

Dorothy (Dot) Butler (1911-2008)

One weekend in 1931, Dot English was having a pleasant time with friends at Era Beach, south of Royal National Park, when her attention was diverted by a group of cavorting nude swimmers. These free spirits were her kind. She joined them that night around their campfire.

They were members of the Sydney Bushwalkers Club, which she joined, finding in bushwalking the adventure she had known as a child, trailing barefoot through the bush with her brothers. Dot became one of the Tiger walkers, who walked long distances at speed in the largely untracked and unmapped Blue Mountains. Carrying a daypack made from a pillowcase, she became legendary as the Barefoot Bushwalker.

Dot was among the first to climb the highest peak in the Warrumbungles in NSW, Crater Bluff, in 1936. Dedicated to conserving the natural environment, she helped convince locals and authorities that the entire area should become a national park. This climb began a love affair with mountains that lasted her lifetime.

Next she made the summit of Mount Cook, 3763 metres, New Zealand's highest peak. In following years she would return for six weeks every Christmas to climb and work as a guide. Conscientious and sociable, she accompanied tourists up the Tasman Glacier and other spectacular locations. Short and stocky, Dot was built like a Sherpa and worked like one. On one expedition, a keen young visitor provoked the condemnation of the head guide by climbing in sandals. "He'll come to no good," she predicted of the young Edmund Hillary.

During World War II Dot cycled from Sydney to Melbourne to marry a bushwalker friend, Ira Butler, an economist. She worked as a hospital physiotherapist and, when Ira was posted to London, cycled back to Albury six months pregnant. She kept bushwalking while raising four children, introducing them to the exhilaration of outdoor life and a passionate love of nature.

Dot Butler, who has died at 96, was born in Sydney to Frank English, a travelling salesman for a pharmaceutical company, and his wife, Isadora, a school teacher. Soon after her birth, the family moved to Brisbane. Dot had measles and was so weakened by the sea voyage that her life was threatened. Isadora would wheel the child in her pram to the top of a hill to watch the sunrise. "The world is very beautiful," she would say, "the moving whisper of great trees, the deep blue sky, the ripple of birdsong ... You won't leave the world that loves you. It's a wonderful world to explore."

Dot grew to dance and hunt with five brothers and sisters through the bush, but business was poor for her father and the family returned to Sydney. When Frank's ventures failed to prosper, Isadora would console herself by telling her brood: "Always remember you are well born." Her grandfather had owned a castle in Ireland. Frank disappeared from their lives one day but he had never made much impact; life continued as normal.

Dot was a bright student at Sydney Girls High School, where she also excelled at sport. Few girls then went on to tertiary education. After a number of clerical jobs, Dot enrolled in a physiotherapy course at Sydney University, while bushwalking at every opportunity. She was introduced to climbing by Marie Byles, who lent books on the early Everest expeditions.

In the 1950s Dot Butler, concerned about the number of Australians falling into crevasses in alpine NZ, established an Australian section of the NZ Alpine Club. Prospective climbers could learn basic safety before joining her to climb with experienced mountaineers. She led these training courses for 25 years.

Butler led her first international expedition to the Andes in 1969. The Australian team climbed 27 peaks, mostly over 5500 metres. She then cycled throughout Europe, trekked in Nepal and cycled around Cambodia, befriending people whose lives would soon be devastated by war. After the Peru earthquake of 1970, members of the Andean expedition established a relief fund to help the people who had helped them.

A tireless supporter of conservation, she worked with the Colong Committee (Australia's oldest wilderness society) in the Save the Rainforest Campaign and creation of the Blue Mountains National Park. She campaigned to save Lake Pedder in Tasmania, Queensland's Daintree, Kakadu in the Northern Territory and Myall Lakes National Park in northern NSW.

The downside of this lifestyle was that Dot was often away from her husband, Ira Butler, a Reserve Bank economist, who became more interested in growing orchids than the outdoors. Some years after their daughter Wendy's drowning in the Kowmung River in the Blue Mountains, Butler revisited the wild river she loved. Returning home she found her husband dead from a heart attack.

A year later, her son Norman died from snakebite in Nimbin. Travel and adventure helped her recover; with daughter Rona she canoed up the Yukon River in Alaska, then trekked through the Sierra National Forest in California. *Australian Geographic* named her Adventurer of the Year in 1988; Butler became a poster girl for Seniors Week when she climbed the Sydney Harbour Bridge, and abseiled down, at 80. Yet, when her son Wade disappeared while bushwalking in Tasmania in 1995, she had lost three of her four children to nature's forces.

Dot Butler is survived by her daughter Rona Iluna, who scattered her ashes in the Warrumbungles.

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Sydney Morning Herald