

EDMUND HILLARY: HIS EVEREST LEGACY

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In Sir Edmund's death the world has lost the first man to set foot atop the world's tallest peak along with Tenzing Norgay in 1953, and Nepal has lost someone who loved this country and its people like few foreigners ever have.

—“Everest Hero Hillary No More,” *Kathmandu Post*.¹

Introduction

When Edmund Percival Hillary (1919–2008) and Tenzing Norgay stepped on to the summit of Mt Everest in 1953, neither had any idea of how their lives would change and that they would become international celebrities. Crowds of people greeted the successful expedition, and especially Tenzing, as the climbers walked back through the Nepalese hills and valleys. Hillary was interviewed, filmed, and written about on a regular basis until his death in Auckland on 11 January 2008. His reputation was international, but his home was New Zealand, where he came to be considered the quintessential New Zealander. Hillary was seen as practical, innovative, giving things a go, but also low-key and modest. Yet for someone whose fame stretched back for more than fifty years, his presence until quite recently was almost absent from New Zealand's history books. When finally he did appear, his role was symbolic of the iconic status he held within contemporary New Zealand society.² By the beginning of the twenty-first century, historian Michael King considered that Hillary had “earned the uncontested title of ‘greatest New Zealander.’”³ Hillary would have been famous throughout his life because of the first ascent of the world's highest mountain, but he used the “almost accidental fame” that Everest brought him to do “practical good” both at home and overseas for nearly fifty years.⁴ That “practical good” overseas was mainly in Asia, especially in the small Himalayan country of Nepal. Hillary became the face of New Zealand in Nepal, and through Hillary, New Zealanders came to know of Nepal. Some joined his expeditions and became involved with his organization, the

1 “Everest Hero Hillary No More,” *Kathmandu Post*, 12 January 2008, 1, 3.

2 Hillary's image is on the NZ\$5 note.

3 Michael King, *The Penguin History of New Zealand* (Auckland: Penguin Books, 2003), 510.

4 *Ibid.*, 511.

Himalayan Trust, while many others visited and often made their own contribution to help the people of one of the world's poorest countries.⁵

Unlike existing biographies of Hillary which depict the life of an individual,⁶ this article explores his changing relationship with the peoples and places of Asia. Hillary went to the Himalaya to climb mountains, but in a long association with the region that continued for the rest of his life, the adventurer and explorer also became a humanitarian and environmental activist. He remains most well known for his wide-ranging and ongoing aid programme among the mainly Sherpa inhabitants of the Mt Everest region, but in 1985 he became New Zealand's High Commissioner to India. He travelled to other countries in the region in various roles, such as the President of Volunteer Service Abroad (VSA) from 1963 to 1976, and he became a prominent advocate for the conservation of the Himalayan environment, especially the Mt Everest area, but also more broadly through, for example, the Himalayan Environment Trust that was set up in the late 1980s. He was among the initial awardees in 1987 of the United Nations Environment Programme's Global 500 Roll of Honour. Nevertheless, he continued to have adventures, such as the Ocean to the Sky jet boat expedition in 1977 in which he journeyed up the Ganges River and into the heart of rural India.

Three features are particularly significant in considering Hillary's association with the peoples and places of the Asian region. Firstly, the long period of time between his first visit in 1951 and his last in 2007 inevitably had an effect on the types of involvement during different phases of his life. Secondly, these activities were integrated into a way of life that was organized from his home in Auckland and which encompassed other activities in other places, such as his long association with Antarctica. Thirdly, to all of this he brought his own ideas and way of doing things. When Sir Edmund Hillary died, people in Nepal and India remembered the mountaineer, but mourned and honoured him because of the close bonds he had subsequently established with them. Yet his busy life had also revolved around his involvements in New Zealand; present at his funeral were representatives from government and many of the New Zealand organizations that he had actively supported.

This article is in three sections. The first examines Hillary's early involvement, from his initial climbing trip in 1951 through to building the first school in 1961. This project marked a watershed in his life, and section two looks at this new direction, discussing the uncertain early years of the aid programme in the Solukhumbu district of

5 Michael Gill's recent book vividly recounts the stories of the volunteers at Khunde and Phaphlu (Solu) hospitals, but also reveals insights into Hillary and the rewards and challenges of working with him. The chapter about our family captures the flavour of our involvement, but my own research into the history of Khunde Hospital found that the volunteers often had little knowledge of the wider context of Hillary's work in Nepal. Michael Gill, *Himalayan Hospitals: Sir Edmund Hillary's Everest Legacy* (Nelson: Craig Potton Publishing, 2011); Susan Heydon, *Modern Medicine and International Aid: Khunde Hospital, Nepal 1966–1998* (New Delhi: Orient Blackswan, 2009).

6 Pat Booth, *Edmund Hillary: The Life of a Legend* (Auckland: Hodder Moa Beckett, 1993); Alexa Johnston, *Sir Edmund Hillary: An Extraordinary Life* (Auckland: Penguin Viking, 2005).

Nepal. By the early 1970s the foundation was laid for his ongoing involvement in the Asian region, so these middle and later years are considered together in the third section.

Climbing Mountains

“I was sixteen before I ever saw a mountain,” wrote Hillary in the opening sentence of *High Adventure*, his personal account of the Everest climb.⁷ In 1935 Hillary had saved some money, and his parents allowed him to go on a school trip to Mt Ruapehu. Mountains were to become a very important part of Hillary’s life, whether in New Zealand or overseas, and would remain so, even when in later life he could no longer climb and had difficulties acclimatizing to the lack of oxygen at high altitude. While Alexa Johnston gained unprecedented access to Hillary’s personal archives for her authorized and illustrated biography, his own extensive writing still provides the best entry into his world, moving beyond what he did to what he thought and why he acted in the way he did. In these works he becomes more human and self-questioning.⁸

Hillary’s early life was unremarkable. He was born in Auckland on 20 July 1919 and grew up in the small town of Tuakau, about 60 km to the south of Auckland, where his father had established a local weekly newspaper. One of three children, he had an elder sister June and a younger brother Rex. His mother had trained as a teacher and believed in the importance of a good education. After attending the local primary school, he was sent at the early age of eleven to Auckland Grammar School, thought to be one of the best academic schools in the country. In his autobiographies, Hillary describes his strict upbringing, clashes with his father’s rigid views, loneliness, lack of friends, and a sense of physical inferiority.⁹ He thought he must have been a “difficult child.”¹⁰

When he was fifteen, the family moved to Auckland and eventually bought a house in Remuera Road, one of the best suburbs. This was a big surprise to Hillary, because in his daily life there never appeared to be any money for the children. Hillary did reasonably well at school, and his mother encouraged him to go to Auckland University at the young age of sixteen, but after two “rather miserable” years studying mathematics and science, Hillary left and went into the family bee-keeping business:¹¹ “It was a good life—a life of open air and sun and hard physical work.”¹² The family had a period of

7 Edmund Hillary, *High Adventure* (London: Readers Book Club, 1957), 15.

8 Johnston, *Sir Edmund Hillary*. For part of this article, I draw on some of my earlier research, in particular from Heydon, *Modern Medicine and International Aid*. Paul Little’s recent book does not add much. Paul Little, *After Everest: Inside the Private World of Edmund Hillary* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 2012).

9 Johnston’s biography similarly draws heavily on Hillary’s autobiographies.

10 Sir Edmund Hillary, *View from the Summit* (London: Doubleday, 1999), 40.

11 *Ibid.*, 43–44.

12 Edmund Hillary, *Nothing Venture, Nothing Win* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1975), 25–26.

involvement with a religious group, Radiant Living, becoming foundation members when it set up a branch in Auckland. Hillary left after a few years, but during this time he “learned to speak confidently from the platform; to think more freely on important topics; and to mix more readily with a wide variety of people.”¹³ These were all skills that he needed after 1953.

Hillary climbed his first peak during the summer of 1939–40—Mt Olivier in the Seally range in the South Island. “I returned to the Hermitage after the happiest day I had ever spent,” he later wrote.¹⁴ He developed a new enthusiasm for the mountains that “gave me little rest in the years that followed.” As a young boy Hillary, like Tenzing, had been a dreamer.¹⁵ He read avidly about adventure. Two books in particular now became his “climbing inspiration” and brought him into contact with far-off Asia, in mind if not in body.¹⁶ He “climbed every weary foot” with Frank Smythe on the North side of Everest in *Camp Six* and travelled in the Himalaya with Eric Shipton in *Nanda Devi*.

New Zealand’s mountains became Hillary’s personal adventure, and he quickly rose to become one of the country’s leading climbers. The Southern Alps were a good training ground for the rigours and ice of the distant Himalaya.¹⁷ In 1946 Hillary met Harry Ayres, New Zealand’s “outstanding” mountain guide, and Hillary saw this as the turning point in his climbing career.¹⁸ The two often climbed together. Hillary learned a lot from Ayres about the technical aspects of climbing and “absorbed a great deal of his [Ayres’] philosophy of safe but forceful mountaineering.”¹⁹

Like other New Zealand climbers at this time, Hillary’s sights were turning to the Himalayan region.²⁰ In 1951 he made his first visit when a small all-New Zealand expedition set off to climb in the Garhwal Himalaya in India. A four-week journey took the group by air to Australia, by sea to Sri Lanka (then Ceylon), and by train and bus through India to Ranikhet, where four Sherpas joined the group.²¹ By this time

13 *Ibid.*, 27.

14 Hillary, *High Adventure*, 18.

15 Tenzing Norgay (as told to James Ramsey Ullman), *Man of Everest: The Autobiography of Tenzing* (London: Reprint Society, 1956), 37–38.

16 Hillary, *High Adventure*, 18.

17 L.V. Bryant, *New Zealanders and Everest* (Wellington: A.H. & A.W. Reed, 1953), 8.

18 Hillary, *View from the Summit*, 59.

19 Hillary, *Nothing Venture*, 78.

20 Philip Temple, *The World at Their Feet: The Story of New Zealand Mountaineers in the Great Ranges of the World* (Christchurch: Whitcombe & Tombs, 1969), 48–49.

21 In this article I use “Sherpas” to denote more than one Sherpa, but I also use “the Sherpa” to refer to the ethnic group. This in no way implies that I am homogenizing Sherpas and Sherpa culture. I would like to thank Dr Lhakpa Norbu Sherpa for his advice. Lhakpa Norbu Sherpa, *Through a Sherpa Window: Illustrated Guide to Traditional Sherpa Culture* (Kathmandu: Vajra Publications, 2008).

the Sherpa had established an important role in Himalayan expeditions through their ability to cope well with the demands imposed by the high altitude and through their commonly perceived personal qualities of cheerful companionship. Hillary “learned many lessons about Himalayan travel—lessons in handling temperamental coolies and in dealing with local peoples.”²²

Afterwards, Hillary did not return immediately to New Zealand but was now to make his first visit to Nepal. British climber Eric Shipton’s positive memories of New Zealander Dan Bryant, on an Everest expedition in 1935, led Shipton to agree to a request from the New Zealand Alpine Club; he invited two New Zealanders, from the group already in Nepal, to join him on the reconnaissance of Everest from the south.²³ Hillary’s descriptions in *High Adventure* of travel in Nepal are vivid. He wrote of the heat and the wet of the monsoon, swollen rivers, magnificent forests, leeches, and the steep and narrow tracks.²⁴ As the expedition approached “mountain country,” the weather cleared, their spirits lifted, and they received an enthusiastic welcome from the Sherpa in their “homeland.” Finally came the excitement of seeing more and more of the great peaks, and “over it all towered the summit pyramid of Everest.”²⁵ In 1952 Hillary returned to Nepal and was part of Shipton’s expedition to Cho Oyu.²⁶

Although Colonel John Hunt replaced Shipton as leader of the planned British attempt on Everest in 1953 and had not met Hillary, he invited him and Lowe to join the team. The story of the successful climb is now familiar and will not be retold here. In his own story of the expedition, Tenzing commented that Hillary was “quiet and friendly.”²⁷ On the upper part of the mountain, he partnered Hillary. “Like many men of action, and especially the British, he [Hillary] did not talk much, but he was nevertheless a fine, cheerful companion; and he was popular with the Sherpas, because in things like food and equipment he always shared whatever he had.”²⁸ Tenzing remained unhappy with Hillary’s version of the final climb because, as he saw it, “we were not leader and led. We were partners.”²⁹ In *High Adventure* Hillary finished his story on the mountain,

22 Hillary, *High Adventure*, 22. The term “porter” is used today instead of “coolie” which is now considered derogatory.

23 Eric Shipton, *The Mount Everest Reconnaissance Expedition 1951* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1952), 22. Hillary comments that he also “cheekily” wrote a letter to Shipton about the expedition, suggesting that members of the New Zealand group were “very well acclimatised.” Hillary, *View from the Summit*, 76.

24 Hillary, *High Adventure*, 23–41.

25 *Ibid.*, 41–44.

26 To the dismay of the British, who saw Everest as their mountain, the Nepalese government gave permission for the Swiss to attempt to climb Everest in 1952.

27 Tenzing, *Man of Everest*, 230.

28 *Ibid.*, 240.

29 *Ibid.*, 260–62.

but in *Nothing Venture, Nothing Win*, he described the expedition's return walk and reception as they approached Kathmandu, where banners depicted Tenzing on the summit and Hillary on a rope further back and lying down. Hillary was "the second man."³⁰ At first amusing, this became irritating. In *View from the Summit*, Hillary commented that "It is interesting in these days, when I have a warm relationship with all the people of Nepal, to look back on the Everest era when I was largely resented by the Nepalese and I wasn't particularly enthusiastic about them either."³¹

Hillary received a knighthood from the newly crowned Queen Elizabeth of England for his achievement. His success on Everest made him famous, but his outlook on life remained that of an explorer and adventurer. Being the first to set foot on the highest point on earth did, however, act as a catalyst. Philip Temple, in his account of New Zealand mountaineers on overseas expeditions, contrasted the Hillary of 1952 with that of 1954:

He was no longer simply the strong, hearty companion, mildly ambitious for himself, with plenty of go; no longer the man who was often glad to follow a lead, taking an unsophisticated view of his surroundings. Everest proved that he could tackle and overcome the biggest problems and there was something to be said for his way of going about things. He was more certain, more confident, more experienced in organisation and leadership and more ambitious for himself and others.³²

This would all be important in the years that followed. In the 1950s Hillary's world became a mixture of lecture tours, family life, writing, a little bee-keeping, and a lot more adventure, both in Asia and other parts of the world. He married Louise Rose in September 1953, and son Peter was born in 1954, with daughters Sarah and Belinda following in 1956 and 1959. In 1954 Hillary returned to Nepal as leader of a New Zealand Alpine Club expedition to explore the Barun Valley area to the east of Everest. Between 1955 and 1958 however, his attention turned to another continent when he became involved with the Commonwealth Trans-Antarctic Expedition, controversially leading the New Zealand team to the South Pole by tractor.

At this point in Hillary's life, there was no indication of the watershed that would occur during his next Himalayan expedition. In its planning, Hillary's focus was that of the outsider who came to Nepal primarily for climbing, science, and adventure.³³ In 1960–61 he returned with a multi-purpose expedition with the aims of looking for the yeti (the famous "abominable snowman" of the Himalaya) and conducting physiological

30 Hillary, *Nothing Venture*, 165.

31 Hillary, *View from the Summit*, 25.

32 Temple, *World at Their Feet*, 95.

33 In the late 1940s a few climbing expeditions gained Nepalese government permission to enter the country because they also had scientific objectives.



Figure 1. The Heydon family and Khunde Hospital staff with Sir Edmund and June, Lady Hillary, at Khumjung School in 1997. Photograph courtesy of the Heydon family.

research into high-altitude acclimatization, culminating in an attempt to climb Makalu, the world's fifth highest mountain, without oxygen.³⁴ Unlike the mountainous areas of New Zealand, similar terrain in the Himalaya was often inhabited, and it was on this expedition that Hillary decided to do something to help the Sherpa who he believed had given so much to mountaineering. Hillary had a lot of fun with his expeditions, but he also described a feeling of “duty” to help them.³⁵ Sherpas were his friends. He did not feel sorry for them, but believed they lacked money and the educational opportunities to help themselves. As he was in a position to provide these, he believed he should.

Hillary traced the beginning of his aid programme to a conversation he had during the expedition. One evening in October 1960, in the extreme cold of the expedition's high-altitude campsite, Hillary asked the senior of his Sherpas how he could most help

34 His original intention was to climb Everest from the north. *Miscellaneous—expedition to Everest (Sir Edmund Hillary) 1958–60*, ABHS 7148, box 114, LONB 99/57 Part 1, Archives New Zealand/Te Whare Tohu Tuhiuhinga O Aotearoa (hereafter cited as ANZ), Wellington.

35 Sir Edmund Hillary, interview by Susan Heydon, Auckland, May 2002. Sherry Ortner discusses the “sahibs” of Himalayan mountaineering and refers to the values of male, Western paternalism of responsibility towards the subordinate and weak. Hillary's own use of the word “duty” implies a very strong sense of responsibility, but he never saw Sherpas as weak or subordinate. Sherry B. Ortner, *Life and Death on Mt. Everest: Sherpas and Himalayan Mountaineering* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2000), 46.

them.³⁶ His *sirdar* (foreman) Urkien's choice was education, rather than medical care or agricultural improvement which Hillary thought were the Sherpa's "primary needs."³⁷ Some schooling existed in the monasteries, but the only government school was at Namche Bazar and its fortunes varied. Hillary had some reservations about providing education, because he believed that too much "could make the children misfits" in their own community.³⁸ Romantics did not want to see any alterations to the Sherpa way of life, but change was already occurring with the opening up of Nepal and visitors coming to the Everest area. Secular education was a powerful symbol and tool of modernity, but education, so Hillary and his friends believed, would also help Sherpas cope with and harness the changes.³⁹ In June 1961 Hillary built them a school in Khumjung, the largest village in Khumbu.⁴⁰

In *High in the Thin Cold Air*, his book written with Desmond Doig about the expedition, Hillary described his thoughts as the group left the village:

With something of a lump in my throat I turned away and dropped down the long slopes that led back to civilization—promising myself as I did so that I would return some day to this village in the clouds, to enjoy the hospitality of its friendly mountain people and gain refreshment from their kindly philosophy; and to feel again the uplift of spirit and quickening of the pulse as the eyes roamed upward and dwelt lovingly on the perpetual challenge of icy spire and rock tower, high in the thin cold air.⁴¹

In her book *Life and Death on Mt. Everest*, anthropologist Sherry Ortner writes about Sherpas having lives "off" as well as on the mountains.⁴² Hillary was now engaging with the people and the place of their life off the mountains. This encounter in June 1961 was very different from his first visit almost a decade earlier; he was thinking about stopping rather than just passing through on his way to the next peak.⁴³

36 Sir Edmund Hillary, *Schoolhouse in the Clouds* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1964), 2.

37 Peter Mulgrew, *No Place for Men* (Auckland: Fontana Silver Fern, 1975), 153–54.

38 Hillary, *Schoolhouse in the Clouds*, 23.

39 Anthropologist James Fisher, who as a Peace Corps volunteer had joined Hillary's 1964 expedition, also believes that the schools were the "crucial link between tradition and modernity." James Fisher, *Sherpas: Reflections on Change in Himalayan Nepal* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997), 172.

40 Khumbu is the Sherpa name for the Everest area. In 2011 Khumjung School, now a high school, celebrated 50 years of providing education in the area.

41 Edmund Hillary and Desmond Doig, *High in the Thin Cold Air* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1963), 275.

42 Ortner, *Life and Death on Mt. Everest*, 5.

43 Sue (Susan) Heydon, "Kiwis in Khumbu: Negotiating Landscape and Community at Khunde Hospital," in *Landscape/Community: Perspectives from New Zealand History*, ed. Tony Ballantyne and Judith A. Bennett (Dunedin: University of Otago Press, 2005), 133–45.

A New Direction

“When I left Khumjung on June 13th I little realised I was leaving behind what was to become a new way of life for me.”⁴⁴ In 1961 Hillary did not envisage the wide-ranging and long-term involvement that subsequently developed. He saw the school as a “one-off” project.⁴⁵ The change of direction would help channel some of Hillary’s restless energy, would draw on his developing organizational skills, and would require the determination that helped him succeed on Everest as he dealt with the many challenges that he faced. The work would also alter fundamentally the focus of Hillary’s life. In addition, it would introduce the mountains and people of Nepal to New Zealanders. Hillary’s love of adventure remained, but over the next decade this love was combined with a practical and increasing involvement in a developing aid programme in Nepal.

The Hillary family spent 1962 in North America, but Hillary’s next expedition to Nepal reflected the new direction. As he wrote afterwards:

The Himalayan Schoolhouse Expedition 1963 was an expedition with a difference. We planned to assault two great unclimbed peaks, members of the party were mountaineers of wide repute, yet our major program involved much more than this. We intended to repay in some measure the debt we owed to the Sherpas who live in the shadow of Mount Everest: we would build schools for them, pipe fresh water, and treat their diseases.⁴⁶

Although Hillary suffered what appeared to be a “transient stroke” on Makalu in 1961 and would not go really high again, it is unlikely that a need for a new challenge was the main reason for this different type of Hillary expedition.⁴⁷ After building the school at Khumjung, he began to get petitions from other villages asking for assistance.⁴⁸ Such requests for help, combined with Hillary’s personal feelings that he should assist if he could, led him to continue. To help carry out his plans, he gathered like-minded people around him, people who could also adapt to working in the difficult conditions in Khumbu.

Hillary’s objectives for the 1963 expedition were wide-ranging and focused on practical projects in several of the main villages in the area. Water supplies were improved in Khunde and Khumjung, schools built at Thame and Pangboche, and a medical clinic provided in Khumjung for six months. Before the expedition had even reached the Everest area, Hillary encountered an epidemic of smallpox, and his direct

44 Hillary, *Nothing Venture*, 251.

45 Sir Edmund Hillary, interview by Susan Heydon, Kathmandu, April 1997.

46 Hillary, *Schoolhouse in the Clouds*, preface.

47 Mulgrew, *No Place for Men*, 192. Hillary was also sick in 1954.

48 For example, a petition from Thame village, dated 27 October 1962, included the much quoted sentence, “Though our children have eyes but still they are blind!” Hillary, *Schoolhouse in the Clouds*, 3.

and active response provides a good illustration of his way of doing things.⁴⁹ Hillary knew that smallpox might be a problem during his expedition, as the American Mount Everest Expedition had reported a case. Hillary's expedition came across other cases and deaths, and fear of the disease grew amongst the local population who began asking for help. Although some vaccination had occurred previously in the area, most people were unprotected.⁵⁰ Hillary resolved that a vaccination programme had to become a major part of the expedition, and at Namche Bazar he discussed the situation with the checkpoint captain who had a radio.⁵¹ Hillary sent a message to Kathmandu, and two days later, "with unprecedented alacrity," the Swiss Red Cross plane dropped the vaccine into Khumjung, where the expedition was based.⁵² The disease was spreading rapidly. Members of the expedition immediately began vaccinating villagers and eventually were to give over seven thousand vaccinations throughout the district. Hillary later wrote that of all the expedition's activities "the one most widely appreciated was undoubtedly the vaccination, and this hadn't been part of my original plans."⁵³ The Nepalese authorities in Kathmandu also appreciated Hillary's efforts.⁵⁴

Listening to Sherpas, undertaking practical projects, and carrying out what he had said he would do were hallmarks of Hillary's way of working. While Hillary may have felt an obligation to help the Sherpa, this sense of duty did not form the basis of his relationship with them; the evident warmth of his affection, the respect he gave them, and the way he worked with them as equals did not arise out of obligation. This relationship has underpinned the whole Hillary/HimalayanTrust programme in Nepal. Although he often used the familiar language of the western narrative of the Sherpa, he neither idealized them nor believed himself superior.⁵⁵ Hillary was also conscious of the intensified Chinese presence just over the border in Tibet; this awareness pervaded books written about the area in the 1950s and early 1960s.⁵⁶ Widespread international concern about the spread of communism was an important factor in Nepal receiving increasing

49 Hillary, *Schoolhouse in the Clouds*, 40–49.

50 M.B. Gill, "The Sherpas: A Survey of an Isolated Mountain Community" (diss., University of Otago, 1961), 16.

51 Hillary, *Schoolhouse in the Clouds*, 48. Namche Bazar was the administrative centre of the area, but government presence was limited in the early 1960s.

52 *Ibid.*, 42. Hillary later received a bill for 800 rupees (US\$105) for the flight.

53 *Ibid.*, 49.

54 Ian McIntosh to Hillary, 21 September 1963, Himalayan Climbing Expeditions & Schoolhouse Project, ABHS 6949 W4628 NDI 64/14/2 Part 2, ANZ.

55 See Vincanne Adams, *Tigers of the Snow and Other Virtual Sherpas: An Ethnography of Himalayan Encounters* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996).

56 Hillary, *Schoolhouse in the Clouds*, 7. Hillary does not discuss this in later accounts. Hillary's concerns at the time are clearly evident in documents, especially from the New Zealand High Commission in New Delhi. See Himalayan Climbing Expeditions & Schoolhouse Project, Part 2.

amounts of foreign aid, but little assistance had reached the areas along its long border with Tibet. Hillary saw his efforts as providing Sherpas with “some opportunity to see that Western society has its virtues and its opportunities for growth and freedom.”⁵⁷

While education was the main thrust of Hillary’s early involvement, he did not abandon his belief that western medicine would also help. Hillary initially approached the Nepalese government in late 1963 for permission to open a small hospital in Khumjung, but as he was uncertain about the funding, he decided not to proceed with it in his application for an expedition in 1964.⁵⁸ This expedition built schools at Junbesi in the lower area of Solu, Chaunrikharka, and Namche Bazar, but also provided general medical care, continued smallpox vaccinations, and began work among some of the Khumjung schoolchildren on a prophylactic programme to combat iodine deficiency diseases.⁵⁹ It also built an airstrip at Lukla, which would greatly facilitate the transportation of building materials and supplies since, like most of Nepal, the area had no roads.

The hospital at Khunde was Hillary’s biggest project in the 1960s. In October 1965 Hillary wrote to Ian McIntosh at the Department of External Affairs in Wellington and enclosed his application to the Nepalese government for approval to build a small hospital.⁶⁰ Also included were three petitions from the local village councils to support his proposal.⁶¹ New Zealand did not have diplomatic representation in Nepal, so Wellington forwarded the application to the New Zealand High Commission in New Delhi to approach the Nepalese government through the Royal Nepalese Embassy in New Delhi.⁶²

Although the proposal was successful eventually and the hospital built, the project highlights the challenges that Hillary faced as a private, if eminent, individual operating in the official world of governments, whether New Zealand’s or Nepal’s. Hillary needed funding for the hospital and estimated that the hospital and first year’s running costs would be £15,000.⁶³ At this time Asia was New Zealand’s main focus

57 Hillary, *Schoolhouse in the Clouds*, 7.

58 Hillary to Ian McIntosh, 21 January 1964, and McIntosh to Bishwa Pradhan, Royal Nepalese Embassy, New Delhi, 31 January 1964, Himalayan Climbing Expeditions & Schoolhouse Project, Part 2.

59 Max Pearl, “Kiwi in the Khumbu,” *New Zealand Medical Journal* 64 (October 1965): 584–88. Pearl was the expedition’s doctor.

60 Hillary to McIntosh, 15 October 1965, Himalayan Climbing Expeditions & Schoolhouse Projects, ABHS 6949 W4628 NDI 64/14/2 Part 3, ANZ.

61 These are referred to in the files, but the originals were forwarded with the proposal and have not been viewed by the author. Petitions from local people became a recognized part of the local ritual of asking for assistance.

62 Secretary of External Affairs to the High Commissioner, 22 October 1965, Himalayan Climbing Expeditions & Schoolhouse Projects, Part 3. New Zealand’s High Commissioner to India was accredited as its Ambassador to Nepal.

63 Hillary, “New Zealand Hospital for the Sherpas,” 22 October 1965, Himalayan Climbing Expeditions & Schoolhouse Projects, Part 3.

for external aid. Hillary tried to persuade the New Zealand government to support the project under the Colombo Plan, through which some New Zealand aid was already going to Nepal, but was unsuccessful.⁶⁴ The main reason given was that such a project, not being directly related to the economic development of the area, was not considered a suitable use for New Zealand aid.⁶⁵ The response from the government in Wellington to Hillary's work in Nepal at this time appeared ambivalent. It was one thing to lend support to Hillary in his dealings with Nepalese bureaucracy or talk positively about his projects, but quite another officially to endorse or finance the work. Hillary found New Zealand's "conservative" political environment "frustrating" and at times clashed with the politicians.⁶⁶ Nevertheless, New Zealand's official aid became entwined with the private aid of Hillary's programme in Solukhumbu. Whether private or official, Hillary became the face of New Zealand aid to Nepal.⁶⁷

Hillary, in his determined fashion, had to look for alternative sources to fund the hospital. He set up the Sherpa Hospital Appeal Committee under his chairmanship to raise funds through a public appeal in New Zealand and organized a business-house appeal with Louise making the appointments and Hillary visiting each business. The turning point came when the Lions Clubs of the Auckland Provincial District decided to back the project and raised over £8,000 by organizing lectures and selling tickets. New Zealand businesses donated building materials, food, medicines, and equipment. Finally, assistance came from Hillary's American sponsors in Chicago, Field Enterprises Educational Corporation and Sears Roebuck, and the sale of expedition press rights. In March 1966 Hillary received approval from the Nepalese government to build the hospital, although he was unhappy about their proposed customs duties.⁶⁸ The

64 Hillary to McIntosh, 13 September 1963, Himalayan Climbing Expeditions & Schoolhouse Projects, Part 2. The Colombo Plan came into operation in 1951 and aimed to stimulate development in the Asian region through capital aid and technical assistance.

65 T.P. Davin for the Secretary of External Affairs to the High Commissioner, 16 October 1964, Himalayan Climbing Expeditions & Schoolhouse Project, Part 2. The Department's file also emphasized the issue that the Nepalese government had not requested the project, so the Department was unclear as to the project's priority. Some health work was funded at this time. A New Zealand Colombo Plan Surgical Team worked in South Vietnam. "Colombo Plan: Vietnam: Surgical Team. Statement by the Prime Minister, 25 January," *New Zealand Foreign Affairs Review* 22 (1) (January 1972): 51.

66 Hillary, *Nothing Venture*, 306.

67 Graeme Thompson's contemporary discussion of New Zealand's international aid performance concluded that while the people of New Zealand "probably" led the world in terms of private foreign assistance, official government assistance placed New Zealand "low" on the list of donor countries. Graeme J. Thompson, *New Zealand's International Aid* (Wellington: New Zealand Institute of International Affairs, 1967), 113.

68 Shardul S. Rana, Joint Secretary, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, to Hillary, 22 March 1966, Himalayan Climbing Expeditions & Schoolhouse Projects, Part 3.

expedition proceeded as planned and built the hospital in six weeks during the northern autumn of 1966.⁶⁹ The official opening of the hospital was held on 18 December 1966.

At this time, most countries and international agencies failed to meet their expected goals in implementing aid programmes in Nepal.⁷⁰ Plans had conceptual flaws, and people seriously under-estimated the problems of working in Nepal. After two hundred years of keeping “the west,” principally the British in India, at arm’s length, Nepal was only just “opening up” to people from such countries. Although individual Nepalese could be very supportive, the official attitude to foreigners was at times hostile. Hillary sought the help of New Zealand authorities to assist him to achieve his various aims; nevertheless, in the insecure international climate in the Himalayan region following the intensification of Chinese activities in Tibet and tensions and conflict between India and China, permission was neither easy to obtain nor could applicants assume a positive outcome.

During the 1960s Hillary gained experience in dealing with the Nepalese authorities, but he had previously been in trouble with them and this had an impact on his subsequent activities. Following the unauthorized ascent of Mt Ama Dablam by members of his Himalayan Scientific and Mountaineering Expedition while Hillary was out of the country in 1961, the Nepalese government wanted to make an example of Hillary as a warning to other groups not to disregard their rules.⁷¹ It cancelled permission to climb Mt Makalu. Permission was later reinstated, but Hillary’s reputation for apparently disregarding rules lingered. In 1964, while the New Zealand High Commission was assisting Hillary with his application to the Nepalese government to build an airstrip, the High Commissioner confidentially informed the Secretary for the Department of External Affairs in Wellington that “We have been rather pointedly reminded that Hillary has in past given offence by departing from agreed and approved programme or route.”⁷²

Hillary’s position was not helped by the fact that his assistance targeted Sherpas. To Hillary and other climbers, these were the people who were contributing so much to their success, yet were seen to live impoverished lives in a tough environment and deserved some help in return. The high profile given to the Sherpa outside Nepal was

69 Brian Ahern, “A Hospital for Kunde,” *New Zealand Alpine Journal* 22 (1) (1967): 13–19; Neville Wooderson (member of the construction team building Khunde Hospital in 1966), interview by Susan Heydon, Khunde, April 1998. I would like to thank Neville Wooderson for a copy of the plans of the hospital.

70 Eugene Bramer Mihaly, *Foreign Aid and Politics in Nepal: A Case Study*, 2nd ed. (Lalitpur, Nepal: Himal Books, 2002), 204–7.

71 For an account of the incident, including the text of the two letters from the Nepalese government, see Hillary and Doig, *High in the Thin Cold Air*, 205–8.

72 Telegram from the High Commissioner to the Secretary of External Affairs, 15 July 1964, Himalayan Climbing Expeditions & Schoolhouse Project, Part 2.

out of step with the situation within Nepal where the government actively pursued a policy of discouraging ethnic difference and promoted a unified Nepal.⁷³

When Hillary built the first school in Khumjung in 1961, he had not envisaged it as the start of a continuing and expanding aid commitment to the people of the area, although he certainly had ideas at the time about other ways to help. The small school and other early projects were primarily funded through the support of his early expedition sponsors, but Hillary's aim was that the Nepalese government would assume responsibility for their running in approximately five years.⁷⁴ The Nepalese government preferred to deal at a government-to-government level rather than with individual people. It struggled to cope with the burgeoning number of people, organizations, and governments that wanted to provide aid to Nepal but which also imposed demands that the government found difficult or impossible to meet.⁷⁵ Hillary's difficulties during the 1960s—whether concerned with climbing mountains or aid to the Sherpa—need to be understood within this wider context of the Nepalese government wishing but struggling to remain in control of what was happening in their own country.

Hillary relied on the goodwill and services of other people to assist him in New Zealand and Nepal. He was also involved with schemes elsewhere and, for example, in 1967 led an expedition to Antarctica. While Hillary was personally reluctant, pressure was mounting from different quarters to put his work on a more formal footing with the Nepalese government. By the end of the decade, it was becoming harder to gain permission for voluntary efforts such as those of Hillary. Ralph Naylor, from the New Zealand Forest Service, joined Hillary in Nepal in 1970 on a Colombo Plan assignment for the Department of External Affairs, but he also provided an assessment of “Hillary aid” and Hillary's relationship with the Nepalese. After listing Hillary's considerable achievements in the region, Naylor commented on the concern of Nepalese officials in the area that

Through no planned seeking of power on his part, but by virtue of the money and resources at his disposal, Sir Edmund is perhaps the most powerful person in Solu-Khumbu where changes are occurring. He alone can order an aluminium roof for a monastery or a Darjeeling teacher for a school.⁷⁶

73 See David N. Gellner, Joanna Pfaff-Czarnecka, and John Whelpton, eds., *Nationalism and Ethnicity in a Hindu Kingdom: The Politics of Culture in Contemporary Nepal* (Amsterdam: Harwood Academic Publishers, 1997). For an overview of the period's turbulent politics, see John Whelpton, *A History of Nepal* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

74 “Sir Edmund Hillary's Activities in Nepal,” 19 August 1964, Himalayan Climbing Expeditions & Schoolhouse Project, Part 2. This restricted brief from the Department of External Affairs for the High Commissioner's visit to Nepal in September broadly discusses Hillary's aid work and the New Zealand government's position.

75 Mihaly, *Foreign Aid and Politics in Nepal*, 202–3.

76 R. Naylor, “Afforestation in the Khumbu. A Colombo Plan Assignment” [1970], in “Forestry in Sagarmatha National Park—Nepal: A Collection of Unpublished Reports 1970–1995,” ed. G.C. Baker (Rangiora: New Zealand Forest Research Institute, 1995). This collection was held at the Sagarmatha National Park headquarters at Namche Bazar. I am grateful to the park warden, Nima Wangchu Sherpa, for allowing me to consult this and various other publications. At ANZ, Naylor's forestry report—but not these comments on Hillary—is in Nepal: Solu Hospital, ABHS 950 W4627 118/13/13/14 Part 2.

The official opening of Khunde Hospital encapsulated the uncertainty regarding official Nepalese support for Hillary's work. While Louise Hillary conveyed the happy completion of a successful aid project, documents in the New Zealand High Commission files reveal considerable concern.⁷⁷ Only the Assistant Minister for Education, Gyarendra Bahadur Karki, had attended from the Nepalese government. He gave a long, mainly political speech in Nepali that ended with three cheers, and the High Commissioner, John Farrell, wrote that "we thought they were for Sir Edmund and his team."⁷⁸ From the press release however, he learned that they were for the King. He believed that a combination of factors—some of which were due to the expedition and the voluntary nature of the aid, while others had nothing to do with Hillary—had irritated the Nepalese, and as a result they showed their displeasure not in words but in "non-cooperation." While the question of customs duties was under consideration by the Nepalese government, in February 1967 Farrell wrote that "It is recommended that this should be noted officially as an embarrassing situation."⁷⁹

Staff at the New Zealand High Commission in New Delhi were caught in wanting to help Hillary, but having few mechanisms to do so.⁸⁰ Hillary was aware of the difficulties surrounding the implementation of his projects, but was reluctant to lose some of the independence that he personally enjoyed and which had enabled him to carry out a lot of work. Nevertheless negotiations began in late 1970 with the text for an agreement submitted by High Commissioner Brian Lendrum to the Nepalese government.⁸¹ On 20 January 1972 Hillary, as Chairman of the Himalayan Trust, signed a three-year agreement with Bharat Raj Bhandary, the Foreign Secretary for the Nepalese government.⁸² The agreement outlined the terms and conditions under which the government and Hillary would work together "desiring to co-operate in promoting the economic and social welfare and the development of educational and health services" in Eastern Nepal.⁸³ This agreement, with subsequent renewals, became the basis of Hillary's operations within Nepal. The Foreign Ministry later released a press-note which reported that the agreement "regularizes" existing

77 Louise Hillary, *A Yak for Christmas* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1969), 88–99.

78 J.E. Farrell to Secretary External Affairs, "Hillary Hospital Expedition," 23 December 1966, Himalayan Climbing Expeditions & Schoolhouse Projects, Part 3.

79 J.E. Farrell to Secretary of External Affairs, 7 February 1967, *Ibid.*

80 See correspondence between Pearl, Hillary, and Lendrum in 1970, Himalayan Climbing Expeditions & Schoolhouse Projects, ABHS 6949 W4628 NDI 64/14/2 Part 4, ANZ.

81 See *Ibid.* The proceedings in Kathmandu were mostly handled by New Zealander John Claydon, who had been a pilot with Hillary in Antarctica and was in Nepal as Airport Management Adviser with the Asian Development Bank's Air Transport Development Project.

82 Louise Hillary describes the occasion in Louise Hillary, *High Time* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1973), 180–84. The Hillary's tent in Kathmandu contrasted with the formal surroundings of the former palace of Singha Durbar which housed government offices.

83 Agreement between His Majesty's Government of Nepal and the Himalayan Trust regarding Educational and Health Services Projects, Trust Agreements, Himalayan Trust, Dilli Bazar, Kathmandu.

projects and allowed for additional projects in the future.⁸⁴ Hillary's relationship with the Nepalese authorities was now more secure.

Middle and Later Years

As Hillary approached his fiftieth birthday in 1969, he wrote a list of practical resolutions of things he had wanted to do for a long time but that he hoped would "keep me reasonably fit and adventurous."⁸⁵ He built a family bach at Anawhata on Auckland's west coast, he completed a Grand Traverse of Mount Cook, and he improved his skiing. He had accomplished much in his life, but with his inherent restlessness he was even more relieved to find that there were many tasks left to do and adventures to be had.⁸⁶ This section examines a much longer time span, but the overarching theme is that, despite Hillary's increasing age, his outlook and activities from the 1970s were built on foundations already laid.

His projects in Nepal absorbed much of his time. The New Zealand government became more involved in Nepal. Following the election of a Labour government in 1972, New Zealand's international aid contribution increased.⁸⁷ While Hillary's rejected request for financial help steered Khunde Hospital along a different aid trajectory, within a few years the New Zealand government entered into a bilateral agreement with the Nepalese government to build, in partnership with Hillary, a second hospital that was bigger than Khunde and which it would support for five years. The press statement issued from the Prime Minister's office in September 1974 announced that "Here we have a good example of a voluntary agency working with the Government and with the local people."⁸⁸ Health now occupied a more prominent place in the world of governments and international aid projects, and the less top-down approach and emphasis on partnership with the intended recipients aligned with Hillary's ideas and approach. Hillary continued to administer Khunde Hospital, but the hospital at Phaphlu was taken over by the Nepalese government after five years, and at the beginning of 1980 became the district hospital for Solukhumbu. It continued to be helped by Hillary, reflecting how he worked to support Nepalese government policies and programmes.

In the early 1970s Hillary's interest in the Everest region developed another dimension: environmental concern. As he noted in *Nothing Venture, Nothing Win*, when

84 "Miscellaneous," *Nepal Press Digest* 16 (3) (24 January 1972): 25. The *Digest* was first produced by the Regmi Research Project, Kathmandu, in 1956.

85 Hillary, *Nothing Venture*, 302.

86 *Ibid.*, 308.

87 Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *The Flow of Resources from New Zealand to Developing Countries 1972/73* (Wellington: The Ministry, 1974); Sam Buckle, "A Conscience Issue? Attitudes of New Zealand Governments to International Aid, 1967–1975" (BA (Hons) diss., University of Otago, 1996).

88 24 September 1974, Nepal: Solu Hospital, ABHS 950 W4627 118/13/13/18 Part 1, ANZ.

he returned each year to work on the hospital or the schools, “I see many changes.”⁸⁹ While “in general I dislike controversy . . . it is sometimes better to speak up and suffer criticism.”⁹⁰ His ideas about conservation of the human and physical environment sparked more controversy than his other work, particularly among the local population. The airstrip that Hillary built at Lukla in 1964 facilitated the entry of an increasing number of visitors to the region, and other development began to occur. A joint Japanese-Nepalese plan to fly tourists to a luxury hotel proposed building an airstrip on the potato fields of Khumjung village. Compensation would be provided, but Hillary was concerned that villagers would become a “dependent bunch of pensioners.”⁹¹ He organized a meeting and explained the longer-term implications of the project. The villagers rejected the proposal and sent a petition to Kathmandu which the government accepted. An airfield was built on another site.

By this time western visitors and government officials and advisors were expressing their concern about the environmental degradation of the Everest area.⁹² Momentum gathered first around the idea of creating a national park and then, at the request of the Nepalese, for New Zealand to be involved in its establishment. Through his presence and influence in Nepal, Hillary became involved. At the end of a letter to New Zealand Prime Minister Norman Kirk in April 1974, Hillary wrote:

I have been acting as a sort of go-between in this matter and doing what I can to help it along. I have to admit it will be rather embarrassing for me if New Zealand should now withdraw its offer to supply an investigatory team. I hope you will give this your sympathetic consideration.⁹³

A few days earlier Kirk had agreed to support the Solu hospital project, but of the park he wrote in a note that he was “not favourably disposed, can Hillary persuade me?”⁹⁴ A New Zealand mission was sent in 1974 to evaluate New Zealand’s possible participation, and a bilateral agreement was subsequently signed between New Zealand and Nepal. In 1976 the Sagarmatha National Park was formally gazetted by the government of Nepal.

89 Hillary, *Nothing Venture*, 305.

90 *Ibid.*, 307.

91 *Ibid.*, 305.

92 See Barbara Brower, *Sherpa of Khumbu: People, Livestock and Landscape* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1992) and Stanley Stevens, *Claiming the High Ground: Sherpas, Subsistence and Environmental Change in the Highest Himalaya* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1996).

93 18 April 1974, Nepal: Mount Everest National Park, ABHS 950 W4627 118/13/13/14 Part 2, ANZ.

94 11 April 1974, *Ibid.*

Among the Sherpa, Hillary's role was less favourably regarded. In the meetings held by New Zealand and Nepalese planners, Sherpas, as geographer Stanley Stevens has written, accused Hillary of "betraying" them.⁹⁵ Many did not believe that the park would act as a buffer from the adverse effects of tourism and thought that it would be a disaster for their way of life. Many thought that they would be evicted, as had happened at Chitwan. Hillary later wrote that, in the 1976 *panchayat* (village council) elections, all the chief candidates were against the park, and he had to agree that their concerns were valid:

One, an old friend of mine, Khunjo Chumbi, was aware of my original support of the national park and commented in his speeches that "Hillary first brought sugar to the lips of the Sherpas, but he is now throwing salt in their eyes."⁹⁶

In 1975 the Hillary family planned to spend the whole year in Nepal. His recently completed autobiography *Nothing Venture, Nothing Win* conveyed a happiness that was, however, about to be shattered. The building of the Solu Hospital brought enormous personal tragedy for Hillary. On 31 March 1975 his wife, Louise, and their younger daughter, Belinda, were killed in a plane crash just after take-off from Kathmandu on their way to Phaphlu. As he was to write in his later autobiography *View from the Summit*, Louise was the one "who kept us all going as a successful and tight little team," and she had become an increasingly important part of his work in Nepal.⁹⁷ This work was to continue, but it was an unhappy time for all.

In 1977 Hillary set out on a new adventure, using jet boats to travel up the Ganges, the sacred river to hundreds of millions of people in India. The expedition's aim was to travel from the river's entry into the Bay of Bengal to as far as the team could go towards its source in the mountains. In his book *From the Ocean to the Sky*, no mention is made of his personal unhappiness over the preceding two years, but in his later autobiography he wrote how "Louise and I had always been enthusiastic about this idea . . . In fact it was one adventure that she had felt she, too, could go on."⁹⁸ The planning and early part of the expedition was an adventure, as he wrote in 1979, "but as the weeks went by my attitude to it slowly changed . . . For me, too, it became a pilgrimage and one that I was sharing with an immensely warm and hospitable people."⁹⁹ At Varanasi Hillary took part in a *puja*, describing it as "one of the most impressive religious occasions that I had experienced."¹⁰⁰ In 1999 he wrote that "I don't know why, but suddenly my feeling

95 Stevens, *Claiming the High Ground*, 311.

96 Sir Edmund Hillary, "Preserving a Mountain Heritage," *National Geographic* 161 (6) (June 1982), 702.

97 Hillary, *View from the Summit*, 236.

98 Edmund Hillary, *From the Ocean to the Sky* (New York: Viking Press, 1979); Hillary, *View from the Summit*, 244.

99 Hillary, *From the Ocean to the Sky*, 18.

100 *Ibid.*, 114.

of constant depression seemed to lift a little. In my tent that night, with the music and chanting still ringing in my ears, I felt stimulated and revived. For a time at least the sadness of the previous two and a half years had vanished from my mind and life was worth living again."¹⁰¹ Crowds of people thronged the riverbanks as the expedition journeyed up-river. Progress was followed in the Indian newspapers with considerable enthusiasm, although some reaction was negative, suggesting possible CIA links with a missing spy device being used to assess the river's pollution.¹⁰² Hillary received an apology from the Prime Minister, Moraji Desai.

In 1984 Hillary's life took another direction and in a country that he had come to love—India. Following the Labour victory in the election, New Zealand's new Prime Minister, David Lange, approached Hillary about becoming High Commissioner to India. Alexa Johnston writes in her biography, "Hillary was probably the only New Zealander—apart from cricketer Richard Hadlee—whose name was known throughout the sub-continent. And he was certainly the only one whose name has appeared in Indian school textbooks since 1953."¹⁰³ As High Commissioner to India, he was also accredited as Ambassador to Nepal and Bhutan. He and June Mulgrew, a friend for many years, arrived in New Delhi in February 1985 to reopen the High Commission that had been closed since 1982. By the time they left India, the post had new buildings and was thriving. Hillary was not a diplomat, but his high profile helped open doors that his experienced staff could then take advantage of.¹⁰⁴ High Commission staff recall that "His door was always open to any of the local staff to discuss their personal/official grievances and we found that his satisfaction was in settling and helping us as much as possible."¹⁰⁵ New Delhi was also much closer to Nepal, and, when Tengboche monastery burned down in 1989, Hillary was able to respond quickly. He continued to promote international awareness of and concern for the Himalayan environment. In 1988 the Himalayan Adventure Trust, later to be renamed the Himalayan Environment Trust, was registered in New Delhi by leading Indian mountaineer Captain Mohan Singh Kohli and Hillary. The Trust was launched in Hong Kong in 1989, and, the following year in New Delhi, it held its First International Conference on Environmental Protection of the Himalayas.¹⁰⁶

In July 1989 Hillary left New Delhi and returned to New Zealand, where, at his home in Auckland on 30 November 1989, he and June were married. While he remained

101 Hillary, *View from the Summit*, 248–49.

102 "Desai Offers Apology to Edmund Hillary," *Times of India*, 9 December 1977.

103 Johnston, *Sir Edmund Hillary*, 202.

104 Elizabeth Hawley (honorary New Zealand Consul to Nepal and long-time associate of Hillary), interview by Susan Heydon, Kathmandu, June 2003.

105 Written by A. Rajan, Administration Manager, New Zealand High Commission, New Delhi, 25 November 2003; and given to the author during a visit to the High Commission in November 2004. I am very grateful for the hospitality of High Commission staff.

106 Himalayan Environment Trust website, <http://www.himalayanenvironment.org/event.php> (accessed 9 May 2012); M.S. Kohli, *Sherpas: The Himalayan Legends* (New Delhi: UBSPD, 2003), 309–10.

committed to his involvement with the Asian region, he placed increasing emphasis on planning for the future so that his work could continue. In Nepal, funds from supporting organizations in Canada and the United States, and later the United Kingdom and Germany, provided more financial security than in earlier years. Nevertheless much time and travel, which he found increasingly tiring, were spent in fundraising. Along with his other commitments, he supported the work of these partner organizations through, for example, his presence at fund-raising dinners. At the end of a letter to members of the Himalayan Trust in New Zealand, he wrote that he “did 6 trips around the world this year [1991] and hope[d] to restrict it a little more in 1992. However things don’t look much better.”¹⁰⁷

While Hillary held meetings to consider the future, for those receiving his aid the work carried on. He visited Nepal each year, but his declining physical capabilities had a significant impact on his presence there. He no longer did the building, and he travelled by plane or helicopter rather than walking. His increasing intolerance of the high altitude meant that he was no longer able to stay in Khumbu, so in the latter years he became more distant to the people of the area. The Kathmandu office under Ang Rita Sherpa became increasingly important in implementing Hillary’s programme and liaising with different Nepalese government departments and organizations. On 9 April 2002, at a meeting in Kathmandu, Hillary handed over responsibility for the running of the major part of the Himalayan Trust’s work in Nepal to the Himalayan Trust Advisory Committee under the chairmanship of Ang Rita. Finance was assured for at least ten years. Although his age and decreased practical involvement were major reasons for the increasing handover to the Nepalese organization, Hillary for many years had intended to do this. Although he hoped to influence the transition, his intention was not to control it, and he believed that if those in Nepal subsequently decided to do things differently then so be it.¹⁰⁸

A banquet at Government House in Wellington marked his eightieth birthday in 1999, but two major anniversaries were approaching. Hillary planned to be in Nepal in 2003 for the fiftieth anniversary of the first successful ascent of Mt Everest, visiting India on the way and England afterwards. While Hillary might have preferred a small party with his Sherpa friends, the anniversary was the focus of an international celebration and publicity that began long before the actual day. Anyone staying in the Hillary household in 2002 could not be unaware of the phone ringing day and night and the piles of mail and invitations that arrived at the house.¹⁰⁹ In the days leading up to 29 May 2003, a series of events was held in Kathmandu, culminating in a big party in the evening. In Nepal the occasion was about more than climbing Everest. Presented by the Prime Minister, Lokendra Bahadur Chand, King Gyanendra Bir Bikram Shah Dev

107 11 December 1991, Khunde Hospital Archives, Khunde.

108 Discussions with Sir Edmund Hillary between 2002 and 2007. Hillary made his last visit to Khumbu briefly by helicopter during his regular annual visit to Nepal at the end of April 2006.

109 I spent a week there in May 2002. I would like to thank very much June, Lady Hillary, for the invitation and warm hospitality.

bestowed honorary citizenship on Hillary.¹¹⁰ Permitted under the 1990 Constitution, Hillary was the first foreign recipient of this honour, and it was awarded for both his success on Everest and his valuable contribution to the health and social sectors in Nepal.¹¹¹ Earlier in the day during live television coverage linking events in Nepal with New Zealand, the New Zealand government acknowledged publicly Hillary's work and considerably increased its financial support, requesting that it be used to fund health and education.¹¹²

The second important anniversary was the fiftieth anniversary in 2007 of the establishment of Scott Base in Antarctica. Hillary had maintained his interest in the region throughout and was present at the fortieth anniversary there in 1997, and in 2007 he again made the journey south to the ice for the celebrations. Later in the year, despite increasing ill health, he was supporting efforts to preserve Scott's and Shackleton's huts.

On 11 January 2008 Sir Edmund Hillary died in hospital in Auckland. The news flashed around the world, and tributes poured in to honour the passing of one of the great international figures of his time. Hailing the first successful ascent of the world's highest mountain and more particularly what Hillary had done with his fame and how, eulogies once again made the partnership between Hillary and Sherpas into headline news. Even if in later years his practical involvement had declined, he had continued to watch over the work carried out in his name and then had entrusted both the running and the decision-making to the Sherpa and the organization in Nepal. New Zealand gave Hillary the rare honour of a state funeral, which was held in Auckland on 22 January 2008 and broadcast live on television. Sherpas in Khumbu were able to watch as in New Zealand five Sherpas placed *khata* (ceremonial scarves) on the coffin, including Ang Rita Sherpa, Chief Administrative Officer of the Himalayan Trust in Nepal, who also gave a tribute. He spoke of their loss as "bigger and heavier than Mt Everest."¹¹³ Among the other speakers was one of Tenzing's sons, Norbu Tenzing Norgay.

Since Hillary's death, his work and achievements have been remembered and acknowledged in different places and in different ways. He was honoured with the Padma Vibhushan, India's second highest civilian award, and is one of the few people of non-Indian descent to receive it. The Himalayan Environment Trust established the Sir Edmund Hillary Himalayan Environment Award. In Nepal, the airport that he

110 Tenzing died in 1986.

111 I am very grateful to Ang Rita Sherpa, Chief Administrative Officer of the Himalayan Trust in Nepal, for a copy of the citation's English translation from the Home Ministry of the Government of Nepal. Ang Rita retired from this position in 2011.

112 Helen Clark to Hillary, undated but in reply to Hillary's letter of 19 June thanking her for the news of the Government's pledge, Heydon Papers.

113 "Kiwis Applaud Memory of Beloved Sir Ed," *Waikato Times*, 23 January 2008, souvenir edition, 2.

built at Lukla was renamed Tenzing-Hillary airport.¹¹⁴ When presenting the Padma Vibhushan to Hillary's widow, June Lady Hillary, Kamal Nath, India's minister of commerce and industry, said that India was "very proud" of Hillary and that he was considered an Indian as well as a New Zealander.¹¹⁵ A similar theme was adopted in a tribute to Hillary by one of Nepal's senior journalists and the editor of *Himal*, Kanak Mani Dixit, when he referred to Hillary as a "Southasian."¹¹⁶ Nevertheless, even in the Everest area, there is now a sense of moving on. On the track above Syangboche airstrip, a sign reads "Hillary Hospital" and "Hillary School." The sign is new and is there so that visitors know of Hillary's importance in the area, but also so the next generation of young Sherpa know.¹¹⁷

Conclusion

From his first visit to Asia in 1951 until his death in 2008, different and changing relationships with the people and places of the region played a central part in the life of Edmund Hillary. He for many in Asia came to represent New Zealand and New Zealanders. His was "An Extraordinary Life,"¹¹⁸ but that life becomes a way to explore and reveal the many public and private layers in New Zealand's relationship with different parts of the Asian region. Although he, as New Zealand's High Commissioner to India, lived in New Delhi between 1985 and 1989 and for much of his life had spent months travelling each year, home was always New Zealand. Hillary went to the Himalaya to climb mountains, but he used the fame that he gained from his success on Everest in 1953 to assist the people who had helped him get to the summit. Within a few years the explorer and adventurer became a humanitarian when he embarked on an aid programme that continued for nearly fifty years. His concern for the people became a concern for the place, both Everest and the surrounding area, and the wider Himalayan environment. He retained his enthusiasm for adventure, but inevitably, as he got older, he could participate less in the physical activities that his restlessness craved.

114 Raju Dev Bhattarai suggests that "official condolence" in Nepal at the time was limited "due to political outbursts and upheaval" which prompted him to compile a tribute that makes "the loudness of his contribution resound once again in the minds of the Nepalese people." Raju Dev Bhattarai, *Tribute to Sir Edmund Hillary: Burra Sahib* (Auckland: Raju Dev Bhattarai, 2009), 11.

115 "India Bestows Highest Civilian Award on Hillary," *New Zealand Herald*, 22 May 2008, http://www.nzherald.co.nz/feature/story.cfm?c_id=1501792&objectid=10511857 (accessed 26 May 2008).

116 Kanak Mani Dixit, "The Gentle Adventurers," *Himal*, February 2008, <http://www.himalmag.com/read.php?id=2525> (accessed 7 May 2010).

117 Dr Kami Temba Sherpa (medical assistant at Khunde Hospital since 1977 and doctor in charge of Khunde Hospital since 2002), in conversation with the author, Khunde Hospital, February 2010.

118 Johnston, *Sir Edmund Hillary*.

Throughout his life and in his many, varied, and often long relationships with the people and places of Asia, Hillary brought his own ideas and way of doing things. The determination that took him to the top of Everest was similarly applied when in Nepal he began to build schools and undertake other projects in the 1960s. As Nepal's Social Welfare Council's "Observation Report" in 2007 noted of Khunde Hospital, "This hospital was established in very remote Khunde village when one had never imagined a hospital in any area of the entire Solukhumbu district. It has won heart of local residents by providing service to place neglected by Nepal government and least imagined by any one."¹¹⁹

Hillary was most closely associated with the mainly Sherpa people who lived near Mt Everest. In the tributes after his death, many in Nepal referred to Hillary as a "father." In many contexts such an attribute attracts the negative connotations of western paternalism, but Hillary never considered Sherpas as "childlike" or inferior. Hillary's great friend and local organizer was Mingma Tsering of Khunde, and Hillary recalled that Mingma could be "bossy" with him—but that he "needed" to be.¹²⁰ At Hillary's funeral, Norbu Tenzing Norgay described Hillary's love for the Sherpa as "like that of a parent towards a child; it was absolutely unconditional."¹²¹ The warmth of this relationship was underscored by Ann Wilson's painting of Mingma hanging in Hillary's home draped with a respectful *khata*. Hillary's world met that of the Sherpa through Mingma, and it was a partnership that operated in practice as well as theory.

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119 "Observation Report of Khumjung High School, in Khumjung V.D.C., Khunde Hospital in Khunde V.D.C. and Nurseries Operated by Himalayan Trust in Solukhumbu District 2064," presented by Mrs Subhadra Dahal, Mr Kiran Bhakta Shrestha, and Mr Shiva Kumar Basnet, Social Welfare Council, Heydon Papers. In the Nepali calendar the year 2007 is 2064. The Social Welfare Council monitors and coordinates the activities of local and international NGOs in Nepal.

120 Hillary, interview, June 2002.

121 "Funeral Reaches out with Gentle Intimacy," *New Zealand Herald*, 23 January 2008, A4.

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