

smelled them, eaten smoke and ashes without food, climbed over the downed timber, shivered, drank the rivers and the lakes; they would be a part of us, not postcard scenes.”

Throughout her life, climbing remained for the letter writer a means to experience the “highpoints of existence,” the “peaks of exaltation.” Lowpoints are brushed over with a puzzling innocence about accidents and consequences. “In the mountains,” she writes on the top of Mt. Whitney, when she learns that World War II has begun, “the youngest, the strongest, the most skilled, the bravest win—in war they die.” That the best may die in the hills as well is something the letters hardly acknowledge.

For the most part, the book is a wild, continual shout of joy. What it isn’t, as a result, is a gripping narrative. And the reader may well wonder whether the true story might lie in those moments of real commitment that Ruth downplays as she tries to reassure family members. Or else it lies somewhere between that transcendent life she found in the heights and the daily struggles of her domestic existence. Glimpses appear in the editor’s notes of untold family conflicts and climbing near-misses, and of one daughter’s ultimate rejection of the lifestyle her parents chose.

But as its editor writes, the book is not its author’s polished creation: “This is a human story. This is not the story Ruth would have produced for publication.” So why, the reader might ask, should anyone other than a historian keep turning the pages? For the reason that Royal Robbins praises Ruth in his introduction: because she had, in her own manner, “the heart of a mountaineer”—a conviction that climbing might offer a pure source of mental, physical, and spiritual beauty. And because today Ruth’s belief in the sheer enjoyment of adventure seems far more radical and eccentric than it should.

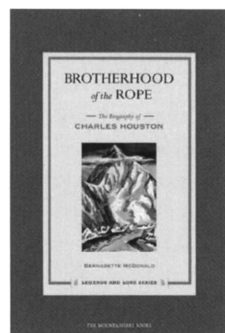
Among her papers, Ruth’s daughter found the introduction to the unwritten book, in which Ruth justifies it best: “Climbing used to be such fun, old climbers so good to new ones.... Now is a time of specialization, foreign expeditions, and public interest in climbing. But then were the great beginnings, and the best climbing friends one could have had. Nowadays the climbers swarm over the earth—but in our heyday, the new routes, the unclimbed summits, lay closer at home, and perhaps were even harder to reach.”

KATIE IVES

Brotherhood of the Rope: the Biography of Charlie Houston. BERNADETTE McDONALD. SEATTLE: THE MOUNTAINEERS BOOKS, 2007. HARDCOVER \$34.95; PAPERBACK \$18.95.

Most contemporary climbers know the name Charles Houston, but many aren’t sure where or when they’ve heard it, and fewer still can recall his achievements. Until you bring up K2—high and wild K2. K2 was the scene of one of the most remarkable mountaineering tales of all time: that of the 1953 American K2 expedition and the dramatic fall while the team of climbers was lowering Art Gilkey.

Having grown up in Los Alamos, where George Bell lived for much of his life, I was very aware of the significance on the 1953 expedition from my early high school years, and in the early 1980s, borrowed *Savage Mountain* from a friend’s father, Eiichi Fukushima, himself part of the Mount Vinson first ascent team.



The 1953 trip was the epitome of friendship—a group of friends, some quite new to each other, deciding to evacuate another of the brethren from a dangerous mountain together, as a team, and possibly the most cohesive team of climbers that has ever existed. *Savage Mountain* is a good entrée into the lives of a remarkable group of American mountaineers whose important climbing activities spanned many years, but in *Brotherhood of the Rope: the Biography of Charlie Houston*, Bernadette McDonald has given us the long view of perhaps one of the more significant members of that 1953 brotherhood: Charlie Houston.

Brought up in a setting of wealth and privilege, Houston stands out not so much for what he accomplished, but for how he did it—with grace and humility and diplomacy, and a continual questioning of his own self-worth and achievements. Indeed, McDonald so focuses on Houston's insecurities that a non-climber-type reader might think he was some kind of insecure neurotic. To me, his story is remarkably like the stories of all climbers—the insecure-while-bold, navel-staring, ponderous bunch that climbers are.

But the story's a good one, and it overshadows McDonald's apparent qualms about Houston's personality. After an apprenticeship in the Alps, he joined Brad Washburn's expedition to then-unclimbed Mt. Crillon in southern Alaska in 1933. It was with Washburn, Bob Bates, Ad Carter, and Terris Moore that Houston became part of the legendary Harvard Five, a group of 1930s mountaineers whose climbing adventures would span the globe and several decades. Although they were unsuccessful on Crillon, Houston learned a great deal from Washburn, a true master of Alaskan expeditioning.

"...Charlie learned from Washburn the critical importance of sound leadership," McDonald notes. "Potential for a power struggle existed between the two, since both had strong personalities. Washburn recalled a small misunderstanding over some routefinding when he had to struggle to retain control of the situation. Despite the disagreement, Washburn contended that Charlie was the strongest climber in the group—much stronger than Bates. But Charlie insisted that he took a subservient role on Crillon, absorbing what he could from Washburn."

The following year, Charlie's father Oscar—something of an adventurer himself—suggested an attempt on Foraker, the fourth highest mountain on the continent, and one that "had not yet been mapped; few people had been near it, and none had described it." Yet somehow Oscar had procured a sketch of the mountain. Charlie took what he'd learned on Crillon, and, with T. Graham Brown, Charles Storey, Chychele Waterston, Carl Anderson, and Oscar headed to the Yukon, where they climbed Foraker. Although Washburn, who was not invited, returned and climbed Crillon that year, he and Houston would never climb together again.

In 1936 Houston and several American youngsters joined forces with a handful of famed British mountaineers, including Noel Odell, Bill Tillman, Peter Lloyd, and T. Graham Brown, to climb Nanda Devi, the highest peak that would be climbed until Annapurna, in 1950. Although Houston and Odell managed to establish a high camp at 25,000 feet, Houston ate contaminated meat, and had to descend the next day. Tillman and Odell continued to the summit.

Houston's next major climb was his almost-as-famous 1938 attempt on K2, with Bob Bates, Dick Burdsall, Paul Petzoldt, Bill House, and Briton Norman Streatfield, in which Houston and Petzoldt reached 26,000 feet. The failure was not entirely without achievement, as the climbers cracked the nut on a route that would, ultimately, become the standard route on the peak.

The 1953 expedition is also documented in detail, but thankfully does not distract from Houston and Bates' own book on the subject (*K2: The Savage Mountain*), nor from the other sections of Houston's life that are so well documented in *Brotherhood*.

Most readers will be interested in the other important aspect of Houston's life: his research into altitude's effects on the human body. Beginning early in his career, in WWII, Houston played a leading role in researching how oxygen and lack of it affected pilots, and then mountaineers, and pretty much anyone else whose life required them to get high.

In 1967 Houston got involved with the high-altitude physiology study (HAPS) on the upper slopes of Canada's Mt. Logan, an ongoing series of summer experiments that would last until 1979. By 1975 Houston and his research team had identified and described acute mountain sickness (AMS), pulmonary edema, cerebral edema, and retinal involvement, four of the basic conditions considered standard for high-altitude mountaineers to know today.

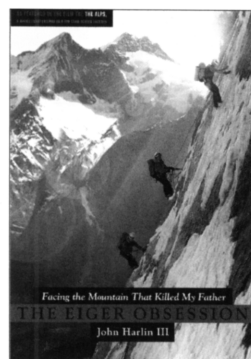
"He always backed [his observations] up with research," McDonald writes. "He offered up countless examples of preventative and coping measures for the debilitating effects of HAPE. His findings were used by climbers around the world, particularly those going to the highest range—the Himalaya. They changed the way climbers planned their acclimatization programs and how they treated and reacted to the early symptoms of high-altitude sickness. His research firmly established Houston as one of the world's leading authorities on the subject—he undoubtedly saved lives in the mountains."

His devotion to altitude research was a theme throughout, and, eventually, in 1980, Houston started work on *Going Higher*, a groundbreaking book that brought together medicine and altitude in a carefully woven balance. Self-published, it wildly outsold his expectations, has become the standard resource on the subject, and is currently in its fourth edition.

Houston was also an advocate for drug rehabilitation programs, and for community and family medicine. His devotion to his family is well-documented in this biotome. In *Brotherhood*, readers will find a treasure of American mountaineering's most famous ascents, stories, characters, and periods, all told from the perspective of one of American mountaineering's most noble sons.

CAMERON M. BURNS

The Eiger Obsession: Facing the Mountain That Killed My Father.
JOHN HARLIN III. NEW YORK: SIMON & SCHUSTER, 2007. 283 PAGES.
\$26.00.



For more than 20 years I've known John Harlin III, not really well, but not simply casually either. During all that time I never got up the nerve to ask him what it was like to be the son of *the* John Harlin, the Blond God, probably the finest American alpinist of his day, the first American to climb the Eiger Nordwand, and of course the martyr of the Eiger Direttissima. Yet I had a strong sense that father and son were utterly different kinds of people. The John Harlin I knew seemed soft-spoken, sensitive, a good listener, a patient and skillful editor, and the farthest thing imaginable from an egomaniac. I only met John Harlin *père* once, when he was the surprise speaker at an AAC annual banquet in Boston in the early 1960s, where he gave a slide show that had the audience gasping. Everyone, however, knew the Harlin of legend: impossibly tough, fanatically driven, movie-star handsome, with a steely calm in the face of impending disaster.