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EVEREST THE HARD WAY

THE FIRST ASCENT OF
THE SOUTH WEST FACE

CHRIS BONINGTON



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CHRIS BONINGTON

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Back cover: Dougal Haston climbing the Hillary Step at almost 29,000 feet. Photo: Doug Scott.

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To Mick Burke and Mingma Nuru

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INTRODUCTION TO THE 2025 EDITION

I can hardly believe it's fifty years since we climbed the South West Face of Everest. Fifty years since Dougal Haston and Doug Scott stood on the summit and then survived a brutally cold night out at the South Summit as they descended, the highest open bivouac in history and without oxygen too. I'll never forget hearing Doug's voice crackling across the airwaves as I waited anxiously for news at our camp below the Face. It's fifty years, also, since Pete Boardman, then the youngest person to have reached the top, passed Mick Burke, still going up as Pete went down, never to be seen again.

When I went to the summit myself ten years later, only Doug and I were left from that list. Dougal died in 1977 skiing near his home in Switzerland; Pete disappeared on the North East Ridge of Everest in 1982, on an expedition I had led. At a break in the cornice, I looked across at the wild ice towers and snow flutings that ran down from its knife edge, where Charlie Clarke and I had looked in vain for signs of life. I thought also of my close friend Nick Estcourt, who, with Tut Braithwaite, had led the crux Rock Band on the South West Face, opening the way for success in 1975. Nick had died on K2 three years later, clipped to the same rope as Doug when an avalanche struck. Only Doug escaped.

All this was in my head as I neared the summit of the world, where my friends were waiting for me, including Pertemba Sherpa, who had been our Sirdar, or lead Sherpa, on the South West Face, when he reached the top with Pete Boardman. He was also Sirdar on this 1985 Norwegian expedition that achieved such success, with seventeen successful ascents, thanks in part to Pertemba's organisation. I remember him beckoning me up those last few metres, and how I crouched at the top, weeping with joy and sorrow and exhaustion, thinking of my friends and how badly I had wanted, needed even, to reach the top. I was a little over fifty years old, and for a short time held the record as the oldest person to have climbed Everest. Now, as I write this, I'm ninety, and still thinking about it.

I first saw Everest in 1961, on the approach to its near neighbour Nuptse, part of the horseshoe that surrounds the Western Cwm. Nepal was a different

country then, without the bustle and pollution of today. There were no flights to the mountains in those days. This was three years before Ed Hillary's team built the airstrip at Lukla. The road out of Kathmandu ended just outside the city. After that, we were walking. On our approach we saw just one other European, Peter Aufschnaiter, who, with Heinrich Harrer, had escaped a British internment camp and then into Tibet, where he had been living until the Chinese invaded. This was long before the trekking industry got going, nurtured by Jimmy Roberts, who a year before had led my first Himalayan expedition, to Annapurna II, at 7,937 metres just shy of the magic 8,000-metre mark the year before. Despite some altitude problems, I made the first ascent with Dick Grant and Ang Nyima. It would be the highest summit I reached before Everest in 1985, twenty-four years later.

Jimmy had proved a capable leader, not going up on the mountain himself but making sure logistics happened properly and marshalling the team. It was different on Nuptse, where Joe Walmsley was happy simply to put a team together, get us to the mountain with sufficient gear and then let us get on with it. Unlike Annapurna II, the Nuptse team was full of experience and talent, and it needed to be, because the face we were climbing was arguably the most technical route yet attempted in the Himalaya. Perhaps if we'd got on better personally, then none of that would have mattered, but as we made progress on the mountain, the team broke up into small parties, each thinking they were doing the lion's share of the work. Despite it all, I reached the top with Ang Pemba, one of our six Sherpas, a day after Tashi Sherpa and Dennis Davis made the first ascent, and just ahead of our companions Les Brown and Jim Swallow.

For weeks we'd been looking at the same limited vista, but as Pemba and I reached the crest of Nuptse's summit ridge, the narrow gorge of the Western Cwm opened beneath us and the surrounding mountains burst into view, stretching away to the far horizon. Right in front of me was the black summit pyramid of Everest, seamed and traced with ice and snow that had stuck to the Face. I had no thought of climbing it. In 1961 it seemed far too difficult. I was more absorbed by the Tibetan Plateau that rolled away into the distance, a seemingly endless panorama of brown and purple hills.

Himalayan climbing was put on hold after that. I left the army and met and married my first wife, Wendy. With her encouragement, I gave up the idea of a settled career for life as a freelance writer and photographer. During these years, in the mid 1960s, I did some of the best climbing of my life in the Alps, including the first ascent of the Frêney Pillar on Mont Blanc, and the first British ascent of the Eiger. I also met people like John Harlin, who

understood the sort of big project that the media might buy into. John perished climbing a new route in winter on the Eiger's North Face, which I covered for a weekend magazine. Whilst waiting on the summit to photograph his partner Dougal Haston, I suffered some frostbite, as did Dougal. We recovered together in hospital back in London, and we talked about the South West Face with our doctor, Mike Ward, who had been on the first ascent in 1953. We wanted him as leader, since neither of us felt capable, but political difficulties put an end to Himalayan climbing for a few years.

When I did go back it was to lead an all-star team on the South Face of Annapurna, the first truly steep Himalayan face to be climbed. I made mistakes, but I found I had a facility for it, loved the logistical challenge and the challenge of managing – or at least trying to manage – some hefty egos. In those analogue days you couldn't just send an email to Kathmandu and book yourself on an expedition to an 8,000-metre peak. It took months of organisation; writing letters, making calls, begging gear, liaising with embassies, seeking advice, telexing agents in Nepal and organising the travel arrangements for a big team of climbers, akin to herding cats. Success on Annapurna, albeit at terrible cost right at the last with the death of my old friend Ian Clough, led inevitably to my renewed interest in Everest.

It felt though at the start of the 1970s that all the world's best Himalayan climbers were looking at the same objective. Twice I was invited to participate in expeditions to the South West Face. I accepted the role of climbing leader on an all-star international attempt in 1971, but I had misgivings about its structure and finally withdrew. They wanted to try two routes at once and that didn't seem practical to me. It wasn't easy to say no. I had bouts of depression afterwards, not trusting my judgment. In those days only one team got a permit each season; even if they didn't climb it, when would I get another chance? I had another offer the following spring from the controversial German expedition leader Dr Karl Herrligkoffer, but withdrew from that as well. Luckily for me, an Italian group with permission for the post-monsoon season of 1972 pulled out. So, I took their slot. Part of me thought to play it safe and repeat the 1953 route. At that stage no Englishman had climbed the mountain, and that Englishman could be me. I was tempted but it was yesterday's challenge. I was more interested in the future.

In retrospect, it was almost inevitable that we would fail. No one had yet climbed Everest in the post-monsoon season, which grows progressively colder as the weeks pass. There was so much to learn. We had only made it halfway up the Face by mid-October, when the first of the bitter winter

winds hit us like an express train and destroyed our camps. By the start of November temperatures higher on the Face fell to -40 °C. There were arguments and frustrations among the lead climbers about who would get to lead through the crux section of the Rock Band that separated the lower Face from the summit slopes. Even after we called it a day, we suffered the tragic loss of Tony Tighe, a young Australian who had been helping at Base Camp and who had wanted to see the Face for himself, only to die in the Ice Fall. It was a sad end to what had been a failure, but we had learned a great deal that we put into practice in our successful ascent.

When we came home in 1975 after our successful ascent there were plenty who thought our use of fixed ropes, fixed camps and a big team was outmoded. It's true that by then the alpine-style revolution was underway, something I appreciated and welcomed. Yet how we climbed on Everest then bears no relation to how Everest is climbed fifty years on, with endless resources and helicopter support. It was much riskier in 1975. Our weather forecasts were threadbare in comparison to what's now available. Equipment was improving, but the risk of frostbite these days is much reduced thanks to the quality of boots and down equipment, and the reliability and lightness of oxygen equipment. We were leading on hard new ground and the style we used was the only option to allow us a meaningful chance of success. I have no regrets on that score.

Our success on Everest changed my life. I was honoured for my role, and I found earning a living became easier, something that before Everest had been a worry, especially with a growing family. Everest gave me new avenues for public service, as chancellor of Lancaster University and with the Outward Bound Trust. It changed Doug's life too. He had always been interested in the local communities he encountered on the way to his climbing objectives. That was certainly true on Everest, and I'd been a bit worried when he started taking a personal interest in hiring porters to carry gear to Base Camp. Sadly, a young deaf lad he'd taken a shine to fell into a river and drowned. That galvanised him, and he spent a good portion of the rest of his life dedicating himself to the charity he set up, Community Action Nepal. We had our ups and downs over the years, but I was devastated when he died. He would be so proud that the work he started goes on.

Chris Bonington

Hesket Newmarket

April 2025

CHAPTER ONE

A SECOND CHANCE

After we gave up our attempt on the South West Face of Everest in November 1972, I remember saying to Chris Brasher who had come out to Base Camp to report our story for *The Observer*: 'Climbing is all about gambling. It's not about sure things. It's about challenging the impossible. I think we have found that the South West Face of Everest in the post-monsoon period is impossible!' Rash words for, of course, the story of mountaineering has proven time and again that there is no such thing as impossible – although, I think, we could be allowed this self-indulgence immediately after our beating.

Only two days before, on 14 November, I had been lying in my hoar-frost-encrusted sleeping bag in the battered box tent at Camp 4, at about 24,600 feet on the South West Face. The wind was hammering at the walls, driving small spurts of spindrift through the many rents caused by stones dislodged from the Face above. Outside there was a brilliant blue sky and a sun that blazed without warmth. From out of this void had come the wind, tearing and probing at tent and climber.

Somewhere above, Dougal Haston, Hamish MacInnes, Doug Scott and Mick Burke were pulling across the line of fixed ropes, towards Camp 6. The wind was so strong that it had lifted Doug, a big thirteen-stoner, bodily from his steps and hurled him down; only the fixed rope saved him. I had had some inkling what it was like, for the previous day I had made a solitary carry up to the site of Camp 6 – even then the wind had been buffeting hard and I had wondered just how they were going to be able to erect the box tent in those conditions.

But there had been nothing I could do but wait. Jimmy Roberts, my deputy leader, was far below, camped on Kala Pattar, the rocky hummock of just over 18,000 feet that rises above the Khumbu Glacier forming a perfect dress-circle from which to view climbers on the upper part of the South West Face of Everest. He had a walkie-talkie with him and throughout the day reported on the tiny black dots which were making their slow progress

across the snow slopes below the Rock Band. One had turned back early but then, having reached the site of Camp 6, the remaining three turned back. For some reason Dougal Haston and Hamish MacInnes had decided not to stay at the camp as originally planned and I could only guess that because of the strength of the wind, they had been unable to erect their box tent. There was no way of knowing for certain until they got back to their tents at Camp 5 and made the seven o'clock call that night. Night fell quickly but then the time crept by slowly until, at last, I could switch on the radio.

I got Dougal. They had pressed on to the site of Camp 6, but as I had suspected, they had been unable to get the tent up and even if they had, there is little they could have done. The gully ahead had been swept clear of snow, and the rock could not be climbed in that intense wind and cold. They were coming down the next day. And so I started to arrange our retreat from the mountain; all the Sherpas at Camp 2 to come up to Camp 4 the next day to pick up loads; the Nepali foreign office to be informed.

It was all so terse and matter of fact but after switching off the radio I could not stop myself crying in the solitude of that small dark tent. We had tried so hard but in those last few days I suspect that all of us had realised that there was no chance of success, although none of us was prepared to admit openly to defeat. It was too late in the season; the winds of Everest were reaching over a hundred miles per hour; the temperature was dropping as low as -40 °C. We were all much too tired and our equipment was in tatters.

We returned to Britain with a mixture of emotions. There was sadness at the loss of Tony Tighe, a young Australian who had helped us at Base Camp during the expedition and who had been killed by the collapse of a sérac wall on the last day of the evacuation of the mountain. This was mingled with satisfaction at having taken ourselves beyond limits that we had previously thought possible and feelings of heightened friendship and respect for each other cemented by the experience. There were memories of fearsome nights in Camp 4 with the wind hammering at the box tent, bringing stones from the Rock Band above thundering over the roof as one huddled against the inner side of the tent and wondered when it would be crushed. But there had been moments as well which made all the struggle and suffering worthwhile. I shall never forget my solitary trip to Camp 6 on the penultimate day of the expedition as I plodded laboriously up the line of fixed rope. My oxygen system was only working for part of the time but as I slowly gained height, creeping above the confines of the Western Cwm – higher at that moment than any other person on the surface of the Earth

– the very effort I had made and the loneliness of my position made the everexpanding vista of mountains seem even more beautiful.

Before leaving Kathmandu at the end of November 1972, I had already filed an application for another attempt on the South West Face in the next available spring slot. This was a slightly hopeless gesture since the mountain was now fully booked, autumn and spring, until 1979. The Nepali only allowed one expedition on the mountain at a time, and such is the popularity of Everest that it becomes booked up years in advance. There are two periods in which the mountain is considered climbable: spring and autumn. The former season, undoubtedly, has much to recommend it; there is less wind particularly at altitude but, most important of all, squeezed as it is between the end of winter and the arrival of the monsoon (sometime at the end of May or the beginning of June) an expedition starts at Base Camp at the coldest period of the season and then enjoys relatively warmer weather as it progresses up the mountain, having the warmest possible period just before making a summit bid. On the other hand, in the autumn the climbing period is slotted between the end of the monsoon, around the middle of September, and the arrival of the winter winds and cold which we had found, to our cost, come in mid-October giving an uncomfortably short period of tolerable weather in which to climb the mountain.

It seemed highly probable that the South West Face would be climbed before we could have another chance at it, even though a fair proportion of the expeditions that had booked Everest were not planning to attempt the South West Face. There did seem to be one hope, however, for the Army Mountaineering Association had the booking for the spring 1976 slot; by themselves they were not strong enough to tackle the South West Face and had no plans for doing so. During the previous few years the army had organised a number of successful expeditions to the Himalaya, climbing both Tirich Mir and Annapurna from the north side. I had been a regular soldier and was a founder member of the Army Mountaineering Association; this seemed an excellent opportunity to persuade the army to incorporate three or four strong civilian climbers, such as Haston or Scott, and try the South West Face at what appeared to be the best time of year for such an attempt. I was prepared to take on the role of climbing leader under the overall leadership of an active soldier, feeling that in this way the expedition could have been fully cohesive and that the civilian members could have fitted in.

I went down to Warminster to see Major-General Brockbank, who was chairman of the Army Mountaineering Association, and put my plan across.

He did not like the idea and turned it down. I can sympathise with his thinking for there were obviously several problems. The Army Mountaineering Association naturally wanted to maintain its own identity and, although I was an ex-member, there was the possibility that my own reputation as a mountaineer could have engulfed them. Success could have been portrayed by the press as that of myself and the talented civilian climbers who had been brought in, rather than of the team as a whole. There could also have been personality problems inevitably created by bringing two groups of climbers together for reasons of convenience rather than selecting a team from scratch. I would, nevertheless, have been prepared to take this risk and make it work, since this seemed the only chance we had of reaching Everest.

In the spring of 1973, Guido Monzino – the Italian millionaire who had relinquished the autumn 1972 booking, thus allowing us our chance – organised a massive expedition to repeat the South Col route. This expedition used two helicopters, hoping to ferry gear up the Ice Fall and even into the Western Cwm. This was a controversial step since the Ice Fall and lower part of the mountain are an integral part of the climb and the use of aircraft to solve logistic problems seemed an unpleasant erosion of the climbing ethic. Monzino could have argued that it is preferable to use an aircraft rather than risk the lives of Sherpas who carry the brunt of the risk ferrying loads in the Ice Fall and Western Cwm but, in the event, this argument was proved specious. The helicopters, at altitude, could not manage a sufficiently effective payload to eliminate the use of the Sherpas and were used instead for ferrying members of the climbing team up and down the mountain for their rest periods. In the end, fate took a hand – one of the helicopters crashed, fortunately without any injury to the occupants, and this ended a very expensive experiment. Our objection to the use of helicopters on Everest is on aesthetic grounds, for one of the beauties of the Western Cwm is its majestic silence; both the sound and sight of a helicopter chattering up the cwm would be an unpleasant, if not unbearable, intrusion. In spite of these problems, the Italians were successful, placing eight men on the summit of Everest by the original South East Ridge route.

In the autumn of 1973 came the next serious onslaught on to the South West Face, with the biggest expedition so far: thirty-six Japanese climbers, sixty-two Sherpas and a twelve-man Base Camp group. The expedition was organised by the Japanese Rock Climbers' Club. They started earlier than we had done, with an eight-man advance party going out to Kathmandu in early April, sending part of their gear by light plane to Luglha, the airstrip in

the Dudh Kosi valley just below Namche Bazar. They brought the rest of their gear out with them in mid-July which meant that they had to carry it through the worst of the monsoon rain to Sola Khumbu.

They established their Base Camp on 25 August and at first made excellent progress, following the same route as ourselves in 1972. They were hit by a savage seven-day storm at the beginning of October, just after they had reached the site of Camp 5 at 26,000 feet. Sadly they lost Jangbo, one of their best Sherpas, who had also been with us in 1972, in an avalanche on the lower part of the Face. Influenced by this tragedy and the deterioration of the weather, they resolved to turn their main effort to an attempt on the South Col route. Two of the party, Ishiguro and Kato, reached the summit of Everest in a single push from the South Col on 26 October. They had to bivouac on the way down and suffered from frostbite. This was the first post-monsoon ascent of Everest and a magnificent achievement, but the South West Face remained unclimbed. The Japanese had not abandoned the attempt on the Face when they turned to the South Col, but on 28 October, after two other members of the expedition had reached the site of Camp 6 on the Face, they decided to call off the expedition.

Back in England I followed the Japanese progress as closely as sparse newspaper reports and intermittent letters from friends in Kathmandu would allow. In some ways I should have been quite relieved had the Japanese succeeded, since this would have removed the nagging problem, enabling myself and other British climbers to get on with our more modest but nonetheless satisfying schemes. It did seem fairly unlikely, anyway, that the South West Face would still be unclimbed in 1979 – the next date there was a free booking – and so, that autumn, I was already immersed in other plans. In the spring of 1974, Doug Scott, Dougal Haston, Martin Boysen and I were going to Changabang, a shapely rock peak of 22,700 feet in the Garhwal Himalaya. I had also applied for permission to attempt the Trango Tower, a magnificent rock spire off the Baltoro Glacier in the Karakoram for the summer of 1975.

And then, one morning in early December 1973, a cable arrived from Kathmandu. It was from Mike Cheney, who helps to run a trekking business called Mountain Travel. It was founded by Jimmy Roberts, who had been the leader of the first Himalayan expedition to Annapurna II in 1960, had given me advice and help in the intervening years, and had been deputy leader in our 1972 attempt. Mike had always been the back-room boy, doing all the donkey work of arranging documentation, booking porters, helping our gear through customs, but had never actually been a full member of

an expedition. He had also always kept me very well informed of happenings in Nepal.

The cable read: 'Canadians cancelled for Autumn 1975 stop Do you want to apply Reply urgent Cheney.'

Suddenly all my nicely laid plans were upset; I had another chance of going for the South West Face but at the wrong time of year. We had already found that it was too cold and windy to climb the South West Face in the autumn. The Japanese had also failed but at least that had shown that a man could reach the summit of Everest in late October by the South Col route and that he could even survive a bivouac within a thousand feet of the summit, admittedly at the price of severe frostbite.

It took me several days to decide. If I were to attempt the South West Face again I felt strongly that it should be in the spring rather than in the autumn. The memories of the bitter wind and cold of the autumn, the problems of leadership and organisation, the worries of finding the money to pay for it were all too fresh. Could I go through all this again for what might be little more than forlorn hope of success? Every consideration of reason and common sense said 'Don't go!'

But the fact that Everest is the highest mountain the world, the variety of mountaineering challenges it presents, the richness of its history, combine to make it difficult for any mountaineer to resist. And for me it had a special magnetism. I had been there before and failed, and in the end I knew that I could not let pass the opportunity to go to Everest again, even if an attempt on the South West Face seemed impractical.

One challenge that intrigued me was the possibility of organising a lightweight expedition to climb Everest by the original South Col route, employing no Sherpas and moving up the mountain as a self-contained unit of twelve climbers. I had pursued the same line of thought before committing myself to the South West Face in 1972, from similar motives of worry about the practical feasibility of a full-scale attempt on the South West Face. I talked to Doug Scott, Dougal Haston and Graham Tiso about my plans. All three had been with me in 1972. Doug and Dougal were non-committal but Graham, who had organised all the equipment for my first Everest expedition, was positively enthusiastic about the scheme. All too well he knew the problems of assembling the equipment necessary for a major expedition. He had put in a brilliant performance as a support climber on our 1972 trip, reaching 26,000 feet without using oxygen and staying at altitude as long as anyone on the expedition; the thought of taking part in a small, compact expedition, where he could even have the opportunity of

reaching the summit of Everest, obviously appealed to him.

Through the winter of 1973–74, Mike Cheney pushed our cause in Kathmandu and I did what I could from this country, enlisting the help of the Foreign Office and any other contacts I could think of. But Everest filled only a small part of my mind for I was busy planning our expedition to Changabang which we hoped to climb with a group of Indian mountaineers. Even more important, we were in the throes of moving from suburban Manchester to a small cottage on the northern side of the Lake District.

I had lived in the Lake District from 1962–68 but then found myself getting more involved in photojournalism than in climbing, with all my work coming from London. The move to Manchester was rather an unsatisfactory compromise between staying in the Lakes and moving all the way down to London. I very much doubt, however, if I could have organised my first two expeditions – to the South Face of Annapurna in 1970 and Everest in 1972 – from the Lake District. At that stage I needed the amenities provided by a large city, near the centre of the country. We bought a small cottage in the Lake District for weekends and holidays and, in the spring of 1973, whilst lying in the garden one day, relaxing from the stress of closing down the 1972 expedition and writing its book, I suddenly realised how important was this quiet peace and beauty. My life was now much more closely involved with climbing and expeditions, and it seemed ridiculous to live in a place whose sole advantage was that it was easy to get away from and fairly accessible to London. And so we started the long, laborious task of making our cottage large enough not only to take a family, but also act as a place of work where I could organise my expeditions and write. Thus, that spring of 1974, Everest only occupied part of my mind.

When I set out for Changabang at the end of April the cottage still wasn't finished, and I left Wendy and the children ensconced in a small caravan at the bottom of our field. We had reached Delhi and Doug Scott, Dougal Haston and I were staying at the Indian Officers' Club before setting out on the final stage of our journey to the Garhwal Himalaya when the telegram arrived. We had permission for Everest in the autumn of 1975.