
Legends & Myths



'Fujiyama from Otome togi Pass', Constance Gordon-Cumming,
12 August 1879, watercolour, 15in x 24in. *(Courtesy of Chris Beetles Gallery)*

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Remembering Maestri



Cesare with his wife Fernanda when they were living in Andalo during the winter of 1959-60. (All images courtesy of Gianluigi Maestri unless stated otherwise.)

On 19 January 2021 the Italian alpinist Cesare Maestri, ‘il Ragno delle Dolomiti’, died at the age of 91. He was perhaps the most controversial mountaineer of all time.

When I heard the news, I knew at once that I wanted to write an article about his life. Maestri operated mainly in Italian circles and as a result he was not widely known by the world at large. I had the opportunity to correspond with him on a number of occasions, and to meet him in person, and I felt that after his death he deserved to be better known to the outside world. I also recognised that portraying him objectively would not be an easy task, given the controversies that have surrounded him, mainly due to his activities between 1957 and 1970 on a certain remote peak in Patagonia: Cerro Torre.



Left: The famous meeting between Maestri and Bonatti near the summit of Cerro Adelas, after Bonatti pipped Maestri to the summit to claim the first ascent. (Photo by Carlo Mauri, Folco Doro Altan collection)

My relationship with Maestri started during the period from 1969 to 1972, when I had the good fortune to be working at the Rome office of what was then called the British Tourist Authority. Because of my love of mountains, and climbing in general, one of the first actions I took after arriving in Rome in September 1969 was to join the Rome branch of the Italian Alpine Club (CAI). This meant I could enjoy regular trips to the limestone outcrops around the city, as well as visiting the higher

mountains of central Italy. It also meant I received regular journals and news bulletins from the CAI, enabling me to keep myself 'al corrente' with the doings of Italian mountaineers around the world.

During a visit to the UK I met Ken Wilson, founder and editor of *Mountain*, and asked if he would like me to send him news updates from Italy, information which otherwise might reach him late, or not at all. After a couple of pints, I found that I had assumed the totally unofficial title of 'Italian correspondent', and started looking out for news items that might be of interest for the magazine.

One of the first pieces I picked up and sent to Ken was a report that in 1970 Cesare Maestri was on his way to Cerro Torre intending to climb the mountain in winter by the south-east ridge, a route which at the time had turned back a number of expeditions including in 1968 a British team comprising Mick Burke, Dougal Haston, Peter Crew, Martin Boysen and Peter Gillman of the *Sunday Times*.

I had vaguely heard of Cerro Torre and its ascent by Maestri and his Austrian companion Toni Egger in 1959. According to the accounts of Maestri and Cesarino Fava, who performed a back-up role and wrote about the expedition, Egger and Maestri had reached the summit in deteriorating weather but Egger was swept away by an avalanche during their descent and killed. The only camera the couple had was lost with Egger. Like most people who had read the accounts from 1959 I took the claim at face value, because I had no reason not to. So why was he going back, and why in winter? Later it came to light that he had taken with him a petrol-driven compressor, which was intended to speed up the process of drilling holes to insert expansion bolts in the rock.

Maestri and his team did not complete the route in the southern hemisphere winter of 1970, and returned in the summer 1970-71 to finish the task with a new compressor motor and a winch to pull it up. The summer expedition was reported on a daily basis by news outlets in the Trento area. They reached the level plinth on which the snow mushroom at the summit rests but did not climb the mushroom itself.

There was clearly a story here, and accordingly I wrote to Maestri asking if he could let me have an account of the expedition and particularly some photos for reproduction in *Mountain*. The reply came back quickly and was combative in tone. The full text of his reply was reproduced in *Mountain* 23 for anyone who is interested, but my enquiry about photos was brushed aside:

I refuse to give photographic evidence, which I have in plenty, because if the doubters themselves are not capable of reaching the summit I don't see why I should be the one to give them the satisfaction of seeing it. This sort of satisfaction can only be obtained as we obtained it – by dint of technique, willpower, hunger, cold, sacrifices, resistance and frostbite. Let these gentlemen reach the summit and bring me down a piece of our compressor, because it is their job to provide to me the proofs which they expect of me.

This was a reference to the fact that there was no photographic evidence of the success of the 1959 climb that resulted in the death of Egger.

The next thing to happen was that I received a telegram from Pete Gillman, saying he would like to interview Maestri for the *Sunday Times* and would I act as interpreter? Clearly the story was spreading beyond the confines of the mountaineering world. Before I had plucked up courage to phone Maestri I received a further message that Ken Wilson would be coming as well. In the end there were four of us, Ken, Pete, myself and Leo Dickinson, who came to get footage for a BBC film he was working on.

The interview took place in July 1972, and happened to fit in with my journey back to the UK at the end of my posting in Rome. The four of us met Maestri at his shop in Madonna di Campiglio, but he invited us to his home nearby, where we talked in his study for a good part of the day. The whole interview was also reproduced in *Mountain* 23. Given the tone of the letter Maestri sent me I was somewhat apprehensive at the prospect of meeting him but our welcome was cordial, and one of the first things he said to me was that we two could address each other using the friendly form of the second person (like most European languages except English, Italian has formal and informal ways of addressing others; the informal is reserved for family and close friends such as climbing mates). The interview finally came to an end because the other three had to get to the airport for their return flight to England. Maestri drew a map to show them the way. I was concerned that we had overstayed our welcome.

I am not intending here to discuss Maestri's claim to have reached the summit of Cerro Torre on the 31 January 1959. A great deal has been written

about this, and no doubt after his death there will be more. I am aware some people still believe the ascent took place in the way described but that the majority do not. All I will say to people who do not believe the claim is that there are four main issues they need to address:

If they were not climbing Cerro Torre, what were Maestri and Egger doing between 28 January and 3 February 1959?

Whatever they were doing it resulted in the death of Egger. How and where did this happen? ('Where' has been partially resolved by the discovery of his body in 1975 a couple of kilometres from the base of Cerro Torre.)

Whatever actually happened, it left Maestri severely traumatised and I believe he never totally recovered from this for the rest of his long life.

Above all, the great, unanswered question to be addressed is *why*? If we say the mountain was not climbed in 1959, why did Maestri claim that it was rather than reporting what they had actually done?

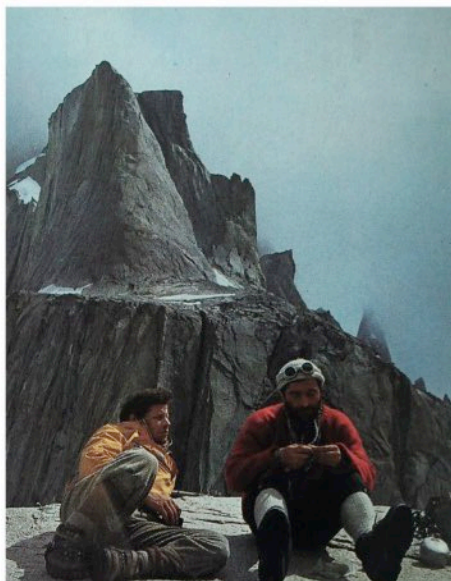
Evidence of what might have happened during the key period between 28 January and the 3 February has recently come to light but that is outside the scope of this article.¹ My purpose here is to examine the effect the 1959 expedition had on Cesare but to understand the context we need to consider his life before Cerro Torre, as well as the events of the previous 1957-58 expedition to Patagonia.

A good deal of what follows has been taken from books written by Cesare himself. It's not well appreciated outside Italy but Cesare was a writer as well as a mountaineer and his own words (translated here but kept as close to the original as possible) reveal a good deal about his background and character.

He was born on 2 October 1929 to parents who ran an itinerant theatre company so that he was rarely in the same place for long. This gave him an unsettled childhood, which was not helped by the death of his mother when he was eight years old. It also placed him in Italy during the 1930s, when fascism was rampant. Initially Italy and Germany were on the same side but after the death of Mussolini, Hitler took over Italy and ran it in the same way as other occupied countries. The Alto Adige region, where Maestri's father was born at the time when it was part of Austria, came in for some heavy bombing, perhaps as a punishment for siding with Italy at the end of the First World War. In his teens Cesare joined the Italian resistance, as well as the communist party, and saw at first hand the worst excesses that war can bring.

The only thing I knew how to do after the war ended was steal from the Germans anything that had commercial value ... My father was so worried about me that in 1947 he sent me to Rome to stay with my elder sister Anna, in the hope that she at least would help me to find a way forward ...

1. For analysis of Maestri's claims, see R Garibotti, 'A Mountain Unveiled', *American Alpine Journal*, Golden, 2004, 46 (78) pp138-155, and K Cordes, *The Tower*, Patagonia Books, 2014, although a new edition is imminent, and R Garibotti with K Cordes, 'Completing the Puzzle: New Facts About the Claimed Ascent of Cerro Torre in 1959', *Alpinist.com*, posted 3 Feb 2015.



Maestri and Fava relaxing on the slabs below the Mocho, at the foot of the south-east ridge of Cerro Torre.

I was a young man on whom the war had left deep traces of sadness, hatred, death and misery...

In 1949 Cesare had his first experience of rock climbing, when Gino Pisoni led him up the Paganella, reached by bike and on foot from Trento. As so often happens with people who cannot see a clear way forward in their lives, he was thrilled by the mountains and took the decision to work towards becoming an alpine guide. He started by taking a job carrying supplies every morning from Molveno up to the Pedrotti

hut, on the Bocca di Brenta, a height gain of 1,600m. The loads were between 30 and 40kg and the pay was calculated according to the weight. Rather than coming down immediately he would find some easy climbing to do, normally solo because he couldn't find any one to climb with. He comments that in his early climbing days he had difficulty in finding partners:

Other climbers regarded me with some diffidence. Therefore I went alone.

Of his initiation into climbing he wrote:

My problem was that I was born in a family which had no climbing tradition, and I did not discover the mountains until I was 20. Even then climbing for me was not an end in itself, but a means of establishing myself in society.

In spring 1952 Cesare completed his national service and it was after this that many of his solo ascents took place. He discovered that unusually he found it easier to climb down rock faces than up. Later in the 1950s, as more climbing partners became available, he became more interested in aid climbing, including bolting if placements for standard pitons were not available. Increasingly, climbing became a vehicle for expressing his anarchic views.

He was considered for the Italian expedition to K2 in 1954 and was interviewed by the expedition leader Ardito Desio. It seems to have been a case of dislike at first sight: the requirement to sign a document pledging obedience to the CAI commission set up for administration purposes may not have helped. He was not the only one. Riccardo Cassin also fell by the wayside at this point.



Maestri with Tenzing Norgay in October 1957 on what was, according to Tenzing, the Everest climber's first pure rock climb, the Paganella.

In spring 1955 Maestri attended a course for aspirant ski instructors at Cervinia, which he failed. To make up for it, he decided while he was there to make an ascent of the Matterhorn, still in winter conditions, by the Italian ridge. He reached the summit in bad weather and descended safely but was surprised to hear that his claim to have done the route under the prevailing conditions was queried by Jean Pellissier,

a local guide, and his tracks had been followed to verify if his claim was true or not.

It was the first time I had experienced such an underhand blow from fellow climbers. It wasn't my ascent that they were querying, but the whole history of mountaineering, which until then I had assumed was based on trust and loyalty.

On this occasion the affair was amicably resolved, and Maestri and Pellissier became firm friends.

In August 1955 Maestri set out alone to recce the north face of the Eiger, which he was thinking of attempting solo in one day. He reached the Hinterstoisser Traverse but disliked what he saw and came down again.

It was like a battlefield, with signs everywhere of forced retreats, shreds of clothing, a boot frozen into the snow, abandoned rucksacks, rope fragments waving in the breeze like ghosts.

He retreated via the gallery window, writing that he had to break in from the outside and hitch a ride on a train. What the Swiss authorities thought about this is not recorded.

One of his more interesting guiding engagements took place in autumn 1957, when he took Tenzing Norgay up the ordinary route on the Paganella (grades III and IV). Tenzing was in Trento as a guest of the film festival and wanted to sample the rock climbing of the area. He admitted to being afraid during the climb because he had only ever 'walked' before and steep rock was new to him.

Maestri's relationship with Cerro Torre started as early as 1953, when he received a letter from Cesarino Fava, an Italian national living in Argentina, saying that in Patagonia there was a mountain that he could get

his teeth into: *'Questo è pane per i tuoi dente,'* literally 'there is bread for your teeth.' The fact both Cesare and Cesarino came from the Trento region may explain why Fava chose Maestri to write to; there was an active Trento community in Buenos Aires at the time.

The idea lay dormant for a couple of years, then in 1955 the president of the CAI in Buenos Aires wrote officially to Cesare asking him to lead an expedition to Cerro Torre and promising financial support. Patagonia was virtually unknown at the time as a climbing destination; none of the peaks had been climbed with the exception of Fitzroy by the French in 1952. Unfortunately, later that year the CAI in Buenos Aires closed down due to internal disputes but the proposal was taken up a year later by the 'Circolo Trento'. Their offer was less generous than the CAI's and left Maestri to fund his own travel by sea to Argentina as well as providing his own equipment.

In spring 1957 Fava arrived in Italy and met Cesare for the first time. They happened to be discussing the forthcoming expedition in the presence of the Detassis brothers, Bruno and Catullo, who were immediately interested and asked if they might join the team. Not only was the request accepted but Bruno Detassis took over the leadership of the expedition from Maestri. Cesare himself seems to have suggested this because of Bruno's age and greater experience; having him in charge no doubt improved the prospect of attracting funding for the trip.

The project now became embroiled in Italian politics. With no funding available from the CAI in Buenos Aires, a request for funding was made to CAI headquarters in Italy. The request was turned down but while they were on their way to Argentina by ship, word reached them that funding had been granted to another expedition to Patagonia. This comprised Walter Bonatti and Carlo Mauri and they were already en route by air. In Argentina they were to be joined by Folco Doro Altan, who already knew the area from a previous reconnaissance.

So the 1957-58 expedition started badly and matters became worse when Bruno Detassis saw Cerro Torre for the first time and as expedition leader immediately banned any attempt to climb it. Instead they were to concentrate on some of the smaller unclimbed peaks in the area. Maestri was devastated, and it did not help when he met Bonatti and Mauri near the summit of Cerro Adela Nord: they were on their way down having beaten Maestri to the summit. Maestri's team accounted for the first ascents of Cerro Grande and Cerro Doblado among others, but they were poor rewards when compared to the original objective.

In the evening we arrived at our boulder camp. What sadness! It was a disaster. After the leader of the expedition left, the wind had carried everything into the water and sand. Rolls of loo paper were blowing here and there in the wind. They were like the tragic remains of a street carnival that finished in a fight. Our sleeping bags, pullovers and bivouac shoes were floating despondently in a pool of water.



Over a period of eight days in June 1960, Maestri and Claudio Baldessari put up a direttissima on the north west face of Roda di Vael in the Catinaccio group. Previous attempts had come to a halt below a large roof three pitches up the face. This tour de force came at the time when Cesare was reintroducing himself to climbing after the events of 1958-9, and received ample press coverage. The pair was accused of playing to the media by spending longer on the route than necessary, although their time was par for similar ventures around that time, such as the *Saxonweg* in January 1963. They hauled up from the base of the route what they needed by way of water, food, extra gear and even bivouac equipment, so there was no time constraint to the number of days they spent on the face.

We were cold, hungry and thirsty, and most of all needed to find someone who would make us feel part of a community, look after us. Nothing, only cold, desolation, and the wind howling through the boulders. We had no means of heating anything, but found some water from melting ice, and added a little Nescafé, and that was our only refreshment ... It was a terrible night!

Later, while on the return journey, Cesare wrote:

We left with the feeling that we were leaving behind something unfinished. I must return, and I will!

Maestri's reaction to the events of the 1957-58 expedition is understandable but when he starts to make preparations to return in 1958-59, his rhetoric takes on a wholly new dimension. Here is a sample of it, describing the

moment he was at one of his favourite viewpoints overlooking the Trento valley later in 1958:

There is the smell of autumn in the air ... Amid the joy of the colours and scents of autumn, I feel heavy and sad. In a few days' time I will be on my way; I will be leaving Italy and returning down under, far away, to Cerro Torre. I will be continuing the work started by the first expedition.

I will die on Cerro Torre. Definitely I am going to die. The thought is fixed in my mind. Why am I going? Life should not be thrown away. I will leave for the Tower. I will grasp its walls with the strength of despair. I will climb to the summit, with or without a companion. But I won't be coming back. I am certain the Tower will take me, as it is holding me captive now.

What sadness there is in me, where has the overwhelming desire for life gone? If I know I am going to die, why am I going at all? It must be for reasons of pride. I am a man, and I am proud. I remember shouting this out at the top of my voice, causing a flock of chaffinches to flee in terror from a thicket.

But people don't kill themselves for reasons of pride. I tried to understand what were the forces that were pushing me inexorably towards the Tower. Was it my friends' money? The fact I had committed all my savings? That I had sold my car? That I had stated in public that the Tower was 'not impossible'? That I had promised myself that I would reach the summit?

Later we get:

Never before have I approached a mountain as if in a lottery; never before have I said: 'It's the summit or me,' but this time the stakes are high – so high that it can't be called climbing any more. This time the stakes are complicated by vanity, pride, sadness, mistrust, my rights and my conscience.

This was written retrospectively for public consumption but even so, it gives a remarkable insight into Maestri's state of mind when he left for Patagonia in 1958. It surely cannot all be explained by the disappointing outcome of the previous trip. Here is another quote from one of his books describing his feelings about failure:

It isn't the rain wetting the rock that makes me give up; it isn't the clouds rushing low through the fir trees that fill me with fear. There is no rational explanation.

The sense of defeat has gripped me and smothered me like an enveloping cloak.

It doesn't take much: the wind whistling less strongly, a sad thought or a happy memory, and something flips inside me. Then I am overcome by a sense of

being repelled by the rock. Contact with it makes me shudder as if it was polluted. Everything is gyrating around me. The etriers, rope, hammer and pitons are the only things that tie me to the world.

The pitch above is easy. It wouldn't be hard even for beginners, yet my feet and hands don't want to part company with the holds where they are resting. The void becomes even deeper, and the silence more silent. With rapid, tense movements I get ready to descend.

Now it is raining more heavily, and the clouds are filling the valleys. I would have a perfect excuse to explain my retreat but that's not what I want. Something new has occurred within me. It will take several days of soul-searching to understand the reason for this, and to restore my feeling of joy in victory.

When he decided to return to Cerro Torre, Maestri had very little money. He scraped, begged and saved, and also sold anything he thought he could manage without, including his car, a Lancia Aurelia, a classy ride. In his quest for funding Cesare got backing from his mate Claudio Baldessari, who was to have come to Patagonia with him. They had hoped for a grant from the CAI, but in the event this was promised to another expedition bound for Patagonia, which again included Bonatti and Mauri. These two then cancelled their trip, and Maestri argued for the money to come to him but despite the intervention of a senior figure in the CAI this was again refused. Finally Maestri managed to persuade an industrialist in Milan to pay the cost of a one-way airfare to Buenos Aires. Since he was apparently not expecting to come back, this presumably resolved the money problem.

The next blow was that Baldessari was refused leave by the military authorities (for whom he worked) to go with Maestri.

Then, when all seemed hopeless, a letter arrived out of the blue from Toni Egger, whom Maestri had met previously at the Locatelli hut under the Tre Cime di Lavaredo, offering to come to Patagonia. The rest is history.

I'm going to jump now to the period after the end of the expedition and Egger's death. Whether this occurred in the way described or not, the fact remained that a man had died on an expedition led by Maestri, and the matter had to be reported to the Argentinian police. This is very much underplayed in Maestri's books but must have been traumatic at the time. He was a young man of 29, in a foreign country almost at the end of the known world and riven by political chaos. He must have been terrified of what might happen. Could he be arrested, even charged with being responsible for the death? In the event this did not happen and he managed to make his way penniless back to Italy, where his friends rallied round to help him return to a normal way of life.

One of the tasks that Maestri had to undertake on his return to Italy was to visit Egger's family in Lienz. When he did this he inexplicably failed to return to them Toni's possessions, particularly his diaries. This made it impossible for the family, especially Toni's sister Stephanie, to bring closure to



Maestri with his adopted son Gianluigi from a *Paris Match* article hailing Maestri for the second ascent of the *Via dei Colibri* (the Saxonweg) on Cima Grande di Lavaredo with Claudio Baldessari in March 1963. A much later father and son shot taken at a restaurant, not a ski lift, in Madonna di Campiglio.



the questions surrounding Toni's death, questions that continue to haunt her. All Maestri says is:

I had been back in Italy for a month, but neither the extended stay in Argentina nor finding myself in my own city and among my friends raised my morale, which was at rock bottom. Sometimes it seemed to me that I had cheated death unfairly. For example, when I spoke to Toni's mum, I felt as if I had usurped a life and should not have been there. Toni had such a desire for life.

During that night when I was alone on the Tower I thought I would have reached the peak of my grief, but I discovered that the real tragedy began now, with dark periods of silence, unexpected bouts of sadness and the need to go on repeating and reliving the accident time after time during the public lectures I had to give as a means of keeping myself financially solvent.

It seems he was suffering from what we know now as post-traumatic stress disorder, though this was barely recognised as an illness in the 1950s.

In April 1959 Cesare suffered a skiing accident resulting in three months in plaster, bedridden. During this period he reached a decision to give up climbing and try motor racing, encouraged by some of his friends in Bolzano who gave him a car with a racing engine. Within a week of having his plaster removed he was at the wheel. Unfortunately this did not provide a livelihood; he had to accept that only the mountains could give him that. With great reluctance he agreed to take part as technical adviser on a course for mountain guides and porters, and a gradual return to climbing followed.

It was also after his return to Italy that Cesare's family life began to blossom. It is time to introduce Fernanda, his future wife, and the boy who was to become Cesare's adopted son, Gianluigi.

A friend of Cesare's cousin, Fernanda had made an unsuccessful marriage



Maestri leading on the headwall of Cerro Torre in 1970, with the snow mushroom visible above to his right. The snow mushroom, which represents the true summit, was not climbed. Bolts were used on the headwall because, the team claimed, they had left their normal pegging gear lower down.

at a young age. Cesare courted her, initially in vain, but when he was in hospital following his accident, she began to come with his cousin to visit him and a bond developed. They started to live together, renting a house in Canazei, away from the gossip of Trento. Cesare started work on his book, *Arrampicare è il*

mio Mestiere ('Climbing is my Trade'). Fernanda helped with the typing.

In summer 1959, an old friend of Cesare, Giulio Gabrielli, died in an accident on the *Soldà* route on the Marmolada. Cesare was involved in the rescue and helped to carry down the body. 'In some uncanny way I felt that the two tragedies might be connected.'

The accident seemed to bring Cesare and Fernanda closer together and after a year in Canazei they moved to Andalo, where Cesare began climbing again and Fernanda ran a small bistro. Cesare also took on the role of father to Gianluigi. His paternal instinct showed itself in March 1963 over the affair of the *Saxonweg*, on the north face of Cima Grande di Lavaredo. This route, which the Italians refer to more poetically as the *Via dei Colibri* (literally 'Route of the Hummingbirds'), was put up over a period of 17 days in January of that year by a German party. Cesare and his climbing friend Claudio Baldessari decided to attempt the second ascent the same winter, having heard on the grapevine that the route was largely pegged up. Unfortunately the grapevine proved to be incorrect, and they had to abandon the attempt, having insufficient gear with them to replace the aid points that had been removed and finding those left in situ too insecure to use.

Word went round the village that Cesare had found the route too difficult and dangerous, and Gianluigi was teased at school because his father was a coward. Keen to support his adopted son, Cesare went back on the route with Baldessari and enough gear, and they climbed it in a fast time. They found that the rumour about gear being left in situ was true of the second half of the route, and amazingly discarded what they thought would be surplus food and equipment by throwing it off the face. But the route had a sting in the tail in the form of a badly iced-up section: it took another two days, for which they had almost no food, but in due course they emerged at the top and Gianluigi's reputation at school was restored.

Pietro Vidi in action on the *Compressor* route. One of the aid pieces placed with the help of the compressor is visible on the extreme right hand side of the photo.

Everything was now in place for Cesare's life to settle down. He had a wife and a son to whom he was devoted and they were financially secure. Towards the end of 1963 they moved to Madonna di Campiglio and opened a shop, which is still run by the family today. The stage was set for a happy future.

This was not to be. As the 1960s wore on, dark clouds again began to form in Cesare's mind. His PTSD returned but now it affected Fernanda as well.

What set this off were reports he received about the 1960s attempts to climb Cerro Torre, mostly by the south-east ridge. These all failed, but what incensed him most was that other Italians, especially Carlo Mauri, were referring to the mountain as 'impossible'. No one came out openly to say that Maestri and Egger had not reached the summit in 1959, but this was the clear implication.

This whole period is well described in another book titled *Duemila Metri della Nostra Vita* ('Two Thousand Metres of Our Life'), written jointly by Cesare and Fernanda. Again it was written for public consumption, and makes for dramatic reading. Here is a sample:

Fernanda: *Since he had been living with me, Cesare had not climbed anymore. The Tower had rendered him apathetic, indifferent and insensitive to what had previously been his greatest passion. He never spoke about the Tower by day. By night he cried out in his sleep, and while the nightmare lasted he sweated, trembled and cursed that mountain.*

Cesare: *Cerro Torre. The Argentinians call it the cursed mountain, the scream in stone: a stupendous creation. It fascinates you and terrifies you. 2,000 metres of ice-covered rock, 2,000 metres of death, a trap ready to spring at any moment. And the wind! That bestial wind that howls by day and night through the valleys, and carries blocks of ice through the ravines with the sound of 100 reactors. On the summit there is a huge overhang that hangs over your head like death hangs over life. The Tower killed my companion, and morally it killed me as well. I would never return to that mountain.*



Fernanda: *Well then, it's not only the death of your companion. There is something that you are holding inside yourself. I want to know what it is that you have not told me yet.*

Cesare: *I have inside me the memory of days of hunger, thirst, exhaustion and fear, but above all of that obsessive wind. The memory of the huge icy crown of the summit collapsing, tearing Toni from the rock and hurling him into space like a rag doll. I have inside me the memory of when I remained alone, more so than I had ever been before, and of the sense of pity that I felt not for my companion but for myself because the avalanche had spared me. Fernanda, no mountain is worth a life ... Now you know what I am holding inside, now you know what the Tower has done to me.*

Fernanda: *So it was that Cerro Torre entered my life. And immediately I hated it.*

There is a good deal more in this vein.

Against this background the 1970 expeditions were born and to cut a long story short, it was eventually decided that Fernanda and Gianluigi would go to Argentina with Cesare and his team and help with the preparations. The team would take radios with them and keep in touch if possible on a daily basis.

Again, I will not describe in detail the events of the southern hemisphere winter of 1970 and the summer of 1970-71. The team battled for 54 days during the winter and eventually had to give up due to frostbite, lack of food and the means of providing hot drinks. They left most of the gear in place and returned the following summer to complete the route, if reaching the top of the rock structure of the mountain (but not the summit mushroom) can count as completion.

The reasons for returning to the mountain in 1970 have been discussed at length: the *Mountain* interview of 1972 covers them to some extent. Certainly the wish to cock a snook at the people who doubted the outcome of the 1959 expedition came into it. But I believe the main reason for going back was that Cesare was still psychologically traumatised by the events of 1958 and 1959 and by his 'survivor's guilt'; he embarked on this project in a desperate attempt to relieve his mind of the blackness of PTSD and the turmoil afflicting it that had never entirely left him.

Having taken the decision to return to the Tower made me a free man again. I felt like someone condemned to death whose hands were unexpectedly untied when he was on the scaffold.

It is important, I think, to put the compressor used by the expedition, and mentioned earlier, into perspective. This understandably drew condemnation from most mountaineers but I don't believe it was an attempt to stoke up controversy. As has been explained previously, Maestri regarded it as normal to use expansion bolts to climb hold-less rock. He concluded rightly or wrongly, following the failure of several attempts on the south-east ridge, that the route must not be possible by conventional means and



Maestri on descent from Mount Kenya during his visit to Africa in 1973.

bolting would be needed. The rock of Cerro Torre was tough granite and hand drilling the holes to insert the bolts would be a lengthy task. He saw the compressor as the answer to this problem, and needless to say the manufacturers Atlas Copco were happy to oblige. In fact the team found it hugely time-consuming and exhausting to haul the compressor up the rock and frustrating to start it up each morning in sub-zero temperatures. Maestri stated in many places, including the *Mountain* interview, that he would have preferred to manage without it.

In 1982 he went further, claiming in an article that using the compressor as often as possible was part of the sponsorship deal and that the manufacturer's name be displayed on film. Does this explain why at

one stance bolts are scattered around like shrapnel? Or why on some pitches bolts were placed alongside cracks that would have been possible with normal pitons? (Maestri claimed this was because they left their pitons behind.) Is the *Compressor* route a valid means of ascending Cerro Torre (or what remains of it after the 2012 de-bolting)? Opinions will vary, but for the record the route has 25 pitches, of which slightly under half were done with the use of bolts.

The south-east ridge, including parts of the *Compressor* route, was climbed entirely free in January 2012 by Austrian David Lama, supported by Peter Ortner. This fine achievement involved less commitment than it might at first appear; the pair had support from a film team with a helicopter. The film crew added more bolts to those already in place, though the climbing team had nothing to do with this new affront.

A few days earlier, Canadian Jason Kruk and American Hayden Kennedy had chopped over 100 bolts from the *Compressor* during what they described as a 'fair means' ascent; this too proved controversial. The young climbers were highly praised by some and criticised by others, not least Maestri himself. (They were also arrested briefly on their return to El Chaltén.)

It is important also to recall that the first undisputed ascent of Cerro Torre took place in 1974 via the west face, the work of Casimiro Ferrari, Mario Conti, Pino Negri and Daniele Chiappa. This was an outstanding

achievement, which, due to the events of 1958-9 and 1970-1, often doesn't get the credit it deserves.

After the *Compressor* route, Cesare's life took a new direction. The family were still living in Madonna di Campiglio and running the shop, now accompanied by a second one. But in 1973 Cesare went on an extended trip to east Africa with a film director from Trento, Giorgio Moser, who was making a feature-length film for Italian television. Over four months they visited Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda, Rwanda, Burundi and Zaire, and Cesare climbed Kilimanjaro three times, Mount Kenya twice and Rwenzori once. The film was called 'Le Montagne delle Luce', the account of a climber (Cesare) searching for a fellow mountaineer lost somewhere in the mountains of Africa. The only evidence of where he went was a series of letters describing the places he visited, the people he met and the mountains he climbed. In the role of actor, Cesare had to follow where the clues led, eventually ending up at a 'heart of darkness', where he discovered that what he was following was a ghost: the phantom of an Africa that no longer existed.

In 1974 Cesare paid his first visit to Britain. This started off as a PR exercise on the part of JCB, the British partners of Atlas Copco. The visit included the first showing in Britain of the film that was made during the 1970 expeditions. Ken Wilson happened to find out about the visit, noticed that the dates coincided with the first National Mountaineering Conference in Buxton and asked me to find out if Cesare would be willing to attend as a special guest. He was, on condition that the Cerro Torre film would not be shown. I drove Cesare up from London to Buxton and we arrived at the conference hall to find Dennis Gray having his ear roundly bent by the PR officer of JCB, who was mortified that he had not been told in advance about the plan to invite Cesare to the conference. I'm doubtful whether Dennis knew any more about it than he did.

There was some anxiety about whether it was wise to allow Cesare to address the conference, since the story of the *Compressor* route would have been well known to many in the audience. Ian McNaught-Davis, the conference chairman, decided to risk it, and fortunately Cesare hit the right note by talking about the freedom of individuals to do what they wanted in the mountains without interference by official bodies, including (in Italy) the church. It went down well.

Memories from that visit include showing Cesare some of the climbing grounds of the Peak District. I took him to Stoney Middleton and tried to point him towards the rock in the hope that he might show off his soloing ability on Peak District limestone, but he politely declined saying that he hadn't got the right gear. He did however solo some routes on Froggatt the following day. I also recall introducing Cesare to Don Whillans and trying to get them into conversation: the two had clearly heard of each other and were standing together eyeing each other up, uncertain how to break the ice. They never did really, and perhaps that was for the best.

In 1974 I also got to know Fernanda. She had come over to London with Cesare but had to get back to Italy when he and I headed north to Buxton.



Maestri on the summit of Campanile Basso between Carlo Claus and Ezio Alimonta on an anniversary climb to celebrate the centenary of the first ascent in August 1899.

Accompanying the Maestris was a young lady called Bianca, whose role I think was to act as interpreter, though I never heard her speak English. Fernanda and Bianca formed a stunningly attractive couple. I spent two or three days showing them round London and joined them sometimes for dinner. I invited them to visit my wife and me for an evening, but in the event only Cesare made it. I arranged for Cesare to talk to a meeting of the North London Mountaineering Club, of which I was a member, and we were able to view the Cerro Torre film that had been a bone of contention at Buxton, but proved to be nothing special. This happened after the JCB showing, so all was okay on that front.

After 1974 Cesare's life became that of a family man with a business to run. He finally became a ski instructor as well as a mountain guide and became respected as an authority on mountaineering matters. During family holidays enjoyed at their holiday cottage in Sardinia, Cesare and Gianluigi went fishing and deep sea diving. During one such outing Cesare came to the surface too quickly and spent six hours in a decompression chamber to

recover. In 1978 a fishing accident resulted in an injury to the index finger of his left hand which turned out to be irreversible and affected his ability to climb at a high standard, eventually prompting the decision to give up rock climbing entirely.

On 11 September 2001 the attack on the Twin Towers took place, and as many of us will remember the whole world shook with fear about what would happen next. As a member of the peace movement and a respected figure in Italy, Cesare felt that he was in a position to support that cause, and decided at the age of 73 to attempt something he had never done before, to climb an 8,000m peak. On the summit he would unfurl a banner in the name of peace. He chose Shishapangma as the objective, and through a trekking agency made arrangements for a trip there in 2002 with two younger climbers, Sergio Martini and Fausto de Stefani, both of whom had reached the summits of all 14 8,000m peaks. A Trento guide Giorgio Nicolodi also joined them.

Cesare chose to describe what happened in the form of a long letter to his much-loved granddaughter Carlotta, perhaps because she was the member of the family who most actively supported him.

At the Chinese base camp situated at around 5,000m I felt fine, and couldn't wait to start the walk in. On 17 September we left for the climbers' base camp at 5,900m. In front of us was Shisha Pangma, called by the Tibetans 'the Ridge of the Meadows of Heaven'. At first everything went well, but at about 5,700m I began to gasp for breath and felt an overwhelming sense of tiredness. It took hours, and much assistance from my team, and others nearby, to get up the final 200m to the camp. There I was examined by a doctor who was with a Spanish team; he checked the oxygen level in my blood which showed as 25%, a level which would normally be fatal! My attempt ended there, but in fact the weather then changed and none of the other teams camped there made it to the summit. It was not until October 2003 that Sergio planted on the summit the flag I had brought for that purpose.

On his return to Italy Cesare wrote a letter to George W Bush pleading with him to moderate his response to the 9/11 massacre. He did not receive a reply.

So Cesare's last venture in the mountains resulted in failure. It would be fitting to be able to say that he spent the rest of his life in comfortable retirement, but sadly this was not the case. In November 2005 an Italian team finally succeeded in climbing Cerro Torre by the route he claimed to have done with Toni Egger. *El Arca de los Vientos*, as it was called, involved extremely difficult rock and snow-ice climbing and showed no sign whatever of a previous ascent. Pressure mounted again on Cesare to reveal what happened between the 28 January and 3 February 1959, causing his mental turmoil to return, if it had ever left him. Some who knew the circumstances thought that it might help his mental state if he could be persuaded to reveal the true events of that period in 1959, but he remained stubborn to the last.

He suffered a series of strokes, which gradually reduced his ability to move around, forcing him to use a walking frame. In 2018 he gave a final interview to French reporter Charlie Buffet, who had been following the Cerro Torre narrative throughout. As with so much of Cesare's life, this again roused controversy. Some saw it as a last-ditch effort to persuade him finally to help Toni Egger's sister seek the closure she needed, others as a callous attempt to extract information from a sick old man barely aware of what he was saying. During the interview Cesare changed his story somewhat but the true circumstances of Egger's death were not revealed.

The full story of Cerro Torre died with Cesare on 19 January 2021.

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