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One Day as a Tiger: Alex MacIntyre and the Birth of Light and Fast Alpinism

By John Porter

One Day as a Tiger: Alex MacIntyre and the Birth of Light and Fast Alpinism. By John Porter. Vertebrate Publishing (U.K.), 2014. 230 pages. Hardcover, £20.

Late at night on an expedition to Afghanistan in 1977, John Porter gazed through a hole in the wall of his tent, torn by the gales that swept the barley fields and arid hills. A multitude of stars blazed through the dark. "The sky is so incredibly clear above me now," he recalled. "I can see nebulae, and areas where opaque clouds of gas obscure what lies behind, like the impenetrable darkness that looms in the soul even when it is most content."

In many ways, the imagery of this scene lies at the heart of *One Day as a Tiger*, Porter's memoir of his friend, the great British climber Alex MacIntyre, who was killed by rockfall in 1982 on the south face of Annapurna. Long before the Swiss alpinist Ueli Steck completed his rapid solo on the same side of that 8,091-meter mountain, MacIntyre was part of a group of visionaries who brought fast and light styles to the world's high peaks. By the end of the 1980s, many of his peers had also died in the mountains. Awarded the Grand Prize at the Banff Mountain Book Festival, *One Day as a Tiger* documents an era marked by both intense wonder and grief.

Over the course of the book, Porter examines the unfolding of a systematic ambition from the Alps to the Himalaya: "[MacIntyre] believed in a methodology that if you did a, then b, then c, what would result was x, then y, then z. It was the sort of logic that only fate can undo." And as he explores the accumulation of individual decisions, chance events and personality traits that might have contributed to MacIntyre's achievements and (indirectly) to his death, Porter interweaves climbing scenes with leitmotifs of mathematics and chaos, reason and imagination. When a friend points out, "You say that climbing is mainly about having fun and having life-fulfilling adventures, but it seems to me that you leave on a trip with x members in your team and you come back with y. Assuming y is less than x, what have you gained?" Porter responds with one of the book's most compelling passages: "What we gain is a bit like dark matter. We know it has to be there because we know the universe has mass and energy we cannot see or measure, but we cannot say what it is. But the fact is, we keep on trying to describe it."

Paradoxically, it's in the impossible effort to communicate these unknowns that Porter's writing shines. Sarah Richard, MacIntyre's girlfriend, tells Porter, "I would love to have carried on that dialogue [MacIntyre and I] had. That is what death is, the end of dialogue." Nonetheless, as Porter muses, "The end of dialogue is not the end of the story." A sense of an imagined alternate history, in which MacIntyre survived, haunts the narrative: What might MacIntyre have thought, Porter repeatedly wonders, of our modern climbing world; what person might he have become? If MacIntyre's character remains partly enigmatic, that reticence is a testament to the author's own growing understanding of the limits of knowledge. For there are more elusive mysteries than that of alpinism amid the "dark matter" that so many of us seek, glassing the dazzling walls of great mountains, the distant galaxies of starlit skies, or the invisible depths of human souls.

– Katie Ives

Images



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