



AAC Publications

Buried by the Mountain / The Time Has Come

Buried in the Sky: The Extraordinary Story of the Sherpa Climbers on K2's Deadliest Day. Peter Zuckerman and Amanda Padoan. W.W. Norton, 2012. 285 pages. Hardcover. \$26.95.

The Time Has Come: Ger McDonnell, His Life and His Death on K2. Damien O'Brien. The Collins Press, 2012. 188 pages. Paperback. \$29.95.

Welcome, dear reader, to another chapter in our favorite publishing market category: forensic mountaineering literature! Both these books concern the famous (infamous?) 2008 tragedy on K2, in which 11 climbers died. The formula is simple: hybridize a traditional climbing narrative with a deadly force of nature. Then look through the wreckage for good guys to exalt and villains to excoriate.

In *Buried by the Mountain* the good guys are the climbing Sherpas and Pakistani high-altitude porters, and the deeds of the sahibs are in the background. This role reversal touches a guilty nerve in the climbing community. Few readers of the AAJ, I'll wager, have returned from Himalayan expeditions entirely satisfied that they treated the locals fairly, from porters to liaison officers. I sure haven't.

Zuckerman and Padoan make a commendable effort to liberate "high altitude workers" from the anonymity of their servile position. There are rich biographical portraits and excellent anthropological insights. Though but a sideshow in the overall disaster, the treatment of Shaheen Baig, 39, vividly dramatizes what it means on a dangerous mountain when one kind of life is worth more than another. Shaheen, working for a Serbian team, is chosen leader to set ropes on the Bottleneck on summit day. Pulmonary edema strikes him violently in the early morning at Camp 2. Lungs gurgling and paralyzed, certain that he will die soon, he radios to the cook, Nadir Ali, and asks to be left on the mountain. But Nadir, a devout Muslim, sees this as a direct command from Allah to go to the rescue. His attempts to raise alarm in camp are cold-shouldered, so he sets off alone. He passes three descending climbers and they too decline to help. After 12 hours of continuous climbing, Nadir reaches Camp 2, zaps a comatose Shaheen with dexamethasone, and drags him down the mountain and out of the shadow of death. When later asked about the three descending climbers who refused to help, Nadir replies that they were doubtless weak and nursing ailments of their own. Would they have helped if Shaheen were Australian, say, and not Pakistani? "I don't want to answer that aloud," he replies. "They don't work for us. We work for them and I want to keep working for them. They pay good salaries. Most of them are good people, and we need them to keep coming back to Pakistan, so please don't make them look bad."

Heroic action often is born from disaster, and another hero on K2 that season was Gerard "Ger" McDonnell, very likely the last of the 11 to die. *The Time Has Come* memorializes the life of the first Irishman to make it to the top of K2, relates his previous climbing adventures, introduces us to his wonderful family from Kilcornan in county Limerick, his love of Irish music (he played percussion with a bodhra?), his Catholic piety, his Samaritanism, his bonhomie. From the anecdotes and testimonials of climbing partners and Ger's diary, there emerges a picture of a fine individual.

The core of the book is what happens in the hours preceding his demise. Ger, 37, an Everest summiteer, was one of two non-Dutchmen on the eight-man K2 Norit team. Because of delays in setting up fixed ropes in the Bottleneck and the Traverse, and slow progress by a Korean team in the lead, it is not till 4 p.m., 12 hours after setting out from Camp 4, that the majority of the climbers work through these key obstacles. Even with hours of further climbing to the summit, the Korean,

Norwegian, and Norit teams go ahead, trusting to get there just before dark, which they do, at 6:40. On the descent the leader of the Norit team (Wilco van Rooijen), Ger, and an Italian, Marco Confortola, run out of strength and willpower and are benighted at around 8,400 meters, despite urgings from Sherpas to climb down. At first light, Wilco charges downhill and passes two Koreans and a Sherpa, tangled in fixed rope and hanging upside down, pretty close to death. When Ger and Marco later come upon this sight, they devote no fewer than three hours in an attempt to rightside these men, without success. Whereupon Ger wordlessly climbs up toward the anchors in further attempts, and Marco heads down.

In Marco's view, expressed in highly fractured English, and subsequently reported in the first newspaper accounts, Ger was disoriented and hypoxic to the point of irrationality. But evidence indicates Ger had almost certainly reached the anchors, lowered the entangled bundle and freed the three men, and that they had subsequently started down the mountain, Ger following, when all were wiped out by serac fall. The story arc is familiar: man leaps off sea cliff in attempt to save drowning child; both are swept out to sea.

Both authors have one-paragraph caveats about the credibility of their reconstructions. Zimmerman observes that: "Survivors of the Death Zone have imperfect recall, and the media maelstrom makes recovery—and accuracy—elusive." But they press forward undeterred. Forensic mountaineering literature cannot exist without basically denying the vast evidence from high- altitude psychological and physiological research.¹ These books are shaped by a few conjectural language bridges over lacuna and aporias. And often the final narratives, as with the McDonnell story, are pitted with illogicalities and papered-over disconnects.

Neither of these books is particularly timely. It's been five years since the K2 disaster, and three years since the publication of Freddie Wilkinson's very competent *One Mountain Thousand Summits*, which gave generous consideration to Sherpa perspectives and to the probability that McDonnell acted as his family believes. In the normal course of publishing, belated factual differences or reinterpretations don't merit entire books. But forensic mountaineering lit is different. In this market niche it appears that any climbing misadventure with a high body count can be disinterred again and again.

John Thackray

¹ There are dozens of citations in the medical literature on brain damage, psychosis, cognition impairment, persistent memory loss, neuropsychological impairment, lost psycho-motor ability, and mental efficiency at high altitudes.

Images

Article Details

Author	John Thackray
Publication	AAJ
Volume	55
Issue	87
Page	362
Copyright Date	2013
Article Type	Book reviews