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Unlikely mountaineers

It was mid-September 1984 and high winds scouring the North Face of Mt Everest had pinned the American climbers in a camp high on a ridge bordering the massive wall. The American expedition had been continually plagued by the gales—winds so strong that they had blown away 20-kilogram bags of food and torn a side shield off one climber’s goggles, freezing the exposed tissue in his eye and leaving him temporarily blind. The Americans, however, methodically pushed on, establishing a string of camps up the mountain, fixing permanent ropes between the camps to act as a safety line and stocking the camps with food and fuel.

The team consisted of the elite of America’s alpine climbers and they were slowly putting themselves into position to snatch one of the last great unclimbed routes left on Everest. The mountain was first climbed in 1953 and since then climbers from around the world have continued to find challenges on Everest by climbing ever steeper and more difficult routes and by tackling the peak without the aid of supplementary oxygen—a feat not accomplished until 1978. One of the greatest challenges—the one driving the Americans on through the vicious winds and frequent snowstorms—lay on Everest’s northern side.

The target of the first serious attempts on Mt Everest in the 1920s, the North Face is a great pyramid rising more than 3500 metres above the Tibetan Plateau. British climbers attempted the mountain by the most obvious line of weakness on the northern side: a series of ridges and shoulders that bordered the wall on the east. They and subsequent mountaineers, however, could not help but notice a striking feature: a long couloir or ice gully that split the face vertically from about mid-height to just below the summit. It is what mountaineers call a ‘classic line’: a route that is aesthetically pleasing in its directness and simplicity, albeit one that is also steep, physically demanding and fraught with considerable danger.

There was no incentive for climbers to attempt the Great Couloir, as it was known, in the 1920s and 1930s, since, as long as Everest had not been climbed, mountaineers would naturally concentrate on the least difficult route to the top. With the closing of Tibet to foreigners in 1950, there was no possibility of access to the northern side of Everest, so the Great Couloir was, as far as mountaineers were concerned, gone, although it certainly was not forgotten.

In 1979, the northern side of Everest was opened again to foreign mountaineers. Three years later, a large, experienced and talented American team took on the Great Couloir—and just missed making the first ascent of Everest's imposing North Face. They quickly regrouped and organised another expedition to Everest's north side in 1984. Their objective again was the Great Couloir but this time there was a bureaucratic obstacle as well. Chinese authorities controlled climbing on their side of Everest by issuing permits; only one group was allowed to attempt a particular route at a time. In 1984, the Americans had been beaten to the punch for the Great Couloir route by an Australian team.

This was not much of a problem in the Americans' view. Who ever heard of Australian mountaineers competent to climb Mt Everest? Australia was the world's flattest and hottest continent, it had no tradition of alpine climbing and its handful of mountaineers, with only a few expeditions to the Himalaya under their belts, had managed to climb only four 7000 m peaks and none of the world's 14 peaks of more than 8000 m. To top it off, the Australian team of five climbers—tiny by Everest standards—would attempt the unclimbed Great Couloir route without the help of supplementary oxygen. No route on Mt Everest had ever been climbed—not even by the world's best mountaineers—for the first time without oxygen. The Americans, then, were still in a commanding position to make the first ascent of the North Face. They would set up camps part-way up the early British route, wait patiently for the Australians to throw in the towel and go home, then traverse into the Great Couloir and snatch the prize.¹

Throughout September, the American plan seemed to be working to perfection. Undaunted by the frequent spells of bad weather, they had set up several camps on the North Ridge and were poised to move into the Great Couloir. The Australians, meanwhile, were having their problems. They had made very little progress at all on the vast face and, with a high point of only 7300 m, were a long way from making a summit attempt. Furthermore, they seemed to retreat at the first sign of bad weather and spend their time skiing on the upper Rongbuk Glacier rather than forcing the climb up the couloir.

1 Krakauer, J. 1985, 'Return to the North Face', *Outside*, February, pp. 29–32, 68.

Confirmation of the Americans' view came from the local staff attached to the Australian base camp. They visited their colleagues with the American expedition and reported that the Australians were a group of no-hopers—very nice young lads but lacking the drive and determination needed to force a route up a mountain as formidable as Everest. They would probably ski around for another week or two and then return to the golden sand, warm waters and sunny skies of Australia, content to have banged their crampons and ice axes into the lower slopes of Everest's north wall.

It was not surprising that the crack team of American climbers had trouble taking the virtually unknown Australians seriously. Even Australian mountaineers' own countrymen know little of their exploits and often question the sanity of their desire to climb in the Himalaya. Well-known writer Thomas Keneally expressed that typical attitude succinctly:

I remember a day when Lincoln Hall was sitting at his ease on the sundeck of my house in Sydney and chatting about his experiences as a member of the first Australian party ever to climb Everest. All of us there on the sundeck were dressed for a summer's day. I noticed the damage which several seasons of Himalayan frost-bite had done to Lincoln's feet and hands. As non-climbers always do, I wondered about the compulsion which makes an Australian, born in the sun in a country of ancient, worn-down mountains, seek the transcendent cold and height of the highest mountains of all.²

Keneally's comment points out the two commonly mentioned factors that work strongly against would-be Australian Himalayan mountaineers: Australia's climate and culture of sun, surf and sand and its total lack of any substantial mountain range on which to train.

Mention Australia to a North American or European and they will almost surely conjure up images of a vast desert of red sand and bouncing kangaroos rimmed by a coastline of pristine beaches, coral reefs and tropical fish. Many of Australia's sportspeople most well-known overseas come from activities associated with sun and sea: golf, tennis, swimming, surfing and sailing. Australia was the first country to take sailing's most coveted prize—the America's Cup—from the United States. Its Ironman competition—a spectacular display of strength and endurance in a setting of crashing surf and broad beaches—could become Australia's biggest sporting export.

From an early age, Australian boys and girls are introduced to the leisure culture of sun and sea. The standard Australian family holiday is a trip to their favourite coastal park: set up the tent, stoke up the barbecue and head for the water. Advertising reinforces this mind-set. We are constantly shown images of healthy, attractive

2 Keneally, T. 1989, 'Foreword', *The Loneliest Mountain*, Simon & Schuster, Sydney, p. v.

young adults cavorting on a golden beach at sunset and older couples enjoying a quiet drink at a posh seaside resort. The sound of waves rhythmically crashing on a rocky headland, the smell of the salty seaside air and visions of bright sunshine glinting off golden sand are indelibly etched onto the Australian psyche.

And what of mountains? Behind the coast are rocky escarpments and rolling, wooded hills; there is no range of jagged, snow-clad mountains to challenge adventurous young Australians or fire the imagination of armchair climbers. When it comes to the continental mountain sweepstakes, Australia is dead last.

A quick examination of the international literature of mountains and mountaineering leaves one in no doubt as to just where Australia stands. The forward to National Geographic's book *Mountain Worlds*, which profiles 18 of the world's mountainous regions, clearly sets out the situation—naturally from an American point of view:

Mountains. They span the globe, swell the oceans and rise on all continents and major islands. They are the Sierra Nevada, Cascades, Coast Ranges, Alaska and Brooks Ranges, the Appalachians—and the Rockies, with more than a hundred different ranges large enough to have their own names. They are the peaks of the Antarctic, and the Andes and the Sierra Madres. They are island mountains like Tahiti, Hawaii, and the Azores, and mountainous islands like New Zealand and Greenland. They are the Himalayas, buttressing the thousand-mile-wide Tibetan Plateau that averages 15,000 feet—higher than anything in the contiguous United States. They are the Atlas and Kilimanjaro and Kenya. They are the Pyrenees, Caucasus, the Alps that dominate western Europe, and the Urals, the traditional boundary between Europe and Asia.

Their names sing of wild places and unfenced spaces—Ruwenzori, Tetons, Hindu Kush, Dolomites, Uinta, Sangre de Cristo, Bitterroot, Allegheny, Gallatin, Karakoram. Mountains command the eye and enlarge the being. They dominate the globe like no other natural thing except the oceans.³

Australia does not receive a mention—nor do any of its diminutive mountain ranges. Obviously, no Australian range is featured in the body of the book.

In the mountaineering literature, Australia is even more conspicuously absent. In Francis Keenlyside's *Peaks and Pioneers. The story of mountaineering*, he quite properly focuses on the Alps and then the Himalaya. In a chapter entitled 'Further afield', he looks at developments in North and South America, New Zealand and European ranges other than the Alps. He introduces his short section on the history of African mountaineering with 'Mountainwise Africa is a disappointing continent'.⁴ He could well have added that mountainwise, Australia is a nonexistent continent.

3 Sedeen, M. (ed.) 1988, *Mountain Worlds*, National Geographic Society, Washington, DC.

4 Keenlyside, F. 1975, *Peaks and Pioneers*, Paul Elke, London.

At least middle-aged American adventurers Dick Bass and Frank Wells had to pay lip-service to Australian mountains. Disgruntled executives, they decided to solve their midlife crises by climbing the highest mountains on each of Earth's seven continents. That required them to scale Mt Kosciuszko—a feat that received a scant nine pages in the book on their adventure, *Seven Summits*. And much of that brief chapter, entitled 'Kosciuszko: a walk in the park', is devoted to planning their attempt on remote Mt Vinson, the largest peak in Antarctica. After coping with storms, extreme altitude, dangerous snow conditions and remote access on the highest summits of the other continents, their main problems on Kosciuszko were organising the champagne for the top and fighting off the hordes of tourists out for a weekend walk.⁵

The last word comes from John Cleare, a professional mountaineer/photographer who has travelled the world filming and participating in adventurous activities. He has jumped out of hot-air balloons over Texas, hung off the north wall of the Eiger filming Clint Eastwood in precarious positions and climbed and photographed wild sea-stacks along the British coast. His survey of the world's ranges and peaks, simply called *Mountains*, is a highly respected guide to mountaineering around the world. He does devote a section to Australia, with a most appropriate introduction on the Australian climbing scene:

Seen from space, Australia must appear as a vast, dull grey and red expanse, with only a green fringe on the east coast to break the monotony. A closer examination of this belt would reveal an almost continuous chain of mini-mountains. Mt Kosciuszko, the continent's highest point, barely tops 7,000 feet. Mostly wooded (the timber line extends to 4,000 feet), the Great Dividing Range is the preserve of the 'bushwalker' rather than the mountaineer. Its mountains have been well described as being '... so old that time has rounded them to resemble sleeping dinosaurs, with here and there a skeleton showing ribs and vertebrae...' Australia has no permanent snowfields and few mountains you can't walk up, or drive up.

Australian mountaineering is confined to a small but growing band of rock-climbing devotees who live in the cities of the south-east. It is a lucky coincidence that the 'mountainous' south-east is also the centre of gravity of this flat continent's sparse population. Elsewhere vast distances, searing heat and inferior potential have combined against any significant mountaineering activity.⁶

Interestingly, Cleare's perceptive comments on Australian climbing were published in 1975, the year the first Australian expedition went to the Himalaya and the year in which many strands of Australian mountaineering began—strands that would eventually twine together to produce some astonishing results. It was undoubtedly the most significant year in the history of Australian mountaineering.

⁵ Bass, R. and Wells, F., with Ridgeway, R. 1986, *Seven Summits*, Pan Books, London, pp. 269–77.

⁶ Cleare, J. 1975, *Mountains*, Macmillan, London, pp. 235–9.

That realisation was to come much later. For the Americans dug in on Everest's North Ridge in 1984, Australian mountaineers were still very much unknown—indeed, a novelty. The Americans could be forgiven for thinking that the Australians should be at Bondi instead of base camp. Just a week or so after the weather finally settled, however, the American mountaineers—poised to capture one of the great remaining prizes on Everest—were suddenly reduced to spectators witnessing one of the most remarkable climbs Everest had ever seen. The climb intensified the Americans' curiosity and raised questions that were increasingly asked by experienced mountaineers as more and more Australians ventured into the Himalaya and came away with more than their share of successes: just who were these most unlikely of mountaineers, coming from the world's flattest, hottest continent? With no tradition of mountaineering and no significant mountains in their homeland, how did they get the skills to tackle Everest and other Himalayan giants? And, as Thomas Keneally so lucidly queried, what would make Australians—from the most equable of climates and the most comfortable of lifestyles—risk their lives in the extreme dangers and discomforts of Himalayan climbing?

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