

Letters from Everest

GEORGE LOWE

*Edited and introduced by Huw Lewis-Jones**Foreword Jan Morris**Afterword Peter Hillary*

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George Lowe's letters home to family from the Everest expedition of 1953 make a delightful read. This volume, published just before Lowe, the last of those Everest climbers, died in 2013, is a great memorial to him.

A simple, attractive, stylised cover complements the traditional binding of this little hardback. Three maps enable the reader to follow the expedition. Two show India and the route from 'Katmandu' (as Lowe wrote) to Everest. These appeared in *Coronation Everest* 1958 by journalist James (later Jan) Morris. Now probably the last person alive associated with the expedition, she wrote the Foreword. The other map, of the route up Everest, appeared in Lowe's *Because it is There* (1959). Some of Lowe's sketches are included; and those of the open and closed oxygen systems clarify the text.

Without a doubt, the letters are really enjoyable, but there are inadequacies around them. In spite of the Foreword, Introduction and Afterword there is little on Lowe's climbing background in New Zealand, which began in 1945. He understood that his early expeditionary mountaineering was perfect preparation for Everest. No mention is made of his fear of heights as a boy and young man, nor of his severely broken arm at the age of ten, which never mended properly. In his calm practical way Lowe overcame such problems to become one of New Zealand's best climbers by the early 1950s. The story of his actual inclusion on the Everest expedition could have been better explained, and more background to the expedition would also have been helpful. The photographs are not well reproduced, but they are available elsewhere.

The letters begin on 20 February 1953 in Bombay, where Lowe was immersed in expedition organisation. In Bombay, Poona, and even in 'Katmandu' there is a clear sense of the British Raj, even though Indian independence had come in 1947. This was primarily a British expedition and Lowe is fully accepting of that, while at the same time aware that he and Hillary were different from the British climbers.

The letters themselves are captivating. George Lowe's sense of humour, his honesty, and his ability to write, offer a new freshness to the

story of the successful expedition. His letters vary in length and coverage, but he wrote as often as possible to his sister, Betty, in Hawkes Bay, who copied them to relatives and friends. Even when high on the mountain, in most difficult conditions, he managed to write with clarity and style, covering what he did, occasional illness, and giving his impressions of place and people. Where possible, he offers a broader picture of the whole expedition. Throughout, Lowe praises the leader John Hunt for his hard work and his focus on getting someone to the summit of Everest.

Part of the charm of the letters is that they are often all over the place, as Lowe was interrupted, or tried to go back in time to give a fuller narrative. This can be a little confusing, but that was what life on Everest was like. Lowe was in one place at a time, doing one job, and so could not know everything that was going on. Considering how and when they were written, they give a remarkably full story.

As is the nature of informal letters, Lowe does not always explain. For example, on page 43 he writes he will go to Poona to visit 'Professor Finch ... to discuss oxygen'. Pages later he reveals that this was George Finch who reached 27,900ft on Everest in 1922. But there is no mention of how advanced Finch's thinking on oxygen use had then been, and how unacceptable to the British climbing establishment. Finch was originally an Australian.

The letters do not always do justice to Lowe's own efforts. In particular, his role on the Lhotse face is underplayed. There his snow and ice skills, honed on New Zealand's glaciers, enabled him to establish most of the route to the South Col. Tired, with little support from other climbers or only a few Sherpas, struggling to take still and movie pictures, as well as force a route, understandably Lowe was in no condition to write in detail. Each day probably felt much the same anyway. His was an heroic achievement, but his letters show he did not then realise its significance. Such is the nature of many archival records – they do not tell the full story and they do not give all the information a modern reader might, with hindsight, like to have.

A principal delight in these letters is their immediacy, something not found to the same extent in the published accounts of the expedition—John Hunt *The Ascent of Everest* (1953), Wilfred Noyce *South Col* (1954), and Ed Hillary *High Adventure* (1955) are the other important books. In these the story has been re-worked and polished, even where based on diaries and letters. Lowe does not gossip or tell tales, because he was very much a team man, doing what he could for the expedition, but his account, unlike all others, is very raw and direct. He speaks to us in

these pages from Everest.

The later letters (the last is 26 June 1953, nearly a month after the summit achievement) cover the walk out to 'Katmandu' and the team's growing realisation of the storm of excitement and acclamation they had created. Lowe also highlights two rather distasteful subsequences to the successful ascent. Tenzing was born Nepalese, but he lived in India, so where he belonged was not clear. Both countries claimed him for nationalistic reasons and stated that Tenzing was first to the summit, and even that he hauled Hillary up. The expedition members knew that Hillary had led all the way, but since it was a team effort they would not reveal who actually first set foot on the summit. The media frenzy both during and after the expedition is also described, showing that journalistic competition and underhand tactics are nothing new.

There is no indication in the letters that Lowe resented any of the tasks he was given, or the fact that he had no summit chance. He wanted to get as high as possible and he did manipulate circumstances and expedition needs to reach the South Col and then 27,900ft on the final carry, but essentially he was willing to do whatever the team needed. Given the opportunity he would likely have reached the summit, but there is no doubt that Hillary was by far the fittest climber near the end of the expedition, and Lowe was probably more worn out from the Lhotse face than he realised. But his fitness and determination allowed him to spend four nights close to what is now known as 'The Death Zone' at 8000m, supporting the successful summit climb. Lowe does seem to have acclimatised very well to high altitude.

George Lowe's *Letters from Everest* are not only an enjoyable read, but they offer great insight into a previous world. Not all archival material is so informative. To Lowe and the other climbers, teamwork was essential, and in an individualistic age it is good to be reminded of the positives of working together. These letters reveal a different, simpler world, one where George Lowe was very much at home.

Graham Langton