

BOOK REVIEW

International Society for Mountain Medicine Newsletter, **9** (1): 16-17 (Jan 1999)

High Life, John B West

Oxford University Press and the American Physiological Society 1998

(order details on page 18)

“I sailed in the immensity of the air at the mercy of the winds, experiencing a cold which no mortal ever felt in the severest climates. Nature grew languid, I felt a numbness, prelude of a dangerous sleep, when rising in spite of my lack of strength, I called upon my courage.....” (Paul Bert 1878, From High Life)

High Life describes the history of high altitude medicine and physiology since ancient times. Incredibly, it is John West's 18th book. West is already a legend amongst respiratory physiologists, anaesthetists and high altitude enthusiasts because of his humbling productivity with pen, dictaphone and computer keyboard.

High Life is more than just another reference book starkly tracing the history of climbing physiologists and doctors. It provides a rich description of the basis for much of our understanding of respiratory physiology relevant to both high and low altitude. History can be hard to write in the context of modern understanding but, somehow, West manages to describe many of his characters, despite their failings, with a passion that demonstrates his ability to see their work in the context of their time. On reading the book, I wondered if West wishes he had been there with them. Indeed, I was struck by the major steps in understanding which have been achieved by the experiments of a few individuals over past centuries, and perhaps how little, in contrast, is achieved today by so many.

High Life is not a heavy or dry read like many historical commentaries, but is filled with compelling tales and even humour. West's personal contact with many of the recent characters in history provides an added interest to the story, particularly when the text is read in conjunction with the extensive notes section at the end of the book. There are 12 chapters that are used to separate West's favoured historical moments. He begins with observations from classical Greece to the seventeenth century and then considers the 18th century before turning to a series of chapters which cover particular aspects of high altitude medicine and physiology: high altitude field stations, oxygen transfer by lung and blood, the history of high-altitude diseases, early expeditions to Mount Everest, permanent residents of high altitude, first ascents of Everest and studies at extreme altitude. *High Life* is brought up to date with the final chapter on recent high-altitude studies. The style throughout the book includes excerpts from many original manuscripts and numerous (apparently 185) photographs of the characters who are part of the story. The quality of the reproduction of the photographic images is not perfect, but presumably better quality would have made the book too expensive to produce.

High Life is an extensively researched book, but this is not always apparent from the relaxed style of the main text. However, the 15 pages of notes and the 40 pages of

historical references (I lost count around 700) give a clue as to the enormity of the task which West and his assistant have undertaken.

High Life must be essential reading for all those interested in high altitude medicine, or the history of respiratory physiology and will make a useful companion for anyone lecturing on these subjects. I think the wider audience will be intrigued by the historical events that have led us to our current understanding of what breathing is all about. I wonder how many members of the ISMM who read this book review will find themselves in the last chapter of the next edition of *High Life*.

AJ Pollard

Editor ISMM News

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Last modified 16-Nov-2002