

## **Peter Boardman**

**1950-82**

*by Dr Charles Clarke*

Peter David Boardman was born on Christmas Day 1950, the younger son of Alan and Dorothy Boardman of Bramhall, Stockport. He first went to Nevill Road County Primary School and then on to Stockport Grammar School in 1956. While there he began climbing, visiting the mountains of Corsica in 1964 and 1965. Here he first enjoyed the flavour of the wilderness, 'the freedom of moving, lightweight, through mountain country, carrying shelter, warmth, food and fuel on my back'. In 1966 he joined the Mynydd Climbing Club which then met in the Manchester Arms, Stockport. He began climbing seriously with Barry Monkman, a friend from school, and later with Dave Pownall. Once enrolled in the Mynydd he quickly became a highly competent rock climber, leading VS routes within a year of gritstone and Welsh and Lakeland crags. He visited the Swabian Alps in 1966, youth hostelling, and two years later he went to the Pennine Alps to climb. He graduated quickly through Alpine classics to become a leading British Alpine mountaineer. He made the first British ascents of the North Face Direct of the Olan, the North Face of the Nesthorn and the North Face Direct of the Lauterbrunnen Breithorn.

From Stockport Grammar School he went to the University of Nottingham where he became President of the University Mountaineering Club. He took a degree on English followed by a teaching diploma at University of North Wales, Bangor, in 1973, where for a time he learnt Welsh. He was never to teach in any formal sense of the word but he joined the Glenmore Lodge, Aviemore, in 1973 as an Instructor and gained the Mountain Guide Carnet in September 1977. He joined the British Mountaineering Council in 1975 and, despite little experience in the world of committees, he quickly mastered the demanding post, adding greatly to the BMC's contact with young climbers and climbing clubs, experience which would stand him in good stead when he was elected President of the Association of British Mountain Guides in 1979. His skill in negotiation and his knowledge of international mountaineering bureaucracy facilitated the entry of British Guides into the Union Internationale des Associations de Guides de Montagne. In January 1978, following the death of Dougal Haston in an avalanche, he was invited to take over the International School of Mountaineering in Leysin. As Director he helped continue the tradition of the school and found his metier as a guide and teacher of the sport he loved so much. Instructing and climbing for Peter was never a necessary chore but a positive pleasure; he allowed his knowledge and affection to diffuse freely to those around him.

His first expedition was to Afghanistan in 1972, the University of Nottingham Hindu Kush Expedition, with Martin Wragg, Chris FitzHugh, Bill Church, Margaret and the late Oliver Stansfield, their baby Esther and Bob Watson. On this trip he demonstrated something of his own power – he was immensely strong and skillful, a man who valued speed as a means of safety. As a training climb his small party chose the North Face of Koh-I-Khaaik and followed this with the first ascent of Kohi-Mundi, a great achievement of a first expedition.

In 1974 he visited Alaska and with Roger O'Donovan made the first ascent on the South Face of Mount Dan Beard. Early in 1975 he went to the Caucasus and in July he left to go to SouthWest Face of Everest, the youngest member of the team and in many ways the least known. It was here that I first met him. Large expeditions were also novel for him as an extract from his diary on the approach march shows: 'We round a corner and there is the British Raj in all its glory, neatly lined up in erected tents, crowds kept at a distance, and we sit down at tables in the mess tent and are bought steaming kettles full of tea. For a mountaineer surely a Bonington Everest Expedition is one of the last great Imperial experiences that life can offer.' Peter was a diligent, disciplined member of the team, a little retiring on a sociable expedition. He was certainly one of the strongest members and this led to his selection for the second ascent of the SouthWest Face, following Dougal Haston and Doug Scott. Peter was paired with the expedition Sirdar, Sherpa Pertemba and set off

from Camp 6 in front of a second pair, Mick Burke and Martin Boysen. Martin turned back after a short distance with faulty oxygen equipment while Mick continued alone. Peter and Pertemba reached the summit of Everest in deteriorating weather at 1.40pm on 26<sup>th</sup> September 1975. Peter was wearing, loyally, a Mynydd T-shirt for the summit photograph. With conditions worsening rapidly they returned along the South East Ridge and to their amazement met Mick Burke ascending the ridge alone, about 30 meters below the summit. They exchanged few words and arranged to meet up at South Summit. Peter, despite deteriorating weather and poor visibility, insisted on waiting for over an hour and a half below the South Summit: in the storm that was to follow they were struck twice by avalanches while crossing the exposed slopes of the South West Face and struggled into Camp 6 in the dusk. Mick was never to be seen again.

In the months that followed it fell to Peter to record those moments many times, at lectures and at interviews. He did so with frankness and great sympathy, although it was obviously painful to him to recall what had been to momentous hours of his life.

After Everest '75, expeditions followed with frightening speed. In 1976 he visited the Polish High Tatra and later that year joined Joe Tasker for the West Wall of Changabang, the legendary climb which followed the lead of Joe and Dick Dunagiri a year earlier. Changabang was an example of meticulous forethought – for an example the sleeve hammocks which were to dangle precariously on the face were first tested in a deep freeze – and much of the special equipment was designed and made by Mynydd members. This expedition, too, gave Peter a further share of tragedy, as Joe and he buried the bodies of 4 members of the American Dunagiri Expedition.

Peter had a companion as constant as his travels would permit for the last 6 years of his life. Acquaintance, girlfriend and finally wife, Hilary Collins had first met him as she took part in a course in Aviemore in 1974. In 1976, after Changabang she organised his first lecture, at Belper High School where she ran the School's Outdoor Activities Department. They climbed together shortly afterwards at the Torrs in New Mills (where Peter fell but was held by her) and later in the winter of 1976-7 in Torridon. They planned a visit to New Guinea, Hilary then leaving for a post in Switzerland to teach in a private school. In 1977, unable to visit New Guinea, they climbed together on Mount Kenya (the second winter ascent of the Diamond Couloir) and Kilimanjaro. Peter was soon to follow Hilary to Switzerland, to Leysin, in 1978 when he took over the International School of Mountaineering. They were married in August 1980.

In 1978, by now firmly one of the most respected high-altitude mountaineers, he took part in the K2 expedition led by Chris Bonington. Little was achieved; Nick Estcourt died in an avalanche early on the trip and the expedition was abandoned. The following year was as full a climbing year as is possible. He spent Christmas 1978 in the Snow Mountains of New Guinea with Hilary, climbing the Caestenz Pyramid and Dugundugu. Peter spoke little about this little expedition, preferring to keep this tender memory to himself. 'Back from the Stone Age' in the New Year, he was ready to leave for Kangchenjunga in March with Joe, Doug Scott and Georges Bettembourg. They climbed the North Ridge of Kangchenjunga, reaching the summit without oxygen on 15<sup>th</sup> May. Returning for the Alpine summer season and guiding from Leysin, a further expedition was in preparation. Again a trip that was wholly in Peter's style – small, forceful and elegant to a mountain of mystery. This time it was Gauri Sankar in Nepal. Peter was openly disappointed that an American/Nepalese expedition, led by Al Read had made the first ascent of the North Summit. The West Ridge to the virgin South Summit, looked hard and committing and with John Barry, Tim Leach and Guy Neidhardt (from Leysin), Peter left in September on the third extraordinary expedition of the year. This was as long, fine and intricate a ridge climb as has ever been done in the Himalaya, exposed for long sections and demanding sustained care. Despite John Barry falling from the crest and injuring his arm, the others reached the summit with Pemba Lama on 8<sup>th</sup> November.

For 1980 the unsettled score, K2, remained. It was not Peter's nature to try and recreate a large expedition in the style of 1978. This trip was to be a foursome with Joe, Dick Renshaw and Doug Scott. Having attempted the West Ridge, they moved to the Abruzzi but once again the Savage Mountain struck, all but sweeping the expedition from the Abruzzi Spur in a

succession of avalanches. They survived, reaching 7975 meters, but poor weather and exhaustion prevented a further attempt on the summit.

Mount Kongur followed in 1981, a large expedition by Peter's standards, but one which satisfied his keen interest in mountain exploration. He researched in great detail the history of climbing in Xinjiang and contributed important material to the expedition book. He reached the summit on 12<sup>th</sup> July with Chris Bonington, Al Rouse and Joe Tasker and narrowly escaped near injury during an abseil near the top. A stone dislodged near the top by his own abseil rope knocked him unconscious and he slid almost to the free end until, by chance, his thumb jammed in the descendeur.

Everest followed in March '82 and on this, our third expedition together, I sensed more of his feelings. Outwardly he was placid, apparently relaxed among high mountains with high risks. Growing to know him better I realised how aware he was of dangers of his existence. He wore no blinkers of immortality and had no sense of fatalism – he wished to make sure he stayed alive. I thought he felt fear deeply but was somehow to overcome it to achieve his extravagant climbing ambitions.

A further talent emerged through his climbing career – writing. He spoke and wrote well about Everest in 1975 but could not avoid the label of a successful new boy. Changabang, his first shared experience with Joe, seemed to me to be an event of such magnitude that *The Shining Mountain* leapt from him as part of all his inner experience, an outstanding document of endurance, pain, pleasure and closeness to another human being. The success of the book was immediate in the climbing world and won him wider acclaim with the John Llewelyn Rhys Memorial Prize for literature in 1979.

*Sacred Summits*, published shortly after his death, described his climbing year of 1979, the trips to New Guinea, Kangchenjunga and Gauri Sankar. A book which captured both the variety and intensity of three very different expeditions, it will, I believe, be held in years to come among the greatest of climbing literature, for its merit rather than the author's untimely end.

Although Peter's achievements with his partners will be recorded in the archives of mountaineering, it is his warmth, humanity and wisdom, which will be sorely missed by those of us who loved him. He did not agree with Howard Somervell's epitaph, 'There are few better deaths than to die in high endeavour'. Nor did Joe. As I carved a headstone for their memorial in the Rongbuk Valley my only wish was the last few moments of their lives to be unraveled.