

The following review by Philip Temple appeared in *New Zealand Books* in January 2006.

“Radiant Living”

Sir Edmund Hillary, An Extraordinary Life

Alexa Johnston

Penguin Viking, \$59.95

ISBN 0 67 004554 3

Just when you thought there was nothing else to be recorded or said about Sir Edmund Hillary, this lavish compendium of a life appears, arising from the Auckland Museum exhibition to mark the 50th ascent of Everest, “Sir Edmund Hillary: Everest and Beyond” (2002-2003). The first-time author of this “authorised and illustrated biography” is the exhibition’s curator, Alexa Johnston, indicating both its strengths and weaknesses. Essentially, the book is a superbly designed and expanded exhibition catalogue, incorporating much of its illustrative material - photographs public and personal, telegrams, letters, journals, newspaper clippings, magazine and book jackets, maps, diagrams, pictures of artifacts such as a Hillary honey pot and ice axe - in all about a thousand; to the point where one is almost overwhelmed by the evidence of a life and the testimonials to its brilliance and moral value. The latter are included literally in the form of grateful letters of thanks from the Sherpa beneficiaries of Hillary’s Himalayan Trust.

In the prologue, Johnston quotes from a *Guardian* editorial in May 2003, where the ascent of Everest by Hillary and Tenzing is said to remain as “a matchless pinnacle of genuine unselfish heroism”. She concludes it by writing, “[Ed Hillary] embodies many of the qualities we most admire - he is strong, determined, adventurous, calm, quietly doing a power of practical good in the world and, despite honours and accolades, remaining approachable, good-humoured and down to earth: an extraordinary, ordinary bloke”. Apart from the oxymoron, Ed Hillary has never been the mythical “ordinary bloke”, even before he climbed Everest; and this chest of relics, this reliquary to a national hero, reveals that he has become something more: a secular saint in whom we embody all that we find admirable in a particular myth of national character. It has become increasingly difficult to approach the “living legend” of Ed Hillary, our “national treasure”, without being blinded by the reflected glare of what we like to think is the best in ourselves.

In the early part of the book, Alexa Johnston goes to some trouble to establish the moral roots for an especially New Zealand sainthood: an upright family devoted to healthy living, hard outdoor work and play, just causes and pseudo-religious teaching. In 1938, the Hillary family became foundation members of the Auckland School of Radiant Living which promoted a “philosophy of physical and moral fitness”. In 1941, aged 22, Ed Hillary sat examinations to become a teacher of “Radiant Living” and his test lecture topic was “Inferiority - cause and cure”. He concluded with the words, “I Can!” and received a 100% pass mark. For the rest of his life, he has passed all his career exams the same way and this book might have been better titled, “A Radiant Life”. In political harmony with the precepts of “Radiant Living” were Hillary’s admiration of the social justice broadcasts of “Uncle Scrim” in the 1930s; his call for more “honest-to-God morality in politics” in 1967 - to the intense annoyance of Prime Minister Keith Holyoake; and his participation in the counter-Muldoon Citizens for Rowling campaign in 1975. But most of the energy behind Hillary’s sense of social justice has been directed towards the welfare of the Sherpa people of the Mount Everest region. His expeditions, beginning in the 1960s, when he took New Zealand mountaineers, who were also doctors, teachers or tradesmen, to build and run schools and clinics - with a bit of hard climbing on the side - provide a nice paradigm for the philosophy of “Radiant Living”.

We admire and revere people we are not and whose principles and example we aspire to on our better days. But Johnston’s “extraordinary ordinary bloke” example of Ed Hillary is now anachronistic, something we can never hope to emulate today; and few could even at the time it was established. It now seems laughable that the conjunction of climbing Everest and Queen Elizabeth II’s coronation was heralded as the “dawn of a new Elizabethan era”. It actually marked the beginning of the end of an era, both in exploration and the politics of empire. The *Guardian* eulogy of the “matchless pinnacle of genuine unselfish heroism” seems to confirm this. What neither Johnston nor the *Guardian* question, however, is how matchless the unselfishness or heroism was; whether the need for the myth, in our more morally complicated times, is stronger than seeking out the truth of the matter. This might not reveal that our hero has feet of clay but could give us a better idea of how we, too, can declare “I Can!”

I was at the sharp end of two first ascents of significant unclimbed mountains only a decade after Everest ‘53, and can report that good doses of wilful self-interest and recklessness are as essential to success as unselfishness and heroism. A closer analysis of Hillary’s career would show that he employed the former as much as anyone. His expedition successes had measures of all four qualities; but he did better than most

because he was physically exceptional - hardened by the tough work and “healthy living” involved in his father’s bee-keeping business - and had a single-mindedness honed as an adolescent loner seeking self-confidence in physical proofs of success. He also tended to be in the right place at the right time: the first ascent of Everest would not have been available a year or two later.

None of this is explored in Johnston’s book. Nor is the crucial question of how Hillary made the transition from being a so-called “ordinary bloke” who aimed to go back to bee-keeping after Everest, yet only two years later was a capable and respected leader who handled the complex logistics and man management that led to the establishment of Scott Base and the tractor journey to the South Pole. We do learn that his career revolved around trust and loyalty and Johnston quotes from 40 year-old books by Peter Mulgrew (1964) and Mike Gill (1969) that reveal their takes on Hillary’s intense competitiveness and the qualities that made him a leader. But this issue is inadequately examined. There is the sense that while Johnston was welcomed into the Hillary circle of family and devoted friends and colleagues, this worked against her coming close to her principal subject. Loyalty works against objectivity and truth and it appears that Johnston never kept the intellectual and emotional distance that is essential for the compilation of a definitive biography. There are only a couple of quotes from Johnston “in conversation” with Hillary and there are few traces of the inner man. A surprising amount of material is drawn from secondary sources and Hillary often disappears during the repetition of expedition narratives where the action is being undertaken by others. This is where the priorities for an exhibition fail to make the transition to biography.

Few of the vast array of illustrations focus beyond Hillary’s public persona. Of the more than 80 photographs of him - other than as part of a group - only four or five catch our man unaware of the camera; yet these begin to say more of who Ed Hillary is than all the others put together. Were there really no other candid photographs available or were they not “authorised”?

Following the bash at Government House in 1999 to celebrate his 80th birthday, Ed Hillary said all that sort of thing was “bullshit”. Given the number of times he has put up with this kind of “bullshit” since 1953 he must enjoy wallowing in at least some of it. Perhaps as part of the price he feels he has to pay for a life lived largely meeting his own self-imposed challenges, seizing the day and humming “My Way” as he went along. But also with the character and personality to lead hundreds, if not thousands, of friends and supporters into the chorus.

In the end, does it matter that this book takes us no closer to the inner man, to the motives and actions of “unselfish heroism”? It is a hagiography, yes, but also a marvellous scrapbook and the family album of a local hero so revered that, now Don Bradman has gone, the Aussies want a piece of him, too. Originally, hagiography meant the biography of a saint. Ed Hillary, in his uncomplicated, clean-living pursuit of “Radiant Living”, and in providing irreproachable example and inspiration for that straightforward gospel, comes close to meeting the criteria for genuine hagiography. The only note discordant to this is the book’s description as “authorised biography”. This suggests a saint conscious not only of his gospel but also his congregation. It also begs the question, how would an “unauthorised biography” read? Is there any one yet alive who will live long enough to find out?