
Mount Everest Foundation



Loch Scavaig, Isle of Skye

William Daniell (1769-1837)

c1819. Watercolour with gouache and scraping over graphite on medium, slightly textured, cream wove paper, pasted on very thick, slightly textured, cream card. 8¼ x 12¼ inches.
Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection.

BILL RUTHVEN

Recollections of an MEF Secretary



Bill Ruthven meeting Her Majesty the Queen during the 60th anniversary celebrations of the first ascent of Everest in 2013.

I am sometimes asked how I became involved with the Mount Everest Foundation. The basic reason can be traced back to the early 1950s, when as a student at Loughborough College I was a keen member of the college mountaineering club. One fellow member was a guy called Bob Pettigrew, and in 1954 I took part in an expedition to Lyngen in Arctic Norway led by Bob: at the time he was the club chairman, and I was the secretary. Our paths crossed again in 1977, when he was president of the BMC and I was honorary secretary of the Lake District Area Committee.

By 1985, Bob was chairman of the MEF Screening Committee, and when the then secretary found the work too much, Bob asked if I would be interested in taking it on. At the time I was going through a bad patch at work and this seemed an ideal opportunity to get involved in something entirely different. So once again it was 'Chairman Bob' and 'Secretary Bill'.

Meetings of the Screening Committee were always interesting. At one of

the earliest, we were interviewing a couple of 'young hards' who thought that they were going to the ends of the earth, when an elderly bespectacled gentleman sitting at the end of the table asked where they planned to establish their base camp. They mumbled the name of a well-known village, to which he suggested that if they progressed slightly further up the valley they would find a level grass area on which to pitch their tents, with good water in a nearby stream. The elderly gentleman was Sir Edward Peck, who had explored mountains all over the world while serving his country in a variety of diplomatic postings.

For some years the MEF Committee of Management had a separate secretary, Bill Risoe, but in 1988 he decided to retire, and the chairman at the time, George Band, asked if I would be interested in taking over. His idea was that I would take on the C of M, and a new secretary would be appointed for the 'Screeners'. However, as the Screeners' secretary I did not attend meetings of the C of M so while I was the only person in direct contact with expedition leaders, I always had to wait some time to hear the outcome of the meetings from Bill before I could let the expedition leaders know the results of their grant applications. It therefore seemed sensible to revert to a single secretary (i.e. me) serving both committees, and this was agreed.

Between then and my 'retirement' in December 2013, the MEF kept me pretty busy dealing with several hundred leaders and expeditions, and attending over 130 meetings of one committee or another, tendering apologies for absence from just three due to spells in hospital. As now, the only real commitment of an expedition awarded a grant was to submit a report on the trip. But I soon discovered there were a number of past expeditions, which did not seem to have met this simple requirement. I felt it my duty to chase them until they did so. For this Ted Peck bestowed me the nickname 'Ruthless Ruthven'. But it had its results, revealing that one leader, having received an MEF grant, cancelled his trip and joined another one, which had also received an MEF grant, on the other side of the world. The 'diverted' grant was recovered, and future applications from the errant leader monitored carefully.

Although the majority of expeditions were made up of university students or graduates, I was shocked by the spelling and sometimes grammar displayed in the resultant reports. One example that sticks in my mind included the phrase: 'After much discussion, we all agreed to take alpine guitars.' Thoughts of an unusually musical expedition were dashed when I realised the team had selected 'alpine gaiters' as the best equipment to deal with the deep snow that was anticipated.

One day in 1987 I received a telephone call from a lady in New York called Wendy Davis, who told me that she was employed by an expedition being planned to celebrate the thirty-fifth anniversary of the first ascent of Everest by attempting a new route: the first alpine-style ascent of the east face without the use of bottled oxygen. It was hoped the team would include the sons of both Ed Hillary and Tenzing Norgay, and she asked if I could give her the telephone number of John Hunt, who was to be invited to be

'honorary co-leader'. While I would not normally pass on a number, this seemed to be a very special case, and I did as she asked. Later I discovered that John had suggested including a British climber in the team to make it truly international. His proposal was Stephen Venables. Over the next months I received several more calls from Wendy, culminating in one in which she excitedly told me that of all the team, only Stephen had reached the summit of Everest, and he was now back in UK, about to appear on the 'Wongan Show'. A few hours later I watched on TV as Terry 'Wongan' interviewed not only Stephen, but also Dr Charlie Clarke, who had by chance met up with him in Kathmandu, and treated his frostbitten nose and toes.

In May 1993, the MEF celebrated the fortieth anniversary of the first ascent of Everest with a lecture and reception at the Royal Geographical Society. Our patron, Prince Philip, was already committed to attend another event, but we were delighted Her Majesty the Queen and Princess Anne accepted instead. As we chatted informally with the Royals I looked round hopefully for the official photographers, but in vain. Later I learned that the Queen had requested no photos during this part of the evening. Bob later consoled me: 'But I'm sure she'll tell her friends that she met you.'

In those days, the Screening Committee tended to be a group of specialists, who remained as long as they desired, with no specified time limit. Most expeditions applying for support were interviewed, which led to some very long meetings, the longest being in March 1989 which started at 9am and finished at 9pm, during which time no less than 36 trips were interviewed. But in 1994 the C of M decided that like themselves, the Screeners should be subject to a six-year period in office: this took effect in 1995 and Stephen Venables was transferred from the C of M to chair the Screeners. About the same time, it was decided more applications should be considered 'on paper'.

In May 1995 I received an enquiry from a Mr White, deputy head of mission in the British Embassy in Tel Aviv. He asked me to comment on the achievements of 'K D', a British subject currently living in Israel, who claimed to have climbed many of the world's highest peaks, including Everest twice, and was seeking a reference for an expedition he was planning to New Zealand. He intended to include an Israeli and an Arab in his team, and make the first ascent of an unnamed peak, which he intended to dedicate to peace. At the time I kept a database of successful Everesters, on which his name was conspicuously absent. He claimed that his second ascent, in 1990, was on an expedition led by Stephen Venables, but Stephen confirmed he had not been back to Everest since his dramatic ascent in 1988. And, like me, Stephen had never heard of KD. Other claims included being a top competition climber – fourth in Britain – and acting as a stunt double in several well-known films. A long and fanciful article about him, in the *Jerusalem Post*, carried the sub-heading: 'K D has not lived down his reputation as the country's top sport climber.' Why should he?

This was my first experience of the Walter Mitty type; not so for Mr White, who as a diplomat in Israel was familiar with the well-documented Jerusalem syndrome: 'I suspect that Mr D is the possessor of a rather

fanciful imagination ... It is likely that he will be numbered amongst the many we meet who claim close kinship or actually to be the Messiah, but who unfortunately have lost their passports, have no money etc.'

With more and more ascents of Mount Everest being recorded, some people seem to forget that it is the highest mountain on earth, and is still not 'an easy day for a lady'. In addition to relevant enquiries, I have received some from individuals with remarkably little mountaineering knowledge or experience. Possibly the ultimate was a telephone call from a young man I received in November 1993. After general introductions, the call went something like this:

Caller: I've decided that I would like to climb Mount Everest

MEF: Oh! Are you very rich?

Caller: Not particularly. Why?

MEF: Well, it is a rather expensive exercise these days, but let's come back to that later. When were you thinking of going to Everest?

Caller: Next summer, when I have finished college. I would prefer to climb it in the summer, as I don't like climbing in the cold. [!]

MEF: Have you climbed in the Himalaya before?

Caller: No.

MEF: Okay, then tell me about your Alpine experience.

Caller: Well, I've never actually been to the Alps.

MEF: What have you climbed then?

Caller: I climbed a mountain in South Africa once.

MEF: How high was that?

Caller: About five thousand.

MEF: (With tongue in cheek) Feet or metres?

Caller: Feet, I think.

MEF: I think that you ought to have a few seasons of Alpine climbing and then maybe one or two trips to the Greater Ranges before you consider Everest.

Caller: But that is going to cost a lot of money! Do I have to pay some sort of fee to climb Everest?

MEF: Yes. Assuming you plan to climb from the Nepali side, the local authorities charge a peak fee, which is currently \$50,000 for a party of up to five.

Caller: But that's ridiculous. Is there a reduction for students?

MEF: Highly unlikely. The mountain is in their country, so whatever we think or do, they can charge what they like. There are many other costs to consider, apart from just getting to and from Nepal. I think that you'd be most unlikely to stage an expedition to Everest these days for less than, say, £100,000.

Caller: But I can't afford that!

MEF: I suggest you might talk to one of the British companies, which are offering commercial trips: one has just succeeded in getting several clients to the summit. But I think they would expect a reasonable level of experience before they would be prepared to accept you as a paying team member.

At this stage the caller, by now thoroughly demoralised, thanked me for my assistance and said goodbye. I wonder what happened to him? These days, he might well find someone to take him.

After 50-odd years carrying heavy rucksacks up hills in many countries, I was suffering severe back pain. All attempts to relieve this proved to be short-lived at best and mostly ineffective, so in 1997 I was referred to a 'top' spinal surgeon. His proposed solution was an operation to 'decompress' my spine, and construct internal 'scaffolding' to hold it in position. Although the surgery was successful, during or immediately after the operation I developed an epidural haematoma, or blood clot, which was not addressed for a whole week, by which time I was paraplegic due to cauda equina syndrome. Thus what was expected to be about two weeks in hospital was extended to six months. Having walked into hospital, when I eventually left it was in a wheelchair. But unlike most of the patients on my ward, I wasn't idle. Apart from reading many books, particularly during physiotherapy sessions, I endeavoured to keep up to date with MEF work, using a borrowed laptop to write letters onto floppy discs, which were then given to my daughter to print and post. During this time I received letters of support from many people, including John Hunt and Chris Bonington, encouraging me not to give up my MEF work. This was excellent advice, and gave me a reason to get up each morning.

The Duke of Edinburgh has been patron of the MEF from day one, and I have had the honour of meeting him on several occasions. The first was in 2003 when he and the Queen joined us in celebrating the fiftieth anniversary of the first ascent of Everest. We were arranged in groups around a sumptuous room in Spencer House. Unfortunately, the edge of the carpet became caught up in my wheels, and I was busy trying to untangle things when I suddenly became aware of a tall figure looking down on me.

'You don't need to back away from me,' he said.

Forgetting the detailed instructions we had received on how to address royalty, I replied: 'Oh, hello there!'

In fact, Philip could usually be relied on to have a (not always tactful) cheery quip. In December 2011 a reception for 'explorers' to celebrate the centenary of Captain Scott's trip to the South Pole was held at Buckingham Palace. All attendees were provided with cards bearing their names and professions, which were read out by a palace official as they reached the head of the queue to meet the Queen and Duke. On learning that Malcolm Bass was a clinical psychologist, Prince Philip commented: 'You've come to the right place.' And at the 60th anniversary of Everest's first ascent, he met a number of people who had been closely associated with Everest expeditions, including Jan Morris who – as James Morris – had been *The Times* correspondent on the 1953 expedition. Moving on, he met Ronald Faux, who held a similar position on the army expedition of 1975. Prince Philip asked Ronnie: 'Has anything interesting happened to you since Everest?'

In 1987, I received a letter from a New Zealand publishing company enclosing a complimentary copy of a newly published book entitled

The Story of Everest National Park. At that time, the book was only available within New Zealand, but the letter offered further copies to the MEF at a very favourable rate, with profits to go to the Foundation if I would act as their UK agent. After discussion with the C of M, it was agreed I should investigate further and, if a viable proposition, I should import one hundred copies to sell for a figure that would ensure a reasonable profit for the MEF.

Although possibly outside my terms of reference, this was the first of a number of minor fund-raising schemes in which I was involved, with the three-fold aim of raising the profile of the MEF, celebrating outstanding expeditions and educating those who might want to go on future trips. In the early 1990s it was agreed that the MEF should initiate a series of annual lecture evenings. Although the first of these was originally intended to take place at the RGS, due to confusion over costs it was held in the Alpine Club in January 1992, and titled 'Mountain Expeditions of 1991', with the leaders of four very different trips talking about their achievements.

To avoid becoming too much of a drain on resources, for future events – held at various universities, Newcastle (1993), Sheffield (1994), Glasgow (1995), Bath (1996) and Manchester (2007) – I managed to raise some sponsorship. I had started work on a similar evening to be held at Oxford Brookes in January 1998, but had to hand over to other committee members when I went into hospital for my spinal operation in May 1997 and was still recovering in January, so could not even attend as a guest. In 2000, these events were to some extent replaced by a regular slot at the Kendal Mountain Film Festival.

In 1994, its 50th anniversary, each place setting at the annual dinner of the British Mountaineering Council included a specially engraved (but fully functional) souvenir karabiner. With the 50th anniversary of the first ascent of Everest looming, it occurred to me that if suitable terms could be agreed a similar karabiner could be sold to raise funds for the MEF: once more the C of M agreed. The inscription was '1953 – EVEREST – 2003' and until all one hundred were sold, I could be seen wearing a 'necklace' of karabiners whenever I attended mountain events like the Kendal festival.

After several years of negotiations, in November 2008 a settlement was finally reached regarding the photographs taken on Everest expeditions between 1921 and 1953. As part of the compensation for allowing the RGS to retain ownership of the photographs in perpetuity, it was agreed that the MEF would receive free use of the Ondaatje Theatre for one evening a year. This allowed the MEF to institute an annual fund-raising evening, which it has done ever since, sometimes linking up with other bodies, like the Himalayan Trust UK in 2013.

While I have thoroughly enjoyed my work for the MEF, I'm flattered to say that my efforts have not gone unnoticed. In 1999 I was granted honorary fellowship of the Royal Geographical Society and following nomination by the BMC, in 2002 I received a Torch Trophy Trust Award, which was presented by Princess Alexandra at a ceremony held in The Queen's Club. A few years later I was elected to honorary membership of the Alpine Club.

ANDY MACNAE

The Future of the MEF

Since its inception in the aftermath of Everest 1953, the Mount Everest Foundation has granted well over £1m to expeditions exploring and pushing the boundaries in virtually every mountain region on Earth. Key first ascents supported include new routes on Everest, Kangchenjunga, Annapurna, Shishapangma, Changabang, Nanga Parbat, Xuelian and the Ogre as well as many lightweight trips that have pushed forward the boundaries of modern mountaineering. Over 1,600 expeditions have benefited and many would not have happened without MEF support.

But it is always good for an organisation to occasionally take a look at itself and ask if it's doing as well as it could. Last year, when the MEF Committee of Management pondered this question, it appeared as though the answer might well be: 'not quite.' For one thing the number of grant applications was down on where it was at the start of the millennium; in particular we were seeing fewer applications from younger teams and first-time applicants. At the same time the MEF fund was growing and as a charity we needed to ask whether we were doing enough to get funding where it was needed. And then there were a number of governance questions around whether we were following best practice. So with all this in mind we did what any committee worth its salt would do and launched a review. And having been banging on about all this for some time I got the pleasure of co-ordinating it and along with some willing colleagues, pulled together everyone's views into some recommendations.

Importantly, the MEF committed to consider everything and anything; this gave us the licence to ask some challenging questions. Sometimes you need to play devil's advocate. One deliberately challenging question posed was: 'Does the MEF matter anymore?' It was revealing to see just how passionate responses were. On one hand we could point to the decline in application numbers and, most importantly, a general feeling among members of the committee that many expeditions would have happened with or without MEF support; at the same time policy limited what we could do for really ambitious trips. On the other hand we can always point to genuinely innovative and exploratory trips still happening today that epitomise what the MEF is all about.

So in asking questions like this we were trying to focus on what difference the MEF should be making in the future. We agreed we want to see MEF funding making the difference between expeditions going and not going, and helping climbers and scientists think about ambitious trips to places that they couldn't otherwise afford. And so the key review question to us was