

Obituaries

Sir Edmund Hillary, (Fig. 1), who died on 11 January 2008 made the first ascent of Mount Everest and was one of the leaders of the Commonwealth Trans-Antarctic Expedition that performed the first transit of that continent in 1955–1958.

The ascent of Everest had been a challenge to mountaineers from 1892 when the mountaineer and surgeon Clinton Dent had pronounced: ‘I do not suggest that it would be wise to ascend Mount Everest, but I believe most firmly that it is humanly possible to do so.’ The first British expedition took place in 1921, but it was the disappearance of Andrew Irvine and George Mallory in 1924, last seen by their colleagues, still striding bravely upwards on the mountain’s skyline before cloud blotted them from view, that galvanised public interest in the mountain. In the end, after one of the best prepared and, under John Hunt, most resolutely led, expeditions to that date, it was for Hillary and Sherpa Tenzing to achieve the fame of being the first men in the world to stand on Everest’s summit on 29 May 1953. From that moment of glory, Hillary’s career opened out into a lifetime of adventure and of widening interest.

He remained seemingly untouched by any of the fame that accrued to him. His own laconic summary of his active life as merely a ‘constant battle against boredom’



Fig. 1. Sir Edmund Hillary (1919–2008).

only gave part of the picture and was typical of his innate modesty and of his dislike of cant.

Edmund Percival Hillary was born on 20 July 1919, at Auckland, New Zealand, into an old-established farming family. His mother, who had been a teacher, insisted on him remaining at Auckland Grammar School until he was 18, but after an unproductive two years at university he was allowed to come home to the open air life he loved, to work on the family bee farm. All his life, Hillary described himself as an ‘apiarist’ and remained in partnership with his brother in the business.

Physically he developed his great strength after a slow start as a small and shy child, but by the time he was called up for war service, in 1943, he was strong enough to upset the day’s work programme by moving a dump of artillery shells in half the time allotted for the task. In the World War II he served with the Royal New Zealand Air Force from 1944 to the end of hostilities, as a navigator of Catalina flying boats on reconnaissance patrols over the Pacific.

Hillary was an experienced climber in both the New Zealand and European Alps when, in 1951, he and his friend, George Lowe, with two others, embarked on an expedition to the Garwhal Himalaya. The party returned to base to receive an invitation for two of them to join Eric Shipton’s Everest reconnaissance, then on its way out to the Himalayas from England. Hillary and Earle Riddiford were the lucky ones, and from a point on Pumori, Shipton and Hillary had a view of Everest rising out of the Western Cwm, from which they were able to envisage a route up the mountain from Nepal. In the following year Hillary and Lowe accompanied Shipton’s Cho Oyu expedition and were picked as members of his team for the 1953 assault on Everest.

The substitution of Colonel John Hunt (later Lord Hunt), who was then unknown, for Shipton as leader of the expedition caused hard feelings which might have come more into the open had it not been for Shipton’s dignified withdrawal and his continued friendship with Hillary and other team members. In the event the decision to appoint Hunt instead of Shipton was justified by the skill with which the former handled his large team of the world’s most expert climbers, each with his own strong and disparate individuality. Hunt from the first regarded Hillary as a ‘very strong contender’ for the summit.

He was, Hunt recorded, ‘quite exceptionally strong and abounding in a restless energy, possessed of a thrusting mind which swept aside all unproved obstacles’. After the return, only 500ft short of the summit, of Tom Bourdillon and Charles Evans, Hillary and Sherpa

Tenzing went into action and reached the summit at 11.30am on 29 May 1953. They spent just 15 minutes there, during which Hillary took Tenzing's photograph, before descending.

The news broke in England on the morning of the Queen's Coronation, 2 June. It had broken earlier on the South Col of Everest, where George Lowe, waiting to meet them with hot soup, was greeted with Hillary's typically irreverent and cheerful shout of 'Well, George, we finally knocked the bastard off.' The rejoicing of British and Nepalese alike was only temporarily marred by the ill-natured and ill informed clamour concerning who had reached the top first.

Hillary's achievement was crowned not only by appointment as a Knight Commander of the Order of the British Empire (KBE), and by much public acclaim, but also by an exceptionally happy marriage that year to Louise Mary Rose of Auckland. They had a son and two daughters. Lady Hillary was an accomplished violinist and a woman of great vitality. Her death in 1975 in an aeroplane accident with their younger daughter, Belinda, hit her husband very hard. For his part Sherpa Tenzing was awarded the George Medal (GM) for his contribution to the expedition's success. He died in 1986.

Hillary's success on Everest established him overnight as an acknowledged leader in the competitive field of high-altitude mountaineering. In 1954 he led a New Zealand Alpine Club expedition to the Barun Valley east of Everest. His gallant rescue of a comrade left him with broken ribs and an acute attack of pneumonia, but he was soon fit enough again to take part in the Commonwealth Trans-Antarctic Expedition (1955–1958) led by Dr (later Sir) Vivian Fuchs.

This first overland traverse of Antarctica was combined with a strenuous scientific programme. Starting from Shackleton base on the Weddell Sea, the main party under Fuchs was to cross the continent (about 2,500 miles) by way of the American station at the South Pole, to Scott Base on the Ross Sea in the New Zealand sector. Hillary's task was to enlist New Zealand support for the project, to establish Scott Base, and to organise supply depots inland for the use of the crossing party on the second, longer lap of their journey. The entire success of the venture is part of polar history but it was not achieved quite as planned.

Instead of the main party's punctual arrival at the South Pole, while Hillary waited at the first depot on the home run, the New Zealanders, the first overlanders since Amundsen, drove their ramshackle Ferguson farm tractors into the American base two weeks before Fuchs rolled up in his stately purpose-built Sno-cats. But it should be noted that Hillary's route had been traversed before while Fuchs' was entirely unknown. Hillary's dash to the pole, driving the last 70 miles non-stop and with only 12 miles of petrol in hand, is one of the classics of polar adventure. But the charge that he risked the success of the whole project by going ahead with so little safety margin has never been entirely refuted.

Hillary received the Royal Geographical Society's Founder's Gold Medal for 1958, and in 1960 was back in the Everest region with an ambitious programme largely financed by the American publishers of encyclopaedias, Field Enterprises Educational, of which he was to become a director.

The aim was to search for the yeti or abominable snowman, carry out physiological research and climb some mountains. The Himalayan Scientific and Mountaineering Expedition of 1960–61 was perhaps too unwieldy to be a thorough success, and Hillary suffered a stroke and had to return temporarily to base. Out of it, however, developed the projects that were to become the abiding interest of his later years.

Everest lies in the homeland of the Sherpas, the hardy mountain people of the Sola Khumbu who had been porters, guides, hosts and friends to generations of British climbers. It seemed they wanted a school, and it instantly struck Hillary that 'here was an ideal way to repay the Sherpas for the help and pleasure they had given me'. The first school was built forthwith, and afterwards Hillary came back to the Sola Khumbu in 1963, 1964, 1965 and 1966, bringing his family and friends to help, taking part not only in fund-raising but also in the actual physical labour, aided by singing Sherpas, of constructing schools, hospitals, an airfield and a bridge. It was a tragedy that Louise and Belinda Hillary were subsequently killed on one of their visits to the Sola Khumba.

In 1967 Hillary was back in the Antarctic, scaling Mount Herschel on the western shore of the Ross Sea. In 1968 he explored in jet boats the rivers of eastern Nepal, making the first ascent of 180 miles of the Sun Kosi from the Indian border to Kathmandu.

Although one of New Zealand's most famous sons, Hillary took little part in public life. He was bored by the formality of government circles, and critical of politicians who seemed to him to care too little for the needs of the world outside their boundaries. Instead he worked effectively over the years as director of Field Educational Enterprises of Australasia and as consultant of sports equipment to the American firm Sears Roebuck.

He was president of the New Zealand Volunteer Service Abroad and interested himself in such diverse causes as family planning and race relations. Hillary had little grace of manner, being gruff and casual with strangers, but he came into his own in the field. Here the 'ebullient, restless Hillary', as George Lowe described him, retained basically the same spirit of adventure and fun, long after he became famous.

Hillary was the obvious choice to light the New Zealand bonfire in honour of the Queen Elizabeth's Silver Jubilee 25 years after he had stood on the roof of the world. He was appointed to the Order of New Zealand (ONZ), the summit of New Zealand's honours system, in 1987, the year in which the order was instituted by the Queen. He was appointed a Knight of the Garter (KG) in 1995.

A prolific author, Hillary published many books about his adventures. They included *High adventure* (1955), his account of the assault on Everest, and its precursors; (with George Lowe); *East of Everest* (1956), which described the 1954 New Zealand Alpine Club Himalayan Expedition to the Barun Valley; (with Sir Vivian Fuchs) *The crossing of Antarctica* (1958); *No latitude for error* (1961); (with Desmond Doig) *High in the thin cold air* (1963); *Schoolhouse in the clouds* (1965); the autobiography *Nothing venture, nothing win* (1975); *From the ocean to the sky: jet boating up the Ganges* (1980); (with Peter Hillary) *Two generations* (1983); and the autobiographical *Sargamatha: view from the summit* (1999).

In 1989 Hillary married June Mulgrew, widow of Peter Mulgrew, an old friend and fellow explorer who died in an air crash on Mount Erebus in Antarctica. Hillary's son Peter has become a notable mountaineer (climbing Everest twice) and explorer in his own right.

He is survived by his wife, and by his son and elder daughter, Sarah, of his first marriage.

Ian R. Stone

Roy Piggott, (Fig. 2) known simply as 'Piggott' to friends, family and colleagues alike, can justifiably claim to be the father of ionospheric research in Antarctica, and more

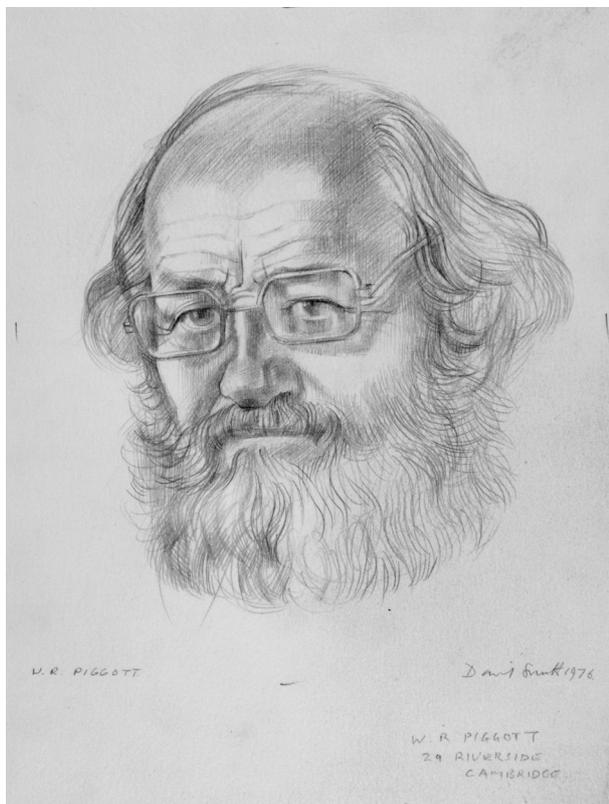


Fig. 2. Roy Piggott (1914–2008), a pencil sketch by David Smith.

generally he will be remembered for his clear insight into the importance of the Antarctic region as a laboratory for space and atmospheric science in general.

William Roy Piggott was born in Merton, South London in 1914, the oldest of five children, and educated at Royal Liberty School and King's College London. He began his career as research assistant to Sir Edward Appleton. He played an important role in WW II advising the military on radio communications, and immediately post-war led a colourful clandestine campaign in occupied Germany which led to the formation of the world famous Max-Planck-Institut für Aeronomie at Lindau. He was appointed OBE in 1953 for his wartime activities.

After the war Piggott worked in ionospheric research and communications at the DSIR Radio Research Station (RRS) at Ditton Park, Slough. He realised early in his career that the key to understanding the ionosphere globally would be found in studying its behaviour in the polar regions, and more specifically in Antarctica where the large offset between the geomagnetic and geographic poles provide extreme conditions not found elsewhere. He recognised the profound value of making observations in the Weddell Sea sector and was the prime mover in formulating and prosecuting the ionospheric programme for the Royal Society IGY Expedition to Halley Bay (1956–1958). Subsequently he provided the leadership and drive to keep the Falkland Islands Dependencies Survey (subsequently renamed the British Antarctic Survey, BAS) operating ionospheric experiments at several of its wintering stations, including Halley Bay. Whilst still a fulltime employee of RRS Piggott essentially ran the BAS programme, providing equipment, recruitment, training and supervising the field staff, and making certain that the data were fully utilised. He continued in this informal leadership role, supervising the research of many young field scientists until he retired from RRS (by then known as the Appleton Laboratory) in 1973. He then started a new career as founder head of the new Atmospheric Sciences Division at BAS.

In this new role he made two visits to Antarctica and was a very powerful advocate for the importance of Antarctica in general and Halley Station in particular as a laboratory for atmospheric science. Many young scientists both at home and overseas were inspired by his views encapsulated in a lecture entitled 'Why Antarctica', given in many fora and to widely diverse audiences. We have in large part his seminal thinking to thank for the continued UK investment in Antarctic Atmospheric research which has provided an outstanding research platform at Halley to this day, recognised very aptly by naming the laboratory there in his name.

As well as being an excellent scientist and a resourceful colleague, Piggott was a very nice man to know. He was unfailingly generous with his time, scientific insight and ideas. There are several generations of active scientists who owe their early training and success to Roy. He was

unstinting in his patience and kindness and very free with his ideas, probably too free for his own good!

In his retirement Piggott took up Chinese brush painting, trying to capture the essence of Antarctica through this unusual medium. He also devoted himself unselfishly to his wife Alison, during her final illness at the end of their 57 years of marriage. Piggott is survived by his daughters Carrie and Chrissie.

Everyone whose lives have been touched by Piggott has his or her own particular story about this lovable archetypal British eccentric. He was universally highly respected, and will be sorely missed by colleagues around the world. Piggott will live on through his humanity and his legacy to ionospheric physics.

John Dudeney