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First published 1983

This edition published by
MAINSTREAM PUBLISHING COMPANY (EDINBURGH) LTD.
25 South West Thistle Street Lane
Edinburgh EH2 1EW

ISBN 0 906391 38 5

The publisher acknowledges the financial assistance of the Scottish Arts Council
in the publication of this volume.

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Cover and book design by Jenny Carter
Front cover illustration by John Hewitt
Printed and bound in Great Britain by
Spectrum Printing Company, Edinburgh

ROOF OF THE WORLD

Man's First Flight Over Everest

James Douglas-Hamilton

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FOREWORD

The Rt. Hon. Lord Tweedsmuir C.B.E., LL.D.

THIS BOOK IS by the son of the chief pilot of the highly successful and hazardous Houston Mount Everest Expedition of 1933. It tells of how four men, in two single-engined bi-planes were the first in history to look down on and photograph the top of Mount Everest. The writer is my son-in-law.

In June 1932 his father, then the Marquis of Douglas and Clydesdale M.P. was approached by my own father, John Buchan, who was then M.P. for the Scottish Universities, and asked if he would lead such a venture if it proved possible to launch it. My father had been a very fine climber in his youth, and was a member of the Alpine Club. He wrote a book called *The Last Secrets*, containing a chapter on Mount Everest which was then unclimbed. He never lost his interest in exploration and I have seen him in the Rocky Mountains in Canada when he was well into his sixties, planning in his mind's eye the routes he would have taken on those towering peaks. But of all mountains Mount Everest fascinated him most. Its upper slopes were at that time still unseen by mortal eye.

Clydesdale appealed to him because he had youth and vitality and was a distinguished and skilful airman commanding 602 (City of Glasgow)

Bomber Squadron in the Auxiliary Air Force. He was also a superbly fit young man. He had been stroke of the Balliol VIII, captained the Oxford Boxing team, was a good skier and had been middleweight boxing champion of Scotland. Almost every moment of his spare time was spent flying with the Auxiliary Air Force. He had a burning conviction that the air was his element. He seemed to my father to be an altogether natural choice as Chief Pilot, and a man for such a challenge.

If any should wonder why men are drawn to such hazardous adventures, the answer lies in the words of that great polar explorer, Fridtjof Nansen: "A mighty manifestation of the power of the unknown over the mind of men".

Until 1856 Everest was one of a series of almost unapproachable Himalayan peaks and was dignified, not by a name but, merely a number: Peak XV in fact. It was christened after a Surveyor General of India called Sir George Everest, and from its christening it has held mystery and magnetism for the rest of the world. It had by 1933 drawn a number of climbing expeditions, claimed not a few lives, and was still unconquered. This mountain with a very English name seemed a personal challenge to the people of this country. The magnetic pull of the mountain has never diminished.

Flying then was still in its infancy. People were just getting used to the world having a new dimension, once described as an "uninterrupted navigable ocean that comes to the threshold of everyman's door". At that time Britain had achieved the records for flying the greatest distance, at the maximum speed and to the highest altitude yet attained. But already Admiral Byrd had ridden this new element to the North and South Poles, and Britain was feeling the challenge. A committee was formed. Clydesdale and my father were members and 14 months of intensive work went into the planning to keep four human beings in the air over Everest for 15 minutes. In the course of this study aviation took considerable strides.

On April 4th, 1933, the two single-engine planes took off from Purnea on the 150-mile flight to the peak of Everest. Looking back there were so many things without which the expedition could never have been begun. One was finance. All through this century expeditions have been funded by private subscription, generally coming from many pockets and involving the knocking on many different doors. Those of us who knew Clydesdale remember his charming diffidence and very real shyness. He would have found this distasteful and difficult. It was therefore the greater gain that the financial generosity of Lady Houston, whom he approached, put all financial worries behind them. The other equally fundamental necessity was gaining permission of the Nepal government to fly over their territory.

But there were so many other factors that had brought them to this jumping-off point. The most powerful ingredient of success was the excellence of the team under their wise and experienced leader, Air Commodore Fellowes and the individual calibre of the pilots

and observers which made it a practical proposition. Fellowes had insisted that the minimum should be left to chance, and that they must do all their thinking on the ground, and work out as far as possible every conceivable situation with which they could be faced in the air. Their flight from Britain to North Africa and then across India to their starting point was an epic in itself. It took them across an older India, an Omar Khayam tapestry of Maharajahs and palaces and peacocks, tigers and temples.

From the moment that morning when they took off to climb through the many thousands of feet of the dust haze of the Indian plains to reach the clear mountain air this becomes a story of four people. Clydesdale and his observer/photographer Colonel Blacker were in one plane. Blacker's grandfather had been the first Surveyor General of India. He had ended a distinguished career by killing an adversary in a duel, and falling dead from his adversary's bullet, at the same instant. To his grandson, this expedition was a long held ambition. Clydesdale would pilot the leading aircraft with Blacker as Chief Observer and the other aeroplane would be flown by Flight Lieutenant David McIntyre, a brother officer in the same Squadron, with an extremely experienced aerial photographer called Bonnett.

This was no ordinary adventure for adventure's sake, neither was it just a desire to get in first, although that came into it. Many experts had worked on these planes and the splendid Pegasus engines were far ahead of their time. But the fact remains that they would only photograph Everest, and return, if they had unusually favourable weather conditions. The Pegasus engines could carry the aircraft at 140 miles per hour at that height, but the winds are often far stronger than that. They reckoned it would take them 1½ hours to reach Everest and they would have enough petrol then to stay for 15 minutes and no more. They took no parachutes, but reckoned that they could possibly glide for 75 miles if the engine failed. The cockpits were open, and to keep alive at that altitude, which would almost instantly extinguish human life, they had to wear electrically warmed clothing and oxygen apparatus. Daunting conditions.

The photographers had to perform 46 different tasks if they were to bring back the results which they hoped.

Only a few hours later they returned. But it must have seemed like days to those who were awaiting them on the ground. What the flyers had seen struck them with a force of revelation. Accounts written by men whose normal speech was the simple English of everyday life reached high flights of lyrical description. Clydesdale wrote of the sighting of Everest from above the heat haze 50 miles away, "the dust haze, completely obscuring the foothills, rose well above the snow line with the result that this arc of great mountains appeared detached from the earth and suggested an eerie land floating in a drab sea somewhere between earth and sky". None of them were ever to forget that scene, or how close they came to disaster when a down-draught caught them and sent them hurtling downwards to

clear a long knife-edge ridge far too closely to bear thinking about. In a very few hours they were back at their base again.

It would probably be quite wrong to assume that people read forewords. For those that may, I will not spoil the end of the adventure, and the act of "magnificent insubordination" which justified its undertaking. The expedition takes its place among the great pioneering sagas of the history of aviation.