

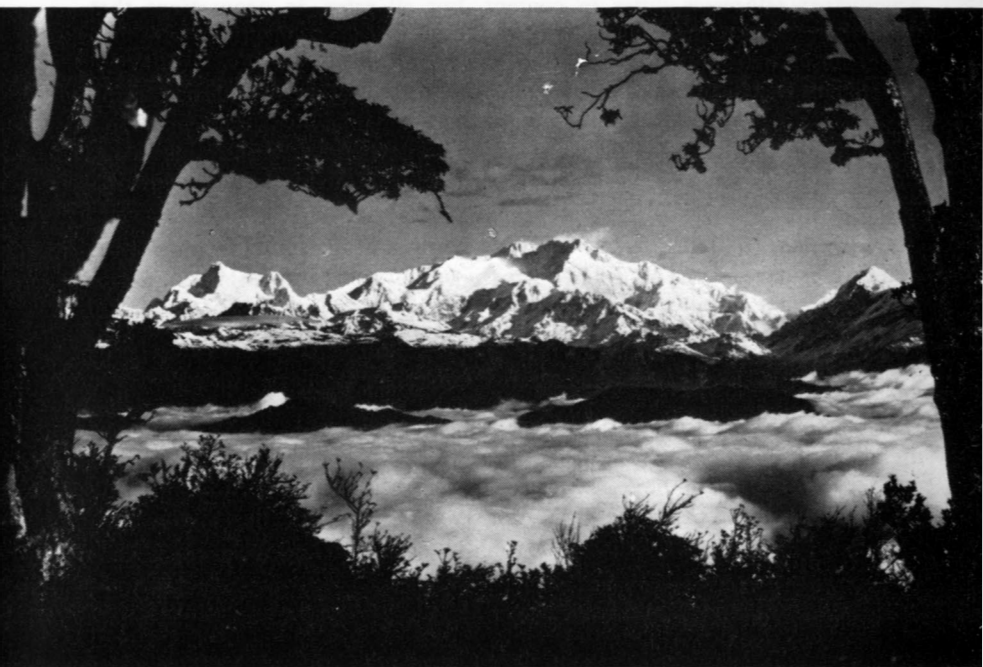
Valedictory Address

Charles Evans

(Read before the Alpine Club on 7 December 1970)

I first saw the Himalaya on the last day of 1944. The particular day, like the event, fixed itself in my mind because actually to see those mountains was the realisation of many youthful dreams, and the realisation far surpassed anything I had expected; moreover, I was lucky enough to see the mountains for the first time in a way that, looking back, I now know was uncommonly dramatic. The memory of the feelings aroused has not, I assure you, been altered significantly by later events: I have looked up an old diary, and what I remember corresponds closely with some notes I made at the time.

I had chosen to spend a short leave at Darjeeling and on the day I arrived cloud lay over all the foot-hills and was thick and damp in the town itself. In the upper part of Darjeeling there was then a road at the side of which was an abrupt drop guarded by an iron railing; on the morning after my arrival I was walking up this road in a chilling mist when the cloud parted without warning and I found myself looking through a jagged hole at the entire Kangchenjunga massif: Jannu to Pandim—I didn't then know their names but I can recognise them now in a quick sketch I made that evening from memory.



Fresh snow lay to a low level and the sudden sight of these gigantic mountains, dazzling white in bright sunshine, and seen through a frame of dark cloud, affected me like a physical blow. I noted at the time that the sensation was deeper than I could have imagined without experiencing it. I sat on the iron railing and tried to look down at the colourful bazaar below, but I could not: my eyes were drawn irresistibly to the snowy range which shone in the pale blue sky. I was filled, so my old notes tell me, with 'a sort of happy queasiness'. Ten minutes later the cloud-rift was closed and the vision was gone, never to return in quite that form.

From boyhood I have had plenty of day-dreams about mountain travel and climbing, but on that last day of 1944 I did not dream about the forbidden mountains of Nepal, and I certainly did not suppose that ten years later I should be back at Darjeeling to set foot on the mountain I had just seen; nor, quite obviously, did I suppose that the pursuit of my early dreams would lead me to the predicament in which I find myself this evening.

Valedictory addresses differ in content, but all refer, in proportions that naturally vary from President to President and from age to age, to three topics: the activities of Club members during the period of the expiring Presidency, the state of the Club and of our sport now and in the future, and the retiring President's own attitude to mountains and mountaineering. Even when this last difficult, and possibly alarming, topic is not explicitly introduced the President, in the course of his address, cannot but make his attitude evident.

My immediate predecessor, like Tom Longstaff in 1949, was more adroit than others of us have been, and did not give the usual formal address: I can, therefore, in recounting our members' doings, go back further than the three years of my term of office; indeed, I must do so because some of the events to which I wish to refer date from Eric Shipton's Presidency, or earlier.

I have heard it suggested in this very room that the climbing achievements of members of this Club are now negligible in comparison with the achievements of their predecessors in the years between the wars and in the period immediately after the last war. The record of the last six years and the articles in our own *Journal* show such a suggestion to have no foundation in fact. We need go back no further than 1965, the year of the Matterhorn Centenary; in January of that year members took part in the first ascent of Big Ben, Heard Island, in one of the most tempestuous regions of the globe; that same year nine members of an Indian expedition reached the summit of Everest: the leader was a member of our Club, Lt-Cdr M. S. Kohli. That year, too, Michael Ward was again

exploring hitherto unknown mountain areas of Bhutan, and the late John Harlin, soon after to become a member, was making the direct ascent of the West face of the Little Dru.

The next year Harlin was killed on the Eiger while his party was making the first direct ascent of the North face; other members were climbing the North ridge of Alpamayo, and exploring and climbing on the east and west coasts of Greenland.

In 1967 members were busy again in Greenland, in the Andes, in Bhutan (Peter Steele), in the Central Himalaya, where Bob Pettigrew's party climbed Papsura, and in the Antarctic, where Ed Hillary's party made the first ascent of Mount Herschel; and in New Zealand Tom Peacocke, who was then fifty-nine, set us an example by climbing Mount Cook.

At the same time members or members-to-be were exploring as climbers in Turkey, in the Hindu Kush, and on the fantastic cliffs of Norway, and continued steadily to accomplish very notable routes in the Alps: for example, the North face of the Matterhorn in winter (3rd ascent) and the right-hand Pillar of Brouillard—all this, be it noted, before the merger with the Alpine Climbing Group.

During the last three years an even greater pitch of activity has been maintained: in the Alps a new *direttissima* on the Badile deserves special mention, as do the Bonatti Pillar and the Eigerwand, and ascents by our members of such climbs as the North face of the Triolet, the Brenva face routes and the Walker spur are in danger of becoming commonplace. Members have been active as ever in distant ranges, making first ascents of The Fortress (Cordillera del Paine), of Mukar Beh in the Central Himalaya, of the North-east face of Yerupaja and the south-west buttress of FitzRoy; and this year, as you know, two parties have climbed Annapurna I. Captain Day's party, sponsored by the Army Mountaineering Association, repeated the route of the first ascent of Annapurna made in 1950, and Chris Bonington's party forced a new route on the South face. The South face route introduced to the 8000 m Himalayan peaks the Alpine practice of attempting a hard face route because the line itself and the very great problems seemingly presented were attractive to the climbers and were calculated to be within their exceptional powers. Except on the lowest part of the face no Sherpas were employed, and except for load carrying by the leader between some intermediate camps, no oxygen was used. The achievement was remarkable and it is clear that the tragedy which cast a shadow over the expedition was unrelated to any unusual dangers or difficulties of the route. A fall of ice like that which killed Ian Clough could equally well have happened

with fatal results on numbers of more fortunate Himalayan expeditions that many of us could recall.

In addition to these climbs, which are new, extreme in some way, or situated in far distant ranges, the less spectacular climbing of the majority of our members has solidly continued; this sustained activity of our members is as true a sign of the vitality of our Club as are the more spectacular feats of the few.

It is not only in the mountains that members have been active: the tradition of writing continues, and among members' publications are Blackshaw's *Mountaineering*, Farquhar's *History of the Sierra Nevada*, Ward's anthology *The Mountaineer's Companion*, Bonington's *I Chose to Climb*, Dennis Gray's *Rope Boy*, Noyce and McMorrin's *World Atlas of Mountaineering*, Milne's *The Book of Modern Mountaineering*, Peter Gillman and Dougal Haston's *Eiger Direct*, Byne and Sutton's *High Peak*, Lunn's *Unkilled for so long*, and Shipton's *That Untravelled World*. There are also our own recently introduced but very successful series of guide-books and our *Journal*, which must be mentioned particularly because of the recent and most acceptable change in its format and scope. Other Presidents have blamed the Honorary Secretary for bringing pressure to bear on them to give a Valedictory Address, but in my case it was the Editor who did this by showing the Valedictory Address to me over a year ago as one of the contents of the 1971 *Journal*—so far ahead must the Editor now look.

Fellowship because of an enthusiasm shared is the most important reason for the existence of a Club like ours, and it is with very great regret that I have to report that since 1964 we have suffered many sad and serious losses through death. Among the more senior members we have lost were many whose names were known throughout the world of mountaineering: George Abraham, Graham Brown, R. L. G. Irving, Marcel Kurz, Willi Rickmers, J. A. Sim, Lawrence Wager, and now George Finch. We have also lost young members, some of whom were among the outstanding mountaineers of their generation and were killed while climbing. We are too close to them for me to single out any except one whom I mention because he was at the time of his death President of a part of our own Club: Tom Patey, then President of the Alpine Climbing Group, was killed while abseiling from a stack off the north coast of Scotland.

Halfway through the last six years an event of moment in the Club's history took place. In 1967, after two years or more of preparation, the Alpine Climbing Group was merged with the Alpine Club for a trial period of five years. An admirable account of the reasons for the merger and of the steps leading to it was given by Anthony Rawlinson, one of its main architects, in Volume LXXII



2 Makalu, Lhotse and Mount Everest from Kangchenjunga. Photo: Charles Evans

of the *Journal* (1967). The Alpine Climbing Group, while retaining its identity and special characteristics, became a special section within the Alpine Club and an integral part of the Club in order that formal association should give the Alpine Climbing Group (which has, by its rules, a young and changing membership), such advantages as accrue from the traditional international standing of the Alpine Club, and in order that this body of very active and gifted climbers should have a direct voice in the policy and affairs of the senior club. So far, although there have been, and will be, difficulties, the experiment promises well: Alpine Climbing Group members have been quick to seize such help as we can give in planning and carrying out expeditions to distant ranges, and your Committee, at least in part, owes to the enlivening influence of its Alpine Climbing Group members its renewed concern during the past two years with the role and future of the Alpine Club. The Committee adopted for its own use certain principles of policy which were mentioned by me at our last Annual Dinner and summarised in the most recent number of the *Journal*. I hope they commend themselves to you all and will be of use to our successors on the Committee; any comments I add now are strictly my own, a mixture of my stray thoughts at that time and of my later reflections: they are not to be blamed on the Committee.

When I was elected to the Club I was proud to be admitted to an international community of men actively interested in mountains all over the world. It did not occur to me that such a community might possess anything so tinged with self-consciousness as a 'role', nor did I expect this community to do anything

for me. It was enough that the community existed and that as a member I could now meet and talk with men whose interests, enthusiasms and code of practice were approximately like my own, though most of them had been in the game longer than I and could teach me a great deal.

I hope that we shall never make the self-conscious and self-important gesture of trying publicly to define our role, for I think even now that the only role (if we must use the word) of this Club is merely to be; its very existence means that there is a means of getting to know men like yourself (if you happen to want to) and of swapping ideas and experiences.

Our difficulty in retaining our old quality as *the* Alpine Club and at the same time staying close to those most busily climbing is related today to geography and to numbers. Our headquarters is in London and we are few, but the number of acceptable potential members is large and London, for many of us, is, after all, a remote and isolated place. We may overcome the difficulties due to geography and numbers by more often taking the Club, which is its members, to the climbers, and letting them see us; we shall certainly not preserve the Club as a fine institution if we simply let ourselves be pressed into touting for new members by offering 'services': concessional rates and so forth.

I think, therefore, that we must pay most attention to the part of the Committee's 'Declaration of Intent' which recommends closer touch with the climbers and attach less importance to the part which refers to 'services'.

When you made me President you pleased me most because the compliment, however undeserved, was paid by you who know and share what has been the main interest of the greater part of my life, and I can now well understand why at least two earlier Presidents said that no other honour would have pleased them so much.

You also brought me, after an absence of several years, into touch with the mountaineering scene as it appears today: you gave me the opportunity to renew old friendships and to make new ones, you made me think and read a great deal more about mountaineering than I would otherwise have done and, which is more relevant to this address, you took the risk of being subjected to a host of reminiscences, which I shall spare you, and subjected also to comments on our sport today by one who has been out of touch and is now only an onlooker. Those comments ought to have the merits of detachment but I well know that they have no freshness; the detachment is naturally not so absolute as that of the onlooker whose climbing experiences are derived only from reading or from sitting in front of the television set; and the absence of freshness may be no

bad thing—it may mean that in matters of importance many of us have a consistent attitude to mountaineering, an attitude which is not influenced by fashion.

To the completely detached onlooker mountaineering today might present a picture of a highly organised group activity, a sport ('game' might be a better word) in which the audience is all-important (whether the audience be the general public or a specialist audience of climbers), a sport crudely competitive, the attention of its leading stars entirely focussed on the limits of technical achievement made possible by superb physique, by the development of new mental attitudes and by remarkable advances in material equipment; it might seem to him largely professional, entangled with education and instruction of various kinds, with 'show-biz' and publicity, entangled also with the promoting of national, local and personal prestige, and invaded by bureaucracy and a tendency to multiply clubs, social occasions, periodicals and, above all, committees: 'climbers', he might be forgiven for thinking, 'are only human after all'.

He would undoubtedly ask about the reasons for climbing, and there would be plenty of answers, some of which would occur spontaneously to him and the rest of which would be eagerly supplied by our own remarkably introspective fraternity: escape from urbanisation, the frantic sad search for personal identity in a mass society, the longing to do something better than others, or to do something at least different, the friendships cemented (and sometimes, alas, broken) by partnership in hardship and danger, the inward searching for reassurance about a man's own quality, the wish to engage in some activity for which you must 'pull out all the stops'—'s'employer à fond', and so on and so on. I hope that somewhere in the list would be the athlete's joy in his skill brought near perfection, the joy of discovery and of knowledge of the mountains themselves, and the happiness produced simply by the mountain environment.

Fortunately, although I have been absent some time from the active climbing scene, I know more about it than my imaginary detached onlooker and I know that this picture of our sport (to me rather a disagreeable picture) is incomplete and distorted; I know too that all the reasons given him or thought up by him for the climbing phenomenon (the bad ones and the good ones and the silly ones) are true for most or all of us, but that no single one will do for any one man and that each man will weight differently each reason in the list.

Some of the less favourable impressions of my detached onlooker cannot be denied, and to me the climbing scene seems altered in ways which deserve comment: competition is more evident than it was; so is the courting of

publicity; mountaineering is more used than it was for ends not directly connected with mountains—education, the winning of prestige and the making of money through ‘show-biz’, chiefly film and television. The pages of climbing periodicals are so filled with descriptions of climbs of extreme difficulty that for the average man repetition produces boredom and hinders appreciation of the great merit of some of these achievements: he is left wondering whether mountaineers are now interested in anything but the conquest of extreme problems; interest seems to have moved towards prowess and technique and away from the setting, away from the mountains themselves. Please do not think that I presume to belittle the satisfaction of making the first ascent of an extreme route: it is a creative achievement which, for lack of the experience, I must be content to suppose must satisfy enormously. But in sport to accomplish is not all, and there are plenty of signs that at least in Britain and in France, and perhaps in Austria and in America, those very exceptional men capable of such achievements are thinking that simply to achieve may be less important than to perform the act within some conventional self-imposed rules, to observe ‘the spirit of the law’.

Robert Paragot wrote (I translate very freely) that ‘although artificial means brought to perfection will enable man to solve any climbing problem whatever, can one then say that the particular accomplishment is nobler than any other or that it has enabled man to realise himself more fully?’ He and the climbers from this country who regard it as ‘bad form’ to peg a climb which has been led ‘free’ are reminding us that the way a game is played may be more important than the bare result, a characteristically English attitude which it is far too easy to mock. In the approach to a sport or game that English attitude, which traditionally has been the attitude of this Club, is the sign that we are rational beings with a sense of proportion.

I have digressed more than I intended: I am not competent to talk of method as it is today, I don’t want to plunge into speculation about so-called artificial aids, whether they be boot-nails, *étriers* or oxygen, and I don’t believe that anyone could quote rules for our sport except the unwritten ones to which I trust we all subscribe: that mountaineering ought not to be conducted in a way that interferes with the pleasure of others, nor, if it is possible to avoid this, in a way that destroys or limits a man’s own satisfaction in what he is doing. I say ‘if it is possible’ because at root we destroy or limit our own satisfaction in what we are doing not by our way of doing it but by the attitude which leads to our way of doing it: for example, an immoderately competitive state of mind; and a state of mind cannot be changed by rules, although we may hope in time to influence it by counsels, for example, of moderation.

The climbing scene has been altering ever since this Club was founded, and most of the recent changes which are disagreeable to me, to whom mountaineering has always been a most private pleasure, are so because of personal taste in the matter of the degree to which an attitude may be indulged.

We are nearly all of us competitive in our limited spheres, most of us have used climbing at one time or another for other ends, and controlled publicity has its uses; the authoritative word on such questions was said for me long ago when Eric Shipton wrote that 'directly people allow the element of competition to *rule* their activities and care *more* for trophies or record breaking or acclamation than for a real understanding of their craft . . . they are in danger of losing the real touchstone of values which alone makes anything worth while'. (The italics are mine.)

I return here to my own fear that the shift of emphasis from preoccupation with the setting to preoccupation with the performance and the technique could be so great as to be an important loss to us and to our successors as mountaineers.

Shipton once wrote 'the skier wishes to become part of the country of snowladen firs and winter mountains which means so much to him', and not long ago Michael Ward wrote that 'for the majority of mountaineers the aesthetic pleasure inherent in the mountain landscape is the most lasting quality in their climbing careers. For the mountains can be enjoyed long after the desire, or more important the ability, to do hard routes persists'. I would qualify that by saying that the enjoyment is less intense when the power of action is impaired. Mountains, like the sea, and, I suspect, the desert and the polar regions, give a man a spiritual experience which lays a powerful hold on him, and they do it the more surely when he is or has been an actor there. Longfellow's words about the sea could be applied to a mountain: 'Only those who brave its dangers comprehend its mystery'.

On the mountain, to struggle, to grasp rock with the hand, to place the foot in the ice-step, are aids to what I have called the spiritual experience: I am alone, sharply isolated, and face to face with—I don't know what.

In this context I find myself and others much too free with words like 'spiritual', 'comprehend', 'aesthetic', 'become part of'; ('mystical' is not a word I have used); but mountaineering, like sailing, is sometimes more than sport, and this is because it presents us with a kind of experience in trying to describe which men have used these words.

For many of us, certainly for me, the experience has two major elements: one is a sense of being face to face with a vast mystery, and on the very brink of a momentous revelation; the other is an awareness of having before me a scene with some special quality which makes me long to make it mine so that I can enjoy it for ever and be identified with it. I know by now that the momentous revelation will never take place and that, as Edward Thomas said, 'Beyond the farthest of far ridges is only a signpost to unknown places', and I know also that we can only enjoy for a brief moment the emotional effect, however produced, of awareness of a particular environment (and if we like the emotional effect, some of us call the environment 'beautiful'). Let me add that I know too that I haven't a clear idea of what I meant when I spoke of 'identifying myself with it', but I mentioned this vague feeling of identification because it must be familiar to many of you. The sense of being on the brink of a revelation recalls to my mind the sight of sun seen on a distant snow-field, seen through a momentary rift in a dark and enduring curtain of cloud; the sense of a beauty that must be captured for ever recalls for me many an actual mountain descent when pauses were frequent and long, not from fatigue but because I could not drag myself away from the scene before me.

Charles Meade felt, lingering on Kamet, that 'The urgency of absorbing what one could of such beauty was almost oppressive', and today there is the appealing remark attributed to Peter Haag when he declined to come down for a change after twenty-three days in a high bivouac on the Direct route on the North face of the Eiger 'I prefer to stay up here: it's more peaceful'.

When my eldest boy was eight years old he went with his mother up the North ridge of Tryfan on a day when a wild Westerly was driving cloud and soft rain over the ridge. They were alone, and on a ledge near the top he stopped and said thoughtfully and with approval, 'Mummy, these are the wild and lonely places'.

The wild and lonely places cast their spell over us by making us aware of a mystery and a 'beauty' as we call it. For us who need help to such awareness, there are, if we are mountaineers, wild and lonely places to suit each man's need: for some (the fortunate ones) in remote ranges, for others nearer home: the wild and lonely places are there on Tryfan and on a multitude of steep crags even within a stone's throw of the highway and within earshot of the crowd.

The members of this Club sometimes make very strange bedfellows: we have a remarkable diversity of nationality, age, occupation and background; we differ widely even in the nature of our interest in mountaineering, and I suggest to you that the only bond that can hold us together has little to do even with our

craft and its practice, and nothing to do with any service the Club gives its members; it depends on a common susceptibility to the atmosphere of 'the wild and lonely places'.

The atmosphere of these places stirs us in a way which few have been able to describe, except obliquely, by allusions to the surroundings and to their own actions, allusions which produce in us who are of like mind the recognition of an experience shared.

Gertrude Bell could describe very well indeed; she was a true mountaineer and a bold traveller in mountains and desert, one for whom mountaineering was but a small part of life; she was no stranger to this experience that binds us together, and she could convey it:

'To those bred under an elaborate social order few such moments of exhilaration can come as that which stands at the threshold of wild travel. The gates of the enclosed garden are thrown open, the chain at the entrance of the sanctuary is lowered, with a wary glance to right and left you step forth, and, behold! the immeasurable world. The world of adventure and enterprise, dark with hurrying storms, glittering in raw sunlight, an unanswered question and an unanswerable doubt hidden in the fold of every hill. Into it you must go alone, separated from the troops of friends that walk the rose alleys, stripped of the purple and fine linen that impede the fighting arm, roofless, defenceless, without possessions.'