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Everest—The First Ascent: How a Champion of Science Helped to Conquer the Mountain

By Harriet Pugh Stuckey

Everest—The First Ascent: How a Champion of Science Helped to Conquer the Mountain. Harriet Pugh Stuckey. Lyons Press, 2013. 402 pages. Hardcover. \$26.95.

This superb, wonderfully researched, and readable book does several impossible things impossibly well. It tells the story of the '53 British Everest expedition again and makes it new. It brings into plain sight a member of that expedition previously erased—like a liquidated member of Stalin's central committee reappearing in a photograph. It portrays that man, an eccentric English scientist named Griffith Pugh, as the essential figure in high-altitude physiology in the 20th century. The way we climb now—the clothes we wear, the food we eat, the fluids we drink, how we acclimatize—comes from Pugh's meticulous in situ experiments.

Pugh was an expert skier selected for the 1936 British Olympic team. A medical officer in WWII, he trained mountain troops and made observations about fitness and adaptation to altitude. Like other British mountaineers of his era he was stoic, but unlike others he did not think that suffering was ennobling, especially not the suffering of men ill-trained and poorly clothed and fed.

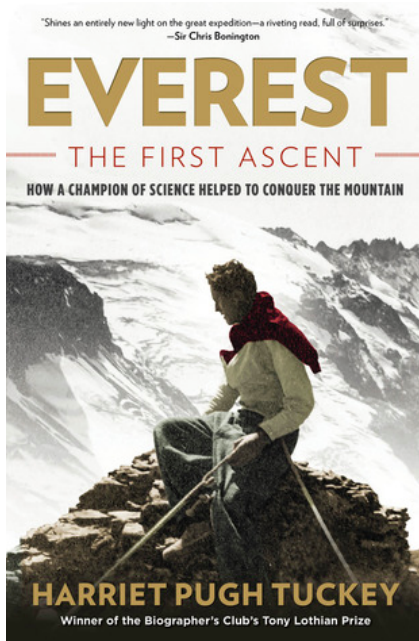
One of Pugh's insights had to do with the need to remain hydrated at altitude. Previously, in the Mallory days and the slightly later Shipton-Tilman era, copious fluid drinking was considered bad form, a moral weakness perhaps, but Pugh proved experimentally that low fluid intake led to fatigue and a host of cascading physical anomalies at altitude. In the face of sneering opposition he quietly made his case, and climbers on Everest became avid brewers of tea. One proof is that Ed Hillary, previously one who had called the water-drinkers sissies, arrived at the summit and promptly urinated on it.

Everest—The First Ascent is a misnomer. That title seems calculated to rope in those of us who are not yet quite stuffed full of Chomolungma lore, who will throw dollars at any handsome (and this book is very handsome) work promising a few happy hours mulling over once again the pluck of the early expeditions with men who climbed to 28,000 feet wearing sport coats and thin leather boots. What this book is, rather, is a brilliant biography of a historic field scientist, one who did essential work in high-altitude medicine and addressed other fascinating problems in exercise physiology.

Interestingly enough the author is Pugh's daughter. Consumed with anger at her often-absent, often-hurtful father, anger which turned for reasons of self-preservation to bleak indifference, she has turned the immense energy of that suppression to an act of beautiful resurrection, and we have as a result a book so brimming with truth about certain dimly understood famous personalities (Hillary is one; John Hunt, leader of the expedition, is another) that serious scholarship about the conquest of the 8,000-meter peaks, how it was actually done, by what type of people, can be said to have started anew, here, in these pages.

Robert Roper

Images



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