

The Lost Explorer: Finding Mallory on Mt. Everest. Conrad Anker and David Roberts. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1999. 192 pages. \$22.00.

In 1924, it took ten days for the news to reach London that George Mallory and Andrew Irvine had disappeared on Mt. Everest. In 1999, when members of the Mallory and Irvine Research Expedition finally located Mallory's remains on a rocky slope beneath the Northwest Ridge, people around the world (myself included) looked on with spellbound fascination as the dramatic events unfolded almost in real time on the World Wide Web. When news of the discovery first broke, regularly logging on to the expedition website became as much a part of my day-to-day routine as eating and sleeping. Daily postings describing the climbers' experiences and emotions, the details of what they had found, how they had found it and what light the discovery might shed on mountaineering's greatest mystery kept me glued to my screen like a teenage boy hacked into a Victoria's Secret changing room.

Then came the magazine articles. As the days after the discovery lengthened into weeks and months, the story seemed to be splashed across every glossy page that wasn't a cosmetic advertisement. The copy, largely more polished and fleshed-out forms of the same information that had already saturated the internet, was beginning to wear thin, but the fact that the articles were supplemented with macabre, arguably exploitative and utterly compelling photographs insured that they remained eminently salable.

Finally, inevitably, the parade of books: the "official expedition" story, scholarly dissertations by alpine historians and other pundits and then the personal accounts of various individuals both directly and peripherally connected with the discovery. Frankly, by the time Conrad Anker's *The Lost Explorer*, one of the last titles to appear on the shelves of my local bookstore, came to market, the whiff of commercialization had thickened into a full-fledged stink. Granted, Anker is the man who actually "found the body," but did we really need another 192 pages telling us about it? How could anybody justify yet another entire book devoted to such an over-told and oversold story?

It was with a weary, almost reluctant, skepticism that I opened this book and began to read. What I discovered was a surprisingly worthy tale and a refreshing perspective: the anti-Mallory point of view.

Without a doubt, the greatest stumbling block to objectively deciphering the evidence of the Mallory discovery is history itself. The courage of the ill-equipped yet resolute early Everest expeditions, the burning ambition of the tenacious Mallory to finally conquer "his" peak, the drama of Mallory and Irvine's final attempt and their mysterious disappearance into the clouds, are heroic and epic ingredients that have simmered in the pots of imagination and speculation for three quarters of a century—ample time to stew the collective consciousness. The fact is, the vast majority of us yearn for concrete evidence that Mallory and Irvine made the summit. Barring that, however, many seem willing to give them—by virtue of their colorful personalities, experience and grit—the benefit of the doubt. By virtue of his own experiences and personality, Conrad Anker cannot.

Few writers are as qualified to judge the mental and physical obstacles that George Mallory faced on that fateful day in 1924. Like Mallory, Anker is the cream of his generation. The consummate mountaineer, he has climbed the world over, demonstrating time and again his technical mastery on mountainous terrain. Perhaps more importantly, the book makes clear that he has also bridged the crevasse that separates mind and body, fine-tuning his mental screws to the point of achieving a dispassionate recognition of his own strengths and limitations. As one of the best in the game, widening the scope of this self-awareness to include

others is a short leap for Anker. Such clarity permits him to perceive events without embellishment and render opinions unfettered by ego or popular perceptions. In short, Anker is able to detach himself from the heady romance of the Mallory-Irvine mystery and give an honest and well-supported assessment of the probability that the ill-fated pair reached the summit. His conclusion is that they almost certainly did not.

Rather than debating the significance of tantalizing but circumstantial evidence (numbers on oxygen bottles, cryptic notes and the like), Anker's opinions are based almost solely upon his own firsthand experiences during the expedition: his tainted attempt to free climb the formidable technical crux of the Second Step, the surprisingly difficult and dangerous terrain he encountered between the Third Step and the summit, his own difficulties in shepherding a debilitated summit partner (whose experience and equipment far exceeded those of the relatively novice Irvine) and ultimately, the position and location of Mallory's remains. For Anker, it all adds up to a tragic anticlimax: an aborted summit bid (almost certainly below the Second Step), a disastrous slip on the descent, a long and fatal fall. Though the hackles may rise, his reasoning is so compelling that even the most rabid pro-Mallory advocates must pay heed. And his discovery of the body brings added credibility to his logic and instincts. It was, after all, Anker's mountain sense that led him to the spot where Mallory lay—well outside the expedition's designated search area.

This is not to say that Anker is unaffected by the Mallory-Irvine legend. His reverence and admiration for the early Everest climbers is evident both in his writing and in his determination to thoroughly investigate the possibilities of that time period (i.e., free climbing the Second Step). In context, he is clearly awed by what these men attempted and by what they achieved. To this end, co-author David Roberts does his usual admirable job of distilling all the historical information into a thorough and well-crafted back-story. But in the end, there is no doubt that *The Lost Explorer* is Anker's book; amid the avalanche of media hype and over-exposure surrounding the Mallory discovery, it is his objective, unencumbered and honest perspective that makes this title a unique and important addition to the literature of Everest.

DAVID PAGEL

Last Climb: The Legendary Everest Expeditions of George Mallory. David Breashears and Audrey Salkeld. Washington, D.C.: National Geographic Society, 1999. Numerous archival photos. 240 pages. \$35.00.

How would the discovery of George Mallory's body have been reported and marketed if it had occurred before Everest went to the top of the charts in 1996? Probably the way it was when Wang Hongbao reported seeing "old English" near his 1975 camp where Conrad Anker found Mallory in May, 1999. The new context of the discovery has led to a lot more romantic speculation obfuscated through the fog of hero worship. Nothing discovered reveals more than we already knew: Mallory and Irvine died in an accident of unknown cause during an unsuccessful yet courageous and prudent attempt that reached an amazing height on Everest, even by modern standards.

Thanks to the maturity of these seasoned authors, *Last Climb* treats the discovery with an honesty of perspective that will stand the test of time and accords Mallory and Irvine the respect and dignity they deserve by recognizing them as real humans rather than sensationalizing and mythologizing them. The result is a much more powerful tribute to their efforts than the simultaneously wishful and gratuitously brutal analyses of the more commercial exploitations of the discovery.