COVER PAINTING

This painting was commissioned from the renowned Sherpa artist Kapa Kalden in 1968. Khunde village and its new hospital occupy the top half with Mount Everest behind. Two black Hillary pipelines snake their way down from the spring on the slopes of the sacred mountain Khumbila, and John and Di McKinnon, first of the volunteers, can be seen (though not identified) in front of the hospital.

In the lower half of the painting is Khumjung village with its Hillary school built in 1961. The season is spring as shown by the piles of leaf-toilet compost in the fields and the seed potatoes being tossed from a basket into newly-hoed furrows. A stone-mason shapes rocks between the two Buddhist chortens on the left. Khumjung monastery, amidst its grove of sacred junipers, is partly shown on the right, and attached to the houses of the wealthier families can be seen separate rooms housing private shrines beside tall prayer flags. The Hillary buildings have metal roofs rather than the grey wooden shingles of traditional houses.

# HIMALAYAN HOSPITALS

## SIR EDMUND HILLARY'S EVEREST LEGACY

**Michael Gill**
with Lynley Cook

craig potton publishing

For additional information, photos and the latest updates, visit the website:

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# PROLOGUE

When night fell, three figures left the low stone building and trudged along the path leading out of the village. One of them carried a large tapering basket slung from a headband. His hands pulling down on the woven band eased some of the weight from neck and shoulders. In the basket was the body of a man.

Before long they reached the last stone house of the village and entered a rock-strewn meadow. Following grassy paths between boulders they came to a more open space. Here the basket was lowered, a pick-axe and spade produced. The digging took some time, for even in this clearing the ground was stony. But finally the grave was finished, the body laid within it. Quietly the three people retraced their steps, past the dark houses, between the stone walls, until they reached the building they had come from.

This seemingly sinister episode is not the beginning of a detective novel. It is one of the stories told by doctors who over the last forty years have worked in Sir Edmund Hillary's two hospitals in the Sherpa region of the Himalayas. Two of the three figures were young doctors from New Zealand. The third was a poor Tibetan, prepared to risk spiritual pollution in return for a meagre payment. The body was that of a Tamang porter who had been brought to the hospital a few days earlier, desperately ill in the last stages of tuberculosis. He was beyond the reach of medical care by then and had died in hospital.

The problem was what to do with the body – or rather how to cope with the dead man's spirit now hovering over the place where he had died. Had he been a Sherpa, the relatives would have known what to do. For a start, they would have made sure that he died in his own home rather than in a foreigner's hospital populated with its own unpredictable cloud of spirits. They would have called in the lamas, who in turn would have used their Buddhist rituals to summon up beneficent deities to escort the spirit of the dead man safely into the next world and towards his next rebirth. And when he first became ill, they would have had the local shaman, the lhawa, sit beside him and go into a trance, into the other world where he could find out which spirit was causing the disease and how best that spirit could be persuaded to leave the man.

This book tells how these different healers came to know each other. When the first Europeans entered Solu Khumbu in 1950, they found a land that felt as one imagines medieval Europe might have been. Big, rambling monasteries with red-robed monks sitting in the sun, or cross-legged, chanting, in front of an array of gilded, richly clothed images in the temple. A silent, peaceful landscape without machines. Sherpas carried loads of wood on their backs, water from the spring in a wooden bucket on a headband. Fields were dug, planted and harvested by hand; the houses were built of chipped rock and roofed with wood shingles or slate. The rhythm of life was dictated by the seasonal plantings, by moving the yaks to high mountain pastures, by Buddhist festivals in the monasteries and harvest celebrations in the villages. Religion was an abiding presence for both good and evil, with spirits in the air, in the mountains, always ready to punish or help according to how one lived by their precepts.

For two years the doctors moved in this world. Even if their medicines were not always accepted, socially they were welcomed into a warm and hospitable community. These doctors had, after all, been brought to Solu Khumbu by Sir Edmund Hillary, the Burrah Sahib, who each year returned to help its people with schools, pipelines, bridges. The doctor couples in turn fell in love with the Sherpas. There were inevitably bad times, but when separation came at the end of two years the doctors felt keenly the loss of an important part of their lives.

The crow is acquiring merit by sheltering amongst prayer flags
MIKE GILL

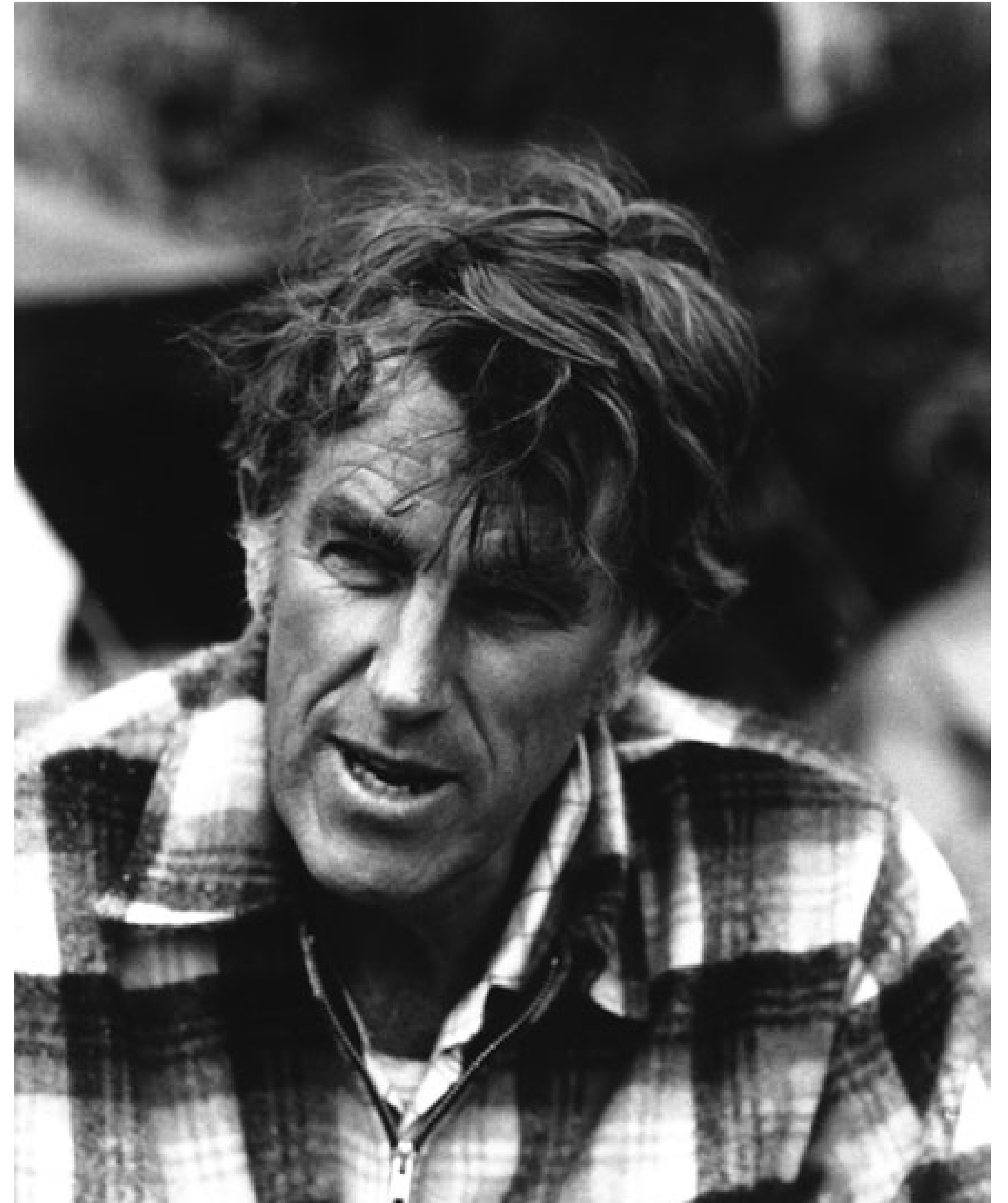
# INTRODUCTION

Sir Edmund Hillary established two hospitals in Solu Khumbu, the Himalayan homeland of the Sherpas. The first, in 1966, was Khunde Hospital in the Khumbu region at the foot of Mount Everest; the second, built in 1975, was at Phaplu in the Solu valley. Both were staffed by volunteer couples from New Zealand or Canada working for periods of two years. Eventually both hospitals were handed over to Sherpas – Phaplu to Dr Mingmar Gyelzen in 1982, and Khunde to Dr Kami Temba in 2001.

In 2006 the volunteers who had worked in the hospitals gathered in Nepal to celebrate forty years of hospital medicine in Solu Khumbu and tell stories about their lives in an environment so different from anything they had known before or since. One of the volunteers, Lynley Cook, felt that the stories should be told in a book, and began collecting letters, interviews and photos. I offered to edit the material and write the linking text.

My own role needs further comment. I first met Ed in 1960, when he invited me on the first of many expeditions, and I have been intimately associated with his aid work since it began with the building of Khumjung School in 1961. In 1960–61, Ed was hunting the yeti, climbing mountains and supporting his scientific leader Griff Pugh in the Silver Hut expedition studying high-altitude physiology. At that time, I was a twenty-two-year-old medical student, obsessed with climbing mountains and always ready to drop my career, such as it was, whenever Ed invited me on another of his amazing expeditions. I was a founding member of Ed's Himalayan Trust when he formed it as the vehicle for his aid projects in 1966, and I was a member of its Medical Committee which selected and supported the volunteers for Khunde and Phaplu. From 1982 to 2001, as secretary of the committee, I wrote a monthly exchange of letters to the volunteers and distributed these to Trust members. So I had large files of my own to add to Lynley's collected letters and interviews.

It seemed at first that the material would be repetitive. Surely one two-year period would look much like another? But it has not turned out that way. The volunteers varied widely in their personalities and backgrounds, and they spoke and wrote differently about their experiences. Each chapter became an unpredictable encounter with a couple I had met but could not claim to have



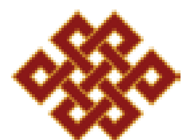
Ed Hillary, 1970 MIKE GILL

known. From the files I would take a pile of their letters, an interview, and immerse myself in their words – and I would find my imagination stirred by what they had said or spoken, so that I seemed to be there with them. For all the volunteers, the two years at Khunde or Phaplu, where they grew close to a community that was stranger than they could have guessed, were some of the richest of their lives. 'Is there life after Khunde?' they asked when their time there came to an end. Life back home was always easier, and in the end preferable, but something had been lost, a sharp edge, a closeness to a more natural world.

My one regret is that I have been unable to place this manuscript in the hands of Ed Hillary whose comments were always perceptive. He was central to the strange and different life led by the volunteer couples in Solu Khumbu. His Himalayan Trust was the most pared away of aid organisations, consisting as it did of a Sherpa, Sirdar Mingma Tsering, at the Khumbu end of the line, and, at the other, Ed himself, who spent part of each year in Nepal and a significant part of the rest of his time raising money abroad, particularly in the US and Canada. Between Mingma and Ed there was no bureaucracy, just a succession of volunteers who grew to love Nepal. Although the stories here are for the most part about the volunteers, all of them knew that Ed was the important figure in the life of the hospitals. That is why this book is dedicated, with great affection, to Ed Hillary. Without him the events described here could never have happened.

Mike Gill
Auckland, 2007–2011

The village close below is Khunde with its hospital marked by a long shining roof. In the middle distance is Khumjung. The mountain is Ama Dablam.
MIKE GILL, 2007



CHAPTER 1

# ED BEGINS IT ALL

OCTOBER 1960 – DECEMBER 1966

It was in October 1960 that Ed Hillary conceived the idea of schools and a hospital to help the Sherpas. He and his party were crossing the 5,800-metre Tashi Laptsa pass which provides a passage over the mountain rampart to the west of the Sherpa region called Khumbu. With its stone-swept gullies, icefall and crevassed névés, the Tashi Laptsa is not easy even with crampons, ice-axes and ropes. Before crossing the pass, they had pitched a makeshift camp high on the moraine-covered ice of the Tolam Bau glacier. There, as night fell and the porters crowded for warmth under tarpaulins, Ed and his climbers, along with Sirdar Urkien and Nepali-speaking journalist Desmond Doig, huddled around a fire of juniper and azalea scrub whose pungent smoke filled the air. With Desmond translating, talk turned to the Sherpas and their future, and the question was asked, 'If there were one thing, Urkien, we could do for your village, what would it be?' Ed had thought the answer might be a small hospital, but the answer Urkien gave was, 'We would like a school for our children.'

The answer was not forgotten. Next day, they crossed the icy snow of the pass and saw before them the fabled Khumbu, home of the Sherpa porters who carried loads on high mountains. It was a day of bright sun, and from the crest of the pass an array of peaks filled the horizon: white spires, fluted faces, blade-like ridges and great rock walls. Here was a place utterly remote – except for a couple of Tibetans, stripped to the waist and wearing sheepskin trousers and boots, who were driving a mob of yaks and goats that went slithering over the icy surface.

That evening, after passing the red temple and houses of a monastery perched on a cliff above the valley, the party camped in Thame, first of the six main Khumbu villages. It crouches in the lee of a ridge that gives shelter from the fierce catabatic winds that come hurtling down from the Tibetan Plateau in late winter. Unexpectedly, they found the village surrounded by a sea of black, domed tents belonging to Tibetan refugees who had fled Chinese reprisals against rebellious Khampa tribesmen.

After crossing the Tashi Laptsa pass from the Rolwaling Valley the yeti hunter enters the Khumbu region through the village of Thame. On the far side of the Dudh Kosi valley rise the peaks of Kangtega and Thamserku. MIKE GILL, 1960

Thame lies in the Bhote Kosi (Tibetan River) valley which runs 32 kilometres from the 5,700-metre Nangpa La pass in the north to the sentinel village of Namche Bazaar in the south. When the first Tibetan immigrants – who became known as Sherpas, People of the East – crossed the Nangpa La around 1530, they would have grazed their yaks here and built their first rough shelters. The most famous Tibetan of them all, Tenzing Norgay, crossed the Nangpa La as a boy in the 1920s and worked in Thame before moving on to Darjeeling to start his career as a high-altitude porter.

The year 1960 was one of unprecedented Tibetan migration, and the huge herds of yaks, goats and sheep they brought with them scavenged across the hillsides of Khumbu like locusts – it was more than a decade before the grasslands and other vegetation began to recover. Despite their plight, with their animals being slaughtered, or dying of starvation, or being driven over the Tashi Laptsa to look for grazing, the Tibetans were in excellent spirits.

Next day, Ed's party moved south to Namche, tucked in its scoop in a hillside that plunges down to the confluence of the Bhote Kosi and Dudh Kosi rivers now running in deep gorges. A fine spring provides an abundance of fresh water. Namche, the usual entry to the Khumbu and best-known of its villages, was home to traders bringing salt from Tibet in exchange for grains harvested in Nepal. In 1960, no one foresaw its future as a major trekking centre.

In the afternoon sun they moved on again through shrubs aglow with autumn colours, this time to the villages of Khunde and Khumjung, 500 metres higher. The track eased off as it wound its way across close-cropped grass amongst

TOP AND ABOVE Tibetan refugees in Thame, 1960 MIKE GILL

TOP Panorama of Khumbu in 2010 looking east from the slopes of Kwangde. The houses of Namche fill the small cirque lower centre. The pale flat airstrip above it is Shyangboche. Khunde and Khumjung occupy the valley a little higher and to the left. In the middle distance is Phortse village. To its right on a spur across the Dudh Kosi valley is Tengboche Monastery. Mountains left to right are Taweche, Nuptse, Everest (behind), Lhotse (in cloud), Ama Dablam. Kangtega rises just out of sight on the right. LHAKPA SONAM SHERPA

ABOVE Namche Bazaar in 1960. Fifty years later the same village is crowded with two- and three-storey trekker lodges. MIKE GILL

Ed Hillary climbing the trail from Namche to Khunde, 1960. The peaks left to right are Taweche, Everest and Lhotse. MIKE GILL

clumps of juniper and fir. There were long mani walls of stone slates carved with the incantation Om Mane Padme Hum, bringing merit to those who pass by, and chortens painted with the eyes of the Buddha. To their right rose unbelievable mountains, a constellation of ice-clad ridges converging on the summit of Thamserku, and the immense rock walls of Kangtega surmounted by its snow saddle. They came over a hill and caught their breath as, suddenly, before them was Ama Dablam, most beautiful of mountains.

After crossing a small pass through a wilderness of huge moraine boulders, they came in sight of Khunde and Khumjung, almost continuous one with the other in their hanging valley, once the bed of an old lake. Rows of stone houses with grey slate or shingle roofs grew from the landscape. Around and in front of the houses stretched potato fields, now bare, whilst towering behind rose the slopes of the sacred mountain, Khumbila. Khumjung was the home village of Sirdar Urkien and there, eight months later, the first school would be built. Khunde was the home of Mingma Tsering who from 1963 would be Ed's sirdar. Six years later, it would become the site of the hospital.

From Khumjung the group took the trail that dropped sharply to the gorge of the Dudh Kosi, then climbed to Tengboche Monastery with its view of the Lhotse–Nuptse wall and the mighty peak of Everest rising behind. To the north, across a gorge on the steep slopes of Taweche, clung Phortse, fifth of the Khumbu villages. An hour past the dark red walls of the monastery was the highest village, Pangboche, but before reaching it the party turned right to enter the Mingbo valley in the shadow of Ama Dablam.

The Silver Hut expedition of 1960–61 was one of the more complex of Ed's many ventures. It had begun, in the autumn, with a search for the yeti in the mountains to the west of Khumbu. Its winter segment was devoted to high-altitude physiology under the leadership of Dr Griff Pugh. And its third section, in the spring of 1961, would be an attempt on Makalu, the world's fifth highest mountain, using the winter's acclimatisation and knowledge to make the climb without oxygen.

In Mingbo, Ed joined up with his scientists, climbers and builders who were constructing the Silver Hut on the Mingbo névé at 5,800 metres. And it was

## YETIS

At the beginning of the expedition, Ed had called for yetis, dead or alive. A live yeti would have been an embarrassment to the group which had no facilities for containing a large disgruntled ape – who would not have been mollified by the promise that she (or he) was about to spend the rest of her days in the Lincoln Park Zoo in Chicago.

The yetis had left behind them a trail of red herrings in the form of artefacts which travelled abroad to be examined by experts under the surveillance of headman Khunjo Chumbi. In the salons of Paris and Chicago, Khunjo was a huge success, but the nature of the yeti eluded them: the hand was a human hand; the domed scalp had been fashioned from the skin of a Himalayan serow, a member of the goat family; the long shaggy black fur came from a blue bear.

On a high névé Ed's team had found tracks which surely belonged to a yeti – but they shrank to fox prints when traced back to deep shade where the sun could not enlarge them through melting. It seemed the yetis had retreated into some mountain fastness where even a Hillary could not reach them. Later, volunteers were to learn that a yeti reveals itself only at night. If you find yourself alone in a rough shelter at 5,000 metres on a stormy night and you hear a strange whistling call followed by the sounds of a large animal shambling towards you, then your best option is to flee rather than wait for a photo.

D.L. Snellgrove in his scholarly *Buddhist Himalaya* has the final word on yetis. In a footnote on page 294 he writes: 'In popular belief the yeti is an entirely mythological creature, identifiable with the rakshasa of Indian mythology. He belongs to the entourage of the "country-god" of Khumbu (*Khumbu-yul-lha*) who sends him forth as an emanation, when he intends harm to anyone. Thus to see a yeti is a very bad omen, only to be countered by directing effort forthwith towards accumulating merit. The yeti-caps are used once a year in the temple dances, when a monk masquerading as the yeti accompanies the "country-god" on his reeling rounds. Mountaineers have on several occasions mentioned the existence of unexplained foot-prints, which their Sherpa assistants regularly identify as those of a yeti. Whatever these foot-prints may be, the only connection with the yeti exists as an extension of the popular imagination.'[1]

Makalu Base Camp, 1961 with Lhotse and Everest behind MIKE GILL

in Mingbo that Ed was able to meet a request from the Red Cross to build an airstrip that would help them bring food to the Tibetan refugees. It was the first and most terrifying of his three Sherpa airstrips. Since his days in the Antarctic, Ed had liked using small planes to fly supplies to remote and difficult places, so he set to work clearing rocks from a yak pasture in a tiny, enclosed valley at 4,600 metres. The entrance was at right angles to the line of the strip, which was 400 metres long and ended abruptly at an immense boulder. On his first landing, Captain Schrieber, an experienced Swiss pilot, had lurched crabwise up the primitive strip, knocking off the tail wheel before his plane came to a halt metres short of the terminal boulder. Surveying the damage, he shook his head and commented, 'Ach! Mingbo is not for beginners!' Nevertheless, it was used to fly in supplies for Tibetan refugees before its closure by a civil aviation official who had landed in turbulent conditions. When reminded that the immediate closure would leave him with a seventeen-day walk to Kathmandu, he opened the airfield for one last flight. Amongst the last loads to be flown in was a prefabricated aluminium building made in Calcutta which, in June 1961, would become the Khumjung school.

In the last weeks of 1960, Ed left the physiologists to their winter work and flew back to New Zealand. He returned in February 1961 for the attempt on 8,463-metre Makalu. On the leisurely trek from Kathmandu, he was joined by the wives of expedition members, including his own Louise and Peter Mulgrew's wife June. It had been an ambition of Ed's to share with Louise the delights of walking through Khumbu, and indeed she loved it. But soon the women were flying off the new airstrip, leaving Ed to get his expedition across the three high passes that separated Mingbo from Makalu.

He had hardly begun to acclimatise to the heights above 4,000 metres when he was peremptorily summoned to Kathmandu to explain to the Nepalese Government why his Silver Hut physiologists and climbers had, on 13 March, made the first ascent of Ama Dablam without permission. It had not occurred to anyone that permission might be required for a peak as low as 6,856 metres. In the end, the misunderstanding was smoothed over, but Ed had lost two valuable weeks in Kathmandu that should have been spent acclimatising and getting fit. He was now forty-one. His letters to Louise show how frustrated he was that he could not easily slip back to being the old Ed who could stride with such power across the high-altitude landscape.

20 April 1961. Silver Hut

My dearest Louise,

Just a scribbled note which may or may not catch the plane tomorrow (or the next day). All is going well despite various ups and downs … I've been dashing furiously around but I'm definitely finding it far harder work than I used to and am being forced to realise that with age plus my sojourn in Kathmandu, fitness can't just be picked up in a few days. Let's face it sweetheart, I'm an old fogey! I'm not worrying too much … Everybody seems to be going very well indeed and I think our chances are really quite good. I'm very pleased to think that

Rimpoche with Louise and Ed Hillary, 1966 MIKE GILL