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## Echoes from Everest

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Julian Cooper, *Aiguille Blanche de Peuterey*, oil on canvas, 40 x 61cm, 2013

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KENTON COOL

## Everest: A Mountain Undimmed



The Everest group as seen from Camp I on Pumori. North Col is left of Everest summit, Lhotse centre and Nuptse right. Basecamp visible below the Khumbu Icefall. (*Kenton Cool*)

Looking through my photos at basecamp after this week of climbing, I am surprised at how disappointing they are. My father, a pro photographer for 40 years, would be ashamed of me I'm sure. There is no summit photo for Nuptse (which is a pity because I'd always wanted to climb Nuptse); Everest was at 1.45am in pitch darkness, while on Lhotse the weather was bad and we were surrounded by swirling cloud.

But the memories are there, both the good ones and the bad, and they will never fade.

I had managed to climb my dream trilogy of mountains, despite a number of things that popped up and could have derailed the plan. In the end it went relatively smoothly with the mountains climbed in this order: Nuptse on 16 May, Everest on the 19<sup>th</sup> and Lhotse on the 21<sup>st</sup>.

The 'Triple' brought my 2013 Everest season to a close. It had turned out to be quite a rollercoaster. Early on a Sherpa had died in the icefall and there had been the incident on the Lhotse face and the ugly scene that followed at advance base; my client dropped out; and then I had become the first person to summit the three peaks of the Everest group in one season.

But then Everest is never a dull place to be and the year of the 60th



In the labyrinth of the Khumbu Icefall. (*Kenton Cool*)

anniversary of the first ascent was always going to be a little special. Exciting things were in the air, with Ueli Steck, Simone Moro, Denis Urubko and Alex Bolotov all in attendance and talk of a new route on the south-west face.

Though the number of western climbers was down on previous years, possibly to do with the crowds and negative press from 2012, the overall numbers were similar, due to a greater number of climbing Sherpas than

ever before. The big operators this year were Seven Summits Trekking, with almost 80 paying clients climbing variously on Nuptse, Lhotse and Everest, while Eric Simonson's IMG had nearly 60 clients. In addition there were a couple of big Indian teams as well as the Crown Prince of Qatar. If nothing else it was a cosmopolitan basecamp, a far cry from 1953. As I write, all the stats for the season aren't in, but it looks like it will be another very successful season with more than 630 summitings. The



'George Mallory would have been astounded at the... kit, clothing and technology we have in 2013.' Keith Partridge departs Camp III on the Lhotse Face. (*Kenton Cool*)

number of deaths this year currently stands at nine on Everest (both north and south sides) and one on Lhotse.

I do not want to dwell on the darker aspects of the 2013 season but of course the 'fight' on 27 April between Ueli Steck, Simone Moro, Jon Griffith and the Sherpas stole most of the headlines. I was at basecamp when this incident occurred so I didn't see the confrontation at ABC nor the chain of events on the Lhotse Face that led up to it, but clearly there are underlying issues that need to be addressed.<sup>1</sup>

Almost every ascent of this beautiful mountain depends upon Sherpas carrying huge loads through dangerous terrain, and there are many stories of Sherpas risking their own lives to help the western climbers. One can argue that this is the Sherpas' work place and what they are expected to do, but I'm also a mountain guide who earns his money on Everest and people don't expect the same from me.

In the last few years the skill and understanding shown by the best Sherpas has risen dramatically. Nepal is now a member nation of the IFMGA, the governing body of mountain guides, and some Sherpas hold qualifica-

1. The three Europeans – Steck, Moro and Griffith – were on an acclimatisation climb and unroped when they apparently stepped over the ropes of a Sherpa team fixing the standard route up Lhotse Face. The Sherpas claimed ice had been knocked down on to them; the Europeans dispute this. Subsequently the trio was confronted by an angry mob at camp II (ABC) in the Western Cwm. Fearing for their lives they made a risky descent of the Icefall avoiding the fixed lines and ladders and left basecamp with all speed.



Leaving Camp III and heading toward the South Col with the Yellow Band and Geneva Spur in sight. (*Kenton Cool*)

tions that allow them to work also in the European Alps where the skill set required to look after clients is vastly different to that needed on Everest. Some of the commercial teams on Everest have their lead Sherpas operating as 'guides', making critical decisions high on the mountain, rather than simply as 'high altitude workers'. Often such top Sherpas are brought across to the US or Europe for further work or training. In short, the gap between the average Everest climber and the Sherpas in terms of climbing ability is diminishing, and in some areas the Sherpas are far better.

Yet although the competence of Sherpas has changed dramatically, there is still a subtle 'them and us' mentality – one that harks back to when Sherpas were considered second class citizens, lacking modern equipment, eating in different mess tents and even, in some cases, having to use different toilets. It is still not uncommon to see Sherpas carrying the high altitude boots of western climbers to high camps so that the climber doesn't have to wear the cumbersome boots through the Icefall. We consider the Sherpas on a par yet we still expect them to do these things.

The events of 27 April may never be fully understood. Even if the 'facts' can be established, it is probably as much a matter of perceptions by the different parties. I'm writing this at basecamp where the feeling within the Sherpa community is that Ueli and his friends did something wrong.

Ice is knocked off climbs all over the world and people often have disa-



Upper reaches of Everest from Pumori with the south summit clearly visible on the right-hand skyline. (*Kenton Cool*)

greements in the mountains, yet these things never result in such violence. Maybe apologies weren't accepted as intended; there is a rumour that a racial slur was used by one of the climbers in the heat of the moment (I hasten to add I didn't personally hear this). The Sherpas are a proud people and there is no doubt that a provocation of some description occurred, but the outcome, the near-lynching of three climbers at ABC far outweighs any affront on the day. The three openly said that their lives were saved by the actions of a small number of other western climbers who stepped in.

I, for one, was sad to see Ueli, Simone and Jon leave Everest; their project was an ambitious one and they would have left a positive mark on the mountain. Instead we have a blot, a stain that will linger in the minds of the general public for many years to come. I have always understood that mountaineering was a sport to cross borders, cultures, religion; a sport that brought people together from different social classes. Maybe that is a rather naive view given the events of 27 April. For me climbing is, and always has been, about friendship, challenge and new experiences. Everest is very much part of that and I still believe the mountain can provide all of those gifts for everyone.

I've had a passionate affair with Everest for 10 years; stepping down onto the Khumbu glacier each year feelings like a homecoming, not only due to the amount of time I have spent here but also because the mountain



Kenton Cool rounds the Geneva Spur with Nuptse in the background. (*Kenton Cool*)

represents such huge milestones in my life. Coming to Everest for the first time seemed a natural progression from my personal expedition climbing. I was asked to lead a commercial trip in 2004; it was only a small one but it showed me a totally different side of expedition life. Everything was well oiled and heavily supported and although initially I struggled to adjust to this new style, over the years I eased into things.

Unlike some, I don't view Everest as a huge white elephant: quite the opposite. The 'elephant' has relevance here. Being the highest point on Earth was always going to make Everest a target for trophy hunters, in the same way that big game becomes the quarry of safari hunters – and the bigger the better in the hunter's eyes. The commercial teams that gather on the mountain each year facilitate paying climbers get safely to the top in just the same way that professional hunters help their clients bag their elephant or whatever. In this sense Everest might be regarded as a necessary evil, fulfilling an inevitable market.

But Everest for me means so much more. While as a guide I have specialised on Everest and made more ascents than any other European, putting the work aspect aside, I am captivated by her as a truly beautiful mountain. I particularly like the way she hides her southern flanks, coyly tucked behind neighbours Nuptse and Lhotse, withdrawn from climbers approaching up the Khumbu valley. Even from basecamp she is largely

hidden. The more dramatic looking north side is different; it is there on full display for miles.

Life on Everest today may be far removed from the experience of early expeditions, but it's one that the climber and trekker should embrace. At the height of the season, basecamp is a bustling tented city with much warmth and friendship to be found as climbers from all over the world share ideas and stories. Many criticise Everest basecamp as some horrid pit with far too many people; anyone who thinks this clearly has never been there. For me it's a community that, for a few brief weeks, is in this great little bubble where the 'real' world has no place. I do sometimes wonder if we have it wrong and the real world is a fabrication and that basecamp represents the norm; if only reality could exist somewhere between the two!

Paradoxically, the world's most elevated 'city' is also a great leveller. It's down to a certain mindset that is one of the more attractive features of climbing. Round the mess tent table can be bankers, students, doctors, firemen, models even, yet we seem to be cut from a similar mould that gives us something in common. I struggle to think of any situation where barriers are broken down in such a way; everyone is an equal on Everest – or should be, Sherpas, porters, yak men included – and that's one of the things I particularly love about it.

The wide social mix on Everest in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is certainly in stark contrast to the narrow class strata of the expeditions of the 1920s. Everest has, on so many levels, become a very different place since 1922. George Mallory would have been astounded at the equipment available in 1953 let alone by the kit, clothing and technology we have in 2013; and he would certainly have been astounded by the social and ethnic melting pot of climbers. But let's not forget one thing, the mountain herself has not changed in the nine decades since Mallory first set foot on her slopes.

The 1922 expedition – the first serious attempt – has become close to my heart after our own exploits on Everest in 2012. That year I took to the summit one of the Olympic Gold medals awarded to the 1922 Everest Expedition at the 1924 Winter Olympics by Baron Pierre de Coubertin, fulfilling a 90 year-old pledge to see one of the medals successfully reach the summit, 'for all mankind' in de Coubertin's words.

It may be easy for the armchair climber to dismiss today's Everest as a circus, and in some respects with good reason. Everest has always attracted more than her fair share of strange and wonderful people; look back to 1934 when Maurice Wilson planned to crash a plane into the mountain and then simply walk to the top. Today the list of ascensionists includes a blind man, a man with no legs, an 80 year old, a 13 year old, para-gliders, boarders and skiers, but in no way has this outlandish cast diminished what the mountain is and what she stands for.

Nor is there anything new about the thick vein of commercialism that runs through Everest mountaineering. Even back in 1922 a number of the expedition members (Arthur Wakefield for one despite his skill as a climber) paid for the privilege of taking part. National prestige was also



Sunset at the South Col. (*Kenton Cool*)

traditionally a big factor. Everest was considered to be a very British mountain until the 1950s when the Swiss decided to have a go and so very nearly wrote a very different history, Raymond Lambert and Tenzing reaching 8595m on the south-east ridge.

Early teams were often backed by commercial wheezes, exclusive newspaper deals for example, or even by governments, success on these giants being a matter of national pride. And Everest expeditions have been good earners; the 1953 trip made so much money from book sales and lectures that the Mount Everest Foundation was created on the back of it, a foundation that has helped many a smaller expedition (including a number of my own). John Noel was astute enough to 'buy' the film rights to the 1924 expedition and make a living from the photographs and movie that he produced. And it is hard to argue that Everest was not a commercial mountain at the time of the big international expeditions of the early '70s when Bonington's mighty south-west face expedition of 1975 was sponsored by Barclays Bank.

Perhaps it depends on your understanding of that word 'commercial'. According to some, the era of commercialism on Everest started in 1985 when Dick Bass was 'guided' to the summit by David Breashears, after which big national teams increasingly gave way to smaller teams that included paying clients. By then, of course, the mould in terms of climbing



The last leg: Hillary Step and summit seen from the South Summit in a snowy year.

help fulfill the dreams of paying clients. Critics think this is nothing more than raping the mountain, bringing it down to the level of the inexperienced by laying thousands of metres of fixed rope so that one merely needs to slide a jumar in an upwards direction to reach the top. As one of these commercial Everest guides myself, I have to be careful about how I present my views, but as I hope I've made clear, I do not think this development has detracted from the wonders of the hill.

Everest is a beautiful mountain and summit day is a fantastic climb. If you could slice off the top 1000 metres and place it in the European Alps it would be a sought after climb. People sometimes forget that, blinded by what they have to go

style had been well and truly broken by a certain Italian. In my opinion, Reinhold Messner's ascent in 1980 – solo, without supplementary oxygen and over some new ground – represents the high water mark for Everest in terms of style and quality of expedition. The great man was back at base-camp towards the end of this season; unfortunately I did not get the chance to speak to him personally about the changes that have occurred since his glory days here.

Over the last 20 years commercial operators have made Everest their own, with well-organised teams utilising the power of the local Sherpas to

through both physically and mentally to reach the top. I often wonder how many people really look around them, how many really enjoy that day as it unfolds. That's one respect in which I'm especially lucky; those stellar moments I might have missed first time around I get a second chance with. Take the South Col as an example, it's such an extraordinary place; to have time to explore is a privilege, walking over to peer down the east face, wandering about picking through old expedition relics and then, as the sun sets... well it is simply sublime, coloured additionally by the thought that in a few hours you'll be embarking on a climb to the top of the world. But

that's my personal take. For almost everyone else who will ever go there, the South Col represents little more than a very uncomfortable staging camp where a mental battle needs to be fought before going up; few, if any, seem to share my enjoyment of the beauty of the place.

So what about my own 'three peaks challenge' this year? As I say, it's been an ambition of mine for a few years but it's always been on the back burner due to commitment to clients. This year when my client failed to show for personal and business reasons I had the chance.

First up was Nuptse, and what a great mountain; a marvellous route on the North Buttress first opened by Doug Scott and crew in 1979, since when it's seen a number of ascents by several variations. It was awesome terrain, fun steepish rock and ice with magnificent views looking back to Everest and the mighty south-west face.

It felt like a long day; I had climbed from basecamp straight through to camp III (6800m) on Nuptse where I was lucky enough to share a tent with Alex Txikon and then climb with this great Basque climber the following day. I summited around 1pm, then descended back to camp II on Everest.

The following day it was up to camp III on Everest before pushing through to the South Col on 18 May. Everest summit day went like clockwork. Dorje Gylgen and I left the Col at 8pm, fearing there might be crowds later on the route, and summited before 2am in the pitch dark, then we made a rapid descent and reached the Col by 4am just as the sun was rising. So no summit view, but I think I know what it looks like pretty well by now. And my friend Dorje has been there 10 times himself.

My 11<sup>th</sup> visit to the top of the world, fast and summiting in darkness,

was untypical of ascents with clients. For them, leaving the South Col is a pivotal moment; it's all too easy to come up with an excuse to snuggle further down the sleeping bag, to turn over to snatch more much-needed sleep. Statistically, those who step out of their tent into the darkness will probably summit. But it's a huge mental step to take. Those precious thin layers of tent fabric provide a haven in an environment that

at best can be described as hostile, but often feels more like a war zone. Preparation starts around 6pm: attempts to eat and drink, melting water for bottles, checking oxygen bottles, and all the time your mind is whirling with what may lie ahead, what's forgotten, how will I perform, the 'what ifs' rolling into the mind like breakers on a beach.

Manage those preliminaries and take the first few steps and you are well on the way to the summit. The climb to the Balcony (8500m) is steady toil



Way to go in the Khumbu. (Kenton Cool)



Morning shadow: The rising sun casts Everest's image over the Khumbu at about 4.10am. (Kenton Cool)

following your headtorch beam, unless blessed with a full moon in which case it becomes a magical moonlit ascent. Way off on the horizon electric storms are always visible. These scared me on my first ascent but the subsequent realisation that they were hundreds of miles away has turned the lightning to an added beauty of the climb.

The section from the Balcony to the South Summit probably represents the hardest part of the climb. Three rock bands guard the ascent and many underestimate, or even don't know about, this part of the climb. The barriers are short but even so several of my clients have expressed surprise at their unexpected difficulty. Once through the last of the barriers there is a faint gully that works its way up to the South Summit; it always seems to take an age, each footstep a struggle, even with supplementary oxygen.

Luckily, around this point, the sun finally rises. It starts as a dull glow in the distance at around 3.30am and slowly gets brighter. When the sun finally breaks the horizon it's like a caffeine shot to the body after so many hours climbing in darkness. The unfolding views are simply stunning, with the sun often casting a shadow of Everest on the atmosphere below.

Sunrise is also the first time on summit day that the climber can actually see the top. It appears to be so close and as the crow flies it is. After so many weeks on the mountain the ultimate goal seems in reach, but there is still the traverse from the South Summit and then the Hillary step barring the way. The traverse varies from year to year; under snow it is easy and fast, but when rocky (more often) it is awkward, time consuming and a possible bottleneck. Then all of a sudden you find yourself beneath the Hillary Step. What an achievement by the man himself in '53! It's not easy and of course Hillary had no idea what it would hold for him when he



Kenton Cool at the summit of Everest, fulfilling an 88 year-old Olympic pledge. The Gold medal is that of Arthur Wakefield, one of the members of the 1922 Everest expedition. (Kenton Cool)

climbed it. From the top of the step, the summit is there for the taking, maybe 20 to 30 minutes on a good day, on easy snow slopes.

Those final 100 metres are sensational; the hard grind is done and although there is still the descent to come, one that will demand total attention, gravity will be on your side. This should be a time for celebration. If the weather and conditions allow, climbers should let the situation and emotion wash over them, soaking it all up, because nearly all are never going to experience it again. Personally it is always a moment of mixed emotions: I can be pleased with a job well done if clients are standing there with me, but it also represents the beginning of the end of the expedition and that always saddens me. Of course added to this there is the elation of beholding one of the most impressive mountain views in the world.

Returning to this May: after a couple of hours at the Col, Dorje and I zipped back down and made the little hike to camp IV (7600m) on Lhotse. Here the plan was to leave around 2am and summit around dawn; but there was a hiccup. I became involved in trying to save the life of a Taiwanese climber who was suffering from cerebral oedema. Mr Lee's life was already ebbing away and though I spent all night doing what I could, he passed away peacefully in my arms at around 6am. The last two hours or so was continuous CPR; this combined with the previous days of effort left me exhausted.

We finally left for Lhotse at 9.15am, hardly great preparation but I was with Dorje as well as Mike Roberts and his Sherpa, so we were a strong little team. (Mike is a Kiwi and a guide working for Adventure Consultants.) The gully on Lhotse was great fun and not like anything else I have

climbed on the high mountains. Instead of being on ridges or big expanses of snow slopes, as is the norm, we were tightly enclosed by towering rock walls – very atmospheric. Unfortunately, when we got to the top the cloud was sucked right in and we couldn't see a thing. This was pretty upsetting and certainly not part of the plan, but that's mountaineering for you.

The descent was quick but arduous; Lhotse was super dry this year so there was a lot of loose rock around and we had to be careful. It's a straight up and down route so we were quickly back at camp IV, however from there it is a long way back to camp II and then basecamp. I'd not used supplementary oxygen on Nuptse but I did on the two 8000ers.

I've been lucky with my Everest career. Chomolungma has let me see her in all her guises, from being the first of the year to summit, or alone and able to soak up what that feels like, to being there in the pitch dark, and to carefully managing a paying team to reach the top. I've seen the good and the bad, and believe me the good far outweighs the bad, but as in so many spheres it is the bad that make the headlines.

Despite all the precautions of commercial teams, climbers here will always tread a fine line between life and death, as I saw first-hand this year. Playing at 8000m means there is zero room for error; a simple mistake will very, very quickly compound and before you know it you are staring death straight in the eyes. Perhaps the only other place on the planet where rescue is as hard as the ocean depths. At the Poles you can press a PLB (distress radio beacon) and get rescued; in the desert it's the same; from virtually any part of the planet you can be plucked off by plane, boat or helicopter. But at 8000m

there is no safety net. The air is too thin to sustain life; once you have entered the 'death zone' the clock is ticking. If something goes wrong and you are delayed then, simply put, you are slowly dying. The air is also too thin for any form of airborne rescue. When the French put a chopper skid



Kenton and Dorje relaxed at the South Col, May 2013. (Kenton Cool)



2am on the summit of Everest – time to head down, May 2013. (Kenton Cool)



Climbers on Nuptse high above the Western Cwm, May 2013. West Ridge of Everest behind with Lho La and peaks of Khumbutse and Lingtren to left. (Kenton Cool)



Descending Lhotse in cloud, May 2013. (*Kenton Cool*)

down on the summit in 2005, it was touch and go; a rescue above about 6500m is still not possible.

Such a degree of mortal exposure is unique in this day and age; at 8000m climbing still holds that air of perilous remoteness. The dangers that existed back in 1922 still exist; Everest is still a dangerous mountain to climb; one only needs to look at 2012 and the events of 19 May when four people lost their lives.

Yet despite the risks and common misconceptions, the future of Everest is bright and exciting. I believe we will see a shake-up in how people approach climbing on the North side (due to increased peak fees by the Chinese), meanwhile the South will continue to be the focus of the higher end commercial expeditions. Here, though there will be constant refinement of practices, the scene is likely to remain essentially the same as it has for the last 20 years.



Dorje Gylgen summits Everest for the 10th time, May 2013. (*Kenton Cool*)

Everest still represents a symbol of ultimate endeavour today very much as it did in the 1920s when Charles Bruce and his team first set foot on the mountain. And the raw mountain, Everest her true self, remains forever undiminished, her outer mantle changed only by the natural forces of geological time. She has stood there for countless millennia and will doubtless still be standing proud in the same glorious way long after human beings have left this Earth.

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HARRIET TUCKEY

## Summit Manoeuvres

A Reassessment of John Hunt's Top Camp Tactics



Charles Evans on the South Summit of Everest.  
(*Tom Bourdillon/Royal Geographical Society*)

Around 1pm on 26 May 1953, Tom Bourdillon and Charles Evans became the first human beings to reach Everest's south summit. There they paused and contemplated the route ahead, tempting and thrilling. 'A wilder and more fantastic ridge than either of us had seen before,' wrote Bourdillon. Bourdillon's photograph of Evans gazing towards the unseen summit is one of the icons of mountaineering, conveying excitement and wonder – but also regret, because they were out of time to reach the