

GOOD-BYE TO ALL THAT

Explorers used to navigate Earth's wildest regions and poshest salons with equal composure. But with the world mapped, today's risk takers are blazing a different trail.

By Darrell Hartman

There used to be such a thing as gentleman explorers—those intrepid travelers who were as comfortable in an Arctic whiteout as they were in a wood-paneled drawing room; who defined the outer limits of human achievement without ever seeming to break a sweat. But judging from recent obituaries, this subspecies of explorer is a dying breed. Peter Matthiessen, the author, naturalist, and onetime CIA agent, died of leukemia in April 2014. Mark Shand, the conservationist (and brother of Camilla, Duchess of Cornwall), whose list of ex-lovers is said to have included both Bianca Jagger and Caroline Kennedy, passed away from a head injury less than three weeks later. And Robert Gardner, the anthropologist, documentary filmmaker, and cousin of poet Robert Lowell, died of cardiac arrest just two months after that.

The ruggedness and refinement that characterized Matthiessen, Shand, and Gardner had to do with not just what they achieved but how they achieved it. Born into privilege and driven to succeed, they shared a

SIR EDMUND HILLARY (1919–2008)

The New Zealand mountaineer, seen in 1958
before leaving for the South Pole





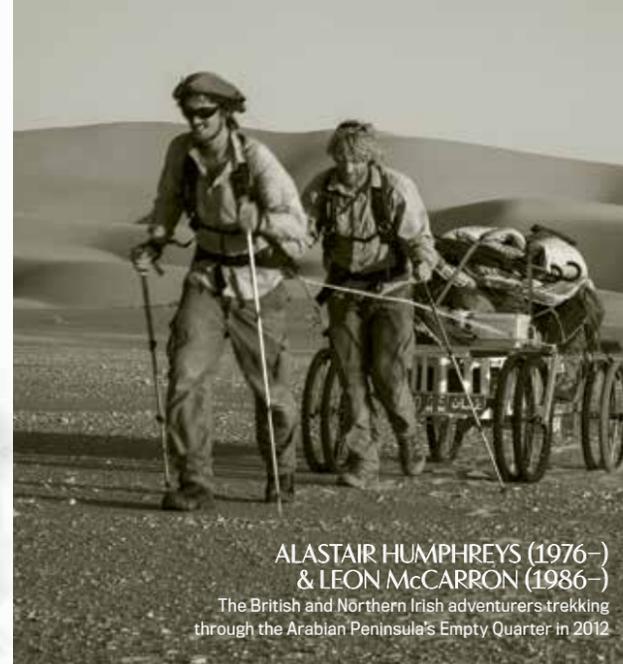
PETER MATTHIESSEN (1927–2014)
The American author at the harbor in Saint-Malo, France, in 1992



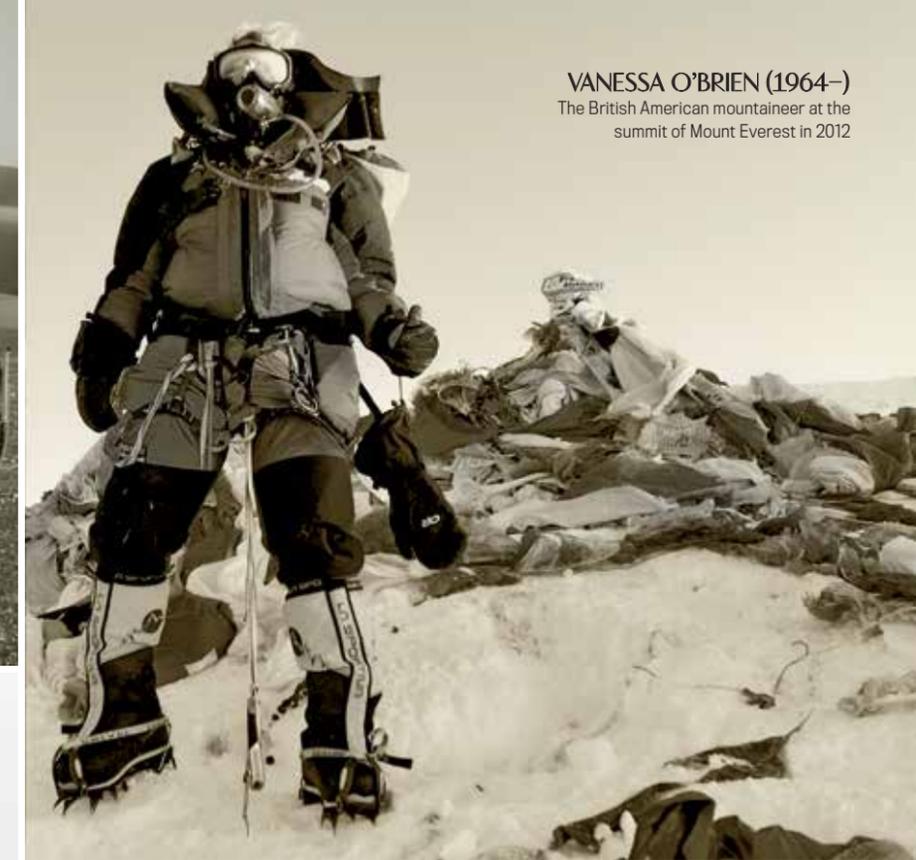
DAVID DE ROTHSCHILD (1978–)
In Sydney, the British expedition leader on his *Plastiki* catamaran in 2010



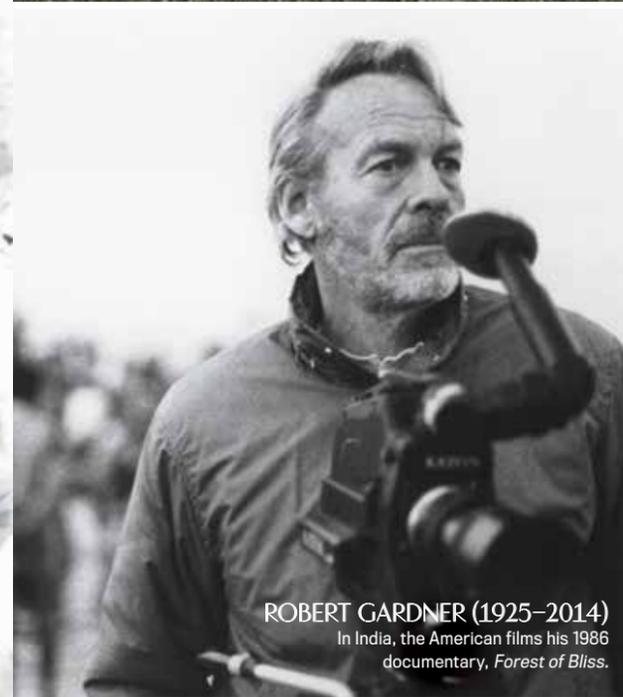
ROALD AMUNDSEN (1872–1928)
On his way to Antarctica, in 1911, the Norwegian explorer wore Inuit-style skins.



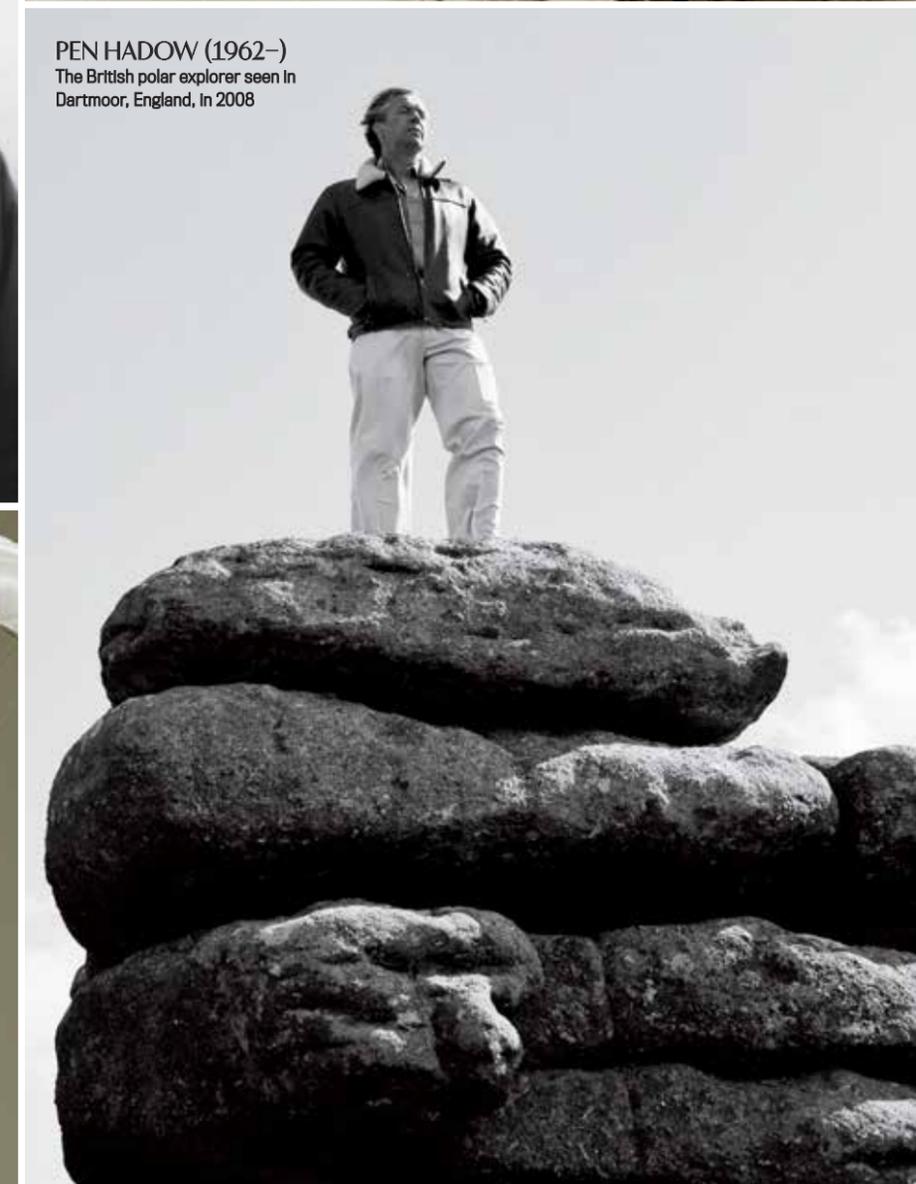
ALASTAIR HUMPHREYS (1976–) & LEON McCARRON (1986–)
The British and Northern Irish adventurers trekking through the Arabian Peninsula's Empty Quarter in 2012



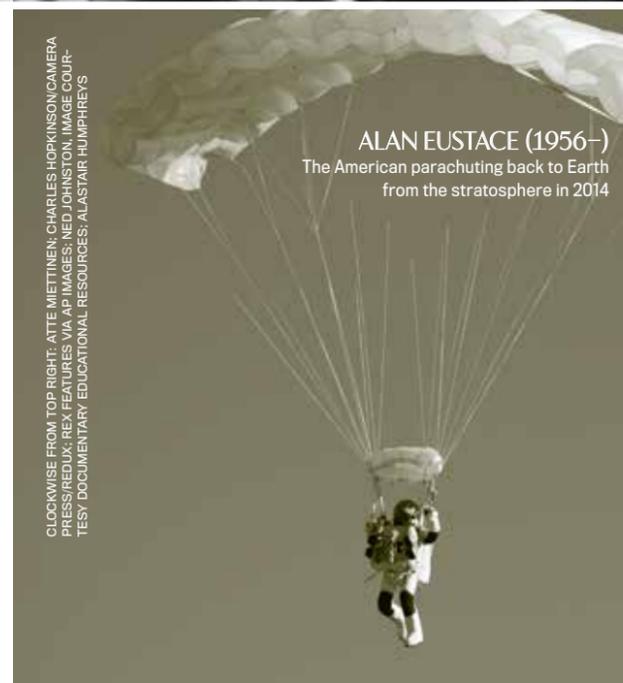
VANESSA O'BRIEN (1964–)
The British American mountaineer at the summit of Mount Everest in 2012



ROBERT GARDNER (1925–2014)
In India, the American films his 1986 documentary, *Forest of Bliss*.



PEN HADOW (1962–)
The British polar explorer seen in Dartmoor, England, in 2008



ALAN EUSTACE (1956–)
The American parachuting back to Earth from the stratosphere in 2014

self-effacing style that brings to mind Antarctic explorer Lawrence Oates, who announced he was “going outside and may be some time” before sacrificing himself to a blizzard rather than compromise his comrades’ pioneering attempt to reach the South Pole. (His exploring predecessor George Washington De Long downplayed Arctic squalls as “anything but satisfactory.”)

With far-off places more accessible than ever, that stiff upper lip has softened. “We’re definitely a lot less tough than we used to be, because life is generally easier,” says Leon McCarron, the Northern Irish adventurer and filmmaker who has retraced the footsteps of Captain FitzRoy and Charles Darwin in Patagonia and of Sir Wilfred Thesiger in the Arabian Peninsula’s Empty Quarter, the largest unbroken expanse of sand in the world.

Alastair Humphreys—who rowed across the Atlantic in 2012 and spent four years circumnavigating the globe by bike—identifies with the “goals and ambitions” of such turn-of-the-century explorers as Roald Amundsen (who beat Oates’s colleagues to the South Pole by a month), but admits to being awestruck by their fortitude. “I can’t imagine going a single day without moaning,” says Humphreys. “They never even used a swearword!”

Many of the first mountaineers—including Prince Luigi Amedeo, Duke of the Abruzzi and eponym of K2’s Abruzzi Spur—similarly shuttled between the twin heights of snow-bound peaks and high society, as did the pioneers of the old Ivy League climbing clubs. For all their accomplishments, today’s daredevils are not nearly so versatile. Vanessa O’Brien,

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: ULF ANDERSEN/GETTY IMAGES; APIC/GETTY IMAGES; TORSTEN BLACKWOOD/AFP/GETTY IMAGES

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP RIGHT: ATTE MIETTINEN; CHARLES HOPKINSON/CAMERA PRESS/REDX; REX FEATURES VIA AP IMAGES; NED JOHNSTON, IMAGE COURTESY DOCUMENTARY EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES; ALASTAIR HUMPHREYS

a dual British and American citizen who hopes to summit K2 in June, discovered as much in the lead-up to last year's American Alpine Club annual benefit dinner in New York City. "Some of these climbers and polar explorers literally said, 'Oh God, I have to go buy a suit!'" O'Brien says.

And whereas personal fortunes once fueled the exploits of yesteryear's gentleman explorers, today polar pioneer Pen Hadow speaks of the growing role of corporations in both exploration and environmental causes. The insurance giant Catlin sponsored Hadow's 2009 Antarctic survey—a 73-day slog that revealed an alarming thinness to the polar ice cap. Climate change is the impetus for a great deal of today's terrestrial exploration, as men who might once have prided themselves on pioneering previously uncharted territories now document the degradation of known ones.

More enticing to the spiritual heirs of Sir Edmund Hillary are those regions above and below the planet's surface: namely, outer space and the little-known ocean depths. James Cameron's nearly seven-mile descent, in 2012, into the Pacific's Mariana Trench had the feeling of a momentous feat—more men have set foot on the moon—even if it was a high-tech repeat of a far more analog dive made half a century earlier. And a new space race in the headlines is taking place between a trio of middle-aged moguls.

Where do these cosmic entrepreneurs fall on the classic-explorer spectrum? With apologies to Jeff Bezos and Elon Musk, only Sir Richard Branson seems to have sprouted from the old-school-adventurer family tree. But compare Branson's logo-brandishing efforts with those of Alan Eustace, the former Google executive, whose motivation for breaking the world record for the highest-altitude free-fall jump seemed to have been the thrill. Eustace refused support from the search giant, lest his 2014 effort be mistaken for a marketing ploy.

Today's explorers also seem to lack the specialization of their forebears. This may explain the trajectory of David Mayer de Rothschild, the youngest heir to the family's banking fortune, whose exploits include skiing at both poles and an 8,000-mile odyssey across the Pacific in a boat made of plastic bottles. His latest venture? A company called the Lost Explorer that sells clothes and apothecary items.

For Humphreys, at least, this changing of the guard carries with it a silver lining. "A lot of these gentleman explorers were tied quite tidily to the idea of colonialism, so there was an air of superiority about it," says Humphreys, himself a Brit. The new, more collaborative approach, he suggests, might result in better decision-making.

And who says the risk takers are gone, anyway? Earlier this year, the *New York Times* reported that subterranean explorers "are in the middle of their own golden age," with down and dirty adventurers mapping newly discovered cave systems. Meanwhile, as the 2014 crash of a Virgin Galactic test flight made clear, reaching even the lower orbits remains a potentially deadly business. The buccaneering Branson has nevertheless vowed to be a passenger on the maiden commercial voyage—once all the kinks have been worked out, of course. ♦

Ruggedness
and refinement
characterized
Mark Shand.



MARK SHAND (1951–2014)
The British conservationist was the founder
of the Elephant Family wildlife foundation.