

British Everest expedition SW face 1975

Peter Boardman and Ronnie Richards

It was a strange sensation to be lying prostrate with heat at nearly 6700 m, rain apparently floating down through the sultry glaring mist outside. Few people had been in the Cwm by the beginning of September and the old hands ruefully remembered November conditions in 1972, hence the gleeful graffiti on the boudoir walls of our lone Camp 2 superbox, exhorting: 'Climb Everest in September, be at home by October'. Express trains rumbled and roared incessantly from Lhotse above, the W Ridge left and Nuptse below; all movement on the mountain was out of the question, so we could indulge in continuous brews and lethargic inactivity.

One's mind drifted back over the previous few days, traversing terrain made familiar, even legendary in the last 20 years. Base Camp, established on 22 August in its field of rubble, and a familiarisation with successive sections of the Ice-Fall on the following days, as the route through to a site for Camp 1 was prospected and made safe for subsequent traffic. Ice-Fall Sirdar Phurkipa, chief road mender and survivor of countless journeys up the Ice-Fall, had shown his approval, white tooth flashing enthusiastically at the unusually benign conditions of the Ice-Fall this time of year. Tottering horrors apparently absent, the main areas of concern were the 'Egg-Shell', a short, flattish area surrounded by huge holes and crevasses, seemingly liable to sudden collapse, and a short distance above, 'Death Valley', hot and a possible channel for big avalanches peeling off the flank of the W Ridge. (A big one did come down 2 weeks later, collapsed the Egg-Shell and probably made the area safer.)

The site of Camp 1 on the brink of the Ice-Fall was avalanche-proof but seemingly only held from a downward shuffle by 2 old Japanese ropes, tautly spanning a huge crevasse, gradually separating it from the W Cwm beyond. This crevasse sported a remarkable ladder creation built by Hamish MacInnes, cradled in rope and braced by further rope and aluminium. And then the W Cwm, which left its inevitable strong impression on those who had not encountered it before. Zigzagging between the initial abysses which cut across the direct path added perhaps a mile to the walk but could be welcomed in the magical beauty of the early morning light, surrounded by towering rock ribs, snow-flutings and then the pyramid of Everest itself, so often obscured when close at hand, with the SW Face etched out in a pattern of snow and rock and the S Col gracefully dipping down to its right. A sad contrast if caught in the reflector bowl heat after a late start, struggling up the gentle incline relentlessly stretching out to Camp 2, apprehension for once blunted where the route was forced close under the flanks of Nuptse.

Poised in Camp 2 under the massive sweep of the Face, all the plans and preparations built up over the last year rested on uncertainties which would soon be resolved: what would conditions and safety on the Face itself be like during this late monsoon period, might we have to wait and build up Camp 2, thus losing our precious time advantage in the race against the autumn winds and cold? What route and camp placements below the Rock Band would be best? A more direct line up the left-hand side of the main couloir had seemed



1 The upper part of Everest SW face. This and next five photos: British Everest expedition 1975

a sudden possible shorter alternative to the known ground up to the right. Above all lay the big question mark over the feasibility of the left hand gully through the Rock Band and the traverse above. By going for the left-hand gully this time, difficulties would be tackled at a lower altitude than on the right side of the Band and Camp 6 could be placed at the top of the Band, thus resulting in a greatly improved logistical situation. We could only hope that our luck with the weather would hold. Since leaving Kathmandu in early

August, we had experienced a weather pattern of generally fine mornings and precipitation later in the day. On the mountain the snow-fall was only occasionally prolonged or sufficient to suspend activity the next day and was often confined to the lower camps.

September 5th was spent watching the white veils which sluiced over the Rock Band after the previous day's heat and snow-fall and poured down the steeper angled left-hand side of the main couloir. Although lacking the

interest of new ground, the right-hand side looked safer and would yield less rock, if snow cover diminished. On the next day it was possible to fix ropes to the site of Camp 3 over stable avalanche debris. Progress up the Face to Camp 5 was continued over the next 10 days by 3 small groups of 2 to 4 climbers who maintained a system of cycling the lead. One group would establish camp and make the route to the site of the next one, to be followed by the next group and so on. Snow did sometimes curtail progress when unstable and for several hours each day a fascinating runnel of cascading spin-drift tumbled down the left side of the gully with more occasional small spin-drift avalanches from the rocks above, one of which nearly choked Hamish and forced him to descend.

Due to the potential avalanche danger, Camp 4 was situated lower than on previous attempts, under the protection of a small buttress and Camp 5 just a little lower than before, in a protected bay to the right of the main gully instead of directly at the foot of the left-hand gully through the Rock Band as earlier envisaged. These were significant changes, since Camp 3 could then be removed and the Camp 2 to Camp 4 and Camp 4 to Camp 5 distances were then more evenly balanced carries. During this period Camp 2 grew and took over its proper role as advance base from Camp 1. Each day exact checks on what food and equipment were in each camp had to be matched against the number of Sherpas available for carrying and what was required for upward progress and maintenance of present positions with safety margins. Radio messages, regarded somewhat ambivalently at first, were prolonged when the chain became extended and front progress almost too fast, especially when oxygen and an alarming number of faulty regulators had to be juggled into the calculations. This operation depended of course on our Sherpas, whose particularly high morale and enthusiasm were key factors in the whole expedition; the unprecedented quantities, so quickly built up at Camp 5, were an indicator of the support coming right through from Base Camp and the organisational efforts of Chris Bonington, Mike Cheney, Adrian Gordon, Dave Clarke and our Sirdars Pertemba and Ang Phu.

Yet, in the midst of the apparently inexorable machine-like activity, the mountain was large enough for one to realise that it would not require much to reverse the tide of circumstances carrying us forward so well. A few days out in front could emphasise the contrasts. Early morning outside Camp 5, the eye would be greeted by a glow suffusing across the horizon, Cho Oyu tipped with rosy orange, Pumori, now a pimple, emerging out of the dark stillness below and the fringe of Gosainthan and its Tibetan neighbours in the distance. Conscious of fiddling with freezing crampons and oxygen apparatus in the half-light and then, cocooned in a semi-somnolent shell, the rhythmical shuffle, pull, plod and gasp up the ropes to the previous day's high point. Fix a few more rope lengths until no more was left and then easily slide down in the bright light to excavate a snow platform and erect the next box, so more rope instead of box platforms could come up from Camp 2.

By the time we reached the Rock Band on 19 September, progress was well in advance of that on previous attempts and even the most optimistic computer estimate on Chris's multicoloured graphs. From below and from air photos it was not possible to see whether the left-hand gully provided a route

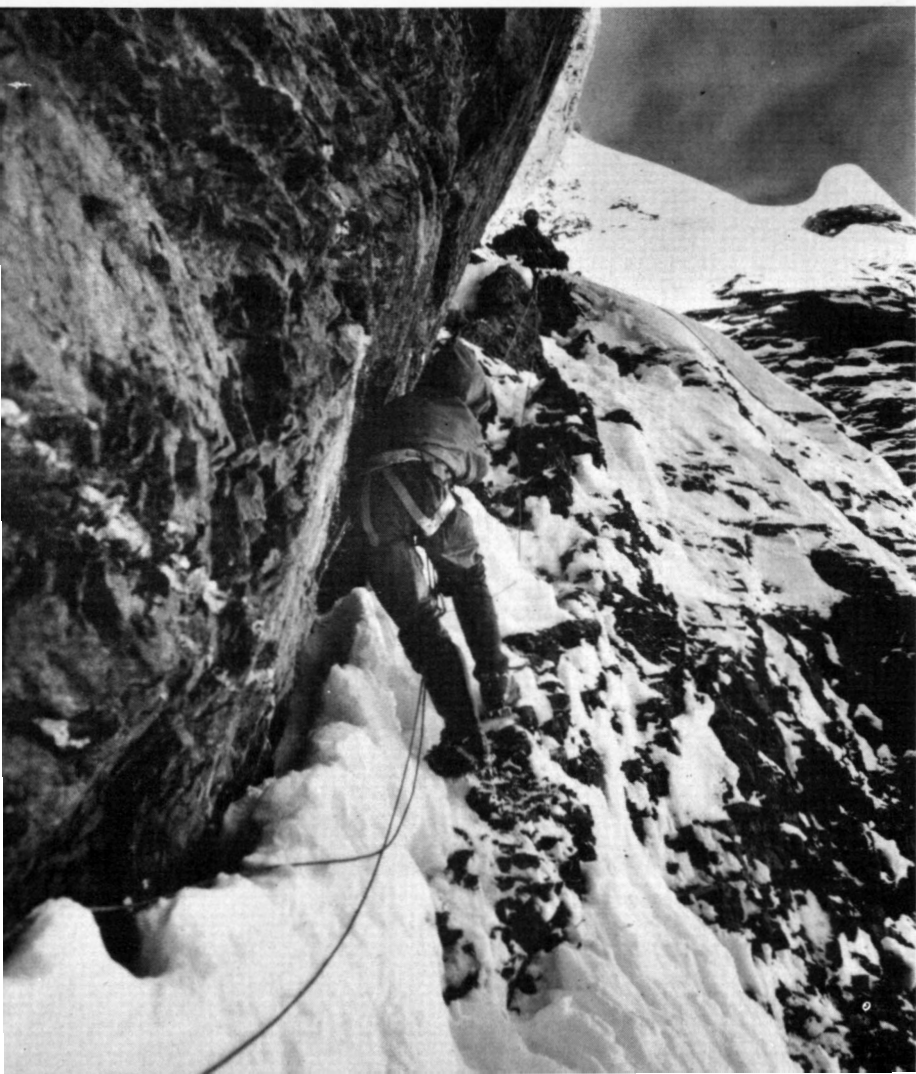


2 *Camp 4 with Cho Oyu beyond*

through the Rock Band, as it was so deep and well concealed. The breakthrough came on 20 September when Tut Braithwaite and Nick Estcourt cramponed into the bowels of the Rock Band. They encountered some difficult mixed pitches whilst entering and climbing up the gully, including an ice-clad chockstone that succumbed to a few pitons for aid. In the curling mists of the afternoon it had the haunting atmosphere of a Scottish gully with dark looming walls soaring upwards from a narrow snow bed. Then Nick and Tut dumped their empty oxygen cylinders and climbed across a remarkable ramp, loose and difficult, that led out from the gully rightwards to the top of the Band.

Down in Camp 2 awaiting developments, an anxious call came from Camp 1 that it was collapsing; Hamish strode off to a Canute-like investigation. A

3 Braithwaite climbing the ramp to the top of the Rock Band



bunting-like bird hopped about outside the mess tent whilst those within disposed of roast yak with relish. When Tut and Nick eventually arrived back off the Face, the crowded superbox felt like the Padarn Lake Hotel as they talked and gesticulated about their high-altitude acrobatics. Temporary feelings of anticlimax at lack of news and non-involvement with action above soon dissolved into euphoria. In only one day, the crux of the route and stumbling block of 5 earlier expeditions had at last been climbed and success seemed near.

On one long relentless day Mike Thompson, Mick Burke, Chris Bonington, Ang Phurba and Pertemba carrying vital ropes, fuel and oxygen, supported Doug Scott and Dougal Haston in establishing Camp 6 on a slim crest on the snow-slope above the Rock Band. At last it was possible to look across that much dreamed-about great traverse, and up the gully to the S Summit of Everest. Above the wind was blowing ice particles off the summit ridge, shimmering in the sunlight. The support team took a long look from their 8320 m eyrie and then, with supreme altruism, turned back down to Camp 5 as the sun declined behind towering anvil clouds over Nepal. Doug and Dougal were left excavating a perch for their tiny green box. After spending a day fixing 400 m of rope that wavered around spurs and over steep rock steps, they were back again and were poised for their final attempt, the Alpine commitment of leaving the end of the safety line and forging for the summit. And at the back of their minds they were aware of the other teams moving up the face below them, snapping at their heels, eager for their chance.

The next morning the BBC cameraman Ian Stewart, plodded dedicatedly up the W Cwm. He pointed his telephoto lens at two figures 1800 m above him moving steadily across the top of the Rock Band. Occasionally a deadman on

4 Haston on the traverse above the Rock Band





5 Haston on the Hillary step

one of their waists flashed a sense of immediacy down into the Cwm.

Back in the boxes on the face everyone was relying for information as to their progress on radio reports from down in the Cwm. At Camp 5, Mick Burke, Martin Boysen and Pete Boardman and Pertemba were listening in every half-hour to progress reports. Mick peered out of the box doorway and up at the dark looming Rock Band 'Well, if they don't make it, they should have their first bounce around here'. Meanwhile, 600 m lower down Dave Clarke and Ronnie Richards crouched over their radio in the main street of Camp 4.

During the traverse, the watchers saw a large powder snow avalanche sweep down from the summit—it plummeted past the two figures now just visible to the naked eye from Camp 2. Then Doug and Dougal disappeared into the S Summit Gully. Hours later, at 3pm they reappeared briefly on the S Summit, only to move from view over the ridge into China. Occasionally a puff of snow appeared in the wind over the summit ridge. Soon the surmise was made by the watchers at Camp 2, Doug and Dougal were going for the summit. In the late afternoon light, 2 figures could just be seen moving, amazingly, unbelievably, up along the ridge. The light was failing and Chris crackled through the radio to the next summit bid team to prepare for a rescue and to load up with pain killers for potential frost-bite. How would Doug and Dougal survive a bivouac at 8750 m?

Next morning the second team found them inside the box at Camp 6, their minds still numb and speech slurred after a night without sleep and without much oxygen. But their imaginations were full of a lifetime sight—sunset from the summit—the interminable brown and silver rivers of Tibet, and a myriad of sunsets, sun shifting behind the plumed storm clouds of Nepal. They told of their near failure when at the foot of the gully Dougal's mask had frozen solid, blocking his oxygen supply and for an hour they had struggled to repair it. They told of the deep time-consuming powder snow in the gully, of the wind slab and the cornices, and of the Chinese maypole on the summit. They told of hallucinations in the snow-hole, of Doug holding a conversation with his feet, and of Dougal's conviction that Dave Clarke was with them, but without his usual issue of warm, life preserving down! However, unlike Doug, Dougal was wearing a down suit. In the heat of the afternoon Doug and Dougal were back at Camp 2, after 1800 m of sliding down the face on the ropes, involving a disciplined concentration on the ritual of clipping and unclipping their friction brakes with sensitive rewarmed fingers. Soon they were in the tender care of Dr Charles Clarke who clad in a suit of red silk, swept around them with a bowl of warm water. In one bold and daring push Doug and Dougal had maintained the upward momentum of the whole expedition by reaching the summit within 33 days of Base Camp being established.

Despite the jubilation and the sense of personal success he must have felt at having co-ordinated and planned the ascent of the route, Chris now felt an added responsibility for the expedition. He intended to recognise the personal ambitions of the other team members and planned for 3 subsequent summit bids. And he was worried about Mick, who by mid afternoon still had not arrived at Camp 6 to join Martin, Pete and Pertemba.

But when Mick arrived at 4pm many fears were allayed. He was his usual

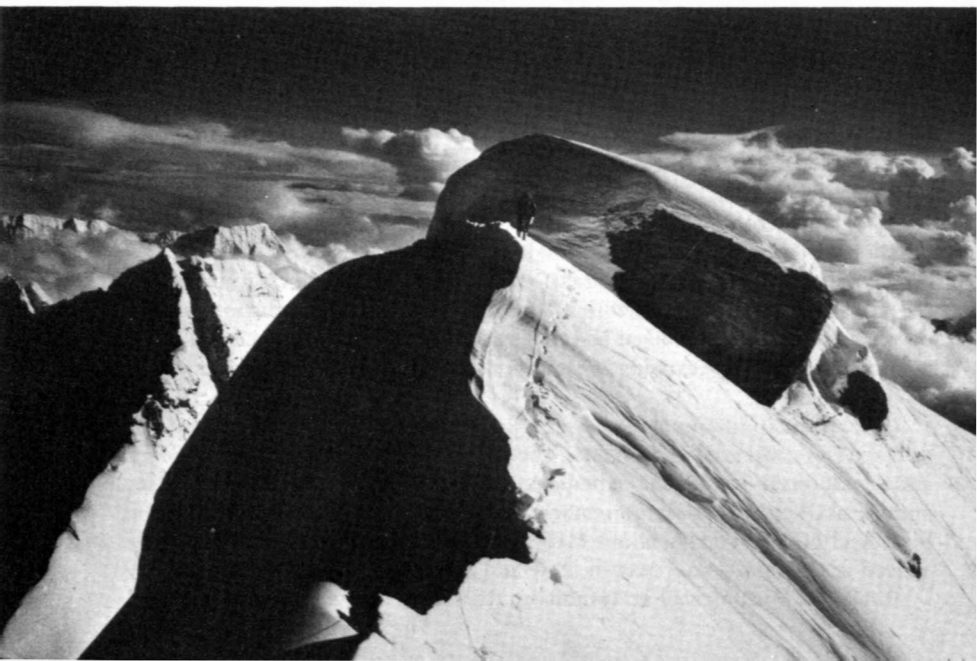
chirpy self. He had been carrying extra camera equipment, had been readjusting the fixed line, had been helping Lakpa Dorje Sherpa whose oxygen apparatus had failed and his own oxygen had run out when he was 60 m below the Camp. He could see the hardworn line of Doug and Dougal's steps stretching beckoningly upwards. With the summit of the highest mountain on earth so accessible, what mountaineer would deny himself at least a try?

By dawn the following morning a chain of circumstances had been set in motion. Pete and Pertemba had reached the end of the fixed ropes and were convinced that oxygen difficulties had forced Martin and Mick to retreat. There was no-one in sight. They kicked away the spindrift from the tracks and moved unroped away from the end of the fixed ropes across the 300 m traverse to the S Summit Gully. There they jumared gratefully up a fixed line hanging over a rock step in the gully. Looking down they could see a solitary sitting figure far back across the traverse and presumed it was Martin watching their progress before he turned back disappointedly to Camp 6. Meanwhile for those back at Camp 2 the view lacked the sunlit immediacy of 2 days before. The weather was changing and the cloud level was down to 8200 m.

At 10am Pete and Pertemba were standing on the S Summit but Pertemba's wayward oxygen set was re-enacting Dougal's ice block and it was 1½ hours and several cold fingers later before they began, roped now, to move along the summit ridge. They were not to be greeted on the summit by the shifting light patterns of a great panorama. Instead visibility was down to 50 m and the sun was shining through the clouds above them. Pertemba attached a Nepalese flag to the maypole.

On their descent they were amazed to see Mick through the mist. He was

6 The summit ridge with the S summit and Lhotse



sitting on the snow only a few hundred metres down an easy angled snow-slope from the summit. He seemed cheerful, congratulated them and asked them to go back to the summit with him so he could do some filming. They declined thinking that since they were moving roped and he was so near the summit, that he would soon catch them up again as they pitched the descent. He asked them to wait for him by the big rock of the S Summit. Pete said 'See you soon' and they moved back down the ridge to the S Summit. Shortly after they had left him the weather began to deteriorate. The sky and cornices and whirling snow merged together, visibility was reduced to 3 metres and all tracks were obliterated.

They waited nearly 1½ hours before deciding to go down. They very nearly did not get back. They had difficulty in finding the top of the gully, found the top of the fixed rope over the rock step in the dark and were covered by 2 powder snow avalanches whilst moving blindly down and across the traverse. It was dark when they found the end of the fixed ropes. Moving across the fixed rope, Pertemba lost a crampon and Pete fell down a rock step to be held on the rope. One of the sections of fixed rope had been swept away. Martin was waiting for them at Camp 6. He had turned back when his oxygen equipment had failed and his crampon had fallen off. Pete and Pertemba arrived back at 7.30 at night and the 3 of them were pinned down at the camp for a whole day and 2 nights whilst the storm continued unabated. Pertemba was snow-blind and Pete could not feel his feet. Martin suffered frost-bite in his fingers whilst clearing the snow that was burying the boxes as avalanches poured past and over the edge of the Rock Band.

When the storm finally cleared on the morning of 28 September there was no chance of Mick having survived. Camp 4 had been evacuated and half the tents at Camp 2 had been destroyed by the blast from an avalanche from Nuptse. Bonington ordered the mountain to be cleared. The climbers remaining on the Face began painfully to descend. Within 2 days the entire expedition was back at Base Camp.

What had happened to Mick? Perhaps the cornices on the Tibetan side of the ridge or the fragile one foot windslab on the Nepal side had collapsed, the fixed line over the Hillary Step had failed, or perhaps Mick, wearing glasses, blinded by the spindrift, had lost his way on the summit dome. He had taken a decision which any of the climbers on the expedition would have made, to try for the summit alone. To us, the question was—was the climb worth Mick's death? But back home, in the mountaineering press, other debates continue. Did Everest, its success, adventure and tragedy, transcend the ethical debates? Was a big, costly logistical pyramid of men and supplies justified in 1975 when so much was achieved elsewhere in the Himalaya that year by bold lightweight expeditions on Gasherbrum 1 and Dunagiri? Do the sherpas and their country suffer from the impact of involvement with such an onslaught of capitalist commercial risk-takers? Was it more than a 'vertically integrated crowd control?'

The expedition owed much of its success to good weather high up (that only broke just when the expedition was at its most extended). It owed its success to Chris's leadership, to Bob Stoodley and Ronnie Richards getting the gear out, to Dave Clarke organising the equipment, to Mike Thompson organising the food, to Tut and Nick climbing the Rock Band, to the cool

panache of Doug and Dougal's summit push, to hundreds of helpers and well-wishers in Britain and Nepal, and to Barclays Bank. It owed its success to climbers working together and trusting each other as friends. And it owed its success to the Sherpas whose involvement with the expedition and its success was total and euphoric—no Sherpas had been killed on the mountain, a Sherpa had reached the summit, they had been paid well and given fine equipment, the climb was over early and there was still good money to be made in the trekking season. The effect on us of their inherent happiness and reliability was more powerful than the impact of any of our misguided Western values on them. The Sherpas had been treated as equals and mutual respect and co-operation resulted. Their success was our success and our's was theirs.

And the mountain? The great drifting snows of winter soon erase the marks of man's ant-like scratchings. Everest's beauty leaves a picturehouse of memories that last a lifetime. Yet, Everest is a big mountain and the SW Face in 1975 required heavyweight tactics. Access to its secrets is only achieved after a 600 m ice-fall and a 2-mile walk up the W Cwm at 6400 m. And high on its slopes there is only a narrow boundary between a controlled and an uncontrolled situation that can be crossed irreversibly within minutes. Beyond the fixed ropes there is total Alpine commitment.

And the publicity? No climbing of Everest can ever be a private affair. Everest, the myth, with its magic and history fills the corners of the minds of many people—as the sunset from the summit filled the minds of Doug and Dougal and as at the end of the expedition, the experience of Everest was a mixture of awe, relief, happiness and sadness for the long lines of climbers who toiled back across the freshly fallen snow, back down the W Cwm. Occasionally stopping and glancing back.

Expedition summary

Expedition members

Chris Bonington, Hamish MacInnes, Peter Boardman, Martin Boysen, Paul Braithwaite, Mick Burke, Mike Cheney, Charles Clarke, Dave Clarke, Jim Duff, Nick Estcourt, Allen Fyffe, Adrian Gordon, Dougal Haston, Ronnie Richards, Mike Rhodes, Doug Scott, Mike Thompson.

BBC team

Arthur Chesterman, Ned Kelly, Chris Ralling, Ian Stewart.

Chronology

1975

- | | |
|-----------|---|
| 9 April– | 20 tons equipment and food carried overland in 2 lorries to Kathmandu |
| 3 May | |
| 9 May– | Sherpa Co-operative organise transport of equipment to Lukla by air and |
| 12 June | then up to Kunde for storage during the monsoon |
| 2 Aug | First walk-in party leave Kathmandu |
| 21 Aug | Estcourt and Haston arrive Base Camp (5425 m) |
| 22 Aug | Base Camp reached by first party. Estcourt and Haston reconnoitre Ice-Fall |
| 23–26 Aug | Rest of team arrive at Base Camp. Ice-Fall climbed and site of Camp 1 reached |
| 28 Aug | Camp 1 established (6100 m) |
| 31 Aug | Haston, Scott and 2 Sherpas reach site of Camp 2 (6550 m) |
| 2 Sept | Camp 2 established |
| 6 Sept | Burke, Fyffe, Richards and Scott reach site of Camp 3 (7000 m) |

7 Sept	Braithwaite and Estcourt establish Camp 3 and fix route to above Camp 4 on next days
11 Sept	Boardman, Boysen, Haston and MacInnes establish Camp 4 (7250 m)
16 Sept	Bonington and Richards establish Camp 5 (7825 m)
19 Sept	Ropes fixed to foot of Rock Band (8140 m) by Bonington, Richards and Scott
20 Sept	Braithwaite and Estcourt climb the Rock Band
22 Sept	Camp 6 (8320 m) established by Bonington, Haston, Scott, Thompson, Burke, Ang Phurba and Pertemba
23 Sept	Ropes fixed across 400 m of traverse
24 Sept	Haston and Scott reach summit 6pm and bivouac at 8750 m
26 Sept	Second summit bid by Boardman, Boysen, Burke and Pertemba. Boardman and Pertemba reach summit; Burke lost on the mountain
27 Sept	Bad weather; Camp 4 and Camp 1 evacuated. Camp 2 hit by avalanche blast
28 Sept	Those at Camp 5 and 6 descend to Camp 2
30 Sept	All survivors back at Base Camp

Mountain literature—then and now

Michael Ward

The purpose of mountaineering literature is threefold: first it is simply to report and record; secondly it seeks to describe the motives and emotions of the climber and lastly to distil that element of beauty which we find peculiar to mountain country and which may profoundly affect us.

While no one can argue that techniques have not changed in the last 100 years and radically in the last 20, men, I suspect, have not changed so very much. When it comes to the climber and so to his literature the maxim I would apply is: *Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose*.

In 1971 Gollancz published a posthumous collection of the essays and other writings of Tom Patey. Here is a passage from his description of an attempt on the Eigerwand with Don Whillans:

'Shortly after noon the next day we left Audrey behind at Alpiglen, and the two of us set off up the green meadows which girdle the foot of the Eigerwand. Before leaving Don had disposed of his Last Will and Testament. "You've got the car key, lass, and you know where to find the house key. That's all you need to know. Ta, for now." Audrey smiled wanly. She had my profound sympathy . . . Don's preparations for the Eiger—meticulous in every other respect—had not included unnecessary physical exertion. While I dragged my weary muscles from Breuil to Zermatt via the Matterhorn, he wiled away the days at Chamonix sunbathing at the Plage until opening time. At the Bar Nationale he nightly sank five or six pints of 'heavy', smoked forty cigarettes, persuaded other layabouts to feed the juke box with their last francs and amassed a considerable reputation as an exponent of 'Baby Foot', the table football game which is the national sport of France. One day the heat had been sufficiently intense to cause a rush of blood to the head because he had walked four miles up to the Montenvers following the railway track, and had acquired such enormous blisters that