

Valedictory Address

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(Read before the Alpine Club on 2 December 1985)

It is thirty-three years since I was last required to address the Club and on that occasion I had the brashness of youth and the inestimable aid of the lantern slide on my side. I also had something of practical interest to recount. Now, many years later, you have done me the honour of electing me your President, an unexpected pleasure. As the time approached to perform my task tonight I reflected that an exhaustive — and indeed to the audience an exhausting — account of the Club's affairs and the doings of its members is pretty boring fare. On the other hand, if one were to devote oneself to more philosophical matters, one inevitably wondered, being 36th in a long line of distinguished predecessors, whether there was anything new to be said. It was no comfort that one of my predecessors, Tom Longstaff, avoided the task by the simple expedient of entertaining us — his was the first meeting of the Club I attended — in his inimitable way with reminiscences. How much more worthwhile that was!

C E Matthews, who inaugurated the tradition in 1880, had no doubts. He said, you will recall, that his colleagues surely had the right to expect something more from their President, than that he should slink away like the Ghost from the battlements at Elsinore, feebly muttering: 'Adieu, adieu, adieu, remember me.' 'The President,' he said, 'is intimately acquainted with the traditions of Alpine government. He watches keenly the state of Alpine morals . . . He has sources of information open to him which are not always accessible to ordinary mountaineers.' And so on; it is heavy stuff and clearly he had in mind a state-of-the-nation address. For my part I want to descend to a rather more mundane level. I have a particular theme I want to develop and I can do no better than take my cue from Grove's valedictory address 100 years ago. 'How extraordinary does it seem,' he says, 'when we think of the year 1857, to contrast the facilities for world travel which then existed with those that exist now . . . and as facilities for going far have increased, so it has become cheaper and cheaper, . . . world travel . . . is no longer reserved for a few rich and adventurous men.'

Grove, you will observe, was talking of world travel, not Alpine travel. But it is pertinent to my purpose to start with Alpine travel and to start at the beginning. Next year marks the bicentenary of perhaps the most important event in our sport, the first ascent of Mont Blanc. It also, as it happens, marks the centenary of the first ascent of the Napes Needle by Haskett Smith, and the jubilee of the first ascent of Nanda Devi by Tilman and Odell in 1936. I shall come back to these anniversaries later.

Now one scarcely needs to be a student of Alpine history to observe that the Paccard/Balmat ascent of Mont Blanc did not inaugurate a great surge of mountaineering activity. It is true that the third ascent, by de Saussure, was in the following year. But between 1786 and 1851, the year of Albert Smith's well-

known ascent, Mont Blanc was climbed only 37 times. It is not hard to see why, or rather why ascents of Mont Blanc subsequently became routine affairs. The reason does not lie, as has been suggested by some historians, with the publicity created by Albert Smith's lectures at the Egyptian Hall. Rather it was that Smith caught a tide, the tide of a break-through in accessibility – the age of the railway.

It is worth reminding ourselves just how dramatic the advent of the railway was, and it will not surprise you that I will be drawing a parallel later with air travel access to the greater ranges. As it happens, Albert Smith made his first visit to Chamonix in 1838, when he was a medical student in Paris, and it took him five hard travelling days to get there, including 78 hours non-stop by diligence to Geneva. And it took Frederik Clissold, who climbed Mont Blanc in 1822, 16 days from London before he reached Chamonix. By 1851 one could travel from London via Paris to Chalons-sur-Saône by rail, and Albert Smith could record, in 1853, that the traveller 'may sit down to his dinner, looking out at the sunset on Mont Blanc, on the third day of his departure from London.' The journey was a little complicated because at Chalons one had to take a boat to Lyons, then overnight by diligence to Geneva, ('the 'Berlines,' I think, are the quickest') with a further change there and at Sallanches. 'Of course,' he says, 'I only recommend this route to those who have youth and health, and are much pressed for time.' By the end of the 1850s the railways had penetrated to Geneva and the journey time to Chamonix could be reduced to two rather full days. The Visp-Zermatt railway was opened in 1891, and my edition of Whymper's guide to the valley of Zermatt, having recommended the Night Express from London, goes on to say, 'If this is taken, you should be landed at Zermatt in the following afternoon, in time to settle down for dinner.'

This, of course, needs to be put into the context of what nowadays we call holiday entitlement. Arnold Lunn's analysis of the composition of the Club in those days shows it to have been predominantly made up of professional men, and my grandfather Edward Hopkinson and his brothers, who in that respect were probably fairly typical members of the Club, would seem to have taken generally between two and four weeks' holiday. (I deduce this from his manuscript notes in the flyleaf of his 1885 *Baedeker*.) Without the railways one would scarcely want to spend three or four weeks getting to and from the Alps unless one could spend at least three or four weeks in the Alps. With the railways cutting travel times to two or three days in total, a three-to-four week, or even a two-week, period in the Alps became attractive and within the compass of a normal holiday. The Pilkington brothers, when they made with Gardner the first guideless ascent of the Meije in 1879 — another landmark in mountaineering — did so in a three-week holiday from Manchester. Lawrence Pilkington remarked rather defensively many years later that they weren't able to wait for the mountain to get into ideal condition as his brother had to get back to work. The saving in travel time, and also, but to a lesser extent, on costs which I will come to later, resulted in a quite disproportionate change in demand; a barrier was broken. The practicability of a regular Alpine holiday had arrived.

It is not surprising then that in the ten years to 1865 over 80 first ascents or

pass crossings were made, not to mention the scores of other climbs. It is difficult to believe that, but for the railways, Whympers's famous engraving of members of the Alpine Club outside the Monte Rosa Hotel in 1865 would have had more than a fraction of the score or so who can be identified. The Golden Age of Alpine mountaineering was the railway age.

The other technological change that occurred at the same time was the steamship, and this is no doubt what Grove had in mind, although he and a number of other leading members of the Club at the time seemed to be more interested in the Caucasuses than, for example, the Himalaya, perhaps because one could go by railway to Odessa. Nevertheless, while travel times to India were vastly reduced by the steamship, we have had to wait nearly 100 years before the Himalaya could be considered to be a holiday playground. The boat journey to India took two weeks, and that, together with crossing India and long approach marches, meant that one needed at least a three-month trip in order to have four weeks or so in the mountains. Grove may have been right on the grounds of cost that world travel was no longer reserved for a few rich and adventurous men, but one did have to have more time than even the pre-Golden Age Alpine explorers. Shipton and Tilman's famous expedition of 1934, which solved the problem of getting into the Nanda Devi Sanctuary, and hence was the essential precursor to the successful ascent of 1936, cost them only £130 a head, but it took six months. Moreover, although £130 was considered amazingly modest at the time, it was no negligible sum for it was equivalent to nearly £2000 in today's £'s.

The ascent of Nanda Devi, or for that matter any of the other expeditions which we would regard as being notable in the development of Himalayan mountaineering and in particular lightweight expeditions, were a necessary but not a sufficient condition to opening up the Himalaya to holiday mountaineers, in the same way as the Alps in the 1860s and 1870s. As with the Alps, what mattered was being able to have a useful period of time in the Himalaya within the compass of a normal holiday. While the normal holiday for a professional man may not have changed greatly from 100 years ago — perhaps four to six weeks rather than three to four — at lower income levels the change has been proportionately much greater: between 1870 and 1979 overall average hours worked per person declined by nearly 50%. It is true that those who lived or were stationed in India were able to indulge in extended holiday mountaineering. And it is true that Imperial Airways opened a seven-day train and 'plane service to Karachi as early as 1929, but it was expensive. Shipton's cargo steamer cost £30 return, Imperial £260 — equivalent to more than £3000 today. It is also true that Campbell Secord, one of the most innovative of mountaineers, got himself to Gilgit in five days from London in 1947. But all this was exceptional, and it was not until the 1950s that travel times to the sub-continent were down to under 24 hours.

The other major factor in all this is cost — the massive change in travel and total holiday costs and how these costs relate to changes in incomes. Information on how much it cost to get to the Alps before the railways is scarce, but it is generally well established that the railways greatly reduced travel costs. Information on railway fares is, however, available; for example, Whympers's

Zermatt guide, which I have already referred to, advertises the first-class fare from London to Chamonix at £5:18s:10d., the second-class fare being £4:2s:4d.; this was for 1911. It is a notoriously hazardous task trying to adjust for inflation over such a long time-span, but estimates which have been made suggest an inflation factor of about 25 times, and on that basis the £4:2s:4d. fare would be £100, and this is perhaps double the cost of an individual's share of two people motoring to Chamonix today.

Total holiday costs are even more difficult to compare, but here the flyleaf of my grandfather's *Baedeker* again comes in handy, because he recorded how much he spent. His costs were typically £30 for a three-week holiday. This would have included a certain amount of guiding at 6s:8d. a day (an unbelievable £8 a day at present £'s), and would have been hotel-based; valley-based camping is a mainly post second world war phenomenon. So these costs, which work out at around £750 at today's prices, could not have been reduced significantly and would be of the order of three times as much as the cost of a fairly basic three-week Alpine holiday today.

Although travel to the Himalaya has been revolutionized by the aeroplane, air travel costs to the Himalaya were more expensive than by sea up to about 1960. Before then, if time was a problem, you had to go by air. Since 1945 air travel costs per passenger seat-mile have fallen by a factor of four. And due to the quirks of fare structures, ticket prices in certain instances have fallen even further. For example, when I went to Nepal in 1957, the round-trip fare was about £250 to Delhi, only about half today's standard economy fare which, as we all know, can usually be significantly discounted through 'bucket shops'. But my £250 is the equivalent of £2000 in today's £'s. It is true that porter rates have increased in real terms, but then for many areas much of the portering has been replaced by buses and trucks, and in any case today's generation are much more economical in the use of porters, thanks to modern food and gear and the tremendous, and welcome development of Alpine style climbing. In the 1950s it cost about £400-£600 a head for a lightweight expedition, that is to say £3000-£5000 at today's prices. Now you can do a basic climbing trip for £800-£1000, and a lightweight expedition for under £2000. To put it another way, it is now possible to spend a four-week holiday in the Himalaya for only a little more than the cost of my grandfather's three-week holiday in the Alps a hundred years ago. Moreover, while the costs we are particularly interested in have fallen steeply, economic progress has also continued in other fields; all in all there has been a roughly threefold increase in real incomes.

Of equal importance to the speed and cheapness of air travel to the sub-continent has been the more recent development of road building in the Himalaya — ironically usually for strategic reasons. (Much of the road building in Switzerland carried out between 1820 and 1860 was also for strategic purposes.) The recent opening of the Karakoram Highway from Islamabad to Hunza and beyond has brought Gilgit and Skardu to within a couple of days' bus journey — at a nominal fare in Western terms — of Islamabad. It is of course true that from 1948 both Gilgit and Skardu could be reached by air. But even that was (and still is) an uncertain, albeit memorable, affair. In 1954 we waited the best part of a week at Rawalpindi for favourable weather, and that

would not seem to be untypical, but what a tremendous flight it was when we finally snaked up the Indus Gorge, with Nanga Parbat building itself a further 4500m above us. Now with the road, the delightful valleys and 6000m peaks to the west of the Hunza river, the 7000m peaks of the Batura to the north, and the great glacier systems and peaks of the Karakoram proper to the east, all this vast and magnificent area is only three or four days from Islamabad and only a day more from London. The Chogolungma glacier and its mountains are now only two days from Skardu, and as members know, it was the base for the first Alpine Club Himalaya climbing meet this summer. The Baltoro and Biafo glaciers are only a few days further and organized treks are now available to Concordia.

I must pass on to the Central Himalaya merely noting in passing that most of the mountain valleys in Zaskar, Kishtwar, Kulu, Spiti, and Lahul are now readily accessible. The roads here have opened up a region of thousands of square miles and hundreds of fine, 5000-6000m peaks. One thinks, for example, of the Kishtwar Shivling, and the tremendous new route put up by Renshaw and Venables in 1983, and notes that they were on the mountain in only five days from roadhead.

In Garwhal roads now penetrate into the heart of the massif, for example anyone who wants to repeat Chris Bonington and Jim Fotheringham's magnificent route on the western peak of Shivling can be at the foot of the mountain in four days from Delhi — two days bus and two days walking.

Road building in the mountain regions of Nepal has been rather less. Nevertheless the new road north from Kathmandu to Tibet has brought the Langtang Valley and its peaks to within a few days of the capital. Further west, Pokhara is accessible by both road and air, which brings the Annapurna Sanctuary to within a week from London. The Lukla airstrip has provided easy, if erratic, access to Sola Khumbu for a number of years, but perhaps more important, the road east from Kathmandu now takes one as far as Jiri; and one can now drive to Lhasa from Kathmandu.

The picture which emerges from this imperfect and rather anecdotal evidence is, I think, fairly clear: there has been since 1960 a revolution in accessibility to the greater ranges:

- the number of mountaineers who can afford to go to the Himalaya is vastly greater than the numbers who could afford to go to the Alps 100 years ago. The total number of mountaineers is also of course very much greater.
- their holiday entitlement is probably a month compared with perhaps three weeks for their greatly better-off — in relative terms — ancestors;
- there are now numerous Himalayan centres which can be accessed rapidly by road;
- travel times to these centres are only two or three days longer than the 24 hours it took to get to the Alps 100 years ago.

And this revolution has been accompanied by a diffusion of knowledge which in turn has brought a feeling of familiarity; we are, if you will, comfortable with the Himalaya.

In short it is now possible for the average mountaineer — and it is the average mountaineer who is my concern tonight — to take his annual holiday in the Himalaya, and to an increasing extent he is doing so as a matter of course. He will not climb as many peaks as he would in the Alps, but with luck he will get in several 5000-6000m peaks. He will be able to enjoy and explore big mountain country — both mountains and valleys — in the same way as the founding fathers of our sport did over 100 years ago. For the ordinary mountaineer air travel and roads have done for the Himalaya, and for that matter for the Andes, what the railways did for the Alps. I must apologise here to the devotees of the Andes that I have not included this great range in my survey; it is simply that there is not time to cover both adequately. I confine myself to observing that all the points I have made about Himalayan accessibility and costs apply equally, but that in addition there is a welcome freedom from red tape and the heights of the mountains make them more amenable to the holiday mountaineer.

At the same time this same prosperity has had its effects on our traditional playground, the Alps. The enchanting view of the Vale of Chamonix painted by William Pars in 1770 is now a ghastly metropolis complete with motorway, and in the summer months there are some 2000 people actively climbing each day; Zermatt in the summer and winter seasons is now one of the larger Swiss cities. There is no need for me to dilate on overcrowded huts, or overcrowded paths or even queueing for climbs. Nor do I wish to enter into that favourite debating topic of whether the Alps are now played out, although one's impression is that the number of new routes of quality has dropped off. Suffice it to say that at the same time and for the same reason that the Himalaya are now able to beckon, at least some of the charm and some of the challenge that have drawn us to the Alps for all these years, have gone.

It is difficult to envisage the same dramatic changes in Himalayan accessibility over the next 30 years as have occurred over the last 30 years, but there is little doubt that there will be a steady trend of improvement. In particular, new roads will open up more and more centres, and the number of people — I am not here thinking only of Britons — with sufficient holidays and sufficient incomes to go there will increase steadily. All of these have important consequences for the new playground countries, for mountaineering in general, and for the Club in particular. I would like briefly to touch on each of these.

The Himalaya may be a large place — there are over 1300 peaks of 6000m or above in Nepal alone — but the local economies are fragile and poor, certainly more so than the Alpine regions were a century ago when tourism was taking off. Moreover the Alpine regions did not suffer from the twin problems of the population explosion and deforestation. Nevertheless I do not myself believe that the additional burden of mountaineers is a significant problem except in the case of mammoth expeditions, and I doubt whether these will grow in number, or in the case of particularly sensitive honeypots such as the Nanda Devi Sanctuary. Sad though it is, one must surely applaud the Indian Government's decision to close it in 1983. Even if the number of climbing parties were to double or treble from the current level of 200 or so a year, when spread across the Himalaya they would still be tiny. The more sensitive problem is surely the

growth of the trekking industry which is now big business — 50,000 trekking permits a year in Nepal.

This brings me to my second point, the increasing importance of our sister organizations in the proper development of mountaineering in the greater ranges. We must foster our contacts with them; with our long experience and traditions I would hope we could be of some assistance to them in exercising a large and difficult responsibility. We must also, I suggest, encourage their authorities to ease the red tape involved in getting to the mountains. I have in mind permits, peak fees, and mandatory liaison officers. If holiday mountaineering is to develop, with all the benefits it could bring to these isolated communities, then it would seem sense to do away with permits and fees for peaks under, say 6000m, and the need for liaison officers. Pakistan has done this, which was the main reason we selected the Chogolungma glacier for the AC meet this year. Nepal has recently increased the number of peaks which require only a trekking permit, which is encouraging, and it is to be hoped that the Indian Authorities will move in this direction. If we are to have an AC meet next year in the Indian Himalaya, as we would like to, it will certainly be necessary to secure flexible arrangements.

I turn now to what this growth may mean for mountaineering in general. Here there are perhaps two quite different points. First, however easy the access may become, the mountains are much bigger. The development of drugs may help with acclimatization or altitude-related problems, equipment will continue to improve, and today's generation will pass on its experience to tomorrow's. But there is no getting away from the fact that these mountains are much more dangerous because of both scale and altitude.

My second, rather different, point is the sad thought that, just as some of the charm of the Alps, and certainly of the valleys, has been destroyed by the very people who came to enjoy it, so inevitably will this happen in the greater ranges. When I first landed at Kathmandu in 1957 Wilfred Noyce looked out of the plane window and said with a note of horror, 'My God, they've tarmacked the runway'; one wonders what he would say today. More recently someone said to me, 'You don't need a map to get to the Everest base camp, just follow the trash.' Perhaps I am too pessimistic, the less grand parts of the Alps do still have a wonderful charm, and so perhaps it will be with the Himalaya. They are a big place.

Finally, what does all this mean for the Club? We call ourselves the Alpine Club, and from time to time in the last century the Club debated whether it should confine its interest to the Alps, but we never did so — the strong lead from people like Grove, Conway and Freshfield saw to that. Nevertheless, our essential background was the Alps, and only a few of our members had any sort of experience of the greater ranges. To go on an expedition to the Himalaya was something special; indeed for many people you didn't just 'go', you were 'selected'. If it was Everest it was a bit like being invited to join the MCC touring party to Australia. All that, I am glad to say, has changed and now, or perhaps it will be tomorrow, the average member of the Club will think no more of going to the Himalaya or to the Andes than he does of going to the Alps. Perhaps this will make the Club more cohesive — there won't be those

grand people who have 'been on an expedition' and those who have only been to the Alps. So I see this progression as being a healthy development which we should encourage. One means of encouragement is the Himalayan or Andean meet. I would like to see them as a regular feature in the annual calendar of the Club's activities. The 20 or so members who visited the Chogolungma glacier this summer may not have climbed so many peaks as on an alpine meet; nevertheless they climbed several and crossed some passes; it was a genuine climbing meet of members, and I suggest in the annals of the Club it was in its way a small but important historical event.

There are two other fields where the Club can be and is in fact being active.

Thirty years ago, when one was climbing actively, it was easy to know what was going on in the Himalaya; it was mostly British and one knew most of the people. Today, with several hundred parties visiting the Himalaya each year — I prefer the word parties rather than expeditions — from a variety of nationalities, the scene is very different. The latest issue of that invaluable publication, the Himalayan Club Newsletter, runs to nearly 40 closely printed pages with only the briefest climbing details. How, in these circumstances, does one keep abreast, not of the major events, but of the detail — if you will — of the 6000m peaks and below. Our Journal cannot, nor should it attempt to, be the repository of such detail.

It was from this problem that the notion of a Himalayan index emerged. I found that Peter Lloyd, who was at that time Chairman of the Mount Everest Foundation, was thinking along similar lines. It seemed clear that what was wanted was some form of index to enable someone planning his annual holiday to find out for any particular area what had been done, by whom, and when, and with reference to the literature — published and unpublished — which would be held by the Alpine Club Library. For the historian it was tempting to draw an analogy with John Ball's — our first President — Alpine Guides which were published in 1864 and reissued as a new edition by the Alpine Club opening a subscription list after his death in 1889. This was a case of the Club taking an initiative *pro bono publico*. Further thought suggested that Himalayan guidebooks were not the appropriate solution. Nevertheless, it is interesting to note *en passant* the number of commercially published trekking guides which have appeared in the last few years. The concept was for a computerised data base which would provide the essential information and references. A feasibility study was carried out by a working party consisting of George Band, Stephen Town, David Baldock and Bob Lawford. They examined the idea in some depth, fleshed it out and endorsed it. By happy coincidence Michael Westmacott agreed to take on the task of directing the operation in addition to becoming Chairman of the Alpine Club Library. We then set about the task of raising the necessary funds. So far we have raised nearly £10,000, helped considerably by a \$5000 contribution from the American Alpine Club. The Club has itself contributed the computer system which was needed for our own administration and for the Library. But we still need to find another £5000 and ideally rather more.

None of those who have been involved in the exercise have any illusions that it is an ambitious undertaking — but so were John Ball's Alpine Guides. The

important point, it seems to me, is that we must not try to be all encompassing (for example, to try to cover all ascents). The essential task is to provide references — to the literature and to archive material — and to build as we go. The essence of a computer data base is its flexibility.

The Library as a comprehensive repository of books, journals, and unpublished material, is an essential component. I would here like to digress for a moment to pay tribute to the stewardship of Sir Douglas Busk, its Chairman from 1972 to early this year. When in 1970 in my capacity as Honorary Treasurer, I proposed on behalf of the Committee that the Library should be organized as a separate body with charitable status, that we needed a professional librarian to look after our unique collection, and that we should raise money, there were a few Thomas's who doubted whether the scheme would work. That it has worked is largely due to two outstanding chairmen, Edwin Herbert (Lord Tangle) and Douglas Busk, who between them raised large sums of money to secure it; nor must I forget the enormous practical help and advice given by two others, Bob Lawford and Frank Solari. But the Library, in spite of these efforts, is not adequately secure; it is not properly endowed and needs more money. We are the custodians of a unique heritage and I ask you to support the joint appeal for the Library and the Himalayan Index.

The Himalayan Index is one way that the Club can fulfil its traditional role of providing a lead in the mountaineering world. Another way is by holding symposia. In the 1970s the Club organized two important symposia on Mountain Medicine and Avalanches. Following that precedent and in line with the general thesis that we should support and encourage mountaineering in the greater ranges, we have held two successful symposia at Plas y Brenin. The first was in March 1984, organized by Charles Clarke and Audrey Salkeld, under the title of 'Lightweight Expeditions to the Great Ranges'. Ten papers were delivered, and lively discussions ensued. Listening to it, I was struck by the wealth of practical information — of know-how — on all aspects of the lightweight expedition, from 'Costs and How to Avoid Them' by Ron Rutland to 'The Risks and How I See Them' by Don Whillans. That symposium mainly focused on the Himalaya, so Al Rouse volunteered to organize a follow-up on the Andes. This was held last week-end, also at Plas y Brenin, and was a great success. I came away with two thoughts. First, we should organize a meet in Peru, perhaps in the Cordillera Vilcanota, in 1987. Second, that we should have at least annually joint ACG and AC meets.

What I have had to say to you tonight has been rather prosaic — how changing accessibility has influenced how and where we practise our sport, and why today in a very real sense the world is our oyster, and how, more importantly, it is more and more the oyster of the ordinary members of the Club. That is a good thing and not only in its own right but because it also enhances that common factor that brings us together. Thirty years ago Edwin Herbert delivered one of the most thoughtful valedictory addresses in our long tradition. You will recall — there will be many here tonight who were present then — how he sought to analyse what it was — the values and traditions — that make the sport of mountaineering what it is. One of the factors he

identified was what he termed 'the essential mountain experience' — that something that most of us would be hard put to explain and which most of us would see no reason why it required to be explained anyway. But it is that experience, which in our different ways we all know, that, in Herbert's words, 'really binds together the members of the Club . . .' It is a catholic experience: Ruskin who fulminated against the climbers who looked upon the Alps as soaped poles in a bear garden, was as much a member of the Club as Albert Smith whom he derided. And it has given us a literature which no other sport can equal. It links Haskett-Smith's remarkable solo ascent of the Napes Needle to those other two first ascents whose anniversaries we will soon be celebrating — Mont Blanc and Nanda Devi. And it links the ordinary members of the Club with, to use Grove's words, the young braves of the ACG. It is that 'something' which can be experienced as much in our own hills as in the Alps or greater ranges. Perhaps the last word should be indeed on our own hills, from Geoffrey Young, in reflective mood at the end of a unique Alpine career, 'For me, too, our own hills, within the measure of my walking, are as lovely and as full of surprise as they ever were.'

