

SIR EDMUND HILLARY

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A Reliable Hero

Philip Temple

It was safe a very long time ago to put the image of Ed Hillary on our five dollar note. He is the only living person to have been so honoured because we knew we could risk putting our money on his reputation. He did not have to die first for us to be sure he would never let us down. From the moment he set foot on the summit of Mount Everest half a century ago Hillary has been New Zealand's most reliable hero.

Hillary grew up between the wars at Tuakau, south of Auckland. His father was editor of the local newspaper and later a bee-keeper. Hillary had a difficult, often confrontational relationship with him that reinforced an inborn determination never to give in or give up. Yet Hillary came to reflect his father's 'mixture of moral conservatism and fierce independence.' The family was never flush with money and Hillary went barefoot to primary school summer or winter. There were few diversions save the local Tuakau flicks and he made his own entertainments with his brother and sister, or through reading and dreaming of adventure.

Outside of his family, Hillary was socially isolated. He had to commute a long distance by train to high school and was treated as an awkward outsider. After his family moved into Auckland's Remuera he spent two years at university and passed no exams and made no friends. But by the time he was 16, from hard work on the bee farm, he was 'as strong as a man and worked harder than most.'

New Zealand writers who were active when Hillary was growing up unconsciously described how he would turn out. He became the kind of man poet R.A.K. Mason saw as the 'embodiment of the New Zealand working class ... tall, rangy, quiet, unemotional, direct'. And there was also a strand of novelist John Mulgan's *Man Alone* in Ed Hillary who, the social loner, would find both refuge and self-definition in mountains.

Hillary's path to Everest began at new year 1940 when, aged 20, he made his first visit to Mount Cook and saw two climbers arriving back from a grand traverse of the mountain. He wrote in his first book that, after hovering at the edge of the excited crowd greeting them, he was 'filled with a sense of futility at the dull, mundane nature of my existence. Those chaps, now, were really getting a bit of excitement out of life. I decided there and then to take up mountaineering.'

Another moment of epiphany for the young Hillary was his solo winter ascent of Tapuaenuku in 1944, made within only three days' leave from air force training at Woodbourne. From this he gained not only self-confidence but also confirmation of the value of stubborn determination and endurance in meeting physical challenges. His favourite, oft-repeated words 'challenge' and 'achievement' were to become a kind of spiritual mantra for someone who has also been as lucky as one of Napoleon's best marshals. One who knew what to do when he found himself in the right place at the right time on Everest and heading for the South Pole.

One of Ed Hillary's guiding aphorisms seems to have been, 'Just DO it.' But he has usually acknowledged that in just doing it, he has been lucky to have had the right people to help him on his way. Technically ordinary as a mountaineer, he became, nevertheless, an accomplished ice climber under the tutelage of that incomparable Mount Cook guide Harry Ayres. Mountaineering partners George Lowe and Earle Riddiford gave him direct aid on the road to Everest during the leadup expeditions of 1951 and 1952 which were led by the legendary British mountaineer, Eric Shipton. From Shipton, Hillary learned how to travel efficiently and comfortably under the most trying expedition conditions. It is not fully appreciated today how much outstanding exploration Hillary undertook in the entire Everest region during the period 1951-54. With George Lowe, this included a politically dangerous foray into Tibet to visit the north side of Everest. With Riddiford and Shipton he was the first to find a way through the Khumbu Icefall into the Western Cwm of Everest.

Hillary's attributes on Everest were less technical than physical and mental. He was endowed with great strength, stamina and lung capacity as well as a bloody-minded determination to lead from the front. He was never backward in telling leader John Hunt what he thought should be done. *The Times* journalist Jan Morris, who was attached to the 1953 Everest expedition described him as having an energy that was 'almost demonic. He had a tremendous, bursting, elemental, infectious, glorious vitality about him, like some

bright, burly diesel express.' On Everest in May 1953 none of the other British climbers could keep up with him but, for political reasons, Hunt did not want Hillary teamed with his old mate George Lowe for a summit attempt. It would not look good in Coronation year to have two colonials first to the top, leaving the Poms in their wake. And the first attempt on the summit was undertaken, in fact, by two UK climbers.

Hillary led the way up the Khumbu Icefall and, at first, climbed chiefly with English members of the team. But all fell off the pace with illness or exhaustion. By the end of April, Hillary discovered that the only person who could keep up with his 'almost demonic' pace was the Sherpa sirdar Tenzing Norgay. Hillary found him 'very strong and determined and an excellent acclimatiser. Best of all... he was prepared to go fast and hard'. He also did not get sick, answer back or argue. Tenzing became the brake man, the belayer, to Hillary's runaway 'diesel express'. Tenzing was also making sure that a Sherpa, one of the great mountain porters who had made climbs on Everest possible, would also be in the first team to the top.

Although leader John Hunt had chosen two others to make the first assault on the summit, using closed-circuit oxygen sets, Hillary took all the steps necessary to ensure that he and Tenzing would be poised to succeed if they failed. To demonstrate the efficacy of the lighter open-circuit oxygen sets, and to show how good they were as a team, Hillary and Tenzing made an astonishing trip on 1 May. They climbed several thousand feet from base camp, through the icefall to Camp Four in the Western Cwm, taking just five hours. And returned to base camp on the same day. It was a phenomenal display of strength.

Later, as the momentum of the expedition slowed, Hillary hassled Hunt to send up more climbers to assist George Lowe in his battle to hack a safe route across the icefields of the Lhotse Face. Hunt warded Hillary off. But by 21 May, with time running out before the monsoon arrived, it looked as if the Sherpas would not succeed in making the crucial carry of food and equipment to the South Col. Hunt agreed with Hillary that he should take Tenzing up to boost morale. They led from the front to establish the critical Camp Eight at over 26,000 feet.

When the first assault team returned exhausted to Camp Eight, after reaching the South Summit of Everest, Hillary and Tenzing were there to meet them. When their own assault began on 28 May, they had just George Lowe, one English climber and one other Sherpa to help them. Carrying huge loads of tentage and oxygen, they established Camp Nine high on the south-east ridge. The following day Hillary and Tenzing reached the summit in good time and returned to tell George Lowe, 'We knocked the bastard off!'

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Hillary revealed no leadership qualities or aspirations before Everest. Other people had largely organised his three Himalayan expeditions to that point. And after he had 'knocked the bastard off', he fondly thought he might get married, go back to bee-keeping and take part in other expeditions when the opportunity occurred. But, unwilling though he was, the Everest climb and a Coronation knighthood demanded leadership of him. Hillary had not been born great, but he strove hard to justify the greatness now thrust upon him. He went on to achieve greatness on his own terms and chose, to paraphrase Yeats, perfection of the work rather than the life.

We tend to see Hillary as our national hero. But his success in Antarctica cemented his place for all time as an international explorer-hero. He is one of the few New Zealanders whom people all over the world can name. He has been an unofficial ambassador for New Zealand for half a century and was an official one when he took on the job as NZ High Commissioner to India between 1985 and 1989. In representing us, he has portrayed us as an open, optimistic, can-do people who reach the top without too much fuss and find the achievement in itself a good enough reward.

Over the years, he has made numerous lecture tours throughout North America and Europe and become a particular favourite of Americans who warm to his no-nonsense but good-humoured energy and who have signed up in droves to sponsor his projects, ranging from new expeditions to Nepalese aid schemes. He was also able to secure long-lasting sponsorship deals that helped secure his own financial position and freed him to pursue his plans. He has been generous with his time and name in fund-raising or in endorsing worthwhile schemes, especially for the Sherpa people through the Himalayan Trust.

Hillary's generosity has extended throughout the New Zealand community as well, especially in connection with projects that have involved outdoor education and recreation. It is no surprise that, for many years, the government agency responsible for this area was named the Hillary Commission. He would also freely lend his name as patron to mountaineering expeditions, write forewords to books about them, and urge their readers to respond to another inspiring story of challenge and achievement.

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Ed Hillary's example of robust masculinity, limned by a Puritan ethic yet softened by an ingenuous generosity, has served us well. He has continued to reflect his father's 'moral conservatism and fierce independence' and has taken good care, despite offers, to remain publicly apolitical. They are values that lately, in parts of our society, seem to have had diminished relevance. But for many of us he represents what we once used to be - in easier, morally simpler times - and what we would have liked to remain. In this respect, Ed Hillary is not only a reliable hero but an unusual one. The explorer or sporting icons of other countries are rarely, if ever, free of political dubiety (Charles Lindbergh); or class prejudice (Robert Falcon Scott) or social distance (Don Bradman); or free from the pursuit of personal glory (Raoul Amundsen). Hillary has always pursued a plan, an idea, a dream, never the cash or the medals.

Eric Shipton told Hillary that if he reached the top of Everest first his life would change forever. Hillary did not believe him and thought that the first letter he received addressed 'Sir Edmund Hillary' was a joke perpetrated by one of his Kiwi mates. Even when he did come to believe it, he saw the knighthood not just as a personal honour, as a lever to fame and fortune, but also as a responsibility to duty and service... without neglecting its use in the pursuit of more great adventures! The world is fortunate that the honour of being first on Everest fell to such a man.

Ed Hillary has secured our enduring affection because he has been reliably self-effacing, too, despite all the accolades. He has always wanted to remain one of us. He is ingenuous, not only in the meaning of being frank and candid but also because he has always seemed artless, without 'side' or false modesty. Referring to his 80th birthday spectacular at Government House, he considered that the kind of tributes he received that day for his successful adventures, and his splendid work for the Sherpas, as 'all bullshit'. If he does understand the mythic role he has come to play in our national psyche, he doesn't want to know about it or claim any special powers or attributes. In this way, Hillary constantly reassures us that, despite the moral and physical decay that seems to surround us, a simple and determined no-nonsense approach to life will see us through, even to the top of the world, and we'll all be right as rain in the end.