



Some Thoughts on the Death of a New Zealand Icon

By Bert McConnell

Ed is gone though his youthful image lives on in our wallets.

Much has been written and spoken about his life and achievements by family and friends and people who knew him well. I have nothing new to add to that incredible story. I only met him once and then very briefly. However I've thought a lot about his influence on young people- obvious enough at the time of his funeral- but what are the lasting qualities we want to remind ourselves of as our memory of him fades? From the moment he stood on the summit of Everest he became the best known New Zealander in the world and remained so till his death. Yet the man who achieved this was not the quintessential hero.

Tall and gangly, not good looking or popular he seemed destined, like most of us, for a life of mediocrity. He wasn't academic, didn't excel in sports and had few close friends. He wasn't 'one of the boys' nor would he have been a likely pick for anyone's team or gang. That he started climbing with a guide and not a bunch of his mates tells us a lot about his lack of companionship in his early years.

It is not an exaggeration to say that those early visits to Mt Cook and his meeting with Harry Ayres changed his life. He found strength and courage and learned new skills among those high peaks that challenged and inspired him and the rest as they say, is history.

How many Ed's are there among the kids we take into the outdoors- kids who aren't popular or clever

or good at sport but who may be turned on by that O.E. trip that you lay on for them? Perhaps not a lot, if we measure by the ability to stand on the summit of Everest, but was that the measure of Ed Hillary? I think not.

Ed's life and achievements are a message of hope for young people- the triumph of the apparently ordinary and unremarkable- as he often described himself. In my view this wasn't false modesty- Ed genuinely believed this and in many ways he was right. What made him extraordinary were the qualities that are often derided by this 'me me me' generation- courage, selflessness, collegiality, kindness and consideration for others and a love and concern for our fellow human beings. Ed's work with and for the Sherpa people over 60 yrs. is living proof and witness to these. As outdoor educators and leaders these are the qualities we need to keep in front of the young people we take into the outdoors for these are the things that make us human and that can make any of us great.

To his dying day Ed was somewhat puzzled and embarrassed by the fame that his Everest climb brought to him. Yet it wasn't the climb itself that ensured him the lasting regard and affection that the world bestowed on him. It was the recognition of his determination to help others less fortunate in the years that followed that turned a celebrated climber into a much loved humanitarian.