
BILL O'CONNOR

Nepal 1998

To those who follow Nepal mountaineering, the name of Elizabeth Hawley will be very familiar. To those who have climbed in Nepal a summons to visit Liz Hawley's office felt as important as going to the Ministry. For more than 35 years Liz has documented the exploits of mountaineers in Nepal. She has recorded in detail the climbers and their climbs – never letting any expedition escape Kathmandu until, good journalist that she is, the 'facts' are down. The result is an accurate and detailed chronology of Nepal's mountaineering history. In recognition of her long service she was awarded the King Albert Medal of Merit for her services to mountaineering.

Sadly I have to report the death of distinguished Swiss mountaineer Albert Eggler who was killed in a climbing accident on the Simmenflue in Switzerland. Eggler played an important part in Nepal's early mountaineering history. In 1956 he led a Swiss expedition that made the second ascent of Everest and the first ascent of Lhotse. In 1965 he was elected an Honorary Member of the Alpine Club. (*See obituary on page 329.*)

1998 was designated 'Visit Nepal Year' in an attempt to boost tourism throughout Nepal. Hoping to increase tourism into specifically western areas, the authorities listed nineteen 'royalty-free' peaks. They are all west of the Kali Gandaki river and provide some tempting objectives. The authorities were hoping that this initiative would go some way towards easing the pressure on areas like the Khumbu and Annapurna and shift valuable foreign income into the poorer areas of the west.

However, while Visit Nepal Year was in full swing the Government felt obliged to restrict access to several areas of West Nepal, the very areas in which they were hoping to stimulate tourism. This anomaly caused consternation among trekking agencies and others who had already set about attracting trekkers and climbers. From autumn 1998 until further notice the following areas will be closed: Dolpo, Rolpa, Rikun and Jagarkot. No reason has been given but it is believed that political unrest provoking a need for increased security means it's a 'no-go' area for tourism.

To celebrate Visit Nepal Year, the following list of royalty-free peaks was drawn up for 1998/99:

1. Hongde (6566m), Mukut Himal just north of Dhaulagiri
2. Shey Shikar (6139m), Kanjiroba Himal
3. Tso Karpo (6518m), Kanjiroba Himal
4. Tripura Hiunchul (6563m), Kanjiroba Himal
5. Kanjiroba (6880m), Kanjiroba Himal
6. Kande Hiunchuli (6627m), Kanjiroba Himal
7. Kagmara (5960m), Kanjiroba Himal

8. Jagdula (5764m), Jagdula Himal
9. Sisne (5843m), Sisne Himal
10. Changla (6563m), Changla Himal
11. Saipal East (6882m), Saipal Himal
12. Firnkopt West (6645m), Saipal Himal
13. Nala Kankar (6062m), Nala Kankar Himal
14. Rakshai Urai (6593m), Guruns Himal
15. Surma Saravar (6523m), Guruns Himal
16. Jeta Bahurani (6850m), Guruns Himal
17. Nampa South (6580m), Guruns Himal
18. Nampa (6755m), Guruns Himal
19. Api West (7100m), Guruns Himal

In addition, ten other peaks were put on the 'permitted' list. There is always a great deal of interest when new peaks are permitted, with climbers hoping for a possible first ascent. However, this list was a let-down, not only because it lacked imagination but also because it included few summits of importance and several that are well known 'tourist' viewpoints offering little more than a stiff hike above a tea shop. Gokyo Ri, for example, has for years been climbed by every trekker and his dog as part of an extended trek around the Khumbu. I have also mentioned several of them in my book *The Trekking Peaks Of Nepal* as suitable training walks before going onto trekking peaks proper. Now put on the official 'permitted' list, these 'peaks' (sic) command a royalty fee and a liaison officer fully equipped with duvet, sleeping bag, double boots, full pay and backsheesh etc, etc. The Ministry seems to have made a serious mistake or have been badly advised. But I'm sure, following better advice, the mistake will be quickly corrected.

The new peaks are:

1. Ramtang (6601m), north of Kangchenjunga
2. Tengkongma (6215m), north of Kangchenjunga
3. Drohmo (6855m), north of Kangchenjunga
4. Ramchur (4500m), north of Kangchenjunga
5. Chhukungri (5550m), Khumbu Himal (5km from Imja Tse)
6. Gokyo Ri (5450m), Khumbu Himal
7. Yala (5732m), Langtang Himal
8. Naya Khanka (5863m), Langtang Himal
9. Ramrong (4499m), East Annapurna Himal
10. Kangtokla (6294m), Kanjiroba Himal

The heights given are those listed by the Ministry.

WINTER 1997/8 AND SPRING 1998

Winter conditions were poor with unsettled weather and unusually heavy snowfall. The result was little success on high peaks and limited success on lower summits. Because of the winter snows, expeditions making attempts early in the spring season had a great deal of trouble with approach routes. Further heavy snowfalls over 10-11 May compounded the difficulties. However, during the second half of May things improved and many expeditions achieved their objectives.

Ama Dablam (6828m)

Not mentioned in last year's notes was the success of an American commercial expedition led by Pete Athans which included Dr Peter Hackett, a high-altitude authority who for many years looked at Ama Dablam from his office window when he ran the HRA Hospital at Pheriche. This expedition put eight climbers on the summit. Other ascents were made by French climbers Besson, Blanchard and Profit. Last honours for the season went to a Spanish and Swiss team who reached the summit via the SW Ridge on 13 February.

Annapurna (8091m)

There were two winter attempts on the mountain. A Japanese attempt at the standard route, which ended low on the mountain at circa 6000m, and a strong international expedition comprising Simone Moro and Kazakh climbers Dimitri Sobolev and well-known Anatoli Boukreev. They approached the mountain from the south via the Sanctuary using a helicopter to reach base camp at circa 4100m. Their objective was to attempt the *British Route* on the South Face. Heavy snowfall made this impossible so they turned their attention to a safer line via the long and undulating SW Ridge via Varak Shikar or The Fang. On Christmas Day, whilst attempting to reach a col between The Fang and Annapurna, all three climbers were swept down the face by an avalanche. Sobolev and Boukreev were killed, Moro survived despite a 700m fall.

Boukreev had an outstanding high-altitude record and his strength at altitude was legendary. Having been part of the Soviet expedition that traversed all five peaks of Kangchenjunga in 1989, he went on to reach summits of 8000m or more on 21 occasions.

During the spring season three teams were on the mountain. Two on the *Original Route* on the north side and another on the *British Route* on the South Pillar. Only a Korean team on the *Original Route* reached the top, when four members and four Sherpas reached the summit on the 3 May. On the south side tragedy struck the Italian-French team attempting the *British Route*. On 25 April, between Camps 1 and 2, an avalanche swept away four Sherpas, missing the Europeans. Three Sherpas survived with minor injuries, whilst a fourth was killed.

Annapurna IV (7525m)

Kazuki Yoshino led a successful Japanese expedition via the original 1955 *German Route* up the NW Ridge. A total of eight climbers including three Sherpas reached the summit on the 18 and 20 May.

Dhaulagiri (8167m)

The *Normal Route* up the NE Ridge was a popular spring venue, with six official expeditions of which four were successful. However, the ascent by Basque mountaineers Juanito Oiarzibal and Alberto and Felix Inurrategi throws some doubt on many previous ascents. For instance, a small Korean team led by Park Young-Soek claimed to have reached a summit marked by an upright pole which could be reached easily following a ridge crest of no great difficulty. When Oiarzibal reached this pole on 3 May he discovered that the true summit was some way ahead over difficult ground. On a following attempt Oiarzibal left the ridge crest and traversed the flank for nearly a kilometre before climbing an ill-defined couloir to the rocky summit. This ascent took eight hours from his top camp at c7200m. Oiarzibal suggests that other expeditions could easily have mistaken the pole for the summit in poor visibility. This was Oiarzibal's twelfth 8000er. The Inurrategi brothers have climbed the seven highest summits, all without oxygen, and this was their ninth 8000er. Members of Slovene and Italian expeditions also reached the summit.

Other expeditions were less fortunate. A Greek expedition ended in tragedy when one member, Nikos Papandreou, climbing unroped, slipped and fell to his death. Frenchwoman Chantal Mauduit, an outstanding alpinist who had already climbed six 8000ers, and Sherpa Ang Tsering, who had partnered her on several expeditions, also died. They were buried by heavy snowfall over 10-11 May and at first were thought to have asphyxiated in their tent whilst cooking. However, later examination showed that Mauduit had sustained a broken neck and various fractures, possibly from an avalanche hitting the tent. Subsequently a trust, whose funds are to be administered by the Association Chantal Mauduit Namaste in Paris, has been established to improve living conditions and provide education for Ang Tsering's children and other children of his village, Namche Thamiteng.

Cho Oyu (8201m)

This ever popular 8000er was the focus of at least 16 expeditions on the *Standard Route* up the W Ridge. At least 60 climbers summited including two Irishmen, Pat Falvey from the Republic and Pat Gavin Bate. Falvey has also completed the Seven Summits. There were two deaths. For lovers of numbers there have now been over 900 ascents of Cho Oyu.

Dorje Lhakpa (6966m)

This stunning mountain, dominating the skyline bordering the Langtang and Jugal Himal, was successfully climbed by a French group led by Michel Pelle following the *Original Route* up the W Ridge. 3000m of rope was fixed, along with two camps. The summit was reached on 15 May. The mountain is known to have had several ascents in lighter style before its first official ascent in 1981 by the Japanese.

Everest (8848m)

Whereas post-monsoon 1997 was a slack time on Everest the spring season was business as usual, in fact better than usual with 30 expeditions attempting

it from north and south. With one or two exceptions, the statistics are more interesting than the detail. By the end of the 1998 Spring season Everest has had 1039 ascents by 808 people since it was first climbed in 1953 – although there are times when it seems like many more. This spring it had a record 118 ascents by 116 climbers. Of these 73 were from the north between 18-27 May and 45 from the south during a single week, although none of these climbed without oxygen.

Of special note is the ascent of Tom Whittaker, a naturalised American born in Wales. Whittaker, a teacher at Prescott College Arizona, lost his right foot in a car accident in 1979. On his first attempt on 20 May, accompanied by American guide Jeff Rhoades and Sherpa Tashi Tsering, Whittaker turned back suffering from mechanical problems with his 'Flex-Foot', whilst Rhoades and Tashi Tsering reached the summit. On 27 May Whittaker, accompanied by Jeff Rhoades and four Sherpas including Tashi Tsering, reached the top.

On the Tibetan side all expeditions except one concentrated on the *Standard Route* via the North Col which was fixed between c6500m and the summit. There were four deaths including that of Roger Buick a 52-year-old New Zealander with no high-altitude experience, although he was a skier! He appears to have been operating independently although he somehow managed to have himself added to Russell Brice's permit without his permission. Arriving late at BC after inadequate acclimatisation, he was seen on 26 May climbing very slowly at c7200m. He was later seen motionless at 7400m. Brice undertook his rescue only to discover he was dead. Brice evacuated his body from the mountain.

Kangchenjunga (8586m)

There were six pre-monsoon expeditions, two on the North Face and four on the normal SW Face. First to summit was the Chinese Mountaineering Association eight-strong group led by Sam Druk who are attempting to climb all 8000ers by the year 2002. On 9 May all the team apart from its leader reached the summit.

On the 18th two members of an Italian-German expedition including Hans Kammerlander reached the summit. This is Kammerlander's twelfth 8000er, although he has also to do the main summit of Xixabangma.

Also on the SW Face Italian Fausto de Stefani with Sherpa Gyalzen reached the summit on 15 May. De Stefani claims to be the sixth mountaineer to have reached the summit of all fourteen 8000ers, although there is some dispute about Lhotse.

On the N Face Gary Pfisterer led a strong international team with American, British and Canadian members hoping to complete the line started by Hermann Warth's 1983 expedition. A Japanese group were also climbing the same line. Five Japanese reached the summit in deteriorating weather on 15 May in two groups. Two climbers, Kenso Akasaki and Atsushi Shiina, suffering from exhaustion, failed to return to their top camp or to survive a bivouac at circa 8000m. The remaining climbers were rescued from Camp 1 at 6100m by helicopter and the remainder of the expedition from Base Camp at Pangpema. Meanwhile, Pfisterer's team waited for the weather to improve and made their

summit bid on 18 May, encountering the dead Japanese en route. Leaving their high camp at 7800m at 5am, Jonathan Pratt reached the summit at 11.30am. Pfisterer decided to retreat from high on the mountain. Meanwhile Chris Shaw, Tim Horvath and Ginette Harrison reached the summit. Harrison reached the top at 2.30pm and in so doing made the first female ascent of Kangchenjunga, the last 8000er to be climbed by a woman. In every respect this was an outstanding achievement. For Pratt, the other British climber on the trip, the ascent means that he is the only British climber to have reached the summit of the five highest peaks in the world.

Lhotse (8501m)

Swiss Guide André Georges reached the summit solo on 17 May. Spanish climber Inaki Ochoa de Olza, also climbing solo, retreated when only 30 metres from the summit due to eye problems caused by freezing. Fortunately, other climbers on the mountain were able to assist his descent. Other ascents were made by members of Andy Lipkiss's commercial expedition.

Jongsang (7483m)

North of Kangchenjunga and marking the border junction between Nepal, Tibet and Sikkim, this striking summit first attempted by Alexander Kellas was attempted by an Irish expedition led by Kieran O'Hara. They reached a high point of circa 6600m before bad weather forced a retreat.

Makalu (8643m)

Three teams climbed the now *Normal Route* via the Makalu La with 12 climbers reaching the summit on or around 19 May. It seems that the mountain was host to a real 'international climbfest' with Andorrans, Bulgarians, Czechs, Russians and Spanish reaching the top, including two women.

Manaslu (8163m)

During the winter at least three expeditions failed in their attempts to reach the summit of this difficult peak from the north-east. Winter conditions were generally poor with heavy snowfalls hindering ascents.

Pumori (7165m)

Several expeditions were operating on the mountain in April but without success. In May an expedition of mainly Canadian climbers led by Tim Ripel attempted the SW Ridge. A Swiss climber on the same permit but climbing independently reached the summit on 18 May.

Saipal East (6882m)

Although this peak exists officially and was put on a list of 'royalty free peaks' for 1998-99 an Austrian team failed to find it. Strangely it does not appear on the Nepal Himalaya Inventory which theoretically includes all peaks over 6000m. Although Saipal was first climbed in 1963 and other teams have climbed and surveyed it none report ever seeing an East peak.

Drohmo, Janak and Tang Kongma

Several smaller, attractive peaks north of the Pang Pema base camp received attention. In September Roger Mear and Doug Scott climbed the South Pillar of Drohmo in 28 pitches. (See article 'Climbing in NE Nepal on Tang Kongma and Drohmo' in this volume.) To acclimatise and gain good views of Drohmo they first climbed the NE Ridge of Tang Kongma (6215m) of which the Swiss had made the first ascent, by the same route, in 1949. These peaks are surprisingly complex and undoubtedly offer outstanding routes to enterprising climbers.