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## Upwardly mobile young men

It is hard to imagine a lifestyle further removed from the rigours, dangers and deprivations of high Himalayan climbing than the genteel academic existence of Canberra's Australian National University. Bordered by the native bush of Black Mountain and by Lake Burley Griffin's picturesque West Basin, The Australian National University is a haven of tranquillity near the centre of the nation's capital. Erudite professors discuss the nuances of John Locke's political philosophy over a cup of coffee in the leafy Fellows Garden; chemists huddle over their lab benches for long hours in the search for newer, more useful compounds; and students earnestly struggle with the latest in macroeconomic theory to prepare themselves for the heady life of high finance. Even sport takes on a rather elegant feeling. One of the major sporting events, the annual 'Town versus Gown' contest, is based on a cricket match, that most civilised of sports in which the players interrupt the battle for orderly tea breaks and favoured spectators spend a day being wined and dined under comfortable pavilions.

Yet it was within the academic atmosphere of The Australian National University that an unlikely group of Australians coalesced to conceive of, organise and mount the most significant of the early Australian expeditions to the Himalaya, a trip that produced a remarkable success on a difficult mountain and that led eventually to the first Australian ascent of Mt Everest. It was a happy mixture of students and non-students, of novice and experienced climbers and of people with energy, imagination and organisational skills—the sort of mixture that produced a whole that was much greater than the sum of its parts. The pot in which this curious mix of people was brought together and stirred was the ANU Mountaineering Club (ANUMC).

Again, it was during that most eventful year of 1975, the year in which Warwick Deacock led the first Australian expedition to the Himalaya, that the ANUMC began to lay plans for its milestone trip to the Himalaya. The club was the ideal vehicle for launching such an ambitious project as it represented not only ANU students and staff but the Canberra area climbing community in general.

In the early 1970s, it was the university community that was poorly represented in the ANUMC; there was a core of rock climbers from the Canberra region but only one or two undergraduate student climbers. One of that non-university core, Peter Cocker, decided that something had to be done about the lack of student participation.

Cocker, like several of the other Canberra rock climbers, was an Englishman who had done a considerable amount of climbing in the mother country before migrating to Australia. He was familiar with the activity of the British climbing clubs and their importance to the development of new talent. ‘When I joined the ANUMC,’ Cocker said, ‘I was very surprised about the fact that there was only one undergraduate climber. I resolved to do something about it.’<sup>1</sup>

By February 1974, Cocker had become the president of the ANUMC and had decided to put a big effort into the club’s Orientation Week presentation. During O-Week, the various clubs associated with The Australian National University set up stalls near the Student Union and vie with each other to attract new members from the ranks of incoming students. In 1974, Cocker went beyond a simple stall; he organised films and lectures on mountaineering and even set up demonstrations of climbing on the campus. The extra effort paid off. The club signed up 30 new undergraduate students.

The very successful O-Week recruitment drive was quickly followed by a climbing meet at Booroomba Rocks, the local ACT rock-climbing cliff. Cocker rounded up nine of the local rock climbers as instructors to take the new recruits out for introductory climbs. The meet was phenomenally successful by almost any standards. Nineteen of the 30 new members came to the event and 16 of those 19 continued to climb on a regular basis thereafter.

In addition to the rock-climbing meets, Cocker organised frequent film, slide and lecture evenings to inspire the new members and to introduce them to other types of climbing and to other mountainous regions of the world. Soon their horizons were stretched beyond the local crags to New Zealand’s Southern Alps, to the Andes of South America, to Mt Blanc, the Matterhorn and the other great European peaks and to the Himalaya itself—the greatest mountain range on Earth. Warwick Deacock showed films of Alaska and of Rakaposhi, and later Canberran John Wanless told

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1 P. Cocker, Interview.

the story of the 1975 Mulkila expedition, which sowed another seed in fertile minds already filling with plans for a climbing trip to high mountains in a remote part of the world.

Simultaneous with Cocker's emergence as an enthusiastic leader of the non-university segment of the ANUMC was the arrival at The Australian National University of a group of energetic, outdoors-oriented young undergraduates who were extremely receptive to the club's new high-profile approach. Ken Baldwin, Andrew Blakers, Keith Burns, Theo Hooy and Martin Stone formed the nucleus of that group, but they were quickly joined by others, such as Andrew Bond and Lincoln Hall, a Canberran who had begun rock climbing while in secondary school.

By early 1975, the ANUMC's nucleus of climbers had reached critical mass and the sweeping granite slabs of Booroomba were abuzz every weekend with groups of ambitious young students impatient to climb higher and harder (see image 6.1). It was the perfect blend, however, of that youthful drive with the more cautious approach of the experienced rock climbers that produced a rapid rise in climbing standards as well as a much larger Canberra climbing community. Veterans such as Norm Booth, Ray Lassman, Dick Curtis, John Smart and Chris Larque gladly gave their time to the young ANUMC recruits and not only taught them the basic methods of climbing, but showed them all the rope-handling and other techniques and attitudes that were essential for safe climbing. As Baldwin put it, 'They provided a bit of sanity amongst all this energy.'<sup>2</sup>

Booroomba Rocks could not contain the energy for long. When the winter months arrived, the ANUMC climbers were up in the Snowy Mountains, learning to climb ice and snow on the short but steep frozen waterfalls on the bluffs above Blue Lake (see image 6.2). New Zealand was the next step and soon groups were travelling to the Southern Alps to learn mountaineering in the now well-established schools at Mt Cook and Mt Aspiring. Indeed, a few, such as Baldwin, had already made climbing trips to New Zealand.

Again, Peter Cocker was one of the primary driving forces as he actively encouraged as many young climbers as possible to build up mountaineering experience in New Zealand. He realised that although the students were becoming proficient rock climbers, they would need several seasons in New Zealand before they could tackle larger snow and ice-clad mountains elsewhere in the world.

With the active program of slide and film nights within the ANUMC, the young climbers had already begun to think and talk about a trip further afield. There were plenty of areas to think about: the Andes Mountains of Peru; the European Alps

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2 K. G. Baldwin, Interview.

with their classic, well-known routes; the great volcanic peaks of eastern Africa; the snow-covered mountains of tropical New Guinea; and, of course, the great Himalayan Range of Asia, the highest mountains of them all.

Climbers often dream and talk of trips to remote mountains overseas, particularly to the Himalaya, but the dreams usually remain just that, until some particular event triggers a core of climbers to begin turning the dreams into reality. For the ANUMC group, that event was a social occasion, as it had been for Warwick Deacock, who launched the 1975 Mulkila expedition over a few beers in Darjeeling.

The location was not as remote for the ANUMC climbers, nor was the occasion as formal as a Himalayan Club meeting. A few of the Canberra group got together over a cup of coffee in a cafe just down the street from an outdoors-gear shop in Civic, Canberra's downtown area. They had been browsing in the shop and, as usual, conversation had quickly turned to an overseas expedition.

Present at that very casual get-together in the cafe were Peter Cocker, John Finnigan, one of the veteran climbers who had been an instructor on that first ANUMC rock-climbing meet and had since become Cocker's regular climbing partner, Lincoln Hall and another of the younger climbers. This time their talk of an expedition to the Himalaya took on a sense of purpose and commitment that lifted it above the level of an idle dream.

By mid-1975, their idea of a Himalayan expedition had gathered momentum and indeed had taken on a life of its own. Vague ideas now gained a bit more substance and practicalities, rather than just wishes, began to dominate conversations among the wider ANUMC membership. Very early on, two major questions came to the fore: where and what type of expedition?

Although it had been agreed that the expedition would go to the Himalaya, that still left a lot of possibilities. The Himalaya stretch for 2700 km in a great arc through Asia and contain countless peaks, climbed and unclimbed, of varying height, steepness and accessibility. The ANUMC group went about the task of choosing an area or a peak in a most systematic fashion. Subgroups were formed to thoroughly investigate likely regions and then report back to the main group. Serious contenders for the target area included the Langtang region just north of Kathmandu in Nepal; the Rolwaling Valley, a little-visited region west of Mt Everest; the very remote Kanjiroba Himal in the west of Nepal; the Garhwal region of the Indian Himalaya; and regions further to the north-west, such as Kashmir and the Hindu Kush.

The final choice of an objective depended very much, however, on the style of the expedition. The original idea, the one Peter Cocker had favoured, was for a low-key trip, an expedition into an area where there were a number of peaks of various sizes and difficulties rather than a single, major objective.

‘We would set up a base camp and stock it with good food,’ he said, ‘and then go off and climb. The idea was to take a bunch of relatively inexperienced climbers into some high mountains and get them some high-altitude experience.’<sup>3</sup> In that regard, Cocker’s idea was very similar to Warwick Deacock’s notion of getting climbers from ‘Down Under’ used to the needs of ‘Up Yonder’.

Several of the areas under consideration would meet the needs of a ‘climbing-camp’ style of expedition and in the end the Garhwal region of the Indian Himalaya was chosen. It seemed to be the ideal area. Its major attraction was the Nanda Devi Sanctuary, a spectacular high, hidden valley surrounded by a rim of imposing snow, ice and rock peaks and dominated by India’s highest mountain, Nanda Devi (7817 m, 25 647 ft), which rose majestically from the centre of the sanctuary. Apart from very high and difficult glaciated passes, the only access to the sanctuary is via the gorge of the Rishi Ganga, a short but arduous and rather dangerous trek. The Nanda Devi Sanctuary offered just what the ANUMC team was looking for: they could attempt several of the impressive peaks on the northern rim of the sanctuary and climb in a spectacular setting in a remote and seldom-visited part of the Himalaya.

Only one problem remained: gaining permission for their plans from the Indian authorities. They quickly discovered—as many other Himalayan expeditions had and would find out—that getting to the mountain often proved more difficult and frustrating than climbing it. They were denied access to the wide range of peaks they had hoped to attempt and were offered instead a single peak, Dunagiri, on the outer rim of the sanctuary.

That decision by the Indian authorities forced a subtle change to the nature of the expedition. Although several members had always preferred an expedition with only one large mountain as an objective, the fact that they could obtain a permit for Dunagiri only meant that the expedition would no longer be a trip primarily to climb a number of lesser peaks but rather a venture with a single, major, difficult objective.

Dunagiri was undeniably a formidable target. Although it had been first climbed in 1939 by a Swiss team led by Andre Roche, it had, by the mid-1970s, been climbed only one other time and, more ominously, had claimed a disconcertingly large number of lives in the intervening years. Furthermore, the ANUMC team decided to tackle Dunagiri by a route not previously tried—a move that would add to the significance of the attempt but would increase the difficulty and possible danger of the climb. Finally, Dunagiri was 7066 m (23 184 ft) high, a Himalayan giant by any standards and particularly so for a team of primarily young university students.

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3 P. Cocker, Interview.

Indeed, no-one in the ANUMC group had been on a climbing expedition to the Himalaya before, so they set about getting advice wherever they could find it. Cocker sought information from many other groups and talked to literally dozens of people, including Deacock and Wanless from the Mulkila trip. In the end, the most important of these advisors was Bill Packard, a New Zealander who had moved to Canberra in 1961 and was the warden at Bruce Hall at The Australian National University.

Packard's connection with Himalayan climbing went right back to 1950, when Nepal was just opening its doors to foreign expeditions. The previous year, the Nepalese Government had yielded to considerable British pressure and allowed a single exploratory expedition, led by the veteran mountaineer Bill Tilman, into the Langtang region north of Kathmandu. The Nepalese had, however, put a condition on the trip—much to the annoyance of Tilman—that the expedition must have a strong scientific component. Tilman revelled in extremely lightweight mountain travel and abhorred any encumbrances added by scientific pursuits. He barely tolerated biologists and particularly disliked geologists, who would invariably burden the expedition with rucksacks full of rocks.

The Himalayan Committee of the British Alpine Club secured Nepalese permission for another Tilman-led climbing expedition in 1950 and, from the British point of view, one of the purposes of the trip was to introduce younger climbers to Himalayan mountaineering conditions to build up personnel for future Everest attempts. Packard was a geography research student at Oxford University at the time the 1950 trip was being organised. With a background in science and some seasons of New Zealand climbing under his belt, he turned out to be the right person in the right place at the right time. After a chance meeting with Tilman at a dinner, Packard was invited on the expedition. He secured his place perhaps not so much by his scientific or mountaineering experience but rather by his extreme economy of words. Tilman hated verbose people nearly as much as he did pick-wielding geologists.

Tilman's 1950 expedition headed for central Nepal with the aim of making the first ascent of a 26 000 ft (8000 m) peak. They first looked at Manaslu and then made an attempt from the north on Annapurna II, later accurately surveyed to be slightly less than 26 000 ft (8000 m). 'Being a characteristic British expedition,' Packard quipped, 'we didn't get to the top of anything, but we didn't lose our fingers or toes either.'<sup>4</sup>

Unfortunately, Packard contracted poliomyelitis on the expedition and that ended his career as an active mountaineer. He remained in Britain for several years, however, and served as a technical advisor to the successful 1953 British Everest expedition and as the London agent for Sir Edmund Hillary's 1954 New Zealand Barun Valley

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4 W. Packard, Interview.

expedition. (The highest peak climbed during that 1954 trip, Baruntse, would be the target of an Australian team in 1988.) When the ANUMC group started looking around for advice on Himalayan mountaineering, there was no-one in Canberra more suited to the task, or more willing to help, than Bill Packard. He was officially appointed technical advisor to the Dunagiri expedition.

### Dinner with the great man

#### Bill Packard

In the late 1940s and early 1950s, one of the wishes of the Royal Geographical Society and the Alpine Club was for Bill Tilman to take a small group of younger climbers into Nepal so that there would be a cadre of younger people with Himalayan experience. The Maharajah-Prime Minister still required scientific work—none of these useless expeditions—so Tilman decided he would take a botanist, as plants didn't weigh very much, but, in his own whimsical way, expressed his general disapproval of rock-collecting geologists.

He had come to speak to the Oxford University Mountaineering Club about his 1949 Langtang trip. I was then at Oxford and very keen in the Mountaineering Club. We heard the great man give his absolutely magnificent lecture, and afterwards, as was the club's wont, the great man was entertained to supper by the inner core of the climbers. I was one of those people, but more on the fringes, I think.

Tilman, having given this wonderful lecture, didn't say a word. We were trying to get him to talk, and all we got were monosyllabic grunts. Somehow it came out I was a New Zealander, and he initiated his first and last question of the evening.

'You know Dan Bryant?' he snapped. Mercifully, I knew Dan Bryant, who had been with Tilman in 1938 on Mt Everest. I started talking about Dan Bryant, and suddenly he cut me quite short, 'Bloody fine bloke!' And that was that.

I had indicated, as had quite a number of other people there, that we were very interested in his sort of lightweight exploratory expeditioning. I was at the university doing postgraduate studies in geography at the time, a fact that he somehow found out.

So I got a letter from him some three weeks later saying, 'Dear Packard, Would you care to join me in the Himalaya this year to wield a phototheodolite. Yours, W. Tilman.'

I, for once, was able to be even briefer than he. 'Dear Tilman. Yes. Yours, Packard.' I then had to go off and find out what a phototheodolite was and how to wield one.

The Dunagiri aspirants needed much more than just advice, however, to get the expedition off the ground. Mounting a major attempt on a large peak such as Dunagiri would require a large amount of resources: climbing equipment, tentage, ropes, fuel, stoves, food and the transport to get it all to the base of the mountain. Most of the team members were university students, who were in no position to fund the trip themselves. Not only was the objective much more formidable than that of the 1975 Mulkila expedition, much more outside support would have to be found to get the trip off the ground. It certainly could not be the 'no free milk powder' style of expedition that Deacock preferred.

The Dunagiri team had one big advantage in their fundraising efforts: they were associated with a university and, in the best tradition of many earlier Himalayan expeditions (Tilman notwithstanding), they could combine scientific experiments with mountaineering activities. The scientific component of the trip could then

attract support, in the form of tax-deductible donations, from quarters that would otherwise not be interested in a mountaineering venture. Furthermore, many of the team had backgrounds in the physical or biological sciences and were thus ideally placed to carry out the experiments themselves.

To attract this type of support, the ANUMC group incorporated itself and published a high-quality colour brochure outlining the expedition's objectives—scientific, exploratory and climbing. Eventually, in collaboration with staff at The Australian National University, the group organised three scientific experiments to be carried out during the expedition: an estimation of the rate of uplift of the Himalaya from the tiny tracks left in rock crystals by disintegrating uranium atoms; the collection of tree-ring samples for dating purposes; and a rather bizarre way of determining the mobility of plant seeds—by having members of the team wear socks on various stages of the march in to base camp and then, back at The Australian National University, placing the socks in a sterile potting mixture and allowing them to germinate. The last experiment was thwarted in the end by the thoroughness of Australian quarantine officers.

The continuing organisation of such a complex enterprise as the Dunagiri expedition entailed a lot of hard work. As Bill Packard put it, "There had to be a "burning light" to keep it going."<sup>5</sup> That burning light was undoubtedly Ken Baldwin. Although he received plenty of help—principally from Keith Burns but also from several others—Baldwin was the organisational driving force behind the Dunagiri trip.

'No matter what else happened,' Packard recalled, 'no matter who dropped out or whatever else went wrong, Ken Baldwin was going to get himself to the Himalaya.'<sup>6</sup> And, as it turned out, he would get everyone else there as well.

It must have been a very busy year for Baldwin in 1977. In addition to carrying a very heavy Dunagiri workload, he was doing his honours year in physics at The Australian National University. 'My supervisor looked aghast when I told him I was organising this Himalayan expedition as well,' Baldwin said. 'To some extent, he was right.'<sup>7</sup> Baldwin, however, still managed a first-class honours that year.

There were many other possible sources of support apart from the science-related ones and Baldwin went to work hunting them out. 'In many regards, funding support wasn't that hard as we were working with a virtually untapped market then,' he recalled. 'We were the first major Australian expedition to the Himalaya, or certainly the first one to seek large-scale support, and we found some very receptive sponsors, particularly food companies.'<sup>8</sup>

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5 Ibid.

6 Ibid.

7 K. G. Baldwin, Interview.

8 Ibid.

The real breakthrough, however, came when Baldwin engineered a \$10 000 package with the *Sydney Morning Herald* newspaper. The possibility of support from the newspaper had initially been raised by the expedition patron, the university's Pro-Chancellor, Dr H. C. Coombs, who knew the Fairfax family. With the backing of such a large media group, the expedition achieved an even higher profile and thus found obtaining additional support considerably easier.

In addition to the direct financial support, the *Sydney Morning Herald* provided a reporter, Ben Sandilands, to accompany the expedition and paid for his share of the expenses. The much higher media profile that the deal ensured, however, meant another significant change to the nature of the expedition. First, the trip had changed from a 'climbing-camp' style of venture in which members went off in small groups to attempt a variety of peaks to an expedition attempting a single, high mountain by a new route. Now that attempt would be in full public view, on the front pages of major Australian newspapers.

Such a major shift in the nature of the expedition was bound to create some problems. Peter Cocker, for one, was very uneasy as the trip grew in complexity and particularly as the publicity aspect grew in importance: "The character of the expedition changed completely. I thought of pulling out, personally. Now a lot of money was involved. Now we had to go and we had to perform. I wasn't very happy about that."<sup>9</sup> The uneasiness about the media situation, at least in Cocker's mind, was never very far from the surface and perhaps contributed to tensions later in the expedition.

Cocker undoubtedly felt most strongly about the potential problems with media sponsorship, as he had become the expedition leader. He was the obvious choice. Although he was a non-student and some 15 years older, his very youthful appearance, engaging personality and supportive and encouraging attitude towards novices made him very popular with the younger climbers. Furthermore, it was largely Cocker—always fired with enthusiasm for grand ideas—who had got the Himalayan trip going in the first place.

In addition to the personal attributes needed for effective leadership, Cocker had a considerable amount of overseas climbing and trekking experience. With the usual Englishman's background of rock climbing in England and Wales and ice climbing in Scotland, he had made climbing trips to the sea-cliffs of Cyprus, to Arctic Norway, where he had a close call when he nearly had a long and fatal fall, and to the north-eastern corner of Turkey, where he and his climbing partner were caught by police in an illegal zone near the border with the Soviet Union but managed to talk themselves out of the delicate situation and complete the trip. On an overland journey from Britain to Australia, Cocker stopped by the Himalayan Mountaineering Institute in

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9 P. Cocker, Interview.

Darjeeling, where he met Tenzing Norgay, Hillary's companion on the first ascent of Everest. Later, Cocker returned to the Himalaya for an 'extended walk' in the Helambu area north of Kathmandu.

Bill Packard, the expedition advisor, judged that Cocker had just the right qualities for leader and was most enthusiastic in his support: 'As leader, Peter was ideal. He had a lot of experience, and he had the right amount of inner good sense and daring. You need a bit of daring. If you're going to do everything absolutely perfectly, you'll never get up anything!'<sup>10</sup>

Cocker, however, had the young team's safety utmost in his mind: 'I was determined before anything else, including reaching the top, that we would eliminate as many risks as possible.'<sup>11</sup> Cocker received considerable help in dealing with potential problems such as a high media profile, as well as with the planning stages of the expedition in general, from two other experienced members, John Finnigan and Charlie Barton.

'The worry about media sponsorship was only amongst the older people,' Finnigan pointed out. 'We were concerned about being driven to do something we didn't want to do. But we recognised that, so it wasn't likely to happen.'<sup>12</sup>

Finnigan brought more overseas experience and a good deal of talent to the expedition team. In fact, he was widely acknowledged to be the most proficient ice climber of the group and one of the best rock climbers. Overall, he was probably the best technical mountaineer of the group.

Like Cocker, Finnigan was originally from England, where he had taken up climbing at an early age through school outings. He remembered one extended trip in particular, where he and his schoolmates were dragged up severe climbs by an overly ambitious instructor: 'We were terrified on various crags all over Snowdonia.'<sup>13</sup> Later Finnigan himself became an instructor for the British Mountaineering Association and led novices up classic rock routes around the British Isles.

His first overseas trip in 1966—to the Dolomites in the Italian Alps—proved an introduction to 'epics', which seemed to become Finnigan's trademark in succeeding years. The journey began when, after a heavy night on the grog, Finnigan managed to get his right hand smashed in a closing train door. Undeterred, the party continued into the Alps but was stopped on the wrong side of the Brenner Pass by floods. After salvaging a bit of climbing on Austria's Kaisergeberge Wall, they finally made it to

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10 W. Packard, Interview.

11 P. Cocker, Interview.

12 J. J. Finnigan, Interview.

13 Ibid.

the Dolomites, where Finnigan, with a right hand that still looked like a boxing glove, led a steep, exposed climb up one of the Vajolet Towers, a group of spectacular limestone pillars.

The next year, he was in Norway attempting the Trolltind Wall, Europe's largest vertical rock face and one that rivalled the great granite walls of the United States' legendary Yosemite Valley. Again, Finnigan was immediately involved in an epic, as he and his partner were bailed up partway up the wall by a nasty storm of sleet and snow. They were in a position, legend had it, from which descent was not possible and the storm-fed waterfalls above prevented them from completing the climb. There was no way out; they had had it. The resourceful pair, against all odds, somehow managed to down-climb the wall the next morning and escape the clutches of the Trolltind. Buoyed by their Houdini-like escape from death, the pair then raced up the wall in record time when the weather cleared.

Finnigan's next epic did not have such a happy ending. In 1969, he was in the Alps to attempt some hard, mixed ice and rock climbs in the Mt Blanc region. He and his partner were on the very steep west face of the Petit Dru, the most dramatic of the granite aiguilles near Chamonix. Again, a snowstorm had forced a retreat from high on the face. After exiting the rock face into a snow couloir, Finnigan was swept off a stance by a rock fall and tumbled hundreds of metres to the bottom of the couloir. He was extremely lucky to escape death, but suffered severe damage to his left knee. The early prognosis was not good: the end of a promising climbing career and probably the end of any athletic or sporting activity.

By the early 1970s, Finnigan had moved to Australia and, after extensive rehabilitation on his knee, was climbing again. Still, he could not bend the knee more than 90 degrees and, as he put it, he 'had to learn to climb again with one and a half legs'.<sup>14</sup>

Even with one and a half legs, Finnigan was counted on to be the main driving force of the Dunagiri climbers and the one who could overcome any severe technical difficulties the group might encounter. Packard recognised Finnigan's importance and his penchant for getting involved in epics. 'John Finnigan,' Packard said, 'is a man who must have broken his bones on almost every mountain range in the world. But he was terribly important to the expedition. He was really prepared to give things a go.'<sup>15</sup>

In addition, every expedition must have a 'hard man' and for the Dunagiri trip, Finnigan was it. On the frequent winter training trips to Blue Lake in the Snowy Mountains, Finnigan was renowned for his desire—after an arduous ski trip to the lake through gales and driving snow when all any sane person wanted to do was

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> W. Packard, Interview.

crawl into a sleeping-bag with a hot cup of tea—to cajole someone out of a tent and climb the hardest ice cliff on the crag. Finnigan’s drive to climb hard was, however, balanced by his bizarre, Monty Pythonesque sense of humour, which could defuse tense situations and made him a most entertaining companion in the mountains.

The third of the trio of English climbers who formed the backbone of Dunagiri’s old guard was Charlie Barton. Barton’s climbing background was considerably different from that of Cocker and Finnigan; most of his overseas experience was in Africa, where he lived for a decade. Barton had climbed the classic volcanic peaks of eastern Africa—Mounts Kenya and Kilimanjaro—but had also climbed in the snow-covered Ruwenzori Range of Uganda and the Hoggar Mountains in the Sahara Desert.

Barton brought many other qualities to the expedition. His long experience in Africa prepared him well for living in the vagaries of Third World societies. Indeed, he revelled in local bazaars, where his uncanny ability at bargaining for everything from a washer for a stove to gallons of kerosene could prove most useful. Perhaps his most important attribute—particularly in a group primarily of young, energetic, but inexperienced university students—was his steadiness. Nothing seemed to ruffle Barton and he could always be relied on to provide that bit of sensible, sane advice that could break an impasse.

Another of the more experienced of the team was Charlie Massy, an Australian who ran a property near Dalgety in New South Wales. Massy was the group’s most experienced climber in New Zealand, with four trips to the Southern Alps, and the expedition’s deputy leader and treasurer.

The bulk of the climbing team, however, was that group of young, energetic undergraduate students who had come to The Australian National University in 1974 and had revitalised the ANUMC. Most were in their early twenties, had varying amounts of ice and rock-climbing experience and had one or two trips to New Zealand under their belts.

Ken Baldwin, as described above, played the major role in organising and coordinating the trip. Also prominent in the organisation were Keith Burns, originally a New Zealander and at twenty-one the youngest member of the group, and Martin Stone, a Tasmanian and a recent graduate of the ANU Forestry Department.

Indeed, the Forestry Department was well represented on the Dunagiri team, with three other students: Andrew Bond, Theo Hooy and Tim Macartney-Snape, who was the best skier of the team. Like Macartney-Snape, Hooy was a Victorian and he was heavily involved in the scientific as well as the climbing aspects of the trip.

Ken Bell, a grazier from Goulburn, New South Wales, added a breath of fresh air to the otherwise sometimes heavy academic atmosphere of the group and lightened things with a sense of humour as zany as that of Finnigan. Another honours physics graduate, Andrew Blakers, a very keen runner, skier and bushwalker, was probably the fittest member of the expedition.

Lincoln Hall and John Armstrong completed the climbing team. Hall promised to be one of the strongest climbers on the trip; he was arguably the best rock climber of the team and, even though he was only twenty-two, had already managed three climbing seasons in the Southern Alps. Armstrong, the oldest climber of the group at forty-three, added another large dose of good sense and willing labour as well as 28 years of climbing experience.

Medical officer for the expedition was Mark Podkolinski, who was no stranger to working in harsh conditions. Before the Dunagiri expedition, he spent 13 months as medical officer at Davis Base in the Australian Antarctic Territory. Finally, getting the news back to Australia was Ben Sandilands, the reporter from the *Sydney Morning Herald*.

Officially on the trip as a reporter, Sandilands had a strong background in rock climbing and mountaineering. He began climbing in the Blue Mountains in the early 1960s and followed that with numerous trips to New Zealand, where he climbed Mt Cook no less than four times, two of them being traverses of the three summits. He had climbed in the Dolomites and the French and Bavarian Alps in Europe, the North Cascade Range in the United States and even on the massive vertical granite walls of Yosemite Valley. In many regards, Sandilands was more experienced than several of the Dunagiri climbing team.

By early 1978, with the team composition settled, the scientific program in place, the sponsorship found and funds raised, the transport arranged and the hard training over, everything was in place to send the largest and most well-publicised Australian expedition to the Himalaya. Or was it?

In the early months of 1978, a series of events nearly knocked out most of the experienced climbers and threatened to leave the expedition leaderless. First, Charlie Barton had to pull out at the last minute. Barton was working on a PhD in geophysics at the ANU Research School of Earth Sciences and the demands of the last stages of his academic program forced him to retire from the expedition. John Finnigan, too, was working towards a PhD and, in addition, his wife, Margaret, was expecting their second child about the time the expedition was due to leave for India. His participation began to look shaky. Losing Barton was a severe setback, but losing Finnigan, with his drive and depth of experience, would be a crippling blow to the team's chances of climbing Dunagiri.

Then, in the final weeks before the team was due to depart, it looked as if Cocker might pull out as well. Although he had been instrumental in getting the Dunagiri trip off the ground—and indeed had played a leading role in rejuvenating the ANUMC and had become a pillar of the club—Cocker, in the months leading up to the departure, was beset with personal problems that greatly affected his participation in the final planning stages.

Cocker had separated from his wife. In addition, he was experiencing severe financial problems; he was working long hours in real estate sales to make ends meet and, in the end, had to sell his car. Just meeting his financial commitments to the expedition posed almost insurmountable problems. ‘Everything was against going on the expedition,’ Cocker said, as he remembered those difficult times:

It was probably difficult for the students to understand how you could be working seven days a week, 10 hours a day and not earn a penny! No-one seemed to understand that it was a real crisis for me, emotionally and consequently financially. Perhaps I should have pulled out from the expedition from the beginning but uppermost in my mind was the safety of the students and the mountain was secondary. Of course, this would put me on a direct collision course with the media expectations for the expedition. I was unable to commit any time or money to the organisation of the expedition.<sup>16</sup>

As the organisational duties multiplied towards the end of the planning stages, Cocker, the expedition leader, was nowhere to be seen at the frequent meetings. ‘Just when he was absolutely needed to keep things going, he was suddenly not around,’ Finnigan recalled.<sup>17</sup>

Things nevertheless had to be kept going and most of the tasks fell into the capable hands of Ken Baldwin. Already burdened with obtaining sponsorship and organising many of the other expedition details, Baldwin found that the additional duties placed on him during the final months taxed even his considerable energy and organisational skills. Somehow he managed to get everything done, but not without a lot of stress and more than a few sleepless nights. Cocker’s absence inevitably caused some degree of friction between him and the overworked Baldwin.

The toughest talk, however, came from Finnigan, Cocker’s closest friend on the expedition team. Just before the expedition was departing, Cocker confided to Finnigan that he had decided not to go and asked for Finnigan’s advice. In typical fashion, Finnigan minced no words: ‘You can’t pull out,’ he told Cocker, ‘you would lose all credibility. If you drop out, you’ll never have any respect around the climbing community again. And you would always regret it yourself if you didn’t go.’<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> P. Cocker, Interview and correspondence.

<sup>17</sup> J. J. Finnigan, Interview.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

That was enough to convince Cocker that he could not drop out. His decision to continue as leader, however, if anything, complicated his role in the expedition because in his absence, Baldwin had taken over many of his functions. 'It had very much become Ken's show,' Finnigan said, 'and he did it bloody well.'<sup>19</sup> With the re-emergence of Cocker just before the expedition's departure, it was Cocker, and not Baldwin, who received much of the attention and accolades in the splash of press coverage the expedition received on departure.

Cocker made efforts to include Baldwin more than others in the subsequent decision making and Baldwin encouraged Cocker to remain leader during his period of personal difficulties. At the expedition's celebratory formal dinner, Cocker as leader was asked to speak but when he stood up, he said, 'This honour goes to Ken Baldwin in recognition of his outstanding efforts to make this expedition a reality.' Cocker said, 'I am sure that Ken has a speech ready.'<sup>20</sup> It is much to the credit of both that they each had the welfare of the expedition as their ultimate goal and, although friction came to the surface once later in the expedition, it was never really a factor in the conduct of the trip in any significant way.

It is worthwhile here to digress briefly to consider the nature of conflict in mountaineering expeditions. Most Australian expeditions have been largely free of divisiveness, but, as we shall see later, it was an important factor in one large Everest expedition.

Conflict among climbers is one of the most fascinating aspects of Himalayan expeditions, particularly to outsiders. Indeed, some American climbers have made a thriving cottage industry of reporting, in lurid detail, all of the interpersonal squabbles and fights that occur during an expedition. It seems they have had no lack of material from large American expeditions, particularly those to K2, the world's second-highest mountain. On one such trip, fighting broke out over who was going to get a window seat on the flight to Skardu—well before the team even reached their base camp. On another, one group of climbers hid oxygen cylinders so that rival team-mates could not reach the summit.

The same types of conflict—sometimes very bitter—have also been part of several Australian expeditions. The reporting of the conflicts, however, whether it be of Australian or other expeditions, often gives the wrong impression—that of a group of childish, immature, egocentric misfits who simply do not get on together. Often it seems that personality conflicts are the cause. To be sure, often rather trivial personality traits trigger an outburst or start a fight, but it should never be forgotten that Himalayan climbers are operating in what is often compared with a war zone,

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> P. Cocker, Correspondence.

in conditions of extreme physical deprivation and hardship and under significant psychological stress, with death never far away. Under those conditions, the more petty personality traits latent in all of us can easily come to the fore.

Usually, however, there are precursors to conditions that eventually cause problems on an expedition. There can be subtle differences in climbing philosophies, genuine disputes over styles of leadership or varying assessments of or responses to risk and danger, all of which feed undercurrents of discontent that can burst into the open given appropriate triggers. Keeping these sorts of potential conflicts under control is often more important to the success of an expedition than is the climbing ability of the members.

Large expeditions are naturally more prone to interpersonal conflict than are ones composed of a small, closely knit group of friends. Two of the first Australian expeditions to the Himalaya—those to Mulkila and Dunagiri—were quite large but both avoided any major conflict. In the Mulkila trip, the low-key nature of the venture, the modest objective and Warwick Deacock's selection of the members all led to a harmonious expedition. The potential for problems was undoubtedly greater for the Dunagiri expedition, with its more difficult and dangerous objective, but serious conflict did not eventuate.

To a large extent, the friction between Cocker and Baldwin was probably due to the pressures that had already built up for them before they even got close to the mountain; for Cocker, it was his personal problems, and for Baldwin, it was the extraordinarily heavy workload of honours year at The Australian National University and the organisation of a big Himalayan expedition. For both, the end of the organisation and of the pre-trip publicity was a decided relief. As Baldwin recalled, 'Now that the organisation was over, I could sit back and enjoy the ride.'<sup>21</sup> The responsibility had now shifted onto Cocker's shoulders as climbing leader, which to him must have seemed lighter than the personal pressures before the trip. As Cocker vividly remembered, 'I got on the plane and shut my eyes. That was it. A fait accompli. I was going.'<sup>22</sup> The agony of indecision was over. Now he was leading a group of Canberra climbers, none of whom had ever climbed in the Himalaya before, to a big and dangerous mountain. Cocker summed up his feelings: 'I was aware that there were two other experienced mountaineers who could have led the expedition; however, I was convinced that I was the best person to ensure the safety of the expedition members, which was always my priority.'<sup>23</sup>

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21 K. G. Baldwin, Interview.

22 P. Cocker, Interview.

23 P. Cocker, Correspondence.

This text is taken from *Himalayan Dreaming: Australian mountaineering in the great ranges of Asia, 1922–1990*, by Will Steffen, published 2017 by ANU Press, The Australian National University, Canberra, Australia.