

## Kenton Cool | Everest: The Untold Story | UK Tour 2023 by Mark Hallam 19/6/23

Kenton Cool, a mere 4 weeks after climbing Everest for 17th time, delivered a spirited, often hilarious and wholly engaging talk to a full house at The Buccleuch Centre on Thursday 15th June. Having taken a 64 year old Sir Ranulf Fiennes, once described by Guinness Book of Records as 'the world's greatest living explorer' to the highest place on earth as well as up the infamous north wall of the Eiger, arguably the toughest climb in the Alps, it could be fair to describe Kenton as 'the world's greatest living mountain guide'.

Used to responding to expected as well as unexpected challenges of guiding clients in the frigid cold of extreme altitude, he showed himself highly adaptable as a speaker, keeping his audience fully engaged despite a few curve balls served up in the setting of the current heatwave. A big well-done to the support team at the Buccleuch who worked tirelessly to deal with several technology glitches, whilst Kenton kept his audience amused with excerpts from a bottomless pit of funny anecdotes, combined with a series of corny jokes about Yaks...

There was also a medical emergency and proceedings had to be interrupted to enable more of the Buccleuch team, plus doctors from the audience, to assist a gentleman who had to be admitted to hospital (kept in overnight, but discharged in the morning with expectation of a full recovery - and family have expressed a big thanks to those who assisted).

Kenton, Cool as ever, switched to *alfresco mode* and guided his audience outside for half an hour where he continued to fully engage the gathering, despite an absence of slides and the presence of the June heat, spiced by marauding midges. It is fair to note though that our speaker, in common with many other Himalayan superstars, had served part of his apprenticeship in the Scottish Highlands, so was scarcely ruffled by the presence of a few wee beasties.

Moving on to the content of the talk: Kenton had started by explaining that his surname, Cool, had not come about through some tasteless attempt at self-aggrandisement. Rather, members of a previous generation of his family had sought to obscure Germanic origins through removal of a give-away *umlaut*, changing the family name from Kühle to Kool before, so he said, finally settling on *Cool*...

He then started his audience on a breath-taking journey through the history of Mount Everest starting with the geological birth millennia ago, when continent sized tectonic plates collided and went *up* instead of *down*, such that a bit of seabed ended up some 29,028 feet above today's sea level. Some 60 million years later, in 1849, an astute Surveyor General of the Great (70 year) Trigonometric Survey of India noticed this particular bit, initially labelled "Peak 15", from a range of some 140 miles and decided to name it after his predecessor, Sir George Everest - instead of Chomolungma ("Mother Goddess of the World"), as locals would have preferred.

Having established that Everest was indeed the highest mountain on earth kick-started an age of exploration dogged by immense challenges; from political hostility to world wars - and not least to the sheer savagery of the terrain compounded by serious cold and the poorly understood effects of low oxygen at altitude. Nevertheless Great Britain led the stage and through a series of expeditions to Everest north side in the 1920's, Norton came to set an altitude record, without bottled oxygen, of 28,050ft (which was to stand for some 54 years, until the Austrian duo of Messner and Habeler made first oxygen-less ascent in 1978). Norton lived to tell his tale. Sadly but famously, on the same 1924 expedition, the lead duo of Mallory and Irvine were to disappear high up on the mountain, leaving their legacy of mystery; around whether they had succeeded in being first to summit Everest, which still wasn't solved even when the frozen body of Mallory was found 75 years later by an American expedition, up at 26,760ft - and showing signs of multiple injuries consistent with having fallen on descent from places unknown...

Failure to summit, World War Two and a different political scene caused attention to switch, in first instance, to the 1950's and second to the largely unexplored South side of Everest. Kenton spent some time explaining the series of events culminating in the successful 1953 British Expedition led by Colonel Sir John Hunt, a British soldier, but where summit pair was Edmund Hillary a New Zealander and Sherpa Tenzing, of disputed ancestry, but probably Nepalese. Famously, the news of this triumph was released just in time for the Coronation of Queen Elizabeth 2nd...

Kenton went on to explain that the entire decade of the 1950's represented an age of first ascents of the world's 14 peaks of over 8000m or 26,240ft, of which Everest is the highest. Almost without exception expeditions were large, came from overseas and involved siege style tactics, with the setting up of fixed camps and ropes, and with use of bottled oxygen on peaks with summits much above 26,000ft - and thereby requiring the employment of many local Sherpa's as high altitude porters, as well as (increasingly) local climbers and experts.

The routes of ascent chosen in this perhaps Golden phase of Himalayan mountain climbing, were the easiest. Kenton explained that several other landmark phases were to follow. In the 1960's to 1970's various teams showed how it was possible to climb these giants by different and progressively harder routes. The Americans were first to climb Everest west ridge and to traverse the mountain, since they used the original south col route to descend, in 1960. Briton Sir Chris Bonnington led a successful ascent of the SW Face in 1975. A Japanese Yūichirō Miura was the first to try to ski down from high up on the mountain in 1970 attempting, unsuccessfully in the thin air, to use a parachute to slow his apparently suicidal 6,600ft plunge... he lived to tell the tale and Kenton was impressed to meet same man aged 80, in the process of becoming oldest to summit Everest in 2013.



The next huge land-mark was climbing Everest without oxygen, as already mentioned, by Messner and Habeler in 1978. This was as a kind of side-show on yet another large siege style (Austrian) expedition to the South side, with fixed camps, fixed ropes etc. Messner silenced the critics a mere two years later, when he took the next step and climbed the mountain *solo* from the North side, in 1980, with just his girlfriend as company, as far as advanced base-camp at 21,000ft. This triggered a kind of 'fast and light' - and 'without oxygen' - era, where small groups or soloists were attempting the very hardest routes on biggest mountains, sometimes in the case of especially Polish climbers; even in *winter*... Kenton mentioned his friend Steven Venables, who reached Everest summit via the vast Kangshung Face, on an ultra-lightweight American expedition. This era, sadly, had some tragic consequences: far from being safer, as originally claimed, many practitioners of 'fast and light' died, examples being Tasker and Boardman, superstars of the 1980's, who disappeared high up on Everest's, then unclimbed North East Ridge...

The latest era, of the 1990's onwards, has been guided expeditions, enabling enthusiasts with lots of money, but insufficient experience, to reach highest places on earth. This is Kenton Cool's era. It has enabled him to have made the current record number of ascents of Everest, for a non-Nepalese national. Necessarily this era has been back to the old siege style climbing with use of standard routes, (huge) fixed camps linked by aerial ropeways. Bottled oxygen is a must for clients - but also guides, who have to be in best possible physical condition to assist their charges. Large numbers of expert Sherpa's are employed, not merely as porters but as climbing guides, colleagues - and now even competitors.

This era, now decades long, has attracted a lot of controversy; severely criticised by respected climbers from former generations, for example by Sir Edmund Hillary, before his death in 2008. There has much published about rubbish, from half destroyed tents and empty oxygen bottles, to human sewerage, which doesn't decompose up in the cold of high altitude. There have also been many deaths - over 310 at the current time, with 2023 season being one of the worst, with some 17 deaths logged, for the year of Kenton's 17th successful summit. Some of the tragedies are due to unavoidable factors such as avalanches, ice-fall collapses, which in 2015 were triggered by an earthquake and resulted in 19 deaths; the worst year on record. Kenton cited examples of many *preventable* deaths, where some error of judgement was involved; not following best practice, ignoring warning signs, mismanaging large numbers at bottle-necks on fixed ropes, failing to do contingency planning...



To partially offset the sad toll of premature death, bereavement and devastated families, Kenton also moved on to describe the many positive steps taken to improve safety and welfare and also to tidy up. There have been vast clean-up operations and there are now strict rules around the removal of rubbish and especially sewerage on the mountain. Kenton himself has modified his own style of leadership, to now include (at greater expense to his clients) getting to know them and taking them on training climbs (e.g. Aconcagua, at 22,841ft highest in the Andes and 2nd of the world's 7 continental highpoints; The Seven Summits) and putting them through a series of challenges before accepting them for an Everest climb. He has evolved a very close working relationship with his Sherpa partners. As such he believes he is able to minimise risks to himself (he is a passionate family man as well as mountaineer!) as well as to his clients. Nevertheless he is realistic and understands that deaths cannot be completely eliminated - and that, having highest exposure to the most dangerous places, the Sherpa teams are the most vulnerable to getting caught out. They are now able to command much better and farer pay for the risks they are willing to take; but nevertheless rarely have access to

Life Insurance... to this end Kenton is (also) a passionate supporter of various charities who support Sherpa well-being. As an aside to his talk he encouraged his audience to purchase T shirts, raising funds for The Juniper Trust, which amongst various actions offers some kind of Life Insurance to bereaved Sherpa families.

Finally, to at least partially answer the question as to why he loves Everest so much, Kenton showed a wonderful slide taken at sunrise from South Summit, showing the shadow of the mountain, stretching to the far horizon...