
Everest 1953: Forty Years On

WALT UNSWORTH

Everest Remembered

It is often said that everyone can remember what they were doing when they heard of the assassination of President Kennedy. Those of us who were around at the time can remember what we were doing when we heard of the ascent of Everest. Despite the best attentions of the *Daily Mail*'s ace foreign correspondent Ralph Izzard (who sadly died this year) young James Morris pulled off one of the scoops of the century in getting news of John Hunt's triumph back to *The Times*, who proudly broke it to the world. Actually the world was a little behind in the news – John's daughter Sally once told me that word was passed to the family late on the previous evening and an almighty party was soon in full swing. Only a bunch of happy Welsh farmers knew Everest had been climbed. The world had to wait till morning.

The ascent of Everest was seen as a glorious portent for the New Elizabethan Age everyone was forecasting – how innocent we all were – and certainly there was a feeling that in mountaineering terms the damned thing was out of the way at last. I don't think the idea that the big Himalayan peaks could actually become playgrounds, like their smaller Alpine counterparts, had ever occurred to anybody. The conquest – and I use the word deliberately – was really all that mattered at the time.

James Morris called it 'the last innocent adventure' and if it wasn't perhaps quite the last, the expedition was based on a tradition that was soon to wither under changing social mores.

The team had none of those little dark men who were crawling out of the Salford terraces and up the most gymnastic bits of gritstone and even my father-in-law, whose only acquaintance with mountains was pace-egg rolling on Rivington Pike, wanted to know why Joe Brown wasn't there. A lot of us did. I pointed out to Dad that Alf Gregory came from Blackpool, hoping to mollify him, but I don't think he believed me – Blackpool was not a place people came *from*. Joe's turn came shortly after on Kangchenjunga.

Apart from the nostalgia perhaps the most instructive thing we can do in looking back over 40 years is to try and assess what impact the ascent of Everest had on climbing in this country. A proper study could earn somebody an interesting PhD, but I don't think Everest *started* anything, except possibly a rash of mediocre expedition books. What it did do was give a rocket booster to a development which was already underway. There had been wartime training in mountain related activities for many men, the pre-war outdoors movement begun by the Youth Hostel Association still flourished and Jerry Wright's Mountaineering Association, begun in 1946, was very active. Although many people outside the sport still believed that climbers swarmed up ropes, and the press always referred to ice axes as ice picks, things were

better than they had been. There was a glimmer of understanding amongst the public at large; even appreciation of why some men and women felt compelled to indulge in such an arduous and risky activity. The ascent of Everest acted as a catalyst, bringing the whole thing into focus. After Everest climbing was A Good Thing in the public conscious.

Above all, though, we shared a sense of pride in the team's achievement. It was a milestone the like of which few of us will ever see again. Even my father-in-law, whose basic beliefs were socialism and Manchester cotton, thought the lads had done us reet proud.