

PROFESSOR N. E. ODELL, 1890-1987

Noel Odell, who died on 21 February at the age of 96, was the last survivor of the climbing party in the membership of the third Expedition to attempt the ascent of Everest, in 1924. That Expedition holds a prominent place in the annals of mountaineering because of the mystery attaching to the fate of George Mallory and Andrew Irvine, following their bid for the summit on 8 June. Odell, who was well qualified on grounds of his fitness and climbing record to take part in that attempt, acted in support of the two climbers, going up twice from a lower camp to over 27 000 feet in search of them on successive days. He will always be remembered for having reported catching a glimpse of the pair in a brief clearing of the mists as he approached Camp 6; a sighting which has ever since left a question-mark about the possibility that Mallory and Irvine, or one of them, may have reached the summit. Did Odell really see them? If so, where were they at that moment in time? These are the questions, intriguing to mountaineers, which may never be answered.

From the age of 13 and throughout his life, Noel Odell found joy and fulfillment in the mountains, which he visited and climbed all over the world. In 1936 at the age of 46 he climbed Nanda Devi with H. W. Tilman; it was the highest mountain climbed at that time. Two years later, with Tilman, he returned to Everest after an interval of 14 years. In his earlier years, Odell found pleasure in less ultimate goals. He showed his prowess on British rock. I recall my own impression of his performance on a route named

'Tennis Shoe' on the Idwal Slabs in Snowdonia, which was typical of his careful and precise technique on small holds when climbing steep rock.

Odell's interest in rock also derived from his high qualifications as a geologist, gained at Harvard and Cambridge, and crowned by his tenure of the Chair of Geology at Otago University, New Zealand between 1950 and 1956. He was an earnest, enquiring man, even a trifle humourless. I remember having been engaged in correspondence with him in a matter of nomenclature, in which he took me to task for having given the name of 'South Summit' to a minor eminence, of great significance to ourselves in 1953, on the final stretch of the South-East ridge of Everest.

But his nature lacked nothing in keenness and enthusiasm. He delighted younger generations of climbers by his lively interest in their aspirations and achievements.

Noel Odell served in the Royal Engineers in both World Wars. He was 50 when he joined up again in 1940. I will always remember my astonishment in Catterick Military Hospital, where I was recovering from a serious climbing accident in 1941, when a tall, keen-eyed and youthful-looking subaltern entered my ward, stood smartly to attention and saluted: 'Lieutenant Odell reporting, Sir!' He was, of course, one of my heroes and such deference to myself, a mere Captain at the time, quite took me aback.

Everyone who attended the 75th anniversary celebrations of the Association of British Members of the Swiss Alpine Club at Saas-Fee in 1984 will remember the seemingly ageless nonagenarian striding across the glacier towards the Britannia Hut, and standing outside that refuge, oblivious to the wind, cold and snowfall, as he signed autographs for his Swiss admirers while younger and less hardy fellow countrymen and women preferred the warmth and shelter within. He was a familiar and regular attender at other Meets and lectures of the Alpine Club, the Climbers' Club and the Royal Geographical Society.

Some of us will remember too, with affection, his wife Gwladys, who died a decade before her husband and was his shy, unassuming but constant companion during their 60 years of marriage.

JOHN HUNT

*Journal
Roy George 502*

*Copy in Noel Odell
Harvard
Travelers
Club.*

NOEL EWART ODELL

1890 - 1987

With the death of Noel Odell the Club has lost its most senior member. He joined the Club in 1916, was elected Vice-President in 1945 and honorary member in 1973. He was also a founder member of the Himalayan Club and honorary member of a number of other mountaineering clubs including the American Alpine Club, the Canadian Alpine Club, the New Zealand Alpine Club and the Norsk ^{or} Tjnder Klub to which he was particularly attached. His wife Mona was also a member of long standing having joined LAC 1921 and remained a member till her death in 1977. See AJ 83 1978 p278.

Odell qualified for the Club in the golden years of alpine climbing before the first world war and was a near contemporary of such great figures as Geoffrey Young, George Finch and Alfred Zurcher. His proposal form was seconded by Hasket Smith. But we remember him most of all as our last survivor of the dramatic 1924 Everest expedition in which he played such a memorable part, spending many days above the North Col, going twice up to Camp VI in support of Mallory and Irvine's attempt on the summit and being the last man to see them alive. His performance that year is all the more remarkable when it is remembered that this was his first Himalayan expedition and his first experience of high altitude, his selection for Everest having been based on his Alpine record combined with the strength and endurance he showed on sledging journeys in Spitzbergen. He had to withdraw for personal reasons from the 1933 expedition but came to the Himalaya in 1936 with the Anglo American expedition to Nanda Devi and this was his second annus mirabilis when at the age of 46 he with Bill Tilman made the first ascent of this noble mountain, then and for some

years the highest to have been climbed.

He was back on Everest in 1938 with Tilman's expedition but, as events *turned* out, did not go very high that year. After the war he continued to climb and explore actively in the Canadian Rockies with Frank Smythe, in Yukon and Alaska with an American expedition, and especially in New Zealand during his time at Otago University. On his return from New Zealand he was sixty-six but this was by no means the end for he remained vigorous right to the end. Even at the age of 93 he attended the 75th anniversary celebrations of the ABMSAC and made his way, with some mechanical assistance, up to the Britannia hut.

As an expedition member Noel was a genial and easy-going companion. On Nanda Devi he was, apart from Graham Brown, the oldest of our party and being a somewhat patriarchal figure earned the nickname, which he rather relished, of Noah.

On Everest in 1938 he was teased unmercifully about his rather ponderous glaciological researches and took it all in good part. He was an impressive man in his prime and Charles Warren reminds me that when the Dzongpen at Shekar entertained us that year the chang girls characterised him as a god like figure. I remember him most clearly of all on a little side journey we took together, crossing back into Sikkim over the ^{Lorak} ~~Lorak~~ La, an excursion we both greatly enjoyed and one about which he often reminisced in later years. The only thing one found to criticise about him was his extreme slowness in dealing with his kit and in doing camp chores. Such things have a disproportionate importance at high altitude and I have long suspected that it was this quality which made Mallory reject him and prefer Irvine for the final assault in 1924.

Odell was a geologist, trained at the Royal School of Mines where, after the interruption caused by the first world war in which he served in the Royal Engineers and was three times wounded, he qualified as A.R.S.M. In the early

twenties he joined the geological staff of the Anglo Persian Oil Company working first in London and then in Persia; he next moved to Canada working for a mining company and later as a consulting geologist. From 1928 - 30 he was at Harvard as lecturer in geology and from there he came to Cambridge first as Ph.D. student then lecturer in geomorphology and was supervisor of studies in geology and geography at Clare College. He remained at Cambridge till the war started and despite various interruptions Cambridge was to be his main base for the rest of his days.

The first of these interruptions was the second world war which saw him, aged 50 re-commissioned in the Royal Engineers, serving initially in this country but later transferring to the Indian Army in the Bengal Sappers and Miners.

Odell never was and probably never aspired to be in the front rank of geological research, indeed his career was the result of perseverance and endurance for he was not awarded his Ph.D. till the age of 49 nor ^{did he get -} got his first professorship till he was sixty, this being at the University of Otago in New Zealand which must have been a very congenial post. A part of his rather splendid inaugural address at Otago in praise of mountains was read out at his memorial service in Cambridge. It is now in the University Library. After a spell back at Cambridge he did a further two years, starting in his 70th year at the University of Peshawar. Geology had provided him with an extraordinarily varied life giving opportunities for field work in many continents and for making a host of friends with whom he kept regularly in touch. He was a great letter writer. Clare finally made him an honorary fellow in 1983 and he was a most loyal and devoted member of both College and University.

Loyalty is also the word that comes to mind in thinking of Odell as a member of A.C. for he was intensely proud of the Club and, even in his eighties and

nineties, an unusually regular attender at Club meetings and indeed at other mountaineering gatherings. Members for whom the events of 1924 and 1936 are ancient history will remember him as an upright and distinguished figure, still possessed of all his faculties and contributing, sometimes at great length, to discussions at Club meetings. Even in the week of his death he was at the memorial meeting organised for Don Whillans at the Royal Geographical Society. His sudden death that weekend was surely the perfect end to a long and active life.

The Noel Odell evening organised by the Club in his memory was a unique and fitting tribute to a distinguished and popular member.

Written by Peter Lloyd for the Alpine Club. Also to be copied by the Himalayan Club Journal.