

Some Good Reads

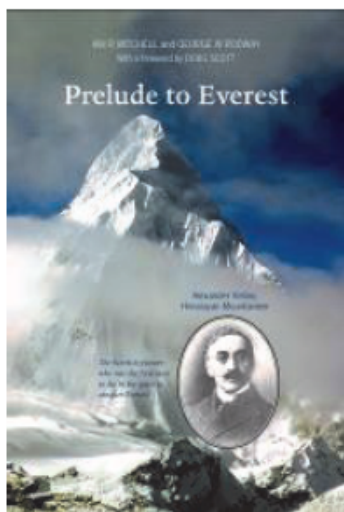
Prelude to Everest: Alexander Kellas, Himalayan Mountaineer

By Ian R. Mitchell and George W. Rodway

Published by Luath Press, 2016

Reviewed by [Mike Nash](#),

Caledonia Ramblers Hiking Club



Co-authored by Scottish writer Ian R. Mitchell and high altitude medicine specialist George W. Rodway, "Prelude to Everest: Alexander Kellas, Himalayan Mountaineer" was published as a trade paperback in 2014, three years after its original hardcover edition. It is the story of a man who, in the early part of the 20th century was widely regarded as the foremost mountaineer in the world and yet by 1950 was all but forgotten, even in his home town of Aberdeen. Kellas did not fit the norm for an explorer/scientist of his time,

and his name was eclipsed by people and events that he helped to inspire and pave the way for.

After discovering the local Cairngorm Mountains at the age of 17, he spent much of his spare time in the ensuing decade exploring the peaks of Scotland and England. It wasn't until 1899, at the comparatively late age of 31, that he began climbing in Europe, where for the next several years he achieved a sound, if not spectacular reputation for alpine ascents. Then, in 1907, at the mature age of 39, he made his first foray into the high ranges of India and Sikkim. He learned fast, achieving his '*annus mirabilis*' in 1911 when he made several first ascents of Himalayan peaks over 20,000 feet, including Pauhunri, which at 23,375 feet (7,125 m) was the highest summit (not the highest elevation) yet climbed. Kellas' world summit record, which he unwittingly held for nearly 20 years was not recognized in his lifetime (as Trisul, climbed by Longstaff in 1907 was thought to be higher than Pauhunri) but these peaks were later resurveyed as 23,359 and 23,375 feet respectively.

Kellas' penchant was for small, lightweight expeditions and he worked predominantly with indigenous people, notably Sherpas. He found that they had natural high altitude adaptation, and he augmented this by providing them with mountaineering training and suitable kit. Prior to Kellas, most expeditions to the region had used other local porters who were physiologically less well adapted, and who were ill-trained and poorly-equipped for working at altitude. Kellas was also decades ahead of his time in favouring local Nepali and Tibetan names for the mountains. He was a private man who didn't write self-aggrandizing accounts of his adventures, and who also struggled with a mental illness disability for most of his life. Because of these factors, he

didn't fit easily into the social mountaineering scene of the day, and according to his biographers, he sometimes appeared to be living in his own parallel universe. However, he wasn't without ambition, as evidenced by his record-breaking attempts, and there was another side to Alec Kellas...

Early in his career he assisted Professor William Ramsay at University College London (UCL) in the discovery of the inert gases argon, helium and neon that were to become hugely important in the 20th century. For this he received a mention in Ramsay's Nobel Prize acceptance speech. Dr. Kellas then parlayed science into his passion—mountaineering—to become the leading high-altitude research physiologist of his day. He prepared the way for the eventual ascent of Everest using supplemental oxygen, and he predicted the essential details of Messner and Habeler's 1978 ascent without such aid. He was a mountaineer and a researcher to the end, overwintering and exploring in the Himalayas in 1920-21 just prior to joining the 1921 reconnaissance of Everest. There, he was slated to conduct further research preparatory to the first summit attempt in 1922. However, on the approach hike he became ill and died of dysentery, likely as a result of poorly prepared food. He was 53.

Not wanting others to see his distress, he had insisted that they all be out in front of him, and he died alone. The sanitized report in the official account said that he died of heart failure. The four Sherpas who he had personally trained for the expedition were especially affected at his burial, and there are suggestions that Kellas' personal relationships with the Sherpas with whom he climbed were the closest of his life. Similarly moved was George Mallory with whom Kellas had made a big impression on day one. Kellas' final claim to fame was to become the first person to die attempting the world's highest mountain. According to the authors, there are two big mysteries of Mount Everest: What happened to Mallory and Irvine, and "why did a man who was so highly regarded by his contemporaries as Alexander Kellas, and whose death as seen by his peers was a serious blow to subsequent plans to climb the mountain, all but disappear from the subsequent narrative of Everest?"

Because of his ground-breaking work and reputation in high altitude physiology, Alexander Kellas began to reappear in the historic record through the research and writings of contemporary high altitude physiologists John West in the 1980s, Michael Ward in 2003, and co-author of this book, George Rodway in 2005 and 2008. Coincidentally, Aberdeen-born writer Ian Mitchell had begun researching and writing about Kellas from a Scottish heritage and mountaineering perspective in 2003, prompted by the 50th anniversary of Everest's first ascent. Both authors had prior experience with collaborative writing, and between them they brought the Scottish, mountaineering and physiology elements together to produce this fresh historical work. Kellas has also appeared in recent mountaineering history epics such as '*Fallen Giants*' (Yale University Press, 2008) where he is variously described as the "incomparable," "ubiquitous" and "inexhaustible." Smithsonian's "Mountaineers: Great Tales of Bravery and Conquest" (2011) devotes a full chapter to him.

"Prelude to Everest" has an academic style with comprehensive end sections, yet it is an accessible and fun read. I had some quibbles with typos that could have been cleared up in a second edition, and an index that I found to be on the light side, but these were minor distractions. An underpinning of the book is the Appendix which contains Kellas' last work: "A Consideration of the Possibility of Ascending Mount Everest." This important paper was Kellas' ticket to the 1921 expedition and was written and deposited with the Alpine Club in London in March 1920 just before he departed the shores of the UK for the last time.

The book opens with a foreword by Doug Scott who reminds us that Kellas was one of the great pioneers of Himalayan climbing, and a short introduction by the authors. There are six maps in the body of the book and a further two maps in Kellas' Appendix. The book also turned up some delightful surprises: I didn't know that Queen Victoria was an avid hill walker/mountaineer and had written a bestselling book about her adventures, "Leaves from the Journal of Our Life in the Highlands" (1868). The reader might also be enticed by the early chapters to spend time exploring the hills of Scotland.

This is a book of significant historical mountaineering interest, and while Canadian content is necessarily slight, Arnold Mumm, Norman Collie, and ACC co-founder A.O. Wheeler do make appearances. Collie, in particular was both a fellow mountaineer and a colleague of Kellas working with William Ramsay at UCL.■

Above All Things

By Tanis Rideout 2012

Published by McClelland & Stewart, 2012

Reviewed by Bill Perry,
Island Mountain Ramblers



Fact is sometimes stranger than fiction, yet some works of fiction can make us feel more involved with the main characters than mere fact or documentary. This is truly the case in *Above All Things*, Tanis Rideout's captivating account of George Leigh Mallory and his part in the Mount Everest expeditions of the early 1920s.

Real Person Fiction (RPF) is often associated with mythological figures such as King Arthur or Robin Hood. More recently, these works have involved pop culture icons such

as film stars and musicians. The story of Mallory and Everest fits comfortably into this genre, since mountaineers and explorers were the rock stars of that generation, and Mallory's friends even nicknamed him "Galahad."

The book manages to be a love story, an adventure novel and a tragedy. The author also generates quite a bit of suspense, which is surprising since we all know how the story ends. In a flash-back, Mallory and his wife, Ruth, are shown in the delirious happiness and magnetic attraction of their first encounter. Later, we see them each struggling in different ways with the problems of the long separations caused by the Everest trips and George's travels to other countries for fund-raising.

For most of the novel, the story shifts back and forth between two narratives: one following George on the 1924 expedition to Everest and the other depicting Ruth's life in Cambridge during the long months of his absence. Ruth's story is more compelling than I could have imagined, and made more so by being told in the first person.

In addition to looking after three children and a staff of servants, she had to contend with the press and the intrusive and almost morbid fascination of a public that hung on every word of each report on the famous explorers and climbers. It was understandable that she might "lose it" on occasion. For example: walking by a river, she overhears a conversation: a woman saying, "George Mallory ... imagine what it would be like to be married to a man like that ... It's all so romantic. How glorious it would be if they succeeded. Think what it would mean." And Ruth's response: "I am walking toward them. 'What would it mean?' I am standing close to them now. 'What could it possibly mean?' I say more clearly now, because I really want to know. I need to. What it could mean? To this woman. To anyone. Whether someone they have never met climbs some damned mountain." (Pages 130-131)

Meanwhile, George was having a difficult conversation with expedition leader Teddy Norton at camp IV on the north ridge of Mount Everest. George is asking Teddy for one more try for the summit.

"I can do this ... I have to do this."

"That won't cut it, George. You want to risk your life? Sandy's? I need more."

"Because I can do it ... You know that and I know that. Let me do it and we'll all go home heroes. All of us."

"I'm asking you not to go, George... don't do this."

"I have to" ...

"You and Sandy then," Teddy eventually said. "One more chance. ...Three days, George ... and we are all on our way back to base camp." (Pages 260-261)

It was two days later that George Mallory and Sandy Irvine left camp VI for the summit of Mount Everest and climbed into history, myth and a mystery that has lasted almost 92 years. I find Tanis Rideout's speculation as to the events which followed to be as probable as any I have read. After all, who among us has not, at least once, continued to climb later than a chosen turn-around time, lured on and on by a summit which seems so tantalizingly close?

This book is a page-turner and hard to put down, yet should really be read more slowly in order to savour the writing style