What if Sir Edmund Hillary and Sherpa Tensing were not the first to reach the summit of Mount Everest in 1953?

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Research Preface

Attempting to rewrite the History Books about such a famous event in British mountaineering may have been counter-productive for this exercise. Precisely because a great deal has been published about the first ascent of Everest there seemed little point in changing the story directly if nothing else, for familiarity and perhaps credibility for those who may know the story well. Rather, more detail was added to create an element of deviance and moral corruption between the climbers and doubt about this historical event. The genre of the creative story may be best described as action and mystery with a historical perspective to inform the reader about this event and entertain them with a new twist upon ethical behaviour. Consequently, by creating a sub-genre of mystery and ‘what if’ possibilities, it leaves the reader feeling ‘out of the know’ wanting to discover more. It was important, however, not to use too much specialist jargon to avoid creating a niche audience, by which only people with specialist subject knowledge might understand.

The 1953 expedition on Everest was led by English Brigadier Sir John Hunt, who had a total of 400 men on the team, mainly made up of Sherpas who were there to carry supplies – this may indicate the grandeur of the task which began in March 1953. The Times newspaper reported (1953: 6) that “the first attempt on Everest was made in 1921”, in which George Mallory
featured, who would later die on the mountain with his companion Sandy Irvine in 1924. It was considered that the 1953 expedition was the last attempt the British would have to be the first to conquer Everest after seven failed attempts. The fictitious part within the creative story is the location of a satchel in which Mallory’s camera was located. In Sir John Hunt’s book, *The Ascent of Everest*, Edmund Hillary (1953: 206) memoirs from the summit records, “We had looked briefly for any signs of Mallory and Irvine but had seen nothing”. Hillary and Tensing took a different route to their predecessors, approaching from the southern side rather than from the North Col so it would have been extremely unlikely that anything could have been found. The controversial theory, from where the creative story idea stems, began in 1999 when the body of Mallory was found, however some of his belongings were missing including the Kodak camera he had been given for the expedition. Likewise the location of his body and other irregularities such as not having an ice axe has led to claims that George Mallory may have got to the top of Everest in 1924. Andrew Irvine’s body is still missing (Hahn, 1999).

In planning to write this creative piece Branston and Stafford, (2003: 36) point out that Tsvetan Todorov, a leading Bulgarian structural linguist, argued that “stories begin in a state of equilibrium before an occurrence causes unrest, disturbing the equilibrium before finally the status quo is restored”. This could be classed as a run of the mill “story arch” which seems sufficient in this case to tell the story clearly. That is, it is not too complicated thereby not distracting from the ethical dilemma which the climbers are faced with, in fact it may intensify it. The initial equilibrium is created by setting the scene for Hillary and Tensing inside the tent just before their summit push. Then the discovery of Mallory’s camera causes a state of unrest. Finally the two decide how they are going to proceed which restores the status quo.

Propp’s (1969) character model was also useful for shaping the conflict between the characters and the situation they found themselves in. Although Propp’s (1969) model contained eight roles, the short story contains three of them; the hero, the villain and the helper. According to Smith (2000: 187) “from a sociological point of view, [the characterisation permitted by Propp's (1969) model] offers potential evidence for understanding narratives as social facts” which may allow us in turn to “affirm the autonomy of culture”. Smith’s (2000) reference to culture is also relevant to the hierarchy / social order of the characters in this story. For example, the hero in the story is Edmund Hillary who has Western values,
seen as being a member of the Commonwealth and representing British interests in exploration. Whereas Tenzing is classed as the helper to the hero which may be interpreted as an inferior position, underpinning his status as being subservient and coming from the far East – this is known as binary opposition of characters. According to Edgar and Sedgwick (2002: 43) binary opposites are a “culturally specific interpretation which reflects elements from the ambient world”. The term used by Edgar and Sedgwick (2002: 43) “culturally specific” seems also to highlight the social and economic divide between the East and the West at the time of the expedition 1950s. Although New Zealand wasn’t geographically Western, New Zealanders shared Western social values as Rosen (2003: 89) points out, “as a result of the National Act 1948, Commonwealth countries had the right to enter Britain and even bring over their families”. It is interesting to note the current twists and turns of the British Government with regard to Commonwealth and National allegiances over repatriation of Nepalese Ghurkas to the UK, the rights of whom were successfully championed recently, by the actress Joanna Lumley (Tomforde, 2008). The social divide between Hillary and Tensing emphasizes the binary connotations for this tale, of Hillary being the ‘stronger’, ‘bigger’, ‘hero’ as opposed to Tensing who was the ‘weaker’, ‘smaller’, ‘helper’. In reality these connotations could not be further from the truth, apart from the fact that Hillary was a physically bigger person

Despite giving a brief account of the two characters’ background and upbringing, the main differentiation between the two in the text was created through certain linguistic choices/tones to identify them. This is evident for example in,

“Oi, Norgay! Get your ass over here you’re gonna wanna see this” and Tenzing responding, “Tenzing no understand Sir? If this ever found out … we get killed”.

The main difference highlighted by such speech are the character’s nationalities and adeptness with the English language. In the first example the author has adopted some common lexical choices such as the guttural “Oi” to mimic speech and the informal contractions “gonna” and “wanna” which indicate the characters fluency in English. These latter features help lower the tenor of the piece and create a colloquial register. The second example, of a non-English speaker, contrasts by using ellipsis to miss out “does not” in the interrogative and “would” in the declarative. The use of lexical choices helps distinguish who the main character is in a passage
whereby due to the second character not being able to speak full-English it gives out potentially pejorative connotations of subordination and weakness.

The link between the story and modern day sport can best be exemplified when studying deviance in sport. The story indicates how far one might be prepared to go in order to achieve their aim having worked so hard to obtain it in the first place. This can be linked to corruption in sport – the manipulation of a sporting event to determine the outcome. According to Cashmore (2000: 422) “as soon as money became involved [in sport], corruption followed”. However, in the story, instead of money there was life-long fame at stake on a national and international stage of always being remembered for completing the first successful ascent of Everest. Maening (2005: 189) seems to agree with Cashmore’s (2000) argument indicating that the “deviant behaviour of some athletes to corrupt sport prevents others from winning on a fair stage”. Therefore, what Hillary and Tenzing did, by keeping the camera secret, may be at variance with the objectives and moral values of society at large. A society who may wish to compete fairly themselves or celebrate the honest success of others who compete and represent peoples and nations without having to discover after the event, that there was scandal or cheating. To live the lie or make a timely confession and suffer the consequences seems to have been one of the dilemmas created for these characters in this creative story.

References (and guided bibliography with notes)


Note: This publication is Edmund Hillary’s own account of what occurred on that expedition which is a useful contrast to how the expedition was reported in the press (Times,
1953) and how the expedition was portrayed in John Hunt’s book(s). Of particular relevance to this creative story may be Hillary’s comments about the importance of photographic evidence of their achievements on the mountain, for example, “I realised how important these summit photographs were” (Hillary, 1956: 243). This seems to introduce an interesting element of doubt that What If this creative interpretation of the ethical dilemma faced by these two climbers, or part of it, was true?


**Note:** The first edition of John Hunt’s book was issued in 1953, the year of the expedition, which revised and updated in 1954 and perhaps after this. This begs a question of reliability about many of these books which claim to offer a truthful account of what actually went on. If it was truthful in the first instance why alter it? Perhaps there was a need for reinterpretation or retelling of instances in a manner which may have been deemed more acceptable at the time, less offensive perhaps. Either way the writing skills of John Hunt seem to be the focus of attention here, rather than his climbing skills, which may indicate the importance of interpretive writing about real-life events.


**Note:** Irving (1942) provides his reflections about famous mountains which he has visited and climbed upon and tells something of their history in mountaineering terms. Consequently, this is a firsthand account from a British mountaineer who was on Everest long before the summit was reached, but long after the 1924 and 1933 expeditions from Britain. Might he have seen evidence of Mallory and Irvine, or even been searching for it? What if he’d found some telling evidence? Interesting accounts are given of the 1924 expedition and 1933 expedition when an ice axe was found at the First Step—a high point on Everest, which surely could only have been left by George Mallory and Sandy Irvine.


**Note:** A useful range of character theories, such as those posed by Vladimir Propp (1969), Jonathan Bishop (2008), John Campbell, Gorden Fletcher and Anita Greenhill (2002, 2009) and Erving Goffman (1959) are available online: (Accessed 27th January 2010).

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Character_theory_(Media)#Propp.27s_Character_theory


**Note:** Howard Sommervell was a member of the 1924 British expedition to Everest during which George Mallory and Sandy Irvine. This is an interesting and sincere first-hand account of climbing of the day which underplays the arduousness of their task generally and in
particular, downplays the major accomplishment of the author to establish a high camp with Edward Norton, which was the key to permitting Mallory and Irvine to make a summit bid.


**Note:** Tom Stobart was a widely travelled man who was responsible for filming the climbing of Everest in 1953 - he was the camera expedition man. Stobart’s (1977) Introduction (pp.13-33) illustrates his depth of interest in travelling and filming in challenging situations. Once again the desire for photographic evidence of the climb is compounded by this independent writing.


**Note:** In this text Tom Stobart offers a firsthand account of climbing and filming the 1953 Everest expedition from his perspective. Once again it emphasizes the importance of gathering evidence on film. Chapter 28 (pp. 229-238) *To he top of the roof of the world* discusses how the expedition was filmed and the difficulties he faced in this role. Chapter 29 (pp. 238-248) *We find ourselves famous* is particularly revealing and relevant to the context of this creative account. Dealing with and coping with the fortunes of fame he paints a picture of being distinctly uncomfortable with the fame and attention that is drawn to himself through his mountaineering accomplishments. There is also the permanent legacy of his film which is always there to haunt him.

The Times (June 02 1953) *Everest conquered; Hillary and Tensing reach the summit*. Available at: [http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/world/article3175412.ece](http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/world/article3175412.ece) (Accessed on 8th December 2009).

**Note:** see also The Times Everest Colour Supplement, 1953: To the summit, the story of the British Everest expedition, 1953. By the Times Special Correspondent [online]. Available at: [http://extras.timesonline.co.uk/pdfs/everest.pdf](http://extras.timesonline.co.uk/pdfs/everest.pdf) (Accessed on 25th January 2010).


**Note:** The book by James Ramsey Ullman presents a biography of Sherpa Tenzing which traces his climbing exploits in Nepal before 1953 and explains how he got to the point of being selected to accompany Edmund Hillary to the summit of Everest. Ullman describes a quiet man, full of humility and respect whose life was changed dramatically, probably for the worse, by the fortunes of fame bestowed upon him as a result of his climb. Interestingly there will have been a high degree of interpretation by Ullman in this text as there is no written form of the Sherpa language (Ullman, 1956: 29), everything being converted first by
an interpreter and then by Ullman to produce this most readable account. (Sherpa is the name of a tribe of people originally from Tibet, it seems to be a Western reduction of the term to mean porter or guide, i.e. that Sherpas have performed such a function for Western expeditions).
**Creative Story**

What if Sir Edmund Hillary and Sherpa Tensing were not the first to reach the summit of Mount Everest in 1953?

Many people believe that their destiny is written in the stars. Others, however, believe that their destiny can be changed depending on the paths they choose to take in life. The journeys along these paths may be accompanied with passion and determination, a raw hunger to succeed in following one’s dream. In other words, no matter how hard the challenge along that path, even if dealt the cruel hand of fate, any obstacle can be overcome in pursuit of an ultimate goal.

May 29th 1953, Mount Everest, Nepal.

A flame glimmered from the match providing just enough light to see the figures through the blackness of their tent. Edmund directed the flame towards the thermometer which was placed handily between the ration packs and oxygen canisters which their lives depended upon, it read -25°C. The wind outside blew ferociously, hitting their tent like a battering ram hammering against an un-relenting door. It was Edmund’s state of unrest which woke his partner who miraculously, after being subject to the worst weather that 28,250ft above sea level can provide, had remained entangled in a deep sleep for the best part of four hours. His partner’s name was Tenzing Norgay, a native Nepalese climber who was classed as one of the world’s best two mountaineers. The other was Edmund.

The reason for Edmund’s unrest was about to be revealed to his loyal companion. Tenzing wasn’t going to take the news kindly, mainly because everything they’d worked for their entire life now hung in the balance. Their frosty and claustrophobic temporary home was now fully lit thanks to an oil lamp which illuminated their tent like a fiery warning beacon atop a hill.
Ed removed his face mask supplying oxygen from the canister that sat beside him. Both men were in the ‘death zone’ and needed a regular supply of oxygen to live at this altitude – they were currently being fed two litres per minute but may need five litres with what Ed about to uncover.

“Oi, Norgay! Get your ass over here you’re gonna wanna see this”, exclaimed Edmund in a state of panic.

“Mr Tenzing, coming – you New Zealand people are hard for Tenzing understand,” replied the Sherpa in a more relaxed tone, scraping together his best English.

Edmund Hillary grew up with his parents in Auckland, New Zealand. Throughout his childhood he was obsessed with travel and adventure and by his early 20s he had already climbed all the mountains his country had to offer. Taking over his family business, Ed went on to be a successful bee-keeper and one day intended to return to his profession after scaling the world’s largest peaks. Now, at the age of 33, he found himself just 750ft from his ultimate aim in mountaineering, the top of Everest!

Norgay made his way over and stared at what Ed was holding in his hand. The object they had discovered was half buried in the cold snow, encased in ice and quite unrecognisable; they had moved it to pitch their tent the night before. Now, somewhat thawed, they could see that the mysterious object was in fact a sheep skin satchel and it was at this precise moment that its significance dawned upon them.

“You thinking what I’m thinking Tenz, nobody ain’t ever been this high up Everest before so how on gods sweet earth is there a bag just lying there over 28,000ft above sea level?” ranted a confused Hillary. “And you’re not gonna to like this either my friend”. Edmund opened the bag and removed a 1912 Kodak pocket camera, the type popular amongst soldiers in World War One. The rest of the sack was filled with maps and other items which they gave no more attention to. They seem to have discovered enough for one day. It was the camera which was of great significance. How could such a small object like this be so significant in the bigger picture? Evidence...

“The camera is God damn Mallory’s, he’s been missing for the best part of 30 years. He can’t have got to the top! We’ve gotta be the first to get there!” Tenzing gazed at Hillary in a state of shocked silence, unsure what to think about the future of their expedition. A million and one questions flooded through Edmund’s head, do they go and look for more evidence? Do they
continue their struggle to the top? Who do they tell? Do they even tell anybody?

The camera belonged to an English mountaineer named George Mallory. Mallory, along with his climbing partner Andrew (also known as Sandy on account of his blonde hair) Irvine mysteriously disappeared on route to the top of Everest in 1924. It was Mallory’s third assault on the mountain and up-until-now nobody was sure whether or not the pair made it to the top. The two were last seen by their expedition colleague Noel Odell, an English geologist and climber on the expedition, who claimed to have seen them approaching the final push for the summit.

The camera Edmund grasped tightly could answer secrets that had been dormant for over a quarter of a century (1924-53). Now they had to decide what to do with the news.

“So what we do now Mr Hillary?” asked Tenzing looking for inspiration from his ‘leader’. Hillary’s response was quick and to the point, “Nothing. We do nothing. I ain’t wasting my whole life wanting to be second best to two Englishmen who got to the damn top 29 years before us!”

Tenzing was astonished at what he’d just heard. The Sherpa was a man of principle, a devout Buddhist who wanted what was best for everyone. However what he also wanted was to be someone his people could look up to, to be a role model of success to help his people rise above the hardships of everyday life in the Himalayas.

The Sherpa broke the silence. “Tenzing no understand Sir? If this ever found out we get killed”.

Irvine and Mallory were both considered legends back in England and since this was a British led expedition, under the command of Brigadier John Hunt, the consequences of betraying the British in any way could indeed be ‘life threatening’.

“And you tell me who’s gonna find out Tensing because I’m sure not gonna tell anyone.”

Tenzing, looking in dismay was reluctant to acknowledge but in the back of his mind knew Hillary was right, a lifetime’s endeavour for recognition could be taken away from them in the blink of an eye.
“Man cannot go through life without having to make sacrifices for the greater good”, Ed reasoned. Their chance to go in the record books was too good to miss. The fame and the fortune of how life might be different (for the better) played over and over in their minds. But could their conscience cope with living the lie, leading a life of constant, unrelenting lies and deceit?

By 11:30am on May 29th 1953 four flags fluttered from the snow capped summit of Mount Everest. Two flags represented the birth places of the men, Tenzing’s Nepalese flag and Edmund’s flag of the United Nations was present. The other two were that of Great Britain (founders of the expedition) which fluttered proudly in their presence along with that of India. Hilly and Tenz had made it, unsure in the knowledge of whether or not they were second best – but did that matter? The two had made their decision and they were going to stick to it.

“It time Mr Hillary” said Tenzing in a rather reluctant fashion.

Without delay Edmund removed a small silver cartridge from the pocket of his coat. The object glistened in the morning sun firing off a ray of light strong enough to transmit an S.O.S signal. The Sherpa knew what they were doing was wrong in all so many ways but both men had worked their entire life in pursuit of their dream – to be the first men to successfully climb the world’s third pole – Mount Everest.

What Edmund had removed from his pocket was the three inch black and white film reel from Mallory’s ‘vest pocket model B’ camera. And without thinking twice about it Edmund exposed the black ribbon of film and threw the cartridge and film over the unforgiving slopes that lay before them, hoping it would never be seen again.

June 2nd 1953, London, England

Thousands of people lined the streets of London in celebration of Queen Elizabeth II’s coronation as ruler of Great Britain. An estimated 20 million people watched on their cumbersome 14 inch’ black and white televisions whilst others tuned in on their wireless sets, determined not to miss out on the news events. Two BBC correspondents gave a live running commentary on the royal pageant in London describing proceedings as the most important occasion since the end of World War Two. Earlier that morning the London Times newspaper had reported the achievements of Ed Hillary
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and Tenzing Norgay’s journey about which the BBC also went on to broadcast:

“It is with great satisfaction that I have the privilege to announce that the British Expeditionary Team, under the command of Brigadier John Hunt, have made a successful ascent of Everest. A special commendation should go out to our Commonwealth compatriot Edmund Hillary of New Zealand, who along with Tenzing Norgay, have become the first people to conquer the world’s greatest summit. On a down-note we understand there was no evidence of Irvine or Mallory whose tragic disappearance in 1924 still remains a mystery. We conclude by speaking on behalf of the Nation when we say ‘thank you’ for your efforts”.

The boys who dreamed of becoming adventurers had their dream come true. However, fate was to intervene in finding their destiny. Despite overcoming the biggest obstacle the physical world can provide in the shape of Mount Everest the pride that they should have been feeling was one of deviance, deceit and ‘what if’. What if they had been lucky enough to remain ignorant of the satchel by not seeing it, what if Mallory and Irvine had made it, what if anyone found out... what if... what if. The façade put on show to the public was one to last a lifetime – only Hillary and Tenzing knew the truth about what really happened that day. Maybe Edmund’s destiny lies elsewhere, whether it’s enduring the Antarctic or scaling the River Ganges which were some of his adventures after 1953. The truth about their discovery on Everest will never be revealed and now lies securely with them in their graves.

**RIP**

Sir Edmund Percival Hillary, KG, ONZ, KBE
(20th July 1919 – 11th January 2008)

Tenzing Norgay, GM (George Medal)
(late May 1914 — 9th May 1986)

**See also:**
