Sir George Everest's 200th Birthday

AUDREY SALKELD, The Alpine Club

Sir George Everest was born two hundred years ago. It is well known that in 1849 reports reached Everest's successor as Superintendent of the Great Trigonometrical Survey of India, Andrew Waugh, of a peak in the Himalaya that appeared to be the highest in the world. Waugh suggested that the mountain should be named for his predecessor as an acknowledgement of his tremendous achievements in the survey. Although the Nepalese now call the peak Sagarmatha and the Chinese Qomolangma, much of the world recognizes primarily the name of Mount Everest.

Born in London on July 4, 1790, one of five sons of a solicitor, George Everest entered the Royal Military Academy at Woolwich at the age of 14. In 1806, he went to Java and was commissioned a lieutenant in the Bengal Artillery, an East India Company regiment. He was active in reconnaissance there, working on military surveys. In 1817, he came to India. The following year, he became an assistant to Colonel Henry Lambton, the third Surveyor General of India, who in 1800 had started a network of triangulation that was to cover the whole subcontinent, starting with Cape Comorin, the southernmost tip. Lambton lived and died by the code that the Map must go forward—no matter what—and it was a principle that Everest adopted quite naturally. In 1823, 70-year-old Lambton died in the field, and Everest succeeded him as Superintendent of the Great Trigonometrical Survey. His first act was to demand more funds and men for the work.

By 1825, Everest had extended the great arc to Kalianpur in central India, but not without its taking a great toll on his health. He returned to Britain on extended sick leave, where he remained for five years. However, he was not idle back home. He used the time thoroughly to review the latest European surveys aimed at calculating the figure of the earth and the most modern equipment. He also supervised the construction of two 36-inch theodolites, the most accurate ever made. Each weighed more than 1100 pounds and needed twelve men to carry it, three at either end of two poles. Massive stone towers were built from which observations were made; a number of these still exist. He also perfected an ingenious series of dials and differential wheels called a "perambulator." This was basically a revolution counter mounted on a wheel which could give a quick...
PLATE 18

From Survey of India

Sir George Everest.
measurement of distance if the diameter of the wheel was known. Previous ones had measured in yards and rods, necessitating complicated conversions to tenths of a mile. Everest remarked, "Since a mile is 5280 feet, I propose that the long hand shall revolve once when the wheel has been trundled over 528 feet of ground." He personally badgered his directors in London for the funds and equipment he needed until they gave in. On the strength of his persistence and personality, he was appointed by them Surveyor General of India on his return, as well as Superintendent of the Great Trigonometrical Survey.

During Everest's term of office, Lambton's network of triangulations was abandoned in favour of running a series of triangles along the meridians of longitude, connected by cross links along parallels of latitude, the "gridiron system." It remains in use today, and it afforded Everest the chance of pushing forward with the measurement of the Great Arc of the Meridian. He extended his work northward to the foot of the Himalaya at Dehra Dun, where he measured a baseline 7.5 miles long in 1834-5. Another baseline was measured at Kalianpur, near Sironj, south of Agra.

Upon retirement from the Survey in 1843, his health broken, he returned to England and married. He was knighted in 1861 and died in Paddington in 1866.

Throughout his career, Everest was a stickler for accuracy. He would not suffer fools gladly and had a fiery temper. He was as blisteringly forthright to his superiors in London as to those who worked under him in India. He never spared himself, and when his legs became paralyzed as a result of his illnesses, he would still be lifted onto a stool to perform his observations personally. He was always ready to fight for better conditions for his staff.

PLATES 19 AND 20
Photos by David Breashears

On the left is Everest's 36-inch Theodolite made by Troughton and Sims. On the right is the 24-inch Theodolite with which the height of Mount Everest was determined.