This is an account of three expeditions led by Chris Bonington to a heretofore untrodden massif in Eastern Tibet in 1996, 1997 and 1998. On the first, Bonington and his friend, Charles Clarke, M.D., using a map purchased at the Lhasa airport and a single photograph from a Chinese mountaineering book, set out to find and explore the terrain around Sepu Kangri (7400m). The result is a fine tale in the Shipton-Tilman tradition, with touches of British amateurism evocative of the Newby’s *Short Walk in the Hindu Kush*. For instance, they’d done no research on the weather and would discover that summer rains in Tibet are as bad as the monsoon in Nepal. On the drive from Lhasa, their guide forbade them to stay in towns, fearing the military or the police would find their travel permit flawed. “The reconnaissance had been one of the best trips I have ever undertaken,” Bonington concludes, “We had done practically no climbing, we had attained no major summits, and yet I had enjoyed a quality of exploratory adventure that I had not experienced since the first trip I made to the Himalaya, to Annapurna II, in 1960.”

On the second visit, Bonington decides on a strong infrastructure of climbers, expenditure, sponsorship and supporting communications technology. In addition to Clarke, he recruits stalwart, near-to-middle-age names of British climbing: John Porter, Jim Lowther, Jim Fotheringham. In addition to three Sherpas, there is filmmaker Jim Curran (also Bonington’s biographer) plus a techie to run the communications paraphernalia. Beset with bad weather and avalanche-prone snow, the team fail fairly low on the mountain.

The following year, Bonington and Clarke are accompanied by four different climbers—less gray hair on sideburns and beards—and a three-man film team. Separately, Clarke and one of the climbers take a month-long different approach to base camp via terra incognita before the others arrive and explore the eastern side of the range. The weather is poor and the terrain treacherous for the climbing team and the expedition fails to get to the summit. Nobody but a desperate publisher would find anything triumphal here. In fact, the amount of prose dedicated to climbing (where we know triumph is to be found) is perhaps less than a third of the text. The most interesting parts of the book are the accounts of the two lightweight probes (in part because they have more contact with the land and the local people) and also Clarke’s history of exploration of the region and his essay on Tibetan medical practices.

For me, *Tibet’s Secret Mountain* is a fascinating record of the penetration of information technology into expeditionary life and the degree to which it reshapes the mountaineering experience. First, a little gear talk. The 1997 attempt on the mountain had a Saturn dish data terminal (30 kilos), and two British Telecom Mobiqs, each about the size of a laptop, linked to a satellite above the Indian Ocean. Bonington is pretty thrilled with his new altimeter that records rate of ascent and other data. The communications tent at base camp had three tables “so that several people could work at the same time.” To kill time, Bonington plays *Warcraft*,

a computer game to which he is addicted.

He writes that, "The other team members, and I too at first, had had reservations about our satellite link to the world, feeling that one of the charms of an expedition was getting away from worries of home and work. But 'because it was there' I noticed my companions were not slow to use the benefits of instant communications. John Porter was able to talk to his two children before they went off to school, Jim Lowther checked up on his estate, and Duncan was conducting by e-mail the final tortuous stages of selling a house. Were we losing some of the romance of mountaineering in our use of modern technology? I don't think so. There was room for the Shiptonesque as well as the satellite."

The second attempt on Sepu Kangri had greater technological scope. As Clarke writes: "Chris was keen that the expedition should have a strong communications background, ideally with the ability to transmit TV film direct from base camp." And so strong was his commitment that Bonington insisted that Clarke’s two-man advance reconnaissance probe, traveling more than 200 kilometers and over at least six 5000-meter passes, carry satellite phones, digital cameras, walkie talkies, global positioning devices and computers and solar panels. This “made our baggage more cumbersome than originally planned, but it did add another dimension to travel through a remote region,” Clarke writes. "Also, if difficult to put into any useful practice, communications could be valuable in case of accident or illness."

Clarke’s somewhat tortuous language seems to barely suppress the thought that technology on this scale does not add, but subtracts a dimension from exploratory mountaineering. It undeniably leads to some pretty bizarre events, such as when Clarke visits the chief lama of a remote monastery that is being renovated. He asks the lama if he would like to talk on the phone to the superior of his order, who lives in Scotland.

"From an open first-floor window we aimed the satellite dish south and dialed the number. It seemed ludicrous to hear the Eskdalemuir monastery’s answering phone playing its recorded message: 'This office opens at 9 a.m. Please try later.' " When the call goes through to the high lama, Clarke writes: "In this place where wood and yak dung were the source of power and the rooms lit with butter lamp, the solar panel and digital technology allowed one reincarnate lama to speak to another. The talk was mainly secular about supplies and the progress of building work."

In addition to the previous equipage, for the third venture Bonington has two wind generators and video transmission links to the ITN studios in London, powered by the two generators. The expedition’s gear list contains three printers. Alas, there was rarely enough juice for them because the 20-kilo battery pack was dysfunctional. Meanwhile, lack of wind made these generators almost useless, only one of a score of disappointments caused by technology overreaching or inadequate testing. Still, thanks to ITN’s generators, there was usually enough juice for 20 e-mails daily, web site picture downloads, four computers and two satellite phones to run most of the day. Even Bonington’s technophilia gets stressed at times. After he returns to Base Camp from an initial probe up to Camp I, he writes, "I had time to sort myself out and prepare for the climb ahead in a way that I had been unable to do before. There had been too many external pressures with ITN reports, answering e-mails, worries about my health and whether I was getting too old for it all."

The TV coverage meant that he appeared in staged video scenes as the climbers made their way up the mountain. At one point, when things are going well, he "dreamt of what it was going to be like reaching the summit and (I) even rehearsed my piece to the camera for the benefit of ITN." When it is clear that the team is more likely to succeed without him than with him, he opts to go down.
"I tried to do a piece to the camera for ITN explaining what we’d decided. The first time I tried I couldn’t control my emotions and slumped down and cried.” He later checks his emotions and explains his decision to the audience.

Bonington is too ingenuous in claiming technology is a convenience that can be used without compromises. The fact that he climbs while rehearsing scripts for the video camera induces a state of mind that must be different from merely slogging up a hill with one’s thoughts, or with no thought at all. The climbers’ obligations to feed the website is equally mind-altering. The quotidian stuff that Shipton would have scribbled in his diary now gets typed on laptops and packaged as up-to-the-minute “news.” Climbing becomes intermingled with show biz values: a private experience, a personal challenge, is morphed into a public spectacle of dubious veracity (for instance, the makeover of Bonington’s tearful moment of truth).

After the media binge, after the last of Bonington’s “reports from Central Tibet” to the slack-jawed couch potatoes back home, there must come the realization that it was much ado about nothing. The diurnal events on this failed attempt on a modest-sized peak (where their high point was 6830 meters) are not likely to hold much interest for climbers, far less the general public, unless quite ordinary acts and thoughts of a celebrity like Bonington are the equivalent, or better than, real news.

Many generations of climbers have sought to impose exalted missions to their activities, such as scientific research or goals of national conquest. The narrative of Tibet’s Secret Mountain tells the story of technological pioneers symbolically preparing the ground for utopian technological futures. Their picture of reality and their mental states are deeply influenced by the requirements of real-time communication. I do not argue that this is a bad choice. God knows, it may be a wonderful cure for the base camp blahs that readers of this journal are familiar with. But I do wish that Bonington showed more awareness of the Faustian bargain’s irreversible consequences.

John Thackray


Shortly after the New Year, the New York Times published a list of sports and the American sportspersons who excelled at them in 1999. As I recall, there were close to 100 activities, not all of them athletic, including more than a handful of which I had never heard. Rock climbing was not on the list, not even in the version known as sport climbing. The lack of regulated and publicized competition complete with spectators leading to “national” or “world” championships probably has a lot to do with this omission.

At the same time, climbing is almost alone in having a literature produced by the actual participants. Deep-water sailing can also lay a claim here, and perhaps it is the isolation and the accompanying lack of spectators that forces climbers and sailors to the equally isolated task of writing. If they don’t do it, nobody else will or even can, and climbers intuitively know that the as-told-to gambit common in other sports just isn’t going to come close to what they experienced. The surprising thing is not that some climbers write, but that some of them write very well.

So we have the doing, then the talking (writing) about the doing, and then the talking about the talking about the doing: action, narration, criticism. There must be something about the