

# Rewriting Irvine into Everest: Audrey Salkeld and Julie Summers

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## Gender in mountaineering literature

Who do you think of when you think of an alpinist? Usually, a white man. This impression is not only because of individual biases but builds on a tradition and a literature that have made this convention seem so obvious. As aptly put by sociologist Delphine Moraldo, ‘codified, thought out, and told mainly by men, excellence in mountaineering was and is understood, conceived, and perceived as male’.<sup>1</sup> High-altitude mountaineering has been defined in key works by scholars such as Sherry Ortner, Julie Rak, and Susan Frohlick as a ‘hypermasculine landscape’.<sup>2</sup> The relationship is reciprocal: mountaineering has also played a key role in defining masculinity in Western culture,<sup>3</sup> and shaped manliness from Romantic and imperial angles.<sup>4</sup> In mountaineering writing, a gender- and race-based opposition often emerges that separates ‘real’ mountaineers from women and Sherpas.<sup>5</sup>

A renewed interest in redressing the balance is evident by the 2020s, not just on climbing walls or among the mountains but also in how we write about and study mountaineering. A growing body of research investigates the experiences of women climbers.<sup>6</sup> In this book, chapters on Junko Tabei and Wanda Rutkiewicz by Jenny Hall and Agnieszka Kaczmarek examine the history of women on Everest.<sup>7</sup> Rather than focusing on the adventure itself, I will look at how climbing stories are transmitted and consider their importance for the consolidation of traditions in the mountaineering community. A focus on the writing and translation dynamics of mountaineering literature reveals the transnational making of this culture and highlights figures who have previously been sidelined because of their gender or their role as translators or editors.

The approach in this account is agent-oriented: rather than focusing on texts, I centre the people who made them, uncovering and sharing their stories

to portray the diverse range of people behind the narrative of one of the most famous events of mountaineering history. This approach invites us to look at mountaineering books not just for what they say but for how they have been created – by whom, in what context, and with attention to how their stories have been constructed and transmitted. Why is this important? Moraldo highlights the reliance on ‘male stories’ in mountaineers’ publications and how rare it is that women climbers write autobiographies on their achievements.<sup>8</sup> Across the history of mountaineering, women are few, and written traces of their exploits even fewer.

Here, I invite you to look behind the surface and explore women’s presence in the telling of other stories. On the one hand, many women writing about mountaineering were still writing of male achievements, and by doing so they contributed to traditional narratives of mountaineering history and culture. In this sport, narrative is everything because any mountaineering achievement has a key phase that takes place off the mountain: the retelling of the expedition, also known as its ‘debriefing’.<sup>9</sup> This phase is fundamental to the overall success of the climb and its reception from the rest of the community. In their writings, most of the women writers I will discuss do not openly challenge traditional gender roles – but then neither did most elite women climbers.<sup>10</sup> On the other hand, I argue that the presence and authority of these women writers represents an important intervention in an environment dominated by men at the level not simply of practice but also of ideology.<sup>11</sup> As Rak notes, the history of Everest has a specific, unparalleled weight in setting codes and goals for the community.<sup>12</sup> If mountaineering has been ‘an activity codified and debated above all by men’,<sup>13</sup> then it is all the more important to highlight the presence of women in this process of codifying and debating, and the importance of their agency in shaping narrative histories of one of its most important events on a mountain with more power than any other to shape the canon of mountaineering writing: Chomolungma, or Mount Everest.

Women were already present in the fabric of many male-centred Everest histories, and this chapter asks how we did not see them when they were already there. A common strategy for approaching Everest and women’s history (and indeed a very important one) is to talk about Junko Tabei and other women in Everest expeditions. What interests me here, though, is the women who have written about the early Everest expeditions and their role in recovering the figure of Sandy Irvine. While Mallory and Irvine disappeared together in 1924, the name of George Mallory acquired a symbolic and heroic status in the United Kingdom and around the world. Irvine, the climbing partner in the final

push for the summit, has been recentred in the conversation only decades later. This chapter focuses on Irvine's historiography and on how women historians were key to its rewriting. From a larger perspective, my research highlights a long and underexamined history of women in the mountaineering community, not only as climbers but as writers, editors, and translators who played key roles in the transmission of its narratives in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

I will present the examples of Audrey Salkeld and Julie Summers, who are but two of many women in Everest's history and historiography. Of course, when talking about women writing the history of Everest, another notable person is Jan Morris, who was the official journalist with the 1953 expedition and reported news of the successful summit ascent by Edmund Hillary and Tenzing Norgay.<sup>14</sup> Morris and many others such as Katie Ives, Elizabeth Hawley, Helen Kilness, and Jean Crenshaw are among the figures that I plan to explore in a larger project on the role of women in the making of mountaineering literature in English. Attention to nonfiction, historiography, translation, journalism, and editing allows us to search behind the scenes of mountaineering classics. Even if the genre is male dominated at surface level of its most famous climbers, this chapter contributes to writing a different history of its making, dissemination, translation, and reception.

### **Sandy Irvine and the 1924 Everest expedition**

Andrew 'Sandy' Comyn Irvine was born on 8 April 1902, in Birkenhead, and grew up surrounded by his family. His gift for engineering and athleticism clearly emerged during his teenage years, and he rowed with Shrewsbury's winning crew at Henley's Royal Regatta in 1919. In 1921 he moved to Oxford, attending Merton College. Immediately selected to join the university boat, he rowed at the Oxford and Cambridge boat race in 1922 and 1923. In 1923, he joined the Spitsbergen expedition organised by the university. This experience was a test in many ways. Another member of the Spitsbergen team, Noel Odell, had already been selected for the 1924 Everest team, and had the opportunity to evaluate Irvine's potential for Everest. Irvine was nominated for the Everest team shortly after. In preparation for the Everest expedition, Irvine worked assiduously to improve the design of the oxygen set used in 1922. Finally, on 29 February 1924, he sailed from England, directed towards Bombay.

Sandy Irvine was only 21 years old at the time. The expedition leader, General Bruce, called him 'our splendid "experiment"', and he went from the youngest and least experienced member of the party to among the select few

in a summit push: 'He rapidly ceased to be an experiment, for we soon found that with a young body he possessed a mature judgement, combined with a very remarkable handiness and adaptability as a practical working engineer.'<sup>15</sup> Another military officer who led the successful 1953 Everest team, John Hunt, viewed Sandy's change of status in the team as remarkable: 'it cannot have been easy, in the social and hierarchical climate of the early 1920s and in a team under military leadership, for one so young to achieve acceptance as equal'.<sup>16</sup> Bruce admired Irvine's stamina and Odell described him as 'mechanically-minded',<sup>17</sup> particularly with the oxygen sets. It was arguably for this reason that Mallory selected him as companion for the final summit attempt. After their departure, they were last seen at 12.50 pm on 8 June 1924 by Odell, who observed two 'objects' moving on what he believed to be the summit ridge, before the clouds rolled back in.<sup>18</sup>

During the 1930s, four more British expeditions returned to Everest, but not much more about that last climb was discovered, apart from finding, in 1933, an ice axe on the Northeast Ridge that was recognised as Irvine's by a triple-nick mark.<sup>19</sup> Sandy's Spitsbergen and Everest diaries were donated to Merton College in 1962, following the death of his father.<sup>20</sup> Herbert Carr published *The Irvine Diaries* in 1979, pointing out that 'Mallory has three biographers [...] it is only right that Irvine should have one.'<sup>21</sup> Yet Carr's book is not a full-length biography but rather a transcription of his diaries, with additional chapters on the Irvine family and the Irvine Travel Fund at Oxford. Until then, there had been few developments in the reconstruction of Irvine and Mallory's last climb.

That same year, 1979, Chinese climber Wang Hong Bao told Japanese expedition member Ryoten Yashimoro Hasegawa that he had seen an 'English dead' on Everest in 1975. Wang Hong Bao died in an avalanche the following day, and no one was able to ask him for more details. That 'English' body was believed to be Irvine's. After decades of conjecture and search parties to find Mallory and Irvine, the big news came in 1999: the body of George Mallory had been found by American climber Conrad Anker in an expedition team led by Eric Simonson and sponsored by the BBC and the National Geographic. Members of the 1999 search party were convinced that Irvine would be easier to find, and only understood the reality of their discovery when they recognised a personal label on Mallory's clothing.<sup>22</sup> This sparked renewed interest in the 1924 expedition, and several new books (on Mallory in particular) were released.<sup>23</sup> By this time, however, curiosity about Irvine had been brewing and it later culminated in the discovery of Irvine's remains on Everest in 2024.<sup>24</sup>

### Audrey Salkeld

Over the twentieth century, Everest emerged as an increasingly popular subject. The surge in Everest-related content is evident in Jill Neate's bibliography of mountaineering literature, which by 1986 encompassed over a hundred Everest titles including expedition accounts, as well as anthologies, history books, poetry, and films.<sup>25</sup> The profusion of material transformed Everest into a specialised domain, sustaining curiosity in the unresolved 1924 mystery. In 1986, an expedition to locate Mallory's and Irvine's bodies was led by American businessman Tom Holzel. Despite meticulous planning, the expedition faced defeat due to adverse conditions.<sup>26</sup> A unique participant enriched the 1986 team – Audrey Salkeld (1936–2023), who was later celebrated as one of the foremost British mountaineering historians. Her prolific contributions were admired by fellow Everest biographers and historians, with Peter Gillman and Leni Gillman acclaiming her as 'the most assiduous Everest researcher of all', and aptly summarised by Ed Douglas: 'Salkeld's contribution to mountaineering history was gargantuan'.<sup>27</sup>

As a young adult, Audrey (née West) Salkeld had joined the Tuesday Climbing Club in London, which introduced her to local and then to wider circles of climbers. Her involvement in the club newsletter later developed into her 'People' column for *Mountain*, an influential climbing magazine. As we can see, from the beginning she had a clear focus not just on mountaineering achievements and exploits but on the individuals behind them. Salkeld's growing influence among mountaineering researchers was warmly acknowledged in the 1970s by Jill Neate, for both personal assistance and the valuable support of her library.<sup>28</sup> Salkeld took immense pride in her private collection of mountaineering books and materials, even describing it as 'the most comprehensive private archive in Britain on mountaineering'.<sup>29</sup> Her commitment to archives extended beyond her skills as collector: she was a ground-breaking researcher, and the first to study extensively the boxes on the first Everest expeditions at the Royal Geographical Society.

Salkeld's interest in the human side of climbing and writing also led her to often take part as a researcher for collaborative projects. Even when not the primary author, her voice echoed through many accounts in her role as researcher, translator, editor, or scriptwriter. Most importantly, she did the bulk of the archival research for Walt Unsworth's *Everest: A Mountaineering History* (1981 and later editions), a fundamental historical narrative that became a point of reference. Though her assistance in collaborative works, anthologies,

and compilations was acknowledged, her role was not always given the prominence or the credit that she deserved.<sup>30</sup>

Unlike other translators of mountaineering literature, she had not studied languages at university, but it was her passion for mountaineering history that led her to languages. She taught herself German precisely to translate books by legends of the sport such as Reinhold Messner and Kurt Diemberger. Everest was also a recurring theme in her translations, especially in Messner's *All 14 Eight-Thousanders* (1988) and *The Crystal Horizon: Everest – The First Solo Ascent* (1989), co-translated with Jill Neate. But Salkeld's prominence extended beyond being Messner's English voice and stemmed from her wider engagement with the mountaineering community.

Before departing for the Himalaya in 1986, Salkeld and Holzel had prepared a book, *The Mystery of Mallory and Irvine*, with the plan of releasing it upon their return. This title was noteworthy for including Irvine's name. The focus shifted, acknowledging that Everest's enigma was not confined solely to Mallory. This dual spotlight could partially be explained by the expectation that they would find Irvine's body (just like the search party that later found Mallory). Salkeld had contacted the Irvine family for her research, and the book gives an overview of Sandy's biography. In the chapter 'Out of the Blue', a pun referring to Sandy's 'blue' status as elite athlete at Oxford, Salkeld and Holzel go into Sandy's experience in Spitsbergen with Odell, and his trip to Mürren in Switzerland in preparation for Everest. Salkeld and Holzel understood the importance of presenting a short introduction to Irvine's life to open a window towards his motivations and goals.

Both Unsworth's and Salkeld and Holzel's Everest books speculate on the possible dynamics of the Mallory–Irvine duo, raising the still-debated question of why Mallory chose Irvine for the final summit attempt. Unsworth's book asks if this decision could have been motivated by a romantic attachment, bringing into the conversation a discussion of Mallory's bisexuality. Unsworth concluded that, even if there had been such an attachment, 'the chances are that it was entirely innocent and not reciprocated in any way'.<sup>31</sup> In the revised 1999 edition of their volume, Salkeld and Holzel also touch on the question, with an emphasis on Mallory and Irvine's shared traits (such as their competitive urge and love for adventure), and also ask if there could have been physical attraction. As in the account published under Unsworth's name, they remain cautious, stating that 'there is nothing to suggest, if that were the case, that it was more than an unacknowledged sense of kinship on Mallory's part, or that it was even recognised by his young companion'.<sup>32</sup> Despite these additions, the overall focus in

Holzel and Salkeld's book remains on Mallory, his connections, and his family's reaction to his death.

The book associated with the 1986 expedition sealed Salkeld's role as Everest expert, and she could finally see her name acknowledged as coauthor. From there, she started to gain authority and became more visible and recognised in the field. In the following years, she authored, collaboratively or individually, several significant Everest books: *Last Climb: The Legendary Everest Expeditions of George Mallory* (1999, with David Breashears), *Mystery on Everest: A Photobiography of George Mallory* (2000), *Climbing Everest: Tales of Triumph and Tragedy on the World's Highest Mountain* (2003). These works, alongside the bibliography *Climbing Mount Everest* (1993, compiled with John Boyle), have stood as crucial references for researchers and the general audience.<sup>33</sup>

Taking part in the 1986 expedition was also a pivotal experience from a personal standpoint. Later, she would mention her excitement upon receiving the invitation: 'I'd almost given up hope of seeing the Himalaya for myself when, at the grand old age of fifty, I was invited to join a team going to look for clues to what happened to Mallory and Irvine. ... We didn't solve the 1924 mystery that year, but Everest exceeded my expectations.'<sup>34</sup> By taking part in that expedition, Salkeld was breaking new ground, in a personal and more public sense. From a personal perspective, she had not dared to imagine that she would be invited to Everest, as she was a historian of mountaineering rather than an elite climber. And while it is quite common for historians to retrace the steps of the subjects of their research, hers was an unusual presence in many ways. As remembered by one of her coauthors, David Breashears: 'she was a calming influence at base camp. She didn't have the ego of a lot of climbers; she didn't crave attention.'<sup>35</sup>

Salkeld surely knew that she did not fit the usual description of an Everest climber, but if aware of her difference, this did not stop her: 'I would be "Expedition historian". I don't think that there ever had been such a creature before and I didn't expect there to be again (although in that I was mistaken).'<sup>36</sup> Salkeld could not imagine it at the time, but her role would later be imitated. The expedition that found Mallory's body in 1999 also had an expedition historian, Jochen Hemmleb. Hemmleb framed himself in quite different terms (presenting himself as a climber and highlighting the similarities between himself and Mallory), but he nonetheless joined the 1999 expedition in a role that had been pioneered by Salkeld in 1986.<sup>37</sup>

As we have seen, Salkeld was not simply innovative and significant for her self-awareness of her distinctive position, and for her ability to carve a novel niche

within the mountaineering community. She also constituted a link between generations of experts in mountaineering literature, providing an example with her writing and personal involvement in solving the 1924 mystery.

### Julie Summers

Salkeld, who is remembered as a generous mentor by Gillman and Douglas, also encouraged Julie Summers, Irvine's great-niece, to pursue her interest in 'Uncle Sandy', brother of her grandmother Evelyn. Summers had then known about him for a long time, but overall her notions remained quite vague. Her interest was reignited in the late 1990s and initially mostly took the shape of extensive reading on the topic, but, despite the comprehensive bibliography on Everest, she was not able to find much on him. Holzel and Salkeld's book made the difference: 'here was a book with some real information about Uncle Sandy and now I was determined to find out more'.<sup>38</sup> Summers then wrote to Salkeld, who replied and told her what she could. As Summers tells us, Salkeld 'gave me the confidence and impetus to go ahead and tackle the project. "Get inside his head, Julie, I want to know what he was thinking"'.<sup>39</sup> Salkeld's role, therefore, is key not just for the number of titles she authored and translated on the subject but also for collaborating with and supporting other women, such as Neate and Summers, in the field of mountaineering research and literature.

After receiving Salkeld's blessing, Summers started sharing her interest with her family, scouting for letters and photographs preserved by Irvine relatives. In 1999, with the discovery of Mallory's body and the surge of attention this created, it was readily apparent that not much was actually known about the other victim of June 1924. Three books were released to mark the occasion, but none was particularly revealing when it came to Sandy. Despite expecting to find Irvine's body, the official narrative of the discovery the 1999 expedition still presented Sandy Irvine as a minor figure, completely dependent on Mallory. In *Ghosts of Everest*, Irvine is repeatedly described as 'a novice' and his relationship to Mallory is even compared to that between 'the priest and his acolyte'.<sup>40</sup> When the climbers find a body, they are certain that it must be Irvine's, since 'it had been an article of faith that if anyone had fallen, it would have been the inexperienced Andrew Irvine'.<sup>41</sup> Jake Norton, climber and member of the 1999 expedition, is even reported saying that 'it had been understood that George Mallory was infallible, he didn't fall, he couldn't fall'.<sup>42</sup> Summers reverts this thinking: despite the fact that Sandy was an inexperienced mountaineer by

comparison with Mallory, he was, for his age, a promising and already successful athlete, fully invested in the ascent.

Summers' biography, *Fearless on Everest*, does not focus on how Sandy Irvine died but on how he lived. As a historian and also a relative, Summers stresses that 'the memory of his life is of far more significance and interest to me than how he died'.<sup>43</sup> Her contribution had the advantage of bringing a family perspective, speaking to people who had met Sandy or knew his immediate family very well. Summers had accepted Salkeld's challenge but getting in Sandy's head proved to be harder than imagined. Not many of his personal records and items from the expedition seemed to survive. Summers was able to detect that there must have been additional material on Sandy that had not been found, as she did not believe the family story that his father, William Fergusson Irvine, had destroyed evidence relating the son's participation in the expedition.<sup>44</sup> Summers' intuition proved to be right: a trunk was found in a family attic, containing letters sent during the journey and from the camps, photographs taken along the way and developed at Base Camp, as well as notes about the oxygen apparatus. This made it possible for Summers to achieve her goal of writing from Sandy's 'fresh, valid and, most importantly, personal standpoint'.<sup>45</sup>

Summers' work addresses all the most heated topics of the Everest debate. What happened to Mallory and Irvine during their summit attempt and why did Mallory select Irvine as climbing partner for the final push? Summers' research and careful examination of Irvine's life and aspirations allow her to move beyond what Unsworth, Holzel, and Salkeld had suggested, by looking at the relationship in closer detail. In Summers' book, Irvine is not just a very capable young man with a gift for engineering but a promising mountaineer with his own ambitions and thirst for the summit.<sup>46</sup> Rather than seeing Irvine as a passive recipient of other members' choices, or an object of attraction, Summers poses him as an active subject, reversing the perspective. In this case, Summers suggests that we should indeed consider that Irvine was also interested in Mallory, as he knew that any chance of being selected for a summit attempt would likely depend on him.<sup>47</sup> Moreover, Summers shows that Mallory had considered Irvine as a potential companion for a summit attempt from early on, and that his final decision was not an impromptu one.<sup>48</sup> Throughout the volume, Summers partially undoes the Mallory–Irvine couple, explaining the key role played by another member of the expedition, Odell, in recruiting Irvine, and the close bond between the two.<sup>49</sup> She argues that Irvine and Odell's friendship was common knowledge, mentioning that they were seen as a 'well-known firm' by some of their companions, such as Norton.<sup>50</sup> Getting closer to

Mallory, Summers suggests, was Irvine's conscious choice, determined both by seeing in him another role model (as Odell had been) and by a strong determination to do all he could to be considered for the summit party.

In addition, Summers' research also brought new elements to the debate on Irvine and Mallory's potential attraction. Irvine's love and sex life had not been explored much to that point, as all attention was directed towards Mallory's sexuality. One of the key points in Summers' book is that Irvine had an affair with Marjory Summers, stepmother of his close friend Dick Summers (who would eventually marry Sandy's older sister Evelyn). Sandy and Dick had met while at Shrewsbury, and Dick's father was Harry Summers, a steel magnate. In 1917, Harry Summers had married for the second time, to Marjory Agnes Standish Thomson. At the time, he was 52 and she was 19, and thus much closer in age to Harry's son Dick – and to his friend Sandy. Dick often invited him to Cornist Hall, the Summers' family home in North Wales, and it was there that Sandy and Marjory met. In 1923, Summers tells us, 'the flirtation blossomed into a none-too-discreet love affair'.<sup>51</sup>

Sandy and Marjory did not try to hide their relationship, as she would appear with him at Henley, in London, and would even accompany him for the first part of the journey to the Arctic expedition to Spitsbergen.<sup>52</sup> Eventually, this relationship led to a divorce between Marjory and Harry Summers in spring 1924. In her book, Summers wonders what this relationship meant to the young Irvine, asking 'was he in love with Marjory or did he just see the affair as an entertaining diversion?' and suggesting that 'she had, if briefly, captured his heart',<sup>53</sup> but ultimately stressing that Irvine knew very well that 'there could never have been a future in the relationship', as ultimately 'Marjory simply wasn't the right type of girl'.<sup>54</sup> The relationship with Marjory, of course, does not exclude potential reciprocal attraction to Mallory, but this had never been the core question: up to that point, the suspicion had rather been that Mallory chose Irvine because he was infatuated, with no questions asked on Irvine's perspective. But analysing Irvine's relationship with Marjory and giving it prominence allows Summers to present and reframe Sandy as an embodied person with sexual and romantic feelings: not simply the object of Mallory's fascination, but a desiring subject.

In this perspective, Irvine is finally given back responsibility for his own actions: Summers' full account of his earlier years and sport career at Shrewsbury and at Oxford is important as it helps to build, little by little, a background that suggests that Irvine was fully invested in an expedition that he framed similarly to a race, a context in which his only focus would have been victory. Up to that

point, the literature on the topic presented Mallory as the active public figure, the hero who captured the audience's attention. In that kind of narrative, Irvine is more private (his shyness is recurrently emphasised), a passive figure, chosen by others, whose real purpose and thirst for victory cannot match Mallory's intensity. Hemmleb, Johnson, and Simonson's book works along such binary lines, going as far as describing Mallory as 'complex' and Irvine as 'uncomplicated'.<sup>55</sup> The consequence of denying Sandy agency might be partially or fully blaming Mallory for Irvine's death. However, Summers' research in Irvine's diaries and correspondence led her to reach a different conclusion. The Irvine family never blamed Mallory, and she also does not hold Mallory responsible. In her opinion, 'by the time they made their final climb in the attempt to reach the summit Sandy, ever his own man, was possessed by the same determination to climb the mountain as Mallory'.<sup>56</sup>

## Conclusion

Sandy Irvine's story is an important example of lives that fell through the cracks in the writing of Everest history, but it is not the only one. In the case of Irvine, finding extra sources allowed Summers to give us an account of Sandy that was more intimate and personal. With other deaths on Everest, such as those of seven porters in an avalanche in 1922, it is more difficult. The lack of sources should not make us forget that many different kinds of people have made and continue to make other Everest histories on the mountain or the page.

As we have seen, women are present in the fabric of mountaineering, making history in multiple roles, and are made invisible under different lenses. Their bodies are not those of the ideal climber, and their roles in writing about mountaineering are often not valued as the authors or agents of their own accounts and expeditions. Summers and Salkeld were able to bring a different kind of contribution to the mountaineering community, not by ascending new peaks but by providing access to its stories and past, retelling them and making them more widely accessible. While the role of historian may seem secondary to the dynamics of the sport, its relevance is heightened if we consider mountaineering's dependence on its history in literary and written form. As Mitchell once wrote, 'the climb is not over till the tale is told'.<sup>57</sup> Audrey Salkeld and Julie Summers (and Jill Neate as well) were able to carve out specific roles for themselves in the mountaineering community, representing a trend that is still relevant today.<sup>58</sup>

Looking back at their history and expertise is a necessary step to start to recognise the diversity of voices who wrote and established the canon of mountaineering history. Salkeld and Summers were able to make the Everest 1924 expedition not only about Mallory, to diversify the conversation around that ‘last climb’ and the choices and events that led to it. Writing about the history of Everest carries weight, particularly as it tackles one of the foundational mysteries in British mountaineering. Writing about Everest has been a key move for women to gain authority within the mountaineering community, in which expertise (of both the literary and practical kinds) is otherwise conceived of as male. Despite their minority position within the space of mountaineering as a practice and culture, by writing about the most famous mountain and its most famous mystery, women sealed their authority within the debate.

Of course, there are differences in their stories, in terms of class, network, and backgrounds. Audrey Salkeld was born not into a family of mountaineers but to a secretary and a builder in south London. She did not have the financial resources to go to university, attended a secretarial college, and married an architect she met at the climbing club. She became a leading voice in Everest’s history, constituting a very different example from others such as Jan Morris. Other key women writers of mountaineering, including Janet Adam Smith, for instance, were often born into families of climbers and had the wealth to study languages, travel to the Alps, and make connections to get to know other members of the climbing community. In this context, what Salkeld achieved is all the more remarkable, and noticeably different from the careers of her peers. Her connections and mountaineering trips, quite unusually, came as a consequence of her research: it was through her archival work and journalism that she established connections with the climbing community and was invited to join expeditions.

Salkeld herself wrote that ‘every mountaineer is an historian’,<sup>59</sup> yet she moved on the less travelled path of historian-mountaineer. In this sense, her trajectory is different from Summers’, whose discoveries were made possible by a combination of her research skills and direct relationship to Sandy Irvine, a position similar to Mallory’s biographer David Robertson, who was his son-in-law. Finally, I should add that Summers’ direct link to Irvine made it easier for me to start working on her. I first learned about Summers as a student at Merton College, Sandy’s own college, as she is still involved with the college archive and collaborating on new initiatives on her great-uncle – and arguably it is this coincidence that drew me to focus on Irvine in the first place.<sup>60</sup>

Salkeld's and Summers' research is also particularly important as previous accounts had portrayed Irvine in conventionally feminine terms, as desired, chosen, and without agency, in comparison with Mallory as the incarnation and 'apex of modernist white British masculinity'.<sup>61</sup> By undoing the superficial description of a (too) young climber persuaded by Mallory, Salkeld and Summers recognised Irvine's intentionality, and contributed to a fuller portrait of his experience. Exploring Sandy's life is a step towards making mountaineering narratives something else than solitary heroes' quests and guides us towards a multivocal and choral dimension that, in the past twenty years, has expanded to include Sherpas, women, and non-Western climbers.

### Notes

- 1 Delphine Moraldo, 'Women and excellence in mountaineering from the nineteenth century to the present', *The International Journal of the History of Sport*, 37:9 (2020), 727–8.
- 2 Sherry B. Ortner, *Life and Death on Mt. Everest: Sherpas in Himalayan Mountaineering* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999); Julie Rak, *False Summit: Gender in Mountaineering Nonfiction* (Montreal/Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2021); Susan Frohlick, 'The "hypermasculine" landscape of high-altitude mountaineering', *Michigan Feminist Studies*, 14 (1999–2000), 81–104, <http://hdl.handle.net/2027/spo.ark5583.0014.004>
- 3 See Peter H. Hansen, *The Summits of Modern Man: Mountaineering after the Enlightenment* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013); Victoria Robinson, *Everyday Masculinities and Extreme Sport: Male Identity and Rock Climbing* (Oxford: Berg, 2008).
- 4 Paul Gilchrist, 'Heroic leadership, mountain adventure and Englishness: John Hunt and Christ Bonington compared', in C. Hart (ed.), *Heroines and Heroes: Symbolism, Embodiment, Narratives & Identity* (Kingswinford, West Midlands: Midrash, 2008), pp. 247–66; Paul Gilchrist, 'Mountains, manliness and post-war recovery: C.E. Montague's "Action"', *Sport in History*, 33:3 (2013), 282–302, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17460263.2013.826436>; Jonathan Westaway, "'Men who can last": mountaineering endurance, the Lake District Fell records and the campaign for Everest, 1919–1924', *Sport in History*, 33:3 (2013), 303–32, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17460263.2013.826438>; Jonathan Westaway, "'A banner with a strange device": Longfellow's Excelsior, Alpine idealism and the transcendent in European mountaineering', in Patrick Clastres, Delphine Debons, Jean-François Pitteloud, and Grégory Quin (eds), *Gravir les Alpes du XIXe siècle à nos jours. Pratiques, émotions, imaginaires* (Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2021), pp. 29–37.
- 5 Ortner, *Life and Death on Mount Everest*; Rak, *False Summit*.
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- 39 *Ibid.*, p. 11.
- 40 Hemmleb, Johnson, and Simonson, *Ghosts of Everest*, pp. 24, 45.
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- 42 Hemmleb, Johnson, and Simonson, *Ghosts of Everest*, p. 123.
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- 47 *Ibid.*, p. 173.
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- 49 *Ibid.*, pp. 51, 68, 118.
- 50 *Ibid.*, p. 228.
- 51 *Ibid.*, p. 69.
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- 57 Mitchell, *Mountain Experience*, p. 72.
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- 60 This contribution was written while working for the project 'Sandy Irvine: Everest 1924–2024' at Merton College, Oxford. The online exhibition and timeline related to the project are accessible at <https://web.archive.org/web/20240509162638/http://www.merton.ox.ac.uk/library-and-archives/exhibitions/sandy-irvine-1924>. I thank Dr Julia Walworth and Julian Reid for their support.
- 61 Rak, *False Summit*, p. 154.