Pioneer of the High Realm: Michael Ward

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Life of Medicine, Mountaineering, and Exploration

Michael Phelps Ward (1925-2005), is perhaps best known to the public for his role as a team member of the 1951 Mount Everest Reconnaissance and participation in the successful 1953 first ascent of Everest. However, he was the holder of an enviable record of wider climbing and mountain exploration, and an important pioneer in high altitude/wilderness medicine, as well. His busy professional life as a surgeon lasted until retirement from the UK’s National Health Service (NHS) in 1993, after which he continued to work on high altitude medical problems and, additionally, devote a great deal of time to researching the history of Central Asian exploration. Of the numerous articles and books Ward wrote, his 2003 book, Everest: A Thousand Years of Exploration is perhaps his most distinctive work. This, his last book, stands as testimony to one man’s exceptional, multifaceted talents. This most unique work brings together the historical chronicle of Everest’s mountaineering, geographical, and medical aspects into a definitive, coherent story.

Ward was the son of an expatriate family; his father being in the Malay Civil Service. Educated in England, Ward spent long periods separated from his parents as these were the days before relatively inexpensive trans-oceanic flights. In fact, his parents were in Singapore when the Japanese Imperial Army swept through this region in the early days of the World War II. His mother just managed to get a place in one of the last boats leaving Singapore for Ceylon and eventually Great Britain, but his father was captured and interned by the Japanese for the duration of the war.

His love affair with the mountains can be traced to a guided ascent of the Wetterhorn, in Switzerland, when he was fourteen. From prep school Ward went to Marlborough, where he spent the war years. There he was introduced to rock climbing in Great Britain by a housemaster, Edwin Kempson. Kempson had been on Everest in 1935 and 1936, and had formed a small mountaineering club at the school before the war. With Kempson’s help, Ward felt that the ‘The seed planted by the Wetterhorn climb... was beginning to germinate’.

Initiating his university medical studies at Cambridge in 1943, climbing was never far from his mind, and it did not take him long to become involved with the Cambridge Mountaineering Club. He began to realise that ‘although rock climbing alone provided...physical delights, emotionally it was mountain country that exercised the stronger hold over me.’ After two years at Cambridge and upon taking a Natural Science Trips (shortened during the WWII years), Ward started clinical medical training at the London Hospital. His first real alpine season was in 1946, and in the summer of 1947 he was again in the Alps, this time with top British climbers Bill Murray and John Barford. While descending the Col du Coste Rouge on the way to a peak named Les Ecrins in the Dauphine group near Grenoble, France, Barford was hit by stone fall. Barford fell onto Ward, who was immediately swept off the slope as well. No one seems to recall whether falling stones or the weight of Barford and Ward tore Murray off the slope, but regardless all three fell in a tangled mass for almost 200 m. Barford and Murray shot straight across a large crevasse at high speed, but Ward fell in, stopping the trio. Barford was dead and Murray only partially conscious. It was learned later that Ward had suffered a fractured skull, but luckily neither Ward nor Murray had any broken limbs. Murray was able to help Ward out of the crevasse, and the battered pair staggered unaided down the valley and were subsequently hospitalised. Not surprisingly, when he woke in a hospital bed the next day, the concussed Ward was not able to recall the accident or the 24 hours preceding it.

After the accident, Ward concentrated on obtaining his medical qualification, but still managed to climb with enthusiasm in Britain and on the Continent during short holidays. In his words, ‘I was considerably more cautious. But the desire to do long...was beginning to germinate’.

Qualifying in 1949, he started work as a House Surgeon at the London Hospital and then Illford. During National Service in the Royal Army Medical Corps in 1950/51, Ward had the time to pursue extracurricular activities. His growing interest in remote mountain country and Everest climbing history led him to pay particular attention to the recently ‘opened’ (to Westerners) country of Nepal. The 1950 probe of the southern approaches to Everest by the distinguished mountaineers Bill Tilman and Charles Houston was of particular interest - as were their reports, which were sceptical about the practicality of a south side route. However, Tilman and Houston had not come to grips with the Khumbu Icefall, nor did they go far enough up the Khumbu glacier to look into the Western Cwm. In addition, they failed to actually visualize the slopes leading from the Cwm to the South Col. Ward spent untold hours at the Royal Geographical Society (RGS) where he ‘discovered’ uncatalogued photos and an unpublished map (ca. 1937), which in turn encouraged enough optimism to lead him to initiate a full-on reconnaissance of the southern ‘route’ in 1951.

With Bill Murray, Tom Bourdillon, and a Canadian, Campbell Secord, Ward organised the reconnaissance of a southern route and obtained sponsorship from the RGS and Alpine Club. With the help of Secord, Ward persuaded Himalayan veteran Eric Shipton to lead the undertaking. Shipton had spent the years of WWII working for the British Foreign Office, and continued to serve until 1951 when the Communist Red Army forced a retreat to England from his last posting in Kunming, China. This important enterprise was carried out along classic Shipton lines; that is, small, modestly funded, and living primarily off the local food. Although Secord did not accompany the 1951 reconnaissance into the field, Shipton invited two other ‘colonials’ (from New Zealand) to join in Nepal. One of these New Zealanders happened to be none other than Ed Hillary, the beekeeper who was vaulted to world stardom less than two years later after he and Sherpa Tensing Norgay became the first to climb to the summit of Everest.

Approaching the mountain during the monsoon, they arrived at the base of Everest by the end of September. The...
commendable exploratory efforts ended at an enormous, insurmountable crevasse at the top of the Khumbu Icefall, barring the way into the Western Cwm. Nonetheless, the team managed a good look at the Lhotse face, and were afforded a tantalising view of the upper reaches of the peak that suggested a probable route. Just as importantly for Ward, he had the opportunity on this expedition to explore the unknown area west of Everest with Shipton, not to mention finding the much publicised 'Yeti footprints' in the process. Ward later remarked 'This was my first taste of mountain exploration and I was fascinated by the mystery of penetration into unknown country.' Before the expedition had left Britain, Murray paid Ward a tribute that placed his organisational efforts and vision into perspective:

"It has suddenly sprung up out of nothing through what Plato would have called a divine madness coming over you. These are the sort of expeditions that are worth going on." Ward's interest in mountain medicine can be traced to this experience in 1951 - it was brought home to him on this trip just how dependent the modern doctor is on laboratory and other diagnostic aids.

Once back in England, the plans to put a full-on British expedition on Everest in 1952 came to naught when it was discovered that the Swiss had already obtained permission from Nepal for that year. The Swiss had actually applied for permission months before the 1951 reconnaissance had even gotten under way. The first reaction was one of great disappointment for Ward and his companions, but in the end the year was not wasted. The Swiss failed to summit in 1952, making attempts both in the spring and fall that year. They were frustrated primarily by significant difficulties with the weather and by the supplementary oxygen apparatus they were using. The British at the behest of the Himalayan Committee, sent a team to another unclimbed mountain not far from Everest, Cho Oyu (8201 m). Ward elected not to go out with the Cho Oyu expedition, jeopardising his chances of participating in any future Everest attempt. He instead spent the year working on the Primary examination of the Royal College of Surgeons.

Anticipating an attempt at Everest in 1953 should the Swiss fail, the Himalayan Committee sent the Cho Oyu expedition into the field with Eric Shipton once again at the helm. The Committee outlined four primary aims for Cho Oyu: 1) To choose a group of climbers who were able to perform effectively at great heights; 2) To carry out a physiological research program; 3) Test oxygen equipment; and 4) Test clothing and other equipment intended for use in the intense cold and wind found at extreme altitude. The climb of Cho Oyu itself was not successful, but Ward felt that the results of three weeks of physiological work that Pugh did on some of the climbers on the nearby Menlung la 5486 m was of unprecedented value, for the first time the problems posed by high altitude were defined in the field. This was the decisive advantage that we in 1953 were to have over all who had gone before us.
On the other hand, Ward admitted that, by 1953, mountaineers in general had still not acknowledged that Everest was as much a problem in applied physiology as in mountaineering. After the return from Cho Oyu during the run-up to the 1953 Everest expedition, Eric Shipton was replaced as leader in favour of John Hunt in a somewhat sordid fashion by the Himalayan Committee. This change in leadership occurred ostensibly because it was thought that Shipton did not possess the interest or ability to lead a large expedition laid out as a military campaign. This was likely the last chance the British would have to make the first ascent of Everest, and the Himalayan Committee reckoned a military officer like Hunt was their best leadership candidate.

Regardless of his non-participation with the 1952 Cho Oyu expedition, Mike Ward was an obvious choice for the 1953 Everest team. On top of being included as a climber, he was also appointed medical officer. As far as Ward was concerned, the main medical problem of a large Himalayan field party such as the 1953 Everest team was preventing sickness. This focus is nicely illustrated in a humorous story related in an obituary of Ward that appeared in the Alpine Journal. He was giving a health talk to the team before setting out for Nepal. He impressed upon them the importance of visiting their dentist well in advance of the expedition and getting any required dental work done. "Because," he said, "I can pull teeth - but I'm not very good at it!"

His primary contribution to the mountaineering endeavour itself in 1953 was the work he did on the Lhotse Face with George Lowe. John Hunt denied Ward the opportunity to climb to the South Col, as it was felt his medical expertise may have been needed in an emergency. The 1953 climb was a watershed event in Ward's life; it consolidated his interest in man's relationship with the mountain environment and set the stage for continued endeavours (of both a mountaineering and scientific nature) in the Himalaya.

Even though a number of years of intense surgical training followed Everest, Ward kept in touch with Griff Pugh. Ward and Pugh helped to formulate plans that came to fruition in the form of the World Book Encyclopaedia-funded Himalayan Scientific and Mountaineering ('Silver Hut') Expedition of 1960-61, which was led by Sir Edmund Hillary, with Pugh serving as the scientific leader. The aim of the program of medical science was to study the physiological effects that extended high altitude (5800 m) living had on individuals who were native to low altitudes. Mountaineers had obviously visited higher altitudes for many decades, and permanent high altitude residents at elevations greater than 4500 m had been studied. However, it was of considerable scientific interest to study native lowlanders residing for many months at the aforementioned altitude in order to better understand not only the acclimatization process, but also high altitude deterioration.

This was coupled with a sister program of Yetihunting, building a school for the Sherpas, and an attempt to climb Makalu (8462 m) without supplementary oxygen. The attempt on Makalu, which took place in the spring of 1961 (following a winter's stay at 5800 m for the Silver Hut residents), did in fact provide an object lesson in altitude-induced physical deterioration - the sort of lesson that didn't require interpretation of analysed data to fully appreciate! During the winter at the Silver Hut, it had been hoped that the residents would become so fit and acclimatized that when spring came, they could reasonably climb Makalu without supplementary oxygen. This was a very sensible hypothesis given the state of knowledge at the time, but in the event, the expedition members were disappointed on this score. While the scientific program at the Silver Hut, which was erected on the Mingbo glacier in the Khumbu region close to Everest, proved a tremendous success and a "wonderful, unique experience" in the words of one of the participants, the attempt on Makalu was unsuccessful.

The mountaineering got off to an inauspicious start when expedition leader Ed Hillary suffered a stroke at a camp near 5800 m. Hillary recovered enough within a day's time to be walked, with the assistance of Dr Jim Milledge, to lower altitudes in Solu Khumbu. He recovered quickly and then supervised the building of the school at Kumjung. This was, incidentally, the first of Hillary's schools that was constructed in the area.

Although the climb on Makalu continued, within 10 days another serious medical event occurred, this time high on the mountain at 8300 m. The victim was Peter Mulgrew, a Kiwi who had been with the expedition in the autumn, and then rejoined the team just prior to the Makalu attempt. He had developed a blood clot in his lungs and was incapable of descending on his own. Mulgrew spent four days above 8000 m, suffering severe frostbite. He was successfully evacuated, but later required bilateral amputations below the knee.

Although Makalu proved to be a very difficult experience, a very significant first ascent of Ama Dablam (6812 m) had been brilliantly accomplished by Barry Bishop, Mike Gill, Wally Romanes, and Mike Ward in February/March of 1961. This bold, technical climb was carried out in an era before the emergence of modern ice climbing equipment, and as such, was years ahead of its time and very likely the highlight of Ward's climbing career. Of course, the phrase 'years ahead of its time' is often quite overused, but in this case does seem accurate - Ama Dablam did not see another successful ascent for nearly 20 years.

In 1963, the Mount Everest Foundation planned to put an expedition in the field to scale the last unclimbed 8000 m peak, Shisha Pangma. Ward was given the opportunity to lead the undertaking. Unfortunately, bureaucratic difficulties made obtaining official permission from the Chinese a drawn-out process. It is not known whether this delay was intentional, but while Ward and his colleagues waited for word on the permit, they learned that the Chinese themselves had made the first ascent. This news scuttled the plans for Shisha Pangma, but a new opportunity quickly presented itself. In 1964, Fred Jackson, a UK-based cardiologist, invited Ward along on a journey to little-known Bhutan - ostensibly to provide medical advice to that country's King. The 1964 venture was a success and the pair returned the following year to study medical aspects of isolated Bhutanese natives with the support of the International Biological Programme. During this time they also managed to ascend several small, yet highly rewarding peaks. This was but one element of the general exploration Jackson and Ward accomplished in a region rarely visited by westerners.

After nearly fifteen years away from Himalayan climbing and exploration, Ward organised a reconnaissance expedition to Kongur, in China's west Kun-Lun region, in 1980. He had started his search for a 'passport' into the uplands of Central Asia in 1972, when China was essentially still a closed book to westerners. In 1978-80 Ward was chairman of the Mount Everest Foundation, and bringing the Kongur venture to fruition was one of the main tasks of the Foundation during this period of his leadership. Ward and Chris Bonington travelled to Peking in February 1980 to conduct the necessary negotiations with the Chinese authorities for what resulted in a successful exploration/ reconnaissance that year. This paved the way for a triumphant summit attempt of Kongur in 1981. The 1981 expedition combined mountaineering and a productive program of high
altitude scientific research, with Ward once again the overall expedition leader.

A further opportunity for Central Asian exploration presented itself to Ward in 1985, when he joined the Royal Society/Academia Sinica Tibet Geo- Traverse and served in the capacity of official expedition medical officer. China had recently established the High Altitude Medical Research Institute in Xining, and aside from being invited to lecture at this institution, Ward was able to come up to speed on the work of Chinese scientists pursuing investigations in this discipline.

Aside from his ongoing involvement in the Mount Everest Foundation, Ward was appointed Commander of the British Empire (CBE) for services to mountaineering and medical research, and awarded the Founder's Medal of the Royal Geographical Society, in 1983. Toward the end of his surgical career, he became very active in London's Worshipful Society of Apothecaries, and upon retirement from the UK National Health Service in 1993, became Master of the Society. This ancient organisation touched upon many aspects of medicine, including facets of particular interest to Ward such as management of disasters - an area of concentration where he helped to develop courses and examinations for medical practitioners. His 'retirement', as such, was really just a shifting of focus, and he remained busy with continued research into high altitude problems and the history of Central Asian exploration.

A dreadful automobile accident a few years before his death had necessitated a series of major operations and a long convalescence at home in the capable hands of his wife, Jane. Unfortunately, before this recovery was complete, Ward died suddenly in October of 2005. Long time friend Jim Milledge captured the spirit of the everlasting hills so important to Ward when he evoked the memory and writings of famous British mountaineer-poet Geoffrey Winthrop Young in an obituary that appeared in the 2006 UK Alpine Journal. Although Ward had actually included several of Winthrop Young's poems in his first book, an anthology titled The Mountaineer's Companion, Milledge felt that one verse in particular served as a rather fitting epitaph for Ward:

I have not lost the magic of long days;
I live them, dream them still.
Still I am master of the starry ways,
And freeman of the hill.
Shattered my glass, ere half the sands had run -
I hold the heights, I hold the heights I won

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REFERENCES


Summary:

Life of Michael Ward. The British doctor who participated in several expeditions and explorations.

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2. Figure 1: M. P. Ward in the Khumbu region of Nepal during the 1951 Everest Reconnaissance. Photograph courtesy of James Milledge. Wilderness & Environmental Medicine , 52-58DOI: ( /07-WEME-WE-105.1) Copyright © 2008 Wilderness Medical Society Terms and Conditions.

3. Figure: Pioneer of Progress: We sat down with senior research engineer Michael Vogt, who is leading a team focused on providing cutting-edge autonomy and artificial intelligence capabilities. Encouraging and challenging our engineers to explore the edge of the possible helps make General Dynamics Mission Systems an industry leader in innovative, smart solutions for our Nation and our allies. Pioneers of Progress highlights the many different ways to be a trailblazer, and how our engineers are exploring new avenues of thought through innovative approaches to the work they do each day. Michael ward's. 4. high realm. 4. pioneer high. 4. mountaineering. 1. exploration. Follow us on Twitter to stay on top of the latest in scientific research. Press proceed to send the authors a message. Follow PubFacts. Proceed. Load Form. Thank You. We have submitted your request - we will update you on status within the next 48 hours. Sign up for further access to Scientific Publications and Authors!