

# EVEREST

## 1953

THE EPIC  
STORY OF  
THE FIRST  
ASCENT

MICK  
CONEFREY



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To  
*Stella Bruzzi*

*What a strange and thrilling thing we have let loose – a very wonderful experience awaits us, if we don't lose our heads.*

John Hunt's Diary, 3 June 1953

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## Prologue

# OUR MOUNTAIN

For British climbers of the 1920s and 1930s, Everest was, quite simply, 'our mountain'. It didn't matter that it was over 4500 miles away on the border of two of the most remote countries in the world, countries that weren't even part of the British Empire. To paraphrase the poet Rupert Brooke, it was a foreign field that would be forever England. The British had measured it, named it, photographed it, flown over it and died on it. And so they assumed that one day a British mountaineer would be first to its summit.

Everest was measured in the mid-nineteenth century. It stands in the middle of the Himalayas, on the border of Nepal and Tibet and like many mountains, marks both a physical and a political boundary. Even though none of the surveyors ever set foot on its slopes, the Great Trigonometric Survey of British India was able to measure its height with astonishing accuracy from observation points over one hundred miles away. They estimated it to be 29,002 ft, 27 ft shorter than the current official height.<sup>1</sup> Breaking with convention, instead of retaining its local name, Chomolungma, they christened it Mount Everest, in honour of George Everest, a former chief surveyor. Good geographer that he was, George Everest was not so keen on this act of cartographic piracy but the name stuck.

At about the same time, the sport of mountaineering was growing in the European Alps. British climbers were very competitive, making first ascents of many peaks in Switzerland and France and, in 1857, establishing the world's first mountaineering society, the Alpine Club. Within a few years most of the high mountains of the Alps had been climbed and the more enthusiastic mountaineers had begun to look further afield for new challenges.

In 1895, Albert Mummery led a small expedition to Nanga Parbat, in modern-day Pakistan, the ninth-highest mountain in the world. His pioneering attempt ended in disaster when he and two Ghurkha assistants were killed by an avalanche. Albert Mummery's death did not act as a deterrent. Soon thoughts turned to Everest, the highest mountain in the world and therefore the greatest prize.

For men like Lord George Curzon, the Viceroy of India between 1899 and 1905, climbing Everest was almost a national duty. He called Britain the home of 'the mountaineers and pioneers *par excellence* of the universe' and actively campaigned for a British expedition under the auspices of the Alpine Club and the Royal Geographical Society (RGS), which was set up in 1830 to promote exploration and advance geographical science. The two organisations joined forces to create the Everest Committee, to administer and raise funds for a British expedition.

Initially, it was hard to get permission from either Tibet or Nepal. Both, in theory, were closed kingdoms, which refused to allow foreigners to cross their borders. But such was Britain's military power and prestige in the region that eventually the Tibetan government agreed to allow a British team to make the first reconnaissance of the north side of Everest in 1921. And so began what Sir Francis Younghusband called the 'Epic of Everest'.

The reconnaissance expedition came back with mixed news. Everest was isolated, awesome and intimidating but not totally impossible. In 1922 and 1924 there were two large-scale attempts

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on the mountain. Both followed the same route to the northern side of Everest, via India and Tibet; both were remarkably successful, considering their very primitive equipment. In 1922 George Finch and Captain J.G. Bruce reached 27,300 ft and in 1924 Edward Norton reached 28,140 ft, less than 1000 ft from the summit. When two British climbers on the same expedition, George Mallory and Andrew Irvine, disappeared close to the top, there was speculation that they might have reached the summit and perished on the descent.

The deaths of Mallory and Irvine further reinforced the idea of Britain's special link to Everest, as Sir William Goodenough, the president of the RGS, wrote to the Secretary of State for India in 1931:

*The [Everest] Committee feel that the fact that two bodies of our countrymen lie still at the top, or very near it, may give this country a priority in any attempt that may be made to reach the summit.<sup>2</sup>*

Tibet banned any attempts between 1925 and 1932 but granted permission for a fourth British Everest expedition in 1933. Once again it was remarkably successful, with three climbers reaching roughly the same point as Edward Norton. The final 1000 ft, however, proved to be a challenge too far. There were three more British expeditions in the 1930s but none got anywhere near the summit. A tone of desperation crept into British rhetoric, epitomised in a letter written by Sir Percy Cox, the Secretary of the Everest Committee, to the latest Secretary of State for India, in 1934:

*Owing to the number of assaults which have been made upon the mountain in the past exclusively by British expeditions, the final conquest of the mountain has become practically a national ambition ... correspondingly it would be a national humiliation were the final ascent*

*to be able to be allowed to pass to the nationals of any other country by reason of any slackening of interest on our part or lack of vigilance.*<sup>3</sup>

There was no official policy of banning anyone, nothing so crude, but effectively Britain had a monopoly over Everest because of its relationship with the Tibetan government and, perhaps more importantly, because it controlled travel through India. Climbers from other countries were welcome to try other Himalayan giants but no one ever succeeded in getting permission for Everest. Germany sent a series of expeditions to Nanga Parbat; Italians and Americans made attempts on K2 but Everest was 'our mountain'. It was the kind of gentlemen's agreement that favoured British gentlemen.

The Second World War changed everything. Britain emerged weakened and wounded. The new bipolar world had room for only two global superpowers: the United States and the Soviet Union. In 1947 the British Empire suffered a body blow when India, the so-called 'jewel in the crown', gained its independence. The British Raj gave way to the Republic of India and the Dominion of Pakistan. Within a decade Union Jacks were coming down all over the former British Empire. Britain's influence in Asia did not disappear overnight but its power was significantly diminished.

In the same year the Dalai Lama, Tibet's spiritual and political leader, announced that he was closing its borders after a very poor horoscope had predicted that he would be threatened by outsiders. Three years later the prophecy came true when his country was invaded by communist China. Mao's new revolutionary government was no friend to Britain and it would be many years before any British climbing party was allowed back into Tibet.

In the same period, however, something remarkable happened. Nepal, which had for decades been as hostile to foreigners as Tibet, tentatively began to open up to the outside world. In 1949 it allowed British and Swiss parties to make exploratory expeditions to its

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mountains and in 1950 a small American trekking party was given permission to visit the Everest region.

This book is the story of what happened next, beginning with the British Everest reconnaissance expedition of 1951 and the little-known training expedition to Cho Oyu in the following year, before focusing in detail on the events of 1953.

It is based on diaries, letters, memoirs and a variety of other archival material, as well as interviews with the participants and their families carried out over the last ten years. Its aim is two-fold: first to give the inside story of the expedition, both for the climbers and Sherpas on the mountain and the large number of other people who played crucial roles in the background. Second, it is an examination of the way that this major event was reported at the time and the myths and misconceptions that have grown up in the years since.

Foremost among the modern myths is that the first ascent of Everest was essentially made by two men: Edmund Hillary and Tenzing Norgay. No serious mountaineer has ever claimed this, and nor did Hillary or Tenzing, but over the years the rest of the team has been largely forgotten. Today newspapers and school textbooks regularly headline 'Hillary and Tenzing's ascent of Everest' and the others go unmentioned. Everest 1953 was a team effort, led by an exceptional leader, John Hunt. Hillary and Tenzing were at the apex of the pyramid but beneath them were the strong shoulders of many other men. They weren't even the first summit pair in 1953. If a small valve had not been damaged on an oxygen set, Charles Evans and Tom Bourdillon could well have beaten them to the prize.

The other myth that needs to be dispelled is that this was an expedition that ran with 'clockwork precision', 'like a military operation' as the clichés go. This again bears little resemblance to the truth. The British Everest expedition of 1953 was very well planned but far from being a smooth ride from conception to execution, it

was marked by controversy at the beginning and at the end and by frequent crises in the middle.

Everest 1953 was also an exceptional media story, with no comparison to any previous mountaineering expedition in the Himalayas or elsewhere. Not only were a reporter from *The Times* and a freelance cameraman embedded within the climbing team but dozens of other journalists from all over the world were assigned to cover the expedition. Most stayed back in Kathmandu; some braved the slopes of Everest itself. All had one aim: to scoop their rivals. In particular they wanted to steal the story from *The Times*, the expedition's principal sponsor. This fevered competition led to some outrageously dishonest reporting, some of which had a significant impact on events. Though much of it was motivated by opportunism and occasionally sheer spite, the media circus was a testament to the importance of the expedition. The three countries most closely involved in the story – Britain, Nepal and India – were at turning points in their history and because of this the Everest expedition assumed an importance much greater than anyone had ever anticipated. Crucial to the British story was an event which had nothing at all to do with the expedition but mattered enormously to how it was received: the coronation of Queen Elizabeth II. The seemingly magical coincidence of the news of the first ascent being published on coronation day turned the expedition into a hugely symbolic event.

The story begins two years earlier, long before the Queen proceeded up the nave of Westminster Abbey and Hillary and Tenzing became two of the most famous men on the globe. A young mountaineer decided that it was about time that Britain staged another Everest expedition. His first step was to visit a world-famous institution.