Reviews

Edited by DAVID STEVENSON

Geoffrey Winthrop Young: Poet, Educator, Mountaineer. Alan Hankinson. Hodder & Stoughton, London, 1995. 354 pages, black-and-white photographs. (Distributed in the U.S. by Trafalgar Square, North Pomfret, Vermont 05053.) $40.00.

If the life of every semi-famous climber were accorded the detailed historical narrative, the sensitivity and the good biographical writing that Alan Hankinson has shown in *Geoffrey Winthrop Young*, mountaineering would have a far bigger and better body of literature. The publisher also deserves praise for bucking the trend of declining quality: the book's paper, print quality, photo reproduction and line editing are all first rate.

In addition to a deeply respectful account of a life, Hankinson gives a deft picture of Young's period, the decades before and after World War I, when Establishmentarians ruled the hills of Britain and fielded a strong presence in the Alps. Young's acquaintances and friends from Marlborough, his public school, from Cambridge University, and from the leaders of the Liberal Party and Bloomsbury included such later luminaries as historian G.M. Trevelyan (*Social History of England*), Lytton Strachey, John Maynard Keynes, poet Rupert Brooke (introduced by Mallory), and A.A. Milne. His father was a friend of Swinbourne. He belonged, Hankinson writes, "to a complex network of families and friends, acquaintances and contacts — the Trevelyans, Arnolds, Arnold-Fosters, Huxleys and many more...."

Among mountaineers, Young knew just about everybody who mattered, being an especially good friend to Arnold Lunn, a talent no less deserving of a biography. Young was not born into an exalted position, but there was enough money to be relaxed about it and his connections led to graceful employments. Though of modest intellect and literary ability, he had great charm and good looks. He was not a very important figure in Alpine history, though Hankinson says otherwise. His best first ascent (guided, of course) was on the South Face of the Täschhorn in 1906. Young's claim to fame was his pen. He was a popularizer of the sport at a time when the Anglo-Saxon world had a far bigger appetite for mountain writings than today. His best books were *Mountaincraft* (1920) and *On High Hills* (1927). Although Hankinson's title labels him a poet, Young only wrote verse in his

youth, and it was not well thought of even by his friends. Hankinson quotes only a dozen lines.

In 1978, when Young had been dead 20 years, Hankinson asked Eleanor (Len) Young for access to her husband's trunkfuls of diaries as material for a biography. It is a pity she said no, for yet another decade passed in which contemporaries died, and leads and sources dried up. Consequently Hankinson must overly-depend on those diaries. More input from others would have created a more ambiguous, complex and more lifelike tale. It hardly helps that Young is not a particularly good diarist. Then, too, having started at one end of the archive, Hankinson is compelled to make readers labor step by step to the bottom of the trunk. In the final decades the quotidian gets a bit thick: books Young reads, opinions on the government, misanthropic views of Everest '53 and complaints that young climbers were deficient in the romantic "spirit" he'd known.

The reason Len Young refused Hankinson's first request for the diaries was that he'd be bound to discover a well-kept secret: Young was a lifelong homosexual. Presumably society's recent toleration of sexual deviance partly influenced her change of mind. After Hankinson overrules his subject's near-certain wishes not to be "outed," there are further obstacles. On the subject of sex, the book lacks the grit and detail of all other aspects of this life. To be sure, Hankinson quotes some gauche and tortured diary entries following Young's visits to the homosexual fleshpots of Berlin and Paris in his twenties. He suggests that Young was sacked from his teaching job at Eaton for being queer and that other sudden career reversals might have had the same cause. As for bisexuality's effect on his marriage (which bore three children) we are treated to a vignette when Hankinson once "summons up the nerve" to ask Len if Young was a homosexual. "And her eyes filled with tears before she replied: 'Yes, he was.' It was years after his death that she told the children about it, and what an anguish it had been to her."

This sort of quivering upper lip may be suitable to post-Victorian England but seems inadequate by contemporary standards of candor in matters sexual and emotional. The shock of the book's central revelation was followed, as I read further and sensed lacunae everywhere, by a "so what?" feeling. I'm not interested in old gossip of who did what to whom in bed, or on an alpine hut floor. But I'm inclined to think that his sexual and emotional needs with men were a central aspect of Young's character. So too must have been the fear of detection. Occasionally Hankinson mentions a climber beloved by Young, without saying if it is a romantic crush, or a sexually explicit attachment.

The trail is equally dead to issues that might have been raised about the incidence of homosexuality in climbers that Young knew. The author recycles the tidbit about Lytton Strachey's desire for Mallory, but nothing is said

of Mallory's knowledge of this, or, if he knew, his reaction. The doors to the closets remain shut. The homophobic values of Young's time — he was at Cambridge when Oscar Wilde was in prison — will not release a picture of one of "the peculiar people," in a phrase used by Young the undergraduate. Convention is also served by Hankinson's picture of a happy marriage despite the rows and blow-ups. For sexual gratification both went outside — a phenomenon covered by a phrase from the 1960s, "an open marriage."

Upon finishing Hankinson, I picked up my copy of *Mountaincraft* and opened it at random. On page 240 I read, "It is quite bad form for the leader, when he is safely up, to exchange airy jokes across the head of another climber in the throes of a passage. A word or movement heard, or still worse, half heard, takes off the climber's attention and dissipates the concentration necessary for a delicate balance or supreme hoist." I flipped forward to page 261, where Young writes that, "Mountaineering must be judged by a spiritual not a utilitarian standard. Courage, moral and physical, that has its source in vigorous vitality and its goal in the extension of human freedom, finds in the hills its hardiest school."

Human freedom... spirit... vitality... these Young quested in life and in the mountains. And if his prose is a little didactic and romantic by today's standards, its genuineness and authorial presence seem to me more compelling than Hankinson's earnest account of Young's life, an oft-made observation about literary biographies, to be sure.

JOHN THACKRAY

The Last Hero: Bill Tilman. Tim Madge. The Mountaineers, Seattle, 1995. Cloth, 288 pages. $24.95.

Bill Tilman's books are durable steerages through the most remote tempests on the planet. His two anthologies, *The Seven Mountain Travel Books* and *The Eight Sailing/Mountain Exploration Books,* should be mandatory reading for climbers seeking meaning beyond the numbers, and sailors vying to be weaned from Global Positioning Systems. Tilman is frequently perceived as a "Victorian-era misogynist" (this from a well known British mountaineering pundit), or an "understated martinet" (this from an American reviewer aligned to modern soulless adventure). It is more accurate to say that Tilman was distinctly old school, of a sterner fiber than the average adventurer, and worth studying for his integrity and his crafted prose.

Tilman, as shown in his own writing and by Tim Madge's insightful new biography, *The Last Hero*, was a disciplined stylist. He was self-effacing to