

## THE CONQUERORS

## HILLARY &amp; TENZING

By conquering Everest, the beekeeper and the Sherpa affirmed the power of humble determination—and won one for underdogs everywhere

By JAN MORRIS

**O**n May 29, 1953, Edmund Hillary of New Zealand and Tenzing Norgay of Nepal became the first human beings to conquer Mount Everest—Chomolungma, to its people—at 29,028 ft. the highest place on earth. By any rational standards, this was no big deal. Aircraft had long before flown over the summit, and within a few decades literally hundreds of other people from many nations would climb Everest too. And what is particularly remarkable, anyway, about getting to the top of a mountain?

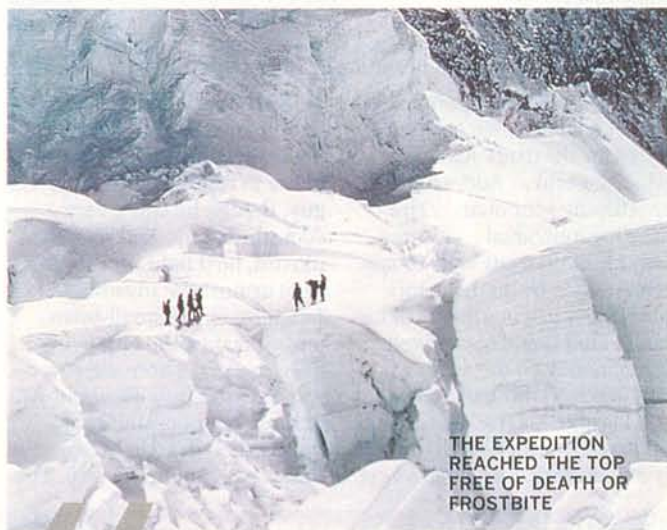
Geography was not furthered by the achievement, scientific progress was scarcely hastened, and nothing new was

discovered. Yet the names of Hillary and Tenzing went instantly into all languages as the names of heroes, partly because they really were men of heroic mold but chiefly because they represented so compellingly the spirit of their time. The world of the early 1950s was still a little punch-drunk from World War II, which had ended less than a decade before. Everything was changing. Great old powers were falling, virile new ones were rising, and the huge, poor mass of Asia and Africa was stirring into self-awareness. Hillary and Tenzing went to the Himalayas under the auspices of the British Empire, then recognizably in terminal decline. The expedition was the British Everest Expedition, 1953, and it was led by Colonel John Hunt, the truest of true English gentlemen. It was proper to the historical moment that one of the two

HILLARY, LEFT, AND TENZING, AMID THEIR HISTORIC CLIMB

climbers immortalized by the event came from a remote former colony of the Crown and the other from a nation that had long served as a buffer state of the imperial Raj.

I am sure they felt no Zeitgeist in them when they labored up the last snow slope to the summit. They were both very



THE EXPEDITION REACHED THE TOP FREE OF DEATH OR FROSTBITE

“Even on top of Everest, I was still looking at other mountains and thinking of how to climb them.”

SIR EDMUND HILLARY, in a 1993 SPORTS ILLUSTRATED interview

straightforward men. Tenzing was a professional mountaineer from the Sherpa community of the Everest foothills. After several expeditions to the mountain, he certainly wanted to get

to the top for vocational reasons, but he also planned to deposit in the highest of all snows some offerings to the divinities that had long made Chomolungma sacred to his people. Hillary was by profession a beekeeper, and he would have been less than human if he had not occasionally thought, buckling his crampons, that reaching the summit would make him famous.

They were not, though, heroes of the old epic kind, dedicated to colossal purposes, tight of jaw and stiff of upper lip. That was George Mallory, who said most famously in 1924 that he was climbing Mount Everest “because it is there.” But if he ever reached the summit, he never lived to tell the tale. Hillary and Tenzing were two cheerful and courageous fellows doing what they liked doing, and did, best,

**BORN** Tenzing, May 1914, in Solo Khumbu, Nepal; Hillary, July 20, 1919, in Auckland, New Zealand  
**1935** Charles Warren makes an unsuccessful assault on Everest—and the acquaintance of Tenzing, his Sherpa porter; Warren later introduces Tenzing to Hillary  
**1953** Hillary and Tenzing are the first to reach the summit of Mount Everest  
**1954** Tenzing becomes head of the Institute of Mountaineering in Darjeeling, India  
**DIED** Tenzing, on May 9, 1986, in Darjeeling



and they made an oddly assorted pair. Hillary was tall, lanky, big-boned and long-faced, and he moved with an incongruous grace, rather like a giraffe. He habitually wore on his head a homemade cap with a cotton flap behind, as seen in old movies of the French Foreign

of 1953. They were not in the least aggressive, except in a technical sense. They were considerable members of a team, and it was true to the temper of their adventure that Hillary's first words when he returned from the summit, to his fellow New Zealander George Lowe, were "Well, George, we've knocked the bastard off!"

**T**he real point of mountain climbing, as of most hard sports, is that it voluntarily tests the human spirit against the fiercest odds, not that

it achieves anything more substantial—or even wins the contest, for that matter. For the most part, its heroism is of a subjective kind. It was the fate of Hillary and Tenzing, though, to become very public heroes indeed, and it was a measure of the men that over the years they truly grew into the condition. Perhaps they thought that just being the first to climb a hill was hardly qualification for immortality; perhaps they instinctively realized their destiny had another place for them. For they both became, in the course of time, representatives not merely of their particular nations but of half of humanity. Astronauts might justly claim that they were envoys of all humanity; Hillary and Tenzing, in a less spectacular kind, came to stand for the small nations of the world, the young ones, the tucked-away and the up-and-coming.

Both, of course, were showered with worldly honors, and



IN KATMANDU, NEPAL, TENZING AND HILLARY CELEBRATE THEIR SUCCESSFUL ASCENT OF AND DESCENT FROM MOUNT EVEREST

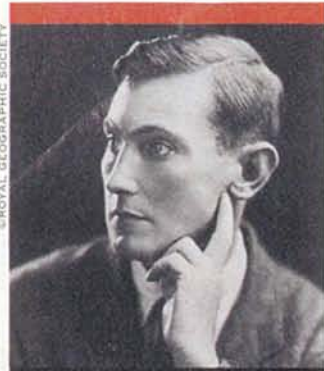
accepted them with aplomb. Both became the most celebrated citizens of their respective countries and went around the world on their behalf. But both devoted much of their lives to the happiness of an archetypically unprivileged segment of mankind: the Sherpas, Tenzing's people, true natives of the Everest region. Tenzing, who died in 1986, became their charismatic champion and a living model of their potential. Grand old Ed Hillary, who is still robustly with us, has spent years in their country supervising the building of airfields, schools and hospitals and making the Sherpas' existence better known to the world. Thus the two of them rose above celebrity to stand up for the unluckier third of humanity, who generally cannot spare the time or energy, let alone the money, to mess around in mountains.

I liked these men very much when I first met them on the mountain nearly a half-century ago, but I came to admire them far more in the years that followed. I thought their brand of heroism—the heroism of debts repaid and causes sustained—far more inspiring than the gung-ho kind. Did it really mean much to the human race when Everest was conquered for the first time? Only because there became attached to the memory of the exploit, in the years that followed, a reputation for decency, kindness and stylish simplicity. Hillary and Tenzing fixed it when they knocked the bastard off.

*Jan Morris accompanied the 1953 British Everest Expedition. Her next book will be about Abraham Lincoln*

### GEORGE MALLORY

Controversy still swirls over whether he reached Everest's peak in 1926. He did not live to tell the tale



Legion. Tenzing was by comparison a Himalayan fashion model: small, neat, rather delicate, brown as a berry, with the confident movements of a cat. Hillary grinned; Tenzing smiled. Hillary guffawed; Tenzing chuckled. Neither of them seemed particularly perturbed by anything; on the other hand, neither went in for unnecessary bravado.

As it happened, their enterprise involved no great sacrifice.

Nobody was killed, maimed or even frostbitten during the British Everest Expedition



PEARY

## RACING TO THE POLES

Fierce duels north and south end with triumph, tragedy and controversy

It was a dual journey to the end of the earth, where all lines of longitude converge. In 1910 Robert Falcon Scott of the British navy left London and set out to become the first explorer to reach the South Pole. But on his way to the Antarctic, Scott received word that Roald Amundsen, a Norwegian explorer, was also headed for the South Pole. In October, Amundsen's team crossed onto the Antarctic plateau on skis, with 52 dogs pulling supply sleds. Scott and his 15-man convoy started in 60 miles farther south than Amundsen. On Dec. 14, 1911, Amundsen's crew arrived at the pole.

Amundsen planted a Norwegian flag and left a message for Scott, who reached the pole on Jan. 17 with four men. All five died on the return, and Scott was found frozen to death in his tent, just 11 miles from safety.

The other pole was involved in controversy as well. In April 1909, Robert Peary of the U.S. became the first man to reach the North Pole. His claim was disputed by another American, Frederick Cook, who said he had reached the pole a year earlier. The Eskimos he traveled with, however, testified to an international committee that Cook had turned back 20 miles from his target.



AMUNDSEN