

VIEW FROM THE SUMMIT

By Sir Edmund Hillary
Doubleday, 309 pages, \$45

LIFE AND DEATH
ON MT. EVEREST

Sherpas and Himalayan
Mountaineering
By Sherry B. Ortner
Princeton University Press,
376 pages, \$40

REVIEWED BY
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What, at the age of 33, after becoming the first person to reach the top of the highest, most mythic pinnacle on earth, does a fellow do for an encore? For Ed Hillary, the New Zealand-born beekeeper turned Her Majesty's most doted-upon subject, the answer lay in part in recognizing that he had no special talent or ability other than "a goodly share of imagination and plenty of energy."

Add level-headedness to the mix and you have a capable, sanguine personality well equipped to be both the first (he really was) to climb all 29,028 feet of Everest, and to make the best of the fame bestowed on him afterward. In a sense, since someone was eventually going to climb the rock, *View from the Summit* makes a case that Hillary's most admirable accomplishments occurred after the feat.

Billed as *Hillary's first, complete and final* autobiography, the book's well-paced narrative is structured, much like the author's life, around the imposing shadow of Everest: From the opening description of his and Sherpa partner Tenzing Norgay's final push to the summit, the story moves back briefly into Hillary's adolescence and early adulthood, then forward over a broad sweep of time, exotic geography and compelling events. It comes to rest full circle as Hillary, sitting in his den one day, receives a phone call from his son calling from the same "flattish, exposed area of snow with nothing but space in all directions" on which his father had stood 37 years earlier.

Hillary's description of incidents and circumstances is remarkably lucid. His tone is understated but confident; no false humility, no foils spared. He mortars together sections with a number of entertaining sub-themes: fate/luck, "the way climbing used to be" and anti-Sir Edmund.

It is anti-Sir Edmund, relentlessly driven, competitive and political, that is at odds with the public's naive image of the beekeeper and builder of Sherpa schools, Sir Edmund. Readers smitten by world-weariness should find it especially uplifting to find it took Hillary considerable ass-kissing, political manoeuvring and raw out-muscling of rivals just to gain a place on John Hunt's 1953 expedition to Everest. Fate would intervene on Hillary's side: when the well-financed Swiss expedition of 1952 failed, using the south-east route Hunt anticipated the following year, also

ADVENTURE

In Everest's shadow



Edmund Hillary, after a 12-day Himalayan trek: 'a goodly share of imagination and plenty of energy.'

doned Fuchs's rigid game plan. He claims the Antarctic experience was more challenging and fulfilling than climbing Everest, and it is hard not to believe him. The project consumed nearly two years and involved overcoming endless logistical nightmares, setbacks and sagging spirits under the most extreme conditions. Once again, Hillary proved to be a master at improvising his way out situations that look frankly hopeless.

Most of the events in *View*, including Hillary's Antarctic expedition, as well as the death of his

wife and youngest daughter in a 1975 plane crash, are covered in bits and pieces in the nine books Hillary has written or co-written. The bulk of these, however, appear to be scarce in bookstores and libraries.

Sherry Ortner makes a sober but timely contribution to recent Everestmania in a book that documents the invaluable Sherpa contributions to modern mountaineering, as well as their historic mistreatment at the hands of their "sahibs." Yet Ortner, a professor of anthropology and author of two

previous books on Sherpa culture, does not believe the Sherpas are blameless in their own exploitation.

Since Hillary's initial efforts to improve the Sherpa's quality of life, attitudes of modern mountaineers toward Sherpa guides and helpers have gradually become more enlightened. Still, Ortner points out, there remains a wide gulf between the two cultures — for example, when the modern, enlightened sahibs pop a vein when a Sherpa refuses to climb after another Sherpa has fallen off the side of a mountain.

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when Hunt's first-team of Charles Evans and Tom Bourdillon was beaten down 1,000 feet short of the summit.

With significant ice-climbing experience in New Zealand's "southern Alps," Hillary was unfazed by Evan's view that the ridge to the summit was not climbable. He and Tenzing proceeded up, camping one night above the South Col, at 27,500 feet, a technique deemed too dangerous today. Success at this stage hinged entirely on the pair's strength and resourcefulness. Reaching the imposing 40-foot-high rock-step a few hundred feet below the summit which now bears his name, Hillary wedged himself into a crack and squeezed himself up like toothpaste from a tube. Today, the Hillary Step is *pas de problem*, as commercial guides use fixed ropes to haul clients like large sacks of potatoes up to their dearly paid-for destinies.

Hillary's high-altitude climbing career came to an abrupt end the following year, when an accident on another Himalayan peak, Makalu, diminished his ability to perform above 20,000 feet. A different vein of adventure soon beckoned, when he met Dr. Vivian Fuchs. Fuchs, for funding reasons, was keen on getting the famous Hillary name on his team planning a crossing of Antarctica with motorized vehicles. Having been a boyhood fan of the tales of Robert Scott's Antarctic adventures, Hillary agreed; Fuchs, in the form of anti-Sir Edmund, very nearly gets more than he asked for.

In his role as the leader of a team establishing supply depots hundreds of miles out onto the desolate, crevasse-filled Antarctic plateau, Hillary quickly aban-