

---

JAN MORRIS

## The Effect of Everest

*Jan Morris, then James Morris, was The Times correspondent with the expedition – the only correspondent permitted, because The Times was a principal financial backer of the enterprise.*

For everyone else the climax of the first successful Everest expedition occurred on May 29, 1953. Not for me. For me it came four days later when, reaching a hand out of my sleeping-bag somewhere west of Namche Bazar, I turned on my radio and learnt that the news of the ascent had reached London, had been published exclusively in *The Times* and had coincided, as it happened, with the coronation of Queen Elizabeth II. As the person responsible for this celebratory conjunction it dawned upon me then, for the first time, that the ascent of Mount Everest might have a lasting effect upon the course of my own life.

In the event it was to influence my affairs, I suspect, more generously than those of most of the climbers. This was very unfair, because until that summer I had been remarkably uninterested in the whole business of Everest expeditions, and I had gone to the mountain more or less as a passenger, courtesy of Hunt and his obliging team. I never got further than the foot of the Lhotse Face, though in anecdote the altitude I reached has grown higher every year. I did nothing whatsoever useful in the way of belaying, step-cutting, putting up tents or contributing to Climbers' Club reminiscence. I ate greedily of the expedition's victuals, presumed shamelessly upon its good nature and secretly sent back to *The Times* obituaries of its members, just in case. In short I was a parasite. Yet nobody was to benefit more from the fame of the Everest achievement, or dine out more often upon the tales of it.

One tale in particular crops up incessantly still, around the world, and I am constantly asked to tell it again. When I first went to America in 1953 I told it in New York, and when I got to San Francisco it was told to me. In Australia earlier this year somebody said: 'Won't you please tell us that Everest story, the one you told at the Foreign Correspondents' Club in Hong Kong in 1974?' Through four decades I have told the story, in after-dinner speech and literary reading, in book and in magazine article.

Unfortunately I am precluded from telling it here, because I recently swore an oath, to somebody absolutely sick to death of the tale, that I would never tell it again as long as I lived. You must simply take my word for it that it was extremely funny. It was also emblematical, as it were, of my connection with the expedition, for it was not a climbing story at all, but concerned the worldly aftermath of the achievement, the gradual metamorphosis of a sporting occasion into a historical footnote.

In those days *The Times*, the pre-eminent newspaper of record, thought of itself as time's own remembrancer, and many of those who worked for it considered themselves more than mere reporters, but instant historians. As a general rule I was of this school myself (though still more I saw myself as a kind of peripatetic *belle-lettrist*), but as it happened on Everest I was excited above all by the technical challenge of getting the news safely back to London out of the Himalaya. We had no radio transmitters, walkie-talkies apart, and it was some 300 miles by difficult wheel-less tracks to the nearest cable office at Kathmandu. Though I was the only correspondent on the mountain, dozens swarmed the foothills or hung about Kathmandu, and the task of defeating the competition, especially with the final news of failure or success, struck me as terrific fun.

I need not bore you with the details of it – the relays of runners I employed, the succession of codes, the hoodwinking of radio operators, the scrambles down the iceflow, the spy-like vigilance of my colleague Arthur Hutchinson in Kathmandu, the skulldug arrangements with Printing House Square. Suffice it to say that when the time came we achieved one of the very last of the old-school scoops – a scoop in the Evelyn Waugh kind, except that the runners carried my dispatches in padlocked bags rather than in forked sticks. In the end *The Times* generously shared the news of the ascent by printing it in its first edition, enabling the rest of Fleet Street to copy it, but still everybody recognised it for what it was, a genuine newspaper coup. *The Times'* own history says that 'seldom had an event brought more credit upon the paper', and it was often coupled, as a dramatic exploit of *Times* newsgathering, with Henri de Blowitz's swashbuckling acquisition of the 1878 Treaty of Berlin, the text of which was published in the paper before Bismarck and Co had even signed it.

The effect upon my ego was disastrous. I was 26, sufficiently pleased with myself already, and the professional kudos that Everest brought me gave me a swollen head which has never quite subsided. I went to Everest an unknown, reported the American magazine *Newsweek*, I came back the trendiest journalist on Fleet Street. Famous hacks breathed alcoholic congratulations at me in El Vino's. I enjoyed my first literary reviews – for had I not, in one of my dispatches, quoted T S Eliot from the Western Cwm? *The Times* gave me a bonus of £200, and when I went with the rest of the team to Buckingham Palace the Queen herself told me how my news had reached her on June 1 (just after dinner, in a red dispatch box). Oh, I was proud as a peacock, that summer of 1953!

But it would have been no more than Andy Warhol's 15 minutes of fame, were it not for the Coronation coincidence. Scoops are not long remembered by the public, and I can see that my association with Everest would not long have affected my life, if it had just been a matter of newspaper hubris. But the fact that the most famous objective of adventure had been reached by a British team at that particular moment, and that my dispatch had been published on the very day of the Coronation – that people did remember, and remember still. At the time it was greeted as an omen of a New Elizabethan Age, to

restore the battered and shabby kingdom to its storied splendours. That never happened, alas, but the romance of the affair, the news of Everest reaching the young Queen on the eve of her dedication to the nation, as it might be dispatches from Drake in the Caribbean, struck a chord in the heart of the world that is faintly sounding to this day.

Earlier this year an eminent American historian, knowing nothing of my Everest connection, told me that he was writing a book about the historical consequence of mountains. Did I know, for instance that the news of the first ascent of Everest was deliberately delayed in order to coincide with the coronation of Elizabeth II? Remembering Michael Westmacott's heroic exertions to speed me down the mountain with the news, contemplating the big toe nail which I still lose, every five years or so, as a consequence of that dash into the darkness, recalling the intricate and shady subterfuges by which alone the story got back to London in time, I soon put him right about *that*. What he said, though, demonstrated how closely the two events are associated, and the link between them is what chiefly benefited me.

You would be astonished how often people still say: 'Aren't you the person who got the news home from Everest on Coronation Day – oh! how clearly I remember the excitement of it!' They have generally forgotten, if they ever knew, that it was a *Times* exclusive: very often indeed they quote the headline the *Daily Express* put over its Coronation coverage – ALL THIS AND EVEREST TOO. People far too young to remember the moment have heard of the conjunction of events, and often ask me to tell them how it happened – sometimes adding a request for that terribly funny Everest story they have heard about from Daddy.

The climbers came to glory honestly, by climbing the mountain. My Everest luck has come chiefly from historical romanticism. Almost at once the magic combination of Himalaya and Westminster opened doors for me. I was given a fellowship in America which I would never have won by my own merits, and which was to alter my life for ever after. I was offered a job at the British Embassy in Washington which would, I have little doubt, have given me the entrée to a diplomatic career. For the rest of my ten years in journalism I occupied a special and totally undeserved status as the Coronation Everest correspondent, and ever since, when I see a special light of recognition dawning on strangers' faces, I know it is because they are remembering that drizzly June morning 40 years ago, when the crowds waited in the streets of London to see their young Queen go by, and like wildfire down the streets ran first the rumour, then the hard news, that Everest had been climbed. 'We shall never forget it,' they say. 'To think it was you who sent it!'

Today I recognise my debt to Everest far more clearly than I did 40 years ago. Professional advantage came from it, but there were profounder blessings that I only realise in grateful hindsight – for it does not happen to everyone to play a part, however peripheral, in one of humanity's supreme adventures.

At one level there was the blessing of success. I was never unsure of my abilities, I have to admit, but to have my confidence confirmed in such a

spectacular way, and in circumstances so happy and glorious, was a most marvellous gift of my youth. The conceited nature of this very essay, four decades on, proves that after Everest I was never to look back, feeling that in professional matters, at least, destiny had granted me the privilege of permanent good fortune. If Everest made me insufferable in some ways, it gave me a lasting serenity in others.

Serenity of another kind, too, came from the mountain itself. It is not, I think, among the most beautiful of mountains, but it has a charisma of its own. This may be partly a subjective kind of magic – the knowledge that this is the highest of them all, the very apex of our planet – but it is partly what the Chinese would call *feng shui*: the particular balanced shape of the mountain, at least on the southern side, the glacier running away down its flank, its graceful buttresses, and the plume of driven snow that flies like a triumph from its summit. Not having to risk my life by trying to get to the top of it, I was greatly soothed by the benign mass of Everest, and have carried the sensation with me ever since.

And finally there was the happy experience of the expedition itself. I don't want to gush, or be sentimental about acquaintanceships long ago, but I have to say that the British Everest Expedition, 1953, seems to me to have been a very nice group of people. It was a gentlemanly group, in the best classless sense. If there were bitter rivalries among the climbers, they spared me the knowledge of them. If they resented my presence there, so utterly alien to the ethos of Alpinism, they never showed it. I had nothing but kindness from them, and have retained friendships among them ever since. So relaxed and kindly did the whole nature of the enterprise seem to me, in my naivety perhaps, that when Hillary and Tenzing reached the top I did not even think of asking who stepped on the summit first, and don't know to this day.

In short, a delightful euphoria overcomes me still, whenever (which isn't very often) I think these days of my Everest adventure. It was a wonderful experience, and it had altogether enjoyable effects. The coded message by which I reported the ascent of the mountain read like this: SNOW CONDITIONS BAD ADVANCED BASE ABANDONED YESTERDAY AWAITING IMPROVEMENT – which meant, when decoded, SUMMIT OF EVEREST REACHED ON MAY 29 BY HILLARY AND TENZING.

Even as I put the despatch in its bag for the runner, though, I had an afterthought, and added two words *en clair*. ALL WELL, I wrote; and how right I was.