

DEBATE

TENZING'S TWO WRIST-WATCHES: THE CONQUEST OF EVEREST AND LATE IMPERIAL CULTURE IN BRITAIN 1921-1953*

In a recent article in *Past and Present*, Gordon T. Stewart examines the British Everest expeditions from 1921 to 1953 'in cultural terms, as a way of gaining insight into the shaping of the British imperial identity from the apparently secure Edwardian period to the era of decolonization'. Stewart identifies an imperial 'master narrative', from the name Everest itself through Lord Curzon's proposals for an ascent of Everest during his viceroyalty to the deaths of George Mallory and Andrew Irvine in 1924, that was 'called into question by the image created, first in Nepal and India, and then in the world press in general, of Tenzing Norgay'. Tenzing was significant, Stewart argues, because 'his voice was the first challenge to the master narrative written by Englishmen for Englishmen about the Everest adventure'. Stewart's broader conclusion is that the conquest of Everest 'signified the end of the era of unchallenged imperial adventures'. Tenzing thus represented the 'transition from the old imperial world in which brave natives worked loyally for the British sahibs, to the new world in which previously subaltern figures like Tenzing became celebrities in their own right and began to communicate their histories in their own voices'.¹

Stewart highlights several important episodes in the history of Everest and empire. He is correct to note the imperial provenance

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¹ Gordon T. Stewart, 'Tenzing's Two Wrist-Watches: The Conquest of Everest and Late Imperial Culture in Britain, 1921-1953', *Past and Present*, no. 149 (Nov. 1995), 171-2, 197.

of the name 'Everest' and the imperial context in which Curzon and Colonel (later Sir Francis) Younghusband conceived of its ascent before 1914. Stewart also identifies suggestive links between the interwar myth of Mallory and Irvine and the traditions of public school athleticism and empire. The mysterious disappearance of Mallory and Irvine near the summit of Everest has remained the subject of much research, speculation and commemoration.² Stewart also rightly notes Tenzing's pivotal role in British representations of the ascent of Everest. In a groundbreaking article in 1980, Stewart suggested the 'ambivalent and transitional' nature of British racial attitudes in 1953, and the 'nuanced relationship' between climbers and Sherpas in his summary of Everest news reports in the *Times*.³ Stewart's more recent contribution to *Past and Present*, however, eschews ambivalence for an unchallenged 'master narrative' disrupted by Tenzing's 'voice'.

This new approach raises broader historiographical issues that require further attention. For example, Stewart considers offering 'a standard orientalist interpretation' of British images of Tenzing, but adds, 'in this case the evidence will not bear the weight of theory'. The 'theory' to which he refers is not made clear, although he later suggests he is criticizing 'an orientalist reading, at least in the stereotyped sense of posing a somewhat monolithic dichotomy between the West and Asia'. Stewart then reasserts such contrasts: 'clearly many of the images of Tenzing in London have multiple orientalist resonances in terms of western power versus Asian weakness, western sophistication versus Asian simplicity'.⁴ By ignoring earlier challenges to his imperial

² *Ibid.*, 172–4, 179. See, for example, Tom Holzel and Audrey Salkeld, *The Mystery of Mallory and Irvine*, revised edn (London, 1996). George Mallory's eponymous grandson climbed the peak by the same route in 1995: *Times*, 23 May 1995. On the name Everest, see also Johannes Schubert, 'Mount Everest — Das Namesproblem', in Helga Steininger *et al.* (eds.), *Sino-Japonica: Festschrift André Wedemeyer* (Leipzig, 1956).

³ Gordon T. Stewart, 'The British Reaction to the Conquest of Everest', *Jl Sport Hist.*, vii (1980), 30–1. Tenzing's role has remained contentious. See the correspondence in the *Independent*, 25, 29 Aug., 5 Sept. 1995.

⁴ Stewart, 'Tenzing's Two Wrist-Watches', 191, 193. Since Stewart does not provide citations for these statements, he directs his argument not against any particular theory, but against the poverty of theory in general. He apparently agrees with the 'unconscious ideological models' of Edward Said, without specifying what they are. In his conclusion, he asserts that his article 'complements' work by John M. Mackenzie and others 'showing the persistence of imperial tropes', and 'connects with' work by Linda Colley, 'defining Britishness against the "otherness" of overseas cultures'. *Ibid.*, 195–6.



Tenzing's Two Wrist-Watches

This photograph in the *Daily Mirror* (4 July 1953) shows Tenzing with his wife in London wearing his two wrist-watches and the clothing made of khaddar, homespun cotton, given to him by Nehru.

(Courtesy Mirror Syndication International)

'master narrative' and fixing Tenzing's 'voice' in an oppositional location, Stewart ironically reproduces the very thing he wants to criticize — a neo-Orientalist interpretation of the 'conquest of Everest'.

Consider Stewart's central image of Tenzing's two wrist-watches. For Stewart, the 'cumulative impact' of a few references to these watches 'all conveyed the image of an Asian innocent who could not have played the leading role in the conquest of Everest. The wrist-watches were emblematic of the ingenious and technically advanced western world whose planning and know-how had been the basis for success, a world in which Tenzing was a bewildered child'. This language is not that of the news reports, but of Stewart's own invention. Contemporary references to the wrist-watches were much more ambiguous, and not such stable signifiers. Stewart concedes that 'Tenzing did not remain encapsulated in the child-like, two-wrist-watch image'.⁵ But he does not ask what the wrist-watches represented to Tenzing. In a photograph of Tenzing in London, as he clasps his hands together in the greeting of *namaste*, his two watches are clearly visible, even flaunted. His gaze is not bewildered but relaxed, dignified and self-possessed. When asked why Tenzing wore two watches, Sir John Hunt, the leader of the expedition, told the *Times*, 'because he was given two'. Indeed, each of the climbers had been given two wrist-watches by sponsors of the expedition. Indian news reports and Tenzing's autobiography confirm that Tenzing viewed the wrist-watches — along with medals, cash awards and clothing he was given while the expedition was in India — as symbols of his new prosperity and sophistication.⁶ By making machines the measure of the man, Stewart

⁵ *Ibid.*, 190–2; Stewart, 'British Reaction to the Conquest of Everest', 32–3.

⁶ *Times*, 4 July 1953; cf. Stewart, 'British Reaction to the Conquest of Everest', 33. In an interview with the author, Charles Wylie recalled that Smiths and Rolex gave watches to each of the climbers. See also John Hunt, *The Ascent of Everest* (London, 1953), 284. Before he reached London, Tenzing was given a watch in Calcutta by the West Bengal Pradesh Congress Committee, and a West Bengal minister gave Hillary and Tenzing two Rolexes on behalf of the manufacturer. Tenzing also told a reporter in Kathmandu that among his treasured mementos were two wrist-watches, one given to him by General C. G. Bruce and another that was 'Tenzing's own special wrist-watch made for high altitude climbing'. See *Statesman*, 20, 27 June 1953; *Times of India*, 27 June 1953. News reports and Tenzing's own account also give prominence to his poverty before the ascent. See Tenzing Norgay, *Man of Everest: The Autobiography of Tenzing, Told to James Ramsay* (London, 1955). This book was published in the United States under the title *Tiger of the Snows*.

revives older colonialist representations of European technological dominance.⁷

Although Stewart refers to Tenzing as a 'subaltern', he does not investigate the issues raised by recent work in subaltern and post-colonial studies. 'Subaltern studies' historians have attempted to recover the agency, experience and subjectivity of subordinate groups by asking 'can the subaltern speak?' In contrast to Stewart's article, these approaches to post-colonial history refuse to accept that 'history' is merely a variation on the 'master narrative' of Europe.⁸ In the remainder of this Comment, I will use these perspectives to highlight the problems with Stewart's 'master narrative', suggest the complexities of Tenzing's 'voice', and pose a few of the questions to be addressed by post-Orientalist histories.

I

MASTER'S NARRATIVES

Stewart's teleological 'master narrative' can only be sustained by a selective reading of the history of the Everest expeditions that emphasizes continuity over change, consensus over resistance. Stewart claims the conquest of Everest 'signaled the end of the era of unchallenged imperial adventures'. But there never has been such an era; it is an Orientalist myth. European narratives of empire have been challenged from within Europe since the

⁷ Stewart also exaggerates the prominence of British 'science and technology' as a theme in British celebrations of the ascent of Everest more generally. Stewart, 'Tenzing's Two Wrist-Watches', 186–7; Stewart, 'British Reaction to the Conquest of Everest', 33–6. In contrast, see Michael Adas, *Machines as the Measure of Men: Science, Technology, and Ideologies of Western Dominance* (Ithaca, 1989); Kwame Anthony Appiah, 'Is the Post- in Postmodernism the Post- in Postcolonial?', *Critical Inquiry*, xvii (1991). For such a celebration of British technology, see the flight over the mountain in 1933: Walt Unsworth, *Everest* (London, 1991), 225–35.

⁸ Dipesh Chakrabarty, 'Postcoloniality and the Artifice of History: Who Speaks for "Indian" Pasts?', *Representations*, no. 37 (1992). See also Ranajit Guha and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (eds.), *Selected Subaltern Studies* (Oxford, 1988); Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 'Can the Subaltern Speak?', in Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (eds.), *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture* (London, 1988); Rosalind O'Hanlon, 'Recovering the Subject: *Subaltern Studies* and Histories of Resistance in Colonial South Asia', *Mod. Asian Studies*, xxii (1988); the forum in *Amer. Hist. Rev.*, xcix (1994); Gyan Prakash, 'Subaltern Studies as Postcolonial Criticism'; Florencia E. Mallon, 'The Promise and Dilemma of Subaltern Studies: Perspectives from Latin America'; Frederick Cooper, 'Conflict and Connection: Rethinking Colonial African History'; K. Sivaramakrishnan, 'Situating the Subaltern: History and Anthropology in the Subaltern Studies Project', *Jl Hist. Sociol.*, viii (1995).

earliest voyages of discovery, and from without by all manner of indigenous resistance.⁹ The Everest expeditions were no exception. Stewart pays insufficient attention to the challenges to his narrative by Indians since the 1850s, British officials before 1914, Tibetans in the 1920s, or the climbers themselves in the 1930s. In addition, to bolster the continuity of his 'master narrative' from Curzon to the Coronation, Stewart does not mention two important contemporary contexts in 1953 — the Commonwealth and the Cold War.

Stewart's narrative was challenged by competing narratives in India and Britain and Tibet. The 1953 Everest celebrations in India invoked a competing 'master narrative', dating from the 'discovery' of Everest by an Indian working for the Survey of India in the 1850s. When the mayor of Calcutta welcomed Tenzing after the ascent, he 'recalled with pride that exactly a century ago a distinguished son of Bengal, Radhanath Sikdar, discovered Mount Everest as the highest in the world. Then came the great hour when "you, another son of Bengal, stood victoriously on the summit, shoulder to shoulder with your gallant comrade, Sir Edmund Hillary"''.¹⁰ In Britain, Curzon and others failed to obtain permission for the ascent of Everest before 1914 because they were unable to convince British officials that Everest was not a strategic and military boundary of India, and thus off-limits, but a cultural boundary to be conquered. After a group of 'dancing lamas' and an Everest film offended Tibetan religious beliefs and cultural practices, Tibetans cancelled all Everest expeditions for nearly a decade. Furthermore, despite Stewart's effort to concretize relations between British and Tibetans as having 'a military cast', relations between Sherpas and Sahibs

⁹ Stewart, 'Tenzing's Two Wrist-Watches', 197. Aside from overtly political opposition and varieties of 'everyday resistance', indigenous strategies also included self-representation or 'autoethnographies': Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (London, 1992), 7–8; also her 'Transculturation and Autoethnography', in Francis Barker, Peter Hulme and Margaret Iversen (eds.), *Colonial Discourse / Postcolonial Theory* (Manchester, 1994).

¹⁰ *Times of India*, 26 June 1953; Alpine Club Archives, London, E2, 'Civic Address to Sherpa Tenzing Norkey'. N. N. Mookerjee's language suggests this may have been a specifically Bengali narrative. For debates over the role of Radhanath Sikhdar or John Hennessy, an Anglo-Indian, see W. H. Murray, *Story of Everest* (London, 1953), 207; Unsworth, *Everest*, 541–5; Parke A. Dickey, 'Who Discovered Mount Everest?' *Eos: Trans. Amer. Geophysical Union*, lxi (1985), 697–700.

were far more reciprocal, intercultural and ambivalent, both in the 1920s and ever since.¹¹

Stewart recognizes that British climbers experienced 'internal doubts, and fears of foreign rivals' in the 1930s, but he seriously underplays their significance. These concerns did not simply reinforce the 'imperial and institutional associations that had now accumulated round' Everest. On the contrary, as German and Soviet explorers mounted stridently nationalist expeditions, many British climbers became embarrassed by their own imperial traditions.¹² Indeed, the organizers' attempts to present the expedition to Everest as a 'national enterprise' that Stewart cites from the 1930s may be read as signs of the weakness of these associations, rather than of their strength. Doubts about large, military-style expeditions led British climbers to reorganize Everest expeditions on a smaller scale by 1938. This change in cultural practice — from large-scale to small-scale expeditions — signified the diminishing importance of earlier imperial associations.¹³ The preference for small-scale expeditions among many Everest climbers survived the Second World War. Eric Shipton led an Everest

¹¹ Stewart, 'Tenzing's Two Wrist-Watches', 177–8. See Peter H. Hansen, 'Vertical Boundaries, National Identities: British Mountaineering on the Frontiers of Europe and the Empire, 1868–1914', *Jl Imperial and Commonwealth Hist.*, xxiv (1996); Peter H. Hansen, 'The Dancing Lamas of Everest: Cinema, Orientalism, and Anglo-Tibetan Relations in the 1920s', *Amer. Hist. Rev.*, ci (1996); Peter H. Hansen, 'Partners: Guides and Sherpas in the Alps and Himalayas, 1850s–1950s', in Jas Elsner and Joan-Pau Rubiés (eds.), *Voyages and Visions: Towards a Cultural History of Travel* (forthcoming 1998); for the later period, James F. Fisher, *Sherpas: Reflections on Change in Himalayan Nepal* (Berkeley, 1990); Sherry B. Ortner, 'Borderland Politics and Erotics: Gender and Sexuality in Himalayan Mountaineering', in her *Making Gender: The Politics and Erotics of Culture* (Boston, 1996); Sherry B. Ortner, 'Thick Resistance: Death and the Cultural Construction of Agency in Himalayan Mountaineering', *Representations* no. 59 (1997); Vincanne Adams, *Tigers of the Snow and Other Virtual Sherpas: An Ethnography of Himalayan Encounters* (Princeton, 1996); Vincanne Adams, 'Dreams of a Final Sherpa', *Amer. Anthropologist*, xcix (1997).

¹² Stewart, 'Tenzing's Two Wrist-Watches', 183–4. For an account of contemporary developments in the Soviet Union, see John McCannon, 'To Storm the Arctic: Soviet Polar Exploration and Public Visions of Nature in the USSR, 1932–1939', *Ecumene*, ii (1995). For German climbing between the wars, see Rainer Amstädter, *Der Alpinismus* (Vienna, 1996).

¹³ Stewart does not distinguish between language, discourse, representation or practice, and argues that all of the interwar expeditions 'remained at the level of quasi-official enterprise'. Yet H. W. Tilman told the Rongbuk Lama in 1938 that the British were not climbing Everest 'for the sake of national prestige'. Cf. Stewart, 'Tenzing's Two Wrist-Watches', 177; H. W. Tilman, *Everest, 1938* (London, 1948), 98. The contrast between 'alpine' and 'siege' expeditions should not be overdrawn, however, as Himalayan 'alpine' climbing has a long history and 'siege' expeditions remained prominent until very recently.

expedition through Nepal on these lines in 1951 and would have done the same in 1953 if he had not been replaced by Colonel John Hunt.

The onset of the Cold War and the attempt to reconstruct the empire as a Commonwealth in the 1950s reasserted and transformed earlier imperial associations. As Stewart suggests, the two Swiss expeditions to Everest in 1952 also revived the international competition in mountaineering that had taken place on different mountains in the Himalayas between the wars.¹⁴ Despite the implicit competition between them, however, the British expedition received much assistance from, and gave generous credit to, their Swiss forerunners on Everest. The importance of the Chinese invasion of Tibet in establishing a Cold War context for Everest in the 1950s also should not be underestimated. A secretive Soviet expedition reportedly attempted to climb Everest from Tibet in the winter of 1952–3. After the ascent, some British observers alleged that Nepalese nationalist celebrations of Tenzing were inspired by Communist agitation. In ways that are still not fully understood, the Cold War and renewed international competition extended older categories of colonial difference into the Commonwealth and beyond.¹⁵

Stewart's 'master narrative written by Englishmen for Englishmen' was but one of many narratives that attempted to define the 'Britishness' of the 'British Commonwealth' to a wide variety of audiences at home and abroad.¹⁶ Images of the Commonwealth in 1953 demonstrate that Stewart's 'master narrative' was only one of at least two possible 'imperial' representa-

¹⁴ On the rumoured Russian expedition, see *News Chron.*, 4 Dec. 1952; *Times*, 12 Sept. 1953; Tenzing, *Man of Everest*, 223; Unsworth, *Everest*, 345–7; Y. B. Gippenreither, 'Mount Everest and the Russians', *Alpine JI*, xcix (1994).

¹⁵ Cf. William Pietz, 'The Post Colonialism of Cold War Discourse', *Social Text*, nos. 19/20 (1988), and the subsequent comment by Anders Stephanson, for a debate of Orientalist elements in totalitarianism. The more interesting question is the interplay between Cold War and colonial discourse. See also *Radical Hist. Rev.*, no. 63 (1995), special issue, 'Cold War and Expert Knowledge'; Thomas R. Metcalf, *Ideologies of the Raj* (Cambridge, 1994), on colonial difference; R. J. Moore, *Making the New Commonwealth* (Oxford, 1987), on the Cold War and the Commonwealth.

¹⁶ Among the many Everest radio programmes, for example, Charles Evans gave a talk in Welsh for the BBC Wales Home Service and John Hunt gave a talk in Hindi for the BBC's Indian Service. Hunt also made programmes in French and German for BBC broadcasts in those languages. See British Library, National Sound Archives, London, Recording 20853 (for Evans); 19466 (for Hunt in Hindi). See also the correspondence in British Broadcasting Corporation, Written Archives Centre, Caversham, R51/333/3.

tions. John MacKenzie distinguishes between the heroic Empire of 'officer heroes, the conquerors and warriors of the past, while the "peace" Empire was that of the ordinary settler and worker, "Empire-builders" rather than "Empire-makers"'.¹⁷ The 'conquest' of Everest by Hillary and Tenzing combined both discourses. By casting Tenzing in an oppositional role, Stewart avoids confronting the ways in which the British incorporated Tenzing into their accounts. Tenzing's role was widely considered 'fitting' in Britain as an example of the continuing partnership and loyalty to the Commonwealth of independent peoples.¹⁸ Hillary also had to be incorporated into British narratives through such rhetoric; this did not occur unproblematically. Hillary was the product of a distinctive New Zealand climbing tradition that had become independent of British models by the 1930s. His background and that of other climbers in 1953 also calls into question Stewart's claim that 'the class traditions of English climbing' governed their selection. As the latest in a long series of collaborations and partnerships between climbers and guides, Tenzing and Hillary were not so much a 'harbinger' of new forces 'undermining the imperial world view' as they were emblematic of the ambivalence and hybridity of the 'imperial world view' throughout its existence.¹⁹

Finally, Stewart's use of the term 'master narrative' itself is problematic. To the extent that a master narrative exists, the

¹⁷ John M. Mackenzie, "'In Touch with the Infinite": The BBC and the Empire, 1923-53', in John M. Mackenzie (ed.), *Imperialism and Popular Culture* (Manchester, 1986), 183. See also Peter Marshall's similar contrast between the 'authoritarian' empire of military conquest, monarchy, nationalism and manly character, and the 'libertarian' empire of the 'ideals' of liberty, self-government and economic development: P. J. Marshall, 'Imperial Britain', *Jl Imperial and Commonwealth Hist.*, xxiii (1995).

¹⁸ Cf. Stewart, 'Tenzing's Two Wrist-Watches', 189-91, with other comments on Sherpas in *Glasgow Herald*, 2 June 1953; *Manchester Guardian*, 3 June 1953; *Birmingham Post*, 4 June 1953; *Observer*, 7 June 1953. In the *Times*, see 'The Sherpas Part in Everest', 4 June 1953; 'The Indispensable Sherpa', 11 June 1953; 'Sherpa Women at Home', 12 June 1953. Stewart was more attentive to this discourse of partnership in 'British Reaction to the Conquest of Everest', 31-2.

¹⁹ Stewart, 'Tenzing's Two Wrist-Watches', 197. On New Zealand climbing, see Graham Langton, 'A History of Mountain Climbing in New Zealand to 1953' (Canterbury Univ., Christchurch, Ph.D. thesis, 1996). Although Stewart cites social snobbery — 'Liverpool, non-public school' (Stewart, 'Tenzing's Two Wrist-Watches', 179) — as the reason one climber was not chosen for Everest, Alfred Gregory joined the 1953 expedition from Blackpool, and neither Hillary nor George Lowe, another New Zealander, came from middle-class, public-school backgrounds. The 'class traditions' were certainly not apparent in the selection of British climbers for Kangchenjunga in 1955: 'Kangchenjunga Seminar', *Alpine JI*, ci (1996).

question remains, how does it attain mastery? That is, why does it become dominant and institutionalized, while competing narratives are discounted or discredited? To answer these questions one might consider the ways in which master narratives 'oscillate' with local narratives, each denying mastery to the other, or one might locate European narratives among a profusion of narrative traditions.²⁰ Master narratives are constructed and refigured in a process that is not dialectic but dialogic, not in opposition but conversation, the result of a heteroglot and polyphonic chorus of 'voices'. In positing Tenzing's 'voice' as 'the first to challenge the master narrative', Stewart suppresses evidence of earlier challenges, competing narratives, and the voices of 'others'.

II

CAN THE SUBALTERN CLIMB?

In Stewart's argument, the corollary of the absence of earlier challenges is the mere presence of Tenzing's 'voice' in 1953. But Stewart's concept of 'voice' is at least as problematic as the term 'master narrative'. Stewart contends that Sherpas 'had no voice to narrate their experiences and views until Tenzing's celebrity status allowed him to move on to the world stage'. But to argue thus confuses 'celebrity' with 'voice', and denies the agency of those who do not express their 'voice' through conventional speech or writing. Sherpa stories about Everest that Tenzing had heard as a boy in the 1920s inspired him to join the Everest expeditions in the 1930s.²¹ Tenzing's 'voice' was not merely an object to be represented by others when he attained 'celebrity status', but a fluid subjectivity that can be recovered through at least three sources: his autobiographical writings, his symbolic use of his clothing and his recorded interviews.

Since Tenzing remained illiterate, his autobiographies are translations and collaborations. Tenzing published two autobiographies with ghost-writers, one of whom commented: 'it would be quite impossible to print exactly what Tenzing said. It has to be translated, so to speak, into relatively conventional written

²⁰ Kerwin Lee Klein, 'In Search of Narrative Mastery: Postmodernism and the People without History', *History and Theory*, xxxiv (1995).

²¹ Stewart, 'Tenzing's Two Wrist-Watches', 197. On such Sherpa stories, see Tenzing, *Man of Everest*, 39–40, 42. For another approach to alternative voices, see Michael Aris, "'The Boneless Tongue': Alternative Voices from Bhutan in the Context of Lamaist Societies', *Past and Present*, no. 115 (May 1987).

form, with due regard to grammar and syntax'.²² Tenzing gave his account in his own words in 'Tensing's Own Story', a series of syndicated articles published in the *Daily Express* when the expedition returned to London. For this series, he dictated his story in Hindi and Nepali vernacular. Instead of drawing on these, Stewart relies on 'Tensing's Story', a second-hand account.²³ When Stewart finally does quote Tenzing's autobiography, he refers to its collaborative nature only to deny Tenzing's agency. Stewart suggests Tenzing's comments about the British were not his own, but were 'coaxed' out of him by his translator, 'with his commonplace American distaste for British imperialism'. But many of Tenzing's stories about the British had appeared earlier in 'Tensing's Own Story', shortly after the ascent.²⁴ In addition, Tenzing attempted to deflect political issues in one of his earliest interviews, published in the American magazine, *Life*, under the headline 'Race-Conscious Asians Take Over Tenzing But They Are Given The Lie In Tenzing's Own Words To "Life"'.²⁵

Tenzing did not speak through the written word alone. He also used his clothing to define a position for himself in ways that suggest a wider context for his two wrist-watches.²⁶ After migrating from Nepal to Darjeeling in 1933, he often negotiated his

²² Tenzing Norgay, *After Everest: An Autobiography by Tenzing Norgay Sherpa, as told to Malcolm Barnes* (London, 1977), 21. For a discussion of related issues, see Tejaswini Niranjana, *Siting Translation: History, Post-Structuralism, and the Colonial Context* (Berkeley, 1992); James Clifford, *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century* (Cambridge, Mass., 1997).

²³ See 'Tensing's Own Story', *Daily Express*, 1–7 July 1953; *Times of India*, 13–17 July 1953, which includes an article by Tenzing's wife with the final instalment; Geoffrey Murray, 'Tensing's Story', *News Chron.*, 3–7 July 1953. Typically, one story cited by Stewart in the *News Chronicle* begins: 'The white sahib's face looked grave, as befitted the shining silver of his hair. He looked hard at Tensing Norkay through the crinkled eyes of one long used to mountains. And he liked what he saw' (6 July 1953). In contrast, Tenzing gave his opinions on the abilities of the British climbers in the *Daily Express* (e.g., 7 July 1953). For both series, see Royal Geographical Society Archives, London (hereafter RGS), EE/85.

²⁴ Stewart, 'Tensing's Two Wrist-Watches', 194.

²⁵ 'Everest Conquerors Come Back', *Life*, 13 July 1953, 122–3. Although Stewart essentializes an 'American' distaste for British imperialism, *Life's* headline for Tenzing's interview suggests that the magazine was more concerned with countering an aggressive Asian nationalism.

²⁶ There is a well-developed literature on the symbolic use of clothing: see, for example, James Epstein, 'Understanding the Cap of Liberty: Symbolic Practice and Social Conflict in Early Nineteenth-Century England', *Past and Present*, no. 122 (Feb. 1989); Arjun Appadurai (ed.), *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective* (Cambridge, 1986); Bernard S. Cohn, 'Cloth, Clothes, and Colonialism: India in the Nineteenth Century', in his *Colonialism and its Forms of Knowledge* (Princeton, 1996).

identity through what he wore. When he reached the summit of Everest with Edmund Hillary in 1953, Tenzing records that his clothes were a summary of his previous experiences — boots from the Swiss, jackets from the British, socks from his wife, a sweater from a friend in Darjeeling, a hat from a Canadian climber, and, ‘most important of all, the red scarf round my neck was Raymond Lambert’s’, the Swiss climber with whom he nearly reached the summit in 1952.²⁷ By far the most famous image of Tenzing is the photograph of him on the summit, in these clothes, holding aloft the flags of the United Nations, Nepal, Britain and India. While the expedition was in Nepal, he became entangled in the competing nationalisms represented by these flags. Once in India, he declared himself an Indian citizen and fulfilled a long-held dream by meeting Nehru, who gave him some of his clothes: ‘Since I had hardly any clothes of my own, he opened his closets and began giving me his. He gave me coats, trousers, shirts, everything — because we are the same size they all fitted perfectly’. The only thing Nehru did not give him was a white Congress Party cap, ‘for that would have had political meaning, and he completely agreed with me that I should stay out of politics’.²⁸ But in the politics of the sub-continent, Everest was no more apolitical than the source of Tenzing’s new clothes. Nehru literally draped Tenzing in his own jacket to make him a symbol of secular Indian nationalism, above party, caste, creed or color. When Tenzing appeared in London in Nehru’s clothes, he looked Indian rather than Nepali. Nehru later opened the Himalayan Mountaineering Institute in Darjeeling expressly for Tenzing: ‘Now you will make a thousand Tenzings’.²⁹

Tenzing’s recorded interviews suggest further dimensions of his ‘voice’. He was often asked how he felt on the summit, and was usually translated as saying how happy he was, how good the weather was, and how he could see down the northern side

²⁷ Tenzing, *Man of Everest*, 261, 303–4. For other comments on Tenzing’s clothing during the selections for Everest in 1933 and 1935, for passing as a British officer during the war, and for disputes over clothing in 1953, see *ibid.*, 48, 56, 85, 234, 282.

²⁸ Tenzing, *Man of Everest*, 289–90. At official events in London, Tenzing always wore the clothes given to him by Nehru. He brought an Indian flag given to him by a friend in Darjeeling; Hunt gave him the British, UN and Nepalese flags (*ibid.*, 293, 229).

²⁹ Tenzing, *After Everest*, 53; cf. Tenzing’s dissatisfaction with the way he was treated by the Indian government at the time of his retirement (177–9). For a further discussion of Tenzing’s ‘subalternity’ in India, see Hansen, ‘Confetti of Empire: The Conquest of Everest in Nepal, India, Britain and New Zealand in 1953’ (unpublished).

of the mountain to the Rongbuk monastery.³⁰ After several such interviews with Hillary and Hunt, however, he was asked to elaborate during a private interview conducted entirely in Hindi. The interviewer, A. Hasan, said that he was going to ask him the same question, because 'either you didn't answer it properly or you couldn't answer it properly. When you reached the summit, how did you feel?':

Tenzing: When I reached the summit, I felt good.

Hasan: Felt good?

Tenzing: Yes, felt good. Because we had attempted this climb six times earlier. This was the seventh time. The fact that we made it, this was the grace of God. Second, we had planned the climb from the north face and I looked down the mountaintop from that side. I saw the Rongbuk Monastery, et cetera, and Tibet. I saw all. I cannot exactly say I saw such and such landmark specifically, but I saw all.³¹

Hasan implied that Tenzing had been unable to speak freely in his earlier interviews ('either you didn't answer it properly or you *couldn't* answer it properly'), and he invited Tenzing to use his 'voice' to challenge the British narrative. But Tenzing did not speak as Hasan expected: "'Felt good?" "Yes, felt good"'.

The problem is not that Tenzing's 'voice' challenged British representations of Everest. The problem is that Tenzing challenges simplistic notions of 'voice' and subjectivity. His was a dynamic and multiple subjectivity; his voice defined by his movement through a variety of discursive positions.³² In India, Tenzing appeared to embrace Nehru's brand of Indian nationalism as surely as he donned Nehru's clothes. Yet on many occasions he rejected these politics. His position depended on the local context. In Nepal, amid the controversies over his nationality, he dictated these comments to *Life* in his own broken English: 'Some people say I Nepali some say Indian. My sisters my mother living here. But now I live India with wife daughters. For me Indian Nepali same. I am Nepali but I think I also Indian. We should all be

³⁰ The 'translations' in these earlier interviews are interesting in themselves. See, for example, Brit. Lib., National Sound Archives, 'London Calling Asia', BBC Far Eastern Service, Recording 19470, 15 July 1953 (recorded 14 July 1953).

³¹ Brit. Lib., National Sound Archive, Recording 19467, interview with Tenzing in Hindi by A. Hasan, 14 July 1953. I am extremely grateful to Anil Sethi for translating this recording with me in the studio. The interview also included Tenzing's wife and one of his daughters. Since Hindi was not Tenzing's first language, even this form of 'speech' is Tenzing's own 'translation'.

³² See, for example, Amina Mama, *Beyond the Masks: Race, Gender and Subjectivity* (London, 1995), 163, and the extensive discussion of Sherpa subjectivity in Adams, *Tigers of the Snow and Other Virtual Sherpas*.

same — Hillary, myself, Indian, Nepali, everybody'.³³ In the more polished prose of his autobiography, he wrote:

If only people will leave me alone politically things will be all right. If only they will not push and pull at me for their own purposes: asking why I speak this or that language, why I wear Indian or Nepali or Western clothing, why the flags were in one order instead of another when I held them up on the top of Everest. It is not so much for my own sake that I feel this as for the sake of Everest itself. For it is too great, too precious, for such smallness.³⁴

More than forty years on, Tenzing is still being pushed and pulled at. He equated nationalism with 'smallness', and adopted a humanism — 'we should all be the same' — that is itself a political position between nationalisms.

Tenzing also articulated a position that was more private and 'religious'. The first group that he spoke to after the ascent — other Sherpas in Solu Khumbu — had their own expectations about his 'voice'. He was sorry to disappoint his mother that there was not, as she believed, 'a golden sparrow on the top of Everest, and also a turquoise lion with a golden mane'. He does not record what he told the monks at the Thyangboche Monastery, but when John Hunt told them Everest had been climbed, the abbot was incredulous and congratulated Hunt on 'nearly reaching the summit of Chomolungma'.³⁵ Tenzing told *Life* that he had often looked at Chomolungma as a boy: 'Then I sit think what lamas at Thyangboche say. They say Buddha god live there on top and they make worship to mountain. I have feeling for climbing to top and making worship more close to Buddha god. Not same feeling like English Sahibs who say want "conquer" mountain. I feel more making pilgrimage'.³⁶ Tenzing's ascent went well beyond local traditions of mountain pilgrimage, when one walked either around a mountain or only part way up it to a shrine to make an offering to the gods.³⁷ On the summit

³³ *Life*, 13 July 1953, 123.

³⁴ Tenzing, *Man of Everest*, 314.

³⁵ Tenzing, *Man of Everest*, 279; Hunt, *Ascent of Everest*, 220.

³⁶ *Life*, 13 July 1953, 122. See also Tenzing, *Man of Everest*, 28–9, 282, 314–15, 271; *Daily Express*, 2 July 1953.

³⁷ Tenzing may have been adapting practices of mountain pilgrimage from Tibetan Buddhism and Bon, the indigenous religion that pre-dates Buddhism and persists as a minority religion in Tibet, as well as rituals of mountain cults from Tibetan folk religions. In certain mountain cults, males of a village visit a cairn or shrine on the slopes of a nearby mountain (but not too high up) to make offerings and ask for good luck, prosperity, and so on. I am grateful to Toni Huber for help in understanding these rituals. See Samten G. Karmay, 'Mountain Cults and National Identity in Tibet', in Robert Barnett and Shirin Akiner (eds.), *Resistance and Reform in Tibet* (London,

of Everest, Tenzing said a prayer and made an offering, but he avoided religious discourses in his autobiography: 'From many sides, among the devout and orthodox, there has been great pressure upon me to say that I had some vision or revelation.' Instead, he said he felt 'a great closeness to God, and that was enough for me'.³⁸

Tenzing's summit rituals — saying his prayers, making his offering, and waving the flags he had been given by others — joined together the 'religious' and the 'political'. His prayers should not be read as a retreat from the 'political' into the 'religious'. To read the 'religious' as a pre-political category of experience may once again reproduce colonial representations of mystical 'others'.³⁹ After all, Tenzing said his feelings of worship were 'not same feeling like English Sahibs who say want "conquer" mountain'. Even when he wore Nehru's clothes, however, Tenzing often rejected nationalism and other 'political' discourses. Such analytical distinctions may have heuristic uses. But Tenzing did not articulate these positions with ease or make such distinctions himself. Stewart essentializes Tenzing's 'voice' in a position that challenges the British and then universalizes it to represent all 'previously subaltern figures'. Yet why should we expect the 'subaltern' to speak consistently in the language of politics or religion, or in other discourses of literate cultures?⁴⁰ Tenzing climbed. Tenzing expressed his 'voice' through his climbing, through actions that spoke louder than words.

III

POST-ORIENTALIST HISTORIES

Stewart shows that there was not one European narrative and one Asian narrative opposed to one another — there was not

(n. 37 cont.)

1994); Samten G. Karmay, 'Les Dieux des terroirs et les génévriers: un rituel tibétain de purification', *Journal asiatique*, cclxxxiii (1995); Toni Huber, 'Why Can't Women Climb Pure Crystal Mountain? Remarks on Gender, Ritual, and Space in Tibet', in Per Kvaerne (ed.), *Tibetan Studies: Proceedings of the 6th Seminar of the International Association for Tibetan Studies*, 2 vols. (Fagernes, 1992), i; Toni Huber, 'Putting the Gnas back into Gnas-Skor: Rethinking Tibetan Buddhist Pilgrimage Practice', *Tibet J*, xix (1994).

³⁸ Tenzing, *Man of Everest*, 273.

³⁹ See Nicholas B. Dirks, Geoff Eley and Sherry B. Ortner (eds.), *Culture / Power / History: A Reader in Contemporary Social Theory* (Princeton, 1994), 38–9.

⁴⁰ Shahid Amin asks: 'Must non-literates always exemplify a code when they speak . . . Is their way of speaking with elites not greatly affected by who they speak to,

(cont. on p. 174)

a 'monolithic dichotomy between the West and Asia'. He even suggests that 'derivative scholarship often deploys one-dimensional applications of such scholarly constructions as Orientalism, and that we have here a case that is much more interesting once alternative readings are brought out'. Although such alternative readings were present from the beginning, he excludes them so his master narrative remains 'unchallenged'. To his credit, he rightly suggests that Tenzing's own account of his life enabled him to escape categorization as a dependent, secondary, or subservient figure.⁴¹ But Stewart, in an argument that hinges on the role of Tenzing's 'voice', does not adequately examine Tenzing's own interventions in the aftermath of the ascent. To be sure, Tenzing made comments critical of the British. But he always made these comments in the context of other remarks that emphasized his friendship and partnership with them. By ascribing to Tenzing the very oppositional politics that he deliberately avoided, Stewart produces in practice the Orientalism that he rejects in theory.

The problem of writing post-Orientalist histories has generated much debate, but thus far no consensus.⁴² It is clear, however, that post-Orientalist and post-colonial predicaments create problems far more interesting — and far more complicated — than simply bringing out 'alternative readings'. At least three questions must be asked about such alternative readings: where do they come from? what do they do? and how do they change? Put another way, these are questions about agency, power and history. This brief account of Tenzing's publications, clothing and interviews makes clear that, even if others represented him as sometimes challenging British narratives, his own 'voice' was more

(n. 40 cont.)

and, indeed, by the subject and object of such a "conversation"?" See the discussion more generally in Shahid Amin, *Event, Metaphor, Memory: Chauri Chaura, 1922–1992* (Berkeley, 1995), 196.

⁴¹ Stewart, 'Tenzing's Two Wrist-Watches', 193.

⁴² Among the relevant works, see Gyan Prakash, 'Writing Post-Orientalist Histories of the Third World: Perspectives from Indian Historiography', *Comparative Studies in Society and Hist.*, xxxii (1990); Rosalind O'Hanlon and David Washbrook, 'After Orientalism: Culture, Criticism and Politics in the Third World', *Comparative Studies in Society and Hist.*, xxxiv (1992); Gyan Prakash, 'Can the "Subaltern" Ride? A Reply to O'Hanlon and Washbrook', *Comparative Studies in Society and Hist.*, xxxiv (1992). See also Nicholas B. Dirks (ed.), *Colonialism and Culture* (Ann Arbor, 1992); Carol A. Breckenridge and Peter van der Veer (eds.), *Orientalism and the Postcolonial Predicament: Perspectives on South Asia* (Philadelphia, 1993); Gyan Prakash (ed.), *After Colonialism: Imperial Histories and Postcolonial Displacements* (Princeton, 1994).

fluid, ambivalent, and nuanced. Tenzing was represented by others in specific ways because those representations had political consequences. Moreover, the political context of the 1950s changed the way that the ascent would be represented even before Tenzing stepped on the summit. Indeed, in a critique of monolithic dichotomies, the similarities of certain British and Indian and Nepalese representations of Tenzing are as important as their differences. Such an approach suggests that discursive strategies such as Orientalism are not exclusively products of the Occident's relations with the Orient, but may appear elsewhere as contingent features of local power relations.

By way of conclusion, consider the ways in which Tenzing illuminates nationalism, internationalism and the agency of other 'subalterns' during the period of decolonization and the Cold War. He became a symbol of national identity in Nepal, India and Britain in ways that demonstrate the complex connection between marginality and nationality at this particular moment in the history of each of these countries. As a member of the Sherpa diaspora, a transnational community living across borders in the Himalayas, Tenzing was a marginal figure, part of a religious and ethnic minority, in Nepal and India. This marginality made him after his ascent a powerful symbol of national identity in Nepal and India — and in Britain as well. In very different ways, Hillary and Hunt shared this position. As an antipodean, Hillary was an outsider in Britain and his partnership with Tenzing became, for that reason, a powerful symbol of an inclusive and diverse Commonwealth. He later came to represent a distinctive New Zealand national identity: his face recently replaced the Queen's on New Zealand's five-dollar bill. John Hunt, who had been born in India and served in the Indian army, celebrated India's contribution to the ascent when the expedition returned to India. He later returned to a hero's welcome at his home in Wales, after which the War Office reprimanded him as a serving officer for showing sympathy for Welsh nationalism. All too often, discussions of national identity, especially British identity, highlight the 'master narratives' of the centre — the rural arcadias of the home counties, the athleticism of the public schools, and so on. The diverse and, in varying degrees, marginal positions of Tenzing, Hillary and Hunt in Britain after the ascent of Everest suggests some of the ways in which British culture is diasporic, constituted

by the dynamic interchange with 'others' on the outside and those on the 'margins' within.⁴³

Tenzing and the ascent of Everest also became symbols of internationalism in Britain and India. After the ascent, for example, the rhetoric of Rajendra Prasad, the president of India, was remarkably similar to Hunt's. Each represented the ascent as the triumph of co-operation, teamwork and the 'human spirit'.⁴⁴ Though their rhetoric of romantic internationalism was similar, its specific political contexts and consequences were quite different. For Hunt, Tenzing represented the internationalism of the human spirit and the United Nations. For Prasad, as for Nehru, Tenzing also may have represented the internationalism of the non-aligned movement. Some images of Tenzing and Hillary as partners in the Commonwealth also represented a kind of internationalism that should be taken seriously on its own terms and not merely dismissed as Curzonian imperialism by another name. Each of these representations may have intended to find a *via media* between the polarities of the Cold War, but their specific meanings were shaped by local contexts. For Tenzing, such internationalism enabled him to occupy a position between Indian and Nepali nationalisms and to express his deeply personal relationship with Chomolungma/Everest.⁴⁵ All of these internationalisms also remained in tension with versions of the ascent of Everest that emphasized local British or Indian or Nepalese national identities.

Finally, the controversies over Tenzing illuminate the agency of the wider group of 'subalterns' who responded to his achieve-

⁴³ My larger work in progress on the cultural history of British mountaineering from 1786 to 1953, and my essay, 'Confetti of Empire', develop these themes in greater depth. On Hillary, see 'Queen Ousted from Kiwi Note', *Independent*, 7 July 1992. On Hunt's sympathy for Wales, see Director of Personnel, War Office, to John Hunt, London, 16 Oct. 1953; John Hunt to Undersecretary of State for War, 22 Oct. 1953: RGS Archives, EE/89.

⁴⁴ See the speeches by Rajendra Prasad on 29 June 1953: Public Record Office, London, FO 371/106880; *Dr. Rajendra Prasad: Correspondence and Select Documents*, ed. Valmiki Choudhary (New Delhi, 1992), xvi, 422. For his internationalism, see also Hunt, *Ascent of Everest*; John Hunt to Jawaharlal Nehru, New Delhi, 1 July 1953: RGS Archives, EE/90; personal interview with Lord Hunt, July 1996. On the use of a similar 'idiom of Romantic nationalism' in the early nineteenth century, see Norbert Peabody, 'Tod's *Rajast'han* and the Boundaries of Rule in Nineteenth Century India', *Mod. Asian Studies*, xxx (1996), 188.

⁴⁵ See also the programme in the BBC 'Reputations' series, 'Hillary and Tenzing: Everest and After', broadcast on BBC2, 18 June 1997; Hansen, 'Confetti of Empire'.

ment. At the time, many of the British thought they knew whom to blame for Nepalese and Indian celebrations of Tenzing: the Communists. Stewart quotes, but does not draw attention to the importance of, this British rhetoric. In Kathmandu, Hunt said that Tenzing 'appears to have been 'got at' by local politicians — we are pretty sure the Communist party is behind it'. But Tenzing wrote of the crowds that greeted him on his return: 'I have often been asked since if they were Communists, and this I do not honestly know. But I do know that they were nationalists, with very strong ideas, and what they were interested in was not Everest at all, or how Everest was really climbed — but only politics'.⁴⁶ There were, of course, Communists in Nepal and India at this time. But if British observers sometimes conflated Communism and nationalism, they were not the only people to do so at the height of the Cold War. As the expedition returned from the mountain, other headlines reported the Korean War, riots in East Berlin after the death of Stalin and the execution of the Rosenbergs. This same period also witnessed continuations of the Mau Mau uprising, Kashmiri separatism, and so on. During the Cold War, diversity and difference were often subsumed into bipolar oppositions. If Tenzing was able to 'speak' from shifting positions of Indian nationalism or internationalist humanism or religious pilgrimage, the Cold War made it difficult for many of the people who celebrated his ascent to achieve even that level of subjectivity. It might appear that now, in the post-Cold War world, this heterogeneous group of 'subalterns' might realize the post-colonial possibility of being able to speak as well as climb. For this to happen, however, historians must recognize the dialogic character of 'master narratives' and the diversity and multiplicity of 'subaltern' voices.

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⁴⁶ Stewart, 'Tenzing's Two Wrist-Watches', 188; Tenzing, *Man of Everest*, 282.