

Hillary and Tenzing reach summit of Everest

29 May 1953

(MCH, 2016j)



A beekeeper from New Zealand, Edmund Hillary, and the Nepalese Sherpa Tenzing Norgay became the first people to stand on the summit of the world's highest peak.

After climbing with British teams in the Himalayas in 1951 and 1952, Hillary and another New Zealander, George Lowe, were invited to join John Hunt's 1953 British Everest Expedition. On 29 May – four days before the coronation of Queen Elizabeth II – the chosen pair, Hillary and the experienced Tenzing, reached the 8848-m summit of Mt Everest via the south-east ridge.

From the moment Hillary told Lowe that they had 'knocked the bastard off', his life changed forever. Before the expedition had even emerged from the mountains, Queen Elizabeth bestowed a knighthood on the surprised New Zealander. In Britain, he and Tenzing became the subject of media frenzy. They attended formal events and lectured to packed halls.



Updated 3rd edition reference

From 1956 to 1957 Hillary led the New Zealand section of a British trans-Antarctic expedition, and, although merely tasked with setting up supply depots, he beat expedition leader Vivian Fuchs to the South Pole (see 4 January).

In the 1960s Hillary returned to the Himalayas to help build schools and health facilities for the sherpas of Nepal. In 1978 he led an expedition up the Ganges River and, six years later, he became New Zealand's High Commissioner to India.

The ascent of Everest enhanced interest in mountaineering throughout the world. In New Zealand, Hillary and Everest helped turn mountaineering from a somewhat fringe activity into something that had new-found respect.

Hillary accepted with unfailing grace the responsibilities that his fame brought, including countless media appearances, book signings and requests to write forewords. Aside from his humanitarian work, he also helped mentor a new generation of climbers.

Despite a multitude of honours and accolades, including membership of the Order of New Zealand, honorary citizenship of Nepal, and a portrait on New Zealand's five-dollar note, Hillary remained humble about his achievements right up until his death in January 2008, aged 88. He remains one of New Zealand's most loved national figures.

See also 'Hillary Returns' (NZ On Screen):

Hillary Returns Short Film, 1953



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