

A THAMES LITERARY TOUR • CELEBRATE A BRITISH STAGE LEGEND

NORTH AMERICA'S LEADING MAGAZINE ABOUT BRITAIN

AUGUST/SEPTEMBER 1997

BRITISH

HERITAGE

IRELAND'S SCENIC

Quiet Man Country



THE MALLORY FAMILY LEGACY

CONQUERING EVEREST

**A UNIQUE WAY TO TRAVEL
SCOTLAND'S BACK ROADS**

\$4.99 / £1.75 CANADA \$5.99

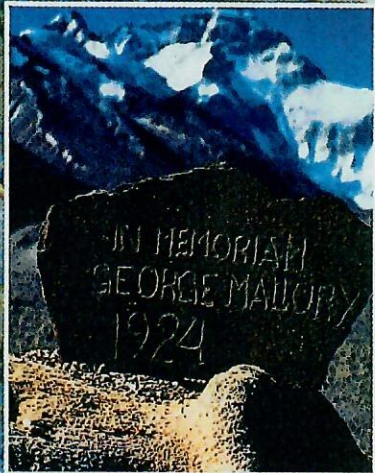




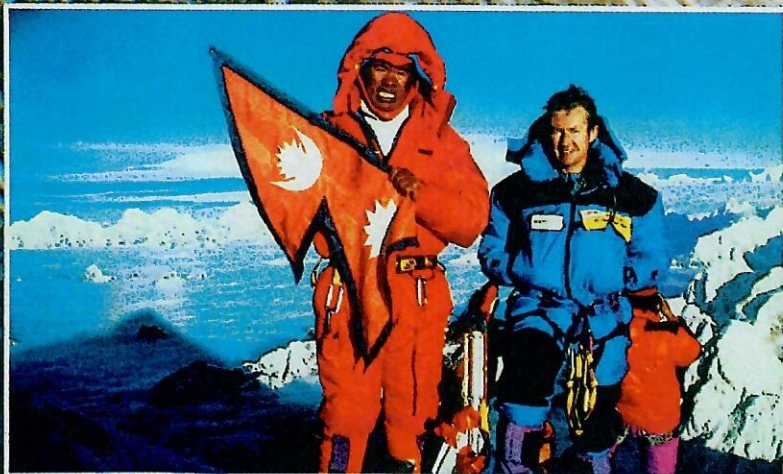
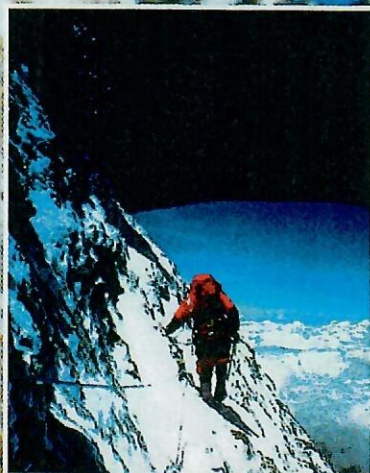
TRAGEDY AND TRIUMPH ON EVEREST

by Paul Pfau

PAUL PFAU



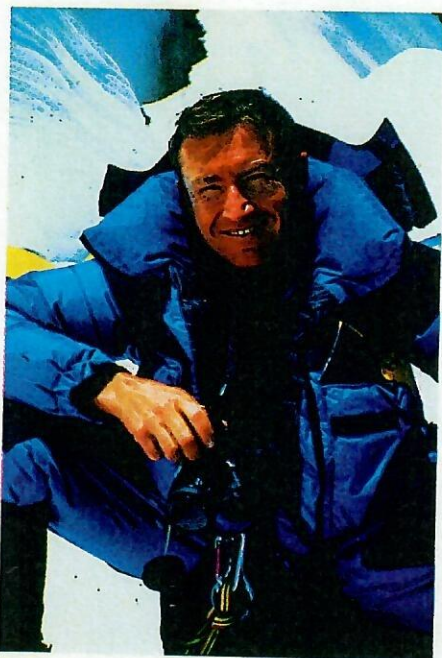
COLIN LYNCH



COLIN LYNCH

Top left: A memorial marker dedicated to the legendary British mountaineer, George Leigh-Mallory, who disappeared on Everest. Top right: A member of the '95 American expedition on Everest's North Face. Above: The circle closed—George Mallory stands atop Everest more than 70 years after his grandfather's final attempt to conquer the mountain.

STEVE RENEKER



CAPT. JOHN NOEL



COURTESY OF THE 1995 AMERICAN EVEREST EXPEDITION

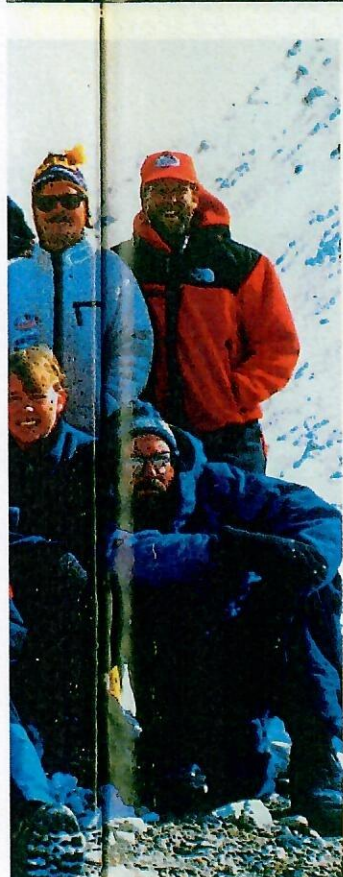


On George Leigh-Mallory's third expedition to Mount Everest, in 1924, he and Andrew Irvine disappeared several hundred vertical feet from the summit. Over the years speculation that they, and not Sir Edmund Hillary and Tenzing Norgay nearly 30 years later, may have been the first to climb to the top of the world, elevated the two to legendary status.

The romance of exploring the last of the globe's great unconquered geologic obstacles pervaded these early British expeditions. Everest rose to the status of Earth's 'Third Pole' following the 'discovery' of the North and South Poles just years earlier, and the urge to conquer it motivated climbers like Mallory. These men shared the special sense of adventure that highlighted this Golden Age of high-altitude mountaineering and exploration. They could rightly be considered the first astronauts, with the goal to climb the world's highest mountain analogous to the quest to achieve space travel decades later.

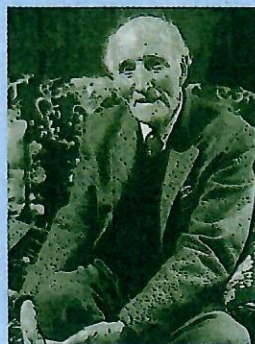
In organizing the 1995 American Mount Everest Expedition & Commemorative Climb, we intended, in part, to honour the teamwork embraced by the British expeditions to Mount Everest in 1921, 1922, and 1924. As we planned to

continued on page 65



Far left: George Mallory the younger, during a rest high on the slopes of the mountain. Above: The 1924 Everest Expedition. George Mallory stands in the back row, second from the left. At the far left is his partner for his summit attempt, Andrew Irvine. At the time of his disappearance, Mallory was one of the team's veterans, having accompanied two previous British teams in 1921 and 1922. Left: The 1995 American Expedition, which finally succeeded in placing a member of the Mallory family on the summit.

First on top?



BOTH PHOTOS PAUL PFÄU

Noel Odell (left) and Captain John Noel (right), teammates of Irvine and Mallory.

The question of whether Mallory and Irvine reached the summit of the world before their tragic deaths remains an enigma. Noel Odell was the last to see the two as 'they struggled strong for the top.' Odell was a quiet, gentle man, whom many in retrospect have suggested should have accompanied Mallory on the fateful ascent because of his acknowledged stamina and wide experience.

At dinner at Cambridge's Blue Boar Inn, an inn that he had long ago frequented with his Everest team-mates, Odell carefully recounted for me his last sighting of Mallory and Irvine. In doing so, he revised, in part, his earlier opinion that the two climbers had reached the Second Step, saying instead that they were 'definitely on their way up the snow slope and not at the Second Step . . . , but below the First Step.'

During the 1995 ascent, team-mates George Mallory and Jeff Hall had an opportunity to observe the North Face from Odell's approximate vantage point. Mallory noted, 'This was my long-awaited opportunity to see for myself, in different conditions of course, the scene he saw. Could he have mistaken the Second Step for the First? . . . To me, it is inconceivable.'

If George Leigh-Mallory did in fact surmount the Second Step, it is hard to imagine that he would not have finished the climb. 'From the top of the Second Step,' his grandson reasons, 'the summit appears to be about 350 metres away. The distance must have seemed entirely manageable to Mallory, who would have looked up at just after midday. As confirmation, we now

know that this "home straight" of the "Mallory route" has taken at least two climbers no more than 90 minutes. It is difficult to imagine anyone turning around under those circumstances, let alone someone as summit-oriented as George Mallory.'

Another survivor, Captain John Noel, then 95 and the last living member of the 1924 expedition, movingly recalled to me his still-vivid memory of the tragedy. Wheelchair-bound, this former officer in Kipling's India nonetheless looked every bit the adventurer. His mind seemed to race across the gulf of years and his voice broke at the memory of his lost friends, he recalled: 'When last seen they were four hours behind schedule—nobody knows why—they were seen to be going forward, to the top. When the men were lost and the expedition came back . . . Irvine's family left the door of their home ajar . . . hoping they would walk in for weeks and weeks. They died in the snowfields of Everest . . . If you had lived as they had lived and died would you ask for any better grave than a grave of pure white snow?'

In spite of the continuing controversy, perhaps the reflection of Edmund Hillary best summarizes the significance of these adventurers to the world of mountaineering. In a letter he wrote to me several years ago, he selflessly commented that although it was unknown whether Mallory or Irvine actually stood first on Everest's summit, all Everesters nonetheless 'stood on the shoulders' of these British pioneers in attempting to climb the mountain.

—Paul Pfäü

EVEREST

continued from page 48

ascend the North Face/Ridge route they had pioneered, I also hoped that we might bring closure to the tragedy the Mallory family had begun nearly 71 years before.

For me, the leader of our climb, the foundations for this expedition were laid at least a dozen years before. The consuming passion to know more about the fate of the Mallory-Irvine expedition resulted from a spirited discussion I had overheard while wandering through

When the Royal Geographical Society and the Alpine Club set out to conquer Everest, Leigh-Mallory was the first climber they selected to participate in the effort. A schoolmaster by profession, he was already one of the world's most accomplished mountaineers.

the aisles of an antiquarian book fair in Los Angeles. I listened transfixed as two English dealers specializing in rare mountaineering literature reminisced about the drama that had played out on 8th June, 1924, when team-mate Noel Odell last saw Mallory and Irvine 'going strong for the top.'

This single fortuitous event inspired my travels to meet many of those who had touched George Mallory's life—loving family members, students who recalled his innovative teaching at Godalming's Charterhouse public school, the respectful survivors of his last great adventure, and friends who revered him still. From the yellowed documents archived at London's Alpine Club, Cambridge's Magdalene College, the Royal Geographical Society, and elsewhere, my pursuit to know more of this man and his times also took me to the places he once called home, the peaks that he pioneered in Wales' Snowdonia and

'BECAUSE IT'S THERE'

The deaths of George Mallory and Andrew Irvine left a nation in mourning. A memorial service on 17th October, 1924 at London's St. Paul's Cathedral was attended by their families and friends, representatives of the King, and the Prince of Wales. A service was also held at Magdalene College Chapel, in Cambridge, Mallory's alma mater. There, the words of Mr. A. C. Benson, Master of the College, perhaps best defined the magnitude of Mallory's loss. In commending Everest's First Knight, the man the world would come to remember for his cryptically understated 'Because it's there' when asked why he climbed Everest, Mr. Benson chose his words well:

'We must not lightly or tamely question the right of men to risk their lives for great or glorious or chivalrous ends. Upon that right and upon those risks some of our highest freedoms and privileges have been founded.'

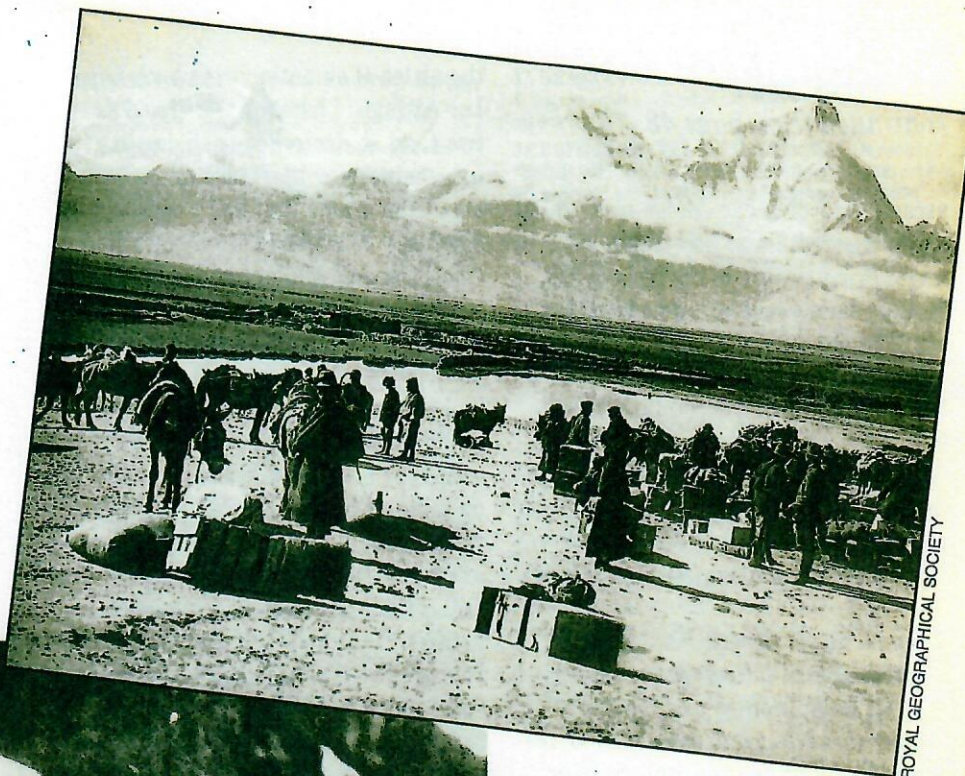
'Today we are confronted by the problem in its most poignant and tragic aspect. George Mallory, whom many of us knew, and who none could know without loving, has lost his life in a great adventure; twice before he has taken the risk, and two years ago his personal achievement was described by the leader of the Expedition as 'not only the most successful and the most daring feat in high mountaineering yet recorded, but one of the greatest feats of human endurance in any field of activity.'



PAUL PFAU



Below: George Leigh-Mallory in the Alps during one of his many successful climbs. Right: A scene from the 1921 Everest expedition, the first European exploration of the mountain. Described as a 'reconnaissance' mission, the expedition's primary goal was the discovery of a practical route to the summit. Although no concerted effort was made to conquer the peak in 1921, Leigh-Mallory reached an altitude of 23,000 feet and blazed a trail that subsequent expeditions followed in 1922 and 1924.



ROYAL GEOGRAPHICAL SOCIETY



PAUL PFAU COURTESY OF CLAIRE MILLIKAN

Europe's Alps, and finally to Everest, the mountain adversary that took his life and that still enshrouds the mystery of whether he and Andrew Irvine reached her summit.

This stream of occurrences ultimately converged, leading to the inclusion of George Mallory, the 35-year-old Australian grandson of George Leigh-Mallory, on our 1995 expedition. At first quietly enthused about becoming a full team member, he modestly turned hesitant, wondering if his mountaineering experience would be sufficient to meet his responsibility as one of our high-altitude climbers. Given the enormity of his family legacy, the prospect of literally following his legendary grandfather's footsteps must have seemed daunting. At least a year before our departure, George wrote to me, rejecting the notion that he should go: 'In my current circumstances,' he wrote, 'I must be realistic and withdraw my expression of interest.'

The prospect of lost opportunity, however, and perhaps some undefined tug to bring closure to his family's Everest heritage, led to his eventual decision to join us. George later explained: 'Although I tried to banish Everest from my mind, the memory of meeting the Australian mountaineer, Roddy MacKenzie, kept intruding on my thoughts. I clearly remembered his words: "George, your fam-

ily has unfinished business on Everest's North Ridge." My decision approached like a juggernaut—Everest was inevitable. . . . The expedition, for which I was surely destined, was knocking on the door.'

Our team, with George finally a part of the expedition, consisted of 38 members, including 22 climbers and 16 support personnel. Following two years of preparation, and an initial conditioning trek in Nepal, our team arrived at the Base Camp (elevation: 17,200 feet) on 25th March, 1995, and we began our two-month residence at the mountain.

Initial poor weather and existing snow conditions higher on the route prevented any significant upward progress until the end of the first week in April. Then, following the route forged by the British in their 1921 reconnaissance expedition, we established three interim camps en route to our Advance Base Camp at nearly 20,500 feet. Marginally good weather and a deliberately slow acclimatization process allowed us to establish a second camp at 22,500 feet by 25th April, and our final two camps at 25,500 feet and 26,800 feet by 5th May.

As a veteran climbing team, we knew the risks inherent in our effort. We were venturing to a place where the atmosphere provides just a third as much oxygen as at sea level and where jet stream winds deliver bone-numbing cold. Although we relied upon disciplined teamwork to defend the safety of each of our members, even these hard-learned skills provided only a thin margin of security against the treacherous conditions of this capricious mountain.

With this always in mind, the first summit team left the Advance Base Camp to position themselves at our highest camp for an attempt to reach the summit on 14th May. Success depended not only upon healthy climbers and solid logistical support, but also on good enough weather to get up the mountain and safely back down again.

George's concerns regarding his high-altitude capabilities gradually yielded in the face of his performance on the mountain. Imperially slim, George even looked like his grandfather, and he moved through his Everest domain

with what must have been the same graceful efficiency. If George's superb acclimatization and speed are testament, I have no doubt that his famous grandfather must certainly have reached the summit of Everest, and with energy to spare.

George's speed and strength recommended him, along with team-mates Jeff Hall and Chirring Sherpa, to be the first to make an attempt at the summit. On a brilliantly starlit night, in virtually windless weather, the trio left the high camp at 1 a.m., mindful of how much time they had in which to reach the summit and still have enough oxygen and daylight to return safely.


Although much of our lower route consisted of easier technical climbing, the crux of the climb—known as the Second Step—still lay above. On this leg of the climb speculation centred on whether Mallory and Irvine had ever reached this rock wall, let alone been capable of climbing it.

By 3.45 a.m., the three climbers reached the base of the Second Step, and little more than ten minutes later they surmounted it and paused to change over to full oxygen bottles. After scrambling over the Third Step, the last

major obstacle, they looked up towards the summit and realized, as George recalls, that 'Mountaineering's Holy Grail was almost within [our] grasp.'

In still-calm weather, the three continued, with the most difficult section of the climb now behind, and reached the summit at 5.30 a.m. Looking to the west, George saw Everest's immense shadow stretching to the horizon past a multitude of Himalayan giants. From this spectacular vantage point, George paused to reflect on the enormity of his achievement.

In all, 13 of our members eventually reached the summit of the mountain. In doing so, we honoured the legacy left by the early British pioneers. The mountains that had claimed the lives of those who had gone before us now returned a measure of peace for us to celebrate their memory. Each of us, in reaching for the summit of our own highest expectations, could not ask for greater fulfilment than this. **B**

 For additional information on the quest to conquer Mt. Everest, go to <http://www.thehistorynet.com> on the World Wide Web.

THE CIRCLE CLOSES

'A glow on the eastern horizon signalled that sunrise was imminent. It then occurred to me that very few climbers, if indeed any at all, had witnessed sunrise from the highest vantage point on earth. The thought so inspired me that I decided to race the sun to the summit and so increased my pace.

'Chirring and I were about halfway up the final pyramid when the sun's first rays struck the snow and I realized I had lost the race. I looked out to the west and saw Everest's immense shadow stretching to the horizon past a multitude of Himalayan giants and experienced a growing sense of imminent victory. After a few more minutes of struggle, we emerged on to the final summit slope and there, just 100 metres away, was the top of Mt. Everest. Emotions overwhelmed me as I realized that nothing would stop me.

'That point—the summit of the highest mountain, where the view extends down for 200 kilometres in every direction—must surely be the one place on this planet where it is easiest to feel a sense of accomplishment. For nowhere else is one's achievement more blatant. There, a sensation of success flooded into me.

'From my pack I retrieved a small laminated photograph of my grandparents, George and Ruth, and knelt down to plant it in the snow. This was a profoundly moving moment, one which symbolized the unarguable completion of a family project. No more did my grandfather's name weigh me down. Jeff, relating to the moment said: 'George, your grandfather would be proud of you.' The love George and Ruth had for each other has always inspired me and I feel it is appropriate that their photo is on the summit of George Mallory's dreams.'

—George Mallory