

---

DOUG SCOTT

## Valedictory Address

This Annual General Meeting has just voted for a significant change in the rules by highlighting the need for the Club to protect the environment and to conserve the Club's heritage. Obviously, 150 years ago, before the age of mass mountain tourism and before there was any heritage to speak of, such additions were unnecessary.

Concern for the environment should, in the Committee's opinion, be all-embracing. It has been given a wide remit to consider more seriously the problem of litter, including the removal of camps and fixed ropes in the Himalaya, bolting, especially retro-bolting on the classic routes of the Alps, the removal of climbers' bodies in the further ranges and also concern for the local human environment, principally the porters without whom we would not even reach our climbs in the Himalaya.

The Club has, of course, always taken a constructive stance on these issues but now, in these days of mass tourism and with the rapid expansion of interest in mountaineering, it is time to take on a greater responsibility and to be more proactive before such problems escalate into crisis. The Chinese ideogram for crises is two characters, the first for danger, the other for opportunity. We must take the opportunity to re-evaluate what the mountains mean to us and how we can preserve the best of what we have had and go forward to enhance the mountain experience rather than do things that degrade it.

All this did not seem to matter before the explosion of interest in mountaineering and in Nepal before 1986. In that year more or less all restrictions were lifted off access to those mountains on the permitted list. In the autumn of 1998, for example, there were 28 'expeditions' on Ama Dablam alone. Twice a year now hundreds of people will construct a village of tents at Everest Base Camp. I have been guilty in the past of giving hardly a thought to leaving ropes and waste at campsites on the South-west Face of Everest during the 1970s. Now it is imperative that we leave no trace. Education is the preferred way forward and we do have to be educated to see a tin can, a plastic bag, as litter. You give a tin of sardines, a bar of chocolate to a Sherpa for lunch and he would, in the past, leave the tin and the wrapping paper on the trail. To him it's just another object on the ground, along with a boulder, a tuft of grass. It's all the same kind of thing until it's labelled differently. These days, with so much commercial trekking, Sherpas have begun to see the need for change and are in fact themselves actively helping to clean up the more popular trails. Where education fails to get the message across, there is something to be said for naming and shaming,

as Steve Razzetti did at our Nepal Symposium. He was quite blunt about an expedition that left a huge amount of rubbish at Dhaulagiri North Base Camp recently. There have been several clean-up expeditions to the popular mountains right up to the South Col of Everest. The removal of oxygen bottles from Everest is important but it has to be seen in perspective. They are not going to damage the Earth – it is a cosmetic defect that pales into insignificance against deforestation along the tracks leading up to Everest. It is to be hoped that clean-up expeditions make fossil fuel and stoves available to their porters.

There are now some two hundred bodies of climbers buried in the snows of Everest or exposed on rocky ridges. The Club has over the last year issued policy statements to open up the debate on their removal. These guidelines have been well received by other Alpine Clubs and individuals. I see that our member, Norman Croucher, has tackled this problem in his recent autobiography and in typically robust manner. A body from a commercial climbing group was left lying on the East Rongbuk Glacier just below ABC, despite yaks returning empty. Norman was a member of this expedition.

The bolting issue is enormous now that just about every other country where there are rocks and mountains has allowed the use of bolts to proliferate. Only in Britain, in areas of the USA and Scandinavia has there been a healthy debate and a line drawn under their use. Despite this and the compelling writings of Bonatti, Messner and other leading continental climbers, national climbing institutions in Europe have actually encouraged not only the bolting of new routes but also the retro-bolting of classic climbs. They have in some cases actually provided and paid for the placement of bolts. No country has been more environmentally aware than the Swiss and yet under pressure from their guides and hut wardens – ultimately for commercial reasons or spurious concepts of *égalité* – the Swiss Alpine Club actively promoted the use of the bolt, considering the debate to be over. The consequence is the dumbing-down of a once profound sport. The Alpine Club needs to reopen the debate because now Continental climbers are drilling their way up all the great faces of the Alps and in remote areas of Baffin Island, Greenland, Africa, in fact everywhere, without much thought as to how the commitment to the climb is reduced for them and subsequent climbers and with no thought for the mountain environment.

In the latest edition of the *American Alpine Journal* there is a report by the German climber Kurt Albert, on his ascent of Polar Bear Spire in East Baffin:

Although we didn't think our route would enjoy much tourism, we made it "repeater friendly". All belay anchors and climbing cruxes have solid Petzl Long-Life bolts, and even normal pounded-in pitons and dubious protection were replaced by "unnecessary" drilled pitons

— so that the eternal complainers will have something to talk about! That is just our climbing style, and it's incomprehensible to me that again and again one meets people who get excited about these drilled pitons, usually either without ever having climbed the route or having technically "muddled their way up".

He is, at least, aware of the opposition to drilling. No man is an island in these days of rapid dissemination of opinion. It is from these islands that we should 'eternally complain' as we have done in all our magazines, our own Journal and in foreign publications. Read Mick Fowler's excellent contribution to *Voices from the Summit* in which he writes of the further ranges: 'The obvious way forward would seem to be to shun the bolt completely and restore the great sense of adventure and uncertainty that is so essential to any healthy climbing scene.'

If I look back over my life and hard times in the mountains those routes that stand out above the rest are where there was total commitment, where a point was reached on the climb when retreat would have been impossible and the only way off was up and down an easier route. That is why for me, and my partner, Ray Gillies, our 1967 ascent of the South Face of Bandaka in the Hindu Kush remains a good memory. With only 120 feet of stiff Edelweiss rope and five or six ice screws and pegs after climbing a second rock step, we had to go for the top even though we were totally exhausted at 22,000 feet. But once the decision was made, or made for us, we got our second wind, channelled all our energies in an upward direction and went for it over the top and down the West Ridge to our eternal satisfaction. In all fields of activity, only when we fully commit do we realise our full potential. Only by taking risks can we give ourselves extra possibilities in life.

It was the same on our traverse of Shivering, on Shishapangma and on big-wall routes around the world such as on Baffin Island. We all know that climbing is partly about keeping the margin of safety satisfyingly narrow without closing the gap and getting ourselves killed. Clearly, to drag up and fix a line of rope as we climb leaves this margin of safety so wide that we feel dissatisfied with the route. We never really leave the ground if we know that when bad weather comes in or we suffer an accident or exhaustion we only have to fix our friction devices from our harness to the rope and can scuttle off down in a few hours in complete safety. Where is the commitment in that? And where is the exhilaration of being out on a limb, a million miles from home, going for it?

The same question should be posed and understood in relation to the equally dubious practice of putting in bolts on belays as is the custom amongst many Continental climbers putting up custom-made routes in Greenland, Baffin and elsewhere. It is only one step removed from fixing rope, for they know that there is always an easy way off at any time by easily fixed abseils, from one abseil station to the next. There is then no edge to the climb, no worries at the back of the climber's mind of changing

weather conditions, terrain or team frailties – no commitment. It is all so predictable.

I had a very pleasant visit with our member Oswald Ölz to the Grauwand in Switzerland a few years ago. We skied in one May morning, climbed the face with the odd bolt in between bolted belay stations, reached the top then moved a few feet to the right and abseiled down a line of chains back to our gear and skied out, all in a few hours. It was good exercise in good company and in wonderful country, but otherwise there was nothing that stands out about the climb. I have been burning with curiosity ever since to know about the other side of the mountain and how I might have managed the complete climb up and down by my own experience and imagination. As it was I had given up that possibility to the guides who fixed the bolts and chain abseil stations.

I have to recognise the fact that none of my, or anyone else's Himalayan climbing would have been possible without the physical help of the local hill people. I have gained so much from their company in other ways. I was reminded of this once again last spring, walking through the villages and along the ridges of Nepal for seven weeks checking out Community Action Nepal projects. It is a salutary experience to spend time in the homes of the Sherpas, Tamangs, Gurungs and other groups, just to be with people who have space and time to reflect, and who seem to be at peace with themselves and with each other. The most important observation I made in watching them was to see how they brought up their children in total security, never more than an arm's length from a parent at night and in the arms of an older sibling or relative during the day. Getting total attention when young means they are not screaming for attention during the rest of their lives as so often happens amongst people in 'developed' nations.

The Committee has had brief discussions on the treatment of porters in the greater ranges with a view to supporting the various mountain tourism codes of conduct drawn up by other organisations. Our members have individually over the last fifty years played an active part in improving the life of the local hillmen who have allowed us to climb their mountains. Ed Hillary, with help from George Lowe and now George Band and Rebecca Stephens, has done a fantastic amount of work building hospitals, health posts and schools in the Sherpa areas of Nepal through the Himalayan Trust. On a smaller scale our Community Action Nepal, with Chris Bonington as a very active patron, is tackling poverty in the middle hills right across Nepal. Many other countries have established NGOs to help, particularly the Americans in Baltistan with over forty projects in health and education under way. The American Alpine Club is supporting some of them financially. More directly concerned with porters is the International Porter Protection Group (IPPG) which was started by Dr Jim Duff. It tackles the urgent problem of ensuring porters are properly equipped to carry over high passes and that if they succumb to mountain sickness

they are properly evacuated, and treated with the same care and respect as any expedition member.

Recently I discussed these issues with the steering committee of Tourism Concern who were about to send out questionnaires to all the commercial trekking and climbing organisations in the UK to raise our awareness of and responsibility to the porters of developing-world mountain areas. In most of these mountains there are no rules and regulations protecting the working man. Everything is left to market forces, sometimes with disastrous results. Fortunately, these catastrophes are now highlighted by the media, and as a consequence the views of the Alpine Club are often sought. The Committee intends to produce a policy statement in the future.

On all these environmental issues, especially those connected with actual climbs, the rest of the climbing world looks to the Club for comment. This may surprise our members, as it does me sometimes, but then on reflection we are the senior Club and our members have been at the forefront of climbing since 1857, and still are. We are also one of the few alpine clubs to require qualification. Whilst that keeps our numbers comparatively small, what we lack in quantity we gain in influence, out of all proportion to our numbers. Being a small, elitist club, and owing to time constraints, we have to be selective in the policy statements that we issue. The Committee has to allocate its time wisely in order to be most effective at preserving the great tradition of climbing and to continue to care for the mountains and mountain people.

Whether by luck or good judgement, the Club has accumulated the largest mountain library in the world and a unique collection of artefacts, photos and mountain paintings. We obviously have a duty to conserve this mountain heritage for Club members and for climbers everywhere. We also have to make these objects available to others for their use and research, otherwise these things would be worse than useless, filling up space and gathering dust. To this end the Committee and the relevant sub-committees have been very active.

George Band has been the driving force as Chairman of the Library Council, with the help of his Committee, particularly Peter Ledeboer who was Secretary right up until his death this year. A professional archivist, Susan Scott, has been employed to catalogue on computer the archives, diaries and other paper records. Our librarian, Margaret Ecclestone, has nearly completed the cataloguing of all the books, helped by her fact-finding tour of mountain libraries around the world. Sue Lawford is making a start on cataloguing the photos, after which she will arrange for all the artefacts to be photographed.

Over many years Bob Lawford has preserved the Club heritage collection, without the help of computers. But even Bob cannot go on for ever, so there is a move afoot to download his precious knowledge to be preserved on disk or tape for future generations. His contribution has been fantastic.

Earlier this year the Committee set up a Marketing Group to enhance the impact of the Club's initiatives, both to increase awareness among existing members and to attract new members. Bill O'Connor has put a lot of work into revamping the Club website and he has also arranged the advertising of our lectures and symposia.

Dick Turnbull has redesigned the Newsletter in a more modern format, and this has been well received despite some teething troubles. It contains photographs, notes of members' activities and climbs, as well as details of Committee proceedings. It is not only a great shop window to attract more members but also a source of information about what the Club is doing. Now that the whole membership is kept informed of the Committee's decisions and proposals, they should be inspired to take a greater interest in events and to encourage other climbers to join the Club.

Our new Membership Secretary Martin Scott and his sub-committee are pleased to report that the Club is continuing to attract an excellent quality of new members. Some of these are top mountaineers doing hard new routes; others are experienced mountaineers doing routes in all parts of the world and we also have students coming in as aspirants, some of whom will be the 'hot-shots' of tomorrow.

Bill Norton's much-needed management handbook, which contains detailed job descriptions for all the Officers of the Club, should help the Club to run more smoothly and efficiently. I only wish that this handbook had been available at the start of my presidency. Alan will now be able to swing straight into action.

I am glad to report that, as a result of the general and rental improvements in the Charlotte Road area, the Committee has decided that the Club can afford to use more space in the building for its own purposes. Accordingly, from April 2002 it will take back, from tenanted occupation on an upper floor, space equivalent to the Club office on the first floor. Plans for the exact use of this space are currently being studied by a working party headed by Richard Morgan. High among the envisaged purposes is additional reading and working space for the library, but there are many other bidders. At present many of the Club's activities are conducted in cramped conditions in an airless basement, where its valuable objects, such as its pictures, are prone to damage and are largely unseen. We also need space to exploit our photographic collection. Upstairs, many activities are conducted, often simultaneously, in the Club office, to the detriment of effective business. But it will be difficult to reconcile all these priorities.

Two thousand years ago Cicero made this perceptive observation: 'What has fascinated man most is the unknown.' I know this to be true for me and for friends of mine. It is as true now as it was in Cicero's day and presumably long before that, from when man had of necessity a basic urge to roam in search of food and security. Or was it just to go off with the boys again, out of curiosity or 'for the crack', to push the limits of endurance, to

face uncertainty and take risks in good and supportive company and to come back more alive than ever before, more aware, to do what has to be done with more certainty. There is more chance of this happening on a small expedition with kindred spirits and without the distraction of media involvement.

The only problem is that this heightened state of being does not last. So there is a need to go again, stepping out into the unknown, following our primitive tribal hunting programming, to be creative, exploratory and resourceful. The best way I can illustrate these grand Olympian views is by describing two climbs, both in the north-east corner of Nepal, one on Kangchenjunga from 1979 and the other on nearby Drophmo climbed in 1998.

As late as 1979 Kangchenjunga had only been climbed twice before, once by Charles Evans' magnificent British Expedition of 1955 from the south and in 1977 by a large number of Indians up the more difficult East Ridge. After four years of diplomatic effort I was given the first permission for the spring of 1979 by the Nepali Government to climb Kangchenjunga from the north-west with Joe Tasker, Peter Boardman and Georges Bettembourg.

We decided not to climb with oxygen equipment, but took one bottle of oxygen, mask and regulator for use in a medical emergency – happily this was not used. We also decided not to use radios, winches and other encumbrances and to limit Sherpa support to two Sherpas as far as the North Col only. From the start it was decided to limit the team to four members and to finance the project from our own resources as far as possible. It was decided not to seek the support of a single main sponsor and to avoid commitments to the media and film-making. Our only commitments, therefore, were to ourselves and the mountain.

For us this would be a big step into the unknown as there was no precedent for climbing any of the big three mountains lightweight and without bottled oxygen. What would happen if we took a step too far, too lightweight without sufficient gear and food to survive a protracted storm? What if one of us got oedema – how would we get him down? 'It might be me,' we were all thinking.

We were two and a half months away from home and six long gruelling weeks on the mountain with the outcome remaining uncertain until the end, breaking new ground all the way from the roadhead for eighteen days to Base Camp and then up the West Face to the North Col and up the North Ridge. Above the North Col we were periodically hit by hurricane-force winds and frequent storms. On our first attempt at the summit the tent disintegrated at 8000m at 4.30am. Georges' sac blew down to the Zemu Glacier, he became snow blind, whilst Peter was frostbitten in the toes and me on my finger ends. Joe suffered from altitude sickness and one of our Sherpas was hit in the chest from falling rocks down the West Face.

So what kept me motivated through wind and cold, avalanches and rock fall, not to mention the lure of home comforts? For sure, I needed to go



home successful, see my name in the magazines, our climb written up as a 'ground-breaking' performance.

However, during the process of climbing, concentrating all my attention on surviving day after day, these ego considerations diminish to the point where there is just me and the mountain. Even my companions are remote from my thoughts. Motivation is pared down to a simple curiosity to discover the mountain's secret places – places to belay, bivouac, lines of weakness through rock bands and whether I can cope with the vagaries of snow conditions, weather and team fitness. In other words, to climb for the first time a route on the highest mountains is intrinsically interesting at the time, geographically, intellectually and especially psychologically – it is totally absorbing. On Kangchenjunga we were frequently right on the edge and at the limits of our endurance. It is then that areas of our being, that are normally hidden, are revealed. Let me explain.

I completely let go of my ambition to climb Kangchenjunga after our second attempt failed in horrendous wind and snowstorms up at 8100m. We had managed to retreat to a snow cave at 7500m where we spent the next day recuperating and discussing the pros and cons of climbing up again. We privately tore ourselves apart during this examination. Family and friends back home were winning out to climbing ambition. But, as so often happens with the acceptance of detachment, events change to allow the original desire to be achieved but then with humility. The goal was reached and, then being unexpected, came as a gift. It happened like this.

In the snow cave I had fallen asleep intending to descend the next day but at 3am I awoke very much at peace with myself and wide awake to something resembling a voice in my chest powerfully telling me not to go down but to go up.

As this sort of thing had not happened to me before I lay there for some time before breaking down the snow blocks and poking my head out into the cold night air. There was no wind, no clouds obscuring the fading stars in the early morning sky. I awoke the others with a brew of tea, telling them with total conviction to pack for the summit. Two days later we were there.

The enormity of our climb came back to me three years ago when in the autumn of 1998 Roger Mear and I climbed up the 1200m South Pillar of Drophmo. This elegant line had frequently caught my attention from Kangchenjunga. We worked our way up rock, monsoon snow and green ice over four continuous days. There is a relatively narrow window of opportunity to do new routes alpine style in the Himalaya. First it is necessary to have the experience and how quickly the apprenticeship is served depends on how long you have until you can no longer carry your own share of the load. I was climbing on borrowed time at 58 years of age and am grateful that my younger companion was willing to lead the harder pitches and thus conserve my limited strength.

Although we had long distance photographs of the route it was full of surprises with icy caves turning up for bivouacs right on cue, interconnecting



gullies, ice faces and snow ribs making for a varied and interesting route. There were times when it all looked too much, standing together on a belay looking up at soft snow on sheer granite slab. We never said no, just had a look and one pitch led into another, in fact twenty-eight rope lengths up and twenty-five abseils back down during four superb sunny days.

To my mind the sheer pleasure of discovery and the elation from accepting and overcoming each difficulty make such a climb far more important than any repeat route on the 8000-metre peaks. There is no comparison. The best part was to come. Roger had energy to spare that took him down glacier and moraine by head-torch to the valley on the fifth night. I stayed at our bergschrund camp. Now out of danger but not yet engaged with the rest of humanity we each savoured the aftermath of our climb alone. This is the perfect moment, the reward for all the effort and risk above. Now there is contentment from having achieved the climb in harmony with each other.

With clear head and strength returning to aching muscles I feel at peace with myself. The usual internal dialogue has ceased. Thoughts come in slowly – slow enough to notice that they are irrelevant silly thoughts that evaporate with recognition. There is for a time a widening gap between one thought and the next. In the intervening space between thoughts is where I find peace of mind. I have not become a mindless zombie, in fact quite the opposite as I am now more acutely aware of all and everything around me and I make all the connections. This continues into the next day as I meander slowly down to Roger and the Sherpas at Base Camp.

There were many trekkers passing by, heading up or returning from Kangchenjunga Base Camp only one day away. It is hard to keep perfect equilibrium, getting into conversation and replying to so many questions. Gradually I return to 'normal' but the heightened state remains a good memory, a reference point as to where I could and should be.

There is a lot to recommend climbing new routes and there are many out there to do, especially in the Himalaya. This has always been for most of us the main reason for going out to Asia year after year. I consider myself fortunate to have had the opportunity to fill in one piece after another of the puzzle in my personal blank on the map, particularly in the mountains of Asia. Certainly, curiosity was, and still is, for me the mainspring to go off with the boys again to the mountains.

My parents never put any obstacle in my way to prevent me wandering off out of Nottingham when very young or later hitch-hiking into Derbyshire, to North Wales, the Lake District, Scotland and the Alps, one place leading to the next with no obvious plan in it, just going along to see. Many lament the lack of adventurous spirit amongst the young of today. Whether this is true or not my generation was lucky to have spent our formative years after the war, when there was not so much money about, without a car, in the absence of television and computer games, when we had to make our own entertainment and usually of a physical kind.

I have gained so much from pushing my own limits of endurance on new

routes on high mountains. At a very personal level I have come to discover areas of my being that are normally hidden, especially in the realms of sixth sense and intuition. I have returned from a hard struggle quietly confident, with more enthusiasm and objectivity for all that has to be done back home and also with a degree of compassion usually lacking.

It is to the close-knit band of mainly British Himalayan climbers that I owe so much. To Chris Bonington for his drive and ongoing enthusiasm – at 68 still taking me rock climbing in the Lake District – and to Roger Mear, Paul Braithwaite, Colin Downer, Ray Gillies and so many others.

Over the last forty years I have shared experiences with so many fine climbers and men. I will never forget the impressions made at the time – so vivid they last a lifetime and beyond the death of so many of them. It is here that I suffer bouts of sadness at the memory of such men as Mick Burke, Dougal Haston, Nick Estcourt, Pete Boardman, Joe Tasker, Roger Baxter-Jones, Alec McIntyre, Al Rouse and many others pushing the limits and in fine style. As Alec McIntyre put it, of our climb up Shishapangma SW Face, 'The Face was the ambition; the style became the obsession.' They were brilliant days – at times I felt I could just go on from one expedition to the next. Why not when we had the experience and energy? How different the Himalayan climbing scene would have been if they had been around – buzzing with their energy and inventiveness. Not for them the numbers game ticking off routes on the 8000-metre summits by routes climbed well enough in the 1950s; not when there was still so much to do that had not been done.

To conclude, I must remind myself that climbing is beyond nationalism and this shows itself whenever climbers from around the world meet up at the many conferences arranged these days. There is always an unusual affinity with others who have pushed the limits, an understanding that transcends national boundaries. We have been inspired by the great climbs of Reinhold Messner, especially his solo climb of Everest and his climb up Hidden Peak via the South-west Face with Peter Habeler in a remarkable three days in 1975. Two of the hardest technical routes achieved in alpine style were put up in the mid-1980s: Enric Lucas and Nil Bohigas climbed the South Face of Annapurna in 1984, and in 1985 Voytek Kurtyka and Robert Schauer climbed the more difficult West Rib of Gasherbrum IV. There are many others coming along thick and fast. It seems incredible that by 1979 Kangchenjunga had been climbed only twice. Now over a hundred climbers have summited.

Inevitably, another generation comes through and already it is well established: Mick Fowler, Pat Littlejohn, Victor Saunders, Andy Perkins, Steve Susted and Andy Cave and now Julian Cartwright, Kenton Cool and Ian Parnell to name but a few, are climbing steep mixed rock and ice faces high in the thin, cold air and in pure alpine style. The best traditions of British climbing are alive and well.