

MOUNTAINEERING

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Everest 1953, 2003: The Empire's New Clothes

Edmund Hillary and Tenzing Norgay reached the summit of Mt. Everest on May 29, 1953, but the news was not announced to the world until June 2, Queen Elizabeth II's Coronation Day. The news was withheld deliberately in order that it be presented to the young queen as "a coronation present." The fusing of these two events in British consciousness provides evidence of the cultural use of Everest as a site for the celebration of nation and commonwealth. Fifty years later, as England celebrates the Queen's golden jubilee, one can argue that Everest has fared far better than the monarchy as an enduring cultural symbol. This paper uses the twinning of these two British moments as a point of departure, a way to explore the shifting meanings, the historical fortunes, of important cultural events over time.

This paper is part of a larger project that explores the cultural meanings bestowed on Mt. Everest, from the early British climbs of the 1920's to today. My primary argument posits Everest as a floating signifier and explores how the meanings that circulate around Everest change significantly over time and represent particular, historically situated cultural needs. The three main stories I explore – Mallory and Irvine in 1924, Hillary and Tenzing in 1953, and Fischer and Hall in 1996 – are joined in intertextual relationships in which meanings of one event bleed into the others, so that one celebrates another, is undone by another, recuperates another. In earlier papers I have argued that the accounts that circulated after the discovery of Mallory's body in 1999 were at least partially aimed at resurrecting the damaged image of Everest as a legitimate challenge for climbers after the disaster of 1996. In this paper I argue that the 1953 climb and its famous characters, Tenzing and Hillary, remain the most salient and useful invocations of meanings of Everest, the most resistant to challenge and change. Elevated as heroes of the Commonwealth in a moment of intense British pride, Tenzing and Hillary appear to have remained heroes for over fifty years, unsullied by scandal or

missteps. Nevertheless, their meanings have shifted over time in revealing ways.
