
TONY STREATHER

Valedictory Address

Read before the Alpine Club on 4 December 1992

There have been many changes to the Club during the last few years – the most radical, of course, being our move from South Audley Street. I intend to use this as an excuse to break with tradition and change the format of my talk this evening. I have read through all the Valedictory Addresses of the Presidents since I became a member – all, that is, except that of Eric Shipton who wisely declined to give one and instead spoke of some of his exploratory journeys in the Karakoram and Sinkiang. Many were extremely intellectual, for we have had some very learned Presidents; others were witty and a few were rather pompous and boring. Howard Somervell, in 1965, got it right when he said: ‘Once every three years the members of the Alpine Club are condemned to listen to a lecture without pictures, without adventure, without excitement, the apparent function of which is to enable the Club to feel what an old bore the retiring President is and thereby to welcome all the more warmly his probably more exciting successor.’ At the end of his address, Howard Somervell said: ‘We want more members, especially from the younger generation of mountaineers, the ones who are really doing the stuff that counts.’ Claude Elliott had said virtually the same thing in 1953. He quoted John Farrar, from back in 1919, who said: ‘We have great traditions, a great past – look to it that we also have a great future and that you cannot have if our candidates are already men of mature age.’ Things don’t change all that much, do they? I am certainly not capable of giving an intellectual address, nor do I believe you would welcome one. What I intend to do is reminisce a little, say something of the last three years, and then take cover behind some slides and talk about two particular expeditions.

I well remember the time when I joined the Alpine Club. The circumstances were rather unusual, particularly by today’s climbing standards. I had just returned home after six years in India and Pakistan. This was at the end of 1950. I had gone out there towards the end of the war to join the Indian Army and had stayed on in Pakistan after Partition. During most of the time that I was on the sub-continent I had lived and served among the mountains of the North West Frontier while being seconded from the Army to the Scouts, the Irregular Forces that policed the tribal territories. My daily duties took me walking or riding through the valleys and over the mountain passes along the border with Afghanistan, in some places separated from Russia only by the narrow strip of the Wakhan Corridor. I suppose that it could just be said, with a little stretch of the imagination, that I was one of the last to be playing the Great Game. It was a grand life for a young officer. I was very lucky.

In those days, when we went on leave from the Scouts, we invariably headed for Kashmir. A fellow officer and I went in the summer of 1947. After the first week or so on a houseboat on one of the lakes and generally living it up in Srinagar, we collected together our caravan – a sirdar, pack ponies and a cook – and set off north to see something of the country. A few days' hard walking and we were at the top of the Tragbal Pass just as the sun came up. We were rewarded by the most incredible sight: just in front of us, looking as though we could almost touch it, was the whole of the SE face of Nanga Parbat. This sight made an enormous impact on me and, without my realising it at the time, could well have been the start of my mountaineering career. When, three years later, I was serving in Chitral and a Norwegian party came out to attempt Tirich Mir, I remembered my first sight of that other great mountain and had no hesitation in trying to work my way onto the team in one capacity or another. I could speak the local language and knew the country well, so I offered to be their Transport Officer.

One thing led to another. One of the climbers was taken ill with what was thought at the time to be pneumonia but which today would have been recognised as pulmonary oedema. This bad luck for him was good luck for me and gave me the chance to join the summit team. And so my first peak became 25,264ft Tirich Mir. I had no idea at the time that I had become the first Englishman to reach the summit of a 25,000ft peak since Odell and Tilman were on Nanda Devi in 1936, fourteen years earlier.

I thought no more about this until I got home from Pakistan a few months later and received a letter from a Colonel Tobin inviting me to visit him at the Alpine Club. He thought I might like to become a member. He would be happy to propose me and I would be seconded by a Dr Longstaff. I said all the wrong things and asked all the wrong questions. What social facilities did the Club offer? I had never heard of the Alpine Club and rather assumed it was an ordinary London club of those times where I would be able to stay when I visited London and where I could entertain my friends! This would be most useful for a keen young officer just starting on his career in the British Army! I had no idea of the honour that was being extended to me nor what a privilege it was that Dr Tom Longstaff, who was the retiring President, should himself be interested in me. I learned later of his long connection with the parts of the world where I had been serving and of his distinguished mountaineering career. He was extremely kind to me and advised me on how to complete my application form. One peak was hardly enough, even though it was a pretty high one. What else had I done so that we could make the form look a little better? We settled, in the end, on several years of scrambling in Baluchistan, Waziristan, Gilgit, Chitral and Kashmir, all areas he knew well. That seemed to be enough for the then Committee and I was elected just 42 years ago.

My introductory remarks have dwelt on the past and this is intentional because the theme of my talk this evening is to be the many changes that have taken place in the general field of mountaineering, as well as within our Club, during the period of my membership. At the same time, I have to admit to a weakness for nostalgia; I am afraid there may be more of it to come.

When you did me the honour of inviting me to become your President my immediate reaction was that I was much too old and that we should find someone younger. This feeling was prompted by my clear memory of the time when I was first invited to address the Club. It was after the American K2 expedition of 1953 and I was still young and impressionable. There, sitting on those leather benches down the side of the lecture hall at South Audley Street, were the great, the good and the elderly. There was a certain amount of snoring and every now and again there would be a grunt of approval or disapproval depending on what I was saying! This was enough to make any young chap wonder just what he had let himself in for and perhaps it was the image that this created that made it difficult to attract young members in those days. Anyway, I was determined that those benches should not be taken to Charlotte Road!

Having mentioned K2, perhaps I could indulge in a little more nostalgia about how my own part in that expedition came about. The same Colonel Tobin, who had proposed me for membership of the Alpine Club, now wrote again saying that I should think about applying to join the expedition that was being planned to attempt Everest in 1953. I had, after all, proved that I could go high even if I was not much of a climber. It was arranged that I should meet Eric Shipton, who at that time was going to lead. I had in fact met him briefly before, when he passed through Peshawar on his way home from his appointment as our Consul General in Kashgar. He now kindly invited me to lunch at his home in Sussex. When I arrived he was gardening. He was combining this with training for the mountains. He had a large old rucksack which he filled with earth at the bottom of the garden and then carried up the hill to the top of the garden where he was preparing a new flower bed. It would be like him to scorn the use of a simple wheelbarrow. The upshot of this meeting was that I was asked to join four other potential members of the expedition, all of whom were experienced alpinists, for a trip to the Alps. I had only been once before on a brief skiing holiday. I thoroughly enjoyed myself but clearly did not impress the others. There may have been some slight resentment that the altitude seemed to have no effect on me whatsoever, but what really let me down was my inept fumbling when the time came to put on crampons. I had hardly used the things on Tirich Mir and this now became all too obvious. The other four were all to become members or reserves but clearly my lack of Alpine experience had disqualified me. I received a brief note from the Everest Office telling me so, but there was little time for disappointment. Almost by the same post came a letter from a Dr Houston in America inviting me to join his team to K2 as Transport Officer and then to climb with them as high as I wished or was able. I shall say more about that expedition later.

But first I must return to the more traditional part of this address and say something of the Club's activities during the past three years. The period has of course been dominated by the move to our new home but this does not mean that little else has happened. Members have continued to be as active as ever in both the Alps and the Greater Ranges and we have held successful symposia and meets in this country as well as in the Alps. We have had some

great lectures. I was fortunate in being able to attend the celebrations in Zermatt of the 125th anniversary of the first ascent of the Matterhorn and, in Chamonix, the 40th anniversary celebrations of the first ascent of Annapurna. All these occasions have kept me in touch with the mountains during my time in office, but my first two years were dominated by the move and I had little peace from the problems this created. I lost quite a few nights' sleep pondering over the decisions that had to be taken at that time. I hope that, in the long term, they will turn out to have been the right ones.

The saga of the move has been well recorded by the previous President, George Band, in his article 'Premises! Premises!' in this year's *Alpine Journal*. I do not intend to go through the story again but I do want to emphasise a few points. First, we must all acknowledge what a debt of gratitude we owe to Emlyn Jones for securing our future, back in 1956, by negotiating such a brilliant deal for the extension of the lease at South Audley Street. Nobody then could have appreciated that this would eventually enable us to buy our first freehold property. Both Emlyn Jones and Sir Alan Pullinger did sterling work negotiating and preparing for our possible move to Exhibition Road; but circumstances changed. George Band had hoped to be able to hand over to me having first completed a firm contract for our new premises. When this did not prove possible he generously agreed to head an Alternative Premises Working Party. He and his hard-working colleagues were responsible for finding 55 Charlotte Road and for preparing it for our occupation. Only when all was ready did they hand over to the new House Committee. There is much for which we have to be grateful to George Band.

During this whole period, finance was a major preoccupation and we were fortunate that the Earl of Limerick agreed to chair a newly formed Finance Sub-Committee to co-ordinate and oversee all the various financial matters of the Club. These needed very careful and strict management if we were to have a sound future, and an appeal was launched to raise capital for the Library. Members responded most generously and the Library will now be able to pay a fair rent to the Club for their part of the building.

There was a mass of work to be done in connection with the move and our temporary stay at the Ski Club. The library and our other possessions had to be moved twice, first into store or to the Ski Club and then to our new home. Gangs of willing volunteers, under the able supervision of the indefatigable Bob Lawford, made this possible, while our hard-working Honorary Secretary, Michael Esten, attempted to keep some sort of order in the day-to-day running of the Club. There are too many people to thank them all personally for their help during this turbulent period and, if I tried, I would almost certainly miss some deserving person out; but our thanks go to them all. Here we are well established in our secure new base. We have room to expand and I look forward to the day when we can afford to have a caretaker's flat and some form of bunk accommodation. A comfortable Reading Room on the top floor, where we would also be able to display more of our pictures and other possessions, is perhaps a pipe-dream – but I hope not!

The President now showed slides of two expeditions: the Third American Karakoram expedition (1953) to K2 and the British Kangchenjunga expedition of 1955. The President said that he had always considered himself lucky to have been a member of these. Both were successful classics in their own way and, because of changing times, there could be nothing like them again. While showing the slides, the President made the following comments:

In 1950, when he was on Tirich Mir with the Norwegians, there had been very few other parties in the whole of the Hindu Kush, the Karakoram and the Himalaya except for the French on Annapurna, Houston and Tilman on the south side of Everest and perhaps one or two others. By contrast, the Services expedition to Everest in spring 1992 had found that they were one of 13 parties at Base Camp and that there was a total of 375 people there! This kind of situation must create all sorts of problems and can certainly do no good to the environment.

While talking about K2 the President mentioned that their leader in 1953, Dr Charles Houston, had led the attempt in 1938 when a route on the Abruzzi Ridge had been established. The key to this route was a chimney in a large rock buttress at about 23,000ft. Bill House had led this and it had been known as House's Chimney ever since. The team had not been using oxygen and when the summit had seemed to be within their grasp they had accepted that they were too exhausted to go on and had had the good sense to turn back. There had been criticism at the time that they had not pushed on hard enough, but they had lived to try again. This had not been the case the following year, 1939, when Wiessner, the leader of an American team, had indeed pushed hard for the summit. One of the team and three Sherpas who tried to rescue him had died. Similarly, in 1986, in the final dash for the summit by various groups, though seven had reached it, only two had survived. In 1953 the Houston party, of which the President was a member, had been stuck by storm in their high camp for several days when Art Gilkey had become seriously ill. In an attempt to carry him down, there had been a dramatic fall when five of the party had been held by a brilliant belay by Pete Schoening. Gilkey, who by now was barely conscious, had been swept away in an avalanche but the rest of the team eventually reached Base Camp and were all still alive and active in the mountains. The President had attended a reunion in Colorado only a few weeks previously. He considered that their survival had been largely due to the fact that they were a very close team.

The President went on to talk about the Kangchenjunga expedition and spoke of the unassuming but brilliant leadership of Dr Charles Evans. Charles had remained in support at the high camp, with sirdar Dawa Tenzing, during both summit bids, foregoing the opportunity of being in a summit party himself. He had, of course, also just missed being the first to the summit of Everest with Tom Bourdillon, when they had reached the South Summit, only a few hundred feet from the top, but were brave enough to turn back when they were doubtful that their oxygen would last out and Charles was having trouble with his set. To have gone on could have led to disaster but by turning back they made ultimate success possible for the team as a whole.

The President emphasised that the members of both the K2 and Kangchenjunga expeditions were all still close friends, as indeed were the surviving members of the Everest 1953 expedition, and that these enduring friendships illustrated the primary object of the Club: 'the promotion of good fellowship among mountaineers'.

The President then continued his Address:

I would now like to make just a few final remarks and leave you with some thoughts for the future. When George Band handed over to me, he mentioned Mike Baker's 1989 Report and hoped that due consideration would be given to its recommendations, especially with regard to membership. I am glad to report that, thanks largely to the efforts of our Honorary Membership Secretary Glyn Hughes, there continues to be a very healthy increase in our membership. Many of our new members are, to quote Somervell again, 'from the younger generation of mountaineers, the ones who are really doing the stuff that counts'. Perhaps we have now managed to shed the reputation for being exclusive in a bad sense that tended to stick to us at 74 South Audley Street. I hope that we can claim that our membership does truly represent the best in British mountaineering today, so that we can continue our leading role in exerting an influence for good on the sport of mountaineering.

Two points that particularly concern me about the future arise from remarks that I made when I was talking about my expeditions. Firstly, what can be done to control the ever increasing numbers that are flocking to the mountains – often, sadly, with no regard whatever to their impact on the environment? We have produced a policy statement about this and we must keep it well in mind in the coming years. My second concern is the modern trend, when climbing, to force on to the summit at all costs. The history of K2 over the years is well imprinted on my mind. The Yorkshire Ramblers kindly invited me recently to their Centenary Dinner. In their brochure was a quotation from an address given to them in 1904 by a distinguished past President of theirs and Vice-President of ours, Cecil Slingsby. He said: 'On the mountains, or in the potholes and caves, let prudent thought and remembrance of those left at home govern your daring. It is always hard to turn back, but if ever to go forward is to court an unjustifiable danger, show that moral courage which is greater than physical.' I hope that this advice might be heeded.

Finally I want to thank all those who have helped and supported me during the past three years – sometimes during difficult periods. I am sure you will give my successor, Michael Westmacott, the same support. I wish him the best of luck. I am confident that the Club is in good hands and will continue to flourish. In the years to come, when I retire to the country, I shall look forward to my visits to the Club in London, when I shall hope to be able to stay in the Bunk House and entertain my friends in the Reading Room !