of Changtse. He barely escaped the clutches of Chinese soldiers before re-entering Nepal.

The story of the final events leading to the history-making ascent by Hillary and Tenzing in 1953, though familiar, is well told. What is not widely known, however, is the backroom maneuvering that led to Eric Shipton’s dismissal as leader. With Tilman, Shipton stands as the finest mountain explorer of all time. Yet, as Unsworth points out, Shipton was not well suited to the demands of leading large expeditions. What counted for Shipton was “his unbounded curiosity to see what lay over the next ridge,” but as the author notes, “the minutiae of a mountain ascent held no interest for him.”

Sandwiched between the 1953 British ascent and later events on the Nepalese side is Unsworth’s account of the north side of the mountain. This is, perhaps, his most interesting chapter, mainly for its new material. He discusses a rumored 1952 Russian post-monsoon attempt that ended in disaster when six climbers, including the leader, disappeared near the highest camp at 26,800 feet. A planned joint Russian-Chinese expedition in 1960 resulted in the Chinese going it alone when the political split between the two communist regimes erupted.

Until quite recently, the nighttime ascent by two Chinese climbers and a Tibetan companion has never been fully accepted in Western countries because of a lack of summit photos and a sketchy account. Unsworth, however, flatly states: “There seems little doubt now that the Chinese did climb Everest in 1960.” Along with several other climbers, I recently had the opportunity to talk with two of the summit climbers, Wang Fu-chou and Qu Yin-hua, about their ascent. Although such personal contacts are hardly conclusive, one had the distinct feeling that these men had been where they said they had.

Of the 1975 Chinese ascent, there can be no doubt with the undisputed proof of the survey marker being left on the summit. Puzzling, though, was the need for the Chinese News Agency to proclaim that three Chinese surveyors had climbed to the summit in 1969, each in separate solo dashes! This episode only serves to undermine the credibility of the earlier ascent. As for the Russians, they made up for past lapses and absences with their outstanding
achievement of putting twelve climbers on the summit last spring via a
difficult, new route on the Southwest Face.

Dominating the post-1953 events are the American West Ridge climb and
traverse in 1963 and the seven separate expeditions to the Southwest Face in
the early 1970s that tackled the mountain "the hard way." Of all the Everest
climbers mentioned, Unsworth appears to have the most admiration for Tom
Hornbein, whose tenacity and single-minded drive were chiefly responsible for
the remarkable West Ridge climb and traverse that stands as one of the major
achievements of Himalayan mountaineering history. Chris Bonington, whose
expedition to Annapurna's South Face in 1970 pioneered the breakthrough to
the difficult face climbs, also comes in for high praise. Despite a hailstorm of
criticism from some quarters about the tremendous cost and publicity that
attended Bonington's Southwest Face endeavors, in 1975 his team brilliantly
succeeded in climbing the face to the summit. Only Mick Burke's disappear-
ance on a solo excursion to the summit marred the outcome of an expedi-
tion that Unsworth contrasts markedly with the ill-starred 1971 International
Expedition, also ably chronicled.

Unsworth concludes his book with an account of what most thought impos-
sible at the time: climbing the mountain without the benefit of supplementary
oxygen. During the British prewar attempts, the issue of oxygen use was hotly
debated. As with the heavy versus lightweight expedition issue, had Norton,
Smythe or some of the others reached the summit without oxygen, the almost
total reliance on oxygen for climbing the highest peaks in the so-called "golden
age" of Himalayan mountaineering would have been avoided. It remained for
Reinhold Messner and his Hidden Peak companion, Peter Habeler, to surmount
this last great physiological challenge, to climb the mountain by "fair means."

The account of the historic Messner-Habeler climb in 1978 is greatly
enhanced by the use of lengthy comments from Habeler obtained in an inter-
view with the author. Unlike the sanitized version in Habeler's published
account, Habeler here gives a graphic rendition of their summit climb, not
altogether favorable to Messner, but one that has the ring of truth.

Unsworth's book also contains an extensive bibliography as well as a useful
summary of all the expeditions. The color plates are one of the few short-
comings. For Everest buffs, or for that matter anyone interested in the climbing
history of the world's highest peak, this book is a must.

JAMES WICKWIRE

Everest the Cruel Way. Joe Tasker. Eyre Methuen, London, 1981. 166 pages,
black and white photographs. £6.95.

This book by Joe Tasker describes the British 1981-82 winter attempt on the
west ridge of Mount Everest. It is a grim story of eight comrades, with slender
resources—crack mountaineers all—undertaking a cruel task with high re-
solve, but who are worn down by the unremitting, bitter cold, by their decision