LESSONS FROM HISTORY

Alpine Journal Review of A. M. Kellas’ “A Consideration of the Possibility of Ascending the Loftier Himalaya”—A Commentary

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This issue’s “Lessons From History” is something of a departure from the norm in that the commentary is provided largely on a review of an original article by Dr Alexander M. Kellas (1868–1921).1 The original article contains many features that illuminate the state of high-altitude physiology of the era, and the strong interest it created in the climbing community prompted its extensive review in a mountaineering journal. The review, which appeared in the Alpine Journal in 1917,2 represents one of the first presentations of contemporary thought concerning high-altitude physiology to the lay mountaineering community. This idea has been refined in more recent years with, for instance, book-length publications on the subject for individuals not on intimate terms with the relevant physiological or medical concepts but who are nonetheless very curious about human response to high altitude. A fine example of this genre is the series of books by Dr Charles Houston.3–5

Alexander M. Kellas was a scientist and a very active exploratory mountaineer in the first 2 decades of the 20th century who did not exactly fit the classic profile of someone weaned on a hard and Spartan existence in the hills. In a letter to his wife, the famous mountaineer George Leigh Mallory described Kellas at the start of the 1921 Mount Everest Reconnaissance Expedition (during the course of which Kellas died), and it reads, in part:

Kellas I love already. His appearance would form an admirable model to the stage for a farcical representation of an alchemist. He is very slight in build, short, thin, stooping, and narrow-chested; his head is made grotesque by veritable gig-lamps of spectacles and a long-pointed moustache. He is an absolutely devoted and disinterested person.6

Although Mallory paints a somewhat improbable picture of an active high-altitude mountaineer, Kellas not only qualifies as one of the finest exploratory Himalayan mountaineers in history but is also recognized as the first person to apply state-of-the-art knowledge of high-altitude physiology to field investigations at altitudes over 6000 m. It is very likely that he had spent more time above 6000 m than anyone on Earth by the time of his death in 1921. He undertook no fewer than 8 expeditions to the greater ranges during a Himalayan career that began in 1907.7 He was also one of the first Europeans to recognize the mountaineering talents of Sherpas, and he often relied extensively on them as sole climbing companions during numerous extended high-altitude explorations and climbs in the Sikkim and Garhwal Himalayas. J. B. L. Noel, a prominent figure in the early exploration and climbing history of Mount Everest, wrote shortly after Kellas’ death that Kellas was the “first to discover the best natives for mountaineering, namely Sherpa Bhotias, and first to train teams of Sherpas for high climbing above 23,000 ft. [7010 m].”8

The Science

For hundreds of years, explorers traveling through high mountain regions have expressed an interest in the phenomenon that we have come to term mountain sickness. There should thus be little surprise in the realization that publications dealing with the topic of mountain sickness were not actually novel by the second decade of the 20th century. In fact, the Alpine Journal had run earlier articles on mountain sickness.9,10 Paul Bert’s famous 1878 tome on experimental physiology, La Pression Barométrique: Recherches de Physiologie Expérimentale, contains an extensive section on mountain sickness.11 However, his book was written in French and is very much a publication for the scientist, so it was probably not well known to English-speaking mountaineers. It