



INTO THE SILENCE

THE GREAT WAR, MALLORY, *and the*
CONQUEST *of* EVEREST

WADE DAVIS

ALSO BY WADE DAVIS

The Wayfinders

Light at the Edge of the World

The Clouded Leopard

Shadows in the Sun

One River

The Serpent and the Rainbow

Passage of Darkness

The Lost Amazon

The Sacred Headwaters

Nomads of the Dawn

(with Ian MacKenzie and Shane Kennedy)

Rainforest

(with Graham Osborne)

Book of Peoples of the World

(ed., with David Harrison and Catherine Howell)

Grand Canyon

INTO THE SILENCE

*The Great War, Mallory, and
the Conquest of Everest*

WADE DAVIS



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To my grandfather Captain Daniel Wade Davis, who served as a medical officer in France with the Royal Army Medical Corps, 80th Field Ambulance, 32nd Division Train, 1915–1916, and in England with the Canadian Army Medical Corps, 1916–1918

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Also by Wade Davis

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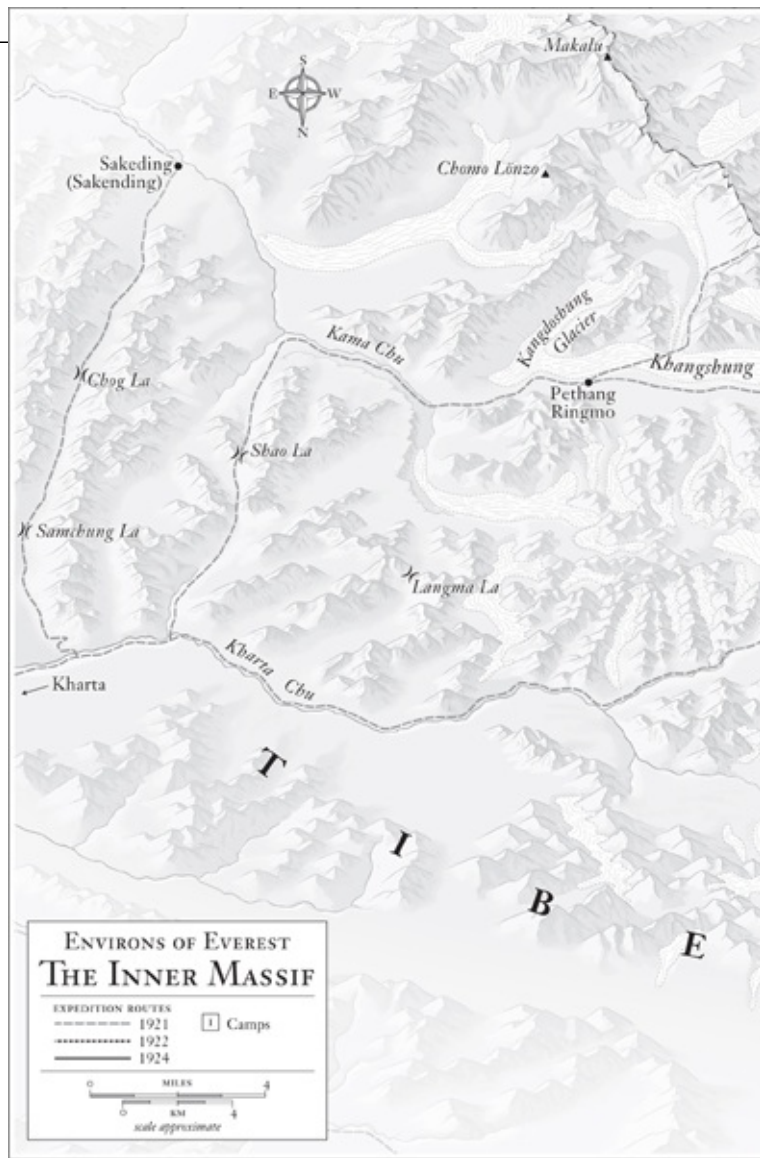
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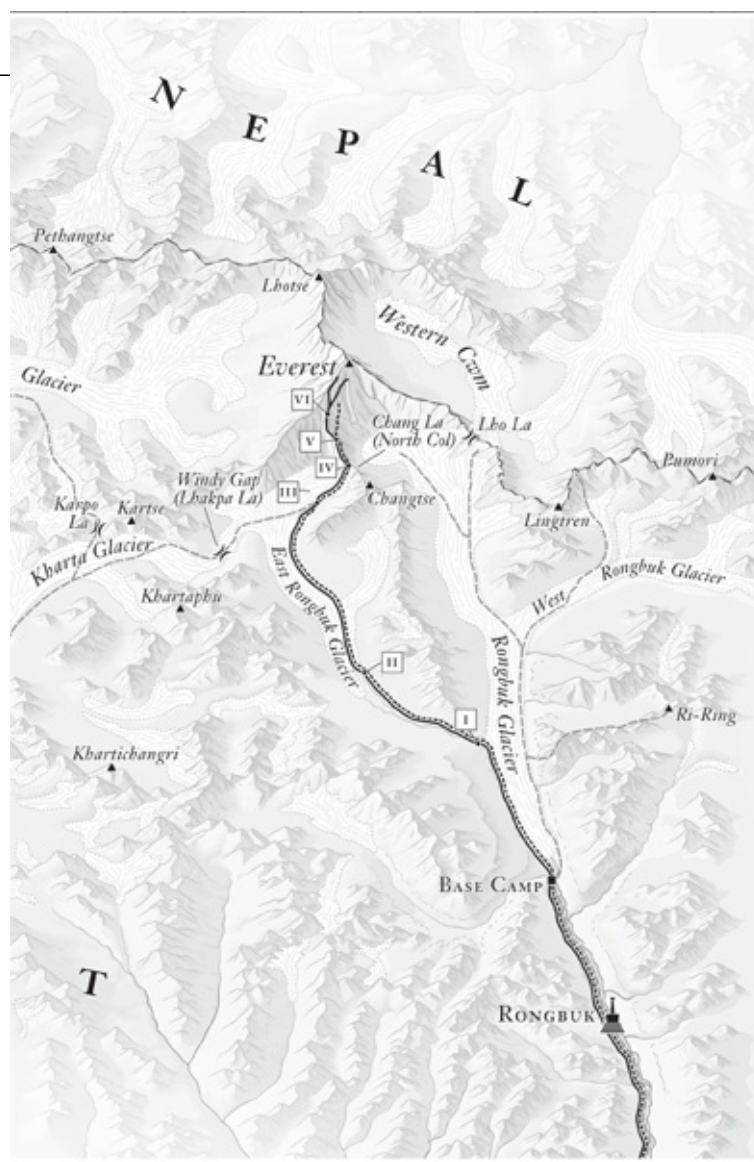
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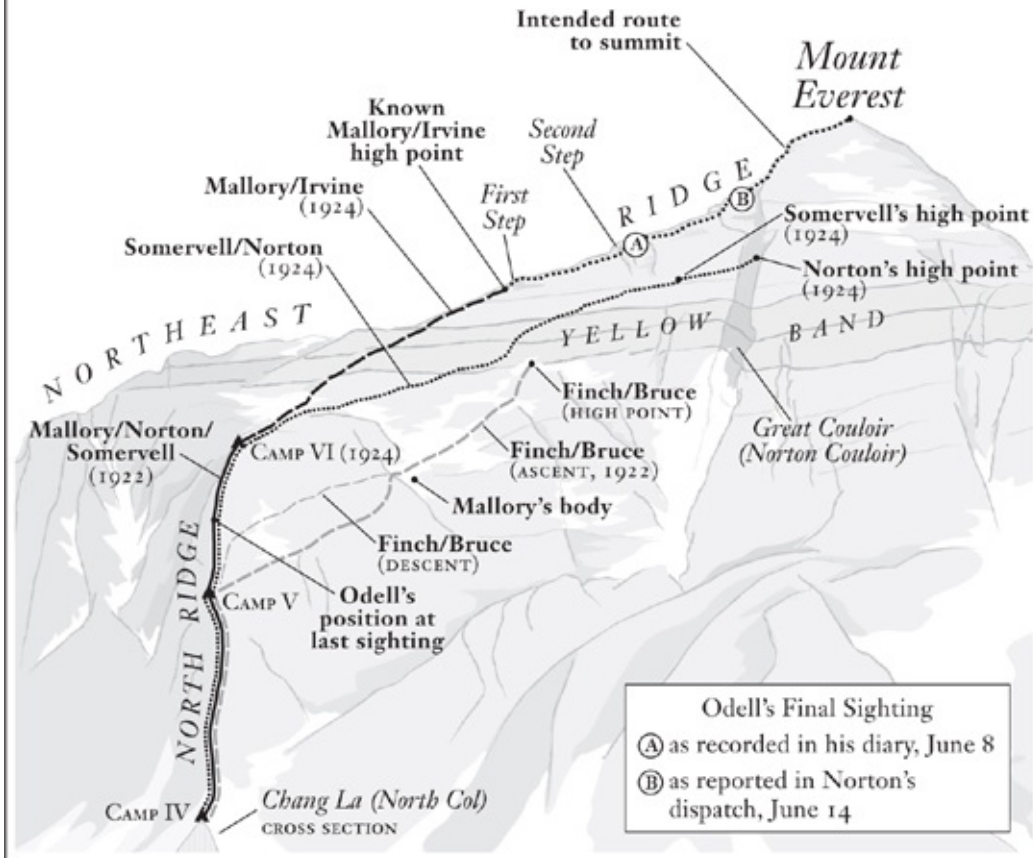
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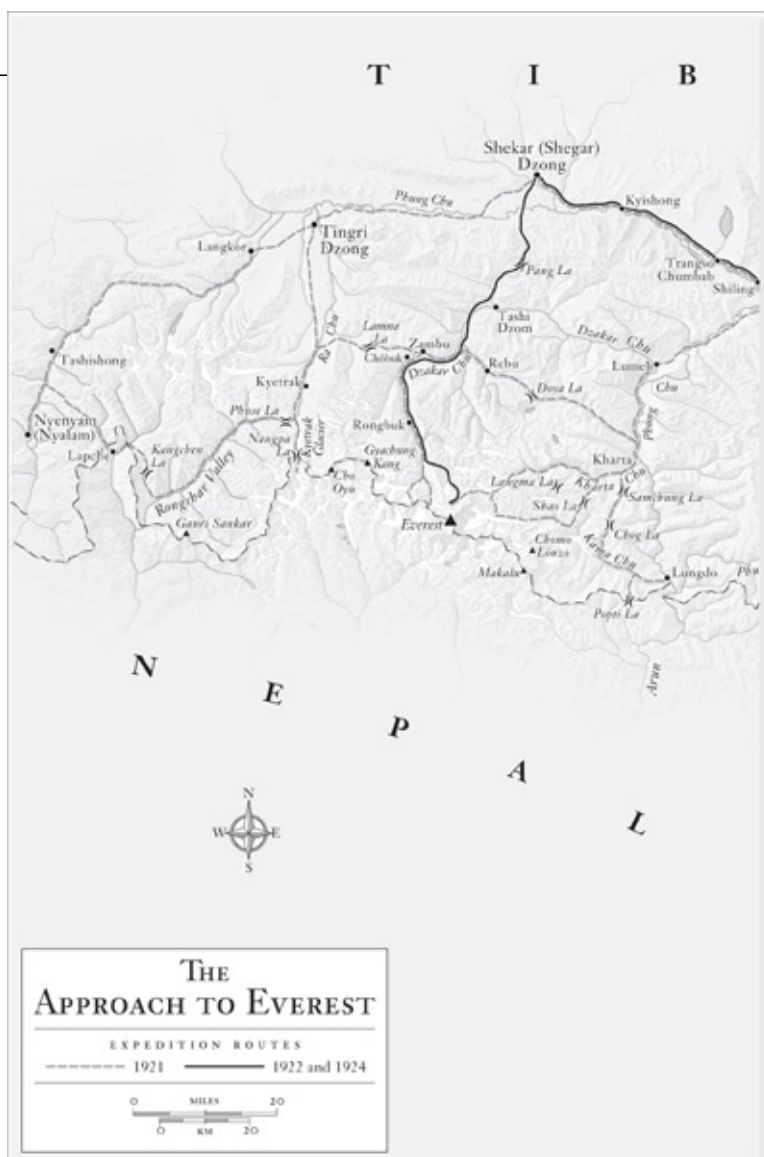
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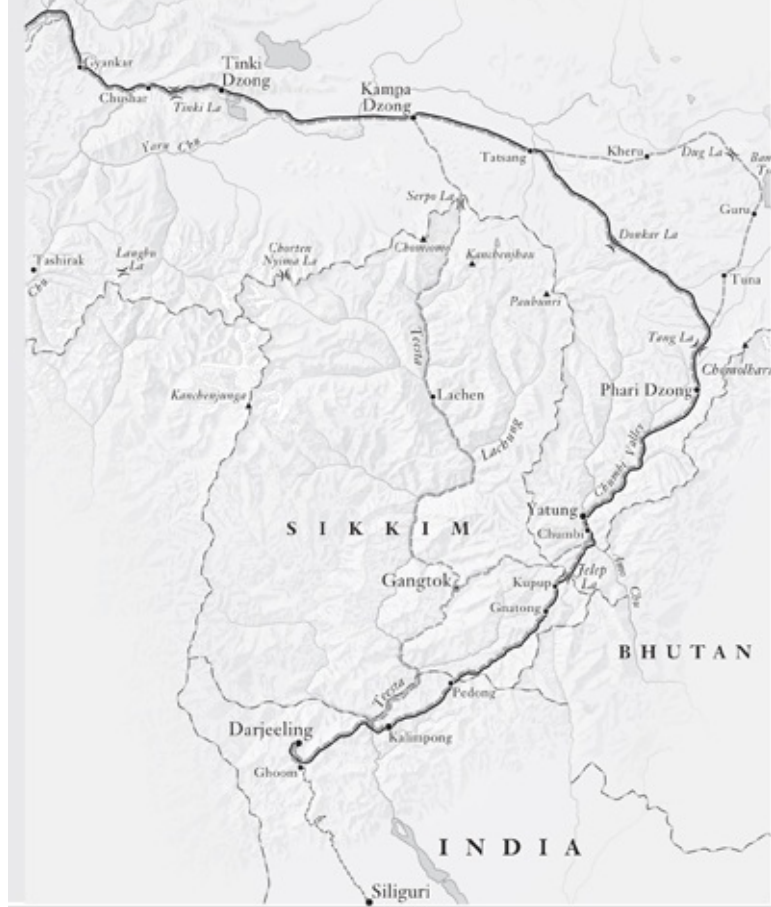




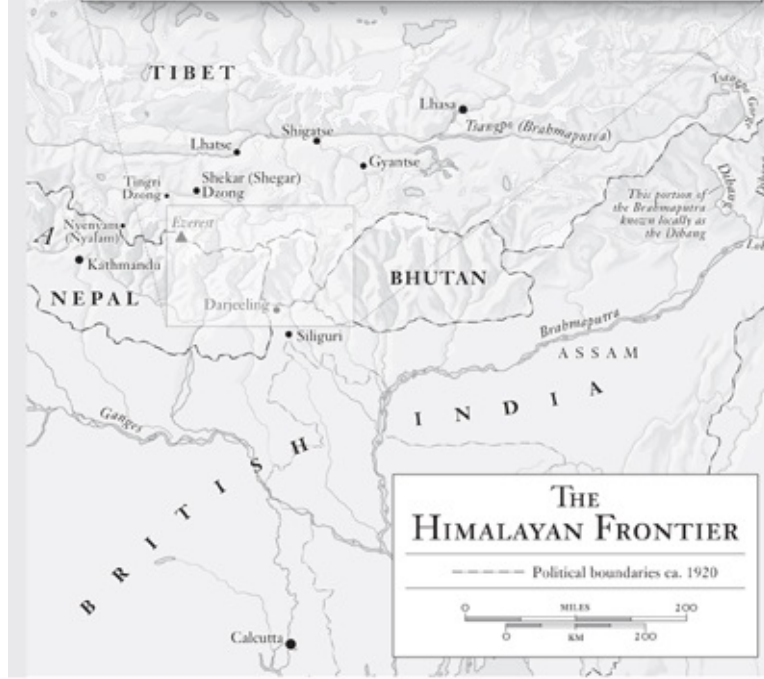
MOUNT EVEREST THE NORTH FACE











Preface

ON THE MORNING OF JUNE 6, 1924, at a camp perched at 23,000 feet on an ice ledge high above the East Rongbuk Glacier and just below the lip of Everest's North Col, the expedition leader Lieutenant Colonel Edward Norton said farewell to two men about to make a final desperate attempt for the summit. At thirty-seven, George Leigh Mallory was Britain's most illustrious climber. Sandy Irvine was a young scholar of twenty-two from Oxford with little previous mountaineering experience. Time was of the essence. Though the day was clear, in the southern skies great rolling banks of clouds revealed that the monsoon had reached Bengal and would soon sweep over the Himalaya and, as one of the climbers put it, "obliterate everything." Mallory remained characteristically optimistic. In a letter home he wrote, "We are going to sail to the top this time and God with us, or stamp to the top with the wind in our teeth."

Norton was less sanguine. "There is no doubt," he confided to John Noel, a veteran Himalayan explorer and the expedition's photographer, "Mallory knows he is leading a forlorn hope." Perhaps the memory of previous losses weighed on Norton's mind: seven Sherpas left dead on the mountain in 1922, two more this season, the Scottish physician Alexander Kellas buried at Kampa Dzong during the approach march and reconnaissance of 1921. Not to mention the near misses. Mallory himself, a climber of stunning grace and power, had, on Everest, already come close to death on three occasions.

Norton knew the cruel face of the mountain. From the North Col, the route to the summit follows the North Ridge, which rises dramatically in several thousand feet to fuse with the Northeast Ridge, which, in turn, leads to the peak. Just the day before, he and Howard Somervell had set out from an advanced camp on the North Ridge at 26,800 feet. Staying away from the bitter winds that sweep the Northeast Ridge, they had made an ascending traverse to reach the great couloir that clefs the North Face and falls away from the base of the summit pyramid to the Rongbuk Glacier, ten thousand feet below. Somervell gave out at 28,000 feet. Norton pushed on, shaking with cold, shivering so drastically he thought he had succumbed to malaria. Earlier that morning, climbing on black rock, he had foolishly removed his goggles. By the time he reached the couloir, he was seeing double, and it was all he could do to remain standing. Forced to turn back at 28,126 feet, less than 900 feet below the summit, he was saved by Somervell, who led him across the ice-covered slabs. On the retreat to the North Col, Somervell himself suddenly collapsed, unable to breathe. He pounded his own chest, dislodged the obstruction, and coughed up the entire lining of his throat.

By morning Norton had lost his sight, temporarily blinded by the sunlight. In excruciating pain, he contemplated Mallory's plan of attack. Instead of traversing the face to the couloir, Mallory and Irvine would make for the Northeast Ridge, where only two obstacles barred the way to the summit pyramid: a distinctive tower of black rock dubbed the First Step, and farther along, the Second Step, a 100-foot bluff that would have to be scaled. Though

concerned about Irvine's lack of experience, Norton had done nothing to alter the composition of the team. Mallory was a man possessed. A veteran of all three British expeditions, he knew Everest better than anyone alive.

Two days later, on the morning of June 8, Mallory and Irvine set out from their high camp for the summit. The bright light of dawn gave way to soft shadows as luminous banks of clouds passed over the mountain. Noel Odell, a brilliant climber in support, last saw them alive at 12:50 p.m., faintly from a rocky crag: two small objects moving up the ridge. As the mist rolled in, enveloping their memory in myth, he was the only witness. Mallory and Irvine would not be seen or heard from again. Their disappearance would haunt a nation and give rise to the greatest mystery in the history of mountaineering.

Never did Odell doubt that they reached the summit before meeting their end. Nor did he question the sublime purpose that had led them all to cross hundreds of miles on foot, from India and across Tibet, just to reach the base of the mountain. Odell wrote of his two lost friends: "My final glimpse of one, whose personality was of that charming character that endeared him to all and whose natural gifts seemed to indicate such possibilities of both mind and body, was that he was 'going strong,' sharing with that other fine character who accompanied him such a vision of sublimity that it has been the lot of few mortals to behold. A few while beholding have become merged into such a scene of transcendence."

Great Gable

ON THE VERY DAY that George Mallory and Sandy Irvine disappeared on Everest, another party of British climbers slowly made their way to the summit of a quite different mountain and in very different circumstances. At 2,949 feet, Great Gable was not a serious or difficult climb, but it was said to be “the most completely beautiful of English mountains.” It anchored the fells of Cumbria, and from its summit could be seen a dozen or more of the rounded hills and rocky crags of the Lake District, where so many English climbers had first discovered the freedom of open space and the feel of wind and rain and sleet on cold hands jammed into cracks of granite and slate.

There were some eighty men and women in this solemn party, most of them members of the Fell and Rock Climbing Club, a loose association founded in 1906 and dedicated exclusively to the celebration of the English hills. Among them was the club secretary, Leslie Somervell, whose brother Howard was then with the Everest expedition, and Arthur Wakefield, club president since 1923. Wakefield had served as medical officer on the 1921 Everest expedition and had been the first to rush to the relief of the climbers swept away by the avalanche on the North Col that buried alive seven Sherpa porters. Death was something he knew well.

The most prominent figure on Great Gable this day was Geoffrey Winthrop Young, who brought up the rear, supported by his wife, Len, as he struggled over boulders and wet stones in rain so fierce it swept the cape from his back. Considered by many to be the greatest English mountaineer of his era, Young was the mentor of Mallory, and had been responsible for both Mallory and Wakefield securing invitations to join the Everest expeditions. This was his first climb since losing his left leg to an Austrian shell on the night of August 31, 1917, on Monte San Gabriele while serving on the Isonzo Front, in Italy. In time he would summit the Matterhorn with a prosthetic limb of his own design, but for the moment it was all he could do to keep his balance and move steadily up the slope toward the others. A gifted Georgian poet and a fine orator, he was here at Wakefield’s invitation to help dedicate a bronze plaque inscribed with the names of those members of the FRCC who had been lost in the war, and to consecrate in their memory a tract of some three thousand acres purchased by the survivors and gifted by them to the nation as a living memorial. The actual deeds to the land had been presented by Wakefield to a representative of the National Trust several months before, on October 13, 1923, at the annual FRCC dinner at the Sun Hotel in the nearby village of Coniston.

“These title deeds,” he had told his audience that night, “represent the lives of those of our members who died for their country, men with whom in many cases we have walked over

these fells, and whose friendship we treasured. The cost is great indeed. Sir, we hand these deeds over to you in the hope and belief that future generations will be inspired with the same sense of self-sacrifice and devotion to great ends, even at the cost of self-obliteration that were shown by those who died and whose monument this is." The names of the dead were then read, as those present stood in silence.

Now many of the same company of men and women gathered around a boulder at the summit of Great Gable. Covering the memorial plaque was a rain-soaked Union Jack, the very flag that had flown at Jutland from the bridge of the battleship *Barham* of the 5th Battle Squadron of the Royal Navy. Before drawing back the flag to reveal the bronze, Arthur Wakefield stepped forward and began to speak of the land, the breath of the moors, the spirit of freedom that had impelled them all to march to war. It was an inspiring address, wrote a reporter for the *Manchester Guardian* who was present, one that brought all thoughts back to those years of strain and trial and sacrifice.

Wakefield's rhetoric was moving, heartfelt, and sincere, but his appearance shocked Young who had not seen him since before the war. Both were scions of the British elite. Born some months apart in 1876, they'd gone to college together, attending Trinity at a time when more than 195 members of Parliament, fully a third of the House, were Cambridge men, and of these 68 were from Trinity. Young remembered Wakefield as a short, broad-shouldered, curly-haired, good-looking northern lad with an attractive smile, well liked by all. But it was Wakefield's prodigious strength that had led Young to recommend him to Captain Percival Farrar of the Alpine Club and the Mount Everest Committee as a candidate for the Everest expeditions. Wakefield, known to his friends as Waker, was a man who liked to walk. In 1905 he had set a record in the Lake District, traversing Scafell Pike, Helvellyn, Skiddaw, Green Gable, Kirk Fell, Steeple, Red Pike, and a score of other summits, covering some fifty-nine miles with a total vertical ascent and descent of some 23,500 feet in twenty-two hours and seven minutes. He had climbed in Switzerland in 1893, and in the spring of 1894 had encountered for the first time the rock of the Lake District, the Central Gully of Great End. Powerful, cautious, methodical, he never fell.

But this was not the man who appeared at Young's side ready to pull back the flag to reveal the names of the dead. What stepped forward was a shadow of the man he had once known with eyes that appeared to be focused into some distant past, as if on a memory that could not be embraced, a thought impossible to distill. Then, unexpectedly, the weather cleared; Young recalled, "The sun broke through the clouds as he made his address under the highest rocks, and in the rather silvery gleam, with its faint halo of mist, I saw him for a few moments again as he had been in his very vital and sunnily serene youth." Other witnesses remember Wakefield hesitating and then slowly beginning to sob as the flag drew back to reveal the names of those who had perished: caught on the barbed wire, drowned in mud, choked by the oily slime of gas, reduced to a spray of red mist, quartered limbs hanging from shattered branches of burnt trees, bodies swollen and blackened with flies, skulls gnawed by rats, corpses stuck in the sides of trenches that aged with each day into the colors of the dead. It was, according to Wakefield's son, the last time his father ever displayed human emotion. He would go to his end never speaking of the war, consumed only by abiding hatred of all things German.

A Mr. Herbert Cain began slowly to read the names of the deceased: S. Bainbridge, J. I.

Benn, H. S. P. Blair, A. J. Clay, J. N. Fletcher ... There were twenty in all, from a club with membership of 450, men and women, young and very old. Such rosters had become all too familiar. Young had dedicated his recent book, *On Mountain Craft*, published in 1920, to fifty friends who had died—some on mountains, but most in the trenches. In another of his books, *The Mountains of Snowdonia*, he recalled innocent times before the war when climbing had the freshness of the dawn and some of the best minds and certainly the finest climbers of his generation—George Mallory, Siegfried Herford, John Maynard and Geoffrey Keynes, Cottrell, Sanders, Duncan Grant, Robert Graves, George Trevelyan, and many others—came together in Wales at the top of Llanberis Pass, at a place called Pen y Pass. By day they would climb and by night they would sing, recite poetry, debate, and argue. In ways impossibly innocent to the contemporary eye, they explored dreams of purity and purpose in a new century where all that mattered was authenticity and beauty, loyalty and friendship. Young was the inspiration for these gatherings, the maître d' and impresario, and from the first in 1903 he recorded each event in a photographic album, which he called the Pen y Pass diary. Of the honed and beautiful faces, the innocent glances—no fewer than twenty-three of the men would be killed in the war, another eleven so severely wounded that to climb again they would have to overcome immense physical impediments, just as Young himself had done.

But of the names read with such intense emotion from this memorial bronze on this cool and windswept day, there were two that especially haunted Young. One was that of Hilton Laurence Slingsby, the brother of his wife, Len, who stood stiffly by his side. Geoffrey was twenty years older than she, and as he looked over the rocks and into the mist, he could see the face of Hilton as a young boy of nine when he had first led the lad up this very mountain. He recalled the day—August 20, 1917—when a letter had reached him in Italy with word that Hilton, after three years at the front, and having already survived a grievous wound, had been “killed in action,” a term, of course, that could mean anything.

The second name was that of Siegfried Herford, killed at Ypres in 1915. A friend of George Mallory's and arguably the finest rock climber of his generation, he was, as Young recalled, “a poet at heart,” a youth who came and went with the “spontaneity of the wind, so near to the light and wonder of the hills in spirit that his feats upon the cliffs only seemed natural. As much as anyone who came to Pen y Pass, Herford had inspired Young to dream. “With our coming together,” he would write, “in that high air all cares seemed to drop from us, like clouds sinking below on that two way view down the pass.”

The litany of the dead had done much to quell such sentiments. In August 1917, when it seemed to everyone that the war might go on forever, Young recorded in his diary a list of good friends who had died, no fewer than twenty-five, and this left room for those he termed acquaintances; of these there were another twenty-five. Writing from Ypres in 1915, he had spoken of the dead in more intimate phrases, as noted in his book *The Grace of Forgetting*.

In the new army around us I knew that there were many younger friends, those who would have become the leaders in mountaineering and in our country. I saw in passing Twiggy Anderson, the perfect hurdler and lively scholar, again an Eton pupil; Terrence Hickman of Kings, good friend of so many mountaineers; and J. Raphael the football player, whom I took to Wales to climb, and who ran hard up the steep slopes of all his mountains, springing on his toes, and explaining to me that that really was the correct way to climb.

They were killed very near to us, and the news came slowly and fatally. The toll of tragic loss, and not only among climbing friends, kept mounting. Dearest of all, Wilbert Spencer at La Bassée, Kenneth Powell the classic athlete, Nigel Madan a close friend, Werner of Kings, cousins John and Horas Kennedy. On other fronts, C. K. Carfrae, Guy Butlin, the brothers Rupert and Basil Brooke, Julian and Billy Grenfell ... Gilbert Hosegood, very fair and tall, came to me in excitement because he had met his brother by chance as he marched with his company through Ypres; and he walked beside him in talk all down the Menin road. Not long after, I drove him south down the front to visit his brother's grave, a lovely spot, and Guy du Maurier, his brother's colonel, was more than kind to us. We were hardly returned to Ypres when news of du Maurier's death also reached us. Hosegood joined up soon after, to take his brother's place he said; he too fell.

YOUNG HAD BEEN AT ZERMATT climbing with Herford during the soft summer of 1914, when all Europe glowed with weather so beautiful and fine that it would be remembered for a generation, invoked by all those who sought to recall a time before the world became a plain of mud and sky, with only the zenith sun to remind the living that they had not already been buried and left for dead. Stunned by a mix of emotions—horror, incredulity, morbid anticipation, fear, and confusion—Young returned to London to find “the writing of madness already on the wall.” He recalled, “I attended the peace meeting in Trafalgar Square, the last protest of those who had grown up in the age of civilized peace: and then the dogs of war were off in full cry.” Forty years later, near the end of his days, he would write, “After the hardening effects of two wars it is difficult to recall the devastating collapse of the structure of life, and all its standards, which the recrudescence of barbarous warfare denoted for our generation.”

He had been born to a privileged life, the second son of Sir George Young of Formosa Place, a stately eighteenth-century house of gardens and roses perched on the banks of the river Thames. His mother was Irish, a splendid storyteller and a great hostess, and their home regularly welcomed such luminaries as Robert Baden-Powell, founder of the Boy Scouts and the hero of Mafikeng; the poet laureate Alfred, Lord Tennyson; and Roger Casement, the Irish nationalist and enigmatic champion of human rights who would be knighted in 1911 for exposing the atrocities in the Belgian Congo, only to be hanged for treason in 1916. Of his three siblings, he was closest to his younger brother, Hilton, who would lose an arm in the war. His childhood was one of action and fantasy, endless days outside in all weather and all seasons, among the bitter cherries and silver beeches, the weeping willows and ancient yew of a country setting that inspired within him a love of color and nature, rivers and the wind, mountains and rain. He never practiced religion in an orthodox sense, but all of his life was infused with a celebratory quest for the wonder of beauty and friendship, the sheer vitality of being human and alive.

At Marlborough, a school that would send 733 boys to die in the trenches, he was known for his good looks, his poetry, and his remarkable athletic abilities. At Cambridge he became a climber, of both mountains and the Gothic rooftops of the university colleges. His impetuous side penned anonymously *The Roof Climber's Guide to Trinity*, thus beginning a long tradition of illicit midnight scrambles over slate and lead and gargoyles. Following graduation in 189

he went abroad, living for three years in France and Germany and becoming fluent in both languages. His true affection was for Germany; he translated the ballads of Schiller and the devotional poems of Dietrich Bonhoeffer. In 1902, he returned to England to take a teaching position at Eton; there he met the young John Maynard Keynes, who would later join him on climbing trips to the Alps.

Young first encountered George Mallory in 1909, at a Cambridge dinner. At Easter he invited Mallory to Pen y Pass, and the following summer the two went off, at Young's expense, to the Alps, where they were joined by Donald Robertson, a close friend and peer of Hilton Young's. They climbed a number of peaks, none more dramatic than the southeastern ridge of the Nesthorn, where Mallory nearly died. He was leading at the time, inching his way across fluted ice, seeking a route around the third of the four great towers that blocked the way up the ridge. Young would later recall his sudden astonishment: "I saw the boot flash from the wall without even a scrape; and, equally soundlessly, a grey streak flickered downward, and past me, and out of sight. So much did the wall, to which he had clung so long, overhang that from the instant he lost hold he touched nothing until the rope stopped him in mid-air over the glacier. I had had time to think, as I flung my body forward on to the belayed rope, grinding it and my hands against the slab, that no rope could stand such a jerk and even to think out what our next action must be—so instantaneous is thought." Miraculously, the rope held and Mallory was uninjured.

In another book, *On High Hills*, Young would remember and praise his companions on this dramatic climb: "To both of them life was a treasure of value; but it was also a talent to be reinvested for the profit of others. Neither hesitated to risk the loss of his share in it, if by doing so he could help to keep the great spirit of human adventure alive in the world." Robertson would die a year later, on a rock face in Wales. A chapel would be built in his memory, and a monument erected within sight of the cliffs where he fell, and a trust established to bring English youths to the hills. Such were the sensibilities in the years immediately before the war, a time when powerful and virile men could speak of love and beauty without shame, and sunsets and sunrises had yet to become, as the painter Paul Nash would write, "mockeries to man," blasphemous moments, preludes to death.

AT THIRTY-EIGHT, Geoffrey Young was too old for active service in 1914. But within a week of returning from Switzerland on July 28, and two days before Britain formally entered the war on August 4, he was on his way to France as a war correspondent for the *Daily News*. By the time five German armies, more than a million men, had advanced into northern France and begun a broad enveloping sweep through Belgium, with Paris as the goal. To the south the French had fallen into a German trap, launching their armies east toward the Ardennes and Alsace, hundreds of thousands of troops dressed in bright red trousers and electric-blue coats moving boldly over open ground as if on parade. The result was a slaughter unlike anything previously known in the history of warfare. In the Battle of the Frontiers, France suffered the loss of more than 300,000 men in a fortnight. In three days beginning on August 20, which Young reported from Namur, on the Belgian Front, some 40,000 French would die, 27,000 of them on August 22 alone. By Christmas, after but four months of war, with four years to go, France would suffer nearly a million casualties.

While the Germans attacked with 87 divisions, and the French countered with 62, the

British Expeditionary Force mustered only 4, which were hastily flung into the line at Mon in Belgium. There, amid the slag heaps and pit heads of the coalfields, 100,000 British regulars, outnumbered three to one, took on the entire German First Army. Obligated to retreat, the men walked blood-shod, their feet so swollen that boots once removed could not be put back on, fighting constantly as they retreated 170 miles with scarcely a rest.

As the British fell back, fighting an epic rear-guard action at Le Cateau, the German commander, Helmut von Moltke, lost his nerve and ordered his three northern armies to turn south, abandoning the effort to envelop Paris from the west, and thus exposing his flank to the French before the Marne River. The French attack on September 5 brought more than two million men into battle. Each side would suffer over half a million casualties. The German assault was stopped but not shattered, and thus began the so-called race for the sea as the armies moved north and west, each constantly trying to outflank its enemy and turn the battle line, which, with each passing day, became more deeply inscribed into the body and soil of France. A final desperate German bid to reach the channel ports of Dunkirk, Boulogne and Calais was thwarted by the British at the medieval town of Ypres, in a battle that the Germans would remember as *Kindermord zu Ypren*—the Massacre of the Innocents.

The frontal assaults on the British began on October 20 and did not stop until the third week of November. The line held, but at a tremendous cost. By the time the rains of winter, the wettest in forty years, drowned out the guns, the British Expeditionary Force, virtually the entire regular army of the empire, had ceased to exist. A third of its 160,000 men were dead. Battalions that had embarked for France in August with 40 officers and 1,000 men had, on average, been reduced to 1 officer and 30 men. The 7th Division, which arrived in France in October with 400 officers and 12,000 men, would lose 9,000 soldiers in eighteen days.

In a strategic and tactical move that would seal the fate of many tens of thousands, the British at Ypres took up defensive positions on a series of low, gentle hills that enveloped the town to the east, thus creating a bulge in the line, a salient that would be dominated throughout the war by German artillery securely positioned on higher ground on three sides. Defending the Ypres Salient, never larger than four miles deep and twelve wide, would over the course of the war cost the British 90,000 men killed and 410,000 wounded. Another 89,880 simply vanished, swallowed by the mud or vaporized by shell fire. German losses were comparable. In four years, an area of shattered ground one could walk around in a day would see no fewer than 1.7 million casualties. Cradled within this cauldron of death, the old medieval center of Ypres, with its noble buildings and great Cloth Hall, would vanish, blackened by fire, battered by artillery, reduced to crumbling ruins and shell-shattered streets where civilians and soldiers alike lived a subterranean existence in cellars where rain, oil, and blood ran together to dampen any memory of peace.

Thus over the last weeks of 1914 came into being the topography of Armageddon. The trenches ran some 460 miles from the Swiss border to the English Channel. The British sector contained some of the worst and most indefensible terrain. The low fields of Flanders were flat, water-soaked, with no feature rising more than two hundred feet above sea level. The slightest hill took on strategic importance, and thousands would bleed and die for a height of land that in Surrey, with its rolling downs, would go unnoticed. The actual British trench line was astonishingly short. From Ypres to the channel was held by Belgian forces. To the south the French controlled the front from Picardy and the Somme all the way to the Swiss frontier.

The British sector, anchored by the towns of Armentières, Arras, and Albert, ran from Ypres south and slightly east into northern France, through the mines of Lens, past Vimy Ridge across the Scarpe River near Arras and down to the Somme. For much of the war it was mere 85 miles in length, and at no time did it exceed 125 miles.

Indeed, the entire British zone of operations, in which millions of men lived, trained, and died, measured but 50 by 60 miles, roughly the size of the English county of Lincolnshire. To the west was the sea, never more than 50 miles to the rear, and the great staging ports and bases of Étapes, Le Havre, and Rouen. To the east were the Germans. To supply and defend roughly 100 miles of war front, the British would dig more than 6,000 miles of trenches. The normal wartime provision of shovels for the army was 2,500; in the mud of Flanders, more than 10 million would be needed. No fewer than 25,000 British coal miners would be engaged around the clock to tunnel beneath the enemy and set charges, which detonated with blasts that could be heard in London.

“The stories of madness are frequent,” Young confided to his diary in February 1915. “The strain no man seems able to support, under accurate shell fire. In one British trench all the men were dead when at last relieved after four days. One surviving subaltern had made himself drunk on the men’s brandy, to endure it, after having pegged out his senior, who was mad, with bayonets to prevent him shooting himself.”

Young lived in Ypres from November 1914 through the end of July 1915. His dispatches collected in the book *From the Trenches*, were among the first and finest eyewitness accounts of a conflict unlike anything that had ever been known. This was not war, he wrote; it was the monstrous inversion of civilization. To call it war was to imply that something of the surface remained, when in fact all that existed was a bruised sky in a bitter night of cobalt rains. He recalled, “Time and again in the blackness ahead the votive candles on the wayside shrine fell dazzlingly across the road. Once I stopped the car and through the sudden silence, a woman’s voice called unemotionally, ‘Is that death?’ ”

Streams of human misery, refugees fleeing the German terror, flooded the roads of Belgium. In the remnants of the town wandered wounded and stunned British soldiers, caked in mud, crawling and choking through the shell-blistered streets. Beyond the front the leprosy earth was scattered with the swollen and blackened corpses of hundreds of young men, and hovering over everything was the appalling stench of rotten carrion.

“In the half-exposed remnant of what may have been a vestry,” Young wrote, “a young RAMC surgeon was working alone, at hurricane speed, on the wounded being carried or left in, or lying on the bloodstained, shattered floor. His face was a mask, his blue eyes like hard steel. The precision with which he cut garments, dressed wounds, bandaged limbs and passed silently on to the next was as remarkable as his speed. All inside was a jostle and a carnage; the noise outside was distracting; the hot dust covered us from the shrapnel bursting above the ruined walls. The bearers bringing or supporting the wounded had been often wounded themselves as they came. I marveled—how could any man stand it, and for hours, alone?”

Overwhelmed by the suffering, shamed into action by the desperate need for more medical support for the troops, Young abandoned journalism to serve in an ambulance unit of his own creation, flaunting his social connections shamelessly to keep his men close to the front where lives could be saved. First in Flanders, and later in Italy, Young and his colleagues

would rescue more than 100,000 wounded soldiers before he himself would be cut down. Ypres was the inspiration. He was there still on April 22, 1915, when the Germans attacked using poison gas for the first time.

“The bombardment,” he wrote,

seemed heavier and more menacing ... I walked uneasily through our wards and offices. A wounded soldier, in the half coma we knew later as shell shock, was being tended and was muttering continuously ‘White faces ... the moonlight ... white faces’ ... I went out. I could see figures running back, the yellow pale of cloud was higher, and again dots of figures in khaki were hurrying forward across the fields out to the northeast of us ... The wounded began to pour in ... the first poison gas sufferers. This horror was too monstrous to believe at first ... But when it came, far as we had traveled from our civilized world of a few months back, the savagery of it, of the sight of men choking to death with yellow froth, lying on the floor and out on the fields, made me rage with an anger which no later cruelty of man, not even the degradation of our kind by the hideous concentration camps in later Germany, ever quite rekindled; for then we still thought all men were human.

ARTHUR WAKEFIELD had followed his own path through agony and despair. He began the war a man of deep religious faith, a devout Anglican who never drank and never failed to attend Sunday service. As Geoffrey Young remembered, at five foot eight, 160 pounds, with a thirty-one-inch chest, he was ferociously strong, a champion boxer and rower at university, with brilliant blue eyes and a penchant for adventure that led him, in 1900, to suspend his medical studies and sign up as a cavalry trooper and sharpshooter with the 70th Company 1st Imperial Yeomanry, destined for service in the Boer War. A year on the South African veldt fired his imagination with the glory of empire, and the duties and obligations of a Christian man and nation. Upon completion of his medical training at Edinburgh and Heidelberg, he joined the Royal National Mission to Deep Sea Fishermen, which led to his meeting Sir Wilfred Grenfell, who had established a series of remote missions along the rocky shores of Newfoundland and Labrador, the first and oldest British possession in an empire upon which the sun famously never set.

Wakefield arrived in Newfoundland in 1908, a time when cod still blackened the sea and the capelin runs were so abundant that their spawn softened the rocks and greased every shoreline with roe. For six years he lived a life of considerable hardship: intense cold in winter, clouds of mosquitoes in summer, a diet of little but flour and grease, molasses, tea, caribou meat, and salted fish. Traveling sometimes by dog team, sometimes by horse or reindeer, on foot or by skiff, he patrolled the entire length of Labrador, a broken coastline of nearly five thousand miles. One of only two qualified doctors in the entire land, Wakefield treated everything from beriberi and tuberculosis to bear maulings and bullet wounds. On one memorable day he extracted no fewer than 149 teeth. Dedicated to God and kind, impervious to physical suffering, possessed of medical skills that seemed wizardly to the scores of people he saved, Wakefield became one of those stalwart colonial figures that loomed over the wild frontiers of the British Empire. A photograph from the Wakefield

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