Edmund Percival Hillary 1919–2008

"Sir Edmund described himself as a person of modest ability; in reality he was a colossus.... He was our hero," New Zealand's Prime Minister Helen Clark said in her tribute to him at his state funeral in Auckland. Referring to him as Sir Ed, as he is generally known in his native land, she added, "Above all, we loved him for what he represented—a determination to succeed against all odds." It was she, not his family, who announced his death to the world.

The prime minister of India spoke of him as one who "drew our attention to the grandeur of Mother Earth." (The street in New Delhi where the New Zealand diplomatic
mission is located was renamed in 2003 as Sir Edmund Hillary Marg.) Nepal’s premier stated that, “The government and people of Nepal shall always cherish fond memories of his selfless devotion to the cause of development of the Everest region, his humane qualities and courageous spirit, as well as his contribution to make Nepal known to the world.”

The saga of Hillary’s ascent of Mt. Everest has been recounted innumerable times. The story I like best is Hillary’s recent description of how he felt when he and Tenzing Norgay had finally “knocked the bastard off” by fighting their way up the difficult rock feature known ever since as the Hillary Step. “[Tenzing] really had a greater desire for success than I did. When we actually got to the top, he was overwhelmed. I wasn’t overwhelmed at all. In fact, when I got to the top of Everest, I looked around, and across the valley is another great mountain [Makalu] and, instead of doing anything particularly dramatic, I looked at this mountain and I mentally picked out a route by which the mountain could be climbed. I didn’t climb it, it was climbed by a French expedition [led by Jean Franco two years later], but even when I was on the summit of Everest I was still looking for challenges across the valley.”

Hillary was constantly looking for challenges throughout the prime of his life. His famous adventures after Everest included making the first visit to the South Pole overland since 1911, by driving across the continent on a Massey Ferguson tractor in 1957; searching unsuccessfully in Khumbu for the yeti in 1960 (he hadn’t expected to succeed—he didn’t believe the creature existed); chugging up the length of the Ganges River in a jet boat in 1977; and becoming the first person to visit the world’s three poles (South, North, and the summit of Everest) in 1985, when he landed at the North Pole with Neil Armstrong, the first man on the moon.

He served as New Zealand’s high commissioner (the title for ambassadors amongst Commonwealth nations) to India, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka, and ambassador to Nepal, from 1985 to 1989. The New Zealand mission in New Delhi had been closed in 1982 by a prime minister who disliked Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, but when a new government came into office in Wellington, Hillary was chosen to reestablish New Zealand’s presence in South Asia. He was the ideal person for the job: he acknowledged that he was not a professional diplomat and so left the diplomacy to his staff, but he also knew that he could open doors for them because of his fame from Everest and from his jetboat trip up the Ganges River from sea to source, which lasted for several weeks and was witnessed by millions of Indians—four million at Calcutta alone—who lined the river banks and considered his trip a religious pilgrimage up their holy river.

Hillary was a man who took glory from Nepal, but was one of the very few who returned to give something back, to contribute to the well being of its people. A few others, like Doug Scott, have made similar contributions elsewhere in Nepal, but not nearly on the same scale. Hillary built the Lukla airfield, which became the gateway to Mt. Everest. He founded his small aid agency, the Himalayan Trust, and in Nepal’s Solukhumbu district built 27 schools, two hospitals, 12 clinics, and numerous foot bridges; his Trust continues to maintain, repair, reequip, and expand the schools and hospitals four decades later, and to send from Kathmandu all the supplies they require to function properly. He was instrumental in getting the Everest area’s
Sagarmatha National Park established and staffed; his trust has financed tree nurseries in and just outside the park to counteract the serious deforestation that had been taking place. He organized and raised considerable funds for the rebuilding of the fire-gutted Thyangboche monastery.

He was revered by the Sherpa people, who were profoundly grateful for his decades of helping them help themselves. They refer to him and they addressed him as “Bara Sahib” (literally “great master”). When they held their Buddhist memorial services in January, they prayed for him to be reincarnated as a human being who would return to them in his next life and carry on his work.

Hillary’s and his Trust’s contributions to the well being of the local people helped to create an area in the north of Nepal which is by far the most prosperous remote area in the country. This is because the people are educated, have good health care, and can speak English and thus earn a good living as trekking guides, climbers, and lodge owners. The Khumbu part of Solukhumbu, the northern area of the district, did not have a single local Maoist during the ten-year Maoist uprising. As it did throughout the Maoist rebellion, his Himalayan Trust will continue its work despite its founder-chairman’s death. Last November he designated his wife, the former June Mulgrew, who has been intimately involved in its work for years, as his successor.

He was rewarded for these efforts during the celebrations marking the 50th anniversary of the first ascent of Everest by being made an honorary citizen of Nepal (no one else has received that accolade). He and his summit partner are being honored posthumously by Lukla airfield’s officially becoming the Tenzing-Hillary Airport.

He was a truly modest man, as Prime Minister Clark mentioned at his funeral service. An editorial in an Auckland paper noted, “His modesty was as legendary as his mountaineering achievements. If ever there was a man who could—in the words of a famous poet of British imperialism—walk with kings without losing the common touch, Sir Ed was he.”

He was the finest man I have ever known. He lived by his very high ethical standards. He did an immense amount of good for other people—and he greatly enjoyed doing it. He was a warm family man who was devastated by the death of his first wife and child in 1975 in a plane crash at Kathmandu airport while he was building a hospital at Phaphlu in Solukhumbu. He loved a good laugh, enjoyed his Scotch and ginger ale, was endlessly patient with people wanting him to pose with them for a photo or asking him for his autograph. (Some years ago, his face was engraved on the New Zealand five-dollar bill—he was the only living person except the Queen to appear on New Zealand currency—and he was often asked to sign one, thus taking a number of them permanently out of circulation.)

He had firm ideas on a number of topics, and when he was asked a question, he would often come out with some pretty blunt answers. He became outspoken on his views about commercial climbing expeditions on Everest, and how they cause great crowding on the standard routes by people who are not real mountaineers. He was convinced that mountains should be left to mountaineers, and there should be a strict limit on the number of climbers on the mountain in the same season; he believed that “the commercialization of the mountain” was “something of a disaster in the sense that you would have a small group of experienced guides who would conduct frequently inexperienced people up the mountain” and dangerously clog the main routes with their numbers. As he remarked to me several times, “I’m only glad we were there when we were, when we had the mountain all to ourselves, and we were accomplishing something with our own skill and determination.”
In one of his last formal interviews, Hillary was asked last year how he would like to be remembered after his death. “If remembered at all, I would like to be remembered for the schools and hospitals and bridges and all the other activities that we did with—not 'for'—the Sherpas. Unquestionably, they are the things I feel were the most worthwhile of everything I was involved in.”

Do you think about dying now? At this stage of your years? “No, I don’t spend a lot of time thinking about dying, but I like to think that if it did occur that I would die peacefully and not make too much of a fuss about it.”

He died quietly on the morning of January 11, 2008. His body had worn out. His heart stopped beating.

**Elizabeth Hawley**

*Editor’s note: A much longer version of this memorial is available at [www.americanalpineclub.org](http://www.americanalpineclub.org)*

**Lara-Karena Bitenieks Kellogg 1968–2007**

Lara Kellogg died last April in a fall she suffered while descending Mt. Wake in Alaska’s Ruth Gorge. She was two weeks shy of her 39th birthday. News of the accident immediately fanned out across her vast network of friends in Seattle and beyond. Sadly, her husband, Chad Kellogg, was one of the last to know. A lone horseman carried word of the accident involving Lara to his base camp in China’s Qionglai Range, but he had to hike out to Rilong to receive the full report of what had happened. Days before her death, Chad and his partners, Joe Puryear and Aj Janousek, had summited an unnamed 18,900-foot peak in the Chang Ping Valley. They subsequently christened it Lara Shan—Lara’s Peak [p. 435].

It was Lara, not Laura—something new acquaintances tended to get wrong. Her parents were Latvian immigrants who settled in working-class West Seattle. Her father, Robert, introduced her to the mountains at age nine with a foray partway up Mt. Rainier. Even more than most Seattleites, she loved that mountain. She loved mountains, period. Still, she didn’t become a climber until her mid-twenties. By then she had been a bike messenger, a bike racer, a kayak guide, a snowboarder, a skateboarder, but not a climber. That changed quickly. After she got a job at Marmot Mountain Works, a Seattle-area climbing shop, she started disappearing every chance she got. Along with her legendary dogs, Greedy and Chavez, and various partners in crime, she started ticking off classic climbs in the Cascades, the Olympics, the Coast Range, the Sierra. I was privileged to be an occasional sidekick. One of the finest memories of my life, in fact, is topping out on North Dome with Lara as the full moon rose over Yosemite.

After I moved to San Francisco, I saw Lara less often. She always made a point, however, of swinging through town on her way to the Valley. I was trying to make my way as a journalist then, and Lara was trying to make a go of climbing. She was succeeding, too, landing guiding gigs with Cascade Alpine Guides and Mountain Madness, and a stint as a climbing ranger on Rainier. Her adventures became farther-flung. Postcards started arriving from distant corners—Nepal, Peru, Alaska. She was out climbing harder and harder routes. Among the