

Honorary members of 1954 – 1957

1954 Sir John Hunt

1955 Dr Roger Bannister, Lord Bilsland

1956 Anthony Eden, Douglas Bader

1957 17th Earl of Eglinton, Earl Mountbatten of Burma

1954 Sir John Hunt (1910-1998)

Col. John Hunt led the May 1953 ascent of Everest and was knighted, along with Edmund Hillary, between that success and his return to Kathmandu a few days later. In 1952 Hunt had been given a special leave from the British Army of the Rhine to organise and lead the British expedition. Hunt did not reach the summit, but his meticulous planning had enabled Edmund Hillary and Sherpa Tenzing Norgay to make the successful assault. The first news reached Britain on Coronation Day.

He had taken part in three previous expeditions to the Himalayas, in 1935, 1937 and 1940, sometimes accompanied by his wife Joy, a former tennis player of Wimbledon standard. His war service included being an instructor in commando techniques and service in Egypt, Italy and Greece, gaining the DSO and the CBE. After retiral from the Army, he became the first director of the Duke of Edinburgh's Award Scheme, holding the post for ten years, and afterwards, created a life peer in 1966, Lord Hunt continued to play a prominent role in public life.

Letter of acceptance, written on headed paper of the British Mount Everest Expedition 1953, from the Royal Geographical Society, 1 Kensington Gore, London, SW7, on 16 January 1954

Dear Mr President,

I write to acknowledge your kind letter of 12th January & to tell you that I deem it a great honour to have been elected to honorary membership of the Irvine Burns Club - the more so when I see the illustrious company, past and present, which you have listed.

With sincere and faithful thanks

Yours sincerely

John Hunt

1955 Dr Roger Bannister (1929-2018)

Roger Bannister was a junior doctor in 1954. On May 6th, he had porridge for breakfast, went to his work at St Mary's Hospital in Paddington, London, then caught a midday train to Oxford for an athletics meet between Oxford University and the Amateur Athletics Association. A gale force wind was blowing. Bannister considered abandoning his attempt to break the four-minute mile, but his Austrian coach warned he had to take the opportunity; the wind dropped a little, and 3,000 spectators had gathered for the 6pm race; meanwhile, a meet organiser, Norris McWhirter, had tipped off various athletics correspondents.

Bannister finished in 3 mins 39.4 secs - a part-time athlete running on a cinder track became, overnight, an international celebrity with an achievement for which he would always be remembered. His record was surpassed by John Landy of Australia 46 days later, on June 21, but Bannister passed Landy on Aug 7 in Vancouver, both finishing within 4 minutes.

Bannister had turned down a place in the 1948 Olympics, and was beaten to a medal in the 1952 Olympics – he had planned to win gold and retire. Having failed, he was so irritated with himself that he focused on breaking the four-minute mile. He said, in a 'Times' interview in 2012 (July 28): "If I had won and retired then I would just have been one of 20 holders of gold medals in the 1,500 metres."

Within months he gave up competitive running to focus on medicine and would tell interviewers that he was prouder of what he had achieved in medical research as a neurologist than in athletics, saying that the ideal was the complete man who had a career outside sport. Bannister was fascinated with the brain and specialised in failures of the autonomic nervous system; he was awarded the American Academy of Neurology's first lifetime achievement award in 2005. He served, at various times, on many sports and medical councils and organisations, mentioned in 'The Times' obituary of 5 March 2018, on which this tribute is based. He was knighted in 1975 for services to sport. In 1985 Sir Roger Bannister was appointed Master of Pembroke College, Oxford, a job he loved, and held for eight years, bringing about the construction of the College's Fulbright building, and holding drinks parties for the students twice a week.

In the late 1950s he was asked to look at a patient who had been shipped home from Malaya with a suspected brain tumour, though in fact the man, novelist Anthony Burgess, was suffering from dehydration due to alcoholism. Burgess wrote about this experience in his 1960 novel 'The Doctor is Sick', in which, as a tribute to his saviour, he called one of the characters Dr Railton, a pun on 'ban(n)ister'. [source: 'The Times' Diary column, 6/3/18]

Letter of acceptance, written from St Mary's Hospital, W.2., undated

Dear Mr Phillips,

Thank you very much for your letter. I feel very honoured to have been elected an honorary member of your society and have much pleasure in accepting.

Yours sincerely

R G Bannister

1955 Lord Bilsland (1892-1970)

Alexander Steven Bilsland was a Scottish businessman. In 1950, he was elevated to the peerage as Baron Bilsland, in recognition of his public service in Scotland, and was further honoured with a knighthood in 1955. He served as Chairman of the National Trust for Scotland.

Letter of acceptance, written from 89 West Campbell Street, Glasgow, C.2, on 15 Decr, 1954

Dear Mr Lockhart

I have received with the greatest pleasure your kind letter of 10th Decr. informing me that at the Annual Meeting of the Irvine Burns Club on 10th January I will be elected an

Honorary Member. I should like to assure you and the members of the Club that I shall greatly value the honour you propose to confer upon me. It will indeed be a great honour to have my name added to the very distinguished list of those upon whom you have conferred the honour of Honorary Membership in the past.

Yours Sincerely
Bilsland

1956 Anthony Eden (1897-1977)

Irvine Burns Club has often offered Honorary Membership to the Prime Minister of the day, in this case Anthony Eden, Prime Minister 1955-1957. He had succeeded Winston Churchill as Conservative leader in 1955, but his premiership is best known for the Suez operation in late 1956, an historic setback for British foreign policy.

Letter of acceptance, written from 10 Downing Street, Whitehall, on 3 January 1956

Dear Mr Phillips

Thank you for your letter of December 27 in which you were so kind as to tell me that the Irvine Burns Club had decided to elect me as an Honorary Member. Please thank the Club on my behalf for thinking of me in this way.

Yours sincerely
Anthony Eden

Notes:

His letter, on Downing St. notepaper, has only the Dear and Your sincerely lines handwritten.

1956 Douglas Bader (1910-1982)

Despite losing his legs in a terrible flying accident in 1931, Douglas Bader persuaded the RAF to let him fly again when war broke out. He became a poster boy for the war in the air, inspiring levels of courage in others they never thought possible. He was almost as famous in Germany as he was in Britain.

Having shot down dozens of enemy planes, Bader was himself shot down over France in 1941. While baling out of his Spitfire, one of his artificial legs jammed under the joystick and, as his parachute inflated, it was torn off. His German captors invited the British to send a replacement false leg and, with Goering's approval, an RAF bomber was given safe conduct over Saint-Omer and dropped a new prosthesis by parachute. Bader then immediately tried to escape and ended up in Colditz. After the war, he raised millions for disability charities.

He had a 'jagged personality' (Ben Macintyre, 17/6/23) - he was a supremely brave man but also arrogant, domineering and selfish, with extreme political and racist views - a far more complicated character than many imagine - courageous, famous, disabled and extremely unpleasant! A far cry from the character depicted in 'Reach for the Sky'. However, his achievements before, during and after the war were amazing.

Letter of acceptance, written from 5, Petersham Mews, SW7, on January 11th, 1956

Dear Sir,

It is with the greatest pleasure that I received your letter of December 27th 1955. I am honoured that you should feel me worthy of being elected to your distinguished company of Honorary Members. Thank you!

Please accept my apologies for this tardy reply but I have been away from home. Happy days for 1956, and I shall look forward to visiting Irvine.

Yours sincerely

Douglas Bader

Notes:

The letter, to President Archibald Green, is typed, except for the opening and closing lines written by the Duke's Private Secretary.

1957 The 17th Earl of Eglinton (1914-1966)

Archibald William Alexander Montgomerie, educated at Eton and Oxford, held several offices in the ranks of Freemasonry in Scotland.

Letter of acceptance, written from Monkwood House, By Ayr, on 16th January 1957

Dear Sir,

Many thanks for your letter of 14th Jan. I am very sensible of the great honour you have done me by making me an Honorary Member of your ancient and distinguished Club. When I read the list of other Honorary Members, I feel quite unfitted and unworthy to be numbered among them. I am extremely gratified by this single [sic] honour, and I would be grateful if you would convey my most sincere thanks and appreciation to all members of the Club.

Yours truly

Eglinton & Winton

1957 Earl Mountbatten of Burma (1900-1979)

Admiral of the Fleet Albert Victor Nicholas Louis Francis Mountbatten, 1st Earl Mountbatten of Burma was a British statesman, naval officer, colonial administrator and close relative of the British royal family. Mountbatten, of German descent, was born in the United Kingdom as Prince Louis of Battenberg – his father, Prince Louis Alexander of Battenburg, the UK First Sea Lord from 1912, retired from public service when Germans were ostracised in 1914 .

Mountbatten served as Viceroy and Governor-General of India 1947-1948, First Sea Lord 1955-1959, and Chief of the Defence Staff 1959-1965. For details of his war service, see the many articles published online.

Letter of acceptance, written from the office of the First Sea Lord, Admiralty, London, SW1, on 18th January 1957:

My dear Honorary Secretary,

Thank you for your letter of 15th January informing me that I have been elected an honorary member of the Irvine Burns Club.

Would you please convey my thanks to the members.

Yours sincerely

Mountbatten of Burma

A.F.

Notes:

His letter, on First Sea Lord notepaper, is otherwise handwritten. The A.F. means Admiral of the Fleet, a position to which he had been promoted a few months earlier, in Oct. 1956.