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Book Review: *Missing in the Minarets* by William Alsup

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Missing in the Minarets: The Search for Walter A. Starr, Jr. William Alsup. Foreword by Glen Dawson. Yosemite National Park: Yosemite Association, 2001. 215 pages, numerous black-and-white photographs. \$24.95. Note: All profits from the Yosemite Association go to support Yosemite National Park.



In the summer of 1933, 30-year-old Walter "Pete" Starr, Jr. set off on a solo expedition in California's Sierra Nevada in order to survey the landscape along the new John Muir Trail. In addition to exploration, his purpose was to gather notes for a guidebook he was writing. An experienced mountaineer, Starr was also a lawyer with a San Francisco firm and the scion of a prominent family. When he failed to come out of the mountains at the appointed time, his father became concerned. Several days passed; concern gave way to alarm. A search effort was mounted, involving some of the most famous mountaineers in Sierra history. An intense search over the course of several days in the vicinity of mounts Banner and Ritter as well as on the spectacular Minarets yielded promising clues but no firm results. In the end, the searchers gave up in despair, packed up their camp and filed grimly out of the mountains to home. All of them, that is, except one: the legendary Norman Clyde. When all others had surrendered hope, he alone persevered. What he found in his solitary pursuit became the basis for several generations of stories told around Sierra campfires. Now William Alsup has provided us with a definitive historical account of those fateful August days almost seventy years ago.

Missing in the Minarets is part mountaineering history, part

detective story, and part photo album. It is 100 percent engaging reading. Alsup's lucid prose is complemented by the inclusion of numerous well-reproduced photographs, some of which are historical and others documentary images made by the author himself. It would seem that Alsup is ideally suited to write a book like this. As a recognized Sierra historian (author of the excellent *Such a Landscape!*, which recounts William Brewer's 1864 California Survey), a skilled photographer, an enthusiastic mountaineer, and a former San Francisco trial attorney now serving as a federal district judge, he applies his many-sided genius to sorting through a complexity of evidence in order to provide his reader with a clear and compelling account of an important episode in the social history of the Sierra Nevada.

It was no easy task. Most of the people who participated in the events are now dead. There are many gaps in the evidentiary record. What evidence does survive, especially in the form of written records, is often contradictory. Perhaps most challenging of all is the aura of myth that has long surrounded the fate of Starr, a swirl of exaggeration and speculation that makes it difficult for a researcher to separate fact from fiction. Nevertheless, Alsup conducted a painstaking and meticulous investigation, literally leaving no stone unturned (you'll have to read the book to catch this allusion). He sought out the few people still alive who were eyewitnesses; he not only tracked down descendants of the Starr family but also members of a Stockton, California Boy Scout troop who happened to be in the area of Minarets at the same time Starr disappeared. Alsup even got his hands on the film that was found in Starr's camera- the last pictures the man ever took-and printed fresh images, which are published for the first time in this book. Having brought all this new evidence to light, Alsup then applies his keen analytical sensibility to reconstructing a plausible chain of events. The result is a book best described as an exercise in mountaineering forensics. You could say that Alsup has succeeded in putting up a new route on a previously unmapped (or poorly mapped) past.

Accounts of mountaineering accidents serve a curious dual purpose in the climbing community. On the one hand, we say such reading is instructive and indeed essential, because it allows us to learn from other people's often fatal mistakes. On the other hand, we experience a simple, though often unacknowledged, attraction toward the gruesome, the same urge indulged by passing motorists who slow down and gawk at bloody car wrecks. The Germans, with their precise psychological vocabulary, have a word for this feeling: *Schadenfreude*, the joy we take in other people's misery. Much of the continuing interest in Mallory is less attributable to the

question of whether or not he made it to the summit than it is to the grisly fascination some people have with the frozen body that lies abject on the upper reaches of the mountain, like a word emptied of its meaning. When you get right down to it, you could say that *Schadenfreude* played no small part in the success of Krakauer's *Into Thin Air*.

In contrast to the fascination with death that characterizes many mountaineering narratives, *Missing in the Minarets* avoids this emotional dog route and focuses instead on character. The author takes great care to allow the evidence to speak for itself. As a writer, Alsup resists the temptation to identify too closely with his subject matter, and he refrains from entering the narrative himself, except at the very beginning and end, in order to provide the context for the investigation. "I drew on my 25 years as a trial lawyer in sizing up evidence," he explains in the afterword, "as well as my quarter-century of hiking and climbing in the Sierra. In this book I have tried, however, to provide enough of the actual record so that readers can make their own judgments, for, without question, the evidence is sometimes subject to multiple interpretations." As a result, *Missing in the Minarets* becomes a tale of two men, Pete Starr and Norman Clyde, which focuses attention on the philosophical question, What is the nature of a mountaineer?

Pete Starr loved the mountains. He was, on the one hand, "outgoing, the sociable son of a prominent family, a joiner in college and career. On the other, at least in the wild, he preferred the companionship of the landscape itself" He was a man who one time, not having a pencil, signed his name in a mountain register in his own blood. And then there is Norman Clyde, one of the great "characters" in North American mountaineering history, who likewise valued his solitude. For most of his life he was not known to have a regular job and spent his days wandering and climbing in the Range of Light, achieving by far more first ascents than anybody else on record. Even this achievement pales in comparison to his devotion to just being in the mountains. Both these men ought to be compared to the most famous of all Sierra mountaineers, John Muir, who, in writing about his own solitary and dangerous adventures on Mt. Ritter, captured something of the spirit of all those old-time Sierra climbers: "But we little know until tried how much of the uncontrollable there is in us, urging across glaciers and torrents, and up dangerous heights, let the judgment forbid as it may."

The ancient Greek philosopher Heraclitus observed that character is destiny. The exquisitely produced *Missing in the Minarets* demonstrates that, for some characters, destiny lay in

the mountains and that this destiny often comes at a dear price. Alsup concludes his book with these admonitory words: "Peter Starr proved how dangerous was the climb; readers definitely should not repeat the act." Wise words. You, however, will likely want to repeat the act of reading this deeply satisfying book.