

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.

Salkeld and Breashears, while not on last year's expedition, both have a long-standing involvement with Everest in general and Mallory in particular. Salkeld is an eminent mountaineering historian and winner of last year's AAC literary award, while Breashears has on various occasions climbed and guided the mountain and filmed the IMAX Everest movie (not to mention highly acclaimed documentaries on Tibet). Rather than focusing on the current rediscovery and forensic analysis, Breashears and Salkeld emphasize the far more interesting and significant circumstances of the three British expeditions of the early 1920s. The adventure and camaraderie that marked these expeditions is apparent in the abundant selection of striking photographs supplemented by judiciously researched background material. The images alone, of early Himalayan mountaineering and the undisturbed Tibetan civilization through which these expeditions approached, make this book a great addition to the coffee table, while the text provides substantial insight into the attitudes held by Mallory and a variety of his contemporaries toward their dream of climbing the virgin Chomolungma.

The tone of the book is set in a dignified forward by Mallory's son, John. He puts the tragic cost of his father's boldness in perspective, which reminds us of the more recent deaths of Alison Hargreaves, Rob Hall and Alex Lowe and the consequences for their families.

Consideration of the mysterious final day is deliberate and reserved. I'm sure the authors would have liked no less than anyone else to be able to conceive of a way that Mallory and Irvine could have summited without attributing to them a reckless "glory or death" attitude. Going on to the top when the consequence is certain death is no more praiseworthy on an unclimbed Everest than it is today, and the authors do not demean Mallory and Irvine by suggesting such a scenario. (Breashears is only too aware of the numerous ways a summit attempt could have ended early and turned tragic.) Regarding the famous step on the ridge, which Odell last saw the climbers ascend through a break in the clouds, Odell later pointed to what we now call the First Step on a Brad Washburn photo. Conrad Anker, whose own first-person account, *Lost Explorer*, demonstrates the same realistic and sensitive understanding of his fellow climbers that Breashears brings to *Last Climb*, recognized that the Chinese ladder provided significant psychological protection for his ascent of the Second Step, even if he hadn't stepped on it when it blocked a resting hold. (Breashears also understands that the off-width technique involved is a specialty of Anker's; while holding the highest regard for Mallory's ability, he also understands it was still not the equal of Conrad's "on a bad day.") Guided by Carl Sagan's dictum, "Extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence," the authors resisted the increased sales potential of the summit fantasy, and instead produced an infinitely more worthy record of historic adventure turned tragic only by accident. (It is also worth noting that Breashears turned down offers for photos of the bodies of friends Hall and Fisher, the kind of situation others have been less reticent to exploit.)

In the conclusion of *Last Climb*, the authors quote Mallory's friend Howard Somervell who prophetically "saw their deaths as 'a clarion call to a materialistic age.'" Fortunately, their own book lives up to the better impulses that guided—and still guides—the true adventurers.

BOB PALAIS

Life and Death on Mt. Everest: Sherpas and Himalayan Mountaineering. Sherry B. Ortner. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999. 396 pages. \$26.95.

Life and Death on Mt. Everest by Sherry Ortner is a fascinating exploration of the complex and changing relationship between international mountaineers ("sahibs") and the Sherpas