
Issues

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The Yeti Footprints

(Plate 52)

Peter Steele gave me a hard time in his biography of Eric Shipton, published in 1998. Nine years before, I had written an article which doubted the authenticity of the celebrated yeti footprint photographed by Shipton during the Everest reconnaissance trip of 1951. In short, I suggested that Shipton had carried out a hoax by fabricating the footprint. Steele dismissed my article, which appeared in the *Sunday Times Magazine*, as 'difficult to take seriously, being so full of scurrilous invective'. And he was particularly aggrieved by my 'churlish appraisal' of Shipton's character.

How neat, I thought. Rubbish your opponent in ad hominem terms and save yourself the trouble of scrutinising arguments set out in an extensively researched article of almost 4000 words. I supposed that in the literary world these things were likely to happen, a prediction fulfilled when an anonymous reviewer in the *Economist* damned *The Wildest Dream*, the biography of George Mallory which I wrote with my wife Leni, as 'adding little' to an understanding of Mallory. I was astonished that someone could be so glibly dismissive of the product of years of work, particularly when I learned the reviewer's identity and remembered that he had told me how much he enjoyed the book when we had supper after an Alpine Club meeting a month or so before.

As for Steele, we met and shook hands at the Banff Mountain Festival last November, where Leni and I were giving a presentation on *The Wildest Dream* which by then had won the Boardman Tasker prize. We agreed to a concordat whereby we could continue the debate over the Yeti footprint in a more restrained and academic manner but since I have never replied to Steele's accusations, I would still like to have my say. I would also like to respond to Michael Ward's article 'The Yeti Footprints: Myth and Reality' in the 1999 AJ, in which I am once again taken to task. I have to say that reading their arguments has only strengthened my belief that the crucial footprint was a hoax, particularly in view of the way both treat a vital item of fresh evidence.

First, let us look at Shipton's primary account of what he found. Shipton, it should be recalled, had led the Everest reconnaissance expedition to the top of the Khumbu Icefall, where the route into the Western Cwm was barred by a monstrous crevasse. Instead of heading directly home, Shipton diverted the expedition into exploring the Menlung region 30 miles west of Everest. It was an enterprise entirely in keeping with the man, a romantic

and adventurous diversion that satisfied his love for lightweight ventures into the wild places of the planet. It could have caused a major international incident, for at one point Shipton led the party into Chinese-occupied Tibet, and had to bribe their way to freedom when they were detained by Tibetan guards.

It was on the afternoon of 9th November that Shipton came upon the footprints that were to cause such excitement and controversy. He, Mike Ward and Sen Tenzing had crossed the Menlung La at 19,960 feet and headed south-west down the Menlung Glacier. Half an hour later, they came upon some tracks in the snow. This is Shipton's account for *The Times*, published on 6th December:

The tracks were mostly distorted by melting into oval impressions, slightly longer and a good deal broader than those made by our mountain boots. But here and there, where the snow covering the ice was thin, we came upon a well preserved impression of the creature's foot. It showed three 'toes' and a broad 'thumb' to the side. What was particularly interesting was that where the tracks crossed a crevasse one could see quite clearly where the creature had jumped and used its toes to secure purchase on the snow on the other side. We followed the tracks for more than a mile down the glacier before we got on to moraine-covered ice.

Shipton took four photographs. Two showed a line of tracks stretching across the snow, one with Ward standing beside them. Two were close-up shots of a single footprint, which had a prominent big toe and impressions of perhaps four neighbouring toes. To indicate the size of the footprints, estimated at around 12" by 6", Shipton included an ice axe in one of the photographs and Ward's boot in the other. On 7th December *The Times* published three of the photographs – two long-shots and one close-up – together with the dramatic headline: FOOTPRINTS OF THE "ABOMINABLE SNOWMAN".

The footprint attracted immediate attention. Until then, the existence of the yeti had been almost solely a matter of Himalaya folklore, embedded in the legends of the mountain kingdoms and supported only by second- or third-hand travellers' tales. Among zoologists and anthropologists there was an air of excitement, since the footprint displayed a range of novel characteristics.

From the impress it had left, the ball of the creature's foot appeared to be concave, whereas on any known creature of similar size, including primates and humans, the ball is convex. There was an enormous difference in size between the 'thumb' and the other 'toes', and a marked gap between the thumb and toes – features also hitherto unknown. And there were sharp indentations apparently left by the outer part of the heel and the inner part of the sole, leaving it hard to conceive what kind of creature could have left these marks simultaneously.

When the scientific world tried to suggest what kind of creature could have left the footprint, it came up with some imaginative proposals. The Belgian zoologist, Professor Bernard Heuvelmans, concluded that it had to be a cross between an ape and a bear. It followed that the footprint had been made by a creature with unique morphological features that had developed in isolation in the equivalent of a Galapagos Islands style enclave deep within the Himalaya. It also had characteristics shared with other creatures of controversy such as the Loch Ness Monster, never leaving any other signs of its existence, such as dung or carcasses; and allowing only occasional imperfect glimpses of itself, instead – as in the case of the Loch Ness Monster – of surfacing in all its glory in full public view.

An early sceptic was Ed Hillary, one of the two New Zealanders who took part in the 1951 reconnaissance. Hillary noticed that there were striking differences between the nature of the tracks in the two sets of photographs. The single footprint is clearly new and fresh, whereas those in the line of tracks are blurred and indistinct, almost certainly the result of thawing and refreezing over a period of several days. Hillary questioned Shipton on the issue several times but always found him evasive. 'Eric,' Hillary told me, 'tended to rather dodge giving too much of a reply.'

A second sceptic was the anthropologist John Napier, a professor of primate biology at London University, who went on to write *Bigfoot*, an enquiry into the existence of a range of creatures of dubious provenance, published in 1972. As well as being baffled by the unique characteristics of the single footprint, he too noticed marked differences between the two sets of prints. The footprint in the close-up shot is almost rectangular, with the addition of the toes. The footprints in the long-shot are oval and there are no signs of toes.

During his research, Napier was so puzzled that he questioned first Ward and then Shipton about the discrepancies. It was Ward who proposed a novel explanation: there had in fact been two entirely different sets of tracks. Shipton supported Ward's account, agreeing with Napier that those in the long-shot were probably made by a goat; it was only those in the close-up which emanated from the unknown creature, yeti or otherwise. Shipton blamed the original confusion on a sub-editor at *The Times*; Ward suggested that the negatives had been mixed up in the archives of the Mount Everest Foundation.

What was particularly striking about this explanation was that it contradicted all previous accounts. Shipton, in *The Times*, had described seeing just one set of tracks, and repeated this in his book *The Mount Everest Reconnaissance Expedition* (1952) and his autobiography, *Upon That Mountain* (1956). Ward too had related the one-track version in his own autobiography *In This Short Span*, published shortly before Napier's *Bigfoot*. Further confirmation of the one-track account is to be found in the diary of Bill Murray. On November 11, two days after the sighting by Shipton and Ward, Murray and Tom Bourdillon came upon the footprints, which Murray

described as 'a long line of spoor along the line of Eric and Michael's track'. I discussed the whole episode with Murray, who died in 1996, and he was certain that there was just one set of tracks.

I wrote my article for the *Sunday Times* in collaboration with Audrey Salkeld, who had previously voiced her doubts about the footprint in *Mountain* magazine. We obtained the full version of the 'ice-axe' photograph – the version that is usually published has been cropped – and found that it contained the top half of a second footprint. Unlike the full footprint above it, it had only vague impressions of the smaller toes; and where you would expect a big toe to match the one in the main footprint, there was nothing at all. It was after pondering all the evasions and inconsistencies that we concluded that the most obvious explanation for the unique and anomalous single footprint was that it had been fabricated by Shipton. It would have been the work of moments to enhance one of the oval footprints by adding the 'toe-prints' by hand, particularly a hand wearing a woollen glove. The crisp indentations delineating the inner side of the print could have been made by Shipton's ice axe. Hillary agreed with us, saying that he could quite imagine Shipton 'tidying up' the footprint in such a way.

It was for my temerity in arguing that Shipton could have been mischievous enough to perpetrate such a hoax that Steele attacked me so vigorously. After our rapprochement at Banff, he recommended that I read the diary of Tom Bourdillon, which I had not seen when I wrote my article in 1989. Steele told me that Bourdillon too had seen the crucial tracks and assured me that his diary entry supported the case for their authenticity.

At the time of the Everest reconnaissance, Bourdillon, a government physicist, was 27. Two years later, he and Charles Evans had the first shot at the summit of Everest, and could well have succeeded had Evans' oxygen equipment not proved faulty. They reached the South Summit where, before turning back, Bourdillon took one of mountaineering's most poignant and iconic photographs, with Evans in the foreground looking up at the tantalising final unclimbed stretch of the summit ridge. Three years later, Bourdillon died in a fall in the Bernese Oberland.

Jennifer Bourdillon – Tom's widow – kindly showed me the original manuscript of the diary he had kept in 1951. The key passage, in which he describes coming upon the footprints on 11 November, reads as follows:

Most interesting thing of the day was about a mile of tracks of Abominable Snowman. This is not a myth. The tracks were about 18" apart, and staggered, and the pads 10" x 8", probably walking on two legs. Eric and Michael has [*sic*] seen and photoed them some days before when they were fresh, & saw the detail and claws of the pads – further, impressions of front pads where the beast had jumped a crevasse and scabbled on landing. Sen Tensing had been familiar with the tracks and said 'big hairy man'. He distinguished between two sorts, one yak eating – this was – but this could have been on grounds of size and age only . . .

Peter Steele, of course, had argued that Bourdillon's account supported his cause. I believe that it does nothing of the kind. Bourdillon and Murray clearly did see the main line of tracks. But in the sentence beginning 'Eric and Michael ...', the syntax of Bourdillon's description makes it equally clear that he did not see the close-up prints, and was instead reporting the description given by Shipton and Ward.

When I looked again at how Steele had rendered this crucial text in his biography of Eric Shipton, I had a further surprise. This is Steele's version, which should be compared with the verbatim extract above:

The Abominable Snowman is not a myth. There were about a mile of tracks set 18" apart and staggered. The pads were 8" x 10" and he probably walked on two legs. There were impressions of the front pads where the beast had jumped a crevasse and staggered on landing.

I was astonished by Steele's selective editing of this crucial passage, as it removed the phrasing which makes clear that Bourdillon was reporting the description given by Shipton and Ward, rather than having seen the key footprint for himself. Since Steele accused me of being 'scurrilous', I felt like applying the same adjective to him. Steele has since told me, however, that he felt 'very contrite' for having 'condensed' Bourdillon's account in such a way. He explained that he had been pressed for time when Jennifer Bourdillon showed him the diary but now agreed that he should have recorded the passage word for word.

In his *Alpine Journal* article, Michael Ward also invokes Bourdillon to support his case. Before considering how he does so, it is worth examining in detail how Ward's own accounts have varied over the years.

This is what Ward wrote on page 83 of *In This Short Span* (1972):

We descended a glacier and in the late afternoon found some large footprints which Sen Tensing declared without hesitation belonged to the yeti. We could see these tracks continuing down the glacier for a long way and in certain places, where crevasses had been crossed, obvious claw marks showed where the animal had taken purchase on landing. A number of very clear prints were photographed, with my feet or ice-axe alongside for comparison. We followed the tracks for a short distance and then made our way off the glacier which we did not wish to follow.

There is one obvious inconsistency with Shipton's account. Ward refers to 'claw marks' left by the creature as it jumped across glaciers, whereas Shipton had described the creature as 'using its toes'. But otherwise, in describing just one set of tracks, Ward's account is in keeping with the published reports by Shipton and the diary entries made by Murray and Bourdillon, amplified to me by Jennifer Bourdillon earlier this year. Tom, she said, had always spoken of just one set of footprints: 'I'm sure Tom

thought it was one creature which had left the footprints. Nothing else had crossed his mind.'

It was under questioning by John Napier that Ward first changed his story and adopted the two-track account. He stuck to that version when I interviewed him for my article for the *Sunday Times* in 1989, and he again elaborated the two-track account. When I asked him why he hadn't described seeing two tracks in *In This Short Span*, he said he thought he had. He then added an intriguing variant. When I asked him why Murray and Bourdillon described seeing only one set of tracks in their diaries, he speculated that the other track must have melted. This explanation certainly did not accord with the weather at the time, Murray especially remembering the 'intense cold' at night. Nor is it easy to see why one set of tracks should disappear entirely while the other remained almost intact.

In his *Alpine Journal* article, Ward at first persists with the two-track account, although with caveats, such as the use of the word 'seem'. He relates how, at 15-16,000ft (Murray said the height was 18,000ft) they 'came across a whole series of footprints in the snow. These seemed to be of two varieties, one rather indistinct leading to the surrounding snowfields, while the other had in places a markedly individual imprint etched in the two to four-inch snow covering on the top of hard névé.'

Shipton, Ward relates, took two photographs of the 'indistinct' prints – those in the long-shots – and two of the 'most distinct and detailed prints' – the close-ups. Ward added that he and Shipton followed the tracks down the glacier and noted that where the creature had crossed a narrow crevasse it appeared to have left claw marks in the snow.

Like Steele, Ward invoked Bourdillon to support his case, saying that Bourdillon 'comments on the tracks which, by the time he saw them, had become deformed by sun and wind'. He and Murray 'followed them for some way down the Menlung Glacier'.

Bourdillon did not in fact say that the tracks had become deformed by the sun and wind. More important than this minor distortion, however, Ward has subtly changed his ground, forgetting his previous distinction between the two sets of tracks, which now appear to be one and the same. He thus leaves the impression that Bourdillon saw exactly what he and Shipton had seen, including the footprint with the toes in the close-up shot. Later in his article, Ward asserts, without qualification, that Bourdillon had 'confirmed their existence' – when Bourdillon, as we have seen from his diary, had done nothing of the kind.

Ward goes on to dismiss my argument that the footprints had been 'a hoax' and to insist that events had been exactly as he and Shipton had described – although without specifying which of the various descriptions this applies to. At the same time Ward abandons the explanation that the footprints were evidence of the yeti or some other hitherto unknown creature, and goes on to consider just how they could have been produced.

Ward's latest proposal is that the footprints were made by 'a local Tibetan with abnormally-shaped feet'. Ward cites various precedents from medical literature and his own experience as a doctor. These include feet whose toes have fused together; feet with deformed big toes at right-angles to the rest of the foot; 'club' or 'lobster' feet which have just two toes; or even feet exhibiting the well-known surgical condition *onycho griffosis* ('ram's horn nail'), where the nail of the big toe becomes deformed and curves under the toe.

By now, however, we are back to the two-track explanation once more, for Ward reasserts the distinction between the 'indistinct' tracks leading off the snowfield, and those with the 'markedly individual imprints'. But we are also in the realm of the utterly fanciful. Leaving aside for a moment whether there are one or two sets of tracks, consider what ensues from Ward's theories, namely that a bare-foot Tibetan with a rare deformity has randomly wandered to a height of at least 17,000 feet on the Menlung Glacier.

None of the deformities Ward proposes in fact accounts for the most striking curiosities about the footprint, such as the enormous difference in size between the big toe and the lesser toes; or the concave ball of the foot. In passing, it is worth noting that we have now parted company with the claw-marks which Ward had previously described. And we face yet another problem, which Ward ignores. Ward says that the wandering Tibetan suffered from deformed *feet*, an explanation that is presumably required since he has not suggested that the feet were not uniform. It appears therefore that the Tibetan's two feet were deformed in precisely the same way – for which the chances must be small.

Perhaps aware of this difficulty, Ward proposes yet another alternative scenario: that 'one footprint was superimposed upon another'. This might account for the single footprint in Shipton's photograph; but it will hardly explain any sequence of footprints, for which so many other explanations have been advanced – from the claw marks left where the creature landed in the snow, to the Tibetan with two identical deformed feet or excessively long toe-nails.

Ward nonetheless concludes that these explanations 'are as plausible as any that have been put forward so far'. Well, hardly. I have already advanced one simple explanation which accounts for every anomaly which Ward wrestles with – and which Steele deals with by ignoring them entirely.

Which brings us back to the question of Shipton's character. Was he capable of playing a practical joke in this way? Unthinkable, says Steele, and utterly out of character. But in the *Sunday Times* article, Audrey Salkeld and I cited several instances showing that Shipton did indeed like to indulge in jokes of exactly this kind.

In 1938, soon after he had returned from Everest, Shipton gave a lecture on the effects of altitude on the brain. He described an incident that

supposedly occurred high on the North Face of Everest in 1924, when Noel Odell attempted to eat some rock samples he had taken out of his pocket in the mistaken belief that they were sandwiches. Odell supposed that his sandwiches must have become frozen and threw them away. Odell told Audrey that the story was 'complete nonsense' and that he had in fact presented the samples in question to the Natural History Museum. Shipton told a similarly fanciful story about finding women's clothing and a 'sex diary' when he and Charles Warren located the body of the doomed aviator Maurice Wilson in 1935. Shipton related how he and Warren had tactfully buried the clothing and diary to avoid embarrassing Wilson. But Warren told Audrey that all of this was utterly untrue.

A further motivation could lie in Shipton's edgy relationship with the idiosyncratic Bill Tilman, his former partner on Everest and another who delighted in spinning travellers' tales. In 1949 Tilman claimed that while climbing at around 18,000 feet near Kangchenjunga before the war, he had come upon a line of footprints 'which could not be explained away'. He speculated that they had been made by 'a new erect being', perhaps wearing 'a primitive form of snow shoe', and went on to argue that if fingerprints could hang a man, 'footprints may be allowed to establish the existence of [the yeti]'.

Perhaps this implicit challenge gave a further spur to Shipton's imagination. However, while all these stories reveal elements of mischief-making on Shipton's part, I concede that it is a more serious step to mislead your expedition colleagues in this way. Jennifer Bourdillon, taking her husband's part, found the suggestion troubling: 'It would have been so alien from anything Tom himself would have done that it would have disturbed him profoundly,' she told me. Bill Murray told me that although Shipton had 'a peculiar sense of humour', and might even have played an initial joke on his colleagues, it was inconceivable that he would 'carry it on like that'.

Ed Hillary, however, believed that Shipton was capable of doing precisely that. 'He definitely liked to take the mickey out of people,' Hillary told me. 'He might have tidied it [the footprint] up, made it look fresh and new and photographed it.' As for Shipton letting the story run, Hillary said: 'He would think that was quite a good joke.'

The debate thus comes down to the issue of Shipton's character, and whether he could have done such a thing. Since Hillary for one believes that is possible, I am proposing a scenario which fits Hillary's reading and acts as an alternative to Mike Ward's deformed Tibetan.

Under my scenario, this is what could have happened. When Shipton and Ward came upon the line of prints, Shipton – unknown to Ward – added the crucial embellishments to the single footprint. He called Ward's attention to it, and joined in speculation that they had found evidence of the yeti. When they met up with their colleagues, it was in fact Ward who talked most volubly about finding the footprint, with occasional backing from Shipton. Shipton duly embellished the story in his account for *The*

Times, which appeared the day after his return from Kathmandu. He was taken aback to discover the furore it had caused, and perhaps relieved when the Natural History Museum, which staged an exhibition based on the photographs, concluded that the tracks could have been made by a langur monkey. Even so, he was irrevocably stuck with his account, for any recantation would expose his earlier deceit.

And Ward? It should be recalled that in 1951 Shipton was the most revered figure of active British mountaineers, who had been on all four British Everest expeditions of the 1930s. Jennifer Bourdillon recalls that Tom 'thought very highly' of Shipton and was reluctant to hear a word against him. He was also fiercely loyal to Shipton, resigning from the 1953 expedition when Shipton was replaced as leader by Hunt, until Hunt persuaded him to change his mind as he was needed to oversee the oxygen equipment. As a young man – 25 in 1951 – Ward was another fervent admirer of Shipton, although he later viewed him in a more realistic light. Even so, by my scenario, if Ward ever succumbed to doubts about the footprint he suppressed them, weighing in instead with new explanations and justifications when he was required to substantiate Shipton's original account. He too passed the point of no return, unable or unwilling to recast the episode in a way which might prove damaging to Shipton's reputation, and committed to endorsing it whenever the question was raised.

As an investigative journalist, I have learned one lesson which may be relevant. No matter how implausible a set of alternative theories may appear, there has to be one which is true. The best rule of thumb is to select the explanation which is both the simplest and least implausible – which in this case brings us back to the hoax.

Ward insists there was no hoax, and he's sticking to his story. It's a good story too, and one which has given us all great fun. There is a clue that Shipton would have enjoyed the fun too, since he remarked in one of his accounts for *The Times* that the footprints 'seem to have aroused a certain amount of public excitement'.



51. The photograph of 'yeti' tracks taken by Eric Shipton on the Rongbuk Glacier in 1935.
(*Eric Shipton*) (p153)



52. The famous shot taken on the Menlung Glacier in 1951; Gillman points to the less definite impression of the creature's 'toes' bottom right. (*Eric Sipton*) (p143)