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Mallory's Moby Dick

Trench warfare on Mount Everest

by PHILIP TEMPLE

The thesis of this massive work is that most of the men who first attempted Mount Everest in the early 1920s had seen so much carnage on the Western Front that death had no hold on them. They accepted a degree of risk that would have been unacceptable before the Great War. Everest hero George Mallory climbed to his death on the mountain because, from his experience in France, death was but a 'frail barrier that men crossed, smiling and gallant, every day'.

The reality, as always, is more complex. Although Mallory said, before he left for Everest in 1924, that it 'would be more like war than adventure, and that he did not believe he would return alive,' he also said, 'He knew that no one would criticise him if he refused to go, but he felt it a compulsion'. A friend drew the literary parallel of Ahab and the White Whale. Everest was Mallory's Moby Dick. Careless and a risk taker as a mountaineer long before the Great War, Mallory was willing to leave behind a wife and young children and risk his life to harpoon the summit.

There had been similar endeavours before, and there were others to come, that showed the Everest project was less to do with the Great War than the British Imperial mission. Before the war, and only seven years before the conquest of Everest was first mooted, Robert Falcon Scott had led his party to their deaths on his attempt to be first to the South Pole for Britain, crossing that 'frail barrier ... smiling and gallant, every day.' What Wade Davis's story of the first Everest expeditions reveals is that little had been learned from either the Great War or Scott's debacle.

US scientist and author Davis, a distinguished explorer in his own right, spent ten years researching all manner of sources for this book. His interest in the subject was sparked in 1996 during an ecological survey when he 'completed a four-thousand mile overland journey from Chengdu, in western China, through southeastern Tibet to Lhasa and on to Kathmandu.' His credentials are impeccable. But Davis's fine book has partially become the victim of the weight of that journey and the subsequent volume of his research. About half of the 570-page narrative is devoted to the first 1921 Everest reconnaissance expedition. The story of this is fascinating enough, of explorers 'walking off the map' in search of the highest mountain in the world, of finding a Tibetan culture that had never encountered Europeans. Yet, just as Mallory and Co became lost among the maze of valleys and passes, so Davis tends to become lost among the thickets of its description.

In giving fair weight to all twenty six of the men who took part in the three expeditions, Davis also sometimes loses sight of the main characters. But Mallory's selfishness and big bungles do come through: his desperate last ditch discovery of the route to the North Col in 1921; his decision to climb to the col in 1922 that caused the death of seven porters; his decision to continue on that resulted in his and Sandy Irvine's deaths in 1924.

Over-arching the Mallory story is a tale of command mismanagement and decision-making which was the genuine legacy of the Great War. The attempts on Everest failed not only because of the physical challenge but also because of the social, class and political considerations that saw the best climbers excluded and the use of oxygen counted as hardly fair play. The Great War metaphor here is cavalry against the machine guns.

Class and politics were still part of the British Everest equation even in 1953 when top New Zealand guide Harry Ayres was excluded because he was a professional. But that expedition included two men who had the same fire in their bellies as Mallory. When the colonial Ed Hillary and the Sherpa Tenzing Norgay reached the summit, the British Imperial mission was finally extinguished.

INTO THE SILENCE, The Great War, Mallory and the Conquest of Everest, by Wade Davis (The Bodley Head, \$39.99).