

Richard Brooke surveying a frozen landscape in 1957


OBITUARY

Richard Brooke obituary

Explorer who assisted Edmund Hillary in the Commonwealth Trans-Antarctic Expedition and had a mountain named after him

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After returning from two bitter winters mapping Greenland in 1954, Richard Brooke barely gave himself time to warm up before knocking on the door of Vivian Fuchs, who was organising an

expedition to Antarctica. Brooke knew that in so doing he was compromising his career in the Royal Navy — his superiors would have preferred him not to gallivant off on another expedition — but the prospect of treading the same ground as his childhood heroes, Scott and Shackleton, was too tantalising to ignore.

Fuchs was arranging the first attempt to traverse Antarctica. His would be the first journey to the South Pole since those of Scott and Amundsen a generation earlier. Whereas their sledges had been pulled by dogs and ponies, Fuchs intended to make full use of modern technology, driving tractors across the ice and calling in aeroplanes for support. He planned that his expedition would be supported by another team, led by Edmund Hillary, who had recently climbed Everest. Hillary's team of Kiwis would scout ahead, prepare supply depots along the route and survey the surrounding landscape. Unlike Fuchs's team, they would rely on dogs. Fuchs saw that Brooke, with the experience he had gained in Greenland of handling dogs and surveying, would be a useful addition to Hillary's team.

In January 1957 Brooke and the Kiwis landed on the west side of McMurdo Sound, an ice-clogged bay into which the vast Ross Ice Shelf descends. To get from the ice shelf to the Polar Plateau you have to cross the Transantarctic Mountains, which skirt the shelf's eastern side. The men set out into the snow to explore whether it was possible to reach the plateau by way of the Skelton glacier, which cuts through the mountains. However, on the third morning Brooke made a near-fatal mistake.

He could see a series of narrow crevasses running parallel to their course. In an impetuous mood, his dogs began to veer towards them.

He made no effort to stop them, thinking that the cracks were narrow enough for the sledge to glide over. “The dogs got across, but the sledge broke through,” he recalled, “but luckily it jammed and I finished with my skis on one side of the crevasse and my chest on the other. You couldn’t see the bottom of that one. If I had gone down I would have been dead, no question.”

This brush with death was par for the course in Brooke’s adventure-filled life. He had already survived a tent fire in Greenland and would narrowly escape death many more times. He and the team made their way up to the top of the Skelton glacier where, at 2,500m (8,000ft), they set up a depot for Fuchs. Later in their 13 months in the Antarctic, Hillary gave Brooke the task of exploring the mountains around the Ross Ice Shelf. Brooke and his team were away for four months, travelled 1,000 miles and reached the top of the 3,735m (12,250ft) Mount Huggins, the first in the range to be climbed.

The team left Antarctica soon after. Brooke recalled looking out of the plane window and thinking that “it was sad to watch the mountains disappear but, on the other hand, we had done our journey, had exerted ourselves and got tired, and we were looking forward to a change”.

Francis Richard Brooke was born in Ealing, west London, in 1927, the son of Roderick, who had won the Military Cross in the First World War and now worked in the Lyons biscuit and chocolate factory in Greenford, and his wife, Muriel. As a boy he read *Adventures of a Mountaineer* by Frank Smythe, a climber of the Himalayas in the

interwar years. Richard's first mountaineering expedition was to the peaks surrounding Lake Ogwen in Snowdonia with his father.

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Brooke with Fido on the Tasman Glacier in 1956

Richard was educated at Durlston Court in Swanage, Dorset, then, to everybody's surprise, at the age of 13 he decided that it would be exciting to join the navy, something nobody in the family had done. He went to Dartmouth Royal Naval College, where he was in the first team in rugby, football, hockey and cricket, and then joined the crew of HMS *Warspite*. Returning home after firing at German beach defences in Normandy, the ship hit a mine, but made it back to port. He then joined the crew of HMS *Norfolk* which, after the war, returned King Haakon to Norway. It was supposed to be a secret mission, but ten miles off shore there were already many fishing

boats full of jubilant Norwegians, waving their king home. It was in Norway that Brooke got his taste for cross-country skiing and snowy mountaineering, and so, on his leave in 1947, he went to the Alps and climbed the Kuffner Arete of Mount Maudit.

The next year he joined the crew of the RSS *John Biscoe*, which shipped supplies to scientific bases in the Falkland Islands. It was on a trip to a base in Marguerite Bay in Antarctica that he met Fuchs, who was leading a survey of the area. His next assignment was in the survey navy, on board HMS *Scott*, where he would have stayed had the ship's commander not convinced him to join an expedition to Greenland. Funded by the navy, members of the expedition researched the area's meteorology, glaciology and geology, while Brooke's role was to survey it. He was almost killed one night when fuel spilt from his stove and set his tent alight. His friend Mike Banks cut the fabric open with his ice axe and hauled him out. He was awarded the Polar Medal for his time there and the Antarctic Clasp for his endeavours on the other side of the world afterwards. A mountain in Antarctica — Mount Brooke — was named after him.

Brooke had a talent for convincing the navy that it was in its best interests to let him go off on adventures; he assured his superiors it was essential that, on his way home from Antarctica, he joined a team of climbers heading for Rakaposhi, a peak in the Karakoram range. He made it to the highest camp, while Banks was the first to stand on its summit.

On his return the navy finally put him to more mundane work. As lieutenant-commander he served on board HMS *Undine*, *Dainty* and *Hermes*, though he left the service in 1966 after being passed over for promotion to captain. The previous year he had married Valerie

Brooks, whom he met on his way to play tennis in Bath. They had two sons, David, who became a teacher, and Patrick, who is about to oversee the refurbishment of the House of Lords. Brooke would take his sons walking in the hills although, being a reticent man, he rarely spoke about his own mountaineering exploits.



Brooke kept mountaineering into his sixties but gave up for the sake of his wife, Valerie

After leaving the navy he worked for the Electricity Council in Birmingham and Bristol. Though uninspiring, the work left time for his many herculean trials: 100 mile non-stop walks; mountain marathons and trips to the Alps. Having been for a long run in the Brecon Beacons before an important board meeting, he yelped in pain in the middle of it as his leg seized up. “Been up mountains again, Brooke?” his boss asked wryly.

In 1979 he climbed the formidable Peuterey Ridge of Mont Blanc. He and his climbing partner did not reach the summit until 5pm, by which time storm clouds were gathering overhead. Looking up at the

ridge from the campsite the next day, Brooke said that the route “gave me more pleasure to look back on than any other climb I have done”.

One of his final excursions was a “golden oldies” trip to Jaonli in the Himalayas, with some of his oldest climbing friends. While they were on the mountain it was rocked by a powerful earthquake that shook handholds loose.

Two years later he decided, to the astonishment of his friends, that mountaineering was no longer for him. He felt he owed it to Valerie not to continue risking his life for fun and he also felt that his many close shaves were a message from God that he was put on earth to do something other than climb mountains. He had always had a measure of Christian faith but since retiring and helping out at St Mary’s Church in Bath, he had felt that faith grow. Never having been one to hold forth about his views, he decided, in 1993, to become a lay preacher.

Yet he continued to walk distances that would daunt a man decades his junior. Even in his final months, he would walk a mile around the block every day. His son David took him on his last trip to the mountains in May last year. They climbed to Llyn Idwal, a small lake in the Ogwen valley, to look at the first mountains he climbed nearly eight decades ago.

Richard Brooke, mountaineer and explorer, was born on January 14, 1927. He died after a stroke on June 29, 2020, aged 93

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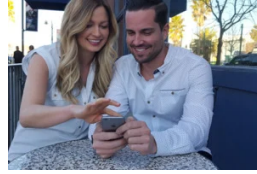
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William Spindler



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William Waff 20 HOURS AGO

I had not heard of Commander Brooke previously, however thanks (once again) to the Times obit staff in bringing him to life and introducing a very remarkable person. Well done, good and faithful servant. May he Rest in Peace and Rise in Glory. Amen.

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Julian H 1 DAY AGO

Great obit and what a striking conclusion

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Yellingtree 1 DAY AGO

Must have been a cat in a previous life - he appears to have used up his 9

lives in this one! Never a moment wasted it seems.

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Stephen Thomas | DAY AGO

What an extraordinary man. Such a loss. RIP

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Matthew Daley | DAY AGO

What a great life.

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Stephen Chimo | DAY AGO

"Fuchs was arranging the first attempt to traverse Antarctica". So what was that fella named Shackleton trying to do 40 years before??

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D

Dedan Kamau | DAY AGO |  Stephen Chimo

Ah, yes, the great newspaper headline;

'FUCHS OFF AGAIN.'

Read it out loud.

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A

Ann Lyon | DAY AGO |  Stephen Chimo

The difference is, I think, that Sir Vivian Fuchs's expedition actually reached its starting point and set off to cross the Antarctic. By contrast, Shackleton's ship was caught in the ice and eventually crushed, necessitating the remarkable open-boat voyage to South Georgia in search of assistance.

Meanwhile, the remainder of the crew remained on Elephant Island in harsh conditions and with limited supplies until relief

arrived (due to the remoteness of South Georgia, this took some time).

B Bobster | DAY AGO | [Reply](#) 4 [Recommend](#) [Report](#)

How wonderful to have a mountain named after you, in eternity hopefully.

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P PAUL BARTON | DAY AGO | [←](#) Bobster

Is there a Mount Fuchs?

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P paul dee | DAY AGO | [←](#) Bobster

Not eternity perhaps but at least 5 billion years.

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T Temporarily Sane | DAY AGO

Just finished Jouis Rudd's *Endurance* and talking to my son-in-law a couple of days ago, I explained that exploration and adventure were still available to our offspring and it was our duty to guide them in understanding that E&A are in their own minds and that E&A takes different forms to different people. Louis showed that you don't have to break records (he said that one of his records could have been for carrying the most booze across Antarctica :-)) or be the first to do it, all you have to do is satisfy yourself that you have experienced E&A to your fullest degree.

Only you can make your and by association, other peoples lives,

fascinating.

G glyn jones | DAY AGO | [Reply](#) 6 [Recommend](#) [Report](#)

Fascinating. His life, in an over-used phrase, is truly inspirational.

Would have ben great to be a fly on the walls at the offices of the Electricity Council of Birmingham and Bristol. The words square pegs and round holes springs to mind.



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Ian Clinton 1 DAY AGO

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What a life! Amazing. Excellent obituary.

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