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Commentary

Geographical reflections on Sir Edmund Hillary (1919–2008)

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Abstract: During the past year, the media, public and officialdom have focused on Sir Edmund Hillary, his achievements, and what they mean to New Zealand. In this commentary, we reflect on how they relate to human geography. Although we acknowledge the obvious tensions that exist between adventuring and the contemporary concerns of the discipline, we also illustrate how Hillary's life and actions resonate with many of the discipline's current hopes, aims and challenges. Specifically, we discuss thematic overlaps in the fields of geopolitics and national identities, colonial histories and resistances, as well as the emerging public geography. We posit that 'Hillary's geography' is closer to human geography than is realized or at least acknowledged by geographers.

Key words: geopolitics, national identity, public geography, Sir Edmund Hillary, New Zealand.

Sir Edmund Percival Hillary's death on 11 January 2008 was a significant moment for many New Zealanders and people throughout the world. A mountaineer, explorer, international icon, reluctant celebrity, philanthropist, as well as a brutally modest and straightforward man, depending on one's perspective, Hillary was one, some, and all of these things. Or, as Hillary put it: 'In some ways I believe I epitomise the average New Zealander: I have modest abilities, I combine these with a good deal of determination, and I rather like to succeed'. It was, of course, Hillary's far from modest conquering of Mount Everest (also *Chomolungma* or *Sagarmatha*) in 1953 that gave him global fame and notoriety. The mountain had been previously visited by 15 expeditions during the first half of twentieth century. None of these climbs had achieved a full ascent. Hillary was a member of a British expedition jointly organized by the Royal Geographical Society and the Alpine Club. Alongside local Nepalese mountaineer Sherpa Tenzing Norgay, Hillary reached the summit at 11:30 a.m. (local time), 29 May. When asked about why there were no photographs of him standing on the summit, Hillary replied: 'Tenzing did not know how to operate the camera and the top of Everest was no place to start teaching him'. The 1953 Royal Geographical Society presidential address published in *The Geographical Journal* proudly stated, '[t]he year 1953 has seen the conquest of Mount Everest, a feat which must rank for all time whether as mountain adventure or as scientific discovery' (Wordie 1953: 262 cited in Middleton 2003). Upon returning to his mountain base camp and meeting lifelong friend George Lowe, Hillary was a little more colourful: 'Well, George, we knocked the bastard off'.

Hillary's achievement was an important public event. Coinciding with the coronation of Queen

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Elizabeth II, the official public announcement of Tenzing and Hillary's ascent was made on the very morning of the ceremony. Hillary returned as a hero to substantial homecoming celebrations in Britain, Nepal and New Zealand. Following the initial festivities, Hillary settled into family life. He married his girlfriend Louise Mary Rose in 1953 and they had three children in quick succession. His life of adventures and explorations did, however, continue and included the ascent of 10 other Himalayan peaks between 1956 and 1965, a trans-Antarctic expedition between 1957 and 1958, an expedition to the South Pole in motorized vehicles in 1958, as well as a jet boat journey up the Ganges in 1977. As a result of his adventuring and the natural ageing process, Hillary's physical abilities eventually waned, and so Hillary participated in lecture tours, accepted roles in international diplomacy (including New Zealand High Commissioner to India) and famously dedicated much of his life and work to the welfare of the Nepalese people. The Hillary Himalayan Trust, established in 1960, championed many environmental, humanitarian and health causes throughout the region. The Trust built schools, airfields, hospitals, clinics, repaired bridges and installed sanitation. Hillary's commitment to these causes, however, came at great personal cost. In 1975, his wife and youngest child Belinda were killed in a plane crash *en route* to joining him in a village where his Trust was building a hospital. Hillary was devastated and took many years to recover. Eventually, in 1989 he married again to June Mulgrew: a partnership that lasted until Hillary's death. Hillary received many honours and awards. In 1987, he was given the Order of New Zealand, and in 1990 he appeared on the new five dollar banknote; he had schools, outdoor pursuit centres and streets named after him. A national icon in New Zealand, Hillary was given a state funeral in January 2008.

There has been a varied literary interest in Hillary, his ascent of Everest and its enduring repercussions. Popular histories have told the story of the 1953 expedition and/or have focused on forgotten or lesser known expeditions (Astill 2005). Critical academic histories have centred on conflicting claims and versions of the expedition from different countries and how each interpretation has its own complex basis in postcolonial, national and masculine identities (Hansen 2000). Anthropological studies have focused specifically on Sherpa religion, politics, and their involvement in Himalayan mountaineering (Ortner 1999). In geography, although connections made to Hillary are often indirect, his conquest of Everest influenced the development of numerous fields of study in physical geography which have focused on natural processes in mountain environments; geology, geomorphology, climatology, hydrology and biogeographies (Holmes 1965; Slaymaker 1982, 1984; Ives 1986; Funnell & Price 2003). More recently, a developing field of research in human geography has considered tourism, conservation, economic development, governance and politics in mountain environments (Funnell & Price 2003). With specific reference to Everest and Nepal, both cultural studies and human geographies have focused on how mountain terrains have become increasingly commercialized through adventure holidays (Stevens 1993, 2003; Johnston & Edwards 1994; Rosen 2007), and concurrent conservation and social concerns.

Whilst it has been easy for the popular media, politicians and the public to commemorate Hillary's life and express sadness in his passing, for academic geographers who have purposefully distanced their discipline from its earlier record of adventuring, conquest and masculine heroism, discussions about Hillary are fraught with difficulty. We argue, however, that Hillary's life and achievements constitute far more than a standard slice of colonial history. Moreover, the geographies of Hillary's life resonate with many themes in contemporary human geography.

Geopolitics and national identities

Almost immediately upon its arrival in Kathmandu, the 1953 Everest expedition became a vehicle for conflict over national interests. As Hansen (2000) suggests, once the ascent was announced, controversies swarmed around a number of questions. The most hotly debated were these: who had reached the summit first? How should the climbers be honoured? Tackling each of these questions involved nationalist interests in Britain and New Zealand (each had certain claims to Hillary), as well as India and Nepal (each had certain claims to Tenzing).

In the case of New Zealand, the country had been granted dominion status in 1907 although

the Statute of Westminster was not ratified until in 1947. This was a critical period, characterized by conflicts over national identity. Whilst it is true that for a substantial proportion of New Zealand politicians and members of the public Hillary's achievements 'for Britain' merely reflected the traditional ideal of the country being loyal to her motherland (or even a 'better Britain'); for others, his achievements were central to their country's newly emerging identity as distinct from Britain. This latter way of thinking embraced Hillary and elevated him to the status of an icon for a new country (Hansen 2000; Pickles 2002).

In the case of Britain, on the eve of the coronation, with its Empire in decline and renegotiation, and the status of its Commonwealth still uncertain, the state wanted the expedition to be presented and remembered as a solely British victory. Consequently, British politicians and the press incorporated Hillary and Tenzing into a 'Greater Britain', playing down their other national identities wherever possible. In India and Nepal, officialdom promoted the idea that Tenzing reached the summit of Everest before Hillary, whilst public signs showed him hauling Hillary the last few feet. Tenzing's journey from poverty to riches was also used as a political tool by India. Just as Hillary was positioned as a model citizen for New Zealand, Tenzing was positioned as model citizen for the new Indian nation. In the context of these competing histories, no national 'master' or 'grand' narrative could entirely account for or be discerned from the 1953 Everest expedition. As Hansen (2000) explains, the mountaineers were both symbols and pawns in a complex decolonization game, where ideas of citizenship were just emerging. Thus differing and sometimes antagonistic notions of national identity existed within, between, and beyond these nations. Britain, India, Nepal and New Zealand all emerged from, and engaged in, the discursive activity of marginalizing the other's national narratives (Hansen 2000).

Even today there are ownership debates over Hillary, Tenzing and the 1953 expedition, and their roles in national heritage industries and spaces. Through national heritage, Hillary is still positioned as the embodiment of all that it means to be a New Zealander: most notably, 'rugged', 'honest', 'frank', 'strong', 'reasonable', and 'sporty' (or at least interested in outdoor culture and activity) (Pickles 2002). Such depictions are inescapably ideological and highly normative because they portray specific kinds of acceptable masculinity that may incur the exclusion of other kinds of masculinity, or identities more generally. In addition, these messages are produced, encoded, and delivered by the state and institutions in ways that attempt to support specific forms of socio-national cohesion (Hansen 2000).

Resistances to colonial histories

As most disciplinary introductions tell us, a central aim of historical geography is to tell the interrelated histories of people, places and events. Undoubtedly, Hillary's life and achievements are inextricably linked to colonial powers and histories that are supported by discourses of other people and places as 'strange', 'exotic' and 'lesser'. In many ways, Hillary was part of a colonial governance system that was dictatorial, exploitative, and often brutal towards local populations. He was a cog in a machine that frequently sought to reproduce the dominance of Western 'expertise' over local knowledge, ideas and practices. Many of Hillary's individual actions, however, are radically at odds with this depiction of imperialism. It is notable that these aspects of Hillary's life are marginalized by our dominant historical narratives. Despite working for a colonial organization and power, despite the conventions of the time, and in direct contrast to the claims of British officialdom, Hillary always credited Tenzing with an equal role in the Everest expedition. Only after Tenzing's death in 1986 did he admit that he was the first man to stand on top of Everest. Hillary was ambivalent about official colonial accolades. His Prime Minister actually accepted his knighthood for him before his return from Everest. Realizing that his nation desired that he accept it, Hillary ultimately did so for New Zealand rather than himself (Hansen 2000). In short, Hillary's profound commitment to the people of Nepal demonstrated a man more in step with the country whose mountains he climbed than the power he once worked for. Years before his death, Hillary admitted: 'My most worthwhile things have been the building of schools and clinics. That has given me more satisfaction than a footprint on a mountain'.

The foundations of public geography

In recent years, a number of sociologists and geographers have argued that their disciplines have allowed a gap to grow between theory and practice, as well as between analyses and important world issues (Bonnett 2003; Burawoy 2005; Murphy 2005; Murphy *et al.* 2005). These scholars advocate 'public sociology' and 'public geography' that not only study pressing issues, but also enable social scientists *qua* activists to work with community groups, nongovernmental organizations and the public sector to foster more public dialogue and education (Burawoy 2004; Murphy *et al.* 2005; Murphy 2006). In geography, the contemporary field of public geographies has historical roots that predate these recent calls (Fuller 2008). These can be traced, for example, in popular 'coffee table' or 'armchair' geographical publications and television channels that engaged with environmental issues, and still do so to this day (Andrews & Linehan 2007). Hillary's achievements are often told as part of this type of geographical imagining and representation of the world. Both he and it have been vivid advocates for the natural world and have maintained a firm commitment to conservation and preservation. However, unlike much 'armchair' geography, Hillary did not actively participate in the commodification of nature for spectacle. Overall he had great respect for the different peoples, places and cultures of this world and worked tirelessly for their equal standing. He adamantly opposed Western hegemonic supremacy and the pursuit of neoliberal nostrums imposed by the developed world on developing nations. As celebrity, geographical explorer, and activist then, Hillary was arguably an early public geographer.

Despite his straightforwardness, Hillary was a complex person insofar as he held positions inside and outside the establishments and institutions of his day. At certain times he worked for them, at others times he worked against them. From the perspective of the early 21st century, Hillary's geographies may seem outdated or at least a topic for historical geographers. Yet, as we hope to have indicated, on closer inspection, Hillary's personal views, words and actions are not simply relevant for more serious consideration, they also live on because they overlap with many of the hopes, aims, and challenges that constitute today's discipline of geography.

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