

ASSOCIATION ESSAY PRIZE 2005-2006

GEORGE MALLORY: MAGDALENE MAN OF THE MOUNTAINS

Elizabeth Clements

On June 6th 1924 George Mallory, gifted mountaineer and graduate of Magdalene, was last seen alive "*going strong for the top*" of the highest mountain in the world before he and his climbing partner Andrew Irvine disappeared into the swirling clouds and became a part of history. Their deaths affected a nation and created a story of such mythical status that their names are now synonymous with the great mountain herself- Everest. The debate concerning their final hours rages on and has in recent years become more polarized in light of new clues and evidence uncovered by the discovery of Mallory's preserved body in 1999. Their mystery still fascinates and generations of people have wanted an answer to the question- did Mallory and Irvine stand on top of the world?

Now the man has become a legend, a symbol, a figurehead for the mountaineering world. Mallory has become part of the fabric of the spell of the mountains, which he himself knew, the very reasoning which seemingly inexplicably feeds the mind of the mountaineer. Yet often lost in these legends is the story of the man behind the myth. Everest only occupied the last four years of Mallory's life and long before the fierce some giantess had captured the popular imagination and even before the dizzy pull of the slopes had taken their firm hold on Mallory, the young George at the tender age of eighteen, came up to Cambridge to begin his life as an undergraduate at Magdalene. To carve his niche as hundreds of students had before him and as countless would after. Mallory may well be one of Magdalene's infamous students and yet one whose life and achievements is perhaps least well known by those who now follow in his footsteps.

George Mallory was born on 18th June 1886 in Mobberley, Cheshire where his father, the Reverend Herbert Leigh Mallory was rector of the parish. George enjoyed an idyllic childhood with his three siblings, Mary, Avie and his younger brother Trafford. "*I think we were rather exceptionally unruly children,*" Mallory's younger sister Avie recalled, "*It was always fun doing things with George. He had the knack of making things exciting and often rather dangerous. He climbed everything that it was at all possible to climb. I learnt very early that it was fatal to tell him that any tree was impossible for him to get up. 'Impossible' was a word that acted as a challenge to him*". Stories abound of George's youthful exploits. Aged seven having been sent to his room for misbehaving, he was later noticed climbing about on the roof of the church. On being caught he protested that he had gone to his room yes - to fetch his cap. Once on holiday at the seaside, George had announced his intention to sit atop a rock and to remain there while it was surrounded by the tide. Eventually as the water threatened to break over George's high seat his grandmother gave the alarm and a young man volunteered to rescue him. However in the rough currents it took him several attempts to reach George, who the volunteer was astounded to discover when he reached him, was perfectly calm and unafraid. How easy it is to see glimpses of George's character appearing in these early episodes as it was being formed and influenced.

In 1896 George was sent to Glengorse, a preparatory school in Eastbourne where his developing character was once again in evidence. This particular incident involved one of George's friends who felt that he needed moral support on his escape attempt from the school. George who in fact was perfectly happy at Glengorse loyally agreed to keep him company. The boys got as far as a church lads brigade shelter where they were hospitably, if guilefully entertained while the school was contacted. When an assistant master came to fetch them, George agreed to return on the condition that he was not beaten when they got back, a promise which was given and then, to George's infinite disgust, broken on their immediate return.

In 1900 George won a mathematics scholarship to Winchester College. He worked steadily he was not an outstanding scholar and while never attaining the highest distinction in mathematics he threw himself into the life of the school and excelled in sports, particularly gymnastics and football. His masters noted that with all his energy and enthusiasm George was "*a boy thoroughly at home and happy in his milieu*". George's housemaster at Winchester was a man named Graham Irving and their introduction led to George's first experience of mountaineering. Irving was looking to choose and train some of the Winchester lads as climbing companions to accompany him to the Alps that summer. George and his friend Harry Gibson were the lucky ones chosen, though George at this point had climbed nothing higher than the Malvern hills and knew little about the sport, Irving was impressed with his gymnast talents and his extraordinary grace and balance.

In August 1904 George first saw the white peaks of the Alps and as a complete novice formed a clean slate for the reputable talents of Graham Irving who was an experienced but controversial climber. He advocated guideless climbing which was a practice deplored at the time by older mountaineers. His climbing opinions were, he knew, contentious and did result as expected in vehement protest from the Alpine club members following his talk and subsequent publications in 1908. Following Mallory's disappearance Irving wondered whether by his teaching methods he had contributed in some unforeseen way to George's death or whether there was some form of inevitability to George's future pursuits.

In the end George succeeded in making two summit climbs, after initial problems with altitude sickness and enthusiastically wrote to his mother about his escapades, "*of course the view from the top [of the Grand Combin] is perfectly ripping.*" In his final year at Winchester, George became a member of the Ice Club, newly formed by Irving. It attracted many enthusiastic members including Harry Gibson and Guy Bullock, who would later climb with Mallory on Everest. George continued to practice his climbing skills once at home and celebrating his last day at Winchester scaled a tower by climbing with his feet against the tower and his shoulders against the neighbouring chimney, a sheer drop of 50 ft looming beneath him. "*It looked like magic,*" described one envious onlooker.

The Ice Club returned once more to the Alps in the summer of 1905 making modest ascents whilst enjoying reportedly excellent morale. It was during one of these ascents that George witnessed a glorious sunrise which he described to his mother in detail, "*... we had already gone up quite a lot, the view was splendid right over to the Mont Blanc range. It was altogether too inexpressibly glorious to see peak after peak touched with the pink glow of the first sun, which slowly spread until the whole top was a flaming fire - and that against a sky with varied tints of leaden blue*".

So it was at an impressionable age George Mallory had an intense introduction to mountaineering, both the glories of the summits and the lows of long fatiguing days and sometimes extraordinary discomfort. "*We had now to face semi-starvation*" Irving cheerfully noted whilst he and George were trapped by the weather in an icy alpine hut.

It is interesting to speculate how pointedly Irving's unconventional techniques influenced George's own climbing style and his later reputation for enjoying "*a small margin of safety*". However despite the clearly lasting impression these Alpine adventures had on the young Mallory there is no doubt that George was, even then, a determinedly individual thinker and a skilled climber all in his own right.

In October 1905 George Mallory became an undergraduate at Magdalene College. It was then a college of only fifty undergraduates loyally described as a small but friendly community by those who knew it well. It was the Sunday before the start of Michaelmas Term when Arthur Benson,

recently appointed supervisor of history at Magdalene attending matins in King's College Chapel, was struck by the young undergraduate sitting in the row ahead of him who was listening to the service with great reverence and attention. Benson noted in his diary "*I had noticed in King's in the morning a fine looking boy, evidently a freshman, just in front of me - lo and behold the same came to call on me, and turns out to be Mallory one of our new exhibitioners at Magdalene... a simpler, more ingenuous, more unaffected, more genuinely interested boy, I never saw*".

George became close friends with his tutor. Benson took a keen personal interest in George and encouraged his protege to work hard and to read as widely as possible. Often their discussion would range away to other topics and over wider fields than those intended. The new undergraduate worked hard on his essays but frequently failed to finish them on time. Mr Benson recalled to David Pye that several times he had to complain of this unpunctuality and one occasion, just after one of these complaints, he found an enormous essay on his table so late in the day that there would be no time even to read it before his pupil arrived. He later learned that Mallory, being so taken with its subject had worked straight through the previous night to finish it.

The stories of Mallory's time at Magdalene are a reminder of not only of how much life has changed at Magdalene but also how some student experiences continue to bear a similar resemblance throughout the decades. What Arthur Benson once described as "*the youthful spirit that flashes and brightens in every corner of the old courts,*" resounds as much now as it did in Mallory's day. One of Mallory's more entertaining escapades resulted from his passion for bathing, which he reportedly indulged with a complete disregard of temperature and circumstance. A warm night in the summer saw Mallory and his friends aboard a punt on the Cam. Mallory insisted on diving into the river from the punt, in spite of protests that the time was nearly ten. He refused to return to the punt and finally the others made off up river, saying the punt needed to be in by ten o'clock. Mallory did not follow thinking he would get into College via the fellows garden. Unfortunately all doors proved to be locked, and there was no one to help him in his need. With no clothing and the punt hopelessly out of reach, Mallory swam across to the quayside and made a sprint, all dripping over the bridge to the college gates. He rang the bell, but before the porter opened the door, a policeman came up and demanded his name. How he succeeded in soothing the man's outraged sensibilities and persuaded him to see the humour of the situation will never be known, but succeed he did and the policeman agreed to leave on the condition that the incident was reported to the college tutor.

In his second year at Cambridge Mallory became part of a close circle of friends who were drawn into the animated discussions and debates of the time concerning art, politics and literature. The group included Geoffrey Keynes who later achieved distinction as a scientist and surgeon and his brother Maynard, the eminent economist, Hugh Wilson, David Pye of Trinity, James Strachey and the poet Rupert Brooke. George was known for being an enthusiastic if not somewhat impatient debater. His friend David Pye said of him "*I think he regarded debatable questions as providing a sort of intellectual fisticuffs in which you hit out as shrewdly as you could and did not resent your adversary doing the same*". Under the influence of such individuals Mallory joined the Fabian Society and his main political interest - votes for women led him to become college secretary on the committee of the University Women's Suffrage Association.

Mallory's time at Cambridge coincided with what Pye described as "*the growth at Cambridge of a very remarkable group of young and older people... who between them contrived to make a notable generation... It is rather a sort of joint contribution of which no tangible record can remain*". This generation had about them a new attitude towards life and other human beings "*of a peculiar quality and flavour, an absolute directness of mind, a half sceptical, half ardent fearlessness in the matters of the heart and spirit*". They discussed, and expressed themselves and their affections in an outspoken manner and attacked everything with a passion for analysis that was new and shocking,

desiring to know the mechanisms behind their emotions. George was in the midst of all this, he was a part of it and an important contributor. Cottie Sanders who later became a climbing friend of George noted the influence these friendships had on him and the serious and conscientious way in which he treated these relationships. *"They were extraordinarily attached to one another; they stuck closer than brothers; there was, literally, nothing they would not do for one another."* David Pye also said of his friend Mallory *"I think the peculiar importance that he attached to this matter of friends was a good deal due to his years at Cambridge."*

Despite being greatly optimistic about his results Mallory only achieved a third in the first part of his History Tripos, which he dejectedly dismissed as a *'worthless performance.'* Arthur Benson blamed himself for allowing Mallory to read too widely and spend too much time on his essays. That summer saw Mallory determinedly pursuing his climbing, as he did in most vacations with his brother Trafford, Geoffrey Keynes and others, usually in Wales or the Lake District. He returned refreshed for his third year at Cambridge during which he captained the Magdalene Boat club for a year which the official history of the club describes as throwing all others *'into the shade'*. George hadn't particularly distinguished himself in athletics at college and was more known for his rowing, representing the college for three years during which the college's one boat made seventeen bumps and wasn't caught once in the Lents or the Mays. During the year of his captaincy the college boat moved up four places in the Lent bumps and five in the Mays, such success resulted in their sending a team to the Henley Regatta, for which financial contributions were happily made and the crew put in a good performance.

The second part of his tripos showed the fruits of George's increased labours and he was placed in the second class. On the basis of this result he chose to return to Magdalene for a fourth year living in rooms in Pythagoras house. In the spring he devoted his time to preparing for the Members' Prize Essay for which he wrote about one of his favourite topics James Boswell, the biographer of Dr Johnson. Although George didn't win the prize, he received favourable comments and was encouraged to publish his work.

It was in his final year, at a dinner in the University Arms Hotel organised in honour of the writer and critic Charles Lamb, that George met Geoffrey Winthrop Young who was later to become his closest friend and counsellor. Young was one of the best British mountaineers and had an exceptional reputation in the Alps, where he had put up numerous new routes. He was also an inexhaustible author, describing his climbs in abundant articles and books as well as being the ring-master and organiser of the famous Pen y Pass parties which brought together many leading climbers at the Gorphwysfa Hotel. Their first meeting went well and Young, struck by George's charisma, invited him to the next Welsh party. That Easter George made an excellent impression on the elite climbers, putting his name to new routes in the Pen y Pass visitors book and singling himself out as among the top rank of British rock-climbers. And so Mallory began to make a name for himself.

George was at this time giving a lot of thought to his future career. He was interested in writing but the possibility of becoming a schoolmaster seemed like a better way to earn a living. Still undecided, Mallory's days at Magdalene came to an end in July 1909. In wishing him farewell his friend Geoffrey Keynes said *"That's that, and the end of you, from a Cambridge point of view - not a very pleasant reflection. Do you realise that you've gone down?"*

In the summer of 1909, at the age of 23, George returned to the Alps to climb with Young. He happily exclaimed in a letter to his Mother, *"How glorious it will be, after dreaming of them for four years!"* George's skills were continually improving, despite his little previous experience people so impressed with his agile movements that they were convinced he would not fall, but he did so on more than one occasion in the Alps and Young himself was shocked by Mallory's utter nonchalance,

after he lost his hold on an overhang and was left hanging by the rope over a glacier. David Pye described such indifference in his friend, *"There is no doubt that all his life he enjoyed taking risks, or perhaps it would be fairer to say doing things with a small margin of safety"*. One Easter in Wales a distinguished Austrian climber, having seen Mallory complete a challenging climb up an ice chimney later remarked *"That young man will not be alive for long"*. George was greatly upset by this and Cottie Saunders was staunch in her defence of him saying *"He was prudent, according to his own standards; but his standards were not those of the ordinary good rock climber... his reach, his strength, and his admirable technique made him feel completely secure on rocks which would fill a less competent climber with a sense of hazardous enterprise"*. However Mallory's abilities as a climber were unquestionable, he was surefooted, had excellent balance and agility, but some regarded him as impulsive and reckless for showing a cavalier concern about such serious situations. Cottie Sanders later remarked of George *"He was .. quite modest about his own performances rather enjoyed confessing, with a half shamefaced and half whimsical amusement to his more desperate escapades. In those days his extreme youthfulness would have made it difficult to recognize in him the responsible leader he afterwards became, or to appreciate the reserve of strength which, even then made it necessary to readjust one's standards in deciding whether for him, a climb could be justified as sound mountaineering"*.

Subsequent climbing seasons saw George setting high standards in his climbing and developing the *"miraculous ease and grace"* which many learnt to admire. He did eventually chose teaching as a career and from September 1910 began work as a schoolmaster at Charterhouse. In 1914 George met his bride to be Ruth Turner. The couple were very much in love and were married in July 1914 on the eve of the First World War. During the war, when George spent sixteen months as an officer on the Western front, Ruth gave birth to their two daughters. Their son was born shortly after the war ended, when George returned to Charterhouse and to his climbing.

In early 1921 Percy Farrar president of the Alpine Club, the world's oldest mountaineering club, began to compile a list of potential climbers for the first expedition to climb Everest. In credit to the climbing reputation and ability that George had built he was one of the first names on the list. Farrar wrote to Mallory *"It looks as though Everest would really be tried this summer. Party would leave early April and get back in October. Any aspirations?"* Mallory didn't hesitate and in early June 1921 found himself climbing the cliffs of a gorge above the Yaru in Tibet with another member of the expedition Guy Bullock, a friend from the Ice Club at Winchester. They had gone ahead of their colleagues and were resolved to obtain their first view of Everest which had been obscured by clouds and landscape for so long. After an hour of climbing they reached the stony summit and looked in the direction of Everest. Clouds covered the range, but eventually they slowly began to lift revealing a little of the range at a time. *"Presently the miracle happened,"* said Mallory in a letter to his wife Ruth, *"Gradually, very gradually, we saw the great mountain sides and glaciers and aretes.... Until far higher in the sky than imagination had dared to suggest the white summit of Everest appeared.... The wildest creation of a dream"*.

It was then three years almost to the day following George's first sight of Everest that the clouds he saw lifting, descended to claim him. On June 6th 1924, it had been more than a month since the third British Everest Expedition had arrived at Base Camp on the main Rongbuk Glacier. Terrible weather and accidents had resulted in the failure of their previous attempts. They were running out of supplies and Sherpa support, George Mallory and his climbing partner Sandy Irvine were making a last ditch effort to race for the summit before the monsoon. This was their last chance of success. Tensions must have been high, but you can also imagine the degree of determination which they must have felt to be so close to their goal. Early on the morning of the 6th they would have clambered from their tiny canvas tent onto the wind savaged North Col at over twenty three thousand feet, shouldered their heavy, primitive oxygen apparatus and begun climbing higher. The

last sighting of the two climbers was made by Noel Odell who at 12:50pm, through a break in the cloud, saw black spots moving, sharp against the snow, up the summit ridge. Mallory and Irvine never returned from their summit bid. The world was tersely informed in The Times on June 21 1924 *"Mallory and Irvine killed on last attempt"*.

There are many theories as to how Mallory and Irvine spent their last hours and endless questions which remained unanswered - how fast were they climbing, what time did they leave camp, how much oxygen did they use, which route did they take, could they have climbed the ridge without modern equipment? In 1999 a US research expedition discovered Mallory's body high on the face of Everest. Expecting to find Irvine, the climbers were surprised to discover clothing labels marked G.Mallory. The group had been hoping to find the elusive camera that Mallory had supposedly carried which might provide conclusive evidence of their success or failure. However it was not found with Mallory, and what discoveries were made from the artefacts on his body in fact created more questions than they answered and opinion remains divided.

The fact that Mallory and so many after him, died for their love of what Joe Simpson describes as *"the beckoning silence of great height"* is a perplexing question for many people. There must be some reason to begin to explain why a life with so much promise and talent, someone one with a young family and so many friends, should be lost in pursuit of a mountain summit and what could be worth such a loss. *"Because it's there"* Mallory's quip, has become a persistently repeated phrase which seems to have been taken as the explanation, not just within the sphere of mountaineering but as an answer for many exploratory needs, expeditions and pursuits. Mallory might well have hit the nail on the head as regards human need to extend horizons, but many of those who knew him saw it as the easy answer of a man who had been asked the same question many times over. It is a simple and obvious phrase, but it cannot be taken as a cynical, Mallory meant it and a great deal more substantial explanation lay behind that. He knew his reasons for having such an intense attachment to climbing and often tried to explain the necessity in his own words. In articles and lectures Mallory had previously expounded his own thoughts regarding mountaineers' attempts to reconcile their reasoning with their risky ventures. Describing the emotional and spiritual journey experienced by mountaineers he wrote *"... A time comes when all is changed and we experience a harmony and a satisfaction. The individual is in a sense submerged, yet not so as to be less conscious; rather his conscious is specially alert, and he comes to a finer realization of himself than ever before. It is these moments of supremely harmonious experience that remain always with us and part of us"*.

When replying to the question *'why climb Everest?'* Mallory once said *"the classic defence of the expedition made by Sir Francis Young Husband is simply this, he says by climbing Mount Everest you will stimulate the spirit of adventure throughout the English speaking peoples of the world. Well I can do no better than that. But though Young husband's words are a justification they do not supply a motive. No one, I expect, would claim that he went to Mount Everest in order to stimulate the world I think records of this sort can't weigh in the balance against the serious work of everyday life. No I suppose we go to Mount Everest, granted the opportunity, because in a word we can't help it. Or to state the matter rather differently, because we are mountaineers"*. His great friend and mentor Geoffrey Winthrop Young described Mallory as *"the magical and adventurous spirit of youth personified... neither time nor his own disregard could age or alter the impressions which the presence of his flame-like vitality produced. There are natures whose best expression is movement. Mallory could make no movement that was not in itself beautiful. Inevitably he was a mountaineer"*. Young never had any doubt about what happened to the climbers after nearly twenty years knowledge of Mallory as a mountaineer, *"I can say that difficult as it would have been for any mountaineer to turn back with the only difficulty past, to Mallory it would have been an impossibility the peak was first climbed because Mallory was Mallory"*.

When those who knew him best had such resolute faith in him and his abilities, speculation seems fruitless and images of Mallory on the summit and what he may have seen from the summit of Everest are easy to conjure. In the end perhaps it is irrelevant to the world whether Mallory and Irvine reached the summit or not. They left a legacy behind which inspired generations and set the world a significant example of courage, determination, commitment, perseverance and the importance of ambition. We marvel at the accomplishments of the early mountaineers. What they achieved without the technological resources available today and the fearlessness they displayed concerning the unknown and the unexplored, demonstrates what we can be capable of achieving. Although we may never know whether George Mallory was the first to stand at the top of the world, it is moving to know that it can't be proved otherwise.

Mallory was a great man, a resolute, brave and focused individual whose love of challenge and ambition was nourished by his experiences at Cambridge and the friends he made in the community of Magdalene. I began this essay intending it to provide current Magdalene students with a history of one of their own, but in discovering Mallory's life it occurs to me that his legacy is not a historical mystery but an inspiration in its purest form to those who follow him, not just about what they can achieve, but what kind of people they would wish to be.

Mallory may forever be known as the man who died in pursuit of Everest and much of the fascination surrounding his life does focus on his dramatic and tragic end, but it is the actions of his life and not the choices he made that led to his death which have become an inspiration, not only to mountaineers but to the thousands of people who know his story.

As his friend and biographer David Pye wrote *"When we are tempted to cry out upon the loss of two such lives, it is well for us to try to see Everest as Mallory saw it. To him the attempt was not just an adventure ... The climbing of the mountain was an inspiration because it signified the transcendence of mind over matter. Those two black specks, scarcely visible among the vast eccentricities of nature, but moving up slowly, intelligently, into regions of unknown striving, remain for us a symbol of the invincibility of the human spirit"*.

Magdalene can be immensely proud of the achievements of one of its greatest sons, both in life and through the legacy he left behind.

FURTHER READING

Lost on Everest: The search for Mallory and Irvine by Peter Firstbrook

The Wildest Dream Biography of an Everest hero by Peter and Leni Gilman

Detectives on Everest: The 2001 Mallory and Irving Research Expedition by Jochen Hemmleb and Eric Simonson

Because it's there: The life of George Mallory by Dudley Green

George Leigh Mallory by David Pye

Ghosts of Everest: The search for Mallory and Irvine by Hemmleb, Johnson and Simonson

Fearless on Everest: The Quest for Sandy Irvine by Julie Summers

George Mallory by David Robertson

Mountains of the mind by Robert Macfarlane