



## AAC Publications

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### Doug Scott, 1941–2020

**In a career spanning decades, Doug Scott was recognized worldwide as one of the greatest mountaineers of the postwar era.** The statistics speak for themselves: over 40 expeditions to Central Asia, countless first ascents all round the world, the first British ascent of Mt. Everest (and by a new route). But what made Doug special was not the height or difficulty or number of ascents—for him, what mattered was how you made those ascents.

Like all the best people he was a jumble of paradoxes: tough-guy rugby player fascinated by Buddhist mysticism; anarchic hippy with a deep sense of tradition; intensely ambitious one day, laid back the next. He was as egotistic as any climber, but also demonstrably generous and compassionate, admired universally for his philanthropy. In his Himalayan heyday he resembled a beefed-up version of John Lennon; in latter years, presiding over his gorgeous English garden in moleskins and tweed jacket, he looked more like the country squire.

He grew up in Nottingham, the eldest of three brothers, and started climbing at 13, inspired by seeing climbers when he was out walking with the Scouts. By the early seventies he was publishing regular articles in *Mountain* magazine, and what an inspiration they were, illustrated with his superlative photos. I remember particularly his piece “On the Profundity Trail,” describing the first European ascent of the Salathé Wall with Peter Habeler. There was also an excellent series on the great Dolomite pioneers—research for his first book, *Big Wall Climbing*—and a wonderful story of climbing sumptuous granite on Baffin Island.

For an impressionable young student, dreaming of great things, this was all inspiring stuff, and I lapped it up. But it was only much later, when I saw Doug’s big autobiographical picture book, *Himalayan Climber*, that I realized quite how much he had done in those early days. As well as Yosemite and Baffin Island, there were big, bold adventures to the Tibesti Mountains of Chad, to Turkey, and to Koh-e-Bandaka, in the Afghan Hindu Kush.

All the while, Doug had been working as a schoolteacher in Nottingham. I have no idea whether he planned all along to go professional as a climber, but it was Everest that made that possible. Doug went to Everest twice in 1972, attempting the southwest face unsuccessfully. Then, while in India during the first ascent of Changabang, a message came through announcing a surprise free slot in the Everest waiting list for the autumn of 1975. With little time to prepare another Everest blockbuster, there was talk at first of a lightweight attempt on the regular South Col route, but Doug was instrumental in persuading Chris Bonington that they should go all-out for the southwest face. That was the great unclimbed challenge.

It seemed inevitable that Doug should have been chosen for the first summit push with Dougal Haston. In a team of big personalities, he was the biggest personality of all. Perhaps, like Hillary, he wanted the summit more than the others; in Bonington’s eyes, he clearly had that extra something—that sheer bloody-minded strength, determination, and ability to push the boat out. Supremely confident, Scott and Haston made an informed decision to continue to the summit even though it was almost dark and their oxygen was nearly finished. On returning to the South Summit and seeing how dangerous it would be to continue down in pitch darkness, they agreed very sensibly to bivouac right there, higher than any other human being had ever previously spent a night, and wait for the morning. It amazes me to this day that Doug was not even wearing a down jacket, yet still managed to avoid frostbite. “The quality of survival,” as he put it, was exemplary.

Following the huge Everest expedition, both its architect, Chris Bonington, and Doug realized that the way forward lay in scaling things back down. To my mind, his finest climb was Kangchenjunga in 1979, with Peter Boardman, Joe Tasker and, initially, Georges Bettembourg. It was only the third ascent of the mountain and the first from the north. Ropes were fixed judiciously on the lower, technical face. Up above, they cut loose and went alpine style, without oxygen. Messner & Co. had already shown it was possible to climb to the highest altitudes without oxygen, but they had done it on well-known ground, with other climbers around should things go wrong. This was a big step into the unknown.

It would take too long to list all Doug's other Himalayan achievements, but it's worth mentioning some themes. What was impressive was the way he was always rethinking expeditions. It was his idea to transfer the concept of the extended Alpine summer season to the Himalaya, with loosely connected teams roaming far and wide on multiple objectives, with the family sometimes coming along, too. He introduced young talent to the Himalaya, bringing Greg Child's big-wall expertise to the beautiful Lobsang Spire and east ridge of Shivling, and Stephen Sustad's stamina to the gigantic southeast ridge of Makalu. They didn't quite pull off their intended traverse of Makalu with Jean Afanassieff, but, my goodness, what a bold journey it was. In fact, despite several attempts, Doug never quite summited Makalu, nor Nanga Parbat, nor K2. But that is not the point. He didn't give a damn about summits for their own sake—unless they were attained in an interesting, challenging way, they held little appeal. Or he might just decide that the omens—or the I Ching, or his particular mood that day, or whatever—were not right, as happened in 1980, when he left the slightly exasperated Boardman, Renshaw, and Tasker to continue on K2 without him.

When the mood *was* right, there was no stopping him. Among all the climbs I would most love to have done (and had the ability to do!), the first ascent of the Ogre in 1977, with Bonington, Mo Anthoine, and Clive Rowland, must be the most enviable, with difficult rock climbing on immaculate granite, 7,000 meters above sea level, at the heart of the world's greatest mountain range. (Less enviable was the epic descent with two broken legs.) Another visionary climb was the 1982 first ascent of the southwest face of Shishapangma, with Alex McIntyre and Roger Baxter-Jones, discovering the most elegant direct route to any 8,000-meter summit.

I only climbed with him once, when we were both speaking at an Alpine Club symposium in North Wales. There was a beautiful sunny morning—far too good to be shut indoors—so we sneaked over Llanberis Pass for a quick jaunt up Cenotaph Corner. It was 1989 and he was middle aged, but definitely still in his prime. He led with powerful ease and then suggested we continue up another route, Grond, a brutal creation of his old mentor Don Whillans. In the absence of large cams to protect the initial offwidth, he grabbed a large lump of rhyolite, explaining cheerfully, "This is how we used to do it, youth," shoved it in the crack, hitched a sling round it, and clipped in the rope. As soon as he moved up, the chockstone flew out of the crack, narrowly missing my head, but Doug carried on regardless, blithely calm, assured and fluent, supremely at ease with the rock.

Doug's conversation, like his lecturing—or indeed his expeditioning—could be enigmatic, discursive, elliptical, often veering off the beaten track into untrodden side valleys, but always with an undercurrent of humor. And never pulling rank: He was a humble, approachable man, happy to talk with anyone. He had great empathy with the people of Nepal, and this came to fruition in his remarkable charity, Community Action Nepal. At an age when most people in Doug's position would be happy to rest on their laurels, Doug traveled the length and breadth of the United Kingdom on grueling lecture tours, pouring all the proceeds into his charity.

As if this were not enough, Doug also managed in recent years to complete a fine history of the Ogre and to finally publish his long-awaited autobiography, for which he was first paid an advance in 1975. His history of Kangchenjunga will be published this year.

Despite the frenetic pace he set himself and his devoted third wife, Trish, Doug seemed in recent years to have achieved the kind of contentment that many people only dream of. He had a genuine

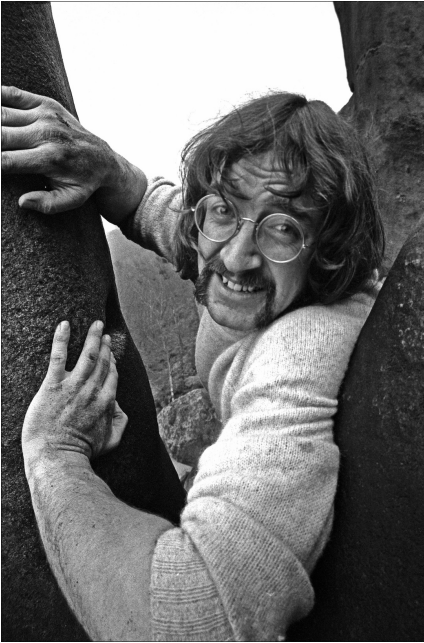
sense of purpose and an assured legacy. He will be missed hugely in the U.K., in Nepal, and all round the world, but most of all by Trish and by the five children of his first two marriages. I feel honored to have known him and glad that if I should ever have grandchildren I will be able to tell them, "I climbed Cenotaph Corner with Doug Scott."

– Stephen Venables

## Images



Doug Scott at home in 2007.



Doug Scott at Black Rocks in 1972.

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