
Unsworth, Walter (Walt)

(1928–2017)

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Unsworth, Walter (Walt) (1928–2017), outdoor writer and publisher, was born on 16 December 1928 at 21 Kirkstall Street, Ardwick, Manchester, the son of Jane Unsworth, boarding house keeper, of 51 St Albans Street, Rochdale. During the Second World War he was evacuated to Abram, near Wigan, and began fell walking and rock climbing in the Lake District on weekends. He met Dorothy (*b.* 1929), daughter of John Winstanley, foreman, on a school bus when they were teenagers. Both were living in Abram when they married on 2 June 1952, at the parish church. They had two children: Gail, later a radiologist, and Duncan, later a photographer.

After national service in the army, Unsworth entered Chester Teacher Training College on a scholarship in 1949. He taught science at schools in Wolverhampton and Manchester and became head of physics at Birch Road secondary modern school in Walkden, Manchester. He introduced one of the first Duke of Edinburgh award schemes, took students to the hills, and erected a climbing wall at the school. His *The Young Mountaineer* (1959) was a book for teenagers that the *Times Literary Supplement* (13 March 1959) commended for including climbing history ‘so that his readers can know themselves inheritors of a great tradition’. After a doctor’s visit due to exhaustion from teaching by day and writing at night, he left teaching to become a full-time writer and editor.

In 1962 Unsworth became editor of *Climber*, a monthly magazine that became *Climber and Rambler* in 1969. By then its circulation was 13,000, twice that of competitors, and it was regarded as the most commercial, conservative, and profitable of climbing publications: ‘Its market is a wide one, covering hill-walker, orienteer and strictly non-tiger climber’ (*Alpine Journal*, 1970, 325). Unsworth produced a guide to climbing cliffs in the west Midlands in 1962 and published *English Outcrops* (1964), a comprehensive directory of crags from sea cliffs to quarries, intended for seasoned climbers. He was elected to the Alpine Club in 1968 and published a climber’s guide to the Ötztal Alps in 1969. A canny businessman, he identified walkers as the market for another publication he helped launch in 1978, *The Great Outdoors* (later *TGO*).

In 1968 Walt and Dorothy Unsworth, together with fellow climbing enthusiasts Brian and Aileen Evans, founded Cicerone Press to publish affordable guidebooks by and for walkers. The Unsworths published the guidebooks from their home, first at 16 Briarfield Road, Worsley, Manchester, and from the mid-1970s at Harmony Hall, Milnthorpe, Cumbria, before moving to offices in Milnthorpe. Walt wrote, edited, and made publishing decisions; Dorothy ran the operations; and their friends the Evanses designed and printed the books in Preston. Walt Unsworth and Brian Evans wrote a guide to the Lake District, and they published guidebooks by others to Ben Nevis and Glencoe, the Cairngorms, the Isle of Man, Norway, other parts of Europe, and trekking destinations around the world. Cicerone published more than 250 guides for walkers and climbers before they sold the press to another husband-and-wife team, Jonathan and Lesley Williams, in 1999.

Walt Unsworth wrote a series of climbing histories and adventure novels for a juvenile audience. These included biographies of Edward Whymper in 1965, A. F. Mummery in 1967, short biographies of other climbers in 1968, and a book on the north face of the Eiger in 1969, which was translated into German. Unsworth's trilogy of children's novels set in the Peak District in the industrial revolution—*The Devil's Mill* (1968), *Whistling Clough* (1970), and *Grimsdyke* (1974)—featured youthful protagonists confronting social and political reform, and the books became recommended reading in schools. Reviewers noted that the Derbyshire moorland was a hero in the novels, and the interplay of a landscape and history featured in his illustrated books with commercial publishers on the River Derwent, the Peak District, and the Lakeland fells.

Unsworth's magnum opus was *Everest: A Mountaineering History* (1981), with expanded editions in 1989 and 2000. *Everest* combined extensive archival research and Unsworth's gift for synthesis with a countercultural attitude that had become influential among climbers by the 1970s. He wanted *Everest* to move beyond the heroism of juvenile literature and show that 'the story of Man's attempts to climb a very special mountain ... arouse[s] both the best and worst in human nature; a theme which previous writers have tended to ignore' (xi). Unsworth recounted controversies over expedition leadership, the use of oxygen, or rivalries among climbers with lively storytelling, an eye for foibles, and repeated criticism of the 'mountaineering establishment'. He viewed George Mallory as an indecisive drifter, competent rather than great. The British team in 1953 was 'the final flowering of the Old Guard' (296). Unsworth's sympathies were with smaller teams, new routes, and 'anything new to man's fight against Everest' (343). The story of new routes and techniques culminated with the British ascent of the south-west face of Everest in 1975 and Reinhold Messner's ascents without bottled oxygen in 1978 and alone in 1980. In this narrative, later climbers could fill gaps on a mountain awash with money. Unsworth had a blind spot toward the 'Asian mind' (98, 221, 352, 361) and has been criticized for not giving agency to Tibetans in the 1920s or Sherpas in later periods. Though Unsworth critiqued an 'old guard', his book reinforced long-standing views of mountaineering as man's battle against nature, sometimes with gendered metaphors: 'There might have been a more sporting ethic about the conquest of the world's highest peak: less rape and more seduction' (196).

Unsworth published other histories, but none achieved the commercial or critical success of *Everest*, which received a mountain book prize at Trento in 1992. Other works included an encyclopedia of mountaineering, anthologies of climbing essays and humour, a history of Mont Blanc, and *Hold the Heights* (1993), a general history of mountaineering over a longer period.

In 1980 Unsworth founded the Outdoor Writers' Guild (later the Outdoor Writers' and Photographers' Guild), served as first president, and received its Golden Eagle award for services to the outdoors. As a leading outdoor writer, editor, and publisher, his colleagues warmly recalled his gruff, northern voice, kindly advice to other writers, and reputation as a 'father figure of British outdoor writing' (*Westmorland Gazette*, 20 June 2017). He died from leukemia at his home in Milnthorpe on 6 June 2017, and his funeral was held on 19 June at St Thomas's Church in the village. Dorothy Unsworth died on 17 April 2018. Milnthorpe Parish Council erected a plaque on the wall of Harmony Hall commemorating this Georgian building and its prominent residents, including Walt and Dorothy Unsworth.

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obituary photographs