

## Review of ‘*White Sherpas*’

by Will Steffen, November 2013

Climbing Mount Everest has become somewhat of a circus these days – mail-order mountaineers by the hundreds, long queues on the summit ridge, traffic jams at the Hillary Step and ever more bizarre ways of trying to claim a “first ascent” of one of the world’s busiest mountains.

So why another book on climbing Everest?

This book tells the story of one of the most remarkable climbs the mountain has ever seen. It is a story that needs to be told because it is one of the most significant first ascents ever of the world’s highest peak, and it has largely gone unnoticed.

The year was 1988, and the Australian Bicentennial Everest Expedition, a joint Australian Army-civilian expedition, assembled at the now famous Everest Base Camp on the south (Nepalese) side of the mountain to attempt the standard route via the South Col. This is the route that Sir Edmund Hillary and Tenzing Norgay first climbed in 1953 and the route that now sees masses of climbers (and non-climbers) attempting to summit Everest with commercial expeditions.

Starting with the Hillary-Norgay ascent, virtually all expeditions that have attempted the South Col route use Sherpas, the local men of the mountains, to carry loads, fix rope, establish camps, do the cooking and assist with the climbing itself. The Australian team decided to attempt the route without the aid of Sherpas above Base Camp, undertaking every aspect of the ascent on their own without any other support. No other expedition had ever climbed Everest via that route without Sherpa support. It would truly be a first ascent.

The book’s author is Patrick Cullinan, one of the Army members of the team, who, along with Paul Bayne and Jon Muir, reached the summit of Everest. Bayne and Cullinan were the climbing pair who, when the expedition was staring defeat in the face, forced their way to the top by sheer will.

The name of the book, *White Sherpas*, comes from Sherpa Sungdare, who had climbed Everest a record five times in 1988. When meeting the Australians on their walk out from Everest Base Camp and hearing of the Australian ascent, he said “You guys are White Sherpas”.

The respect was mutual, as the Australian climbers learned first-hand how tough, competent and essential Sherpas are to climbing Everest from the Nepalese side.

Cullinan’s accounts of the Everest ascent, and of the two preceding “warm-up climbs” (themselves epics in their own ways), are written in a direct and almost matter-of-fact style. But this in no way diminishes the drama and tension of the narrative describing the six days when Cullinan and Bayne were trapped by a storm on the South Col and their subsequent desperate struggle to the summit and back.

The statistics describing the climbers' physical condition are revealing. Their blood viscosity was several times higher than normal – prime blood clot material. Bayne had a hernia and suffered an eye hemorrhage on the summit. His pulse rate was 240. During the climb Cullinan had to constantly take his oxygen mask off to cough up congealed blood from his lungs.

Weaving excerpts from Bayne's diary with his own notes and recollections, Cullinan builds an immediate and often terrifying picture of what it was like just to survive for a world record eight and a half days at the last camp on Everest including the climb of the world's highest peak, a record that still stands. So if you want to know what it feels like to be in the boots of the climbing dead, read this book.

Many had said before the expedition that the climb couldn't be done. The huge Tri-Nation (Nepal, China, Japan) team on the mountain at the same time said they never had a chance.

As Cullinan put it in his understated way, "I honestly believe that Everest has never been climbed in a harder way before or since..."

Everest has seen an increasing number of ascents since 1953, and many ascents that were remarkable in various ways. So how does the 1988 Australian ascent of Everest without Sherpa support stack up against other notable ascents?

Climbers revere those colleagues who put up a climb so difficult, so dangerous or so intimidating that it is not repeated. The guidebook simply says "...has not had a second ascent."

It is now 25 years later, and the climb of the 1988 Australian Bicentennial Everest Expedition still awaits a second ascent.

Professor Will Steffen, former Executive Director of the ANU Climate Change Institute and Himalayan mountaineer, is the author of the excellent and authoritative book, *Himalayan Dreaming, Australian mountaineering in the great ranges of Asia 1922-1990*.