Everest—A Reporter's view

Murray Sayle[1]

Being so famous, the only fact of geography that every school child in the world can be guaranteed to know, inevitably gives Mount Everest a feeling of *déja vu*, a story we can recite by heart. Certainly people who attended the Coronation in 1953 will always have their memories of the Queen's procession in the Mall intertwined with the Western Cwm and the South Col, Thyangboche and Khumbu, Hunt, Hillary and Tenzing. Everest, because we know it so well, hardly seems real.

Certainly my own introduction to Everest (and mountaineering) could hardly have been along more traditional lines. One grey January day, the telephone rang in my London flat and a voice (Chris Brasher's, from the B.B.C.) asked me without preamble whether I would like to go as reporter with an international expedition to Mount Everest. Instantly, I felt that I was participating in something as familiar as the plot of *Hamlet*; this sort of telephone call figures in at least half a dozen accounts of Himalayan adventure. 'How high do I have to climb myself?' I asked. 'The action starts at Camp 2, about 21,000 ft' said Brasher laconically. 'You have to get up the Khumbu Ice-fall to get there.' He added that I had to decide, in principle, that afternoon, as time was running short.

In those days I had no idea how high 21,000 ft might be, much less of my own chances of getting there. I recalled dimly that I had once felt breathless while walking uphill to the post office in La Paz, Bolivia, which is about 13,000 ft. No doubt someone has, somewhere, replied to an invitation like Brasher's with a self-effacing 'I would like to try Snowdon first to see if I like mountaineering', but there are no mentions of such polite refusals in Himalayan literature. With the inevitability of Everest, I accepted.

Next day I was being hastily fitted out in climbing and extreme-cold gear by the very helpful staff of Pindisports in Holborn, who did not seem nearly as surprised as I thought they would be at the discovery that I had no idea of how to tie on a crampon. Their choice of equipment, mostly British, was excellent. It may, in fact, have even been too good. Quite early in the climb Dougal Haston discovered that my Darbellay Face Nord boots were better for climbing than those supplied by the expedition, and I could hardly refuse an exchange. Soon after Dr David Peterson of the United States made a similar discovery about my Point Five Duvet jacket, and I found myself wearing his American-made one. After that, I stopped telling people I found my equipment very comfortable.

[1] Of the *Sunday Times*.

The heart of my job with the expedition was, of course, communications, and about this I could find no information more up-to-date than James Morris's *Coronation Everest*. Things change slowly in Nepal, if at all, and communications now are very much as Morris described them. Indeed, in a significant detail they are worse; the radio link installed between Namche Bazar and Kathmandu by the Indian Army broke down shortly after the Indians left in 1956 and has not been repaired. From the moment I made this disquieting discovery in the Telecommunications Department in Kathmandu, I realised that the inevitability of Everest had triumphed again, and that my despatches, modern technology notwithstanding, were going to carry the time-honoured dateline 'By Runner from Base Camp, Mount Everest.'

Another disturbing discovery followed when Dr Peterson, with whom I shared a room, showed me the 14-lb flexible weights which he was wearing round his ankles 'to get my legs in condition without too much effort'. I surreptitiously tried them on and discovered that I could barely mount the main staircase of the Shanker Palace Hotel. How much this was a serious form of muscle-building and how much climber's masochism I never discovered, although I must say Dr Peterson later moved his 15 st with commendable agility.

I cannot say the same about my own first days on the Everest walk-in, in which I seem to have made the classic set of mistakes which have afflicted every other beginner at this exhilarating and exhausting experience. We left Kathmandu in something of a quandary about what was happening in the outside world, as the Post Office strike in London had cut off telegrams both ways; I was filing reports of our last-minute preparations, my office was sending frantic pleas for news, and both sets of messages were winding up on unattended telex machines in London. One morning in Kathmandu telegraph office I found that Ned Kelly, the B.B.C. associate producer, and I were both trying to send messages to London beginning identically 'Situation now getting desperate . . .' But, desperate or not, the mountain would not wait and we had to set off.

At the time, I described my first days on the trail in a despatch sent back to Kathmandu by runner, and re-reading it now brings back every twinge and groan:

'For our first day ("only ten miles" promised our joint leaders, Norman Dyhrenfurth and Colonel Jimmy Roberts) I packed a thoughtful knapsack: umbrella, waterproof cape, mosquito repellent, binoculars, bush hat, warm sweater, a copy of Vol. 1 of the *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (for wayside halts) cameras, film, exposure meters, sunburn cream, spare socks, spare boots (to avoid wet feet) flashlight, a knife for self-defence (in case of yetis) and so on.

I was rather ashamed to find my knapsack weighed only fifty pounds, when our porters, many of them fourteen-year-old boys and girls, carry seventy pounds each. Still, I thought, no one would know just how light my knapsack really was. The track out of Lam Sangu is a straight ascent of 5100 ft. It is not a road, or even a trail; it is a staircase, step after step climbing up into the clouds. I made 2000 ft with my knapsack before I reached the end of my resources. I know now how

Norton and Mallory felt passing 27,000 ft on Everest without oxygen; splitting headache, breath sawing through a parched throat, knees trembling, and something about the weight of a grand piano on your back.

A lad of about fourteen watched me with amused concern as I staggered upwards through the village of Thulo Paran (which means Big Slope—occasionally even the Nepalese are impressed by their own hills). "Porter, Sahib?", he asked. I nodded. He eased my knapsack off my trembling shoulders and bounded up the Big Slope like a goat. I followed, and was rapidly left behind. Some self-respect came back only when I found my young porter sitting down and panting about 1500 ft further up. At 7000 ft, after climbing 4700 ft with one break for tea, we were in the clouds, and soon after rain and a hailstorm. That night I attacked my knapsack shamelessly. Out went the spare boots, the rainwear, the wayside reading. Then, next morning, we climbed a few more hundred feet to a summit with a superb view of green terraced hills, and beyond the enormous bulk of Gauri Sankar. We were at a respectable 8300 ft—and then the trail dipped down sharply, and we were down to 4500 ft before lunch.

Climbing, to a complete beginner like myself, was agony enough. Going down, I have discovered, is worse, at least in the early stages of getting used to it. Knees creak, ankles ache as the weight of the climber crashes alternately on each quivering foot. After three hours of this, I engaged another porter to carry my knapsack *downhill*, for a very reasonable five rupees. The porter, a man built like a barrel with knotted muscles in his legs, felt the weight of my burden and subcontracted the job out on the spot to a small boy of about ten for three rupees. That night I crashed into my tent, whimpering when I tried to bend my knees. But the next day was better . . .'

Re-reading, I see that this despatch gives an indication, not only of the physical hardships which await a forty-five-year-old reporter atoning for years spent in the line of duty in the bars of Fleet Street, and many other parts of the world, but also some of the cheerful atmosphere of our walk-in. Night after night I would limp in last, or nearly last, of all our long cavalcade, and always there was tea waiting, friendly greetings from Sherpas and Sahibs, and optimistic forecasts that I would still be there at the end, somehow.

It was during the walk-in that I made many good friends, whom I shall, I am sure, keep a long time, and some of the attraction of the mountains was beginning to come clear to me. One climber I felt particularly close to was the Indian, Major Harsh Bahuguna, subsequently killed on the mountain. Only after his death did I discover that a good three-quarters of the expedition considered that they, too, were particularly close to Harsh, an index of the sad loss we all felt at his death.

Now I had a difficult decision to make, which was to recur. It was made clear from the beginning that I was a member of the expedition on the same footing as the others, rather than simply an observer travelling in company, as is for example a war correspondent attached to a foreign army. I therefore participated in all conferences and was told about all decisions. In some sense, I was therefore under the authority of the two leaders, and I early established with them that there was to be no question of censorship or prior approval of des-

patches. If I made mistakes as a result of my total ignorance of mountaineering, it was I, and not my informants or the leaders, who would look foolish. I thoroughly recommend this arrangement to my successors.

In the beginning I had rather grand ideas about the sort of office equipment a reporter ought to take to Everest, progressively corrected by experience as we approached Base Camp on the Khumbu glacier. A portable typewriter has become so much a part of my stock-in-trade that I type notes to my milkman in London. So I brought with me two typewriters, a Baby Hermes and an Olympia, supplies of paper, carbons, envelopes, clipboard, paper-clips and a modest library of classics on Everest for reference purposes, as well as film, odds and ends of photographic gear and a portable radio, all packed in a black box, marked SUNDAY TIMES OFFICE.

I saw my portable office frequently on the march-in, but seldom when I wanted to use it. Sometimes it would leave camp with some of the early porters, and that would be the last I would see of it for the day. Often it would pass me on the trail, bobbing along on the sturdy back of a barefoot Nepalese farmer, while I did my best to keep up, only to see it turn a corner in the trail and disappear.

Sometimes, but more rarely, I would pass *it*; leaning, sunning itself, against the wall of some wayside *chang* house. At such times I could help myself to needed items of stationery, paper clips or carbon paper, or a pot of glue for a trailside editing job. These stolen moments never lasted long. After a few minutes the porter would come out, wiping a straggly Nepalese moustache with the back of his hand, shoulder my office and be off down the endless trail. On days like these, with many villages and many *chang* houses, *Sunday Times Office* would sometimes not come in until near midnight, long after I was curled up in my sleeping-bag.

But an office soon turned out to be a superfluous luxury. One night at Base Camp, I was busy working on a portrait of Yvette Vaucher, our Swiss lady climber, after dinner in our big mess tent when my Baby Hermes froze up solid in the middle of a line. My other typewriter did the same when I tried it in turn. Winterising typewriters was something that I had simply not thought of. I never really found an answer to this aggravating form of writer's block in my time on Everest. It is not at all practicable to try to operate a typewriter while lying in a sleeping bag in a high-altitude tent, and ball-point pens, felt-tipped pens and the ordinary old-fashioned kind of fountain pen all freeze up in sub-zero conditions, as does the hand that tries to push them for very long over the page. The best solution is probably a pencil, but I did not, in my ignorance, think to bring any.

I set off up the ice-fall on 8 April with two tolerant Nepalese, Dr Harka Gurung, the eminent geographer and our Sirdar, Sona Girme. We were some seven hours going up, largely because of my clumsiness (I was wearing crampons for the second time in my life, the first having been the day before, when Dougal Haston gave me a twenty-minute crash course in mountaineering on an ice

47 *In the Western Cwm.* This and the next two photos: John Cleare

hummock near Base Camp). We were also delayed a good deal by the onset of the great storm which did so much to wreck all our hopes on this expedition, the same storm in which Harsh Bahuguna died so tragically. Visibility was a few feet when the three of us got to Camp 1, and I, for one, was all in.

I spent the next eight days in a tent at Camp 1 (about 6250 m) with Dr Gurung, not leaving the tent at all for the first four days the storm raged, and only occasionally until it subsided. I could, however, hear everything that was going on through our Pye Bantam walkie-talkies, and talk to people as they eventually began to come down from Camp 2, for the most part tired, sick and demoralised. I wrote my first despatch from the Western Cwm in this tent, lying beside Dr Gurung in a sort of trough we had melted by the warmth of our

bodies in the ice underneath, warming my ball-point pen and hand every few lines over a single candle we managed to find among the snow-covered piles of equipment lying about. The despatch was an account of the death of Major Bahuguna, as well as I could piece it together, a grim introduction to the rigours of reporting from the Western Cwm and made all the more poignant by the pathos of the story I had to tell and the knowledge that my despatch was going to be carried down by the party of Sherpas taking poor Bahuguna's body down for cremation.

As soon as I could, I made my way up to Camp 2, our Advanced Base Camp at 6614 m, and here I stayed for the better part of the next month. The Cwm has been many times described and I will not try again. It is not a healthy spot, although I was amazed to find that the head cold I arrived with cleared up in a week, and I suffered nothing more than the inevitable cracked lips and raw, bleeding high altitude throat. I slept well enough (I did not take a sleeping tablet on the expedition) and although I seldom felt hungry, I was not conscious of losing weight. In fact I went down from my Fleet Street 14 st 7 lb to 11 st 10 lb, and six months later am still only back to 12 st 7 lb. There may be an idea here for really determined slimmers.

More interesting, perhaps was the system of communications which we finally evolved. Because of the difficult geographic position of Nepal, wedged between two large powers who are not on the best of terms, the Nepalese authorities are understandably cautious about foreigners using radios in their country, especially near the borders and Everest is, of course, part of the border between Nepal and the Tibetan region of the People's Republic of China. From time to time, we heard on our own walkie-talkies what was either unusually musical static or Chinese, presumably being broadcast by border patrols operating in the Rongbuk area on the northern side of the mountain. The Nepalese, however, recognise that radio communication is a valuable safety factor, so we were allowed to use a Racall Squadcall, the standard company radio in service with the British Army, and along with the radio came an operator, Lance-Corporal Lal Bahadur Gurung of the Brigade of Gurkhas, on the purposeful leave from his posting in Hong Kong which the Army calls 'Adventure Training'; he was an intelligent and efficient young man.

After Major Bahuguna's death the Nepalese authorities gave special permission for us to take a spare Squadcall up to Camp 2, and this was one end of my system of rapid communication with London, with L/Cpl Gurung the essential link. I would call him from the cwm at set times, twice a day, and he would copy the message on a standard Army message form and, in his turn, transmit it on the next of his two daily calls to Kathmandu, where another Gurkha signaller was operating an identical set in the main police station. Here Miss Elizabeth Hawley, the *Sunday Times* and Reuter correspondent in Kathmandu (and probably the best-known and certainly the most charming journalist in Nepal) would take down the message and, after informing the Nepalese Government of basic details like accidents, success or failure and the establishment of new camps, file the report by normal press telegram at the Kathmandu telegraph office.

This system worked well enough for short messages, but had many drawbacks. The reception was often poor and messages had to be spelt out letter by letter with many repetitions, clearly impossible with a report half as long as this article. L/Cpl Gurung and his colleague in Kathmandu were well accustomed to basic military English, but more flowery flights of prose sometimes emerged unintelligible at the other end of the system. And security was, to say the least, somewhat leaky.

A newspaper or broadcasting service which has contributed, even modestly, to an expedition naturally likes to think it is getting a measure of exclusiveness in its reports. The police station in Kathmandu became, during the course of our expedition, a favourite rendezvous of rival journalists, and, of course, they had a perfect right to be there and see how Miss Hawley was getting along with her job.

Whether because of this, or because of the free and easy atmosphere at the Kathmandu telegraph office, where outgoing and incoming telegrams seem to find a wide and appreciative circle of readers—or even possibly through coincidence—there seemed to be a close similarity in the choice of words used in despatches to the *Sunday Times* and those being sent from Kathmandu by news agencies other than Reuter's, and appearing in newspapers around the world. After Miss Hawley took to telephoning these rapid despatches to New Delhi, to be sent from there by press telegram to London, our rivals did not seem to be quite so well informed, but the system seemed to break down if messages were longer than a hundred words or so.

We discussed the possibilities of using a code, but they all seemed to be impractical. The Nepalese authorities would simply not tolerate a code which sounded like a code ('the purple mouse has climbed the green tree'), and a code which did not sound like a code ('snow conditions improving' meaning Hillary, and so on, as used for the flash of success in 1953) would need a

48 *Lukla landing strip*

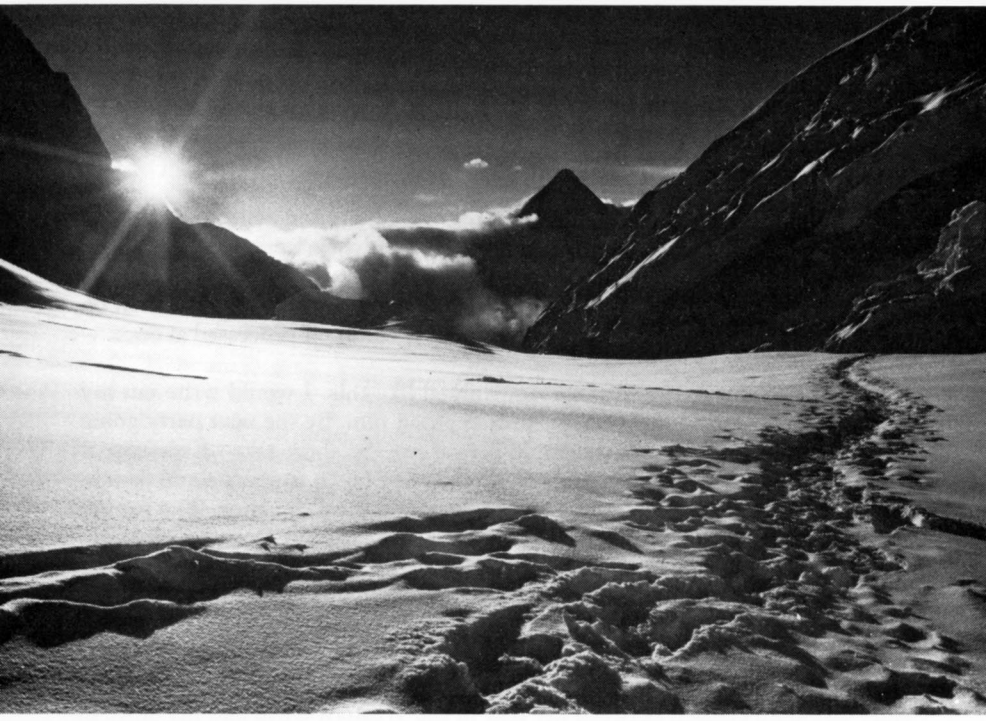
computer to put together if it was used for more than a few sentences. The interest of our expedition lay more in what was going on than the summit or not-summit of 1953, and so we needed a secure way of sending longer messages and, of course, photographs.

I am no more than a rough-and-ready photographer, and other people were taking much better photographs than I was. But they were naturally using colour film in such spectacular surroundings, and we needed some black and white for the paper if, as happened several times, film arrived in London on Saturday morning, just in time to catch the first edition if processed at once.

So, in its final form, the slow system worked like this. I would write out my despatch in longhand and send it, with exposed film, by the next party going to Base Camp. Here a runner would set off for the short take-off airstrip at Lukla, normally a two- or three-day walk but the Sherpa runners could do it in twenty-four hours, and they really had to run to put up this time. The runner would hand the packet to the pilot of the next plane landing from Kathmandu, as often as not Hardi Führer with his Swiss Pilatus Porter. Miss Hawley would be waiting at Kathmandu airport and would clear the parcel through Nepalese Customs and air-freight it by Royal Air Nepal to New Delhi, where the Delhi office of B.O.A.C., whom she had alerted by telephone, was waiting to transfer it to the next B.O.A.C. or Quantas flight to London. All going well—it generally did—five days elapsed between my tent in the Western Cwm and my office in London. If communications were pushing tight against deadlines I offered a bonus of 100 rupees (about £8) to our runners if they caught the plane, which they always did. This was exactly the sum offered by James Morris in 1953, showing that inflation, like so many other disagreeable features of the twentieth century, has yet to arrive in Nepal.

I did, I am afraid, disgracefully little towards helping the expedition in practical terms. A couple of times I belayed Odd Eliassen of Norway while he worked on repairing collapsed sections of the ice-fall route (James Morris did exactly the same for Sir Edmund Hillary in 1953, a humbling thought). Odd did not miss his footing once, so I will never know how effective my belays were. On other occasions I looked after radio communications at camps where I was the only Sahib (Sherpas sometimes get tangled up with 'over and out' and other curious expressions used by Sahibs over the radio).

My contribution, such as it was, amounted simply to staying as cheerful as possible and listening to people's troubles, practically a full-time job on an expedition so plagued with bad luck as ours. I took no part in the dissensions which broke out, beyond talking to everyone concerned and reporting their viewpoints as fairly as I could. Out of respect for my neutrality, or more likely my ignorance, no one asked me to vote in the decisions being argued over which route to take. So that, when Don Whillans and Dougal Haston finally abandoned their attempt at the end of May, I was among the last four to come down off the mountain, after five weeks less a day in the Western Cwm, and still, I felt, on good terms with everyone. Even with Don Whillans, with whom I descended the ice-fall—an experience rather like, I thought at the time, going five rounds



49 *View downhill from Camp 2*

with Muhammad Ali, although Don has often told me since, I do not know how seriously, that our seven hours coming down was one of *his* worst experiences on a mountain. We did not think to bring a rope, and the snow on the trail was in the worst possible condition, sticking to our crampons in big fluffy wads which quickly turned them into something more like skates. There is a technique for clearing crampons in these conditions, by kicking them together, but I don't suppose I shall ever master it. In the meantime, Don had to block my continual slides down the steep places, haul me out of crevasses and wait impatiently as I plodded under overhanging séracs. We made it just before dusk, and the following days of the walk-out—the earth slowly coming back to life, the first grass, the first flower, the first tree, the first night without icy feet—were as joyful an experience as anyone has ever reported.

I have often been asked, since I left Nepal, whether I enjoyed my time on Everest, or indeed whether I am any the wiser about the perennial problem of why men climb mountains. The interest of the Nepalese Government in mountaineering is clear: her mountains are about the only natural resource of this poor and proud country, and no one could grudge them their sliding scale of charges, 800 dollars per expedition for Annapurna, 800 for Cho Oyu and 1000 for Everest. The Sherpas' interest is also clear: courageous and kind as they are, they are professionals, and their five rupees a day is a welcome addition to their modest earnings from yak driving and potato growing. (Dr Gurung, however, has a project for the first all-Nepalese expedition to one of the higher peaks, which would be well worthy of international support.)

But what were we opulent, by Nepalese standards, Sahibs doing disturbing the great mountain, already climbed many times? Reporting such an expedition leaves long periods for meditation when no deadlines have to be met and nothing much is happening, and I spent a lot of sleeping-bag time on this question. Obviously there is an element of back-handed self-indulgence observable in people who voluntarily expose themselves to suffering and perhaps injury and death, when there is so much of this going on in the world already, as the snatches of news from East Bengal reminded us from time to time (and as I was to confirm, going straight there from Kathmandu for a more normal tour of reporting duty). Clearly, climbers ask a great deal of sweethearts, wives and families while they are away on such long and hazardous enterprises, and I am not sure what they can give in return.

For, like the *amour passion* of Stendahl, mountaineering on this scale seemed to me to have very little to do with wives, families or anything going on in the workaday world far below. Rather, it was a kind of spiritual exercise, a retreat into the wilderness, an ultimate coming to grips with oneself and one's limitations in which final success or failure was of little moment. The mountain is still there, unchanged and unchanging. It is the world down here which will never seem quite so important again. I cannot honestly say that I enjoyed myself in the cwm, but, if anyone needs a high-altitude prose man good to 6700 m and, who knows? perhaps higher, I might even go again.