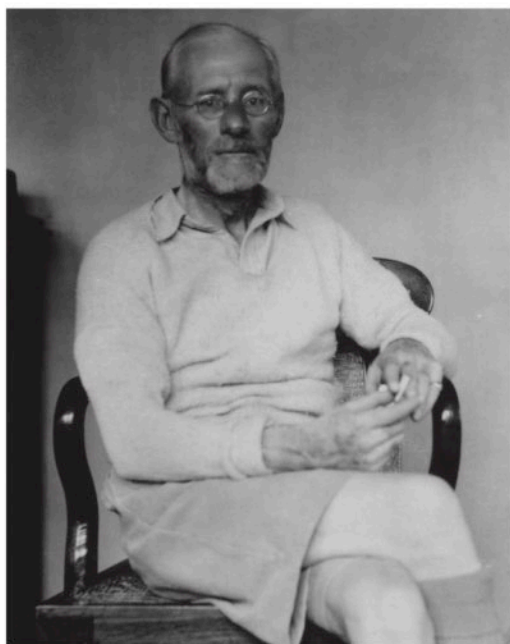

PETER FOSTER

Everest 1936

The Leadership Question Re-visited



Hugh Ruttledge, 1936. (*Alpine Club Photo Library*)

The controversy surrounding who should lead the expedition to Everest in 1936 exposed deep divisions of opinion amongst those who cared and a bumbling Mount Everest Committee (MEC) responsible for the choice. Walt Unsworth, in his magisterial history of climbing on Everest, concluded that the re-appointment of Hugh Ruttledge as leader had been a 'sordid' business' and review of minute books and unpublished correspondence between some of the principal protagonists, on which this article is based, reveals new detail but does little to alter that view. The affair's significance was that it triggered an attempt to reform relations between the Alpine Club and the MEC and modernise the approach to climbing Everest. The disappointing outcome was that nothing really changed.

Ruttledge was 48 and recently retired from the Indian Civil Service when he led the 1933 expedition. A mountain traveller but with limited climbing experience, he had not been the first choice. The MEC's preference and



An expedition postcard of the 1922 Everest team including Colin Crawford, top left. *Back row from left to right: C G Crawford, A W Wakefield, G L Mallory, T H Somervell, E F Norton, H T Morshead. Front row left to right: E L Strutt, C G Bruce, T G Longstaff, G I Finch. (Alpine Club Photo Library)*

habit had been to despatch expeditions under military command but its favoured candidates, Brig Edward Norton and Maj Geoffrey Bruce, had been unavailable. But, despite the expedition's failure, the leadership of this unassuming and amiable man had, apparently, satisfied the committee which, in the expectation of another expedition in the following year, re-appointed him as leader:

Dr Longstaff's motion that Mr Hugh Ruttledge should be appointed Leader of the next expedition was seconded by Brigadier Norton and carried unanimously by the Committee.²

Tom Longstaff was Ruttledge's friend – they had travelled together in the Himalaya – and his support was crucial, for he enjoyed considerable influence. His achievements as a mountain explorer – ranging across the Caucasus, the Himalaya, Tibet, the Canadian Rockies, Spitzbergen and Greenland, as well as accompanying the 1922 Everest expedition as medical officer – had gained him a deserved reputation and much respect. Small in stature, spare in frame, with a big red moustache and latterly a beard, he was never afraid to say what he thought. But Longstaff harboured misgivings concerning Ruttledge's leadership. He had heard mutterings of disquiet from members of the 1933 expedition: 'at least half-a-dozen of them said he had poor judgement.'³ On learning that Ruttledge had been talking of dropping the likes of Jack Longland, Eric Shipton and Lawrence Wager, he grew indignant, for if there had been one success of the 1933 expedition

Tom Longstaff in 1947.
(Alpine Club Photo Library)

it was that there now existed a number of young men with experience of climbing above the North Col who could form the nucleus of any future expedition, and he withdrew his support.

In practice, the team for Everest in 1933 had been picked by the MEC and Ruttledge left to manage it. 'Very soon' he had realised 'the party was not very well assorted'⁴ and set himself 'the task of trying to run the party by persuasion rather than ordinance.'⁵ This experience of expedition leadership led Ruttledge to become 'absolutely convinced that if you can get hold of a good type of soldier who is a good mountaineer, you have the best material

for Everest,'⁶ a telling but surprising conclusion given that the actions of two soldiers, Capt E St J 'Bill' Birnie (Sam Browne's Cavalry) and Maj Hugh Boustead (Sudan Camel Corps), had caused delay in establishing camp five and arguably cost the success of the expedition. By contrast, 'the modern British school of rock-climbers' did not 'provide the material we want for Everest. Most of them are just gymnasts; bad travellers; a mutual admiration society, disliking outsiders and hating discipline'.⁷ Longstaff, whose instinct was to back youth and enterprise, was dismayed:

*Things did not work out as I had hoped ... I told him frankly that I did not think he was playing the game, and I was sorry I was unable to support him any more on the MEC.*⁸

Ruttledge's letter tendering his resignation from the leadership was received and accepted by the MEC on 15 March 1934. According to the minutes of the meeting, 'the only reason' why the committee had accepted his resignation was 'the doubt whether any expedition would be possible for a number of years.' At the same meeting and at Longstaff's instigation, the members of the committee^a agreed to 'place themselves in the hands of the bodies which had respectively nominated them and ... ask the RGS and AC to reconstitute the committee by nominating three representatives from each body.'⁹ Longstaff, who had agitated consistently for the climbers



a. E H Bradby, Brig C G Bruce, Adm Sir W Goodenough and Sir F Younghusband.



Sir Percy Cox, c1930. (RGS)

having an increased say, wrote to Sir John Withers, president of the AC, expressing his view on the composition of the new MEC:

I think it is vital that AC committee should maintain control ... As long as you put Crawford on the new committee the AC would be kept fully informed of the happenings – which is all I want to insure for the future.¹⁰

Colin Crawford, 43, ex-Indian Civil Service, strongly built, enthusiastic and with a 'mischievous humour', had been a member of the expeditions to Everest in 1922 and 1933. On both occasions he had been slow to acclimatise but in 1933

had worked hard in support, making half a dozen trips to resupply camp four at 6,950m. Significantly, he was also one of the expedition's members whose criticisms of Ruttledge's leadership had reached Longstaff's ears.

The reconstituted MEC met on 23 May 1934. Representing the Royal Geographical Society were: Maj Gen Sir Percy Cox, soldier-diplomat and current president of the RGS, who was voted chairman, Lt Col Kenneth Mason, soldier, surveyor and recently appointed to the chair of geography at Oxford, and Lawrence Wager who, with Percy-Wyn Harris, had reached 8,595m on Everest the year before. The AC appointed: Lt Col Edward Strutt, who would assume the presidency of the Club at the end of the year, Ruttledge and Crawford. The first item on the agenda was to approve the minutes of the previous meeting, which none of the new committee had attended, and if they were read out rather than nodded through, some members were not paying attention: Cox would later complain to Longstaff that he had been unaware of Ruttledge's resignation from the leadership.^b

Six months later, at the beginning of 1935, the MEC received news that the Tibetan government was likely to grant permission for an expedition in 1935 or 1936. A meeting was called at short notice and Crawford was unable to attend. Ruttledge spoke authoritatively and 'proposed that application should be made for both years; that a small expedition should go out in June ... main expedition in 1936' and undertook to 'do his utmost in the next few days to make an estimate for an advance party in 1935.'¹¹

b. Beneath Cox's signature approving the minutes, there is an exculpatory, pencilled addendum, initialled by him, which states: 'Sir PZC was not present at the meeting of 15/3/34 but signed at next meeting.'

Go fish. Colin Crawford, strongly built, enthusiastic and with a 'mischievous humour', with friend in India during the 1933 expedition. He would bear the brunt of the Mount Everest Committee's fury at moves against Ruttledge. (RGS)



There was no discussion about who would lead the expeditions and there appears to have been a tacit assumption it would be Ruttledge, his earlier resignation forgotten or ignored. Yet when the committee met on 31 January 1935 the issue of leadership dominated proceedings. Ruttledge, who must have had an inkling of what was afoot, absented himself.

Tom Brocklebank and Raymond Greene, both members of the 1933 expedition, had been invited to attend in order 'to assist the Committee in its deliberations on how the experience of 1933 and previous expeditions should suggest improvement in the organization of future expeditions'.¹² Brocklebank's selection for the expedition had resulted from a chance meeting with Longstaff at the Athenaeum, not the Alpine Club where such meetings might have been expected to occur, and exemplifies Longstaff's influence and the importance of the old-boy network. As Brocklebank later admitted, 'I was a complete amateur and chosen quite wrongly in every possible way.'¹³ Greene, who had reached the summit of Kamet in 1931, had been selected as a climber and principal medical officer. Both men spoke with the same voice, Greene summing up the views of the younger members of the expedition:

*[Ruttledge] is too nice a man to be a good leader ... In the opinion of many members his leadership was weak.*¹⁴

Longstaff, 'who had been expressing strong views on the question of the leadership of the expedition,' was also asked to attend the meeting because Cox considered it was 'only fair to the Committee that Dr Longstaff put these views before them, seeing that they differed materially from those which he had previously expressed as a member of the MEC.'¹⁵ Longstaff reminded the committee that Ruttledge had relinquished the leadership nine months earlier and advised that his replacement should be chosen after consultation with the climbers: 'These are the people whose opinion ought to be known to this Committee if the ideal of a really homogenous party is

to be attained.¹⁶ Nonplussed, the committee decided that: ‘in view of the statements made that afternoon impugning the leadership of Mr Ruttledge it would be necessary for the Committee to give the matter urgent and anxious consideration [and] it was resolved that Mr Ruttledge should be informed of this without delay.’¹⁷ Ruttledge withdrew from the leadership for a second time, observing resignedly to Sydney Spencer, honorary secretary of the MEC:

*the young men ... are the products of their time and, as you know, the young men of today are primarily critical. It is in his blood to criticize anyone of the War or pre-War period. I don't believe there is an atom of personal ill will in all this. But unfortunately since we came home there has been a lot of wild talking and that always breeds trouble.*¹⁸

Predictably, the MEC looked to the military for an alternative leader but Norton, Bruce and Maj Gen Roger Wilson were unavailable. Strutt and Mason turned to each other and neither was prepared to go. Longstaff was asked: ‘what an astounding message I got on the phone – suggesting I [underlined] should lead the Everest show,’ and responded by throwing his weight behind Crawford: ‘that’s who the climbers want. Not a military outsider.’¹⁹ Although Crawford would later claim: ‘I do not consider I should make a good leader of an Everest expedition,’²⁰ his view that neither would Ruttledge was not entirely disinterested. Remarkably, Ruttledge allowed himself to be persuaded to reconsider accepting the leadership and the scene was set for a contest between the two. The voting members of the committee split evenly: Strutt and Wager for Crawford; Cox and Mason for Ruttledge, who was appointed on Cox’s casting vote. Unsurprisingly, Ruttledge wasted no time in informing Crawford that he should not expect an invitation to join the expedition.

Crawford reacted intemperately, accusing Ruttledge of ‘personal ambition’²¹ and disingenuousness: ‘you snatched at the opportunity of slurring over your resignation,’²² and his supporters waded in. ‘Smythe showed me a letter from Longland, a most bitter one [and] I’ve had a horrid letter from Brocklebank too,’ Ruttledge informed his ally, Mason, and ‘Strutt tells me that TGL [Longstaff] continues his dementia, but it’s not confined to TGL.’ Furthermore, Ruttledge had ‘evidence that Crawford is continuing his malignant activities’²³ and suspected that he had ‘corrupted’ Longstaff and poisoned their friendship. The usually equable Ruttledge had had enough:

*I will not have my honour impeached by Crawford ... Nothing can excuse his continued abuse and intrigue after the question of the leadership was decided. I will have nothing more to do with him.*²⁴

He wrote to Cox ‘asking that the Committee should tackle Crawford in the open’ and to Strutt to ‘change the representation of the Club’, meaning



The 1933 Everest Expedition at Phari, Tibet. *Back row (L to R):* Smyth-Windham, Greene, Wood-Johnson, Brocklebank, British trade agent at Gyantse Capt A Russell, Shipton, McLean, Smythe, Thompson, Wyn-Harris. *Middle row:* Ruttledge, Shebbeare. *Front row:* Longland, Birnie, Wager, Crawford, Boustead. (RGS)

to replace Crawford.²⁵ Cox responded by politely inviting Crawford to resign from the MEC:

*Having regard to the views which you hold as to the leadership and the personality of that leader, it seems to me as Chairman that you should not continue to be a Member of the Committee ... I feel bound now to ask you to consider the propriety of resigning.*²⁶

Crawford, unwilling to roll over sought support from the AC Committee and Strutt, now president of the Club, asked Cox to come before the committee to present his case.

Sir Percy Zachariah Cox, GCMG, GCIE & c, had spent almost 25 years as a resident or chief political officer in the Gulf region, his career culminating in his appointment, in 1920, as high commissioner to the newly formed state of Iraq, where he had played a principal role in forming the government and installing Feisal as king. Patient, courteous, inscrutable – it was said he could remain silent in a dozen languages – and with a ‘Wellingtonian’ presence, he had proved a formidable negotiator and administrator. An amateur ornithologist and keen horseman – he would die on the hunting field – he knew nothing of mountaineering. Mason considered him ‘a good judge of men’; Longland described him as ‘a deeply deceitful diplomatic old soldier.’²⁷



Running on empty: Percy Wyn-Harris tests closed-circuit oxygen apparatus at Thangu (3692m) in Sikkim on the way to Everest in 1936. (*Alpine Club Photo Library*)

‘Cox took rather a “pro-consular” attitude and was pretty direct,’ recalled Mason, and ‘would brook no interruption.’²⁸ After giving his version of the events leading to Rutledge’s appointment as leader, Cox addressed the issue of Crawford’s resignation. Ignoring a protest concerning the propriety of reading extracts from private letters, he quoted from Crawford’s letters to Rutledge and concluded:

In my view, Gentlemen, no Chairman of any Committee with a policy to carry out and work to

*do could possibly tolerate the presence on his Committee of an individual who comported himself in this way.*²⁹

The AC Committee deliberated. Charles Meade, who had been a member of the original MEC in 1921 and was now vice-president of the Club, proposed the motion that Crawford resign his membership of the MEC with the significant proviso, ‘on the understanding that the whole question of the relationship between the MEC and the AC Committee be reconsidered before any expedition subsequent to 1936 sets out.’³⁰ Tom Graham Brown seconded the motion, which was duly passed.

Almost immediately, Meade had second thoughts. Cox’s account of Rutledge’s appointment had glossed over the disquiet expressed by members of the 1933 expedition. His use of extracts and unwillingness to produce full letters hinted there had been something to hide. Meade suspected that the AC Committee, some of whom were ‘still breathless from the glamour of his [Cox’s] visitation,’³¹ had been duped. With Graham Brown’s agreement, he advised Crawford to defer his resignation but a week later Cox sacked Crawford, turning disquiet and suspicion into a furore. ‘It is an incredible gangster melodrama. As far as I can make out the plot is to save the face of the Mt. Everest committee by blackening Crawford’s,’³² wrote Longstaff. Meade, now convinced that Cox had ‘behaved like a shit,’³³ sought the AC Committee’s endorsement of his action in advising Crawford not to resign, arguing that Cox had treated Crawford with ‘discourtesy and unfairness’, and that reading extracts from private letters in support of a charge was

'a dubious expedient'.³⁴ Defeated in a vote, Meade resigned from the Committee, together with Graham Brown, Crawford and Longland. Crawford who felt he had been hung out to dry made a final and pathetic statement:

*I have been impugned ... When a man is attacked by powerful and unscrupulous forces if those in a position to protest do not do so, they cannot avoid responsibility. It seems then, I can in no circumstances have any redress. Can you therefore criticize me, gentlemen, because as a last protest, I have resigned this Committee?*³⁵

But it did not quite end there. Graham Brown with characteristic tenacity requested a legal opinion of Cox's action from the master of the rolls, Lord Wright,^c who declined to comment: one trusts he had more important matters to consider. Longstaff continued his plotting by recruiting to the cause George Finch, who had had his own disputes with the MEC.^d At the Club's AGM on 9 December 1935 Longstaff drew Finch aside, showed him the list of likely candidates for the planned expedition, and asked for his opinion. Finch responded:

*I told Longstaff that I considered the relative climbing strength too low, that I was fed up with such evident mismanagement and that I would give notice of a motion of no confidence in the Everest Committee.*³⁶

But it was too late to change the team for Everest. On 1 February 1936, Ruttledge and the advance party set sail for India. However, the goal of enhancing the Alpine Club's role in the conduct of any future attempts on Everest, should they be required, remained.

Finch put down a motion, which, if approved, would have transferred influence from the Club's Committee to the membership. Strutt tried to dissuade him but, as Finch recalled, 'if anything had been wanting to spur me on, Strutt's implied challenge "there's no chance of your motion being adopted" was irresistible.'³⁷ Introducing the motion, he pointed out that the ascent of Everest was now predominantly a matter for mountaineers and argued that the responsibility for organising future expeditions should lie with a committee of experts in mountaineering, as opposed to explorers and scientists. And 'since mountain climbing is peculiarly the business of the Club these experts should be representatives chosen by this Club.'³⁸ Scott Russell, who was present, explained what happened next.

Colonel Strutt, the president, was in the chair. Giving no opportunity for anyone else to speak, he said that George's motion would have the useful effect he had

c. Robert Wright (1869-1964). Elected in 1910, he was also a member of the Alpine Club. In 1945 he was appointed chairman of the United Nations War Crimes Commission which collected the material for the charges at the Nuremberg trials.

d. Excluded at the last minute from the 1921 expedition on the basis of a sloppy and possibly tendentious medical report, Finch reached 8320m on Everest the following year but was not invited on the 1924 expedition.

*suggested, and then went further. He assured the Club that its committee would examine the organization of future expeditions and report back to the Club. That was exactly what the critics of the old Everest Committee had wished for years ... the discussion ended with speed and apparent harmony.*³⁹

Longstaff, who must have thought he had finally won the argument, wrote delightedly to Finch:

*I must write a line of congratulation to you for the magnificent way in which you carried through a very difficult part on Tuesday ... it will not be possible with impunity to bluff the Club again.*⁴⁰

A lull followed, but once news of the failure of the 1936 expedition reached England the campaign to change the MEC's approach went public. Meade attacked first, writing to *The Times* on 19 June to argue in favour of a smaller expedition: 'the perfect model for Everest expeditions is not far to seek, for it is to be found in Mr Shipton's reconnaissance expedition of 1935.' Longstaff followed up with a letter making the same points. In October, commenting on the attempts on Everest in an interview to the *Morning Post*, Finch famously said, 'we are beginning to look ridiculous.' A few weeks later, Graham Brown, fresh from the comparatively small and successful expedition to Nanda Devi, added his criticism in an article for *The Times*:

*These extravagant and formal affairs, with their publicity, their cohorts of trained porters, their armies of coolies, their squadrons of yaks, and their small achievement have caused most of us to wonder what mountaineering is coming to and whether failure may not be inherent in the method.*⁴¹

As he had promised, Strutt convened a special committee to advise how the AC should bring its influence to bear on the MEC. The great and good were represented by: Sir Claud Schuster, a quintessential civil servant^e, who would succeed Strutt in the presidency; Sir Leonard Pearce, eminent electrical engineer who had designed and overseen the construction of Battersea power station; and Brig Edward Norton. Longstaff and Meade spoke for the modernisers and were 'surprised' by their co-members' 'friendly' response to their views. Meade reported to Graham Brown with satisfaction:

*Findings were unanimous ... AC representatives to be elected to the Everest Committee in similar fashion to the members of the AC Committee and to be representatives not mere nominees ... It is suggested with the consent of the RGS, the Chairman of the Everest Committee should be an experienced mountaineer. Small expedition was also recommended.*⁴²

e. The title of Schuster's biography, 'Yes, Chancellor', is a nod to the popular 1980s television series, 'Yes, Minister,' in which the cynical permanent secretary, Sir Humphrey Appleby, ran rings around his political master.

The revamped MEC retained a familiar look, however, comprising the stalwarts, the brigadiers Bruce and Norton, Longstaff, who had been recalled, Mason and James Wordie, more an Arctic explorer than mountaineer who had joined the committee *vice* Wager, and Wager himself, now returned from his year-long expedition to Greenland. Greene was the only newcomer. All were members of the AC. This committee oversaw the organisation of the 1938 expedition under Tilman's leadership, undeniably smaller and cheaper – to the point of frugality, some said – than its predecessors and also unsuccessful.

After the Second World War, the MEC was reconstituted as the Joint Himalayan Committee and reverted to its old structure: the presidents and secretaries of the AC and RGS, *ex officio*, two members each from the AC and RGS, plus a representative of the Himalayan Club, with the result that the committee was populated by men of distinction but whose management skills would be found wanting. In 1952 the committee comprised: Claude Elliott, chairman, president of the AC and provost of Eton, whose climbing days were long past; Wordie, now president of the RGS; Lawrence Kirwan, director and secretary of the RGS, who was not a mountaineer, his main interest being the archaeology of the Sudan; Sir Claremont Skrine, also a non-mountaineer, ex-British consul in Kashgar who had travelled widely in Central Asia; George Lowndes, a former colonel in the Garhwal Rifles and more a plant-hunter than a mountaineer; Harry Tobin, 'elder statesmen' of Himalayan travel and at 73 the oldest member; Wager, now professor of geology at Oxford; Peter Lloyd, who in 1938 had reached 8,230m on Everest using supplementary oxygen; and Basil Goodfellow, senior executive of ICI, a competent alpinist and honorary secretary of the AC. It was, as Unsworth observed, 'the final flowering of the Old Guard.'⁴³ When the committee was faced with sacking Eric Shipton as leader of the 1953 expedition and replacing him with John Hunt, unseemly wrangling and vacillation characterised its actions, as Kirwan recalled: 'if ever there was a case of the right thing done in the wrong way it was this.'⁴⁴

Plus ça change.

Acknowledgements

I thank the National Library of Scotland and the Royal Geographical Society (with IBG) for permission to reproduce quotations from unpublished material in their possession.

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