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# Everest

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GEORGE BAND

## Everest Golden Jubilee 1953-2003

(Plates 14-23)

The Alpine Journal of 1993 was very much a 40th Anniversary volume, including contributions from all the surviving members of the 1953 Everest team. As so many more Everest books were published in conjunction with the 50th Anniversary in comparison to the 40th, the Editor decided that a brief round-up of the celebratory events to mark the Golden Jubilee (May 2003) was more appropriate for this Journal, and asked me to do it.

As with the 40th, the Mount Everest Foundation (MEF) was the natural body to take the lead in this, representing the Alpine Club (AC) and the Royal Geographical Society with the Institute of British Geographers (RGS). The MEF set up a small ad hoc committee and brought in Dr Charles Clarke to chair it, as he had previously been involved with the 40th Anniversary events and would himself become Chairman of the MEF during 2003. This was a considerable commitment on his part on top of his professional duties, but he took it on willingly and cheerfully and it was a pleasure for all of us to work with him.

The other members of this group initially were Richard Morgan, the MEF Hon Treasurer; Bill Ruthven, MEF Hon Secretary; Nigel Winsler, Deputy Director RGS, and his assistant Rebecca Trumble to take the minutes; Glyn Hughes, AC Hon Secretary later succeeded by Martin Scott and Toto Gronlund; Andy McNae from the British Mountaineering Council; and myself as a member of the original 1953 team, particularly to provide the link with the surviving team members.

### **The 1953 Team**

Sadly, our leader, John Hunt, died in November 1998 so we lacked his guiding inspiration. Tom Bourdillon, Wilfrid Noyce, Charles Evans, Griffith Pugh, Tom Stobart and Tenzing Norgay had also passed away. But half the original team of fourteen still survive: Ed Hillary, Charles Wylie, George Lowe, Alf Gregory, Mike Ward, Mike Westmacott and myself, not forgetting our redoubtable non-climbing correspondent from *The Times*, James, now Jan Morris.

Most people's memories do not stretch back fifty years. Such was the continuing publicity given to Hillary and Tenzing that many folk now call us the 'Hillary Expedition' thinking he was the leader. Although Everest certainly changed his life his greatest satisfaction over the last forty years has probably come from the creation and running of his Himalayan Trust

which has helped to improve the lives of the Sherpas in North-east Nepal. So he understandably felt his first priority should be to celebrate the Jubilee with his many Sherpa friends and their community in Kathmandu before coming to join us in London. Alfred Gregory, now in his 90th year, living in the Dandenong hills near Melbourne, felt the journey to be too long and expensive to justify. Sadly, Michael Ward also had to miss most of the celebrations as he was recovering from injuries following a serious car accident (for which he was blameless) followed by heart surgery.

We were very keen to have some of our Sherpa friends join us in London to mark the essential role they played on numerous Himalayan expeditions. Fortunately Tenzing's nephew Nawang Gombu was able to do so. He had been one of the youngest High Altitude Sherpas in 1953, just 17 at the time, and was the first person to climb Everest twice, with the Americans in 1963 and the Indians in 1965, and is an Honorary Member of the AC. Tenzing's eldest daughter Pem Pem also graced the occasion, as did his son Dhamey (by his third wife, Daku) who now lives in Switzerland.

### **Purpose**

Our MEF sub-committee first met on 19 April 2000 and agreed that the purpose should be 'To celebrate the 50th Anniversary of the first ascent of Everest in 1953, a British Commonwealth, mountaineering achievement in the Coronation year, and to raise substantial funds for the MEF.' We started with a clean slate and all ideas were welcome; many of these did not come to fruition and others evolved gradually into their final form. It would be tedious to give too much detail so I will concentrate mostly on the final outcome.

### **'Endeavour on Everest'**

It was decided to hold the main fundraising event, a Royal Gala Celebration entitled 'Endeavour on Everest', on the anniversary day itself, Thursday 29 May 2003, to be followed by a Reception. After considering venues such as the RGS and the Royal Albert Hall, we settled on the Odeon, Leicester Square where the BAFTA Awards are held. It was close to the Warner Theatre where Tom Stobart's Everest film had been given its Royal Premiere on 21 October 1953. The graceful ambience of Spencer House in St. James's Place was made available for the Reception. Through the Queen's Private Secretary, Sir Robin Janvrin, we learnt that our invitation to Her Majesty and Prince Philip, Patron of the MEF, was likely to receive favourable consideration. As the organisational workload increased, we realised that professional help was required so we engaged an experienced public relations consultant, Sarah Turner, who later brought in Annie Taylor to assist and Mandy Duncan-Smith of Media Natura to orchestrate the Performance itself and discipline us participants to conform to a tight schedule. We cannot thank these three ladies enough for their vital contribution to the success and undoubted enjoyment of this magnificent

occasion. Jamie Buchanan Dunlop handled all the complex ticketing without losing his cool.

As to the programme itself, there were two showings, a matinée and a full 1800 capacity, for the evening performance. Sir David Attenborough kindly compered a galaxy of speakers, using a mix of film-clips and slides: Charles Clarke, Chris Bonington, Stephen Venables, Doug Scott, four of the 1953 team: Band, Westmacott, Wylie and Lowe, with a video message from Hillary, and an eloquent coda by Jan Morris. Seven members of the Royal Family agreed to attend. It was an evening of drama, nostalgia, pride and joy which many people found very moving. They will not easily forget Charles Wylie's emotional description of the Great Carry by his team of Sherpas to the South Col, or the allegorical part played in the adventure by Jan, then James Morris, the confirmed Welsh republican, in dashing back down the Icefall with Mike Westmacott, to get the news back in time for the Queen's Coronation: 'The message went on to ring the world and 50 years on is still giving innocent pleasure, is it not – to the Queen and her husband I hope, and to all the rest of us this very day here in the heart of London.'

### **The Media – Films, Exhibitions and Books**

The original team members were astonished by the great interest shown by the media, almost as much as in 1953. Every newspaper and magazine seemed to carry feature articles or special supplements, notably *The Times*, *Geographical*, and the *National Geographic Magazine*. Even *Hello!* had a picture of the 'Everest adventurers' meeting the Queen, beside another of Hillary being honoured by King Gyanendra in Nepal where, under the auspices of the Nepal Mountaineering Association, there was a great gathering of 'Everest summitters' in conjunction with numerous other sporting events.

Most UK TV channels ran special programmes, notably the BBC's *Race for Everest* produced by Mick Conefrey, in which 80 hours of filming were condensed to an authoritative and balanced one-hour programme. Other countries – Germany and Brazil – made special programmes and, in particular, New Zealand produced *On Top of the World* and *Hillary on Everest* highlighting Sir Edmund's early years and his extraordinarily varied and crowded later life. Similarly the Auckland Museum mounted a major Exhibition *Sir Edmund Hillary: Everest and Beyond* opened by the New Zealand Prime Minister on 25 October 2002.

One TV production company, Mentorn Barraclough Carey, was very keen to replicate an Everest Expedition 'in the style of 1953', where a young team of top British tigers unfamiliar with Everest would attempt the climb using old-fashioned crampons and long ice-axes, but equipped with the latest mini-cameras to beam live images to viewers back home. A potential leader, Iain Peter from Plas y Brenin, was appointed and at least six months spent on developing the concept and seeking sponsorship, but in the aftermath of the September 11 catastrophe insufficient sponsorship was

available and the project was aborted. Happily, one of the short-listed leaders, Lt. Colonel Nick Arding of the Royal Marines, refused to admit defeat and instead persuaded the Royal Navy to mount its first expedition to Everest, the Army having climbed it in 1976 and the Royal Air Force in 2000. Under his leadership, they succeeded by the north ridge on 22 May 2003. Their innovative oxygen equipment, pressured to 300 bar, weighed only half that of ours in 1953 and was shown on *Blue Peter* and 'Tomorrow's World' Road Show.

There was always the intention to mount a major Everest Exhibition to mark the anniversary in the UK; various venues in the South-east were discussed at different times: the RGS, Somerset House, the Science Museum, but all of these collapsed for one reason or another, despite a lot of effort expended, particularly by Julie Summers of the Ashmolean, a great-niece of Sandy Irvine. Only the Gurkha Museum in Winchester contrived a display highlighting the role of Gurkha officers and men on successive Everest expeditions. In the end it was the 'National Mountaineering Exhibition' at Rheged, Penrith, which secured the vital financial support of the NW Development Fund to remodel its current exhibition in record time with a full Everest theme from May 2003 to April 2004, as well as showing the Everest IMAX film. Rheged included a special series of Everest lectures in May and June culminating in one on 14 June, repeated on 8 August, by Lowe, Westmacott and Band in a joint presentation reminiscent of the 1953 performances at the Festival Hall and other major locations.

There was no shortage of books published to mark the occasion, but many of these were reprints of early classics, jumping on the Anniversary bandwagon: Hillary's *High Adventure*, Morris's *Coronation Everest*, Bonington's *Everest*, Krakauer's *Into Thin Air* and others less memorable. An exception, conceived by our sub-committee, was a limited edition facsimile of John Hunt's *The Ascent of Everest* with Heaton Cooper's original dust jacket and the signatures of the complete team.

Regarding new books, I was invited by HarperCollins to write yet another on Everest and this was accepted by the MEF as its Official History, and formally supported by both the AC (who had to invent a new logo for it!) and the RGS, who provided most of the 300 illustrations. *Everest: 50 years on Top of the World* was duly published on 6 May 2003 and for two weeks even hit the hardback best-seller lists! I rashly included a section on some of the more remarkable record ascents, hardly expecting several of them to be broken in the very month of publication when over 200 more climbers reached the summit: the fastest was 36-year-old Sherpa Lhakpa Gelu in a crazy 10hrs 56mins; the youngest, a girl of 15, Mingkipa Sherpa, together with her brother and sister; and the oldest, a sprightly 70-year-old Japanese, Yiuchiro Miura, who in 1970 failed to reach the summit but gained instant fame as 'the man who skied down Everest', being filmed in a spectacular parachute-assisted ski descent from the South Col and subsequent fall down the Lhotse Face. They may all have contributed to the festive spirit but

Everest is turning into a circus. 'This is not mountaineering,' commented Reinhold Messner. 'It has been prepared like a piste. The Nepalese government has a choice: it can leave it as it was, or sell it to Disneyland!'

The RGS provided its own super coffee-table book: *Everest – Summit of Achievement* to publicise and profit from its magnificent archive of some 20,000 Everest images donated to it with all rights in 1974 by the MEF. Various writers contributed essays, with Stephen Venables being the Senior Consulting Editor. Stephen also wrote a delightful new book for children *To The Top – The Story of Everest*.

Two other new books were Michael Ward's wide-ranging monograph *Everest, A Thousand Years of Exploration*, covering mountaineering, geographical exploration, medical research and mapping, and our own Alpine Journal Editor's most revealing and readable biography *Tenzing. Hero of Everest*. In the 1950s we had thought Tenzing had been born in Thame, in North-east Nepal, but Ed Douglas's diligent research revealed the full extent of Tenzing's long and astonishing climb to fame from the obscurity of an illiterate yak herder born in a sacred Tibetan valley in the shadow of Everest. Standing together on the summit, it was Hillary who gazed at the surrounding virgin peaks waiting to be climbed, whereas Tenzing saw the valleys and the past beneath his feet: 'the monasteries and the farms, the rivers and forests of his youth. No wonder a mere handshake with Hillary was not enough!'

### **Other Initiatives**

On the agenda of our first sub-committee meeting was a proposal to the Royal Mail for a set of commemorative postage stamps. To our delight this was accepted but extended to a series of six, issued on 29 April 2003, entitled 'Extreme Endeavours' depicting British explorers and adventurers. Although only one represented the Everest team it was the most widely used first class stamp, showing Hillary and Tenzing high on the South-east ridge. Traditionally, the sovereign is the only living person to appear on UK stamps, but again Hillary had broken the mould!

During his short stay in the UK in early June, Sir Edmund, together with Lady Hillary and the rest of the team, were privileged guests at the service in Westminster Abbey on 2 June to mark the 50th Anniversary of the Queen's Coronation. The following evening the MEF hosted a charity dinner at the RGS to honour Sir Edmund and to generate funds for his Himalayan Trust. Since its inception, George Lowe has served as Chairman of the UK Branch of the Trust, with his wife Mary as Secretary. Thanks to some spirited auctioneering by Rebecca Stephens, over £8,000 was raised. Further celebrations with the American Himalayan Foundation in California prevented Ed from joining us at the traditional private party at Pen-y-Gwryd on 7 June, generously given by Jane Pullee, where 42 members of the extended 'Everest Family' sat down for dinner after a full day on Snowdon.

Since the establishment of the MEF, in 48 years nearly 1400 expeditions have been helped. One of the most successful of this year's initiatives has been the 'Leaders Appeal', Charles Clarke writing to invite donations from all those leaders who have benefited from grants in years gone by, using Bill Ruthven's comprehensive database of MEF expeditions. So far, with only half the letters sent out, over £20,000 has been raised.

We had several meetings at the RGS in conjunction with *The Times* (the major sponsor in 1953) and *Geographical*, inviting firms to sponsor packages for the various events. We would like to thank all those who responded generously and who were mentioned in the souvenir programme, notably 20th Century Fox, Odeon Leicester Square, JP Morgan, Dixon Wilson, American Express, Glenmorangie, Shaeffer UK, Stanfords Books, Champagne Taittinger and Hatch Mansfield Agencies, Audi Cars, Go Outdoors, Simpkins of Sheffield, Jagged Globe, Lyon Equipment, Berghaus, Canal + (for use of 'The Conquest of Everest'), British Pathé, Far Frontiers, Think Publishing, M & A Security, Westminster City Council, The Travellers Club, The High Commissioner for New Zealand and numerous individuals.

Of all the Anniversary events, the Alpine Club's own party on 28 May was one of the friendliest and most informal, held in our own premises at Charlotte Road and surrounded by our collection of Howard Somervell's watercolours, augmented for the occasion by an exhibition of newly-processed Everest photographs.

At this stage one would like to give a succinct summary of the total funds raised for the MEF by all these initiatives, but our Hon. Treasurer is on a well deserved holiday in the Alps and the final figure must await his return. Let us say that we anticipate at least £50,000 has been raised.

One of the great pleasures of the Anniversary has been the renewal of contacts with friends old and new. For instance, meeting J J Asper of the Swiss 1952 expedition, the first person to cross the great crevasse at the head of the Khumbu Icefall to enter the Western Cwm, and my seeing for the first time the film clip of him doing so.

Finally, only as I began to write this narrative did I receive a friendly letter from our member Sir Edward Peck in Tomintoul. 'You may be interested to know that in August 1924, as a young boy of 9, I climbed the Haute Cime of the Dents du Midi to be greeted on the top by General Charles Bruce who had come up the North face with his Champéry friend Montagnier. This made a great impression on me as a small boy and inspired my enthusiasm for the mountains which has never left me, even though at nearly 88 I can no more than just about totter up a small hill here in the Cairngorms. Though it may mark me down as one of the oldest members of the AC, I treasure this direct link with Charlie Bruce – perhaps the only living one.'

*O longum memoranda dies!* – Oh day, long to be remembered!