

British culture and the end of empire

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CHAPTER THREE

Coronation Everest: the Empire and Commonwealth in the 'second Elizabethan age'

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On 2 June 1953, the coronation day of Queen Elizabeth II, *The Times* reported that a British expedition had reached the summit of Mount Everest. British newspapers hailed the 'conquest' of Everest as a 'Coronation gift for the Queen', the 'crowning glory', and 'a brilliant jewel in the Queen's diadem'. The ascent of Everest opened the 'new Elizabethan age' by demonstrating that 'the qualities displayed by Drake and Raleigh are triumphantly present in the Britain of today'.¹ BBC radio announced the ascent with great pride 'because British mountaineers have finished the job they began 32 years ago'. The announcer intoned that 'another "far horizon" has been achieved' and 'the conquest of Mount Everest by British climbers is a victory worthy to resound through history, for long centuries to come'.² To the men and women waiting in rain and sleet and hail for the coronation parade, news of the ascent of Everest gave 'a lovely warm feeling inside to think that we, the British, had got there first'.³

The coronation parade included the Queen's glittering carriage surrounded by a phalanx of horse guards, as well as sultans, prime ministers, heads of state, and military troops from throughout the Empire and Commonwealth. That evening, Prime Minister Winston Churchill introduced the Queen's coronation day speech on radio and television: 'Let it not be thought that the age of Chivalry belongs in the past. Here at the summit of our worldwide community is a lady', the Queen. The Queen's own remarks drew strength 'not only from the splendid traditions and annals of more than a thousand years, but the living strength and majesty of the Commonwealth and Empire'. These diverse societies, lands and 'races' possessed different histories but were 'by God's will united in spirit and in aim'. Thus, 'my Coronation is not the symbol of a power and a splendour that are gone but a declaration of our hopes for the future'. BBC television concluded its most successful broadcast day ever with newsreels, the Queen waving from the balcony at the Palace, a Mount Everest talk, and fireworks on the Thames.⁴

To a casual observer, the simultaneous celebration of the coronation and conquest of Everest might appear to be a coincidence. British climbers had tried to climb Everest since the 1920s, and plans for this attempt had begun before the Queen ascended to the throne in 1952. The British expedition that placed Edmund Hillary, a New Zealand beekeeper, and Tenzing Norgay, a Sherpa, on the summit of Everest on 29 May 1953 had been on the mountain for several months and was dependent on the vicissitudes of the weather. After Hillary and Tenzing returned from the summit, James Morris, *Times* correspondent with the team, rushed down the mountain to send a coded message by runner and telegraph to the British Embassy at Kathmandu, where it was decrypted and forwarded to London on 1 June. *The Times*, the Foreign Office and Buckingham Palace then held the news overnight, irrevocably linking the coronation and Everest in British memories of both events.⁵ Morris succinctly captured the mutually reinforcing relationship of the two events in the title of his book about the ascent – *Coronation Everest*.⁶

If the coincidence of conquest and coronation required some luck, hard work and savvy public relations, the imperial rhetoric surrounding these events in Britain stemmed from deeper historical roots and wider contemporary contexts. British mountaineers in the Alps and Himalayas had described their climbing as a form of imperial conquest, exploration and adventure since the mid-nineteenth century.⁷ Historians have identified two predominant visions of empire, the 'peace' empire of improvement and development and the 'heroic' empire of military conquest and manly character.⁸ By the mid-twentieth century, British representations of mountaineering were compatible with both visions of empire, and the British reaction to the ascent of Everest included images of imperial conquest alongside those of international partnership. Indeed, the partnership of Hillary and Tenzing on Everest was represented in Britain in terms that oscillated between these two positions at the moment Britain was attempting to redefine the 'British Empire' as a 'Commonwealth of Nations'.

This chapter examines the representations of the Empire and Commonwealth in the conquest of Everest in British culture in the 1950s. The imperial connotations of the ascent of Everest were shaped in the inter-war years, but altered by the Second World War and the independence of India. Although British mountaineers were initially unprepared for these changes, they benefited from new state support and recent scientific research as well as the expansive definition of 'Britishness' and the Commonwealth. After the ascent, British reactions to Everest took into account competing reactions in other parts of the world and shifted uncertainly between nationalist and internationalist interpretations.⁹ The persistence and adaptation of the imperial theme in the conquest of Everest

calls into question the assertion that the Empire had a 'minimal impact' on British culture in this period. In Britain, the conquest of Everest was widely seen as evidence that British prestige was undiminished, and that British leadership would enable her former colonies to become the multi-racial Commonwealth of Nations that the Queen hoped for on coronation day.

Mount Everest had possessed imperial connotations since the mid-nineteenth century, when the Survey of India identified the remote peak as the highest mountain in the world and named it after Sir George Everest, a former Surveyor-General of India. From the 1890s onwards, British mountaineers proposed the ascent of Mount Everest, often with the encouragement of Lord Curzon, the Viceroy of India, who believed the ascent would maintain British prestige on the boundaries of India. Nevertheless, proposals to climb Everest before the First World War foundered on the opposition of British diplomats who considered any plans to climb Everest in conflict with the geo-political strategy to exclude all outside interference from Nepal or Tibet.¹⁰

The aftermath of the Great War altered the earlier priorities of the Great Game, and continued British domination of India led to permission to climb Everest. In the early 1920s, British diplomats aided the Tibetans in a war against China by trading weapons with Tibet in exchange for permission to climb Everest. Nepal remained closed to foreigners. After a reconnaissance of Everest from Tibet in 1921, the British tried to climb the peak in 1922 and 1924, when George Mallory and Andrew Irvine disappeared high on the mountain. The deaths of Mallory and Irvine gave the British the sense that Everest was *their* mountain. In 1930, Frank Smythe told the British envoy in Kathmandu: 'What British mountaineers feel is that Everest has got to be climbed by a British party. British lives have been sacrificed there.' If British diplomats could squash German proposals to climb Everest, 'it would be regarded very favourably throughout the British Empire'.¹¹

British mountaineers between the wars need not have worried about access. As long as the British ruled India, there was no chance that climbers from anywhere else would be granted permission. After Sir Percy Cox pleaded that Everest was 'a national ambition', the India Office stated publicly that the issue was up to the Tibetans, but decided privately that British climbers would be given preference: 'We should do nothing to facilitate the transmission of a foreign application until the time is propitious for making a British application'.¹² As a result, national expeditions tackled separate peaks, with the British on Everest, the Germans on Nanga Parbat, the Americans on K2, and so on. As the British repeatedly failed to climb Everest in the 1930s and several large German expeditions to Nanga Parbat ended in tragedy, some climbers entertained doubts about the large,

military-style expeditions and experimented with smaller-scale efforts.¹³ The outbreak of the Second World War postponed any further climbing plans, but British mountaineers expected that the earlier pattern would resume after the peace.

The end of empire and beginning of the Cold War in the early post-war period dramatically altered control over access to Everest. After Indian independence in 1947, Nepal began to open its borders to mountaineering parties. The Chinese invasion of Tibet in 1950 also closed the old route to Everest from the north. Independent India had replaced Britain as the dominant regional power, and thus when climbers wanted to ask Nepal for permission to climb Everest from the south, it was New Delhi (rather than London) that they sounded out before asking Kathmandu.¹⁴ After the British received permission for an Everest expedition through Nepal in 1951, they continued to assume that they had the field to themselves: their plans for 1951 extended no further than a leisurely 'reconnaissance' led by Eric Shipton, a former tea planter in Kenya. The British presumed that they could mount a more serious attempt on the summit in later years, as they had done between the wars.

But the older imperial deference was gone. The Nepalese did not distinguish between a 'reconnaissance' and a 'real' attempt to climb the mountain, and in 1952 they granted access to Everest to the Swiss delegation in Delhi. After the British hastily made their own request for 1952, the Nepali Government asked if the two proposals could be combined for a joint Anglo-Swiss attempt. The Everest organisers in London still wanted an 'all-British' expedition, however, and were only prepared to consider a joint-expedition if Eric Shipton were the leader. The Swiss proposed joint-leadership of a joint-expedition but refused to accept sole British command. Although Shipton himself was amenable to joint-leadership, the British organising committee refused. The British Foreign Office, which had actively encouraged a joint-expedition, was very disappointed at their recalcitrance, which exhibited the assumptions of the earlier era of imperial dominance.¹⁵

In 1952, the Swiss twice tried to climb Everest, while the British settled for a training expedition led by Shipton to Cho Oyu, a peak in the same region. The Swiss team identified the best route to the summit of Everest and two climbers, Tenzing and Raymond Lambert, a Swiss guide, reached the highest elevation ever. In contrast, the British Cho Oyu team was unfocused and ineffectual, as Shipton preferred to explore new territory rather than organise a unified attempt to reach the summit. After receiving permission for an Everest expedition in 1953, the British organising committee chose to replace Shipton as leader with Col. John Hunt, a military officer, because of its 'responsibility to the nation and Commonwealth' in a matter of 'national importance'.¹⁶ Hunt had limited climbing

experience in the Himalayas but a reputation as a 'thruster' and good organiser.

Hunt's arrival is sometimes interpreted as the reassertion of an earlier imperial model. Shipton disliked the atmosphere of international competition, while Hunt was a serving military officer who recognised the urgency of the situation. Hunt put his background as a member of Field Marshall Montgomery's wartime planning staff to good use, and developed a systematic plan for co-ordinating the logistics of the summit 'assault'. Most Everest expeditions between the wars had been led by military officers, and one of the organisers told Col. Hunt that in choosing him they were looking for 'another General Bruce', the officer who spearheaded Everest plans from the 1890s to the 1920s.¹⁷ Yet by the 1950s, the implications of a military leader could now be uncomfortable. The Royal Geographical Society (RGS) strongly advised British diplomats in Nepal and India to downplay Hunt's status as a serving military officer as the expedition approached.¹⁸

Indeed, there is evidence that the 1953 Everest expedition was 'a company of sahibs attended by their multitudinous servants', and, as Jan Morris aptly puts it, 'recognizably a formation of Empire'.¹⁹ But the sahibs had to adjust to changes among the servants. The effect of the Swiss giving the Sherpas higher pay and more respect than previous British parties was, one British climber in India warned, 'rather similar to the effect of the Americans on the servant problem here during the war'.²⁰ As the expedition began, the British did not appreciate the Sherpas' greater expectations. In Kathmandu, the British climbers were lodged in rooms at the British Embassy, while the Sherpas were allocated a 'garage, formerly a stable' without any toilets. The next morning, some of the Sherpas 'showed their displeasure by using the road in front of the garage as a latrine'.²¹ The rift was soon bridged by Tenzing, the leader of the Sherpas, and Major Charles Wylie, a Gurkha officer who spoke Himalayan languages. After the Sherpas were promised that they could keep their equipment, the rest of the expedition experienced remarkably little dissension between the Sherpas and the British.²²

Hunt's military efficiency and meticulous planning were undoubtedly crucial, and the imperial style of the expedition was also clearly recognisable. However, these features have obscured the extent to which the British success on Everest was aided by recent developments of the early 1950s. The contribution of the British state to the ascent, for example, has been vastly underestimated. The public purse paid the salaries of most British team-members, including two army officers, two doctors, two scientists and a statistician. Of the other British climbers, a schoolmaster and travel agent were privately employed. Only a student and two New Zealanders scraped by without institutional support. Col. Hunt convinced

the War Office to provide rations at cost, free transport to the Himalayas, as well as 'loans' of clothing, equipment and supplies that later became gifts.²³ Previous Everest expeditions had received only very limited support of a similar nature from the Government of British India, funded by Indian taxpayers. In contrast, the 1953 Everest expedition received so much official assistance that it should be considered a change from the earlier pattern of benign British neglect, and perhaps a transferral of responsibility from the imperial to the home government.

The Second World War had also provided a significant impetus for British research into high-altitude physiology and oxygen equipment for aircraft pilots. The adaptation of wartime research in these areas for use on Everest are 'small' examples of the influence of 'big science' in the early years of the Cold War.²⁴ The Medical Research Council's Human Physiology Division, founded after the outbreak of the Korean War, sent Griffith Pugh to do physiological research on the Cho Oyu expedition in 1952. Pugh joined the Everest team in 1953 and recommended changes in diet, hygiene, and the use of oxygen that contributed substantially to the successful ascent.²⁵ The Royal Aircraft Establishment tested most of the Everest equipment at Farnborough, and one of their rocket scientists, Tom Bourdillon, used an oxygen set on Everest that he had developed in his job.²⁶ *The Conquest of Everest* film paid tribute to these research efforts in scenes showing the testing of tents, boots, and oxygen equipment, and a climber losing consciousness in a pressure-chamber to simulate the effects of high altitude.

As the film soundtrack reaches a crescendo, the Everest preparations culminate in the packing of small British flags with the assault rations. Along with the nationalism of the Union Jack, Col. Hunt wrapped himself in the flag of the United Nations (UN), symbol of a new internationalism. Hunt brought the UN flag to recognise the efforts of the Swiss the previous year.²⁷ When Tenzing reached the summit of Everest, he waved from his ice-axe four flags representing Nepal, India, Britain and the United Nations. Indeed, these flags reflected the cosmopolitanism of this 'all-British' team. While the team included men from the British military, public schools and universities, Hunt expanded his talent search to include a Blackpool travel agent, two New Zealanders, and Sherpa Tenzing. The New Zealanders had been on Shipton's training expedition to Cho Oyu, and Tenzing was making his seventh Everest expedition. If Hunt had wanted to make the expedition narrowly 'all-British', he could have done so.²⁸ That Hunt chose Hillary and Tenzing for the summit party reflects not only a recognition of their abilities but also an inclusive definition of 'Britishness' consistent with the expansive definition of the Commonwealth articulated at the time of the coronation.

To summarise, the British expedition reached the summit of Everest as

a result of three new factors in the early 1950s: military planning, scientific research sponsored by the British state, and an internationalism based on an expansive definition of 'Britishness'. The military planning and scientific research complemented one another. The application of Hunt's military planning and Pugh's research on physiology and oxygen to the problem of climbing Everest were both peace dividends – deferred compensation for investments by the British state in fighting the Second World War and the Korean War. The British expedition provided Hillary and Tenzing with the supplies of oxygen, food and fluid at their highest camp in 1953 that the Swiss expedition had notably failed to provide for Lambert and Tenzing in 1952. The climbers' abilities each year were comparable (even identical in Tenzing's case); yet the logistics and lessons learned about high-altitude physiology resulted in significant improvements in 1953. Equally important, the inclusive definition of 'Britishness' contributed to their success. The co-operation of the Sherpa porters was not a foregone conclusion. The Swiss had treated the Sherpas much better than previous British teams, and even the 1953 expedition got off to a rocky start in Kathmandu. If the expedition's *modus operandi* on the mountain outwardly resembled the pattern of sahibs with their servants, their successful co-operation also reflected the adjustment of earlier imperial assumptions to new post-war and post-colonial conditions.

To commemorate the event, Leslie Haworth wrote a ballad on the 'The Ascent of Mount Everest'. The British folk singer began by entreating 'all you loyal subjects of Queen Elizabeth' to listen to the daring deed of 'thy heroes of her Commonwealth and of one friendly state'. The lilting rhythms of the song ended with the bestowing of British honours on the climbers:

It was upon the morning that our Queen was to be crowned,
When through her wide dominions these tidings did resound.
She called to her Sir Winston says this day is well begun,
What honour should we give these men because of what they have done?
Let Hillary and Hunt be Knights and Tenzing be G.M.
That is the very least that we can do for such as them.
For they've climbed 29,000 feet and then a couple more,
And set their foot where mortal man has never stood before.²⁹

Indeed, once they reached London, Tenzing and Hillary received several honours and were often depicted as members of the Commonwealth. Upon their arrival at the airport, Col. Hunt waved the Union Jack from his ice-axe and the team was greeted by the Secretary of State for War. 'The whole Commonwealth', said Brigadier Anthony Head, 'is moved, and is proud of your great achievement.'³⁰ In an airport interview, Hunt said he was delighted that Hillary and Tenzing 'representing, in a sense, members of the Commonwealth, had been successful in getting to the top. It was

only right and proper.³¹ But interviews broadcast from the airport also carried the sounds of Hillary's antipodean accent and Tenzing speaking in a foreign language which suggested the ambivalence of their position in Britain.³²

The ambiguous definition of the 'Commonwealth' rendered the question of honours for the Everest climbers more complicated than had seemed possible on coronation morning. The British Government conferred knighthoods on Hunt and Hillary within days of the coronation, and announced its intention to honour Tenzing: 'Since he is not a British subject, this requires consultation, and no immediate announcement can be made'.³³ Tenzing had no conception of national identity, and said he had been 'born in the womb of Nepal, and raised in the lap of India'.³⁴ Both Nepal and India claimed Tenzing as their citizen and showered him with awards.³⁵ Rumours that Tenzing would receive the George Medal, the highest civilian award for gallantry, prompted allegations of discrimination. When asked during Prime Minister's Question Time about the disappointment that Tenzing had not been given the same award as Hillary, Sir Winston Churchill replied: 'That does not entirely rest with Her Majesty's Government'.³⁶

The different awards for Tenzing and Hillary reflected the convergence of multiple imperial pasts into a complex Commonwealth present. Tenzing was not given a British knighthood because the Prime Minister of India, Jawaharlal Nehru, refused to allow him to accept one of the honours that had been central to representing British authority in India under the Raj.³⁷ Nehru's rejection of a knighthood reasserted Indian independence and incorporated Tenzing into the traditions of Indian nationalism that had rejected British honours as symbols of British domination.³⁸ Hillary's position was paradoxically similar. Hillary was awarded a knighthood because the Prime Minister of New Zealand, Sidney Holland, had accepted it for him. Hillary learned about his knighthood while hiking back to Kathmandu. 'It should have been a great moment, but instead I was aghast. ... I had never really approved of titles and couldn't imagine myself possessing one.' Since the KBE had already been accepted, Hillary felt he had no choice and was 'miserable rather than pleased'.³⁹ Tenzing's knighthood was rejected to defy incorporation into an expansive definition of 'Britishness'; Hillary's knighthood was accepted to promote it. The claims on both Tenzing and Hillary exemplify the ambivalent positions of 'colonials' in Britain.⁴⁰ British representations of both climbers as members of the 'Commonwealth' responded to this ambivalence by attempting to incorporate them into 'greater Britain'.

Hunt seemed to occupy a less ambiguous position than either Tenzing or Hillary. However, John Hunt's triumphal return to his home on the Welsh/English border also complicated these images of a unitary Britain.

Hunt waved the British flag from his ice-axe as local farmers towed him in a cart up a steep hill to his house, and it soon became known that he had flown the Welsh flag at his camps on Everest.⁴¹ After the Welsh nationalist party announced that Hunt had sent them a message, the War Office reminded Hunt of his pledge to remain non-partisan in the military. Hunt replied that he had merely expressed 'my sympathy with the preservation of the culture and traditions of Wales'.⁴² To the British Government, however, such gestures of Welsh solidarity undermined the image of a unitary British nation.

The British monarchy had rejuvenated itself between the wars through the proliferation of the honours system throughout the British Empire, and the awards for the Everest climbers reflected that 'tradition' as well as the recent compromise making the monarch the symbol of the 'New Commonwealth'.⁴³ After a garden party at Buckingham Palace, the Queen knighted Hunt and Hillary, presented Tenzing with the George Medal, and gave other climbers special Coronation medals. In the evening, Prince Philip presided at a small state dinner that his office limited to 'men only'. Wives and other guests later joined the men for a state reception at Lancaster House. Access was tightly controlled since the press 'might photograph Ministers or other eminent persons in the act of drinking and these photographs might be used against them in later years'.⁴⁴ Stag parties and alcoholic indiscretions were but one dimension of the relationship between monarchy and masculinity that linked the conquest and coronation. As one woman wrote to the climbers on coronation day: 'It is fitting that your team should symbolise for us the vigour, vitality, and high endeavour of manhood, as the Queen symbolises the sweetness, grace and dutiful service of a woman'.⁴⁵

The British press was deferential in its coverage of the state reception but had directly confronted the more controversial issues to emerge since the coronation. While the expedition had been in Nepal and India, questions concerning Tenzing's nationality and whether Hillary or Tenzing had reached the summit first were both hotly debated.⁴⁶ As a result of these debates after the ascent, British rhetoric about Everest shifted uncertainly between a triumph of 'Britain' or the 'Commonwealth' or the 'human spirit' more generally. The British reaction to Everest was thus a complex amalgam of images of military leadership and planning, science and technology, nationalism and internationalism, and partnership within the 'Commonwealth'.

The climbers themselves became the main emissaries of these images when they appeared on television and radio, and in public lectures. On BBC television, Hunt described the ascent with a scale model of Everest, and the interviewer asked Bourdillon about the oxygen, Wylie about the porters, Hillary about the summit, and Tenzing about himself.⁴⁷ Tenzing

also demonstrated the oxygen mask and cylinders while Hunt described how they worked. After the ascent, scenes of Sherpas demonstrating the oxygen were repeated frequently, and represented visually an older ideology of European technological dominance that had formerly underpinned imperialism, but now bolstered images of British tutelage of the Commonwealth in the 1950s.⁴⁸ Afterwards, the BBC considered this programme 'suitable for emergency transmission during a period of national mourning'.⁴⁹ On BBC radio, the climbers themselves told the story of the ascent in a dramatic and well-paced narrative. The announcer depicted Everest not as a national mountaineering problem, but 'in the realm of human endeavour, ... a challenge to man'.⁵⁰ This programme received higher ratings for 'audience appreciation' than any other radio broadcast in 1953 apart from the coronation and an England cricket victory over Australia in a test match.⁵¹

The expedition organisers also struggled with the implications of a 'British conquest' in *The Conquest of Everest* film. A draft press release announced that a feature film was being made 'on the conquest of Everest, to show the world the full sequence of this great British achievement'. The RGS wondered: 'should we say "British" achievement when in our communiqué etc. we have mentioned Swiss efforts and in view of Tenzing disputes, etc'. After internal discussions, the RGS and *The Times* decided to 'leave "British" in'.⁵² As the film went into production, Col. Hunt also asked if the word 'conquest' could be omitted from the film's title. Although the film retained the assertive 'conquest', Hunt gave his book the more neutral title, *The Ascent of Everest*.⁵³

The Conquest of Everest film opened to a Royal Première and rave reviews in October 1953. Throughout the British Isles at smaller cinemas with local dignitaries, Army and Navy Cadets or Boy Scouts and Girl Guides in uniform, book displays and commercial tie-ins, the Everest film continued to juxtapose images of the coronation and Everest. In the film, the photograph of Tenzing on the summit is followed by the headlines announcing the conquest of Everest as the 'crowning glory' to throngs of flag-waving well-wishers, who line the route of the coronation procession. Images of the Queen's carriage in London are followed by scenes of Tenzing and other climbers riding in state in Kathmandu. By the end of the film, after the climbers' ascent and safe return, the overall theme is teamwork and partnership: 'Sherpas and British alike. All had their share in this'.⁵⁴

The British promotional material for *The Conquest of Everest* film also attempted to accommodate the dual message of a 'conquest' that was both British and international. A sample letter from a cinema manager to local schools touted the conquest as a 'great British achievement', and suggested that since 'this film should be seen by every British child we are

offering a special concession in prices'. At the same time, the press book recommended that each theatre festoon its front 'with the flags of the United Nations, together with ample bunting'.⁵⁵

Overseas, the British Government sponsored the film and lecture tours by the climbers to promote British prestige. After the British ambassador to Ethiopia asked to show the film in Addis Ababa, 'not from a revenue producing or theatrical point of view, but purely as magnificent British propaganda', the film was circulated in the diplomatic pouch.⁵⁶ Indeed, the climbers themselves travelled on extensive lecture tours throughout Britain, Europe, America and the Commonwealth. After Hunt was promoted to Brigadier, he lectured in Paris and at the NATO headquarters where he had formerly served, as well as in Berlin and Moscow in Cold War showcases. The RGS considered the extensive Everest lecture series in Europe, 'from a prestige point of view, highly successful'.⁵⁷ James Morris reported that the American lecture tour had created much goodwill and 'did a great deal of good for Anglo-American relations and for mountaineering'.⁵⁸

The Queen herself became an emissary for the combined image of conquest, coronation and Commonwealth. Shortly after the *Conquest of Everest* première, the Queen embarked on a post-coronation journey around the world that landed her in Auckland, New Zealand, at Christmas. To introduce her 1953 Christmas Day speech, British, Australian and New Zealand radio broadcasters produced *The Queen's Journey*, a programme conveying Christmas greetings and pledges of loyalty. After a Maori Haka dance and greetings from Sydney, the programme jumps 'to Britain, to the homeland, cradle of pioneers, discoverers and creators of the Commonwealth'. Tributes then pour in from Bermuda, Jamaica, Canada, Fiji, Tonga, New Guinea, Hong Kong, Sarawak, Singapore, Pakistan, India, Ceylon, South Africa, Central African Federation, Rhodesia, Nigeria, Uganda, Kenya, and research stations in Antarctica and North Greenland. The narrator finally announces:

We have girdled the world, and flashed from pole to pole. (Music) We the people of the Commonwealth are gathered now. Waiting for the Queen to speak to us from New Zealand, from the green and white city of Auckland. (Music up) This great family circle, the Commonwealth, looks back on a year to remember with pride. The year of Coronation, the year when peace came to Korea, the year when Everest was conquered. (Music builds to climax)

The Queen's journey is revealing and renewing the strength of the Commonwealth, the reality of shared responsibility and shared freedom under a young Queen. This is a great pyramid of unity, a mountain massive as Everest, a peak still clouded by the future challenges to all men of goodwill and courage. (Music builds to conclusion)⁵⁹

Edmund Hillary, then at his sister's house in Norfolk, not far from Sandringham, a royal residence, sends the final greeting to the Queen, then in

Auckland, his hometown, before the British national anthem introduces her Christmas Day address.

The Queen's speech expressed her hopes for the Commonwealth and the 'Elizabethan age'. Though she did not feel like her Tudor forebear, she identified 'one very significant resemblance between her age and mine'. Her kingdom was 'great in spirit and well endowed with men who were ready to encompass the earth'. While her ancestors had founded an empire, in the Commonwealth 'the United Kingdom was an equal partner with many other proud and independent nations. And she is leading other still backward territories forward for the same goal. *All* these nations have helped to create our Commonwealth.' Unlike previous empires, the Commonwealth was built on 'the highest qualities of the spirit of man: friendship, loyalty, and the desire for freedom and peace. To that new conception of an equal partnership of nations and races I shall give myself heart and soul, every day of my life.'⁶⁰ The Queen did not directly mention the partnership of Hillary and Tenzing on Everest, but she didn't have to: *The Queen's Journey* had already hailed the Commonwealth as 'a great pyramid of unity, a mountain massive as Everest'.

By the late 1950s, the conquest of Everest continued to provide cause for optimism in the future of the Empire and Commonwealth. But more pessimistic signs were apparent. Following the example of the Everest team, a British expedition to cross Antarctica with motor-sledges during 1955–58 was organised by Vivian Fuchs as a 'Commonwealth' endeavour with a group of New Zealanders led by Sir Edmund Hillary. Hillary was asked to play the role of loyal subordinate by creating supply depots for the British party led by Fuchs across the continent. Left to his own devices, Hillary squirrelled away enough supplies to make his own dash to the South Pole, creating a widely publicised 'race' with Fuchs that Hillary won handily. The British press was furious, but the New Zealand Cabinet firmly backed Hillary's right to go on his own. Hillary later said he had gone to Everest as an honorary Britisher, but went to the South Pole as a New Zealander.⁶¹ The transition from one to the other had been rapid. The 'British Commonwealth Trans-Antarctic Expedition' had departed as a happy family in 1956 but returned dysfunctional in 1958.

Events elsewhere during these years also suggested that the internationalism of 'Coronation Everest' might have been the product of a fleeting moment. The Queen's rhetoric of a multi-racial partnership at her coronation had appeared prophetic when news of the triumph of Hillary and Tenzing arrived with such impeccable timing. After the Suez crisis in 1956 and the 'wind of change' in colonial Africa, however, Britain's influence had diminished and signs of successful partnership were few. Looking back from the late 1960s, one historian of the Commonwealth wrote that the early 1950s had been the 'brief and, retrospectively, golden years of

hope in a multi-racial Commonwealth'.⁶²

Although the moment that produced this particular conjuncture of coronation and conquest and Commonwealth may have been fleeting, the power of the images produced by these events was not, and they left an enduring impression on post-war British culture. Images of 'Coronation Everest' persisted, long after the 'second Elizabethan age' had faded, because Everest helped to renegotiate and redefine the British Empire as something new – the Commonwealth of Nations. 'Coronation Everest' combined older images of imperial conquest with the new partnership of the Commonwealth. The rhetoric of the Commonwealth during these years has been called 'anaesthetising' in that it obscured fundamental changes in the international structures of power that had permanently reduced the scope of British influence.⁶³ Even after signs of imperial 'decline' became visible, the conquest of Everest remained a tangible reminder that the 'Commonwealth idea' could inspire hopes for the future, and the 'Elizabethan age' might represent something more than glorious memories of a distant past. As Sir George Middleton, British envoy to India at the time of the ascent, recalled: 'empires die and go away but it doesn't happen overnight. There is a lot of confetti lying around still, and the confetti of empire was still very visible in 1953.'⁶⁴ To understand why the effects of the Commonwealth rhetoric were so powerful – why so many people in Britain believed in empire and Commonwealth for so long despite abundant evidence of British weakness – is not a question that finds an answer in the posturing of politicians at diplomatic summits. Rather, the popular appeal of the Commonwealth in the years after the coronation is to be found in the enduring but ambivalent images of Hillary and Tenzing standing together on the summit of Everest.

Notes

- 1 *Glasgow Herald*, 2 June 1953; See also *The Times*, *News Chronicle*, *Daily Mail*, *Yorkshire Post*, 2 June 1953; *Manchester Guardian*, 3 June 1953; *Birmingham Post*, 4 June 1953.
- 2 BBC Written Archives Centre, Caversham (hereafter WAC), Scripts, *The Conquest of Everest*, 2 June 1953; and British Library, National Sound Archives, London (hereafter NSA) recording 19226 (made 23 May, broadcast 2 June).
- 3 Royal Geographical Society Archives, London (hereafter RGS Archives), Everest Expedition Archives (hereafter EE) Box 89, J. Maltby to J. Hunt, 12 October 1953.
- 4 NSA, 1CD0126380, Queen's Coronation Day Speech. Some 1953 recordings are excerpted in NSA, H1595, 'Coronation Day: All this and Everest too' [1993]. For the broadcast schedule: <http://www.bbctv-ap.freemove.co.uk/coroneve.htm>.
- 5 Public Record Office, Kew (hereafter PRO), FO371/106879, Alan Lascelles to William Strang, 1 June 1953.
- 6 James Morris, *Coronation Everest* (London, Faber, 1958).
- 7 Peter H. Hansen, 'Albert Smith, the Alpine Club, and the Invention of Mountaineering in Mid-Victorian Britain', *Journal of British Studies*, 34:3 (1995), pp. 300–24. See

- also Felix Driver, *Geography Militant: Cultures of Exploration and Empire* (Oxford, Blackwell, 2001).
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- 23 See RGS Archives, EE/68. Another British soldier and five Gurkhas stationed in Malaya also donated their time to supervise the 'coolies' who carried the supplies.
- 24 See James H. Capshaw and Karen A. Rader, 'Big Science: Price to the Present', *Osiris*, 2nd ser., 7 (1992), pp. 3–25; Robert Bud and Philip Gummett (eds), *Cold War, Hot Science: Applied Research in Britain's Defence Laboratories 1945–1990* (Amsterdam, Harwood, 1999).
- 25 See Michael Ward, 'The First Ascent of Mount Everest, 1953: Dr. Griffith Pugh's Solution of the Altitude Problem', in John R. Sutton, Charles S. Houston and Geoffrey Coates (eds), *Hypoxia and Molecular Medicine* (Burlington, VT, Queen City, 1993), pp. 184–9; John B. West, *High Life: A History of High-Altitude Physiology and Medicine* (New York, Oxford University Press, 1998).
- 26 See, for example, PRO, FD1/9042, and PRO, AVIA54/1476.
- 27 Hunt interview with the author (1996); see also *Statesman* (Calcutta), 27 June 1953.

- 28 The inclusion of two New Zealanders had been announced when Shipton was leader. All other foreign climbers were informed that the committee had decided 'the composition of the party should be entirely all-British'. See RGS Archives, EE/66/12, J. Hunt to D. Bertholet, 12 January 1953; EE/66/8, B. Goodfellow memo to J. Hunt, 18 September 1952; EE/90, C. Elliot to C. Wylie, 15 October 1952.
- 29 NSA, recording 21157, Leslie Haworth, 'The Ascent of Mount Everest'.
- 30 *Yorkshire Post* and *The Times*, 4 July 1953.
- 31 See RGS Archives, EE/89, for the transcript; and NSA, T19520, for the recording.
- 32 See British Pathé Archives, London, 53/50, *Everest Heroes Home*; and British Movietone Archives, London, 59344:Iss.1257, *Everest Victors Here*.
- 33 See *Observer*, *Sunday Times* and *Times of India*, 7 June 1953.
- 34 *Daily Express*, 2 July 1953; Tenzing, *Man of Everest*, p. 287.
- 35 For Tenzing's national identity, and the reception of the ascent in Nepal and India more generally, see Hansen, 'Confetti of Empire'.
- 36 See Parliamentary Debates (Commons), 5th ser., {1953}, vol. 516, col. 971 [oral answers]. The George Medal was announced on 1 July 1953.
- 37 British officials told Hunt that Nehru vetoed Tenzing's knighthood (Hunt interview, 1996). British public records regarding Tenzing's award have been destroyed or remain closed. See, for example, PRO, FO371/106880.
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- 39 Edmund Hillary, *Nothing Venture, Nothing Win* (London, Hodder & Stoughton, 1975), pp. 163–4; Hillary interview with the author (1998).
- 40 See Angela Woollacott, 'All This Is Empire I Told Myself': Australian Women's Voyages "Home" and the Articulation of Colonial Whiteness', *American Historical Review*, 102:4 (1997), pp. 1003–29. See also Antoinette Burton, *At the Heart of the Empire: Indians and the Colonial Encounter in Late-Victorian Britain* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1998).
- 41 Hunt interview (1996). On his arrival, see *News Chronicle*, *Birmingham Post* and *Daily Express*, 6 July 1953. On the Welsh flag, see *Statesman*, 27 June 1953, and RGS Archives, EE/69, Hunt to Barmouth Urban District Council, 22 July 1953.
- 42 RGS Archives, EE/89, Hunt to War Office, 22 October 1953.
- 43 See David Cannadine, 'The Context, Performance and Meaning of Ritual: The British Monarchy and the "Invention of Tradition", c. 1820–1977', in Hobsbawm and Ranger (eds), *The Invention of Tradition*, pp. 101–64; Tom Nairn, *The Enchanted Glass: Britain and its Monarchy* (London, Hutchinson, 1988); R. J. Moore, *Making the New Commonwealth* (Oxford, Clarendon, 1987).
- 44 PRO, CAB124/2924, Government Hospitality Minutes, 6 July 1953. See also PRO, PREM11/458 and FO371/106880.
- 45 RGS Archives, EE/69, J. Reynolds to J. Hunt, 2 June 1953.
- 46 See Hansen, 'Confetti of Empire'.
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- 49 WAC, T32/145, Paul Johnstone to T. O. Tel, 5 February 1954. See also RGS Archives, EE/83.
- 50 NSA, recordings 19207–19212, *Everest 1953: The Story Told by the Climbers Themselves*, broadcast 24 July 1953; WAC, Scripts, *Everest 1953*.
- 51 WAC, R9/6/13–24, 'Listening and Viewing Barometer' and 'Audience Research Reports' for 1953.
- 52 RGS Archives, EE/84, R. B. Williams-Thompson to L. P. Kirwan, 22 June 1953 and attached notes; RGS Archives, EE/66/11 for the communiqué.
- 53 RGS Archives, EE/84, L. P. Kirwan to J. Taylor, 29 July 1953, and correspondence

PETER H. HANSEN

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- 54 National Film and Television Archive, British Film Institute, London, *The Conquest of Everest* (1953).
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