Mistakes That Mountaineers Make

HARRY HILTON

'. . . I fear the painstaking, time-consuming, wide-ranging drive to get to the bottom of a story, to search for the truth is slipping slowly out of fashion . . .'

John Birt, BBC Deputy Director-General
in Channel 4's Opinions, 12.5.88

Following the above comment by one of Britain's leading media men, Harry Hilton recalls some examples in mountaineering history where a little more time and effort might have produced a more accurate result.

I first became aware of inaccuracies in mountaineering literature, at a personal level, two years after the first ascent of Everest. The book: *Summits of Adventure* by John Scott Douglas, published by Frederick Muller in 1955. The chapter: 'Giants of the Earth'. The page: 183. The sentence: '. . . It (a reconnaissance of Makalu) was made by two young British climbers, Herbert Maddock and Harry Hilton and their guides and porters . . .' The author had got it wrong by some 240km for, in fact, we had headed towards Himalchuli.

That same year, 1955, the Japanese mountaineer Funjiro Muraki, writing in *The Mountain World*, stated '. . . Team B ascended the Chuling Khola along a path untrodden by civilized man to the foot of Himalchuli . . .' My friend, the late Bert Maddock, had, of course, in 1953 trodden that same path one year before 'Team B' had got there, though whether Bert ever rated that 'civilized man' tag has often nagged me!

'And there's more.' A year later (1956) the 'authoritative' and 'highly respected' *Alpine Journal* recorded in one of its articles (p38) '. . . Hilton had also made a solo effort on the eastern slopes (of Himalchuli) in the same year (1954 in the article); but we gathered that none of those parties had been much higher than about 16,000–17,000ft . . .' It was Bert Maddock, not myself, with a local porter from the Chuling Khola (whom he refers to simply as 'G' in his journal) who reached about 19,000ft in 1953. Our only claim to fame in those days, and all four facts incorrect! Thus from tiny beginnings do many errors grow; so where does truth lie?

As far as the 'investigative' journalist or scholar are concerned, truth usually involves time, a great deal of it. At the level of newspaper, radio, and television news reporting, with deadlines to meet, there is generally very little – a few hours at the most – of it during which details can be checked. Even under such pressure, some journalists, newspapers, radio networks, and television channels are more reliable than others. Having said that I can recall catching the *Times* out, and that was when it was *The Times*.

At magazine and journal level the excuse for errors of fact are less acceptable. If a 'name' or 'expert' has decided to write a piece for what is, after all, a somewhat select readership, the least he or she can do is to be thorough in his (her) research. (At this point the writer is made suddenly aware of how extremely accurately he will have to tread his way through the rest of this article!)

One camp further up this cone of credibility is the book, a little higher the television/film/radio 'documentary', and at the summit shines the reference book, for that will find its way into homes, clubs and libraries around the world, and young, not to mention old, students will tend to take its contents on trust.

Responsibility for the facts given should, in my humble opinion, be shared equally by author, editor, and publisher or TV/radio/film equivalent. Others disagree with this. The late Tim Lewis, editor of *Mountain* magazine, once wrote to me '. . . In the matter of the truth. D F O Dangar recently wrote to me correcting some facts concerning the Alps. He made the point, from his experience with the *Alpine Journal*, that the responsibility for factual correctness lies with the author. To that I would add that, if I am not the author (as effectively I am in the news columns of *Mountain*), I feel that the editor should also accept responsibility for the rest of the contents of the magazine. He doesn't have to agree with opinions, but he should, as far as is possible (the time factor again) ensure the correctness of the facts. In that context, as you know, I am always glad to be corrected and make the right version known in the columns of the magazine . . .'

Another ex-mountaineering magazine editor, Walt Unsworth, once warned me of the problems faced by the journalist/writer/editor in the quest for truth and the use of 'primary sources'. He stated '. . . I quite agree that whenever possible primary sources should be consulted, but you must not assume that the primary sources are always correct. People don't always record the truth in their journals, and they certainly don't always tell the full story. Furthermore, people when interviewed don't always speak the truth, sometimes for personal reasons and sometimes from sheer bad memory. To complicate matters: (a) they sometimes tell one story and then deny it; (b) they sometimes tell two different stories in two different publications; (c) where there are expeditions in which various members write an account of their adventures, there can be important differences of fact and emphasis between the different accounts (see the six different accounts of the Everest 1953 Expedition); and (d) stories can be slanted for political purposes . . .'

Sound advice to any potential writer. However, the late Joe Tasker accused ex-editor Unsworth of just this lack of consultation with 'primary sources' in 1977, following a piece of '. . . sensationalized misreporting . . .' in that editor's magazine on yet another yeti story. With noble courage Walter duly apologized on behalf of his reporter for letting '. . . a good story run away with him . . .', but, as Joe wrote to me at the time '. . . In this case it (the reference to the "primary sources") would have simply required a telephone call to myself or Pete Boardman, both of whom live in the Manchester area and who know Walt well and see him fairly frequently . . .'

Yet another mountaineering magazine editor, Geoff Birtles, made a

somewhat sharp suggestion to me once after I had voiced my concern over a disconcerting number of errors of fact that had appeared in a mountaineering reference book. He wrote to me: '. . . Suggest you put your mouth into writing and make a comprehensive list of errors (in the book). Not an easy task . . .' Not an easy task indeed, and when I set about doing just that (in my usual distasteful manner, i.e. by actually asking questions around the climbing fraternity), editor Birtles, who had, after all, made the original suggestion to me, ended up with threatened legal action by the compiler of the book concerned. That particular tome is still to be found gracing shelves of libraries, with its 98% of correctness and its 2% of inaccuracies to be discovered by some future student of mountaineering. The threat of legal proceedings against editor Birtles was certainly enough to deter the writer of this article from declaring his further findings of errors of fact.

It is not only in Britain that such errors creep into reference books. In Italy the late Mario Fantin's *Sui ghiacciai dell'Africa* (Cappelli, Bologna, 1968) is a standard Italian reference book on Kilimanjaro, Mount Kenya, and the Ruwenzori. On page 139 concerning the early recorded ascents of Mount Kenya (the 17th in point of fact) it is stated: '. . . *Nel febbraio 1955 Adriano P Landra partecipa per la terza volta ad una spedizione dell'esercito, sul Monte Kenya. Il gruppo è guidato da H Harris e vi è presente anche Harry Hilton con una quindicina di ascari* . . .' or, roughly speaking, in English: '. . . In February 1955 Adriano P Landra took part, for the third time, in an armed expedition to Mount Kenya. The group was led by H Harris and there was also Harry Hilton with some 15 police constables . . .'

The facts of the ascent are: neither Adriano P Landra nor H Harris (whoever he was?) came with us, the leader of the expedition was 'yours truly', the '15' police constables were, in reality, two, and the climbers who reached the summit of Mount Kenya (Batian) on that particular occasion were Pat Erskine-Murray and myself. Simple errors that, once again, could have been avoided by reference to a primary and, I hope in this instance, reliable source.

Radio and television too are not immune from the occasional inaccuracy. In December 1981 (6.12.81, 11.15am, Radio 4), in the BBC's 'commercial' for the programme *Weekend* (subject: '. . . the extremes of adventure . . . mountains and caves . . .'), the announcer spoke of '. . . Chris Bonington . . . who has been to the top of Mount Everest . . .' Chris, at that stage of his mountaineering career, had not. Jim Black, Presentation Editor, Radio 4, admitted to me that the error had been 'created' because '. . . the information was not checked sufficiently within my department . . .' However, to my limited knowledge, no attempt was made by the BBC to rectify this misleading information it had 'created' and transmitted throughout Britain, but the BBC rarely admits to any errors at any time through the medium that has broadcast them, radio or television. Take, for instance, BBC1 television.

In 1978 (4.6.78, BBC1), in the programme *The Other Side of the Mountain*, Alf Gregory stated that the members of the 1953 British Everest expedition stayed at the British Embassy in Kathmandu '. . . because there were no hotels there then . . .' This was not correct. To my limited knowledge, there were at least two hotels: the Himalaya in Joodha Street and the Nepal hotel.

This latter building, where I stayed in 1953 (for a very brief period) was an amazing edifice where you could go to sleep lulled by the music of the Rendezvous Club jazz band and awake to the snarl of tigers from the small zoo that adjoined the hotel!

I wrote to *Radio Times* and *The Listener*, in this instance, to inform the BBC of the error it had transmitted. The editors of both journals found it impossible to print my letter or even the relevant part of it, and although one of them assured me that '. . . we will pass your comments, where appropriate, to the relevant BBC department . . .', no action was taken to present the truth to viewers. Which brings me to my final point – correction.

How do we set about rectifying matters, always assuming that at least a few of us still prefer 'the true facts'? The methods are varied. Through journals there is the letter and the sort of mini *cause littéraire*. I well remember the late Lucien Devies taking Lord Hunt to task in the columns of *La Montagne & Alpinisme* (No 114, 4/1978, p461) over a sentence which (through the translation – another 'true facts' trap – of Michel Schulman) had been attributed to Lucien. (It was the use of the verb 'décapiter' that upset the protester most!) The *doyen* of French mountaineering circles was not amused. As long as magazine and journal editors have the same views on the correction of errors of fact as those expressed by the late Tim Lewis earlier in this article, there is little to fear at this level of publication. However, at book level the outlook is not quite so bright.

In 1984, a significant date in many ways, I tackled Bill Birkett and his publisher Robert Hale concerning the former's statement on the possible cause of the accident which resulted in the death of the late Arthur Rhodes Dolphin (*Lakeland's Greatest Pioneers*, 1983, p148). In that statement Mr Birkett had implied that the '. . . combined weight of the rucksacks . . .' that Arthur was supposedly carrying had '. . . forced him off balance . . .' The assumed extra rucksack belonged to my friend, the late Doctor André Colard, who had just completed the S face of the Dent du Géant with Arthur ('alternate' to 'varied' leads).

The 'true facts' of the matter are, and here I quote from André's letter to me, '. . . It is true that Arthur went to get the sleeping-bags and the small amount of equipment that we left at the foot of the S face of the Géant (a reference to Dennis Gray's version of events in his *Rope Boy*, Victor Gollancz, 1970, p51). Then each of us took our own equipment and did not bother to rope up (this practice being considered unnecessary for climbers of a high standard of competency at this stage of the descent). It was towards the end of the descent of the 'rognon' . . ., in other words, after some 45 minutes of scrambling and easy rock climbing, that Arthur slipped . . .' Thus André and Arthur had been carrying their own sacks for at least three-quarters of an hour before the accident happened.

Mr Birkett was duly consulted by Mr Hale who wrote to me: '. . . We are informed that Mr Birkett's account (of the accident) was written after consultation with sources closest to the scene . . .' (24.1.84), and '. . . in the light of all the circumstances including of course the impossibility of resolving the mystery of A R Dolphin's death, the author (Bill Birkett) does not feel any

change to his work is called for at this stage . . . we would like to draw your attention to the fact that no publisher can be expected to endorse all the statements and opinions of his authors . . .' (9.2.84).

I often wonder, as do André's widow and children, what Mr Birkett's idea of '. . . sources closest to the scene . . .' involved. It did not include any consultation with the late Doctor André Colard in either Belgium or Saudi Arabia.

At the other end of the scale, Macmillan London Ltd, the publisher, thanked me and assured me that the couple of errors (e.g. 'Lewis', p203) that I had spotted in John Cleare's book *Mountains* (published in 1975) had been placed in the '. . . reprint file, and this will be brought to the attention of the author (I had already respectfully informed John over dinner one evening) if and when we reprint the book . . .'

Further afield, in 1980, Professors Dieslfeld and Hecklau of the universities of Heidelberg and Trier in West Germany, through their publisher (Springer of Berlin, Heidelberg, and New York), not only thanked me for having pointed out the error of their ways (in this instance confusion over the summits of Mount Kenya), but also elevated me to the rank of 'Dr' (or could that have been a simple typing error?)

I think that it was George Orwell who wrote '. . . The first thing that we ask of a writer is that he should not tell lies . . .' (Perhaps some kind expert on Orwell will let me know if I've got it wrong?) And my plea, arising from some of the above experiences, is one that has appeared before, both in this journal and others, and is aimed at writers, editors, and publishers alike. From personal experience as a freelance journalist, writer, and lecturer I fully realize that it is frequently far from easy to discover 'the truth' about certain subjects. At home, how does a crag climber set about ascertaining that he or she is the first to ascent a Jumper or a Lothlorian? In the Alps, where should alpinists turn to make sure that they actually were the mountaineers to make the 'First British Ascent' of the S face of the Dent du Géant? (Come to think of it, what exactly constitutes a 'British' ascent?) In the final analysis, who the hell cares about the exact height of a Himalayan giant? Yet surely dates, altitudes to within 500m, correct names of members of expeditions, and correct captions to photographs (always assuming that they have been printed the correct way!) should all be within the bounds of possibility. It may take more time and effort, but, who knows, you might discover something new in the process (as I have done more than once), perhaps the greatest reward of the thorough researcher and seeker after truth.