THE CREAGH DHU HIMALAYAN EXPEDITION, 1953

By HAMISH MACINNES

THE Creagh Dhu Himalayan Expedition was organised to attempt Everest during the post-monsoon lull in 1953. The party consisted of John Cunningham and myself.

Several days before sailing from New Zealand we heard of the success of Colonel Hunt's party. Plans were changed. We decided to attempt one of the satellite peaks of Everest, and after a hurried discussion we chose Pumori, 23,190 ft.

We travelled to Bombay via Sydney and arrived in the steamy port at the height of the monsoon. The Himalayan Club secretary was most helpful and hustled us through the customs formalities with effortless ease. The same day, July 23, we left on the Calcutta mail for Patna. We did not inform him of our destination.

Our intentions were to trek to Namche from Jaynagar on the Indian-Nepalese border. Our hopes were dashed. The areas to the north were experiencing their worst floods for several years, and all the rivers were impassable. We had to travel through Kathmandu and experienced a certain amount of trouble at the frontier. After only one night in the capital, we hired a Sherpa and headed east. The trek started badly; the first day we were carrying 190 lb. each. The Sherpa, Nima, followed behind with his small pack.

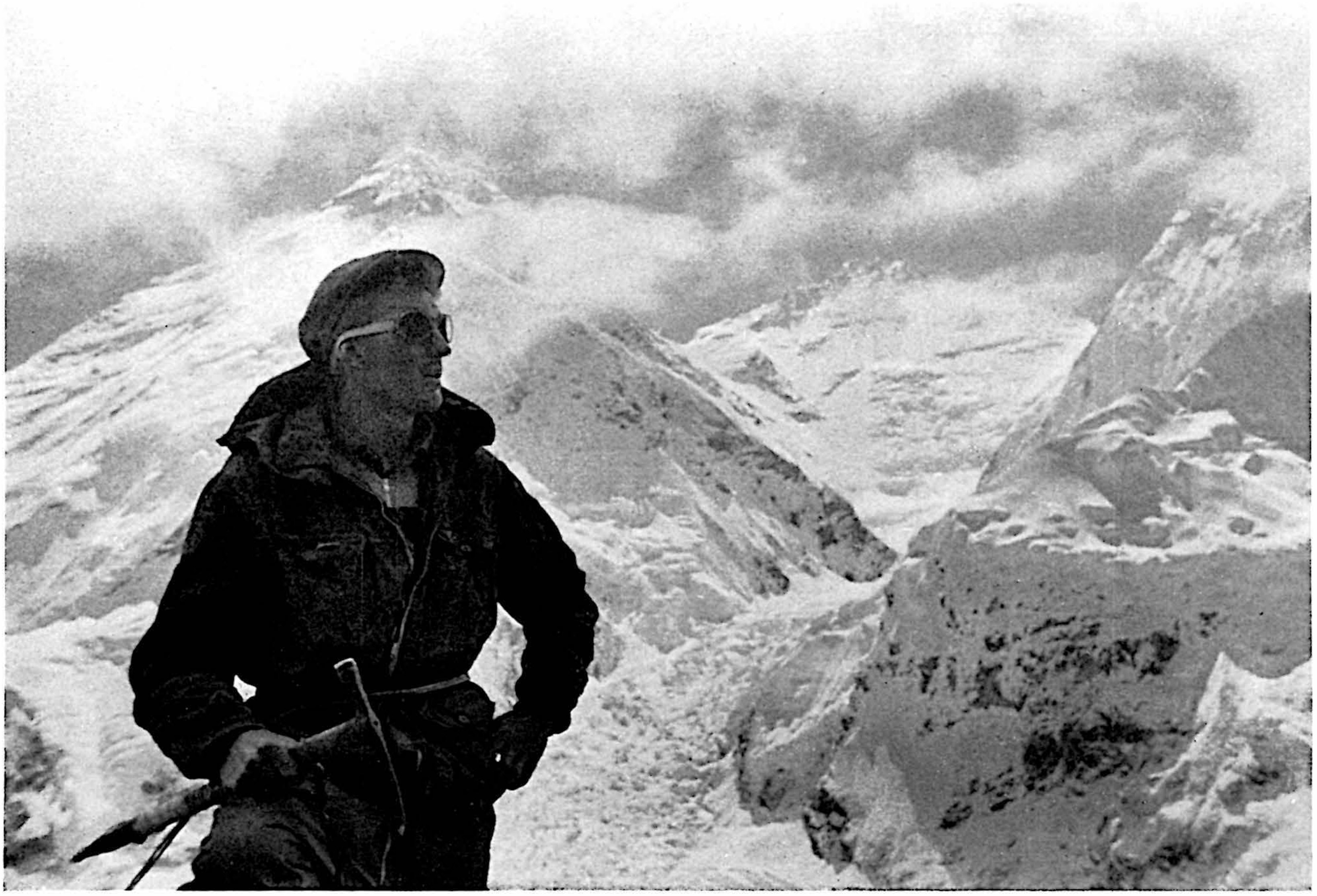
The next day at Banepa we acquired two coolies and with our loads now somewhat lightened we arrived at Namche Bazar twelve days later, after taking a short cut over the Dudh Kund. By this time we had become used to the leeches and the relentless rains, though I was rather weak from dysentery. We were living on native foods only, and the stony rice proved destructive to the teeth and sore on the stomach.

We managed to obtain kerosene and sugar at Namche and dispensed with the Sherpa who, on leaving, offered to give us his knife, fork and mug. We paid him for these, as eating with pitons and tent pegs was not very hygienic.

We arrived at Thyangboche Monastery on August 12 and paid off the two coolies. After staying a week we packed our equipment to the base camp of the British Everest expedition. On the way we managed to purchase a sheep and a sack of potatoes and were all prepared for an assault on Pumori.

Several days of sleet prevailed at base camp and only once did we get a glimpse of our objective.

Tiring of the bleak moraine and the weather, we decided to ferry our equipment to a proposed camp at the base of Pumori. Unfortunately, on doing so, we were caught in a semi-blizzard and had to erect our



THE AUTHOR, EVEREST BEHIND.

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two-man tent on the ice of the Khumbu for the night. Next day we found a suitable bivouac under an overhanging rock and relayed the remainder of our gear to our new home.

The two following days were spent in reconnoitring the mountain as best we could, but the dense clouds were very persistent. Sporadic glimpses of the mountain were obtained and we decided that the best route was offered up a small ridge facing the Khumbu ice-fall. This led to a col with an easy slope to the summit ; it also offered the best protection from avalanches, which continuously swept the exposed faces to each side of the ridge.

Two days after establishing the camp on the lower slopes of Pumori we pitched our small tent with 80 lb. of equipment on a rock promontory at an altitude of 20,500 ft. The camp was on the ridge below the col.

We returned the same day to the bottom camp ; the wind-blown snow covered the rocks ; our windproofs and gloves were soon frozen. Next day bright and early, with 60 lb. packs hanging from our headbands we once more ascended the powder-covered rock ridge to reach the tent at 5 P.M. in more pleasant weather. The altitude was having no effect on us and we felt in the best of health.

We realised that to establish any more camps or to carry heavy loads above this point was out of the question. The snow was not consolidating and the avalanche danger was increasing. The only way we could see of even getting above the col was to bivouac on the upper slopes in an ice cave for the night, and attempt the summit the following day. To make matters worse the primus, which was fitted with a high-altitude burner, would not function and my sleeping bag, which was a thirty-shilling boy scout model, was even colder than I had expected. The ledge on which the tent was perched was rather insecure and before settling in for the first night we belayed to a rock some way up the ridge.

The morning dawned reasonably fair, but to the south the rain clouds still pointed a warning finger at us and the avalanches were an ill omen. We left camp with packs filled with mutton in a well-preserved state, plus sleeping bags and pitons. Progress was slow and the deep snow over ice necessitated crampons. There was only a slight breeze. We climbed steadily till 3 P.M. in difficult snow conditions, the slopes on each side avalanching almost continuously ; the young breeze of dawn had developed into a high wind and stung our faces.

The weather was deteriorating and visibility was only a few feet, the blowing snow covered our tracks as soon as we moved. A meeting of the party was called ; we were at approximately 22,000 ft. Whilst we were shouting to one another a small avalanche cascaded down the slope beside us. We realised that it was not justifiable to go on ; the cold was intense and we felt exhausted.

We started to descend, running out a hundred and fifty feet at each pitch. We muttered a few curses about monsoon weather in general. When we were immediately above our camp there was an awful

avalanche roar from the general direction of the slopes above, and John murmured, ' No wonder ; it's like Aberdeen on a flag day.'

When we arrived home at our precarious camp we found that the snow was piled high on the side of the tent and the front was damaged by dislodged rocks. We slept as best we could that night whilst the storm raged, powdered snow filled the tent, and it was extremely cold. It did not abate until the second morning. By this time the tent had a list of about a foot on one side and we realised that it was time that we vacated our subsiding ridge.

At midday on the second morning we packed 90 lb. packs back to the bottom camp. On the descent we missed familiar landmarks, and examining the ridge more closely, we discovered that several hundred feet of the bottom section had fallen away and was covered in fresh snow. This accounted for the subsidence of the tent platform. We felt relieved to be out of the danger zone now and looked forward to the security of the lower camp.

A well-earned rest was had at the bivouac, and as food was running short we had once again to dip into the rice bag. With the prospect of Pumori rather black and only enough food for another day, we were forced to move down to the lower valleys. We decided to move to the village of Phalong Karpo, at 15,000 ft.

It was dark before we reached the village and we camped on a grassy tussock above the Lobuje Khola.

On our way to base camp we had admired a wonderful spire of rock called Pingero near this Sherpa village, and now in our dejected state hoped to get good enough weather to attempt it. We strode through the village of stone-walled houses in typical Scottish weather, and found that there were turnips and yak butter available. We acquired a small stock and prepared for an assault on the mountain. Our small tent, now much the worse for wear, was pitched at the bottom of the peak. We hoped that we could climb Pingero and return the same day.

Next day, equipped with pegs, karabiners and a hundred and fifty feet of rope we left camp ; the weather needless to say was the same. Our food supply consisted of a bar of chocolate, two turnips and a tin of Pâté de Foie Gras which we purchased at Thyangboche.

We reached the summit (19,000–20,000 ft.) up the north-east ridge at 5.30 P.M. The weather had worsened during the day and now a regular snowfall prevailed. The climb was on reasonable rock, the most difficult part was of severe standard. With only half the descent done darkness fell as silent as the snow, leaving us to inch our way down the ridge. We now wished that we had torches on the expedition. It was September 6.

We moved back to Thyangboche, and after several days spent in the luxury of the small shack allocated to us, we retired to Namche. The many weeks we spent in Nepal had taught us to be very proficient cooks and we could make potatoes and rice in many shapes and forms (even if they did taste the same). We became used to the conventional squatting position.



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When we left Namche on the 16th of the month we had only eight rupees left as climbing expenses without spending our travel money. With this small sum we hoped to attempt a peak lying seven miles to the south of Namche.

The peak, a virgin, was approximately 21,000 ft. high and lay at the head of a vegetous valley. With our eight rupees invested in supplies we set off ; our tent, tattered beyond repair, was given to a Sherpa. From now on we should have to bivouac under stones.

The entrance to this valley was reasonably accessible and we made good time until we reached the bush. The sinewy supple-jack, bamboo and giant ferns now made progress slow. Presently the valley narrowed into a gorge, great walls reached a thousand feet on either side. Headway was now even slower and the turbulent river had to be crossed too often. By 6 P.M. we reached a great overhang of rock with a plentiful supply of firewood ; wonderful birds rejoiced in the trees. We had a simple meal and a certain amount of excitement was experienced trying to extract two great ticks which were burrowing under John's arm.

Next day we again travelled upstream, and I had an awkward time following John up huge boulders the size of church spires which blocked the river bed. Leaving the main stream a mile above the camp we followed a small tributary for an hour. Suddenly a waterfall falling from the bush above offered a new problem. We took to the vertical undergrowth, and hanging to springy bamboo and vines we climbed. This waterfall proved only the first of many, and our hopes were once again dashed. It would take weeks to penetrate to the top of the valley and we had barely enough food for two days. We headed for Bombay.

We trekked south to Jaynagar which we reached ten days later, carrying our own gear weighing 70 lb. each. Food was impossible to obtain at many villages and we experienced a certain amount of hunger. The end of the trip, too, had its humorous aspects ; on arrival at Jaynagar we were interrogated, the police thinking we were from communist Tibet.

A list of the equipment is below, excluding personal gear :

	£	s.	d.
Stove and spares . . .	3	0	0
First aid		18	0
Kerosene		5	0
Sugar		11	6
Butter	1	0	0
Dixies	2	0	0
Ground sheet, maps, 10 candles, films	9	8	0
	£17	2	6

Fares £150 each plus £12 each for expenses in Nepal.