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# Letters from Everest

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*Looking towards Skye from summit of Roisbheinn. Rob Fairley, 1984.  
(Watercolour. 75cm x 102cm. Private collection.)*

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ABBIE GARRINGTON

## ‘Write me a little letter’

The George Mallory/Marjorie Holmes Correspondence

In November 2015, Bonhams auction house of Knightsbridge, London sold for £12,500 a lot comprising 10 letters from the mountaineer George Mallory. Purchased by an as yet undisclosed private buyer, the letters span a single year. They begin in March 1923, during Mallory’s return from the US following a lecture tour, having given talks reflecting on the Everest reconnaissance expedition of 1921, and the attempt of 1922. The last is written in March 1924 while Mallory was *en route* to his final attempt on Everest and bears the address ‘Anchor Line, TSS California.’ While the sale of these original letters prevents access to them until further notice, the Royal Geographical Society does hold photocopies of the set, forming part of the George Mallory Collection, the bulk of which is made up of items recovered from Mallory’s body following its discovery in 1999.

The recipient of these letters is Eleanor Marjorie Holmes, known as Marjorie, aged 19 to 20 at the time of writing, living with her family at Benthams, Yorkshire, and working as an unqualified teacher at a local private school. It was Holmes who had instigated the correspondence with an admiring letter of her own – a ‘fan letter’, as the Bonhams catalogue has it. Her side of the correspondence, believed lost or destroyed, reached Mallory when he was working for the Extramural Studies Department at the University of Cambridge, and he advised caution in addressing envelopes in order to secure their privacy and, we assume, to prevent any implication of scandal. On 13 October 1923, Mallory asks: ‘do you realise that I really was damned, no, I mean dreadfully angry with you Marjorie, you naughty girl? You tell me you meant to put ‘Personal’ on the envelope, [and] I have no doubt you did: but that is not the point.’ Mallory’s caution seems to have affected his subsequent biographers, and these letters are rarely referred to at any length in accounts of Mallory’s personal or professional lives. There is, however, no question of impropriety, since Mallory and Holmes never met, indulging instead in what Mallory’s contemporary Virginia Woolf referred to as ‘the humane art [of letter-writing], which owes its origin to the love of friends.’

The peculiarity of this arrangement, in which Mallory, despite not knowing his addressee in person, used the intimate setting of the personal letter to explore his thoughts on life, purpose and literature as well as the call to climb, struck him as a matter for wonder, and he observes on 26 May 1923: ‘I can never write to you without a delighted surprise that we should have travelled so far together without meeting.’ While the circumstances in this



Left: 'My chief feeling is: we've got to get to the top next time or never. We must get there [and] we shall. Here a pause while I imagine myself getting to the top.' A sketch of George Mallory by E F Norton, taken from Vertebrate Publishing's elegant reissue of Norton's classic, *The Fight for Everest 1924*. As well as the full original text and illustrations, this edition reproduces some of Norton's superb pencil sketches and watercolours along with previously unpublished materials from his private archive.

Right: Norton's sketch of Andrew Irvine described by Mallory in his final letter to Holmes as: 'a splendid specimen of a man; he rowed two years in the Oxford boat as a heavy weight [and] yet is not clumsily made at all; [and] he is completely modest and has a nice voice which reminds me strangely of Rupert Brooke's.'

instance were odd indeed, the function of the personal letter, as opposed to the letter of public record, as a space where a man might meet himself, might work out the more philosophical elements of his existence, was less so. In fact, Mallory had earlier written to Holmes regarding their mooted future meeting, not so much in anticipation as in dread: 'Still, we're going to meet one of these days. We shall have the presence of our bodies [and] what we see in each other to embarrass our intercourse, [and] then you'll have to be quite at your frankest to get over my timidity. By the way, are you beautiful? I hope not. [...] if you are beautiful then Heaven help us; I shall shut up like a sea anemone.' Rather than the *lack* of a meeting hampering their discourse, Mallory instead suggests that it is just such a confrontation – one in physical form – that will disrupt the communion that has grown up on the page. They are, he implies, nearer when apart; a fine thought for an expedition participant condemned to spending such stretches of time alone, or in company he has not himself selected.

Woolf, a careful thinker regarding the function of the letter as a form, suggests in a letter of her own to Clive Bell in 1932 that the hurried intimacy of the comparatively cheap missive of the early 20th century is precisely its value. Previous generations were compelled by the expense of postage to make a letter 'count,' writing in a manner which anticipates the circulation of that letter from hand to hand within a household and beyond; those of her own time were an opportunity to speak hastily, without reticence, and with a single addressee in mind. 'I'm encouraged by the fact that since our generation's letters can't be published,' she writes, because as a result 'this can be a wild scribble between the lights.'

Mallory's letters to Holmes are his own 'scribble between the lights': letters written outside the glare of his fame, and with no anticipation that they will form any part of his posthumous reputation (in contrast, say, the travel journal).<sup>1</sup> The letters are certainly passionate, but that passion is diffuse, rather than being directed solely, or even primarily, at Holmes: for the power of letter-writing itself; for mountaineering; for writing; for addressing oneself to a particular challenge, and finding one's place in the world. Mallory's own lines hint at Holmes's passionate replies, a kind of ghost correspondence since we do not have her letters. Yet Mallory's ten are worthy of consideration in themselves, providing as they do an insight into the way that the mountaineer viewed his own life and achievements, laid out here at times with an interlocutor in mind, but at others as if speaking to himself, undertaking what Clare Brant has referred to as the travel letter's 'experiments in subjectivity.' The letters also encourage us to place more centrally in our understanding of Mallory the identity to which he was most wedded: that of a writer.

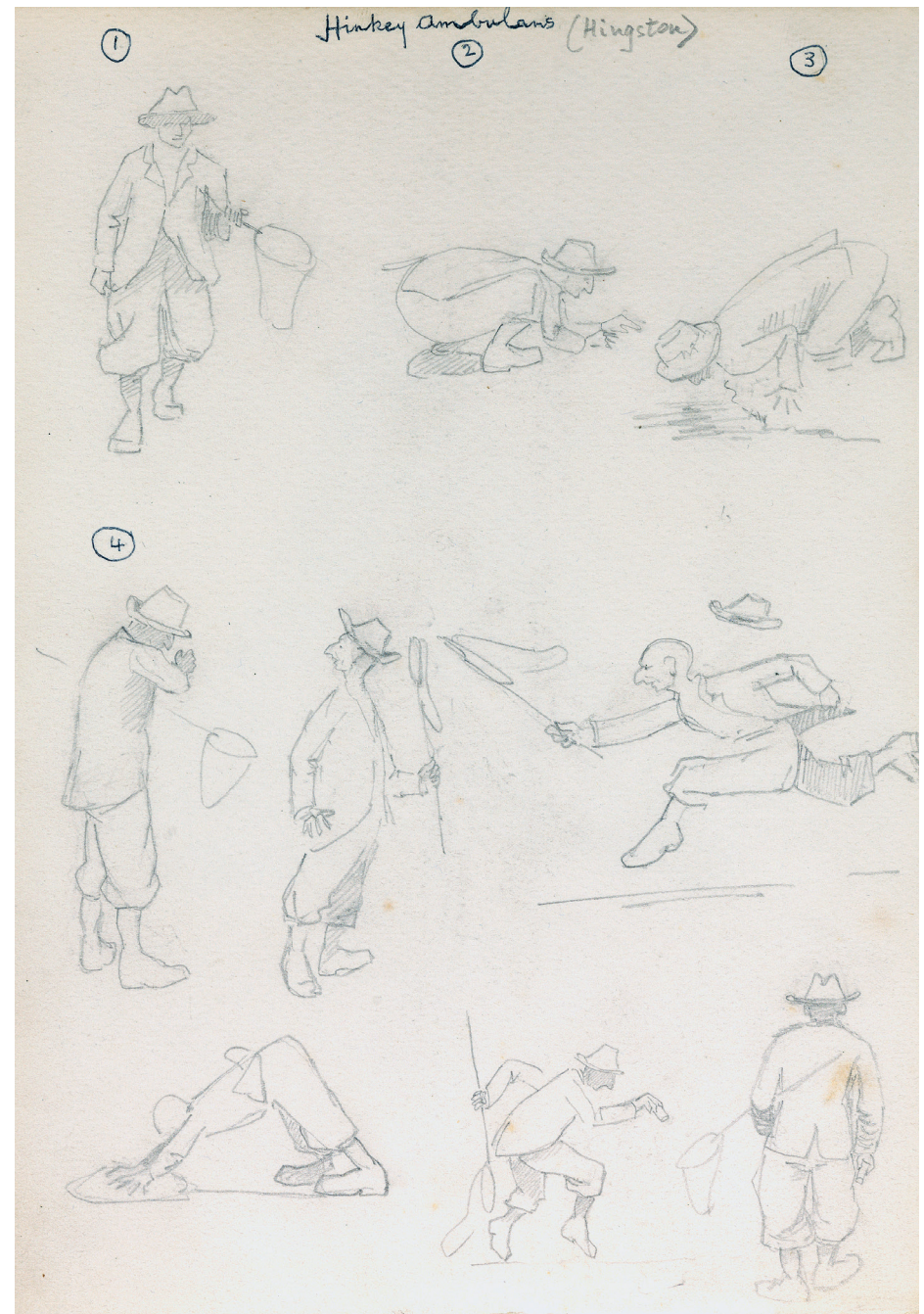
1. These are not intended as letters of record. The other epistolary form, the traveller's diary or journal, is often written with reputation in mind, and may be carried with the body intentionally as a final testament, or else deposited at the last-left camp, for discovery by a search or trailing party. By contrast, the letter sent to a 'nobody' in expedition terms, forms a private conduit for thinking about one's self, life and aims. R F Scott's journals and their public function may well have been in Mallory's mind when thinking of his own posthumous reputation. We should note that Mallory had visited Scott's widow Kathleen shortly before leaving on this final journey, as Robert Macfarlane amongst others has observed.

If addressed by biographers, these Mallory/Holmes letters tend to be mined for presentiments of Mallory's coming doom or, in the case of the last in particular, for logistical or strategic insight into the approaching attempt on the peak. The final letter expresses a particular liking for Andrew 'Sandy' Irvine, who was to join Mallory for his ill-fated summit bid: 'a splendid specimen of a man; he rowed two years in the Oxford boat as a heavy weight [and] yet is not clumsily made at all; [and] he is completely modest and has a nice voice which reminds me strangely of Rupert Brooke's.' Naval officer and poet Brooke has already received a mention in the letter of 26 May 1923, when his poem 'The Great Lover' is commended, and Mallory remarks that 'he was a friend of mine at Cambridge [and] he had that same love of things' which Mallory ascribes to his own habits of thought, allying himself with Brooke's poetic sensibility.<sup>2</sup>

In the last letter of the Mallory/Holmes correspondence, Sandy Irvine's physical fortitude is of interest to Mallory not only in a spirit of admiration for a significantly younger man, but also with the coming climb in mind. Mallory may already have had Irvine in view as at least a potential climbing partner, anticipating reserves of energy that would last out to a final summit bid: 'You know we've got to do it this time; [and] yet it won't be at all easily done. Nor have we come to a conclusion yet as to the best way of trying to do it,' Mallory tells Holmes. In an earlier letter, written on 7 November 1923, Mallory had stated, perhaps with greater confidence: 'my chief feeling is: we've got to get to the top next time or never. We must get there [and] we shall. Here a pause while I imagine myself getting to the top.' The mountaineer finds a visual correlate for that pause in speech, leaving a section of his page blank, before picking up again. That he needs a pause for imaginative mountaineering is anticipated in Mallory's earlier 'Pages from a Journal,' in which he claims that 'It may be harder to think oneself to the top of a mountain than to pull oneself so far.'

Yet there is much in these letters to draw the attention, beyond their contribution to a thorough history of British efforts in the Himalaya. Not only are they a space in which Mallory forms and plays with a selfhood elsewhere constricted by family and public responsibilities. They also contain a valuable set of speculations about the power of the letter as a literary form, in particular its ability to extend the touch of the writer's hand, stretching across the miles to meet the reciprocal touch of the addressee, and its summoning up of the presence of the other. 'Write me a little letter with a word of affection and I would kiss the hand that wrote it,' as Mallory puts it.

2. Brooke's own letter to Edward Marsh of 1912 is more ambivalent: 'Funny your finding George Mallory, I've known him so many years, discontinuously. I'm rather fond of him: but I never have a warm enough affection - no, it's a sharp enough interest I lack - to see him a great deal - I've meant to go [and] find him at Charterhouse [where Mallory was then teaching], but never done it. I always, or generally, have a vague feeling in his presence - as if I'm, momentarily, dull, not he, especially. But what's one to do? But I like him.' In a final Mallory/Brooke connection, William Edward Arnold-Forster, Labour politician and great grandson of Dr Thomas Arnold of Rugby School, married Katherine 'Ka' Laird Cox, the former lover of Rupert Brooke, in 1918. His second marriage was to the widowed Ruth Mallory. Virginia Woolf makes a passing reference to this second marriage in a letter to Angelica Bell of 16 October 1939: 'we've been seeing Will and Ruth Arnold-Forster [...]. The filling in of that story, and the story of Ruth, of Rupert's letter, of George Mallory's death on Mount Everest would fill oh the whole of the telephone book.' Any such letter from Brooke has been lost.



R W G Hingston, expedition doctor and naturalist, captured in affectionate caricature by Norton, probably early in the expedition.



The north face of Everest from the Pang La, about 35 miles from the mountain, in a watercolour by Norton.

The hand that sends a letter to the mountaineer is revered to the point of a courtly kiss; Holmes' presence, and her touch, is both transferred by a letter which bears the traces of her body, and conjured up in the imagination of the recipient. By contrast, Mallory imagines his own writing hand as disembodied, emphasising that which is missing from an exclusively epistolary relationship: 'Can you love a shadow – a mere hand that spins out lame halting words [and] belongs in some way to a name in the newspapers? But words are thoughts, and thoughts are men and women. Can thoughts love each other? Clearly they must.'

It seems Holmes has declared love in her previous letter, prompting from Mallory not only speculations regarding the capacity of letters to allow such strength of feeling, but also consideration of his fame as a kind of lightning rod for female affection. Whatever his doubts about the validity of Holmes's feelings, and whatever his scruples as a married man about discussing such sentiments, Holmes becomes intensely present to him through her letters, an effect which borders on the marvellous. On 4 October 1923, Mallory asks: 'Why should a letter from you have a strange effect on me? – Strange effect? Well, only this, that after reading it I wanted to kiss you. He wanted to kiss a girl he'd never seen – curiously [and] curiously [...]. If she's a scolded child she's a kissed child, spiritually kissed by a man she never set eyes on.' Sending letters, as well as receiving them, could create such

a summoning up of the other party, and the fact of never having met appears no barrier: 'Farewell to you now – my holidays all unrelated – but you a figure more distinct, and nearer, and – yes – dearer. So dear Goodbye.'

This process of imagining into being the absent interlocutor is clearest in Mallory's letter to his wife Ruth in 1922, from which Macfarlane quotes at length: 'I am conscious of you at the other end [of this letter-writing process]; and very often dearest one I summon up your image & have your presence in some way near me.' While these are lonely images – the distant adventurer peoples his solitude with imagined loved ones, so vividly that they take on physical form – Mallory is excited by this conjuring power, and repeats the implication of his bashful imagined meeting with Holmes: that this particular form of discourse might be superior to all others. Writing on 31 July 1923, he claims that 'the letter which proceeds from the real desire to tell things or still more which is inspired by some curiosity or excitement in the spiritual presence of the imagined recipient can be the best talk in words, the best of all.'<sup>3</sup>

If letters to Holmes provided a space for Mallory's 'best talk in words,' it was certainly the case that he remained concerned for the other aspects of his literary output as well. Holmes, we gather from Mallory's replies, has stated an interest in becoming a writer, and he formulates his own status as man of letters using the pose of mentor. In that 31 July 1923 letter, Mallory praises William Henry Hudson, and a note in the archives records the fact he sent Holmes a copy of Hudson's *A Shepherd's Life* (1910), a delivery which is somewhere between a gift and an imposed education. 'Have you by the way seen the two Everest books?' he asks on two occasions, 'I should like to think you had read my chapters.'

Yet his concern is not only with passing on his writer's wisdom to a coming generation, but also with establishing a sense of his own influences, placing himself within a genealogy of landscape writers. In the last letter, *en route* to Everest once more, he declares that 'My reading on board so far has been chiefly [André] Maurois' *Life of Shelley*, or *Ariel*, he calls it. *Ariel* is a good name for him for all that he was never so sad as poor Shelley. Do you know Shelley? One of the greatest spirits that have appeared on earth [and] a man of such moral beauty that I feel dazzled in his presence – I can't tell you how profound a feeling I have for Shelley; he has influenced my life more than any one; when I read Shelley I become like the sensitive plant [and] tremble.' The mention of 'spirit' here sticks with the *Ariel* theme, and nods toward Shelley's 'Spirit of Delight' or 'Rarely, rarely, comest thou', which Mallory had recommended in his letter of 26 May 1923.

It also refers to the only material to which Mallory at time of writing would have had easy access: that contained in poet laureate Robert Bridges' *The Spirit of Man* anthology of 1915, taken on the expedition for common use, which, we should note, is 9.6% Shelley by entry. David Robertson

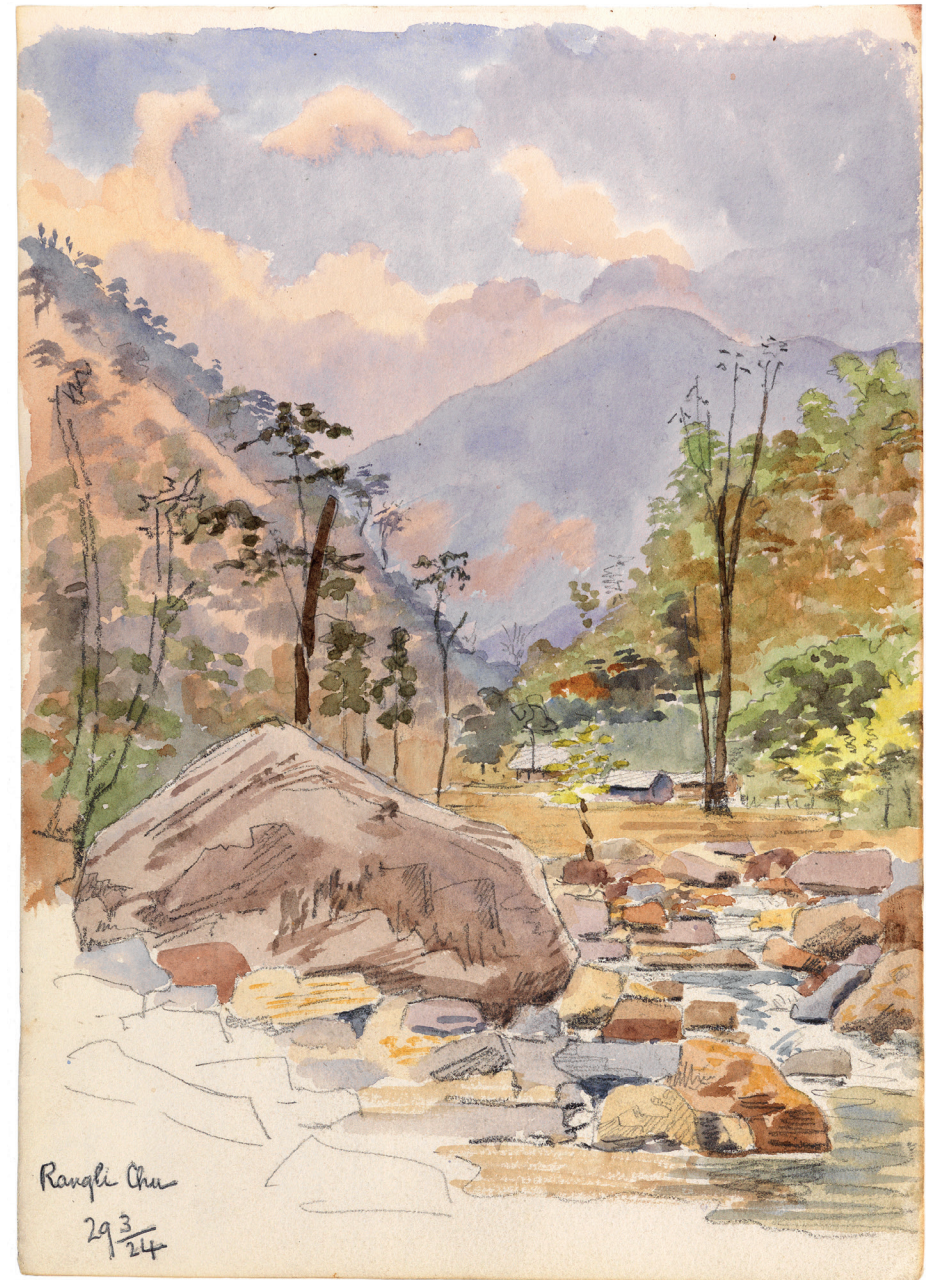
3. Mallory was himself the subject of conjuring practices the following year. Subsequent to his death alongside Irvine, Britain's mountain fans experienced a revived interest in spiritualist séances, as mediums attempted to contact the pair to ask if they had reached the summit, and where it was they now lay. See Hansen.

has recorded that the expedition party reached for the Bridges collection following a particularly bad night at camp III. It is curious that Mallory again commends the vivid and emotionally affecting qualities of writing, and Shelley is, like Holmes or Ruth, summoned by his imagination; he quakes in Shelley's *presence*. It may be that the two central themes of Mallory's letters to Holmes (the power of the epistolary form; his own literary legacy) are linked, since he suggests in his 31 July 1923 note that 'The act of detachment, of planing [sic] off to some other world from which this one may be viewed, is often the genesis of literary work.' The letter's function as a free space for contemplation might permit just such literary beginnings, and it may be this as well as Holmes's requests for guidance in her writing career, that makes literature a central topic in their correspondence; he works out ideas here he may go on to use elsewhere. However, the shift to another world or plane and its value as a catalyst for literary production, might also be read more straightforwardly as the thought of a literary mountaineer: getting high, either physically or in imagination, will get the literary muscles working.

In the previous letter, 23 July 1923, Mallory adds a disclaimer that clarifies his present status in literary terms: 'you might think from one part of my letter that I am a much experienced writer. That is not the case [and] yet I have constantly had writing in mind [and] have gone on writing at intervals though little has been published.' The ever-sensitive Mallory might have perceived the gap between his ambition and his reputation here, given that his lectures and essays were accused during his lifetime and after of excessive complexity and over-writing: too much Shelley, perhaps?

In reviewing David Pye's memoir of Mallory in 1927, 'E F N', presumably Edward Felix Norton, rehearses the faults in Mallory's literary endeavours but, crucially, identifies his particular talent for letter-writing: 'The book quotes extensively both from Mallory's letters and from his more serious literary work. The former are always preferable: his letters are vivid, picturesque, and discursive – recalling those of a bygone generation when men had time to take letter-writing seriously as a branch of literature. His more serious work is often too verbose, and it is sometimes hard to follow him in all his flights of introspective fancy.' These claims confirm that Mallory's writing was not consistently well thought of, in part explaining his anxieties about his abilities, and his intentions, as outlined to Holmes, to continue to develop his literary skills.

Yet they also suggest that he is one of the last great letter writers, a man allied to earlier generations in this respect, and perhaps Woolf is his companion in this. Uncomfortable with his status as 'a name in the newspapers,' the 'scribble between the lights' of dashed letters, often written on the move, permitted not only speculations about his subjectivity, life achievements and future plans, but also a level of literary skill unencumbered by public expectations. The correspondence with Holmes shows us that Mallory writes best when no one (but Holmes) is watching. Part of his work in these letters, even with the clarity of hindsight taken into account, is surely a loose



E F Norton's watercolour of the hamlet of Rongli-Chu in Sikkim. Now a small town, the old temple bell has an inscription in Nepali that reads: 'Rongli was a dense forest in the early days, which had a small path that lead far to Tibet.'



Mallory and Irvine are conspicuous by their absence in this team photo taken at the end of the 1924 expedition. From left to right, back row: Hazard, Hingston, Somervell, Beetham, Shebbeare; front row: G Bruce, Norton, Noel, Odell.

and easy first attempt at writing his own obituary. Read in this way, we should take seriously the claims set out here for Mallory's status as a writer.

In the letter of 15 January 1924, Mallory binds the two sides of his life, the mountaineering and the writing, by metaphorically linking the written line and the rope line of the belay, suggesting that 'words spelt in ink twist a line as one writes to throw over [and] tie to oneself that other one.' That climbing and writing were, for Mallory, linked at a fundamental level is no surprise. That the exploration of those intertwined ambitions appears most compellingly in the epistolary form is something that is clearest in these ten often-neglected letters. Credit is due to Holmes, who was sufficiently wraith-like and half-imagined to count as a 'between the lights' correspondent, yet vividly present enough to draw out the most philosophical speculations of a reticent man. And as Woolf states in her *Three Guineas* of 1938: 'Without someone warm and breathing on the other side of the page, letters are worthless.'

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