

MAURICE WILSON AND EVEREST, 1934

BY T. S. BLAKENEY

THE Alpine Club library has recently received, by the generous gift of Mr. L. E. Frank, the manuscript diary of Maurice Wilson, who died on Everest in 1934 and whose body was found by Shipton's 1935 Reconnaissance Expedition. The diary was extensively used by Mr. Dennis Roberts in his book *I'll Climb Mount Everest Alone* (1957); indeed, the last third of the book contains, substantially, a transcript from the diary. The document is, however, such a curious and valued addition to the Club's archives that it calls for notice here, the more so since, for some unexplained reason, Dennis Roberts's book was never reviewed in the *Alpine Journal*.

The diary runs from March 21 to May 31, 1934, from the date of slipping out of Darjeeling to the last entry, 'Off again, gorgeous day'. Wilson travelled in disguise, inquisitive people being told that he was a deaf-and-dumb Tibetan priest in weak health. He had three experienced Sherpas with him, who had been in the 1933 expedition, but he did not intend that they should come beyond his base camp in the Rongbuk valley; the actual climbing of Everest was to be by himself alone. They followed the Lachen valley route into Tibet, and then took the usual line of earlier expeditions, *via* Kampa and Shekar Dzong, but not camping in the actual villages so as to avoid detection. They reached the Rongbuk valley on April 14. Wilson made two attempts to reach Camp III at the foot of the North Col; the first, from April 16 to 24, failed, and he beat a retreat to his base, where his Sherpas looked after him and pulled him round to a tolerably fit condition again. The second attempt was from May 12 to May 26, two Sherpas accompanying him. Camp III was achieved, but Wilson failed to get any appreciable distance further. He set out finally on May 31, and appears to have died of exhaustion not far from Camp III (Ruttledge: *Everest: The Unfinished Adventure*, p. 20).

By itself, the story contained in the diary is incomplete; one has to turn to Dennis Roberts's book for the background of the whole business.

Wilson was born in 1898, in Yorkshire; the First World War interrupted his career, and he enlisted in 1916, was commissioned in 1917, won the M.C., and was badly wounded in 1918. Like many men, after both wars, he found it difficult to settle down into civilian life, and he tried a varied succession of jobs in America and New Zealand before returning to England in his early thirties, aimless and unhappy. In

1932 he seems to have been on the verge of a nervous breakdown, but was cured by a treatment consisting of fasting for thirty-five days, followed by prayer. This worked, only in Wilson's case it left him with the determination to prove the efficacy of the method by some striking public demonstration. Chance led him to read a newspaper cutting about the 1924 Everest expedition, and he decided that the climbing of Everest *alone* would be the proof that his theories—pre-eminently his belief that if one has faith enough one can do *anything*—were correct.

To get to Everest, Wilson elected to go by air. He discarded a fanciful notion of being parachuted on to Everest by one of the Houston Flying expedition in 1933, and decided to fly a plane himself and to crash-land on the lower slopes of the mountain. Finding he could not in fact get permission from either Tibet or Nepal to fly round Everest, he flew instead to Raxaul in India. He sold his plane and went up to Darjeeling to prepare for a march across Tibet to Everest in the following year.

The story of his flying is in some ways the best part of Mr. Roberts's book; it was certainly the most notable accomplishment in Wilson's life. He had to be taught to fly, and eventually got his certificate, though he appears always to have been a bit ham-fisted as a pilot. In the face of considerable official disapproval and opposition he reached India, flying a Gipsy Moth; this, be it remembered, was in the days of Jim Morrison, Jean Batten, Amy Johnson and others who were making flying history. It was a very real achievement and if only Wilson had taken as many pains in preparing for his mountaineering venture as he did for his flying, it would be easier for us to applaud him, even if Everest was to prove too much.

The flying episode shows that Wilson had the drive needed to accomplish big things, and also the good sense needed to fit himself for the technical requirements of a task. But he took no corresponding pains to fit himself out as a mountaineer. And it is here that one's admiration for his courage and tenacity of purpose turns to something like exasperation at his silliness: it is an excellent thing to have original ideas in mountaineering, as in other matters, and to have firm faith in those ideas, but it is also excellent to be practical, to be rational, to recognise that the children of this world are sometimes wiser than the children of light. Wilson, in so far as he was an opponent of 'mammoth' expeditions, in so far as he was a believer in simple food and simple methods for climbing mountains, had a perfectly arguable case; but to ignore all common sense in his approach to Everest was surely not admirable, but plainly stupid. He had done no serious mountaineering hitherto, and he could not use an ice-axe. He had read a certain amount about mountaineering expeditions, and could, for example, recognise a pair of crampons when he saw them. Yet he took none himself and when he found a pair in a dump left by the 1933 party, he cast them aside,

only to regret having done so later on. His peculiar notions of feeding found him under-nourished by the time he reached the Rongbuk monastery, so he pillaged the reserve stores kept there since the 1933 expedition, just as, later on, he was to throw his feeding principles to the winds and to glut himself on the stores found in a dump at Camp III.

Earl Denman, whose journey (*Alone to Everest; A. J.* 59. 480) with two Sherpas to Everest in 1947 compares with Wilson's, also had his own ideas on how to climb the mountain, but he was rational in comparison with Wilson, for he meant to take his Sherpas (one of them Tenzing) with him to the summit, and he had the good sense to abandon the effort when it was clearly doomed to failure. Wilson's courage is undoubted, but once he had found that he could not manage alone, once his ideas on food had failed him, would it not have been an act of moral courage to admit that he was wrong; that he had something yet to learn; that climbing Everest involved more than merely walking up a slope of varying inclination? He seems to have visualised the ascent as a straightforward progress, one day to Camp III, another to Camp V, another to the summit—something of that sort! Mr. Roberts suggests a comparison between Wilson dying on Everest and Scott's party dying on their return from the South Pole; this really seems fantastic. Scott, like Shackleton before him, had accepted risks on his polar journey, but he had done his best to provide against all risks, whereas Maurice Wilson made no adequate provision. Mr. Roberts suggests that to have taken greater precautions would have been the mark of a man of less faith, but we may surely ask whether a sounder faith would not have produced better results? It is all very well to praise Wilson's sincerity, which, like his fortitude, is not in question; it is his motives and methods that invite criticism. Sincere wrongheadedness is doubtfully admirable; one can hardly doubt that Hitler was sincere in his dislike of Jews, but does this justify the measures he took to eradicate them?

Wilson's mountaineering achievement amounted to showing that a very light party could traverse a harsh stretch of country (Tibet) without coming to grief, but there was nothing in his story to bracket him with such endurance tests as Wilfrid Noyce chronicled in *They Survived (A. J.* 68. 143). He made very heavy weather of the Rongbuk glacier and was so much less fit by the end of May that he had to sacrifice his basic principle, of going on alone, by asking the Sherpas to come with him to Camp V. Like sensible men, they refused; Mr. Roberts admits that Wilson must have known he was done, and his Sherpas obviously recognised it still more clearly.

It seems a sad waste of a life; Wilson had proved in the war, and he had proved as a pilot, that, like Todgers, he could do it if he chose—chose, that is, to take pains, even if he did not enjoy a task, and we are assured that he disliked his military service. Like Denman, he got an

obsession about Everest, but Denman, though he wrote, after failing to climb the mountain, as though the bottom had fallen out of his world, did not commit suicide. Wilson virtually did. He seems to have had no real interest in mountains or mountaineering; climbing Everest was just a job to be done, to establish to the world an article of his faith. There is no apparent reason why he should not have selected any other hard physical test, such as swimming the Channel. A stunt is only justified by success, and Wilson's attempt on Everest remains a stunt, for all Mr. Roberts's urging to the contrary. In Peter Fleming's book, *Bayonets to Lhasa*, there is a vivid passage describing how shocked the Tibetan soldiers were to find that the charms provided by the Lamas, to make men invulnerable to bullets, were worthless. They were down-cast at their faith being misplaced, but at least they had the sense not to continue a suicidal attack.

Wilson failed at such a test; that he achieved a certain degree of fame is beside the point. One could attain some measure of fame by throwing oneself out of the Whispering Gallery of St. Paul's: certainly, the Press would head-line the event. But, as the Mock Turtle observed to Alice, when someone embarks upon a course of action, it is well to ask, 'With what porpoise?'. Maurice Wilson had a purpose in view; he expresses the hope (April 13) that soon the world would be on fire with the news of his success. But an end cannot be divorced from the means used to attain it, and the means adopted by Wilson were so defective that the end he achieved was rather less than that of Policie, the Tibetan dog that disappeared in 1933 on Everest somewhere between Camp III and the North Col.