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## Editorial: A Special History: The Highest Place

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*Editorial*     **A special history: the highest place**

Mt Everest's claim to fame was challenged a few years ago by researchers who used newly available instrumentation to claim for K2 the status of highest peak. For a few weeks at least--until further analysis confirmed that Sagarmatha was indeed taller--it appeared that careers had been made, lives lost, and a landscape and its people irrevocably changed on the basis of a miscalculated elevation.

It is fun to speculate on how different the Khumbu/Sherpa world might have been had Pakistan's K2 been, from the start, the tallest peak detected by the Survey of India. Without its allure as the world's highest mountain, expeditions would never have competed so aggressively to be first to the top of Mt. Everest; it isn't, after all, one of the world's most challenging climbs.

If there had been no first ascent in 1953 by Tenzing Norgay Sherpa and Edmund Hillary, how would the Sherpas and their world be different? All the lives represented in this volume, reporting or reported upon, would have been different, certainly, from writers to subjects to editors.

Would Tenzing have stayed to tend the family yaks in the Thami valley? (Perhaps not, since he might anyway have been one of Robert Miller's Darjeeling Tigers, standing ready for any mountaineering adventure.) In any case his son would have been unlikely to play a role in an American Himalayan Foundation--which would never have come to be, without Dick Blum's experience of Khumbu and affection for Sherpas--that, too, ultimately contingent on Sagarmatha's 8848 meters.

If no Sir Edmund Hillary, then, presumably, no Himalayan Trust, no Trust-sponsored schools, clinics, forestry projects, no accelerated entree for Sherpas into a New-Zealand flavored western world.

No highest peak, then a different history of mountaineering, certainly: fewer ascents, fewer casualties, less incentive for the professional guiding that killed eight people on a single day last year and raised Everest still higher in the public consciousness. No first-ascent and international exposure for Sherpas and Khumbu, then no ethnographic research by Professor Haimendorf? No highest peak, then no Jimmy Roberts-midwifed trekking industry, no widening stream of tourist visitors, no national park, no crowds of development specialists and researchers? No trekking, few tourists? Fewer tourists, no transformation of Namche Bazar from farm-herd-trade-based economy to a Himalayan Zermat. Fewer tourists, less assault on high-altitude forests? Less interjection of national and international agendas? Fewer researchers, fewer territorial academics? (and, to give us credit, less understanding of mountain peoples and places and environmental process).

How many worlds would be different today, outside as well as inside Solukhumbu, if K2 had been the bigger peak? Certainly this issue of *HRB* would have another editor and a different topic; guest editor Tenzing Gyazu Sherpa, here in the US because of contacts made with American travelers and researchers, would have been someone, somewhere else; so would I.

I began this musing with the Sherpas and their world in mind, but it is impossible to escape the realization that my life would have been wholly different had Everest not been the world's tallest mountain. I went to Khumbu for the first time because Everest was the highest peak--no particular lure for me, but compelling to my mountaineer father, whose companion I was on a trek in 1976. He had been invited to lead a climb of Makalu in the early 50s, and had to decline when his third child--me!--appeared. I thus owed him a trip, and with my little brother went along on the Mountain Travel trek he led to help keep our aging father from harm.

We grew up with his shelf of Himalayan mountaineering works: *The Assault on Mount Everest* (C.G. Bruce); *Everest 1933* (Hugh Ruttledge); *Everest the Challenge* (Francis Younghusband); *The Story of Everest*; *Tenzing of Everest* (Tenzing; with James Ramsey Ullman); *The Conquest of Everest* (Sir John Hunt); *Camp Six* (F.S. Smythe); *South Col* (Wilfred Noyce); *Americans on Everest* (James Ramsey Ullman); *The Everest Lhotse Adventure* (Albert Eggler); *Anna Purna* (Maurice Herzog); *The Scottish Himalayan Expedition of 1928* (W.H. Murray). The American Everest expedition of 1963 in particular was my father's, vicariously, both because of friends among its members and because he created a book of their photographs and accounts: *Everest: The West Ridge*, one of a line of Sierra Club Exhibit Format books that came together on our living room floor. I had hopped over the spread-out contact sheets--photographs of ice, rock, and gear-laden climbers, mostly, with a few yaks and village people added in. But there was no inspiration, only annoyance, in sharing the house with an Everest book in the works. And it was reluctantly, out of filial duty mostly, that I agreed to join an Everest trek.

As for so many western visitors to Nepal, the trip was my epiphany. I stepped off the plane in Kathmandu and onto a path to the life I've made since. There were too many leftover questions, in my first encounter with that landscape and its people, to make sense of alone--so I tried graduate school in geography and discovered there a career founded in poking around the Sherpa's world, a personal life shaped ever after by that first encounter with the Himalaya--and a continuing flood of questions about a particular part of it, Khumbu and its people.

There are a lot of us outsiders similarly influenced by Solukhumbu. Certainly the concentration of scholarly and popular accounts about it must reach some sort of record, perhaps in terms of words-in-print per resident. So many scholars in so small a place create interesting conditions for research: the excitement of the intersection of many minds, disciplinary foci, and scholarly approaches; the tension and competition of a crowded research arena; the extraordinary tolerance of the people whose home it is to the twin scourges of tourists and data-greedy researchers. In addition to serving as the professional springboard for scholars from outside, this place is unusual in the increasing conspicuousness of its own people as commentators and analysts of history, continuity, and change.

### In this issue

This issue was intended to bring Khumbu studies, in all its variety, together: to demonstrate the range--in time as well as topic--and depth of study on Solukhumbu and Sherpas, to make it easier to identify and explore further the questions already raised, to pick up where others have left off, to start something fresh. We have been only partly successful; though we fill this issue and half of the next *HRB* with Sherpa stories and accounts of Solukhumbu, much is missing. We have Sherpa stories, and *mikaroo* (light-eyes--Caucasians) stories, but--for example--we don't have the stories of Solukhumbu's other peoples, the *rongba* in Sherpa parlance, lowlanders some of whom have long been part of highland Sherpa-dominated communities. But rather than decry what's missing from these pages, we will tell you what's to be found:

Lhakpa Sherpani's reminiscence from the 1950s, *Runaway*, and Robert Miller's reprinted 1965 piece *High Altitude Mountaineering, Cash Economy, and the Sherpa* represent very different points of view. Yet taken together they tell a story, easy to miss today, of a Sherpa world that has mostly disappeared in the last three decades. Geoff Childs reports on a still more remote part of the Sherpa past in his investigation of a clan history. Sue Heydon and Alton Byers both focus on Khumbu, and use change through time to explain the present configuration of medical care and forests, respectively. An abbreviated, incomplete bibliography follows, of work on, by, and about Sherpas and Solukhumbu; we would like to amend this with further contributions. This research-and-reminiscence sampler is enlivened with yeti stories provided by Ang Tsering Sherpa, part of the Oregon Sherpa community, who told them to Bob Peirce shortly after arriving in the United States.

Our next issue will continue the focus on Solukhumbu before turning to another area of emphasis, Ladakh. Guest editor Tenzing Gyazu Sherpa and I will report on our research on Sherpas in diaspora; we begin here with Tenzing's own story. Fran Sherpa will continue this theme with her report on research about intermarriage of Sherpas to foreign spouses. Some places introduced in Lhakpa Sherpani's *Runaway* will reappear in a substantial article on pilgrimage to Uomi Tsho, Solu, by Eberhard Berg. We will learn more about Sherpa settlement and the forest landscape from Lhakpa Norbu Sherpa, and find out perhaps more than we want to know about sanitation in Sagarmatha (Paul Lachappelle).

We can only hope that readers who don't put the Sherpa and Mt Everest at the summit of their interests will find something useful, too, in these issues. Places to look include the bulletin's regular features, for we have a full complement of **Dissertations**, compiled by Frank Shulman; a substantial contribution to the **Conference Digest**, including the 1997 South Asia Conference at Madison and an extraordinary symposium held last spring in Kathmandu, the *International Workshop on Dynamics of Land-Use/Land-Cover in the Hindu Kush-Himalaya*, both abstracted here. **Books, Reviews, Rejoinders** includes non-Solukhumbu material, and **News and Notes** is entirely free from mention of the place.

Be assured that future *Himalayan Research Bulletins* will target other places, peoples, and topics. As always the editor and staff invite reader contributions. And as always we owe thanks: to contributors for their offerings and patience; to Nepal Studies Association Council members, past and present, for their help; to Portland State students and staff. Alton Byers provided us the Erwin Schneider photographs in his keeping; Kenneth Hanson--ad hoc staff photographer!--offered his work; Kenneth Brower assisted with research. Amy Jo Woodruff has assumed more of the responsibilities for production of the bulletin than any graduate assistant before her, and deserves some sort of medal. Even better might be a firm prospect of future employment, but Portland State University, which has paid for HRB's editorial assistants, will no longer be bearing that cost; we are actively seeking funding to keep such assistance, for without it there can be no *Himalayan Research Bulletin*. And Tenzing Gyazu Sherpa, who initiated this special issue two years ago, now, has filled the role of guest editor as no one else could have done. Thanks, nuk!

Barbara Brower, Editor

**Note on spellings:** The observant reader will notice no effort has been made to standardize spellings of Sherpa words or place names. This is an area of lively and persisting controversy, and the editors have elected to let authors make their own selections from among the range of transcriptions in use. Sorry for the added confusion of those who may not recognize Nauje as Namche Bazar without being told.