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The Third Pole: Mystery, Obsession and Death on Mount Everest

By Mark Synnott

THE THIRD POLE: MYSTERY, OBSESSION, AND DEATH ON MOUNT EVEREST. Mark Synnott. Dutton, 2021. Hardback, 416 pages. \$29.

Any armchair mountaineer knows that Sir Edmund Hillary and Tenzing Norgay are credited with the first ascent of Everest on May 29, 1953. If you've dabbled much in Everest history, you probably also know that George Mallory and Andrew "Sandy" Irvine died in their effort to summit the mountain—an effort that made it tantalizingly close, if not more—in 1924. What I was only dimly aware of before reading *The Third Pole* is how much mystery remains concerning Mallory and Irvine's high point, and therefore the truth behind possibly the biggest first ascent in climbing history.

Synnott's book attempts to answer a series of questions, each of which leads to another, like false summits along a mountain ridge. Did Mallory and Irvine reach the top of Everest—the so-called "third pole"—29 years before Hillary and Norgay? If so, did Irvine capture the moment with the camera he almost certainly carried with him that fateful day? Could it be the camera is still with Irvine's body, and that the film is still viable? And if so, could the greatest mystery in mountaineering history be solved by finding Irvine's body? Spoiler alert: Synnott didn't find the answers to these questions. But what he found along the way is, in my opinion, far more interesting.

You've probably seen Nirmal Purja's 2019 photo near the top of Everest, with a Disneyland-esque conga line of climbers all vying for the summit along a precipitous serrated ridge. Synnott calls this "the day Everest broke," and he provides an insider's perspective to the occurrences of that day. Indeed, Synnott's experience provides an overarching glimpse into the entire industry of climbing on Mt. Everest, an enterprise that has long struck me as an amalgamation of all the worst elements of climbing: colonialism, capitalism, racism, one-upmanship, hubris, and pride. It's a part of climbing I've seldom had much interest in, or anything nice to say about. If a book about Everest has a target audience, I—in spite of the fact that I'm a climber of close to 20 years—could not be said to be part of that group.

And yet *The Third Pole* vastly exceeded my expectations. Not only did I enjoy reading it, but also I actually found myself yearning to join that absurd procession, gasping for Everest's rarefied air (or from O2 tanks, anyway) from the top of the world. Synnott's pacing was perfect, and the storytelling suspenseful. But the real magic in the book is that it made me long to do something I judged others for doing in the past. In other words, it put me in someone else's shoes.

Synnott's book struck me as deeply truthful. The truth is, it forced me to see my snarky opinions about Everest and its climbers for what they really are: prejudices. I have not been to Everest, nor met many of its suitors, and as such, have no legitimate basis for judging them. Synnott has been there and met them, and the impression he relays is far more positive than the critical narrative that has predominated among climbers of mine and Synnott's ilk for as long as I can remember.

Climbing on Everest is a deeply conflicted, deeply problematic industry. Synnott doesn't shy away from that—he leans into it. But even with oxygen, fixed lines, and Sherpa guides, Everest is far from easy. Neither a summit nor survival is guaranteed. No matter who the suitor (including Synnott), there's still very much a question of whether any of us has the mettle to climb the third pole, and return home safely. In that sense, the specter of the summit is just as beguiling today as it was for

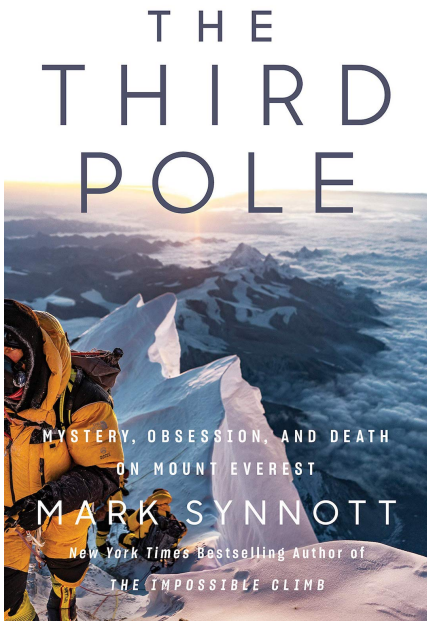
Mallory and Irvine nearly 100 years ago. That, at least, remains the same.

Synnott was on the mountain to try to find Sandy Irvine, his camera, and the answer to a longstanding riddle. But when push came to shove, he decided to pursue the summit in spite of all manner of complications—including the possibility that doing so might jeopardize the very purpose of the mission. I find that telling, but what precisely it tells me, I won't say. Like Synnott, I'll leave it to the reader to decide.

[Note: In April 2022, *The Third Pole* was issued in paperback (\$18), with a postscript that presents very intriguing new information about the potential whereabouts of Irvine's camera. Hint: It may be locked away in a vault in China.]

— **Chris Kalman**

Images



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