

*The Mountains of My Life.* Walter Bonatti. TRANSLATED AND EDITED, WITH AN ADDITIONAL CHAPTER, BY ROBERT MARSHALL. NEW YORK: MODERN LIBRARY, 2001. 443 PAGES. \$14.95.

Was ever a great climber's life so rich in the bright sunshine of achievement and in the darkness of calumny and paranoia? A shadow fell across the life of the 24-year-old Walter Bonatti, when the accounts of the successful climb of K2 in 1954 elided the crucial support role he'd played at great risk to his life. Alternative reconstructions by different players, miscommunications between the climbers, non-communication in dumb show between them and their Balti porters, cover ups and mendacity by principals in the Italian Alpine Club (Club Alpino Italiano, CAI), all play a part.

The bare bones of this wretched story are as follows. With all other members of the team wasted or in retreat, Bonatti, accompanied by Mahdi, a porter with limited climbing or high altitude experience, carried two crucial tanks of oxygen from Camp 8 to around 26,300 feet, where they had expected to meet and share a tent with the summit team, Compagnoni and Lacedelli. The tent was not at the agreed location, and the summiteers made little effort to help Bonatti and Mahdi find them, nor seemed concerned at the danger in which they stood. Unable to reach the higher pair, Bonatti (who'd already spent seven continuous days above 23,000 feet) and the porter bivouacked—this at a time when bivouacs above 8,000 meters were thought to be killers and Herman Buhl's survival of one at the top of Nanga Parbat the previous year deemed a fluke.

Next morning the support pair descended and Compagnoni and Lacedelli retrieved the tanks and summited. All Italy cheered at the achievement, expiating the humiliation of defeat in World War II. But upon returning to base Bonatti was disturbed at the bad vibes coming from Ardito Desio, the leader of the expedition, the summit pair, and the liaison officer.

Bonatti's valor and toughness were barely acknowledged in the final version of the film and the books that followed. On the 10th anniversary of the ascent, the character assassins came out into the open. Compagnoni hand-fed a story to a newspaper alleging that Bonatti 1) attempted to grab the summit for himself and Mahdi, 2) used up a significant part of the oxygen in the tanks that were delivered to the summit pair, and 3) was responsible for Mahdi's terrible frostbite and subsequent amputation of fingers and toes. Bonatti sued for libel and won a judgment, the cash damages going to an orphanage.

The court's ruling did not, however, begin to unravel what had happened on K2, or how these accusations came to be made. On the issue of the oxygen, the court deemed that the accusation was false because the summit pair, and not Bonatti, had the masks and nozzles for the tanks. The mighty CAI refused the enquiry to which Bonatti now felt entitled. His galloping sense of persecution was inflamed by repeated slights and small vilifications. Once the tires of his car were slashed as he gave a slide show. But as he had done from the beginning, Bonatti fought back in print with his version of those events: seeming more of a raving, pathetic figure as time passed and the events dimmed in public memory.

The scene now switches to Melbourne, Australia, to a middle-aged surgeon, Robert Marshall, armchair mountaineer with an interest in Italians first kindled by Fosco Maraini's great classic, *Karakoram*. He learnt literary Italian well enough to try his hand at better translations of Bonatti's first two books, *Le Mie Montagne* (translated in English as *On The Heights*, 1961) and *I Giorni Grandi* 1971 (as *Great Days*). Soon after it was published in Italy in 1985, he also read Bonatti's account of his legal fight in *Processo al K2* (*Trial on K2*). He told me in an

e-mail, "It was obvious to me that there was a great deal more to the K2 affair than Bonatti had ever guessed."

The real eye-opener was a transcription of Mahdi's deposition, which the court, and Bonatti, had found as crazy and incoherent as had been his ravings and ululations during the night of the bivy. Marshall recognized that Mahdi's representation had an internal coherence and consistency. Provided one understood his assumptions, it explained how the allegation of Bonatti's bid to steal the summit came to pass. In broken English several of the climbers in 1954 had promised Mahdi a shot at the summit bid with little regard to the consequences. In *Le Mie Montagne* Bonatti wrote that he "put the proposal to Mahdi, giving him the impression that he might be able to go on up to the summit with me, Lacedelli and Compagnoni." It was a necessary deception, which, however had a grain of truth to it. Mahdi, who had no idea that a bivouac precluded any attempt on the summit, evidently thought Bonatti was taking him on an end-run around the other pair. The canard got passed onto Desio, who accepted it without questioning Bonatti.

Bonatti was grateful for Marshall's insights. But he was to be even more thankful when in mid-1993 Marshall found the evidence that blew up Compagnoni's version of the events. Browsing through his copy of *Mountain World* 1955, he did a double-take at a photograph he'd seen years earlier without understanding its significance. *Mountain World*'s preliminary account of the expedition, authored by Desio, contained a summit picture (never to appear again) in which Compagnoni is seen wearing the oxygen mask and drawing on the tanks that he claimed had emptied two hours earlier and caused him to fling off the mask!

The photograph and Marshall's analysis were published in the Italian mountaineering journal, *Alp* in June 1994, and the climbing community, which had not been over-excited by the court case, suddenly realized the perfidy. Although its chief witness against Bonatti was exposed as a liar, the CAI remained immovable. So in the official world, where the cynical Italians know everything is fixed, Desio's truth prevails (last year he got a Presidential award for achievements in geology and mountaineering) while in the real world, when Desio died, also last year, at 104, the injustice done to Bonatti featured prominently in the newspaper and magazine obituaries of the old martinet.

But for the 71-year-old Bonatti the story is not over: because the truth so betrayed can never be restored to truth. Robert Marshall tells me that even this book's editors felt that Bonatti in places sounded quite paranoid and insisted that language be toned down, and acerbic attacks on the CAI and Desio cut out. And these are the rescuers of Bonatti's truth! Thus the past persists insidiously and incorrigibly in the present, and full restitution for poor Bonatti is impossible, because the initial conditions that led to the conspiracy cannot be undone. Then, too, there are also loose ends, not the least of which is the character and motives of the summit pair, who are as enshrined in Italy's pantheon of greats as are Hillary and Tensing in the English-speaking world. What did they imagine would they gain from these deceptions? How could they traduce what might have been a great and noble climb?

In any event, the attack had no effect on Bonatti's reputation as a climber, because in the following decade he undertook a chain of exploits that made him a climbing legend: among them are the solo southwest pillar of the Dru, Gasherbrum IV, an epic descent and rescue off the central pillar of Freney, a new route on the north face of the Grande Jorasses, first winter ascent of its Walker Spur, and for a finale the winter solo first ascent of the direct north face of the Matterhorn. In Marshall's vivid translation, these constitute the main and most satisfying

part of *The Mountains of My Life*, which also has a few chapters from notable pre-K2 climbs, such as the North faces of Lavaredo in winter.

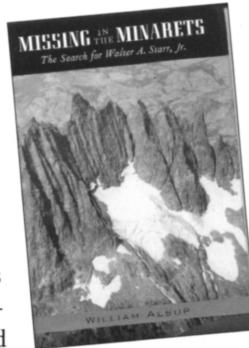
I've given disproportionate space to *l'affaire K2*, which takes up less than a third of *The Mountains of My Life*, because of the weirdness on K2 and of Marshall's unusual penetration of the wall between the author and reader and the subsequent help he gave Bonatti in finding some restitution and peace of mind.

Another factor in this story is Bonatti's power of attraction in deed and language. His prose is passionate, limpid, and economic. It is romantic, but not excessively colored. And like St. Exupery's writing about flying, Bonatti's accounts seem to be charged with a suppressed Judeo-Christian morality play: as if climbing is above all a test of the spirit, the outward manifestation of a struggle with the demons of human weakness.

The book's penultimate chapter, an account of a solo climb of Mont Blanc's Peuterey Ridge at age 54, shows Bonatti at his most lyrical. This route is a serious and committing climb at any age, yet Bonatti's story has almost no technical details, no stain of physical effort, so dedicated is he to closely tracking his emotions and carefully describing his connections to what he sees and hears. A thousand times I've read that climbing is an inner journey of self-discovery, but most accounts of it are strictly exogenous. With Bonatti no, he has an amazing power to define himself, his quest, and to sweep the reader along. Time and again the prose is like shafts of sunlight breaking through cloud as Bonatti conveys the sublimity and ecstasy of his great trials. Language of such power, in this style, won't ever be written again by a great climber: catch it while you can.

JOHN THACKRAY

***Missing in the Minarets: The Search for Walter A. Starr, Jr.***  
WILLIAM ALSUP. FOREWORD BY GLEN DAWSON. YOSEMITE NATIONAL PARK: YOSEMITE ASSOCIATION, 2001. 215 PAGES, NUMEROUS BLACK-AND-WHITE PHOTOGRAPHS. \$24.95. NOTE: ALL PROFITS FROM THE YOSEMITE ASSOCIATION GO TO SUPPORT YOSEMITE NATIONAL PARK.



In the summer of 1933, 30-year-old Walter "Pete" Starr, Jr. set off on a solo expedition in California's Sierra Nevada in order to survey the landscape along the new John Muir Trail. In addition to exploration, his purpose was to gather notes for a guidebook he was writing. An experienced mountaineer, Starr was also a lawyer with a San Francisco firm and the scion of a prominent family. When he failed to come out of the mountains at the appointed time, his father became concerned. Several days passed; concern gave way to alarm. A search effort was mounted, involving some of the most famous mountaineers in Sierra history. An intense search over the course of several days in the vicinity of Mounts Banner and Ritter as well as on the spectacular Minarets yielded promising clues but no firm results. In the end, the searchers gave up in despair, packed up their camp and filed grimly out of the mountains to home. All of them, that is, except one: the legendary Norman Clyde. When all others had surrendered hope, he alone persevered. What he found in his solitary pursuit became the basis for several generations of stories told around Sierra campfires. Now William Alsup has provided us with a definitive historical account of those fateful August days almost seventy years ago.