Asia

British Everest Expedition, 1951. Early in 1951 the Royal Geographical Society and the Alpine Club received permission from the Government of Nepal to send an expedition to the S. side of Mt. Everest. Mr. Eric Shipton was selected to lead the party, which consisted originally of W. H. Murray, T. Bourdillon and M. Ward and was joined later by H. E. Riddiford and E. P. Hillary. Plans were made for a serious attempt to climb the mountain, should a promising route be found; but the expedition was officially called a "reconnaissance."

The party left railhead at Jogbani on August 27th, while the monsoon was still active, and reached Namche Bazar on September 22nd. They had some trouble in obtaining porters at this inhospitable season of the year, and apparently were unable to decide which of several routes to follow. The trip—which should have been a delightful fortnight's march through the lovely valleys of Nepal—was made tedious and unpleasant by the rains, which kept the rivers and their feeder streams in full spate. Thus, during the rains, small streams which had been no problem for the Houston party in October 1950 were impassable.*

The lamasery of Thangboche impressed the British expedition greatly, and the lamas were very hospitable. Surely the view from this lovely spot must be one of the finest of Everest from any angle, and the small monastery on the steep shoulder is almost too theatrical to be true. The party did not linger here, tempting though the lamasery was, but hurried up the valley, turning westward up the Khombu Glacier below Pumori on October 1st. During the next days, four of the party made a determined effort to penetrate the West Cwm, climbing up through fearfully broken séracs of the great icefall to a point estimated at just over 20,000 ft. Conditions were so bad that the route was considered unsafe for laden porters: the snow was often hip-deep, the séracs were very unstable, and the party was nearly carried away by an avalanche set off by their passage. They decided to wait a fortnight before repeating their attempt. No avalanches fell from the precipitous sides of this narrow valley—a

* See Elizabeth S. Cowles and C. S. Houston, "North to Everest," *A.A.J.*, VIII (1951), 1-21.—*Ed.*

danger which is not inconsiderable and which, added to the obvious hazards and difficulties of the icefall, made Tilman and me consider this route impracticable.

The party then split into two groups. Murray, Ward, Bourdillon and Riddiford set out to explore the valleys and glaciers to the W. of the Khombu Glacier, notably the Ngojumba, which rises from the S. slopes of Cho Oyu (26,750 ft.) and Gyachung Kang (25,910 ft.). Without much difficulty, they crossed a 20,000-ft. pass at the head of the smooth, nearly level glacier (unnamed) which runs due W. from the Khombu, directly beneath Pumori, and found themselves in the icefall below the Nup La. From this point they examined the S. face of Cho Oyu (which did not look inviting), attempted unsuccessfully to reach the Nup La (the saddle of which had been reached from the N. in 1921), and finally followed the Ngojumba Valley down to Namche Bazar, later rejoining the other party at base camp.

Meanwhile, Shipton and Hillary had gone up the Imja Glacier, which lies directly S. of Lhotse and rises under the E. face of the Everest massif. At its head, beneath the E. face of Lhotse and the S. wall of Pethangtse, they had spectacular views of Makalu (27,800 ft.). They crossed a pass into the Hongu Valley, beneath Chamlang (24,000 ft.), paralleling the upper Kosi Valley, and then crossed back into the upper Kosi Valley and regained base camp.

During the latter half of October, the reunited party again made a determined effort to reach the floor of the West Cwm and examine the slopes leading to the South Col (25,850 ft.) between Lhotse and the summit cone of Everest. They found the passage of the icefall even more difficult than it had been earlier, for the crevasses had changed greatly and the snow was still unconsolidated. Several large séracs gave way as the party passed near them. Despite these difficulties, they were able to reach the floor of the great valley at the head of the steepest portion of the icefall — only to find that this section, which they had hoped would be relatively unbroken, did in fact slope upwards at a sufficient angle to be badly broken by wide and long crevasses. Regretfully, they turned back and went down to Namche Bazar.

In spite of the difficulties and considerable dangers of the icefall at the entrance to the West Cwm, Shipton states: "We are satisfied that, given favourable snow conditions, there is a practicable route

from the Western Cwm to the summit of Mt. Everest."* This route appears to run up the steep snow slopes which fall from Lhotse and the South Col to the foot of the final pyramid, and thence up the true S. face of Everest. Shipton believes that the difficulties of the final 2000 ft. from the South Col to the summit are not great. He does not speak of the probable difficulties on the steep slopes below the South Col, but considers the crux of the climb to be in the passage of the icefall into the West Cwm.

After the beginning of October, the party encountered exceptionally clear and good weather; they were not greatly troubled by cold or wind at the altitudes reached. They did, however, note winds of great velocity on the upper reaches of all the great peaks — winds which are probably responsible for the freedom of the peaks from snow. Tilman and I made the same observations at about the same time in the preceding year; but, since wind is a problem of Everest before the monsoon as well as after, neither wind nor cold should be the decisive factor in a post-monsoon attempt.

This reconnaissance examined a large area of previously little-known Nepal and brought back answers to some of the puzzling geographical questions which surround this magnificent range. Their energy and perseverance enabled them to cover much territory, and their photographs should be both beautiful and valuable.

From the climber's point of view, their observations are less satisfactory. The entrance to the West Cwm is a formidable and dangerous passage. Shipton's party took considerable risks which they saw need of justifying in their published articles. When Tilman and I examined this route from the lower slopes of Pumori in 1950, we felt — as we still feel — that the masses of snow and ice which lie high on the steep walls of each side of the narrow defile present a real and significant danger. Furthermore, we believed that the icefall would not offer a route which would be feasible and safe for laden porters. The fact that Shipton's strong and able party failed on two occasions to reach the floor of the Cwm, despite considerable effort and daring, confirms me in my belief that this is not a *practicable* route to Everest.

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* "Looking Back on Everest," *The Times,* 21 Dec. 1951, p. 7 (reprinted in *The Times Mt. Everest Reconnaissance Expedition 1951 Supplement,* Dec. 1951, p. 15).—*Ed.*

Moreover, the slope from the West Cwm upwards to the South Col is not very attractive. It is a steep slope, nearly 3000 ft. in extent, broken by huge séracs. Its exposure is the same as that of the W. face of the North Col, where Tilman in 1938 described the "father and mother of all avalanches," and which he and Odell, who climbed it, regarded as dangerous. There would seem to be no valid reason to hope that the similar slope from the South Col would be much different. Finally, there are the last few thousand feet to the summit. On the S. side of the mountain, the strata slope more favorably, the sun is able more beneficently to modify the bitter cold, the snow may be better consolidated (unless blown clear, as when we saw it), and a route may well exist. But it has not been seen except from afar.

I am in sympathy with Shipton's reluctance to expose porters to the danger of repeated passage of a dangerous route. Native porters must remain a trust and a responsibility of their climbing leaders. Having less judgment than strength, they must be chaperoned through serious difficulties; and the conscientious climber will put their welfare above his own. On earlier Everest climbs, Odell and again Longland showed this devotion. Pasang Kikuli showed the same devotion when he gave up his life in his almost incredible attempt to rescue Dudley Wolfe on K2 in 1939. Those Himalayan parties which fail to guard their porters are unworthy of the great tradition created by their predecessors.

The baleful light of publicity which shines on Everest has induced something of that nationalistic attitude so strongly deplored by Irving a generation ago. According to a statement in *The Times,* "From that year [1938] until the reconnaissance of 1951 Everest remained unvisited by man, except for one day in 1942 when Colonel Scott, commander of an American pursuit group in China, flew over the peak in his aircraft." This is inaccurate and ungracious: it ignores Denham, who visited Everest from the N. in 1947; St. George, who entered Solah Khombu in 1949; my father's party of 1950, which first examined the S. side of Everest; and numbers of pilots, of various nationalities, who have flown around the peak on unofficial "errands."

In these days, when the free world is menaced, when "sport" is a word hard pressed to survive, it is sad that brother nations like ours, the British, the French and the Swiss, should feel it necessary to

compete in "national" expeditions among the great mountains, whose beauty and magnificence far transcend man's silly struggles. Yet this very summer we may watch a competition on the S. side of Everest between the Swiss* and the British—and the huge, 150-man Russian expedition on the N. *O tempora, O mores!*

CHARLES S. HOUSTON

Abominable Snowman. Again the abominable snowman has caused a furore. Eric Shipton, leader of the post-monsoon British reconnaissance expedition to the S. side of Mount Everest, brought back excellent photographs of what his Sherpa porters declared were "yeti" tracks. They appeared to show "three broad 'toes' and a broad 'thumb' to the side." This "snowman" had jumped crevasses during its progress down a mile of snow-covered glacier. When he saw these tracks, one of Shipton's Sherpas described to him a "yeti" he once saw, a "half man half beast, about five feet six inches tall, covered with reddish-brown hair but with a hairless face." Shipton's photographs brought immediate publicity and all sorts of legends, such as the one that snowmen leave strange tracks because "their feet turn backward to make mountain climbing easier." Others claimed that the snowmen were missing links. But despite these exotic surmises about the "thing," the tracks of Shipton's abominable snowman look abominably like those of some abominable Himalayan bear.

Panch Chuli. Heinrich Harrer was one of two well-known German mountaineers who escaped from an Allied prison camp during the war and took refuge in Tibet. During the summer of 1951 Harrer, with New Zealander Frank Thomas, two Sherpas and minimum equipment made a serious attempt on 22,650-ft. Panch Chuli in the Almora District of northern India. Base camp on this peak, previously attempted by several expeditions but never climbed, was established at 13,500 ft. Above this point avalanche danger,

* The members of the Swiss expedition, led by Dr. Wyss-Dunant, are André Roch, René Dittert, René Aubert, Raymond Lambert, Léon Flory, Jean-Jacques Asper, Dr. Gabriel Chevalley, Ernst Hofstetter, Prof. Augustin Lombard (geologist) and Albert Zimmermann (botanist). They have long climbed together. Their equipment is reported to include double tents lined with swan's-down, inflated rubber sleeping bags and oxygen apparatus, weighing 22 lbs. per man, "for the final assault on the mountain." A report of 3 June 1952 from Katmandu indicates that both the Swiss expedition to Everest and the British expedition to Cho Oyu have been cut short by bad weather.—*Ed.*