

A black and white photograph of a snow-covered mountain peak. The foreground shows a rocky, snow-dusted slope where a simple tent is pitched. The tent is made of dark fabric and is supported by wooden poles. The background features a large, craggy mountain peak covered in snow, with some dark rock outcrops visible. The sky is dark and clear.

# HIMALAYAN PLAYGROUND

Adventures on The Roof of the World, 1942-72

Trevor Braham

FOREWORD BY DOUG SCOTT

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To Elisabeth  
for her constant encouragement.

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# Acknowledgements

Apart from the picture on the front cover of Camp 3 on Minapin, taken by Dennis Kemp, and on the rear cover of the 1955 Cambridge University Expedition to Spiti, taken by Peter Holmes, all illustrations in this book are from photographs taken by the author.

The maps are based on originals appearing in my earlier book, *Himalayan Odyssey*, which were prepared with assistance from the Royal Geographical Society London, and have been adapted for use in this book.

Once again, I express my thanks to Sallie Moffat for the task of editing the text.





# *Foreword*

Trevor Braham has put together another important contribution to Himalayan literature filling in the gaps in time and space historically and geographically. He shares with us his rich store of memories from a bygone age of Himalayan exploratory mountaineering. He is a link with the past as he started his Himalayan climbing before jet travel, at a time when expeditions could take up to half a year, before satellite phones and the possibility of helicopter rescue. In those days climbers were always fully committed, out of contact with family and friends and without communication to home and office. Such men were mentally and physically tough and were of a time when it was unusual for people to own a motor car, when people used to walk far more, before antibiotics, before nutritionists and personal trainers, when, in fact, it was felt somehow unsporting to train too hard. Nylon had only just been invented, plastic and closed cell foam boots had yet to appear along with the gas stove, ice screws and curved ice axes. Skill levels were lower and the dissemination of knowing what others had done before was far slower.

It was also a time when climbing was beginning to move forward after the huge setback it suffered during the Second World War, particularly on the Continent. But there was co-operation between Britain, Austria and Germany before the war and after it with the Swiss, as on Everest in the early 1950s. There were the beginnings of a proper appreciation of what it means to climb really high and the effect on the body. The physiologist Griffith Pugh had demonstrated on Everest that rehydration was just as important as proper acclimatisation.

How wonderfully fresh and adventurous it must have been for the 20-year-old Braham travelling through the Himalaya in 1942 as a young soldier on leave during the Second World War and how wonderful to have Sherpa companions whom he had read about in the

pre-war Everest expedition books. It is reassuring to find a climbing author not entirely consumed with himself while acknowledging not only who he was with, but also the vital contributions played by those who went before. There is a lot of useful, historical fact introduced into the narrative that is accurate, as one would expect from a former Honorary Secretary of the Himalayan Club, later the editor of the *Himalayan Journal* and the *Swiss Chronique Himalayenne*. Trevor Braham was also very energetic and fortunate to be a natural acclimatiser; he was extremely curious to see around the next corner and to take in evermore of nature's handiwork. He has the gift to be able to evoke images of Himalayan landscape and bring the people therein to life.

Trevor Braham found himself in association with such luminaries as Hillary, Lowe and Riddiford from New Zealand, got to climb with the leading Swiss climbers of the day René Dittert, André Roch and Alexander Graven climbing Kedarnath Dome in the Gangotri.

He also travelled and climbed with the Sherpas and Bhotias – Tenzing, Ang Tharky and other indigenous climbers who had become almost as well known to the British public as the sahibs on whose expeditions they greatly assisted. In fact one of the strengths of the book stems from the time Trevor Braham spent with the local people. He reminds us just how important the Sherpas were to Himalayan exploration and climbing – men like Pasang Dawa Sherpa who climbed Chomolhari in 1937 with Spencer-Chapman and later reached a high point with Wiessner of 8,385 metres on K2 in 1939. In the footsteps of Dr AM Kellas he spent long periods with the Darjeeling Sherpas throughout Sikkim and beyond. Trevor Braham had the capacity to spend long periods happy with his own company as well as that of local people. This is a characteristic common to many explorers of the 1930s and later. So many of them were sent back from the British Empire as very small boys to prep and public schools in the UK where they naturally became self-reliant and resourceful. To be self-contained was always a prime requisite of Himalayan travel with all the inevitable delays for weather, local politics and in the case of colonial administration, bureaucratic procedures. He was right there at a time of great

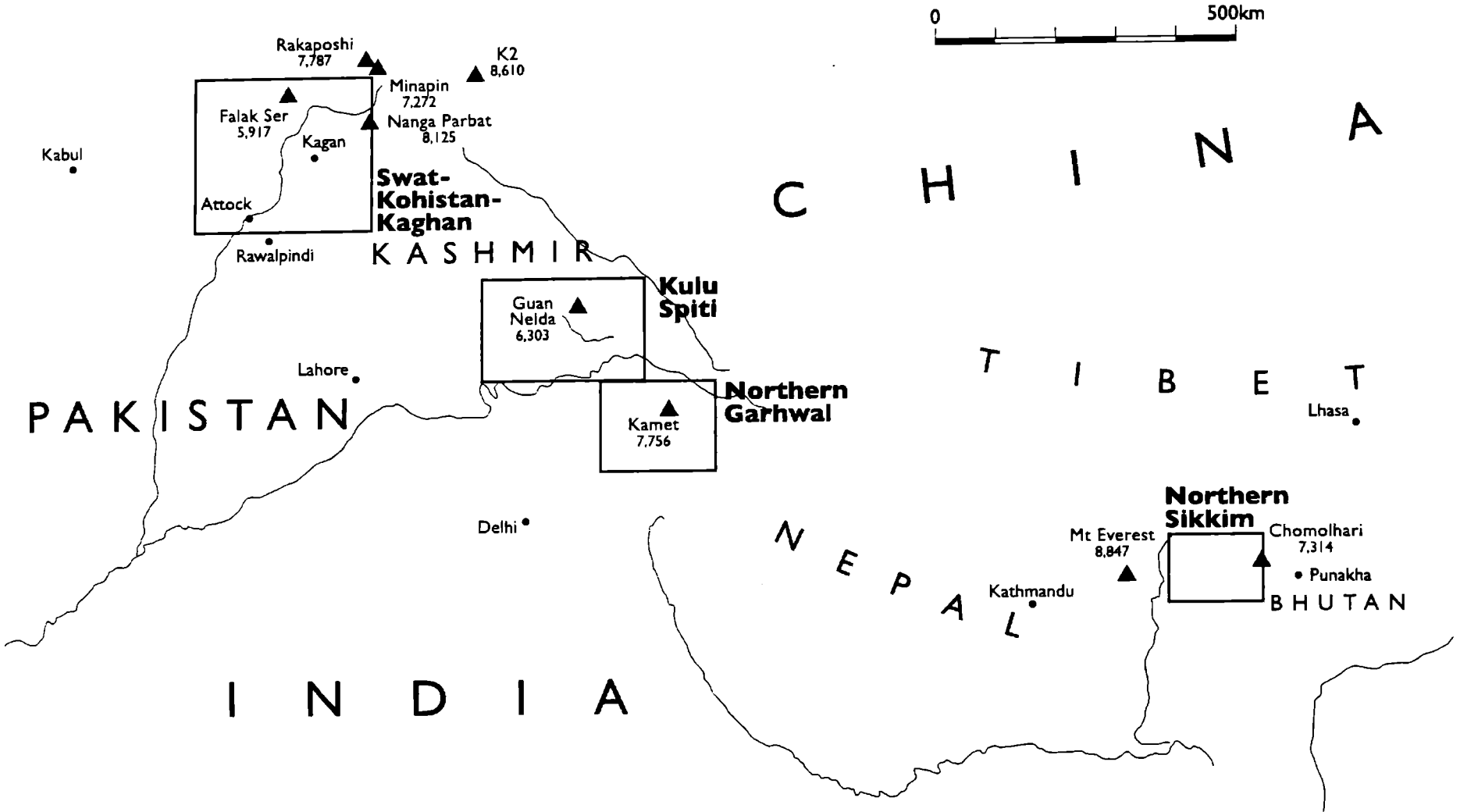
change in the region and was actually in the holy town of Badrinath on the day when 'with pride and joy India's independence was being colourfully celebrated'.

He looks back to those times 60 years later with deep appreciation for all that the mountains have given him. He went to the mountains not to seek material objectives or accolades but for those 'rewards that only mountains possess the power to grant ... free from the clamour and complexities of everyday life'. The vast majority, if not all mountaineers to some extent, will readily identify with this wellspring to adventure, even those pushing out beyond the limits that Trevor Braham set for himself.

—Doug Scott, Cumbria, August 2008



# HIMALAYAN PLAYGROUND





# *Introduction*

Having crossed the rubicon of my eighth decade, I find myself out of harmony with some aspects of the evolution of mountaineering. Boundary lines, re-drawn about three decades ago, are now devoid of limits as to what is feasible and admissible technically, ethically, and physically. Clearly, advancing age has distanced me from practices now considered to be perfectly acceptable. Also, alas, diminishing capacity has begun to deprive me of the pleasures of wandering freely across cherished mountain regions. I have no doubt that a direct relationship exists between the two.

This book is essentially personal, containing my impressions in a series of episodes during a bygone period about people, places, and events. They include recollections that have confirmed a remark made over forty years ago by a friend whose opinions I valued – that I had built a store of rich memories for my old age. It is only lately that I have begun to appreciate what he meant. In idle moments I sometimes look back, recalling particular incidents, delving into old diaries to check inaccuracies in my memory. Doing so has reawakened forgotten pleasures that come flooding back of incidents such as would be unfamiliar to present-day travellers and mountaineers in the Himalaya.

In a previous book<sup>1</sup> I seem to emerge as an impressionable enthusiast, ingenuous, credulous, passionate about each new discovery – qualities that precisely reflected my perceptions at the time. The maturity of later years has led to a deeper appreciation of the pleasures, heightening my awareness of the good fortune that has enabled me to develop a more profound relationship with mountains.

It is generally believed that mountaineers, like those who practice other sports, are egoistic, driven by an ambition to be first, or to win public acclaim by achieving the seemingly unachievable.

<sup>1</sup> *Himalayan Odyssey*, published in 1974

Although regarded as a sport, mountaineering fundamentally is not about winning prizes, unlike sports which involve competition and prize-winning as their manifest purpose. Mountaineers, essentially attracted by mountains, strive to master the physical and psychological skills required to deal with the challenges that the mountains present, in a process that lays bare personal strengths and weaknesses, and yields rewards that are uniquely personal. It is difficult to explain why mountaineers with exceptional skills and experience have succumbed sometimes to what were judged to be calculated risks. George Mallory's last climb on Everest in 1924 might be regarded as a classic example; and more recently, Dougal Haston, who was engulfed by an avalanche while skiing above Leysin on avalanche-prone slopes of which he was fully aware. Was it a combination of ambition and passion that drove both of them at last beyond the frontier of no return?

I would not be truthful if I were to claim immunity from selfishness and egoism during my early years. But I soon discovered that competition and drama were not essential supplements to the pleasures that I derived from mountains, by developing a relationship from which arose greater sensitivity to the challenges that I faced, and of my personal limits to overcome them. Some ventures resulted in success, others in failure; although failure is an unseemly term to apply to the trials and tribulations – and the satisfaction – that every encounter with mountains provides. I was strongly attracted by the solitude and majesty of high places; and by the unspoilt environment free from the clamour and complexity of everyday life. My presence in the mountains was not motivated by material objectives, nor was I seeking accolades for dramatic adventures. The bond that has been sustained for over sixty years has provided me with the rewards that only mountains possess the power to grant. This short volume contains a selection of experiences that have remained particularly engraved in my memory. With the present surfeit of daunting Himalayan achievements, my recollections during a long-forgotten era could be regarded as undistinguished, but they have provided me with memories that will never fade.

The Garhwal adventure, which began with six weeks as an invited member of a Swiss party, was my first large expedition. Testing

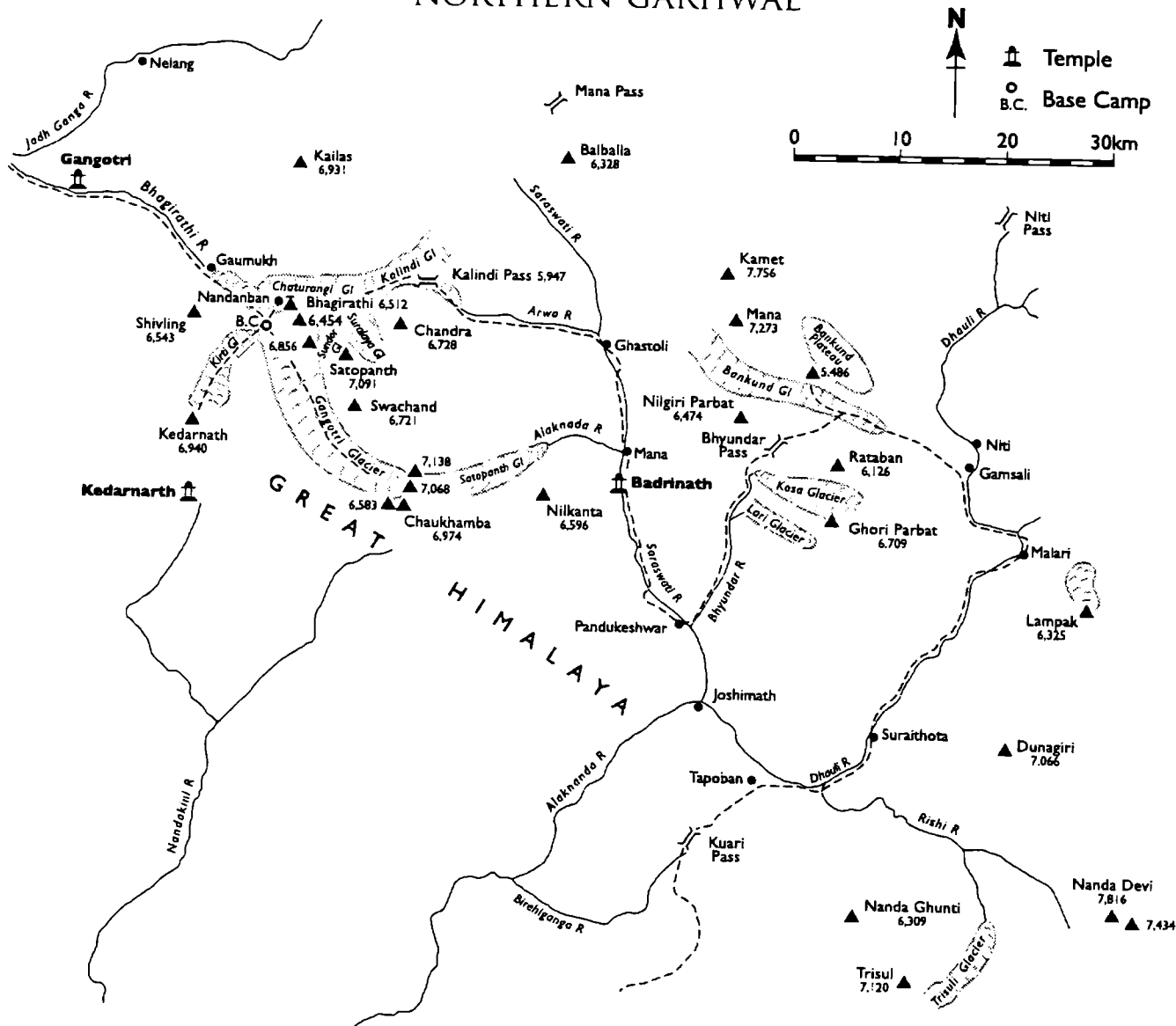
my inexperience among a group of three experienced mountaineers and two professional guides provided the basis on which I began to develop my skills. I look back at Kohistan, my return to the mountains after four years, as one of my most rewarding journeys, comparable in exploratory terms with my visit thirteen years earlier to a remote plateau situated on the Sikkim-Tibet border. Exploration, all too brief, of a primitive corner of Spiti appeared to be the apex and a turning point in my Himalayan career, followed not long after by tragedy in the Karakoram. A seven-year affair with the tallest mountain in Kaghan, which brought my expeditions (though not other mountain adventures) to a close, suggested the title for this book. Reminiscences of incidents and events of an earlier Himalayan period have aroused feelings predominantly of gratitude for opportunities seized, and to the realisation that

there is a tide in the affairs of men  
 which, taken at the flood, leads on to fortune;  
 omitted, all the voyage of their life  
 is bound in shallows ...  
 we must take the current when it serves,  
 or lose our ventures.

My humble gratitude goes to my wife Elisabeth for putting up with spells of unsociability while I researched into the past, for her endurance during my occasional disappearances into the hills for a solitary day of reflection, for her suggestions after scrutinizing untidy sections of my text. And above all, for the unwavering enthusiasm and encouragement that she provided.



# NORTHERN GARHWAL





*Garhwal* 1947

In 1946, having returned from my third journey to Sikkim, I was elected to membership of the Himalayan Club, which had its headquarters in Delhi. The club was then at a low ebb, having not recovered from the loss of a substantial portion of its membership owing to World War II and to political changes in India. It was clear that if it were to survive, it would need to review the scope of its activities. Hitherto it had done stalwart work as a repository of Himalayan knowledge, and had provided assistance to visiting Himalayan expeditions including the recruiting of Sherpas, the majority of whom were settled in Darjeeling where the club maintained a register of their names and previous experience. The work of revitalizing the club happily lasted no more than a couple of years. By 1950, I found myself, as Honorary Secretary, replying to requests from several international groups eager to visit the Himalaya after the end of the long war years. One request came from four New Zealand mountaineers, HE Riddiford, Edmund Hillary, George Lowe, and FM Cotter, who were seeking ideas for suitable climbing objectives for a light expedition. I suggested Mukut Parbat in Garhwal, an unclimbed mountain in the Kamet region, which, before his death in 1949, Frank Smythe told me had been one of his objectives. Members of the New Zealand party met me during their passage through Calcutta in 1951 on their way to Garhwal, where they succeeded in making the first ascent of Mukut Parbat. Hillary's second expedition later in the same year, as an invited member of Eric Shipton's reconnaissance of the hitherto closed Nepalese (south) side of Everest, marked the beginning of his distinguished career.

The first European group to visit the Himalaya after World War II was a Swiss expedition to Garhwal in the summer of 1947. The Himalayan Club was invited to provide a guest member to accompany them, a request which was passed on to me. An opportunity

to meet and climb with some of the leading Swiss climbers of the day, including André Roch, the leader who was a professional guide; Alexander Graven, a top Zermatt guide; and René Dittert, one of the founders of an exclusive club of elite climbers in Geneva, was too good to miss. I was impressed by their modern equipment, particularly their Bally climbing boots fitted with Vibram moulded rubber soles, then practically unknown in Britain, which immediately outdated my brand new Molitor nailed boots. But the rubber soles had a drawback; they felt insecure on wet rock, while on ice or steep névé they were unsafe without the use of crampons, which at the time were very rarely issued to Sherpas. They were the cause of an unfortunate accident on that expedition that occurred when Wangdi the Sherpa *sirdar* (head of porter team) tripped over his crampons on a narrow ridge between the two summits of Kedarnath peak, dragging his rope companion down with him.

I spent nine weeks with the Swiss, acquiring a good deal of experience. It was my first encounter with large Himalayan glaciers and I was awestruck by the magnificence of surrounding groups of unclimbed mountains. I climbed Kedarnath Dome with Roch, Dittert, and Graven, and surprisingly felt no discomfort from the altitude at 6830 metres. From our second base at Nandanban on the Chaturangi (four-coloured) Glacier, I accompanied Graven and Annelise Löhner to one of the signal points set up by Gordon Osmaston's survey party in 1936. I formed a lasting friendship with André Roch, who used to spend his spare hours leisurely with a paintbrush. On an off day at camp in bad weather, I attempted to express my feelings:

the splendid mountain scene avoids  
the lowly traveller's scheming gaze.

Enshrouded in mist, her beauty  
denied and enriched: a lofty look  
of subtle skill and cold confidence.

In haughty grandeur Unexcelled.

Undimmed. Unvanquished.

The clouds, a faithful ally, add  
bleakness to the remote white world  
a colourless vastness of frozen elements.

The snowflakes, driven by an importunate  
 wind, strike like icy needles at bent form  
 and fluttering tent roof; or, in quieter  
 mood, drip limply down.  
 (17.7.1947)

It was a privilege to have visited the mountains of Garhwal at a time when unlimited mountaineering opportunities existed in a beautiful and practically untouched region. In 1939, Roch had led a party of four Swiss climbers to Garhwal, where they made the first ascents of Dunagiri and of four peaks above the Kosa and Rataban Glaciers. In 1947, Kedarnath, Satopanth, and Nanda Ghunti were climbed. Alexander Graven, casting a professional eye at Shivling, whose steep eastern aspect faced us directly above our Chaturangi camp, expressed his opinion that there was 'only one difficult section near the top.' Roch, withholding his comments, didn't quite seem to concur with that view.<sup>1</sup> The 1939 and 1947 expeditions were sponsored by the Swiss Alpine Foundation in Zürich, organisers of the 1952 and 1956 expeditions to Mount Everest.

Nearing the end of my leave I was eager to plan my return by a different route from that intended by the Swiss, and bade them farewell at their camp on the Kalindi Glacier on 15 August, an historic date marking the birth of India's independence. After a hasty breakfast I set out with my personal Sherpa Angtensing and Thundu, carrying sleeping bags, tents, and stores for a projected journey of about three weeks that would take us through Badrinath to the Bhyundar Valley (the latest form appears to be Bhiudar, which is practically identical phonetically), Frank Smythe's 'valley of flowers', over a pass at its head, down to the Dhaulī River, past the Rishi, and back to the foothills and forests via the Kuari pass. Our little party set out at 6am climbing crusty snow into the sun through a thin mist toward the Kalindi pass (5947m), steering along a line of steps we had made the previous evening. As we stood on the

<sup>1</sup> Thirty-four years later, between 3-15 June in 1981, Doug Scott, accompanied by Greg Child, the French climber Georges Bettembourg and Rick White, ascended the east pillar; it was the first ascent from that side done in alpine style.



watershed between the Gangotri and Arwa Valleys, there was a dramatic view including brief glimpses of Kamet (7756m), the highest mountain in India, and Mana (7273m)<sup>2</sup> floating majestically above massive banks of cumulus clouds. Before commencing the descent I was sorry to wish goodbye to Tenzing, who, after the accident on Kedarnath, had efficiently replaced Wangdi as *sirdar*, as well as Ang Dawa and Ang Norbu, the three of them having accompanied us to the top of the pass. Heavily laden, we began our descent in a mist on easy angled snow that later steepened and became mixed with rocky sections. Halting to fix crampons for the final ice slope of 65 metres, we reached the upper basin of the Arwa Glacier. Care was required to negotiate the wide belt of crevasses that followed. Although we roped up, it was painfully clear that without any spare rope a rescue operation would be difficult. Passing the left bank of the stream surging from the snout of the Arwa Glacier, it soon became necessary to cross over to the right in order to reach the seemingly easier southern side of the valley. This required fording a series of icy tributaries lower down, which resulted in an unwelcome soaking for me and most of the contents of my rucksack. By mid-afternoon, in a steady drizzle, we reached a convenient campsite, which had evidently been used before, and decided to halt there. Hot mugs of tea followed, and not long after a welcome dinner prepared by Angtensing, who was a trained cook. Steep cliffs to the north had an unfriendly appearance; our side of the valley looked less forbidding, but I realised that our journey the next day would require crossing several outflows from tributary glaciers that joined the Arwa from the south.

We set out in light monsoon rain at 7.15am the next morning with clothes and kit still damp from the previous day. A chill wind and persistent mist accompanied us, adding mystery to our doubts about the route down the valley where we found and lost occasional signs of a track, giving us the illusion that we were explorers in a wilderness of boulders, moraine, and turbulent streams, six of which needed to be crossed. The most difficult were those issuing from the cliffs to our right that varied in steepness. The easier ones were forded knee-deep across turbulent waters. There were a few that

<sup>2</sup> Both peaks were climbed by Smythe in 1931 and 1937 respectively.

were too dangerous to negotiate, requiring steep ascents and descents in search of a safer crossing. Very little forward progress was possible owing to these manoeuvres, and ten hours were required on that first day to cover a distance of about 15km. By late afternoon the going became easier, leading to wide stony flats where numerous tributary streams issuing from both north and south joined the Arwa. After a long day we halted on a knoll near a shepherd's camping ground about two kilometres above the junction of the Arwa and Saraswati Rivers. From our perch above the latter, the small village of Ghastoli could be seen on the opposite bank where a group of chestnut-coloured horses grazing on green slopes lit by the evening sun provided a refreshing sight to our colour-starved eyes.

A solitary shepherd was an interested spectator of our early morning activities. When it was suggested that he might accompany us as a porter to Badrinath, a distance of about 12km where Thundu had to leave us to return to the Swiss party, he declined the privilege, unimpressed by Thundu's blandishments. The Saraswati River has its source near the Mana pass, about 19km to the north on the commercial highway to Tibet. Our journey followed the path leading south to Badrinath. Having dwelt for over two months amid glaciers, the walk along well-worn tracks, which from Mana onward grew to the status of a road, seemed unusually comforting. Unsurprisingly, some of the inhabitants of the small and attractive village of Mana possessed Mongolian features, the Tibetan border being about a day's journey away. Changes in the character of the country and the sights and sounds of an active population emphasized our departure from the barrenness and isolation of the upper regions. Further evidence was provided by the flags and bunting decorating almost the entire route between Mana and Badrinath, whose temple is an arduously accessible goal for devout Hindu pilgrims from the plains. There, with pride and joy, India's independence was being colourfully celebrated.

Seemingly irrelevant memories of the enchanting walk to Badrinath seem to linger. Chiefly, the strong sweet scent of freshly cut pine-wood, the vibrating sound of sawmills, a proliferation of wooden chalets under construction, and the homely odour of wood smoke. Over half a century later, unspoilt mountain villages such as Mana

have lost some of their earlier charm, their populations having grown from dozens into hundreds. It would be nice to think that felling and planting of the region's great forest wealth have proceeded hand in hand.

The traveller's rest house, locally known as the dak bungalow with a resident caretaker, was situated above the town of Badrinath at 3165 metres. The small building provided what seemed like the sumptuous comfort of a bed after weeks of camping out. Being the sole occupant, I was able to spread out our kit and food to discuss with Angtensing what purchases were needed for the next stage of our journey. Accustomed to meeting the demands of large numbers of summer pilgrims visiting the headwaters of the sacred Ganges River, Badrinath was well provided with a variety of shops. Angtensing and I spent the morning after our arrival, helped by the postmaster and his assistant, buying supplies of fresh fruit and vegetables, sugar, and coarse brown flour. Returning to the rest house at noon I found that the postmaster had acted promptly in meeting my request for a porter when I was greeted by Netar Singh, a man from Mana who handed me a couple of yellowing, well-thumbed letters signed by Frank Smythe and André Roch, recommending his services. The man looked simple, honest, and keen, and I engaged him on the spot. His pay, at the rate of three and a half rupees per day, rising to four rupees above the snowline, seems unbelievably paltry today. I requested him to return the next morning ready to start, bringing one or two companions in case extra portage should be required. He came back later that evening with some homemade *chang*, a most acceptable gift prior to the excellent dinner prepared by Angtensing, which I ate in solitary splendour seated by a warm fire.

An unfortunate incident during my otherwise pleasant stay at Badrinath arose from the absence of the *chowkidar* (caretaker of the rest house), whom I never met. In his place there lurked a youth who seemed excessively keen as a fetcher of wood and drawer of water. When leaving the rest house for shopping in the village with Angtensing, I was concerned about the safety of our kit, particularly of my rucksack, tucked away at the bottom of which was almost my entire supply of money in packets of banknotes. Unwisely unsuspecting, I accepted the youth's offer to act as a security guard during

our absence. On returning two hours later, a search in my rucksack revealed that one of the bundles of banknotes was missing. The guilt of the 'guardian' was palpable. He feigned ignorance, not realising that his facial expression and behaviour clearly demonstrated otherwise. When I offered him the option of handing over the stolen money, or of accompanying me to the police station, he broke down in tears, falling to the floor to beg for mercy. He led me outside the building to a large boulder, behind which he had buried the missing bundle. I felt that he deserved pity rather than punishment – the wealthy foreigner would hardly notice that one hundred rupees were missing – but I had to ban him from the rest house until after my departure the following morning. I found his abject submission as distressing as his attempted theft.

Early on the morning of 20 August, Netar Singh arrived from Mana with Bal Singh and Inder Singh, two sturdy young men from his village. After sorting and packing, it turned out that we could employ both, and Angtensing and I were soon ready to set out with our porter trio down the valley on the next stage of our journey to the Bhyundar Valley, which we reached the following afternoon. I found it, as Smythe had a decade earlier, isolated and unspoilt; but it was too late in the season for the exotic botanical displays that he described. Angtensing, toppling over a boulder, fell into one of the several streams that we needed to cross on the way to our encampment in the upper valley. His subsequent sulky mood was due more, I think, to loss of face with the Mana men than to his soaking in the waters, and supper that evening was a rather patchy affair. A noteworthy memory of that camp was my first view of a Himalayan brown bear, which emerged from a forest on the opposite bank of the river for a drink. Seated outside my tent, I had a tranquil view of the magnificent beast, which appeared to be unconcerned by my presence across 25 metres of raging waters.

The way to the Bhyundar Pass (5086m), our objective the next day, was unclear from information provided by the only shepherd we met in the upper valley. Setting out early, we ascended a tributary of the Lari Glacier. Our misgivings about the route were not helped by a low mist which prevailed throughout the day. Following occasional tracks on a moraine above the glacier, we arrived late in the

afternoon at a sheltered hollow where we found rusty tins of Fry's cocoa and sardines, probably left by the 1936 Garhwal survey party or by Smythe the following year. At dawn the next morning with a partial lifting of the clouds, our situation, perched above the Lari and Kosa Glaciers, of which we had seen nothing the previous evening, caused some excitement. Rataban (6126m) rose close above us to the east, and to the north-west, the icy face of Nilgiri Parbat (6474m) was visible. Thirty minutes of scrambling up boulders and scree in the cold shadow took us to the top of the Bhyundar Pass (5086m), from where we looked north to the lower reaches of the Bankund Glacier bathed in sunshine, a region that seemed drier and more barren than that from which we had come. Directly below the pass was a short but steep stretch of ice, which the Mana men negotiated bravely in their leather-strapped feet following a line of soup-plate steps that we prepared for them. Surprisingly, we came across two skeletal remains of sheep, although we were told by shepherds on both sides that the pass had fallen into disuse during recent years. Below lay an easy descent to the glacier, where we found a grassy patch on its right bank for our camp alongside a fresh-water stream.

We were situated in the Bankund Valley about two kilometres above the snout of the glacier surrounded by groups of well-known mountains, but Kamet and Mana, although not far away to the north, were not visible from our camp. Nilgiri Parbat, now steeply above, was near at hand. It was climbed, as well as Mana Peak, by Frank Smythe in 1937. Directly above our camp, but out of sight, was the Bankund Plateau, discovered in 1936 and mapped by HA Gardiner of Osmaston's survey team; it was visited the following year by Smythe and Peter Oliver as a base from which they climbed two of its peaks. Next morning in glorious weather Angtensing and I had an enjoyable climb on a rock peak of around 5500 metres, situated at the south-west edge of the Bankund Plateau, which provided thrilling views of peaks to the east, west, and south, although Kamet to the north remained hidden.

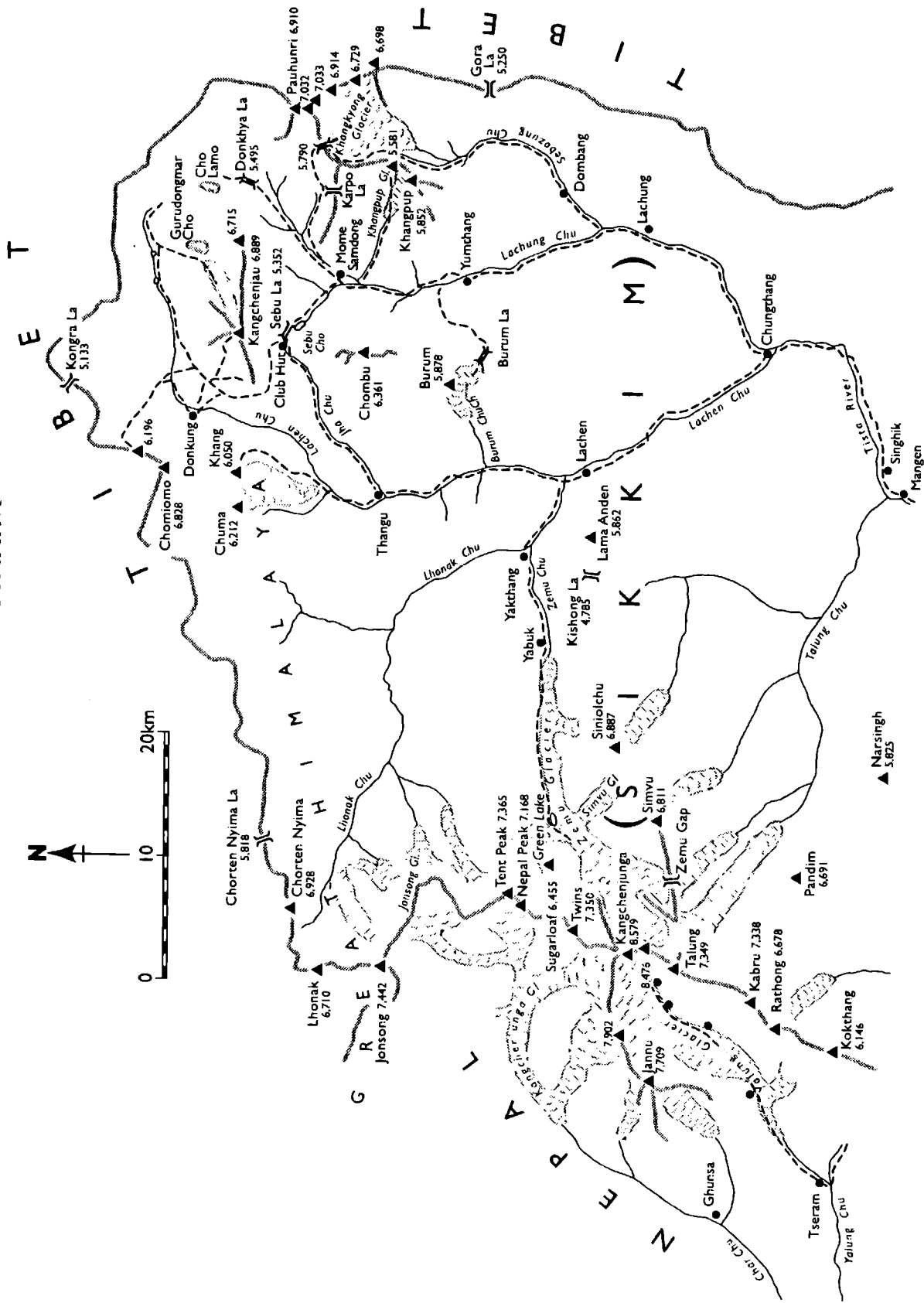
A day later, our return journey began after a sheep had been purchased, slaughtered, expertly roasted by Angtensing, turned into sausages, and eagerly devoured by our hungry party. Walking down the valley across verdant meadows fed by streams issuing from the

Bankund Glacier, we camped outside Gamsali, the last important village in the Dhauli Valley leading northward to Tibet via the Niti Pass. Following the river downstream via Suraithota to Tapoban, we parted from the Dhauli Valley, after passing the entrance to the Rishi Gorge, and struck south toward the Kuari pass. Descending to a small village beyond the pass, I entered what I imagined was a rest house, where I received a welcome from a schoolmaster who invited me to occupy his school for the night. Before my departure the next morning, he assembled his pupils, who provided a lively performance of a folk song that contained a haunting melody, the opening bars of which I still recall.

On 6 September we reached the end of our journey at Gwaldam. On my last morning, under a cloudless sky at sunrise, I watched changing colours flushing the tops of Trisul and Nanda Ghunti with rose pink turning to brilliant gold, before the rays spread like a flood across a horizon of lesser mountains. My travels included episodes of adventure mingled with the joys and frustrations of such journeys, providing two and a half weeks of pure pleasure. At Gwaldam, our little group broke up. After warm farewells, my three loyal companions departed for their village homes with light hearts and well-filled pockets.

My return was not without adventure. When the steering gear of the bus in which I travelled from Ranikhet to the railway terminus at Kathgodam broke down, the driver carried out roadside repairs with a fragile piece of old wire. This took place halfway through the journey along a circuitous mountain road, down which he proceeded to hurtle around one sharp corner after another with complete disregard for the crowd of terror-stricken passengers inside his vehicle. On my arrival at Delhi railway station the next morning, I was searched for lethal weapons and threatened with the seizure of my crampons and ice axe. I had arrived in India's capital city during the turmoil of the aftermath of independence in India and Pakistan. But, to quote an earlier writer, that is another story.

# NORTHERN SIKKIM





At the age of twenty in April 1942, I crossed a threshold into a new world when I made my first acquaintance with the Himalaya. Looking back, my introduction was a very tame affair. Starting from Darjeeling, four days of easy walking were involved along pathways to the north-west, following the Singalila ridge, which forms a boundary between Sikkim and Nepal. The ridge extends roughly north at an average altitude of 3000 metres, providing impressive views of peaks and glaciers, with the Kangchenjunga group as the centrepiece 50km away. On a clear day, Makalu, Everest, and Lhotse stand out against lesser mountains to the north-west, with the Tibetan plateau visible 75km away to the east beyond a foreground of innumerable mountain groups in Sikkim.

On that initial trip an impression lingers of a solitary walk that I took above Sandakphu, where we spent the second night of our trek. From a high point on the ridge in the stillness of a calm evening, I beheld a vast panorama of the Himalaya above a cloud-sea, seemingly poised halfway up the sky, illuminated by bright colours, which faded slowly from gold through shades of orange, pink, and crimson, before the sky, suddenly drained of colour, transformed the spectacle into an icy-grey image. At the time it struck me as an almost occult manifestation. The eastern horizon was already immersed in the shades of night, making me aware of the chilly air at over 3600 metres as I found my way back to the rest house. Nowadays, vehicles carry tourists up to this sublime spot to be accommodated in lodges spread out along the ridge. The following morning the mountains were hidden, and the day's walk led us for much of the way through forests with heavy mist cloaking the pines. Solitary rest houses sited at scenic points were often distinguished from afar by their red tin roofs.

Our needs were looked after by a troop of Sherpas and ponymen;



the former included Dawa Thundu and Ajeeba, familiar names from expedition books that I had read, sporting nailed boots and wind-proof jackets acquired on earlier expeditions. They and their compatriots, long since settled in Darjeeling, found that their livelihood as porters had been seriously affected by the temporary halt in Himalayan expeditions during World War II, some of them having to take on temporary jobs as rickshaw pullers. Others, more enterprising, such as Angtharkay, earned their living and helped others to do so by switching to labour contracting for roadworks. Tenzing, among others, took up domestic employment with British officers posted at stations across India.

The spell cast by those first feeble steps in Sikkim endured and deepened during the next three decades, eclipsing other interests and activities. Two journeys in Sikkim followed in 1945 and 1946. Periods of two or three weeks with friends during spells of service leave seemed sufficient to acquire a wider knowledge of the region. Sikkim was then an independent state administered by a Maharaja and his ministers in the capital town of Gangtok, with a British Resident acting as adviser. In 1946 we met the Resident, who expressed an interest in our journey. He added to our reading matter by handing us a few airmail copies of *The Times* and arranged a tour of the palace and monastery. Much has changed in Sikkim since those far-off years. The Maharaja adopted the title of *Chogyal* (Spiritual Head) after his state ceded its independence to India in 1975.

Little was left of the unique character and charm of Gangtok following the arrival in the 1970s of armed detachments of the Indian army equipped with heavy vehicles. During a period of confrontation with China over disputed borders between the two countries, Indian troops were mobilised in battle order at the Nathu and Jelep passes on the Tibetan border. Roads constructed by the military brought to an end the traditional passage of mule caravans across the passes, laden with wool and silk from Tibet for marketing in Kalimpong in exchange for salt, tea, and other goods from India. The trade diminished greatly after the Chinese occupation of Tibet. Sensitive issues concerning the lengthy border between India and China, stretching from Ladakh in the west to Assam in the east, remain unresolved, but in the interest of promoting closer economic growth, more friendly

attitudes have been adopted between the two nations. In the summer of 2006, the Indian army frontier post at the Nathu pass was reopened after over forty years. At present, only limited areas in Sikkim are open to tourists, and a fee-paying system has been introduced which is beyond the means of small expeditions. Looking back, my most evocative memory of Gangtok is the sight of mule caravans passing along hill tracks and forests above the town, and the friendly tinkling of their bells.

Three early journeys in Sikkim were followed by the Garhwal expedition in 1947; and in 1948 by two tightly packed weeks in the Swiss Alps with a guide introduced by André Roch. Both of us were young and keen, climbing every day. The experience enabled me to define my interests and to assess my strengths and limitations. In 1949 I felt ready to adopt bolder plans. Sikkim was my first choice. The only guidebook available was a slim paperback volume containing 188 pages of route descriptions, diagrams, and maps and was titled *Tours in Sikkim* by Percy Brown, published by Newman & Co. Calcutta in 1917. My copy, a valued item in my rucksack, was the fourth edition, dated 1944. For my first two journeys my *sirdar* was Pasang Dawa Sherpa. (In 1937 he climbed Chomolhari with FS Chapman, whose book, *The Jungle is Neutral*, records his war experiences in the Burmese and Malaysian jungles between 1942 and 1945 training local and Chinese guerillas, and his capture by the Japanese. In 1939, with the American climber Fritz Wiessner, Pasang reached a high point of 8385 metres on K2.) In 1949 I was fortunate to obtain the services of Angharkay, who had established a brilliant reputation during pre-war expeditions to Everest and elsewhere, and had accompanied Eric Shipton on four of his exploratory expeditions. Shipton invited him in 1951 to join his reconnaissance of a new route via Khumbu to the south side of Everest after the government of Nepal had opened the region to foreign expeditions.

In the upper north-east corner of Sikkim bordering Tibet I was attracted by a small unexplored area. The latest Survey of India map, based on an official survey in 1939-40, showed a glacier, the Khangkyong, forming a semicircular amphitheatre south of Pauhunri that contained six peaks with computed heights between 6700 and 7000 metres. The glacier and its basin had not been visited, but the peaks

rising from it had been observed by surveyors from the west in 1936. In 1934, JB Auden<sup>1</sup> of the Indian Geological Survey photographed the peaks from the south, referring to them in an article published in Volume VII of the *Himalayan Journal*. I was curious to find a passage into the amphitheatre, and to search for an exit from it, if possible, to the north or west. Because two of my previous visits to Sikkim in October had been partly marred by late monsoon rains, I decided to plan my 1949 journey for November, when clear and generally more stable weather could be expected, involving, however, shorter days and lower temperatures. The monsoon that year had been particularly heavy, persisting into mid-October and validating my choice of a later start. Miroslav Hruska, a Czech living in Calcutta, joined me. He was not a climber and had no Himalayan experience, but as an enthusiastic skier he had made several winter visits to Kashmir and was a member of the Ski Club of India. He hoped to find opportunities for high-altitude skiing on the Khangkyong glacier.

On 1 November, Hruska and I arrived at Gangtok where we found Angharkay with a team of four Sherpas who included Dawa Thundu, Ajeeba, and Sonam, all tried men and known to me. Angharkay had brought a supply of rice from Darjeeling, but we needed to purchase sugar and flour. After three pack ponies were hired, a fourth had to be added in order to carry additional fodder required for the ponies.<sup>2</sup> Trekking along pathways up the Tista valley, where roads are now frequented by light vehicles, nights were spent at rest houses in Dikchu, Singhik, and Chungthang, where baths could be taken at the end of a day's walk, provided one did not object to being cramped inside an oval-shaped tin tub containing 30cm of lukewarm water. The *chowkidars* of the bungalows, many of which were constructed in the early 1900s, took a traditional pride in adorning their gardens with beds of flowers, and the Singhik garden was particularly colourful, meriting the *baksheesh* (tip) that I gave to its creator. It was there that I was introduced to the Lepcha brew *marva*, a fairly harmless beverage midway between tea and mild beer which is drunk by

<sup>1</sup> Brother of the poet WH Auden.

<sup>2</sup> *The Ascent of Rum Doodle* by WE Bowman, an amusing satire about a mythical Himalayan expedition of massive proportions, was published in 1956.

sucking it through a bamboo straw from a large bamboo pot filled with millet seed fermented in warm water, the pot being topped up to last a whole evening. The dregs are fed to pigs and are said to have an intoxicating effect on them. I felt it would be rather amusing to meet a drunk pig. Our passage along well-worn paths through the hills and forests of the Tista valley was enlivened by the bells of pony caravans and the whistles of their drivers travelling down to markets in Gangtok, Kalimpong and Darjeeling, their saddle bags filled with apples freshly picked from the autumn harvest in Sikkim.

On the fourth day we reached Chungthang, situated at the meeting point of two rivers, the Lachen from the north-west, fed by waters issuing from the Zemu and Lhonak Glaciers, and the Lachung from the north-east, fed by a series of smaller glaciers adjacent to and including the Khangkyong. At Chungthang we left the Tista valley, travelling up the Lachung Valley where we spent our last night under a roof at the large and comfortable rest house situated outside Lachung village. Four kilometres beyond, on the following day, we branched east into the Sebo Valley, whose river has its source in the Khangkyong Glacier over 15km to the north. We were approaching the edge of the treeline and had entered a different climate zone. At Dombang (3100m), we found a solitary habitation accommodating a family of seven engaged in cultivating and harvesting an indigenous medicinal plant on contract with the government. An old man who had resided there for fourteen years told me that we were the first outsiders he had seen. We placed two camps beyond Dombang, entering a region that turned gradually wilder with rhododendron and juniper scrub struggling for existence not far below the snow-covered moraine of the Khangkyong glacier. The summer tracks of yak herdsman ended at about 4000 metres, four kilometres below the glacier where two streams join the Sebo Chu, issuing from valleys leading north over the Karpo La (5380m) to small groups of peaks, and east toward the Gora La (5250m) to Tibet. Our third camp, placed on moraine at 4450m, was situated above the right bank of the Khangkyong glacier. Autumn conditions were very much in evidence. Clear skies brought low temperatures, averaging  $-10^{\circ}\text{C}$  at night. Camped in a narrow valley, we received about five hours of sunshine a day, and it was usually dark by 5pm when early

dinner became the rule, eaten around a campfire fuelled with scrub-wood carried up from below.

On our first day's advance from that camp, Hruska and I, accompanied by Angharkay and Dawa Thundu, moved up a steep section of moraine on which progress was tedious owing to a heavy cover of snow. To our right the steep lower icefall of the glacier was an impressive sight with giant seracs seeming ready to collapse, but prevented from doing so by the low temperature. During our three days there in wintry conditions we did not observe any significant movement in the heavily broken central section of the glacier. By midday, having climbed about 400 metres in three hours, the going began to ease. From our position on the moraine ridge there was an unexpected view of an approach via gradually steepening snowslopes to the western end of the icefall. The tops of several peaks were visible, but of the basin from which they rose there was as yet no sign. It was by no means certain that if we succeeded in entering the basin an alternative route could be found out of it. Since surveyors had not reached the upper glacier, I took comfort from the thought that the steep icefalls indicated on the map as barring entry to the basin were likely to be partly conjectural. We were sufficiently encouraged by what we saw to decide to move our camp a stage further up in an attempt to enter the basin.

Fine weather accompanied by low temperatures continued the following day. Hruska, who had shown signs of altitude sickness for the past two days, was unwell when we returned late the previous afternoon, retiring supperless to his tent with a headache. He was clearly affected by the altitude, and I discussed with Angharkay the possibility of his return to Lachung with one of the Sherpas. The idea was abandoned the next morning when Hruska set out alone pluckily upward, while the rest of us were striking camp. Weakened by his inability to hold down any food or drink, he moved very slowly. The snow slopes that had attracted us from our previous high point turned out to be a torment. In spite of the low night temperature, the daytime heat of the sun and the absence of wind had prevented the surface snow from consolidating. Each of us took turns in the exhausting work of track-making through knee-deep snow, going out in front for about thirty minutes at a time.

Arriving at the top of the slope at 5200 metres, it was thrilling to

discover that we had reached the western end of a large amphitheatre approximately two and a half kilometres wide from north to south and over six kilometres long, falling away toward Tibet in the east and enclosing a semicircular group of six peaks, with the tip of Pauhunri (7127m) just visible in the north.<sup>3</sup> Sweeping round to the south-east above the amphitheatre rose the impressive group of peaks whose heights were given on the map as 6910 metres, 7032 metres, 7033 metres, 6914 metres, 6729 metres, and 6698 metres, the last two at the far south-eastern end were guarded by a formidable series of ice-falls. In clear weather every detail of the mountains could be studied. The easiest to climb seemed to be the nearest, marked 6910 metres, but we were not equipped to tackle the icefall guarding the west face, which appeared to be the most direct route.

By midday it seemed wise to camp on the plateau in order to make a careful study of the possibilities. If a feasible pass existed to the north, there was a chance of reaching a glacier north-west of Pauhunri in the direction of the Donkhya pass (5495m), which we planned to cross during the second stage of our journey. But that approach was barred by an icefall, the intricacy of which was not exaggerated on the map; the reality appeared to be much worse. One up to the surveyors who had probably observed it from the north.

The prospect of finding a way out of the plateau to the west seemed more encouraging. Skirting round firmly bridged crevasses, we mounted slopes where the snow was of relatively less depth than lower down, hoping to find more encouraging signs. Covering a distance of about two kilometres in one hour, we moved toward a rock cliff conspicuous because of its red colour, which had long been a focal point. Reaching it, our seven-hour ascent up snowslopes of variable quality had taken its toll wearying all of us, with Hruska following uncomplaining in our tracks. It was past 3pm when we set up camp at 5500 metres below the cliff at the north-western end of the amphitheatre.

Dawn the next morning revealed clouds over Tibet, raising misgivings about the weather. But the sky later cleared and in our exposed

<sup>3</sup> The original form of spelling has been altered to Paohunli, and the mountain is now classified as sacred. It was first climbed in 1912 by Dr AM Kellas; a second ascent was made 33 years later by Wilfrid Noyce, accompanied by Angtharkay.

situation the sun touched our tents at 6.45am, encouraging an early start. Moving up slopes of ankle-deep snow, avoiding a belt of crevasses where the slope began to steepen, and guided by the gradual easing of the gradient westward, we reached almost imperceptibly a broad saddle, where below us the slopes began gradually to descend. 'Instead of giving three cheers, we calmly walked forward as though we had been crossing Westminster Bridge.' Leslie Stephen's remarks on making the first crossing of the Jungfrauoch in 1862 came to my mind. Estimating its height as 5790 metres, it did not seem inappropriate to call it Hidden Pass, since it was undistinguished either from the east or the west. In the brilliantly clear atmosphere there were striking views of Kabru, Talung, Kangchenjunga, the Twins, Nepal Peak, Tent Peak, and Jonsong in the distance; and nearer at hand, the sharp profile of unclimbed Chombu (6361m). Immediately below us to the east was the full spread of the amphitheatre with the challenging cirque of mountains rising directly above. The hour spent on the pass encompassed by a scene of such grandeur seemed magical; the Sherpas, even Angharkay, appeared moved. Our inability to attempt any of the peaks was compensated by the privilege of having been granted entry into this hitherto secret corner of Sikkim, and of having discovered a seemingly safe passage out to the west.

The descent began with a moderately steep slope ending in a broad snowfield, beyond which we were unable to see. Hruska, responsive to the magnificence of the situation, recorded the scene on movie film and mustered the strength to strap on his skis. He was able to glide smoothly down the slopes in a series of graceful turns to the delight and admiration of the Sherpas. Alas, the joy of his run ended all too soon. The snowfield was followed by crevassed slopes of increasing steepness. A small glacier faced us to the right guarded by an icefall. To the left a slightly larger glacier appeared to provide a better way. We roped up at this point in order to negotiate the crevassed zone ahead, the passage of which, assisted by the firm névé, took about an hour. An ascent of this glacier in the summer would have been a difficult proposition. Coming off the ice, we followed the right bank of the river, the Jakthang Chu, on snow-covered moraine that gave way to an ablation valley. We decided to set up camp in the early afternoon, estimating correctly that it would not be possible to reach our desti-

nation, Mome Samdong, before nightfall. The site, dotted with three small lakes and scattered with scrub, turned out to be ideal, with fresh water and juniper wood at hand, a level space for tents, and ample sunshine to provide warmth until the late afternoon. Hruska, severely dehydrated, was able at last to hold down some liquid and to eat a light supper. A sharp rock ridge to the south divided us from the Karpo La and a short ascent of the slopes above our camp provided views to the north-west of Chomiomo (6828m) and Kangchenjau (6889m), the latter mountain being our next objective.

After a late start the next morning, we descended about 400 metres through the Jakthang Valley – deserted except for an empty yakherd shelter – following the stream along a narrow pathway to its junction with the Lachung River, which has its source about 12km west of Pahunri. Reaching Mome Samdong (4500m) in the afternoon, we found our two porters there with loads carried up from Chungthang, safely stored for the next part of our journey, as well as supplies of firewood collected from below.

In its heyday, prior to World War II, the Himalayan Club established two mountain huts in 1937-8 in Northern Sikkim, conveniently situated for use by members trekking across the Donkhya and Sebu passes. Accommodation consisted of a room with basic furniture, including a stove for cooking, and sleeping quarters on a wooden floor above. On previous journeys I had found both huts a haven of comfort, particularly in stormy weather. In 1949, the Mome Samdong hut was a ruin. The entrance door was ununlockable, the only window in the room had been removed, the stove was broken, and a damaged table was the sole item of furniture left. Its location on the route to the Donkhya La appears to have made it a target for Tibetan traders and yakherders. Hruska, although somewhat recovered at the lower altitude, did not feel up to facing a return to higher altitudes, which our subsequent plans entailed, and decided to return to Gangtok the following day. He was accompanied by Sonam and two porters, who would carry surplus items to Gangtok to await our return.

Requirements for the next ten days were minimised, and our party, comprising Angtharkay, Dawa Thundu, Ajeeba, and Mingma, set out the day after Hruska's departure, more heavily laden than usual, but



relieved to have parted from the persistent north wind that swept the exposed situation of Mome Samdong. A five-hour walk, mostly over semi-consolidated snow that covered the gradually ascending plateau, took us to a small lake at 5200 metres, about three kilometres short of the Donkhya pass, which had long been clearly outlined in the north. On a grassy patch, with plenty of fuel available in the form of peat and yak dung, we set up what turned out to be a sheltered camp.

On 15 November, an hour's ascent took us to the top of the pass at 9.30am, where Angtharkay hoisted a long streamer of prayer flags. Despite its height of 5495 metres, the pass was devoid of snow. A Tibetan who accompanied us pointed out the crumbling remains of watchtowers used during early wars between Sikkim and Tibet, when the Donkhya ridge marked the frontier between the two countries. The crystal-clear atmosphere created an otherworldly scene. To the north, 460 metres below, the sharp light of the sun turned the iced surface of the Cho Lamo Lake into a dazzling mirror. Beyond lay the unconfined spread of the Tibetan plateau with Khamba Dzong clearly visible 40km away. The top of Pauhunri was visible to the east, with the Gurudongmar peaks in the west. At Cho Lamo Lake we encountered an encampment of two yak caravans on a journey north into Tibet via a pass of 5288 metres. We were heading west, halting that afternoon at Yumcho (5200m) near Gurudongmar Cho, a larger lake than its neighbour Cho Lamo. While the Sherpas set up camp, I walked along the shores of the lake to examine the eastern aspect of Kangchenjau, a mountain that had not been climbed since Dr AM Kellas' ascent in 1912. Kellas had suggested the possibility of a better route from this side, but I failed to discover one and decided that we should move round to the west in order to examine whether a route might be found from there, or if that failed, to repeat Kellas' northern route. The icefalls that tumble steeply down the east face of Kangchenjau, together with those from its close neighbours Gurudongmar (6715m) and Sanglaphu (6224m), feed the main lake and

<sup>4</sup> Gurudongmar Peak was climbed 13 years earlier by Eric Shipton and E Kempson on their return from the 1936 Everest expedition led by Hugh Ruttledge. In October 1996, a party of six British climbers led by Doug Scott explored the glaciers and peaks around Gurudongmar and Chombu, attempting both mountains and climbing three peaks of 5575 metres, 5691 metres, and Chombu East (5745m).

its smaller neighbour, both of which were partly ice-covered.<sup>4</sup>

Leaving Yumcho and bypassing Donkung (5562m), the last settlement on the route to Tibet via the Kongra La (5133m), we travelled south, camping in a sheltered hollow at 4900 metres below a small glacier west of Kangchenjau to escape from the howling wind that had accompanied us since our crossing of the Donkhya pass. Climbing for three hours from that camp up moraine and easy rock, we reached a saddle at about 5550 metres, situated below the upper portion of the lengthy and spiky west ridge of Kangchenjau, leading to its west summit, which confirmed my suspicion of the impracticability of a route from that side. The mountain is topped by two distinct snow domes separated by an undulating snow plateau over one kilometre in length. The east summit, climbed by Kellas, is marked on the survey map as 6889 metres; the west summit, evidently slightly lower, although positioned, has been given no height. From the saddle on which we stood there was a view south of the north-west face of the unclimbed peak of Chombu. The saddle provides a feasible though steep descent to the Jha Chu Valley where the Himalayan Club hut was situated. Since we might have been the first persons to visit the saddle, we built a cairn there.

Our disappointment was somewhat appeased upon reaching Donkung later in the day where a sheep was bought, at a cost of about £1.50, duly killed, roasted, and feasted upon that evening. The happy mood was heightened when I agreed to the Sherpas' request that a rest day would follow prior to our attempt on Kangchenjau. With Angtharkay and Dawa Thundu applying their combined skills, the Sherpas spent a large part of their rest day cooking and eating. Partly to escape from the acrid yak-dung smoke and the squalor of the quarters at Donkung, I climbed the scree and boulder slopes to the north-west along a route that I had followed three years earlier during an attempt to climb Chomiomo, a mountain that straddles the Tibet border.<sup>5</sup> My objective was to make a close study of Kellas' route on the north side of Kangchenjau, which we intended to follow. Although there did not seem to be any technical difficulty, I

<sup>5</sup> The first ascent was made in 1910 by the indefatigable Dr Kellas, and a second ascent was made in 1945 by TH Tilly accompanied by Angtharkay.

found that the slope leading to the north col received no sun at all, the col itself very little, and the upper part of the mountain about three hours late in the afternoon.

Leaving Donkung on 19 November with Angtharkay, Dawa Thundu and Ajeeba, our intention was to place a camp below the slope leading to the north col of Kangchenjau; and if required, to bivouac on the col before, or after, the final lap to the summit. *L'homme propose, Dieu dispose*. We ascended 350 metres over a series of bare hills before obtaining a view of the entrance to the valley that we were seeking before descending 100 metres in order to reach it. Our camp was placed at 5790 metres beyond the smaller of two minor lakes, a short distance from the foot of the slopes leading to the col. Peat was available for burning, but our niche was exposed to the fierce blast of the north wind.<sup>6</sup> The sun had left the site before our arrival at 2.30pm and the tents were still in shadow when we set out at 9.30am the next morning. None of us had much sleep that night owing to the wind relentlessly lashing our tents, causing mine to collapse, which provided me with a reluctant outing at 3am to re-fix the guy ropes in a temperature of -20°C.

The wind had abated slightly on the 20th when we left camp. For the first 400 metres, progress up the moderately angled slopes toward the col was rapid, easily kicking or scraping steps up a hard snow crust. Beyond that we reached a belt of seracs where the angle steepened. The crust had thinned out and, in front, Angtharkay had begun cutting steps. Advancing slowly, we arrived at a point 200 metres below the col. There was no special difficulty, but after over two hours on the sunless slope bothered by the wind, fingers and toes had begun increasingly to lose sensation. Dawa Thundu and Ajeeba, behind, were voicing difficulties. I joined Angtharkay to find out what he thought. He was going strongly and his immediate reaction was that having come so far, we ought to continue. The time was almost midday and I estimated that not less than four hours, probably five depending on the conditions, would be required to reach the summit along an icy wind-swept ridge about 490 metres above

<sup>6</sup>In August 1912, Dr Kellas had placed his camp at an estimated 5850 metres in a similar position.

the col, plus an equivalent period for the descent back to the camp below, ruling out a bivouac on the col at c.6400 metres owing to its exposure to the wind. I felt that the risk of frostbite was something that I could not accept, either on behalf of the Sherpas or for myself. With regret, I gave the signal to turn back. A decision that troubled me deeply afterward, but which I now believe was right. Wintry conditions had defeated us.<sup>7</sup>

Kellas made two attempts on the northern route in early August 1912, accompanied by two Sherpa porters. On the first, five and a half hours were required to reach the north col from his camp at 5850 metres, owing to the steepening of the upper slopes to 70 degrees and the need to cut steps in glassy ice. On his second attempt the col was reached in two hours; from there, the climb to the domed east summit took four hours, owing to a few icy passages. On the descent, 460 metres above their camp, one of the Sherpas slipped, dragging all three down in an involuntary 300-metre glissade, fortunately without serious damage.<sup>8</sup> Returning to Donkung that evening, disappointed and weary, a mug of tea was as much as I could manage before retiring into my sleeping bag; the others, including Angtharkay, appeared to be equally deflated.

Leaving Donkung for the last time on 21 November, we reached Gangtok five days later via Thangu, Lachen, and Chungthang, above which a long diversion was necessary across a major landslide that had carried away a section of the pathway, blocking the river and filling the inhabitants of the village with the fear of flooding when the dammed waters broke out.

Throughout the journey, Angtharkay's long experience singled him out as an undisputed leader of his team and a source of encouragement to them. He was competent, utterly honest, and reliable. On the last day of our walk back he spoke to me with deep feeling about the privations endured by Sherpa families in Darjeeling without any means of livelihood during the long winter months. A

<sup>7</sup> An article about Kangchenjau by Sonam Gyatso appeared in Volume 23 of the *Himalayan Journal*, stating that a party of four in October 1961 'reached the col from the north' spending the night 'in a rock cave' from where they took seven hours to 'reach the peak.' The account is short on detail, casting some doubt about its accuracy.

<sup>8</sup> *Alpine Journal*, May 1913, p.127-137.

year or two later their fortunes began greatly to improve. Angtharkay himself was much in demand – the following year with the French on Annapurna, and in 1951 exploring the Nepalese side of Everest with his old friend Eric Shipton.

Once more I visited Sikkim in October 1952, accompanied by Angtharkay and a small team of Sherpas, hoping to round off my unfinished adventure with Kangchenjau. On reaching Gangtok, I found conspicuous changes with the presence of the Indian army who had overrun the small town. I was advised by the dewan, India's political representative, that entry to the north was barred beyond Thangu. Angtharkay and I considered briefly, but rejected, the risk involved in trying to slip through furtively. We crossed the Sebu pass (5352m) to Mome Samdong, moving south to reach the Khangpup glacier where we ascended a summit of 5580 metres. After crossing a 4867-metre pass to the west we obtained a view of the complicated Burum glacier system. Sadly, my final visit to Sikkim was disappointing.

Born in Kunde in 1909, Angtharkay returned to Nepal in the early 1960s where he decided to retire, building a large family home in Kathmandu for his wife, daughter, and four sons, and acquiring a farm nearby. He spent the last fifteen years of his life tending his crops and cattle, and died there peacefully in 1982.





1955      *Spiti*

In June 1954, returning from the Yalung glacier on the south-west side of Kangchenjunga, I began to consider plans for a second visit to Garhwal during the summer of 1955. About that time I received a letter from Peter Holmes, aged twenty-three, who was in his final year at Cambridge. Glowing with self-confidence, he stated that he was a member of the Cambridge University Mountaineering Club and was planning an expedition that summer to the Spiti region of the Himalaya, situated north of Kulu on the Lahul-Ladakh borders. His interests, apart from mountaineering, included cartography and geology. He had discussed his plans with Richard Hey, a geology don at the university,<sup>1</sup> who was aware that the shaly rocks of Spiti were known to contain rich deposits of marine fossils at altitudes between 3500 and 4500 metres, of which only limited numbers had been collected. The prospect of collecting and bringing back a variety of specimens attracted Dr Hey, who agreed to join Holmes and was able to obtain grants from the Royal Society London and the Sedgwick Museum Cambridge for geological exploration. In 1932, an expedition to Ladakh from Yale University, led by H de Terra, had discovered green-hued shales in a locality of fossilised plants between 60-70 million years old, which he described as 'an entire petrified forest'.

Geological research has led to acceptance of the theory of continental drift, and to the belief that vast tracts north of the Indian subcontinent were under the waters of the Tethys Ocean between 300-50 million years ago. The uplifting of the Tethys floor with its variety of marine life, compressed between the continental plates of Tibet in the north and India in the south, led to the formation of the world's youngest and highest mountain chain.

<sup>1</sup> Dr RW Hey, MA, Ph.D., a Founder Fellow of Churchill College Cambridge.

Spiti had been largely neglected during early topographical surveys; the only map available was based on fieldwork carried out between 1849 and 1863, containing many blanks, with bare outlines of valleys and little more than a hint of peaks and glaciers. Holmes was aware of these deficiencies from the reports of two small expeditions. The first, in 1952, had entered the Dibibokri Basin south-west of the Bara Shigri Glacier in Kulu, reaching its eastern watershed and crossing briefly into Spiti.<sup>2</sup> The second, in 1953, had explored the north-east section of the Bara Shigri Glacier toward the watershed, viewing a glacier in Spiti to the north-east.<sup>3</sup>

These discoveries suggested the existence of several unknown glacier systems and mountain groups on both sides of the Kulu-Spiti Watershed. Holmes was among the first to realize the potential in Spiti for exploration of these semi-blank areas on existing maps, and focused his attention on two valleys in Spiti, the Gyundi and the Ratang, flowing north-east from the divide into the main Spiti Valley. The party he got together included Alastair Lamb, reading for his doctorate at Cambridge, who expressed an interest in carrying out ethnographical studies in Spiti, a region about which very little was known.<sup>4</sup> Holmes, as the only mountaineer in the party, was looking for a mountaineer to replace a former army colleague and climber, who had to opt out at a late stage. Mountain exploration had always interested me and I accepted his invitation to join the party. Over cups of coffee in Holmes' digs at Trinity College during the autumn and winter of 1954, plans gradually began to take shape. Meanwhile, Holmes managed to pass his finals, get married, and persuade his bank manager to provide the loan he required to realise his plans.

On 8 June, 1955, four members of the Cambridge University Expedition – Peter and Judy Holmes and Alastair and Venice Lamb – set out from England in two Morris 5cwt vans on a 12,000km road journey to India lasting eight weeks, travelling through Europe,

<sup>2</sup> *Himalayan Journal* Volume XVIII, p.110, Kenneth Snelson.

<sup>3</sup> *Alpine Journal* Volume LIX, p.288, AE Gunther.

<sup>4</sup> Alastair Lamb subsequently wrote several books about Central Asia, including *Britain & Chinese Central Asia* and *Asian Frontiers*.



Turkey, Iran, and Afghanistan. Dr Richard Hey would travel out by air in early August, and I agreed to join the party at Manali, a large village situated at the head of the Kulu valley.

Kulu is a picturesque and fertile alpine zone situated below Lahul and Spiti to the north and north-east, and the Pir Panjal and Dhauladhar Ranges bordering Kashmir to the west. Its friendly and attractive inhabitants dwell in well-built wooden homesteads resembling Swiss chalets, surrounded by terraced fields on which crops of rice and maize flourish. The upper part of the valley is covered with scattered forests of walnut, oak, and pine, as well as a wealth of orchards producing apples, pears, and plums. The party, minus Hey, who was delayed, assembled in Manali on 8 August at Sunshine Orchards, a private guest house run by Major Henry Banon, formerly of the Garhwal Rifles, who was then in his eighties. His father was Captain AT Banon of the Royal Munster Fusiliers, who established Sunshine Orchards. Henry Banon had acted as honorary local secretary of the Himalayan Club for a number of years; he exercised a good deal of genial authority in the area serving on the village council. After marrying a local girl, he raised a large family, extended and developed the orchards that he had inherited, and produced a wide variety of fruit that had won a high reputation. Our rooms at Sunshine Orchards looked out across the orchards to forests redolent with the scent of pines. Much of Major Banon's time was spent inside his large store-room, where the packing of freshly picked fruit took place for despatch to destinations throughout India. I remember his tall, bronzed figure wearing a Kulu hat, seated at the centre of a bustling crowd of lackeys and children of all ages, busy directing operations.

A day was spent in Manali sorting loads and hiring pack ponies for the journey to Spiti. Mountain porters were in short supply, as we had been preceded by H McArthur's party of four who had been travelling round the triangle of mountains in Central Lahul enclosed by the Chandra and Bhaga Rivers; and by an RAF Mountaineering Association Expedition led by AJM Smyth, which climbed two peaks above the Kult Valley in Lahul.<sup>5</sup> On 10 August the Holmes' and Lambs set out with a caravan of 18 ponies carrying the bulk of the

<sup>5</sup> *Alpine Journal* volumes LXI, no. 292 and 293, contain accounts of both expeditions.

expedition's stores and equipment. I waited in Manali for Hey and tried to recruit a few local men or Ladakhis as porters. Hey reached Manali the next day and we set out on 12 August together with six laden ponies for the Rohtang pass (3977m) on the Kulu-Lahul Watershed, walking through craggy hillsides and boulder-strewn slopes in a Scotch mist. On reaching the crest of the pass, we looked north into a different climatic zone. We had left the monsoon behind and stood on a dividing ridge between the green and fertile landscape of Kulu and the brown and barren uplands of Lahul; below lay the Chandra Valley, through which our route would lie for the next few days.<sup>6</sup> Descending from the pass, we met Hamish McArthur, Frank Solari, and their wives, accompanied by two Sherpas and two Ladakhis returning to Manali after a month's travel in Lahul. It was agreed that two of their Ladakhis, Rinzing and Sonam, would double march back from Manali to join us below the Kanzam La after three days. At the pass one day earlier Holmes had been able to recruit Jigmy, a third Ladakhi. Our three young Ladakhis turned out to be a valuable asset to the expedition during the next six weeks. Hey and I followed the path on the south bank of the Chandra River, catching up with the advance party who had camped at Chatru on the opposite side of the Chatru stream. Owing to the thundering waters, conversation between us was impossible that evening. It was there that we made our acquaintance with the first of a series of unbridged and flooded rivers that were to become a regular feature of our journey. In the mid-1950s tourism had not touched the region. Following the construction of motor roads and bridges, Kulu and Spiti have since entered the modern age with its accompanying advantages and inconveniences. The Chandra Valley used to be the traditional connecting link for nomads and traders who travelled with their pack animals via Kyelang to Jammu and Kashmir, and over the Baralacha pass (4890m) to Lahul and Ladakh.

Our progress for the next three days was marked by dawn starts to benefit from the lower water level of rivers and streams, and our daily stages were of variable lengths determined by the existence

<sup>6</sup> Half a century later the crossing of the Rohtang pass involves a journey on an overcrowded highway filled with honking buses, lorries, and private vehicles impatiently awaiting their turn in lengthy queues.

of meadows where the ponies could feed. One stream was forded through waist-deep icy water after a safety rope had been fixed on the opposite bank. The ponymen's technique was to move cautiously into the water with the leading animal, closely followed by the rest who were hustled in one after another accompanied by shouts and shoves. We had no accidents, but there were some near misses. Crossing the Shigri Flats, we bypassed the large terminal moraine of the Bara Shigri glacier where its outflow enters the Chandra river. There were glimpses of some of its peaks, including 'White Sail' (6446m), climbed in 1941 by JOM Roberts. During Gunther and Kempe's visits to the glacier in 1952 and 1953, two peaks of 5970 metres and 6095 metres above the Bara Shigri Glacier were climbed.

On 21 August we crossed the Kanzam La (4550m) and descended into Spiti. In near perfect weather, the scene approaching the pass with colourful Buddhist banners and flags fluttering above a giant cairn was enhanced by views of the mountains of Lahul. We reached a meadow 300 metres below the pass where we found an encampment of Indian police who gave us a friendly greeting, suggesting that since the next feeding ground for the ponies was 25km away, it would be wise to halt there for a day; a request that had been expressed earlier by our ponymen. We felt that our rest day could be spent usefully by ascending a mountain, the top of which was visible east of the meadow and seemed to offer an interesting training climb.

Holmes and I set out at 6.30am the next morning, taking Rinzing with us. From a col situated on an intervening ridge we crossed a small glacier to reach the north ridge of the mountain, which we followed to the top (5639m) after cutting through a final ice cornice. An unexpected view extended to the east. Unknown to us at the time, we were looking at a group of tributary glaciers at the head of the Karcha Valley, situated north of the Bara Shigri system and containing a cluster of peaks, one of which had been climbed by Gunther and Kempe in 1953.<sup>7</sup> Our ascent of about 1400 metres had taken six hours, and we returned to the meadow to bask in the late afternoon sunshine before an early supper and bed. Rinzing proved to be reli-

<sup>7</sup> A year later, Holmes and Rinzing made a quick visit to this group, climbing a small peak from which they discovered the existence of a possible pass that appeared to connect the Karcha and Gyundi Valleys further to the south-east.

able on rock, less sure as yet on snow. An early start was made the next morning for our longest single day's march lasting eight hours, which followed the Spiti river and led us through a stark and barren landscape on shale and pebble flats. It was during this walk that Hey discovered his first fossils. Much more evidence of their existence was to follow.

The name Spiti translates as the Middle Country, a name appropriate enough since it used to be a sovereign buffer state situated between Ladakh and India. The plateau-like landscape bore a conspicuous resemblance to Tibet geographically, climatically, and in the character and customs of its Buddhist inhabitants. In 1955, a population of about 2,500 lived in scattered villages spread across the plateau at an average height of 4000 metres. The small communities were surrounded by irrigated fields producing crops of barley, peas, and mustard in quantities sufficient to provide for their basic needs. A form of population control was practised, whereby only the eldest son was permitted to marry and raise a family. Younger sons were taken to the nearest monastery before reaching the age of ten, where they lived in celibacy as monks. Snow-fed waters, vital for the survival of the population, entered the Spiti river through gorges and torrents carving deep features into an otherwise dessicated soil. Winters were severe; between October and April the passes were closed, virtually isolating the valley and keeping the inhabitants housebound for almost six months. The population of livestock, comprising yak, sheep, and goats, had to be kept small. Trade with neighbouring states was mostly by barter, with local pottery and wool being exchanged for salt and tobacco. Our predominant impressions were of a medieval environment untouched by the outside world. The modernisation brought about during the last fifty years following construction of roads and bridges would inevitably have altered the character of the country and its people.

Our second day's walk in Spiti took us to the village of Al, situated near the outflow of the Gyundi stream. Hey and Lamb had left us after the first day, accompanied by Jigmy and four ponies, to search for fossils further north toward the Laguadarsi La. Information obtained from the villagers of Al about the Gyundi valley was not encouraging. Although it was approachable from this side – and

from the Karcha Region on the other side of the watershed to the west – the valley was passable only in early spring before the melting of the winter snows and in late autumn with the shrinkage of the river caused by freezing of the feed waters, enabling shepherds to drive their flocks up the valley from both sides for short periods of grazing. The valley's length was generally supposed to be about 40km. The villagers appeared to have no knowledge about the presence of high mountains, one of which (6525m) was positioned on old maps between the upper reaches of the Gyundi and Ratang valleys.

Undaunted by the information given to us, and suspecting that in late August the Gyundi river had probably reached its peak summer level, Holmes and I decided to make a tentative foray up its left bank, taking with us the head ponyman. After traversing crumbly slopes of scree for two hours, gaining about five kilometres, we reached an impasse above a cliff and turned back having noticed signs of a pathway on the opposite bank which we decided to follow the next day. During an outing of eight hours, accompanied by Rinzing and a ponyman, we walked, climbed, and waded about 12km up the right bank of the Gyundi, reaching a point 300 metres above the river, from where we obtained a view of the next ten kilometres along a meandering valley with steepening banks on both sides. Ahead we could see intervals of sandy bays between rock cliffs, suggesting obstacles involving steep ascents and descents. The chance of our pony caravan proceeding up the valley, with an unseen distance beyond estimated at 15km, seemed minimal. Of high mountains rising above the valley there was no sign. On our return that evening, the mood was one of deep dejection until well after supper, when a more constructive decision was taken to wind up the Gyundi camp and move south to the Ratang Valley.

From Al, two small villages were passed during a walk of 15km before we reached Rangrik, the largest village in Spiti with a population of 200, a school, and a post office. We found it deserted except for a youth who handed us garlands of fresh peas. About two kilometres beyond we reached the entrance to the Ratang Valley, where we followed a path that took us to a good campsite on shingle flats beside the river with a fresh-water spring nearby. Setting up camp there, our tents were close enough to the river to enable us to judge

its strength by the sound of heavy boulders crashing downstream below the surface. The distance that separated us from the village spared us from providing its inhabitants with a permanent peep-show. It was 27 August and the site was to remain our base for the next 19 days. Twelve ponies were released and six were retained with two ponymen for our return journey.

With the combined skills and care of Judy Holmes and Venice Lamb in the mess tent, which served as cookhouse and dispensary, we were treated to good meals, which included pies, cakes, and tarts. A regime of strict hygiene was adopted, a source of amusement to Sonam, who was appropriated as kitchen assistant and was quick to learn from the cooking lessons he received. Our camp with its colourful array of tents represented a microcosm of comfort in the barren and forbidding entrance to the Ratang Gorge. Hey and Lamb, pleased with their excursion to the north, joined us there two days later. Once Hey had got through to the people what he was seeking, a flood of specimens was produced, enabling him to choose only the best. His final collection of ammonites and belemnites filled three wooden boxes, which were shipped to England after Bombay Customs had been persuaded that ammonites were not the preserved remains of some Biblical tribe. Lamb was able to gather local knowledge about the ethnology and ecology of the region. He had a meeting with the Nono, former hereditary ruler and supreme judge of Spiti, demoted by the Indian Government to honorary magistrate (3rd class).

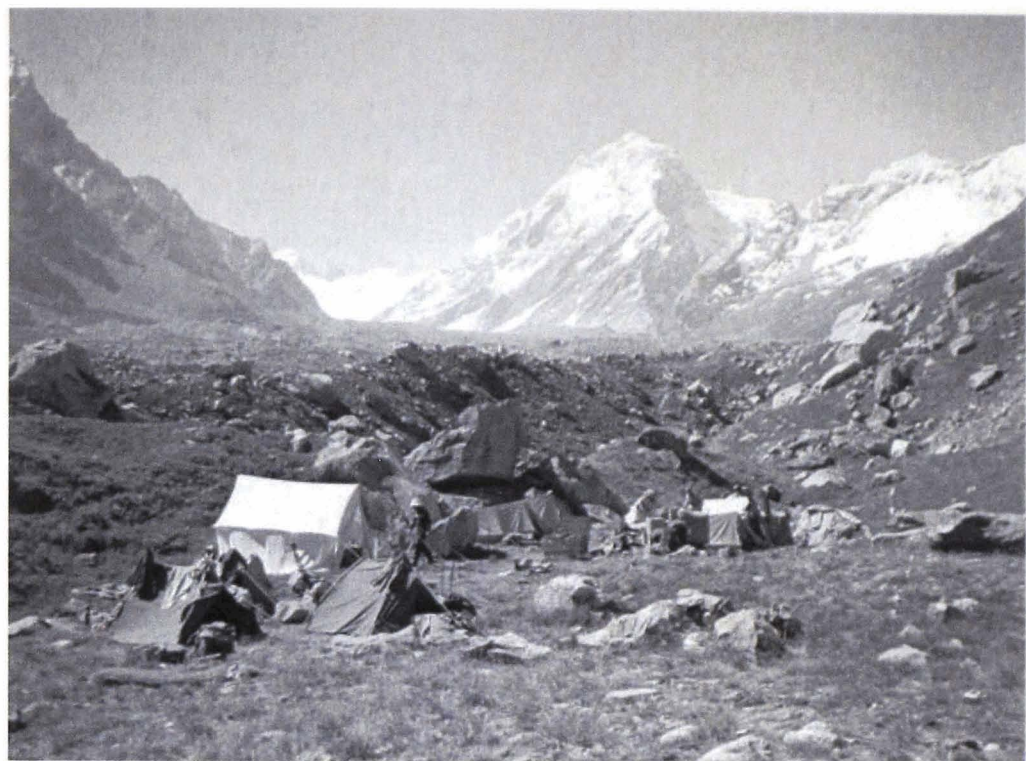
Peter Holmes, archetype of a young man in a hurry, was restless to move ahead. He was absorbing new scenes and impressions, which were to have an important bearing on his future plans, assiduously recording them with his new Leica and Rolleiflex equipment. Ten days later, after returning to base camp from our exploration of the Ratang Gorge, he had firmly resolved to return to the area the following year in order to attempt to clear up the topography, which we had lacked the time to do in 1955. But I anticipate.

The morning after setting up our base, Holmes and I climbed to the top of a spur 600 metres above, enabling us to form a better impression of the Ratang Gorge. It appeared to be steeper, narrower, and of smaller dimensions than the Gyundi, seeming to end in the

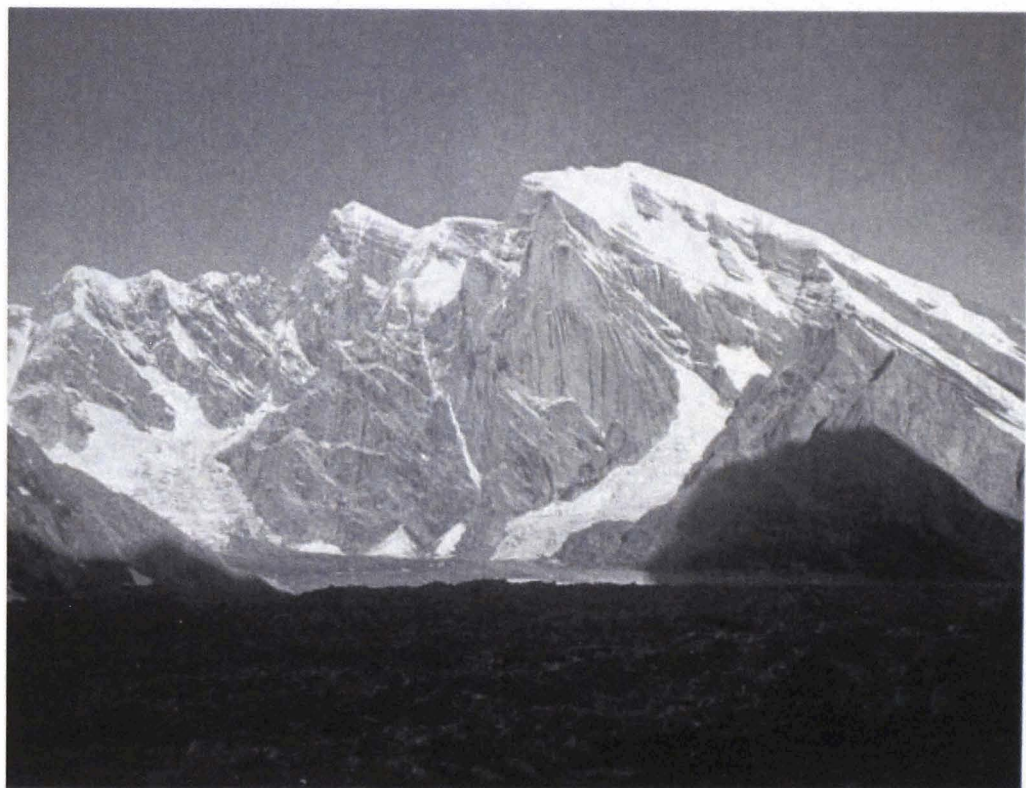
south-west with a group of three snow-covered peaks hardly more than 20km away in a direct line. It was a challenging sight which strengthened our resolve to find a way through the valley. Looking east we noticed an isolated peak, wondering whether it could be Shilla, marked on the map as 7025 metres, said to have been climbed during the early surveys by a *khalasi*, a surveyor's assistant. We knew that JOM Roberts in 1939, and a former district officer, Mr. Emerson, in 1940, had approached the Ratang Gorge, but were turned back at the entrance by floodwaters. We needed to obtain local information about the gorge from the villagers, and to engage two men for a week's exploration. The school-cum-postmaster, an English-speaking Indian, agreed to arrange for the hire of the men, but added that most of the villagers were working in the fields or on the roads. It was no surprise to learn that, as in the Gyundi Valley, shepherds drove their animals through the gorge to graze on the upper meadows for limited periods in early spring and late autumn.

Holmes and I completed our packing in readiness to start the following morning, but there was a 24-hour delay owing to the non-arrival of the local men. We set out at 8am on 31 August with Rinzing and Sonam lightly laden, and the two local men carrying over 30kg each. We asked the locals to lead the way, crediting them with knowledge of the route, which they proclaimed went as high as possible above the river, adding that the first stage would be short, followed by a longer and more difficult second day before reaching a meadow on the third day. Owing to frequent halts, their route took us in three hours to the high point Holmes and I had reached in an hour and a half two days earlier. From there, descending broken rock and scree, they led us down to the river – and to the end of their first day – where Rinzing and Sonam set up our tent in a sandy bay. We reckoned that we had advanced barely six kilometres, were at a height similar to our base, and had reached a point where the main difficulties of the gorge appeared to be about to begin.

Breakfasting under clear skies at 7am the next morning in readiness for an early start, we were attracted by loud whistles and cries from the slopes above, where we spotted Hey, Lamb, and Jigmy, who had travelled through the night to tell us that anarchy prevailed in Rangrik village owing to the departure of our two men without

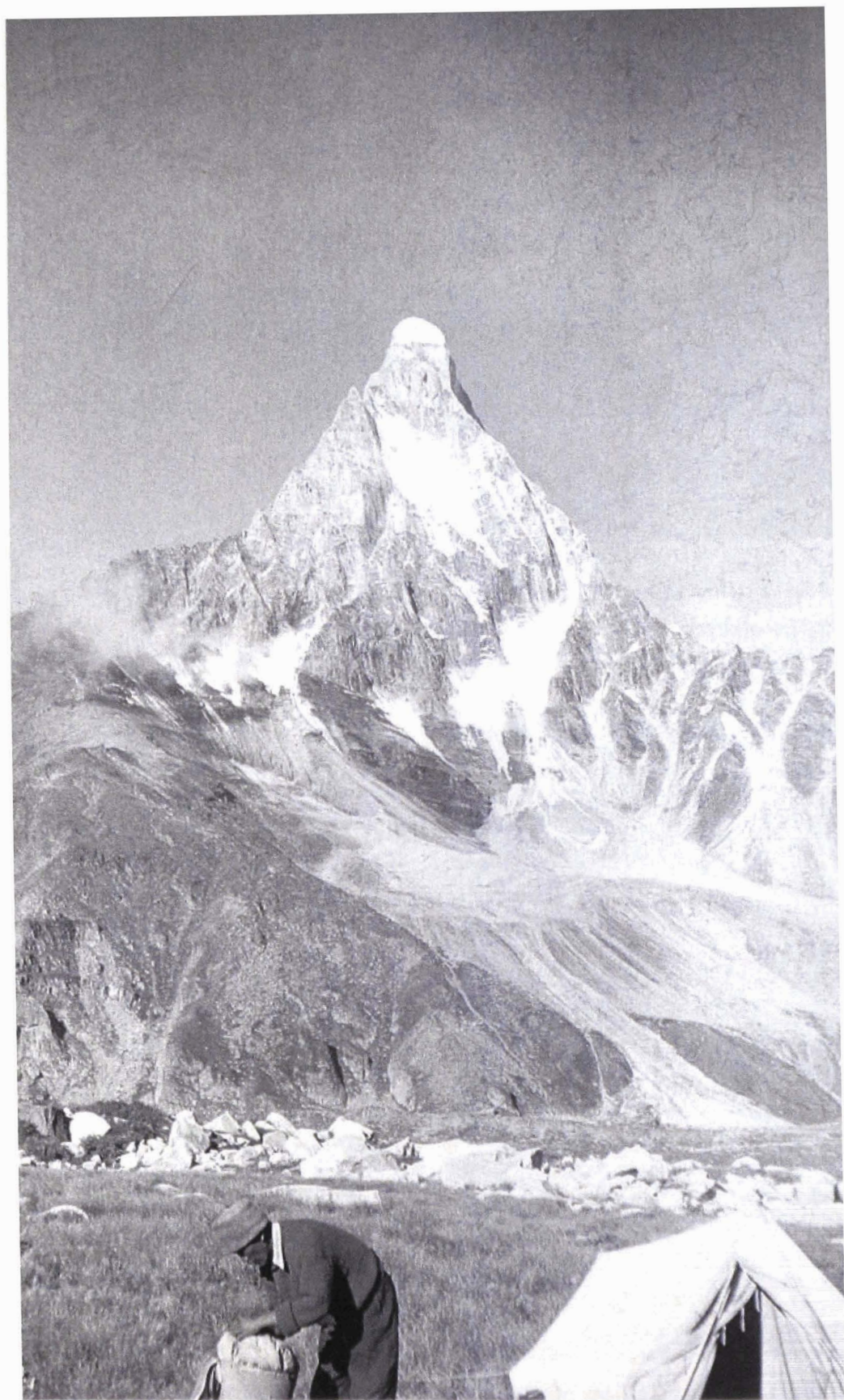


Base camp on Gangotri Glacier. Kharchakund (6612m) behind. Garhwal 1947.



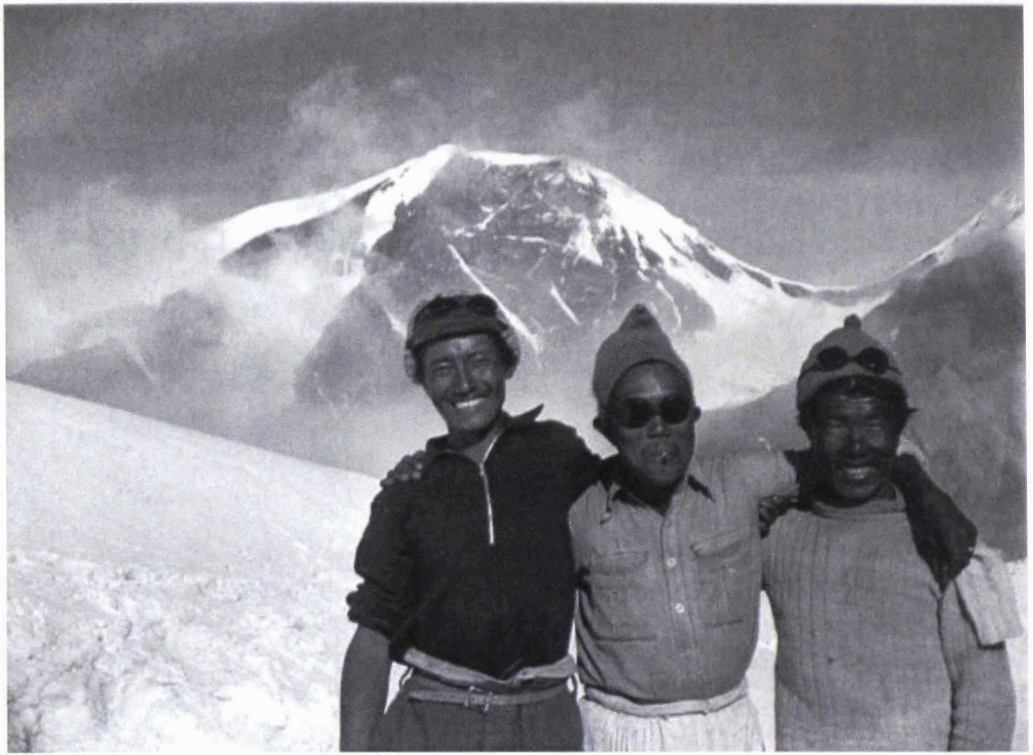
Kedarnath Dome (6830m) on the right, main summit (6940m) left. Garhwal 1947.





Shivling (6542m) from Chaturangi Glacier. Garhwal 1947.



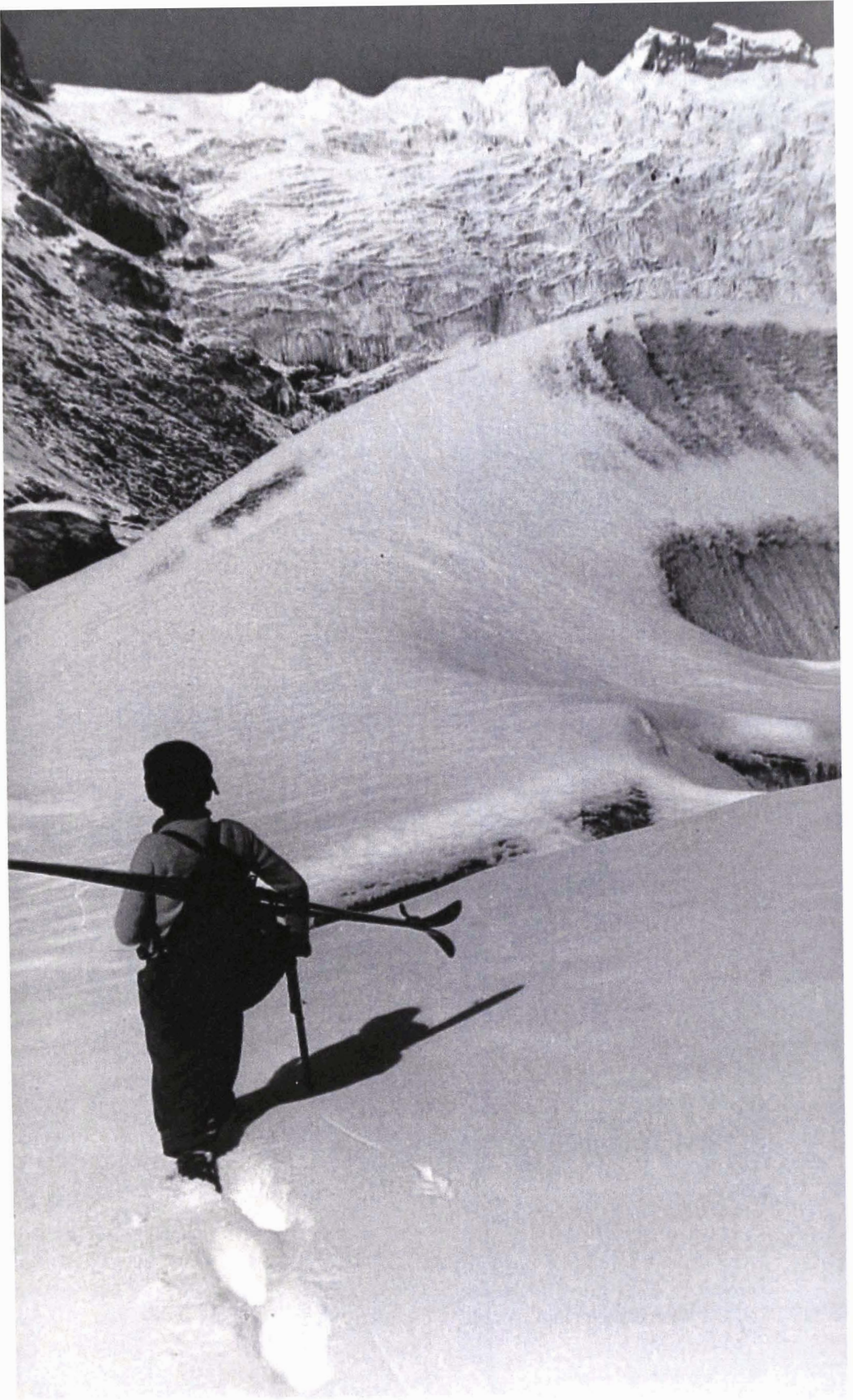


Tenzing, Ang Dawa, and Ang Norbu on Kalindi Pass (5946m), 14 August, 1947. Garhwal.



Camp outside Gamsali. Bankund Plateau in the background. Garhwal 1947.





Angtharkay approaching icefall below the Khangkyong plateau.  
Sikkim 1949.





Sherpas descending from Hidden Pass (c.5790m) with Khangkyong peaks behind. Sikkim 1949.

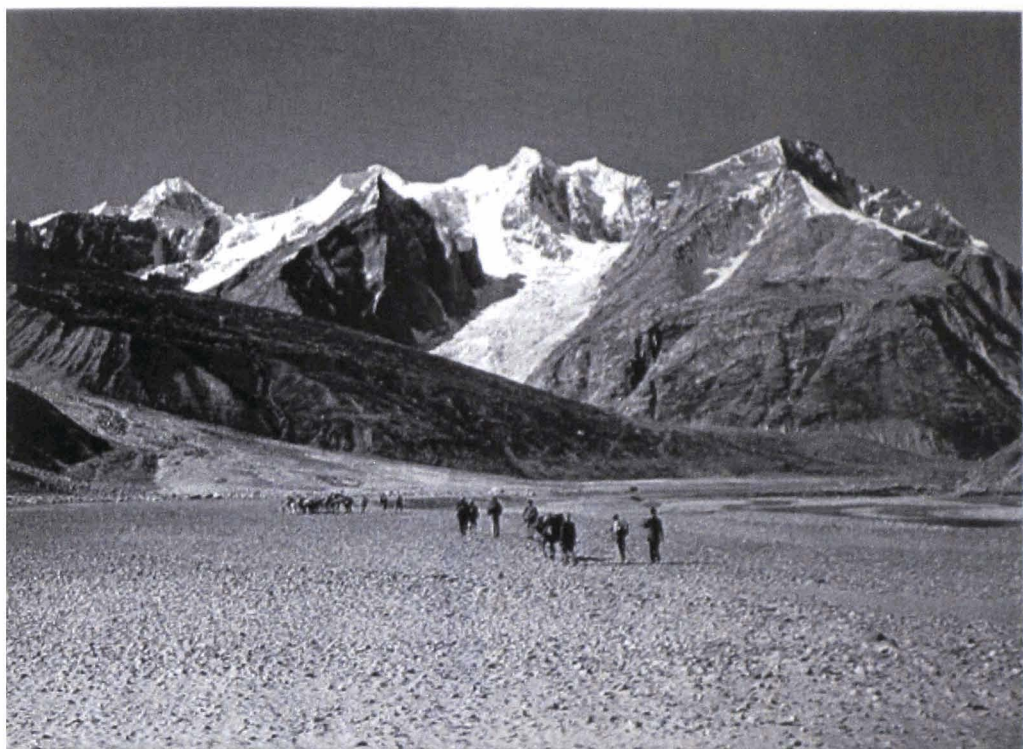


Kangchenjau seen from above Donkung. The sunlit north col is the low point left of centre leading to the east summit; the lower west summit is on the right. Sikkim 1949.

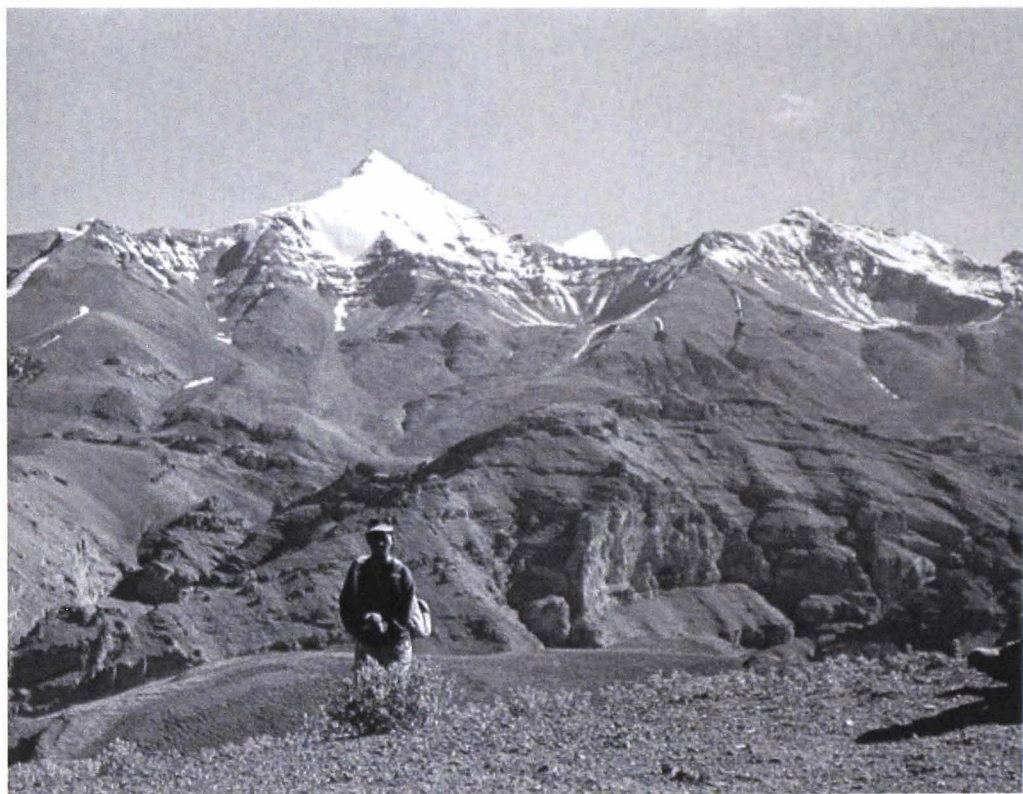


Panorama from the Hidden Pass showing peaks rising above the plateau. Heights from left to right are: 6910m, 7032m, 7033m, 6914m, 6729m, and 6698m on the Tibetan border. Sikkim 1949.





Our caravan in Chandra Valley near the outflow of Bara Shigri Glacier. Spiti 1955.



Guan Nelda (6303m) with Rinzing in the foreground. Spiti 1955.





Spiti expedition party. Seated front, left to right: Trevor Braham, Judy & Peter Holmes. Seated middle: Alastair & Venice Lamb, Richard Hey. Standing rear: Ladakhis Rinzing and Jigmy, three Kulu ponymen, and Sonam (partly hidden). Spiti 1955.

approval by the village headman and council of elders. The two men had to return. This was awkward, chiefly because re-sorting of loads would be necessary. Although Jigmy now joined us, some items had to be left behind, and each of us would need to carry a heavier load. The two truants suggested guiding us over the next difficult stretch before going home. They led the way for the next three hours, beginning with a climb of 300 metres, followed by a descent of 150 metres to a col from where rope was needed to lower the loads over a cliff down to the riverbed. They deposited their burdens there with a gesture of finality. We were not sorry to see them off. Two hours later, after struggling through the narrowing gorge with its containing walls at one point within a stone's throw of each other, we chanced on a suitable camping place and halted, too weary to confront further obstacles without a night's rest.

The gorge held us in suspense for two further days with surprises around almost every corner. In one eight-hour day we advanced barely four kilometres; the next day was memorable for an unprotected 125-metre traverse across a scree slope 100 metres above the river, where a slip would have ended in the thundering waters. On the fourth day we reached a fork where the main river branched right, away from a meadow on the left through which ran a subsidiary stream. The stream sprang from a glacier below the three peaks that we had earlier assumed formed a part of the Kulu-Spiti Watershed, but we were beginning to discover that this was far from being the case. In order to reach the meadow it was necessary to cross the main river, which was wider and deeper at this point. Rinzing, undaunted, demonstrated his courage when, after testing the waters, he crossed over, deposited his load on the other bank, and returned to help each of us across.

Our fourth camp was placed at 4400 metres on the meadow, which was covered with tall grass, wild flowers, and traces of yak dung. Leaving Sonam there, four of us moved up toward the glacier snout, following the moraine to a snow basin below the north face of the highest of the row of three peaks, where we camped at 5200 metres. During the afternoon, Holmes and I carried out a reconnaissance to prospect the way to the ridge connecting the peaks. While monsoon clouds were firmly established over Kulu to the



south-west, the skies above us remained clear. The following day in perfect weather, accompanied by Rinzing, we reached the ridge traversing the middle summit. Putting on a rope, we used crampons to descend to a col which led us further along the ridge to the highest of the three summits. The snow was generally firm, but on a few narrow and icy stretches it seemed safer to move singly. The climb to the middle summit (5940m) had taken three hours; an hour later we reached the highest point (6010m). From there it was clear that our peak straddled the ridge between the Ratang and the Parahio valleys to the south, and was some distance away from the Spiti-Kulu watershed. The latter was crowned by a long line of unmapped and unnamed mountains, only one of which, standing above the others, was marked on the map as 6632 metres. There was a partial view of the Gyundi Valley to the north, while nearer to us in the south we noticed at the head of the Parahio glacier a conspicuous pass leading across the watershed ridge to Kulu. To the north-east, the shapely pyramid that we took to be Shilla stood out as a solitary beacon. The rough outline of the area shown on the map conveyed little impression of the scene before us. The single peak marked was part of a concentration of peaks and glaciers that filled both sides of the watershed, the tallest rising from the large glacier system of the Bara Shigri in Kulu, explored for the first time in 1953 by Gunther and Kempe, and in 1952 by Snelson and Graaf. Our peep into the unknown was intriguing and encouraged Holmes to draw a sketch, which could be correlated later to the round of photographs that we had taken. The tops of the Gyundi and Ratang Valleys were not visible from where we stood, but we knew that the former contained a pass crossed by shepherds from Kulu that was observed by Gunther from the Bara Shigri, but not crossed. We did not know at the time that Snelson and Graaf, after exploring the Dibibokri Basin in June 1952, reached a pass on the Kulu Watershed and descended to one of the branches of the Parahio Glacier, on which they camped for a night before returning over a second pass to their base in the Parbati Valley.

Fascinated by our discoveries, but troubled by the unanswered questions that they raised, we descended to our high camp where Jigmy handed out mugs of hot tea. Packing up the tents, we returned to the meadow the same afternoon, much to the relief of Rinzing

and Jigmy who told us that they had a very cold night at the upper camp. Sonam had not been idle during our absence, having amassed supplies of juniper wood and dried yak dung. Supper was eaten under the stars around a warm but smoky fire. On 6 September we began the return journey to base, which was accomplished in two days instead of the four that we needed on the way up. There was less to carry, we were familiar with the problems, and, more important, the water level of the Ratang River had dropped slightly, owing to lower night temperatures. Wading across the stream more frequently in order to avoid some of the worst rock and scree sections, we found the water appreciably colder than it had been a week earlier. We had two close calls: when an overconfident and heavily laden Rinzing slipped in mid-stream and was almost lost; and when Sonam did the same, and in trying to hold him I lost my balance. Fortunately Rinzing was near and came to the rescue. During the last hour of our march back to base, Holmes announced that he had decided to return to the Ratang in 1956. I remarked that every first-timer to the Himalaya expresses similar intentions, and many of them do return. But his was no idle dream – of which more later. Meanwhile, I pointed out to him the shining white pyramid visible ahead, which dominated the Shilla Valley. ‘Why don’t we go and climb that now?’, I said. So it was agreed. We were unaware that JOM Roberts had visited the mountain in 1939. Roberts later told me that he reached what he considered to be the top in a whiteout, but could not be entirely certain that it was the highest point.

On 8 September, a day after our return from the gorge, Holmes and I proceeded up the Shilla Valley in luxurious style, carrying nothing ourselves. Hey joined us to search for fossils; and we were accompanied by Rinzing, Sonam, two laden ponies, and a ponyman. The local name of our mountain was Guan Nelda (6303m), loosely translated as Snow Moon in the Sky. Shilla Peak, we were told, stood at the top of the valley about eight kilometres beyond to the north. Passing Langja Village, we left the Shilla Valley, branching east to follow a subsidiary stream where we found a good campsite at 5250 metres amid rolling brown hills, our objective dominating the eastern sky. Hey decided to remain at this camp, which seemed ideally suited for his purpose. The following day, in order to reach the foot

of our mountain, a deep ravine had to be crossed. It led us to a traverse across shale and scree slopes, which took us to the base of the north-west face of Guan Nelda at 5500 metres where we camped. From there, looking west up the Ratang Valley, we were able to identify the two peaks that we had recently climbed.

The night temperature dropped to  $-4^{\circ}\text{C}$  and there was a sharp flurry of snow at 5am the next morning. Holmes, Rinzing, and I set out at 6.30 with the upper half of the mountain obscured by a belt of cloud. Ascending an initial snow ramp, we reached the 45-degree face of mixed rock and snow, which took us to about a third of the way up the west ridge of the mountain. Visibility was poor owing to cloud and intermittent snow showers. In order to avoid suspected cornices we traversed the slopes slightly below the ridge on freshly fallen snow lying above a firm base and were guided by occasional openings in the shifting clouds. On the steep final pyramid, steps were cut in hard snow for about 60 metres, leading us to the highest point. Rinzing had been climbing confidently, and I edged him out into the front so that he should be the first to reach the summit, upon which there was just enough space for the three of us to stand. Holmes had not fully acclimatized in spite of his earlier climbs, and he was troubled by a cough. The ascent had taken three and a half hours. We spent 30 minutes on the summit hoping, in vain, to obtain a view of Shilla, but the clouds were firmly established around the upper part of our mountain. Visibility was poor during the descent as we retraced our upward tracks in deteriorating snow conditions. Sonam had moved our camp to a grassy hollow at 4800 metres, which we reached in the afternoon.

The weather was fine the next day. While Rinzing, Sonam, and the ponies moved down to Hey's camp, Holmes and I moved up the valley, following the Shilla stream, determined to locate the approaches to Shilla. An hour's walk took us to a wide bend in the valley, where we found ourselves facing a large white mountain situated behind Guan Nelda with gently inclined snow slopes leading to a domed summit. This could only be Shilla, first climbed in 1860 by a *khalasi* of the Survey of India who carried a signal pole to the summit. It surprised us to find that the height of Shilla appeared to be no greater, even rather less, than that of Guan Nelda. Holmes

conveyed this information to the Survey of India, submitting copies of the photographs that we had taken of the two mountains at close range. The evidence provided was taken seriously enough for the Survey of India to undertake a fresh study of old survey records, from which they discovered that the 7025-metre height of Shilla had been computed from two trigonometrical observations instead of three, in accordance with standard survey practice, and was therefore subject to error. In 1963, following a modern survey, the height of Shilla was marked on survey maps as 6110 metres, thus demolishing the legend of the brave *khalasi* who, by climbing to the summit a century earlier, had established what was believed for over 50 years to be an altitude record.

We returned to Hey's camp that afternoon to find that he had not fully completed his survey. I watched in amazement as he picked up what appeared to him to be an interesting stone, and striking it with his hammer extracted from it a fossilised ammonite – an extinct marine mollusc that lived under the Tethys Sea in a bygone era. It should be added that the main geological objective of the expedition – to determine the age of the Spiti shales – was not achieved, as every outcrop examined was largely hidden by glacial deposits. Nevertheless, large collections of ammonites were made, which, though not in place, were certainly from the Spiti shales, and the collections were deposited at the Sedgwick Museum in Cambridge.

After our return to base in the Ratang Valley, a day was spent packing and disposing of surplus food and other items, ridding us of about two pony loads. We began the walk back on 14 September, reaching Manali one week later. During our final two days in Spiti our caravan was a focus of attraction, trailed by villagers who brought flowers and peas, provided a song and dance display, and offered fossils for sale. Crossing the Kanzam La into the Chandra Valley we noticed a change in the weather. Autumn had set in; the mornings were frosty, the lower water level of streams made them easier to cross, and the temperature of the water was a good deal lower. At Chatru, of infamous memory on our way out – where Venice Lamb and Judy Holmes were almost lost in the stream, rescued only by the prompt action of Lamb, who tied a rope around his waist and drew them to safety – we took a high-level route back. Entrusting

Rinzing and Sonam to ensure the safe arrival of our pony caravan at Manali via the Rohtang pass, we struck south crossing the Hampta Pass (4275m) along a pathway that skirted the glaciers below Deo Tibba (6000m) and Indrasan (6220m), the latter mountain then unclimbed. Spared from the passage of commercial and tourist caravans on the Rohtang route, we found ourselves in an attractive region that still retained a rare pristine quality. Descending from the Hampta pass, the track led us through a warmer alpine zone where, late that afternoon, we camped on an open meadow at 3000 metres. The next day, descending through rich forests of mixed conifer and deciduous trees, we returned to Sunshine Orchards to find that Rinzing, Sonam, and the baggage ponies had arrived safely.

A recent project, received favourably by the Himachal government, to establish a ski resort in the Hampta region with the construction of tourist facilities including hotels, cottages, and ski lifts, is said to be under serious consideration. In the imperfect world in which we live, conflicts of interest arise between technology, progress, and nature protection, which usually end in triumph for economic interests.

In 1956, Peter and Judy Holmes returned to the Ratang Valley, accompanied by Judy's brother Gary Walker. Holmes was fortunately able to engage Rinzing and Sonam again, the latter, at 26, being the oldest member of the party. An Indian security officer was attached to the expedition. In September 1955, Holmes and I, accompanied by our three Ladakhis, had spent four hard days struggling up the Ratang Gorge. In June 1956, with winter snow still lying in places over four metres deep forming natural bridges and partly blocking the flow of the river, the party, which included twenty local porters, required three easy days to reach the meadow, where they established their base.<sup>8</sup> Above the meadow, Holmes, accompanied by Rinzing and Walker, followed the Ratang Gorge from a point where it continues north-west to its headwaters that spring from the glaciers below the Spiti-Kulu Watershed. They established a series of light camps, climbing seven peaks between 5700 and 6000 metres,

<sup>8</sup> Between May and June the villagers of Ranrik make up to three trips through the Ratang Gorge to collect winter wood from abundant supplies of juniper available around the meadow.

enabling Holmes to prepare a sketch map of the area.

The party then returned along a new route via the Parahio glacier, crossing the pass that we had viewed in 1955 under the assumption that it would lead them via the Dibibokri glacier into the Parbati Valley in Kulu. Snelson's 1952 exploration of the Dibibokri glacier north of the Parbati led him to the discovery that the Parahio glacier contains three separate branches. He succeeded in crossing a pass which led him to the southern branch of the Parahio, where he camped for one night before exploring the central branch, crossing from it to re-enter Kulu. The conspicuous pass at the head of the Parahio glacier that Holmes and I had observed in 1955 was deceptive; the descent on the Kulu side was concealed from our view, and the complete Parahio system had not been visible. It was the northern branch of the Parahio that Holmes chose for his crossing in 1956. The choice turned out to be a serious error. Although the pass provided a straightforward route on the Spiti side, the descent into Kulu was fraught with difficulties, leading to a series of hazards and misadventures for the exhausted party of seven, who were only able to extricate themselves after a five-day struggle, and the almost total depletion of their food supply. On reaching the Parbati valley in Kulu, Sonam lured a sheep from a nearby flock, which was killed and roasted, saving the enfeebled party from near starvation."

In 1957, Peter Holmes joined Shell Transport & Trading, spending his early years in the Arabian Gulf, Sudan, Lebanon, Libya, and Nigeria, acquiring fluency in Arabic and establishing close relations with leaders of the countries in which he worked. He was appointed Chairman of Shell in 1985, and was knighted in 1988. Replying to my congratulatory note, he wrote, "To think that I joined Shell in order to pay off what I owed to my bank for two Himalayan expeditions!" On his retirement from Shell at the age of sixty, he relished the freedom to indulge in his personal interests, and was able to enjoy to the full his passion for travel, adventure, photography, and his later interests which included skiing and scuba diving. He died in 2002. One of his obituaries described him as the 'improbable and

<sup>9</sup> *Mountains and a Monastery*. Peter Holmes' book about the 1956 expedition, was published in 1958. His article, together with a sketch map, was published in the *Himalayan Journal* Volume XX, p. 78, 1957.

buccaneering Chairman of Shell'. Before his death he sent me a copy of his book, published in 1988 with the sponsorship of the Shell Company of Turkey, *Turkey a Timeless Bridge*, a folio-sized volume of photographs containing descriptions of a country he knew well through family connections in the Levant Consular Service going back to the days of his great-grandfather.<sup>10</sup>

Peter Holmes, whose mother was American, was born in Greece. He was raised in Hungary and the USA, so it is not surprising that he developed a love of travel at an early age. During national service with the British Army, he served in the Korean War as a lieutenant, earning distinction and the Military Cross for leadership during a number of exploratory patrols into enemy-held territory.

The 1955 Cambridge University expedition to Spiti got together again at the Holmes' London home to mark its 30th anniversary, when all of us were still young enough, and keen enough, to enjoy exchanging tales about the intervening years.

<sup>10</sup>The text of the book was written by Alastair Lamb, who was with us in Spiti in 1955.



*Karakoram* 1958

During the late 1940s and early 1950s I visited the Himalaya almost every year, an indulgence that I knew could not continue indefinitely. There were breaks in the summers of 1948, 1951, and 1956, climbing with my young Swiss guide and friend, Arthur Lochmatter, in the Valaisian Alps. Our objectives had grown more ambitious with each new season, culminating with our last campaign together when we climbed the Dufourspitze, following up with a traverse of Castor and Pollux the next day, and racing back just in time for me to catch the last train from Zermatt to Brig, which enabled me to make my return flight departing from Zürich early the next morning.

In 1957, while editing the *Himalayan Journal* during the height of what might be regarded as the Himalayan Golden Age – between 1950 and 1958, thirteen of the fourteen 8000-metre peaks were first climbed – I had a sabbatical year, if the term can be applied to seeking and editing material obtained from international expeditions eager to announce and advertise their successes.

In 1958, I was approached for information about the Karakoram by EC Warr, who was endeavouring to organise a small party to attempt an unclimbed mountain of modest size. The outcome of our correspondence was an invitation to join his party for a period of two months to make an attempt on Minapin Peak (7272m), situated in the independent state of Nagar in Pakistan. Although I had to advise him that I could not obtain leave for more than six weeks, Warr agreed to my limited participation. The venture was privately funded, each member contributing his share of the overall cost. Food and equipment were purchased in England. Warr was the joint partner of a London store dealing in camping and mountaineering gear. His party of four included Dennis Kemp, a professional photographer, Chris Hoyte, a thoracic surgeon, and Walter Sharpley, an engineer.



The Minapin Glacier had been visited twice. Two surveyors, attached to Eric Shipton's 1939 Karakoram expedition, had carried out a plane-table survey based on a triangulation by PG Mott, which resulted in the publication of a map by the Royal Geographical Society. In 1954, an Austro-German scientific expedition, which included the well-known climber Anderl Heckmair, visited a wide area of mountains in Nagar and Hunza, from Kampire Dior in the north to Rakaposhi in the south, mapping and positioning the main peaks and glaciers. Of Minapin, or Diran as it is known locally, they remarked that an ascent from the north could be made 'without any special difficulty.' I had learnt from Kenneth Mason, professor of geography at Oxford and a former editor of the *Himalayan Journal* (1929-40), that a rapid advance had been observed in the Minapin Glacier in 1892, which continued until 1912, followed by a retreat for the next twenty years. In 1933, aerial photographs taken by the Royal Air Force had shown heavily built-up sections of ice on the broad upper part of the glacier, which led Professor Mason to suspect that because of its unusually narrow descent valley, a further advance within the next decade would seem possible. Based on local enquiries that I made in 1958, this did not seem to have been the case.

Although Warr had applied to the authorities in Pakistan for permission to visit the area several months in advance, no answer had been received prior to the expedition's departure by sea from England. After their arrival in Karachi at the end of April, a permit was issued enabling them to travel from there to Rawalpindi and Gilgit accompanied by a liaison officer, Lieutenant Jaffery of the Pakistan Army. The authorities, who were not yet aware of the economic potential for encouraging foreign expeditions, did not have in place any suitable administrative procedures to deal with them, and no regulations had been introduced for the employment of liaison officers. Lieutenant Jaffery accompanied the expedition to Minapin village, where he left them without implementing arrangements for local porters, turning up two months later, a few days before the expedition was wound up.

By 1958, international mountaineers had begun to develop an increasing interest in attempting some of the highest peaks in the Karakoram, a hitherto neglected field. That same year, several first

ascents were made, including Mike Banks' British team on Rakaposhi, a mountain situated in a valley adjacent to Minapin, an American party led by Nicholas Clinch on Gasherbrum I, a Japanese Kyoto Club party on Chogolisa, an Austrian party on Haramosh, and a large Italian expedition on Gasherbrum IV led by Riccardo Cassin, when Walter Bonatti and Carlo Mauri climbed the mountain by a technically difficult route that has not been repeated.

Eleven years after the departure of the British, relations between India and Pakistan were still fraught with tension, and travel between the two countries was subject to strict restrictions. I was fortunate to obtain a visa without too much delay, and was permitted to pass through immigration and baggage checks at airports in Delhi and Rawalpindi with the minimum of fuss, carrying nothing other than my rucksack and climbing gear. But two valuable weeks of my leave were lost at Rawalpindi, my permission to join the expedition having been delayed by the authorities in Karachi, presumably because of suspicions arising from my entry into Pakistan via India. Aircraft travelling from Rawalpindi to Gilgit were used principally as cargo carriers. Flights were irregular, cloudless conditions being considered essential to enable DC3 aircraft with a low ceiling to overfly the relatively narrow Indus Valley. Despite this precaution, accidents were not unknown. Magnificent views of the north-west face of Nanga Parbat were obtained during the flight. My unscheduled halt at Rawalpindi was very frustrating, and was probably an added reason for the sad event that later brought the expedition to an early close. My idle time there was partly relieved by visits to Colonel E (Buster) Goodwin, then in his mid-70s, who provided tireless accounts of half a lifetime spent on the North West Frontier of India, where he gained a deep insight into the manners and customs of the people, conversing with them in their own tongue, and accepted by them as *persona grata* wherever he went.<sup>1</sup>

The fuselage of the DC3 in which I travelled from Rawalpindi with three others was stacked with supplies of mixed cargo. Touching down on the sandy airstrip at Gilgit amid clouds of dust on 23 May, a

<sup>1</sup> A book about his experiences, *My Life Among the Pathans*, was published privately in England in 1969.

colourful scene was provided by a parade of almost the entire company of Gilgit Scouts assembled in ceremonial dress with a massed band to salute their commanding officer who was waiting to board the aircraft on its return flight.<sup>2</sup> I had been invited by the Political agent Mr. Kiyani to stay at the Residency, an attractive old building with British associations, including a well-kept garden. At lunch several officials from surrounding states were present, including the Mir of Nagar, who persuaded me to hire Nagar porters rather than men from Hunza, which seemed reasonable given that the mountain we hoped to climb was situated within the borders of his state. He was a likeable young man aged 32, who had succeeded his father at the age of 14. Mr. Kiyani drove us to the Kargah Valley, where a trout nursery had been developed for the benefit of tourists. At the entrance to the valley, high on a dominating cliff, stood a Buddhist carving reputed to be over 1,000 years old. We were told that the rare and elusive snow leopard could be occasionally sighted in that valley during winter.

The jeep hired for my journey of 70km through the Gilgit Valley to Minapin Village arrived punctually at 8am the following morning, and I set out on 24 May under the naive impression that I would be the only passenger on a three- or four-hour drive. Shortage of petrol, mostly flown in, meant that every vehicle moving up or down the valley on the narrow road – only recently opened for vehicles – carried passengers and cargo well beyond the bounds of safety. Loaded on our jeep were eight passengers and about 300kg of cargo. There were several halts and three breakdowns before the jeep creaked into the village of Minapin late that evening after a journey of seven and a half hours.

Entering the rest house, a small bungalow containing two unfurnished rooms, I met a scene of undisguised gloom. EC Warr and Walter Sharpley, seated in semi-darkness, told me that Chris Hoyte

<sup>2</sup> The Scouts were raised in 1892 by George Cockerill and Francis Younghusband as a levy force under the authority of the British agent in Gilgit who exercised political control of nine small states in the region. Their presence brought to an end the raiding of trade caravans arriving in Gilgit from Central Asia, and to the recurring vendettas between the two rival states of Hunza and Nagar. In 1970 all state territories in the region were merged with Pakistan.

and Dennis Kemp were occupying a temporary camp above the valley with a modicum of supplies. The expedition had been stalled at the village for almost two and a half weeks owing to a deadlock in negotiations with the village headman for the hire of porters. The liaison officer, although perfectly well aware of the party's inability to speak a word of the local language, had irresponsibly left the expedition neglecting his primary duties. I summoned the headman who appeared after sunset having fulfilled his rituals during the Muslim month of fasting, telling him of my discussion in Gilgit with the Mir and advising him that if our requirement for porters was not met the following day, I intended to cross over to the rival state of Hunza to hire the men that we required. The threat produced an immediate response.

On 26 May, the entire party and all our loads were deposited at 3500 metres on a patch of snow beside the lower moraine of the Minapin Glacier, with an awesome view of our objective dominating the background. Fifty porters had carried loads as far as the snowline, refusing to go beyond. The weather had deteriorated and light snow had begun to fall while they received their wages, hastening down to their homes. Seven men were retained for ferrying loads to a base camp further up the glacier.

In fine weather the next day, Dennis Kemp and I moved up the glacier, which was covered with 12-15cm of hard snow, toward Kacheli, a summer grazing ground filling a broad ablation valley still under a heavy cover of winter snow which became our base. The site, sheltered by a tall moraine on the right bank of the glacier, provided a complete view of the north face and north ridge of Minapin Peak. Ahead, guarded by an icefall, was an upper basin which seemed an obvious launching point for an attempt on one or the other.

On the first day, the trip from our depot camp to Kacheli (3750m) took three hours, later reduced to two, and even one hour and a half when much of the surface snow on the glacier had melted and a route through the crevasses had been flagged. In clear weather, views of the six 7000-metre peaks of the Batura Group, over 40km away to the north-west, were an impressive sight. Eighteen years were to pass before the highest summit (7785m) was reached by a German expedition. Ferrying of loads continued each day irrespective of the

weather, and within one week everything had been transported to base camp.

During that period there was a good deal of activity at and above base. An underground food store was constructed in the snow a metre and a half deep, a covered kitchen was prepared, and, at a suitable distance, a deep hole was dug for use as a latrine. A route through the icefall was prepared and flagged, opening the way to the upper basin where Camp I was placed at 4500 metres, situated near the base of a mountain that we called Snow Dome (Sumayar, 5640m). Two attempts were made to climb it in order to study the respective merits of the face and ridge routes on Minapin. From about halfway up Sumayar, a unanimous choice was made to attempt the north face of Minapin, which would give access to the west ridge of the mountain leading to the summit.

While ferrying loads between base and Camp 1 we adopted a schedule of alpine starts at 2am, taking advantage of frozen conditions on the glacier and reaching the upper basin when the sun's first rays touched the top of Rakaposhi, whose east ridge, decorated for much of its 12km length by delicate ice fluting, connects with the west ridge of Minapin. The ridge, which has not been climbed, poses a challenge to a new generation of extreme ice climbers. The brief, spellbinding moments at sunrise, when the summit of Rakaposhi was touched with gold and the twilight shadowing the scene below was suddenly flooded with the bright colours of a new day, produced images of ineffable beauty. The round trip back to base occupied about six hours, avoiding the soft snow of mid-morning. Daytime temperatures in the sun at base usually exceeded 40°C, dropping below 0°C at night. Skiing provided an occasional diversion on the slopes above; I was much less skilful than the others, and during a fall I managed to bruise my coccyx after an encounter with a protruding rock – about which more later.

With four tents placed at Camp I and fresh supplies reaching base every day, we felt that we could at last get to grips with Minapin, making an initial venture on 11 June up the north face. Setting out at 5am, Hoyte and I climbed easily up moderately steep slopes of hard snow, taking about five hours including a breakfast halt to reach a point almost halfway up. Above us was a sloping crevasse, over two

metres wide in the central part of the face, which seemed climbable with the aid of a ladder. Not far to the right was an ice cliff under the shelter of which we put up a tent. A disturbed night was spent there owing to alarming creaking and dripping noises from above. Abandoning the pretence that the site was safe, we had no difficulty in convincing the others on our return to Camp I that the only safe shelter on the exposed face would be an ice cave.

During the next three days, with the joint efforts of the whole party, a cave was dug at 5100 metres and stocked with rations for five days. The climb to it from Camp I averaged about three hours and the descent, through the soft afternoon snow, took an hour and a half. From it there were magnificent views to the north and the west, and of the narrow winding course of the glacier below. Directly facing us was the inviting south face of Sumayar Peak. A weather change set in on the first afternoon that the cave was occupied. After two nights and one day cavebound, mostly spent shovelling away mounting layers of new snow that threatened to block the entrance, Hoyte and I descended to Camp I. Continuous snowfall for the next four days stalled further progress. Of the four porters who remained with us, only two could be persuaded to carry loads above Camp 1 after being given basic instructions in the use of a rope and an ice axe.

The twenty-second of June, sadly my last day with the expedition, was brilliantly clear. Dennis Kemp and I left Camp I at 3am in a temperature of  $-10^{\circ}\text{C}$ , easily cramponing up the frozen 45-degree slopes on the south face of Sumayar. Shortly after sunrise, after three hours of ascent, we reached a prominent col (c.5350m) and were greeted by a boundless panorama of unnamed and unclimbed mountains sharply outlined in the clear atmosphere filling the horizon from north-east to north-west. We halted there for breakfast, and to restore the circulation to our fingers and toes. The final 300 metres to the summit, on a breakable crust, took an hour. A more composite view of Minapin was available from there. A close examination of the north ridge revealed relatively easy slopes lower down, turning steeper and corniced, followed by a rock section and a progressive narrowing of the ridge, which fell sharply to the Silkiang glacier in the north-east. The summit area of Minapin consisted of a broad snow plateau with the highest point at its south-eastern end.

Our decision to follow the north face had been wise. We were able to distinguish a second crevasse, higher up on the face beyond the first, above Camp 2. As well as what looked like a steep ice slope providing an exit from the north face to the west ridge. Kemp and I spent almost an hour on top of Sumayar before returning to the col. The descent from there provided unexpected excitement. There had been a substantial change in the snow conditions of the early morning and we discovered that the firm snow up which we had cramponed had now turned into a slushy mass overlying hard ice. Moving singly for about a dozen rope lengths, we decided, unwisely, to cast off the rope and glissade down the rest. Unable to adopt a sitting position owing to the painful injury to my coccyx, I was forced into an unnatural posture on the steep slope resulting in loss of control. I managed to check my slide after about 150 metres; a worried Kemp poised above soon joined me to discover with relief that I had suffered no damage. Thereafter descending more cautiously, we reached the bottom of the face in about an hour, returning to Camp I at 3pm. We learnt from Hoyte and Sharpley, who had just descended from the north face of Minapin, that in spite of digging into deep snow for two hours, they were unable to find the ice cave at Camp 2.

The next day, efforts to find the cave succeeded. Above it, the lower and upper crevasses on the face were bridged with a caving ladder, and on 24 June, EC Warr and Chris Hoyte reached the west ridge, placing Camp 3 slightly below the crest at 5850 metres. The final 60-metre climb to the crest was very steep and bucket steps were cut into a substratum of compacted snow covered by one metre of powder. The day before, with deep regret, I had to leave Warr, Hoyte, Kemp, and Sharpley, supported by only two Nagar porters; the two others who had declined to carry loads to Camp 2 were paid off and were eager to descend with me. The liaison officer, who had just returned, remained at Camp 1.

Bad weather between 25 June and 3 July held up further progress. On 5 July, Warr and Hoyte returned to Camp 3 and opened a route from there to a site for Camp 4 on the west ridge at 6550 metres. The following day, joined by Kemp and Sharpley, all four moved up to Camp 4 carrying stores and a tent, the latter two returning to

Camp 3. There were signs of bad weather approaching that evening with flaming sunset colours. On 7 July, Warr and Hoyte set out from Camp 4 for the summit, while Kemp and Sharpley carried further supplies from Camp 3 to 4 facing very windy conditions. After cooking a meal there they began to descend to Camp 3. At about 10.30am they saw Warr and Hoyte high on the broad slopes below the domed top leading to the summit plateau, evidently still moving up. Half an hour later clouds descended over the summit area, which was not visible again until the evening. Assuming that they had departed from Camp 4 at 7am, it had taken Warr and Hoyte over three hours to climb about 450 metres; a relatively slow rate of ascent probably owing to the unaccustomed effects of altitude. A calm, sunny morning followed, and when the two support climbers returned to Camp 4 at midday, they found that the tent had not been occupied. The upper part of the mountain was scanned for any sign of movement; there was none. The fine weather continued, and they followed the upward tracks of the summit pair on that day and the next, but it became obvious that the absence of the two climbers could not be explained by an unscheduled bivouac higher up.

Without facilities that are now commonplace, such as mobile telephones and a helicopter rescue service, Kemp and Sharpley had no option but to wind up the expedition.<sup>3</sup>

Ten years later, Minapin Peak – or Diran, to quote its local name – was first climbed (or might it have been a second ascent?) by a party of three Austrian climbers led by Hannes Schell, who placed their final camp at almost the same site as the 1958 Camp 4. A Japanese party followed the same route in 1976, and a third ascent was made in 1979 by Spanish climbers, one of whom failed to return. By the 1980s Diran had become a fairly popular mountain for small parties, and several subsequent ascents were made, including one by the north ridge. Three fatal accidents were recorded.

Any claim that Warr and Hoyte reached the actual top of Minapin before their disappearance would be conjectural. Based upon the facts, they were last seen by Kemp and Sharpley at a height of

<sup>3</sup> On 24 June, one day before a long spell of bad weather hit the whole region, two British climbers, Mike Banks and Tom Patey, reached the summit of the neighbouring peak of Rakaposhi.




approximately 7000 metres, *ascending* the slopes toward the domed edge of the summit plateau. In good conditions they would have required about two hours to reach the highest point at the far south-eastern end, having to navigate across the broad plateau leading to it in unknown snow conditions. Half an hour after they were sighted, the upper part of the mountain was obscured by cloud for the remainder of the day, indicating stormy conditions in the summit area. Before the storm struck they would have reached the plateau. From there, disoriented in a whiteout, they would have encountered the steep ice slopes that fall southward to the Bagrot Glacier over 1200 metres below, or equally steep slopes to the north-east, falling to the Silkiang Glacier. A subsequent discovery provides evidence that the storm drove them off the plateau to the south.

Thirty-eight years after their disappearance, on 24 July, 1996, two members of a Japanese expedition, H Iwasaki and M Suzuki, made the first ascent of Diran from the south, with a base camp on the Bagrot Glacier. Setting out at 6am from a camp placed on the west ridge of Diran at 6350 metres, they reached the highest point at 2pm. During their descent, at approximately 6850 metres on the steep southern slopes, they discovered an old ice axe protruding from the frozen surface, which they dug out and took back to Japan. Shigeharu Inouye, a non-climbing member of the Japanese party, after a painstaking search lasting over two years, succeeded in tracing EC Warr's daughter. On 29 August, 1999, a ceremony was held at the Alpine Club in London, attended by members of Warr's and Hoyte's families and friends, at which the ice axe, identified as having belonged to Warr, was presented by Mr. Inouye to his daughter Ann Anderson. From a photograph collection now in the possession of Dennis Kemp's nephews John and Ian, a slide show of the 1958 expedition was presented, to which I added a live commentary, followed by pictures taken in 1996 by the two Japanese summiters who described the southern slopes of Diran as averaging 50 degrees, crevassed, and dangerously exposed to falls of ice and rock. It is clear from the position in which the ice axe was found that EC Warr and Chris Hoyte were driven off the summit plateau to the south, where they encountered the treacherous ice slopes above the Bagrot Glacier. They are likely to have been roped, but if one of them slipped it would have

been very difficult, if not impossible, for the other to secure the fall.

EC Warr seemed to possess a bundle of built-in energy, tending to push himself too hard. He was unwell for a while, having to descend to a lower level for a brief rest. Owing to his highly-strung nature I seldom saw him really relaxed. It is possible that he might have had altitude problems on the final climb. Chris Hoyte was a sound climber, physically tough, congenial to everyone, and could always be counted upon in difficult conditions. Dennis Kemp was clearly in his element on the expedition. He was a good climber and was deeply attached to the mountains; personal ambition, or a craving for glory, played no part in his motivation. All the best expedition photographs were taken by him. Walter Sharpley's presence in the party was an asset. It was he who handled quietly and competently many of the tasks and duties that inevitably arise on expeditions. The Nagar porters did their best. If they were faint-hearted, they never caused any trouble, nor was there any pilferage from expedition stores. Their fear of approaching the north face of the mountain was real, but might have been overcome if we had been able to provide them with full climbing gear.

For myself it was a deep disappointment to have had to leave the party at a critical stage, resulting from the two frustrating weeks of delay at Rawalpindi. My first news of the disaster came from a newspaper report three weeks after it had occurred. If Warr and Hoyte had heeded the signs of approaching bad weather on the eve of their climb, delaying their start by one day, they would have benefitted from two days of fine weather that followed. Based on the performance of the Japanese in 1996, who required eight hours to reach the summit from their last camp situated on the southern side 200 metres lower than the 1958 Camp 4, they would have required ten or eleven hours to complete the climb to the summit and return to Camp 4. No meteorological information was available to the expedition. Whether or not they reached the summit of Diran, Warr and Hoyte pioneered a route that opened the way for others.



# 1962 Swat & Kohistan

Scarcely a year and a half had passed since I had taken up a post in the Punjab plains<sup>1</sup> of Pakistan, where a vast network of canals, conceived by the British in the 1890s, succeeded in converting a former desert into a rich agricultural belt producing crops of wheat, cotton, corn, and mustard. The climate provides a combination of extreme summer heat and cold winters. In April 1962 I faced the discomforting thought of having to spend a second summer in the plains, with daytime temperatures rising to 48°C and seldom falling below 28°C at night. Since a spell of summer leave was permitted, it seemed wise to spend a few weeks in the hills.

On a visit to Peshawar early in May 1962, I was introduced to Miangul Aurangzeb, the son and heir-apparent (Waliahad) to the ruler (Wali) of the independent State of Swat, who was shortly to be married to the daughter of Pakistan's President General Ayub Khan. The Waliahad had been a pupil at the Doon School in Dehra Dun, and spoke with warm regard about his former English masters, RL Holdsworth, John Martyn, and Jack Gibson. He had invited them in 1940 to visit his state when they made the first ascent of Mankial (5715m), believed at the time to be its highest mountain. Swat had been practically untouched by tourism, but it seemed that changes might be on the way after a proposal was put forward by Austria to sponsor the development of a ski resort in an area west of the capital of Saidu Sharif. The gestation period for such schemes being lengthy, several years were to pass before the plan reached fruition. Meanwhile, entry was restricted to the northern regions of the state. My discussion with the Waliahad proved fruitful. I was eager to spend two or three weeks exploring the mountains north-east of the Swat Valley, having been in touch with Lieutenant EJE Mills,

<sup>1</sup> Panch-ab = five rivers.

who had glanced at the area in 1961 and suggested the possible existence of a peak higher than Mankial. I had been in touch with Jimmy Mills, then serving at the Army Staff College in Quetta. He had led a joint Pak-British expedition to Kunyang Chish in 1962, when he and his companion Captain MRF Jones were killed by an avalanche on the south ridge of the mountain. His influence provided a strong stimulus to the growth of interest in mountaineering by young Army officers in Pakistan. The plans that I outlined to the Waliahad were acceptable to him. 'If you would like to come you would be welcome,' he said. 'But since your journey would require entry into the tribal areas, you would need to be accompanied by an armed escort, which we shall provide.' I discovered later the reason for his warning. A Scottish couple, attached to a Christian mission in Multan, had been attacked not long before by tribesmen while camping in a forest north of the capital. The Wali visited the spot within 24 hours, extracted a confession from the culprits who were then punished, and compensated the victims for the theft of their property. The opportunity to explore a new mountain area overcame any disquiet that I might have felt about my personal safety. No map of the region seemed to be available. This was not unusual because of the sensitive attitude in official circles about disclosure to foreigners of information concerning their frontier areas.

In the early 1960s, the population of Swat was about half a million, composed mainly of Yusufzai,<sup>2</sup> and of mixed Kohistani and Afghan tribes. The Yusufzai were among the first of the Pathan tribes to have had contact with the British in 1845, and several of them were recruited when the Corps of Guides was formed by the East India Company.

The waters of the Swat River are fed by the junction of two small rivers at Kalam, the principal village in the upper valley, which descend from glaciers flowing from mountain groups further north. Chitral and the mountains of the Hindu Kush lie on the north-west borders of Swat, with Gilgit to the north-east and Kaghan to the south-east. Below the capital town of Saidu Sharif, the valley broadens into fertile plains through which flow the clear waters of the

<sup>2</sup>Literally, descendants of Joseph.

river, providing ideal conditions for the cultivation of food crops including maize, wheat, rice, and a variety of fruit and vegetables, which is largely in the hands of smallholders using primitive farming methods. In 1962, tourists were extremely rare in the region. The upper and lower sections of the valley present contrasting geographical and climatic features. The people appeared to be healthy and cheerful. But it was not always so.

The early history of Swat is filled with religious and political wars. Its people were engaged in a decisive battle in 327BC, when they successfully resisted the invading armies of Alexander the Great at Barikot in the plains 15km south-west of Saidu Sharif. Early Chinese writings reveal that the area was the cradle of Buddhism, which flourished between the 4th and 8th centuries AD, when the country was known as Odyana, meaning Garden Parkland.<sup>3</sup> The Moghul invasion in the early 16th century led to the rise of Islam. The occupation of Swat by the Yusufzai did not occur until late in the 16th century, following which the territory was torn by centuries of lawlessness owing to feuds and bloodshed between tribes and clans. The founder of the Miangul family, hereditary rulers of Swat, was known as the *Akhund* (religious teacher). As a young man in the 1830s, he marshalled his followers to resist British territorial advances. Later, using his considerable influence to discourage inter-tribal vendettas, raids, and robberies, he was responsible for introducing an era of peace and understanding; he died in 1877. His grandson, Miangul Gul Shahzada, having succeeded in achieving political cohesion between the tribes, created the modern State of Swat in 1917, which he ruled for 30 years as a benevolent autocrat bringing about peace, security, and progress. He handed over power in 1948 to his son Miangul Jehanzeb Khan, who continued the tradition of personal rule, exercising supreme authority over his subjects, and virtually eliminating tyranny, crime, and poverty in the state.

With entry into Swat and Kohistan assured, my preparations began to fall into place. Unable at short notice to find a companion, I

<sup>3</sup> Evidence of that period has remained scattered over the region in the form of Buddhist statues and monuments. Sadly, during the past decade many have since been damaged or destroyed by fanatical religious elements infiltrating from Afghanistan where similar destruction has taken place.

based my plans on a solitary journey of three weeks starting in mid-August. While food such as porridge, milk powder, tea, sugar, soup, and chocolate were purchased before departure, I counted on obtaining local supplies of potatoes, flour, and eggs.

After a hot and sleepless overnight railway journey from Lahore, I found myself disembarking at dawn at the small terminus of Nowshera, 30km east of Peshawar. On the opposite platform was a train waiting on a narrow-gauge line ready to depart, but seeming in no hurry to do so. In the fullness of time, it began to move out leisurely on a slow three-hour journey to its terminus at Dargai, 75km away to the north. In the chaos that followed its arrival there, I joined the hordes of passengers who rushed to the bus stand to secure seats for the road journey via Malakand to Saidu Sharif. How accommodation was found for the throngs of people and baggage in the two buses that were available remains one of the eternal mysteries of the east. I was relieved that the driver of my bus courteously offered me a seat beside his own. Not a shop nor a village was passed on the journey without halting for the convenience of passengers. The lush green of the fields along the valley provided evidence of the abundant water supply, and the wayside stalls teemed with freshly picked fruit including apples, peaches, pears, raspberries, and grapes. Long avenues of poplars and Australian blue gums (*eucalyptus simmondii*) that lined sections of the route were a refreshing sight.

At Saidu Sharif (960m) I spent a night at the state-owned Swat Hotel. There, in a clean, simply furnished room, I was able to recover some of my lost sleep, and at 7.30am the next morning I stepped outside into the orderly town which seemed a haven of calm. Hiring a private taxi to accommodate myself and my baggage, I was soon on my way to Kalam (2057m), 105km up the valley. The beauty of the forests was one of the main features of the journey on a surfaced road almost devoid of traffic. About halfway up, at the village of Bahrain, I stopped to discuss arrangements for porters with the sub-divisional officer of the district who dwelt in what resembled a Swiss mountain chalet with a view of the snowy summit of Mankial visible in the north-east. He was expecting me and telephoned to Kalam to notify the local authorities of my arrival, assuring me that there would be no difficulty in engaging porters and an armed escort for my journey.

On my departure, he handed me a bag of apples freshly picked from his orchard.

Situated on a grassy plain 150 metres above the river and the village of Kalam stood two timbered bungalows, in one of which I spent a night. From it there was a view of Swat's highest peak, Falak Ser (5917m), framed between intervening ridges; nearer at hand rose a series of heavily forested hills topped with rocky summits. The unspoilt alpine setting fulfilled the desire that I had long felt to be back in the mountains. Two small buildings, a dispensary, and a school were the only other constructions that occupied the far end of the grassy plain. I was fortunate to have experienced the isolation and charm of this picturesque spot. Five years later it was filled with a cluster of dwellings and ancillary facilities for the benefit of tourists.

Six men turned up the next morning introducing themselves as my porters. They were uniformly dressed in loose grey shirts and baggy trousers, wearing the crowned woollen hats of the region with their feet shod in stout leather sandals soled with old tyre rubber. Sorting out the loads between themselves, they marched off to Matiltan, one of them, to my surprise, carrying a wooden box of food weighing 40kg. I accepted a jeep ride offered by an Army colonel from Peshawar and travelled with him on a narrow road through magnificent cedar forests which terminated outside Matiltan village, where a small fort housed a detachment of 36 militiamen.<sup>4</sup> A couple of hours were spent at the fort while my porters, all militiamen, prepared rations for their journey. The *subedar* (sergeant in command) provided a meal, accompanied by excessively loud radio music, and I found myself providing the major part of the small village with a focus of interest. Beyond the surrounding fields and walnut trees was a challenging view of the twin Batin peaks. Both had been climbed; the south peak (5700m) in 1957 by CH Tyndale-Biscoe, an Australian schoolmaster, and the north peak (5485m) in 1958 by the Austrian mountaineer Wolfgang Stefan, returning from his successful expedition that year to Distaghil Sar (7884m).

<sup>4</sup> Every able-bodied Yusufzai man was required to fulfill a compulsory period of five years service with intervals of leave every three months.

My party, comprising an armed escort, six porters, two legs of mutton, and two chickens, set out from Matiltan fort at 1pm on 15 August. Our first camp was placed in a pastoral setting on a meadow near the junction of the Ushu and Paloga streams with a lake nearby enclosed by forested hills in the east. The Yusufzai militiamen were conditioned by their military training to camping out, and to privation and cold during their long and severe winters. They were cheerful, willing, simple, and eager to fulfill any duties around the camp. That evening, gathered round a log fire, they were in high spirits, singing merrily like a bunch of boys on a school outing. My escort, Mohmand Sadiq, a taciturn young man, was very attentive – sometimes embarrassingly so. He never let me or his rifle out of his sight, sleeping with the latter under his body outside my tent door.

Although the search for Jimmy Mills' high peak was my main objective, I felt in need of an initial period of acclimatisation, which would fit in with my curiosity to take a look at the approaches to Falak Ser, first climbed by Tyndale-Biscoe in 1957 and not attempted since.<sup>5</sup> Following the Ushu stream on a pathway winding through rich conifer forests for about nine kilometres, we branched east to enter the Falak Ser valley, where the path steepened and the conifers gradually gave way to birches diminishing in size as we gained height.<sup>6</sup> A few shepherds were seen, but there were no tracks beyond the treeline. Following the river along old moraine, we reached a good campsite at 3500 metres by mid-afternoon, from where two men returned to Matiltan.

Accompanied by Sadiq early the next morning, I moved up the narrowing valley, rounding a series of cliffs that had blocked our view of the Falak Ser glacier. Following the moraine we climbed past the right bank of the glacier and reached the névé above, with Falak Ser in full view ahead. The north ridge, which seemed the obvious ascent route, was accessible across a broad stretch of heavily crevassed glacier. Since there was little snow cover on the ice, we

<sup>5</sup> Two further ascents were made in 1968 and 1969.

<sup>6</sup> It is believed that the birch was among the earliest of trees to emerge at the end of the Great Ice Age, and dwarf birches remain today as the last to flourish at the foot of glaciers.



found a safe passage through the crevasses, enabling us within two hours to reach a relatively level portion of the upper glacier, which seemed ideal as a campsite and provided access to a snow rib that led to the north ridge of Falak Ser. The ascent, although certainly feasible, would need more time than I had bargained for, but having got thus far I decided to return to the site with a tent and give it a try. Sadiq seemed to be a natural climber, following me faultlessly and showing no sign of concern on the glacier. During a brief halt on our descent in a colourful ablation valley covered with a profusion of polygonum, gentian, potentilla, and saxifrage, Sadiq enquired what really drove me to faraway places. He seemed to find it hard to accept that pecuniary gain was not the real reason.

Setting out on a fine morning with two men carrying food and gear, a tent was placed on the upper Falak Ser glacier. Our arrival coincided with the appearance of dark clouds heralding stormy weather. Brewing tea for the two men who were preparing to descend, I cautioned them to follow closely our upward tracks on the glacier. They were scarcely out of sight when snow began to fall. Our reconnaissance that afternoon toward the snow rib was clearly off, and Sadiq and I were confined indoors for the next four and a half hours with snow piling up outside. I emerged from the tent twice to re-fix the guy ropes and sweep away the increasing weight of snow that was threatening the roof. By 5pm, with heavy snow still falling, Sadiq appeared visibly discouraged suggesting retreat. Although it was certain now that our proposed attempt on the ridge the next day would have to be abandoned, I turned down the idea. There was heavy fog, and we would certainly be overtaken by darkness. We ate our supper of soup, bread, and cheese in silence and prepared for a long night. There was no let-up in the snowfall and I had little sleep pondering about our chance of finding a safe way down through the crevasse belt masked by a heavy cover of fresh snow. Such thoughts did not trouble Sadiq, who slept soundly. A peep outside the tent at dawn revealed visibility of about 10 metres with light snow still falling. In eighteen hours, over 50cm of snow had fallen. It took almost two hours to dig everything out, brew a hot drink, and pack the bulky tent, now almost twice its normal weight, before stepping into the whiteout with heavy loads. On my fourth passage of the glacier,

I was counting on being able to identify familiar features to see us through – aware that Sadiq, who followed closely in my footsteps keeping up a low murmur of prayers, was counting on my doing so. Slowly, with some easing of the fog, we came off the glacier after two hours, within sight of a point where I had placed a cairn on the way up. We were met there by three of our men from below who offered us hot drinks and relieved us of our loads.

The six days spent in the Falak Ser valley were not entirely wasted. I felt much fitter, had examined a mountain to which I hoped to return, and had been well supported by my men. Returning to our camp on the Paloga meadow on 22 August, I faced an unscheduled delay awaiting the arrival of a fresh set of men from Matiltan, my first group having fulfilled their prescribed period of duty. My new escort, Mam Seth, was a sturdily built youth proud of his duties, but he seemed less experienced than Sadiq, whose departure I regretted. Seven men had been sent from Matiltan Fort by the *subedar*, all of whom looked equally wiry, if not rogueish, and of whom I selected five, mainly on the grounds that they wore leather-strapped country gaiters for use on snow.

From the meadow our journey lay south-east toward the Paloga pass, which would lead us over to the Kandia district in Kohistan. Walking initially along a broad valley, there were views of the south side of Falak Ser, revealing its steep rock face in sharp contrast to the mountain's snowy aspect from the north. Bearing right up a subsidiary valley, we followed a narrow pathway where my new team of porters made heavy weather of the ascent, requesting stops every twenty minutes, sometimes to refasten a load, otherwise merely to rest, and later to plead that we had reached the last suitable camping place below the pass. My intention had been to reach the pass on the same day, and I thought that if I moved forward steadily with Mam Seth, the porters would follow. I was wrong; they were soon out of sight behind. About halfway up I spent the best part of two hours waiting for them, having had to send Mam Seth down to goad them along. By late afternoon, since there appeared to be no sign of a pass, I halted near a shepherd encampment to check my whereabouts. The walk had been fascinating, into the depths of an unfrequented region partly forested and almost alpine in character, following sheep tracks

and occasional pathways. The porters arrived exhausted and in the dumps, whether feigned or real, and there seemed to be no option but to call it a day – which probably was just as well because the pass turned out to be seven kilometres away and about 770 metres higher. We set up camp in a sunless and chilly spot at 3525 metres, where a shepherd family resident in a cave nearby visited us with a brass urn filled with sheep's milk, frothy and warm, raising the cheerless spirit of the porters.

After advancing upward for five hours the next day, misled by one false pass after another, I stepped onto a dividing ridge at 4495 metres and looked across to the south. Steep slopes led down to the Aspe Dara valley in Kandia, 750 metres below. Beyond, over 15km away in a direct line to the south-east, it was exciting to see a snow plateau guarded by an icefall surrounded by a group of five peaks. Here, at last, seemed to be the object of my search. I assumed, correctly, that about three days would be required to reach the plateau, provided that a way could be found. There seemed to be no easy descent to the Aspe Dara from where I stood, but from a solitary *gijar* (shepherd) I learned that the ridge contained three false passes, only one of which was occasionally used as a crossing for sheep. The porters by then had reached a sheltered hollow 50 metres below the ridge where I later joined them. Clouds were beginning to gather, and the descent from the Paloga pass would have to wait until the morning. Snow began to fall while camp was being organised on a patch of scree.

Late in the night the snow had changed to sleet, and during a sulky dawn the porters had rustled up their fire by 5.30am, but were not ready to start until 8am. The morning view from the pass, which bore no cairn or other sign of passage, was partly cloud-covered. One of the porters, viewing the initial steepness of the descent, declared that it was too dangerous and downed his load, announcing that he wanted to go home. I dismissed him without further ado; and in case any others entertained similar intentions, I declared that, as a deserter, he would receive no wages. Unbidden, two of the strongest men shared the abandoned load between them. Two hours of rough scrambling down scree and loose boulders, at an average angle of 45 degrees with scarcely any sign of a path, led us down to the Aspe Dara valley, where we joined the main pathway connecting Gabriel

in the east to Matiltan in the west via the Matiltan pass.

We began to feel that our troubles were over, but soon realised that they were about to begin. The natural features of Kandia, as this side of the divide is called, provided a change of character. In place of tree-clad hills, we found ourselves facing stark rocky slopes, narrow defiles between cliffs, and unbridged torrents. Altogether a wilder and more rugged country, in keeping with the character of the Kandiwals, as our men liked to stress with some disdain. The few people we met certainly looked more indigent and spoke a coarse dialect. I had hoped to reach Gabriel that evening, but after almost seven hours along a route that had not been particularly easy, my loyal followers, who had given a good account of themselves, were beginning to show signs of distress. There was some difficulty in finding a suitable place to camp and we settled for an abandoned and reasonably clean sheep pen about 12km short of our destination.

Rainfall most of the night followed by a dull dawn did not induce an early start. We were on the road at 8am the next morning, reaching Gabriel three hours later. The walk provided the only unsettling experience of my journey. I had advanced well ahead of the porters, accompanied by Mam Seth, who was a few paces in front, when he announced that we were about to enter a dark forest belt and it would be safer if I moved into the front enabling him to protect me from behind. The suggestion seemed sensible. Soon after changing places I began to feel uneasy with a tribesman two paces behind, armed with a bayonet, a rifle, and a finger on the trigger. For fifteen minutes we proceeded in this fashion. My fears gradually evaporated when I realised that Mam Seth was genuinely concerned about what might result from negligence to fulfill his duties. Later that afternoon, introducing me to my new escort, Sobhan, who had just arrived from Matiltan, Mam Seth came to greet me before his departure. He rarely smiled, but I was pleased to see his face light up when he accepted my parting gift.

The fort at Gabriel, which housed 20 militiamen, had a fairytale look with turrets, peepholes, and a drawbridge. I received an unexpectedly warm welcome from the *subedar*, arising, I suspect, from his eagerness to meet someone arriving from the outside world, his own being limited to an eccentric telephone connection to Saidu Sharif

and a transistor radio. A small school and a dispensary had been set up recently in the village by the Wali, and construction had begun on a road. Maize fields surrounding the village yielded crops barely sufficient to meet the needs of the inhabitants. Trade consisted of wool and *ghee* (rancid butter) from the valley, bartered in lower Swat for rock salt and cereals using animal and human transport. The people looked healthy and cheerful, as do most communities isolated from the corrupting influences of civilisation. A prolonged halt at Gabriel was occasioned by the generosity of the *subedar*, who insisted on providing a three-course meal, a gift of 16 eggs, and 8kg of freshly milled maize-flour for the porters. It was almost 4pm by the time we were able to get away.

Crossing a maize field on the outskirts of the village, I was hailed by an old farmer who unwrapped a swollen finger which had turned gangrenous. Apart from providing him with antibiotic tablets and a clean bandage, my inability to give him any real relief saddened me. A two-hour walk followed with the plateau and its peaks in full view ahead to the south, leading us to an ideal spot at 2300 metres on a patch of tall grass where we camped just two kilometres short of the village of Mirshahi. The grey shadow between day and night gave the peaks filling the skyline a phantom-like appearance, making them seem remote and, to me at least, more elusive. From which direction could they be approached? The porters claimed no knowledge of the area. I had no map, nor was I aware whether the region had been surveyed – unanswered questions that troubled my sleep that night.<sup>7</sup>

All doubts were swept aside early the following morning when a dignified old man with a flowing white beard and robes accompanied by two retainers halted outside my tent on his way to Gabriel. ‘What is your destination?’ he enquired. I answered by pointing to the range of mountains gleaming in the sunlight. ‘Those,’ he said, ‘are the Siri Dara mountains that rise beyond my village of Mirshahi. You will be my guest, and I will help you to get there.’<sup>8</sup> I expressed my thanks warmly, telling him that his information had

<sup>7</sup> Two years later at the request of the Wāliahad, the Survey of Pakistan began their field-work in the area with the object of preparing a set of new maps.

<sup>8</sup> *Siri* = head, *Dara* = valley, i.e., the Head of the Valley.

been of the greatest possible help. Following the road by which he had come, we soon passed the village of Mirshahi. Continuing south, we reached the village of Siri Dara, situated at the point where a stream of the same name enters the Gabriel river. A crude bridge was crossed to its right bank, bringing a change of scene. Climbing a boulder-strewn path, I was immensely relieved to obtain a glimpse of the edge of an icefall at the head of the valley. Forests of oak and walnut followed by juniper scrub led us into a gorge, which opened out later to reveal a peaceful hamlet set above scattered cornfields where we camped that afternoon. Purchasing a chicken from the village, we were offered gifts of grapes and local vegetables.

A long climb the following morning in wild country beyond a diminishing pine forest took us to the foot of a cliff eight metres high, to which was attached a pine trunk into which steps had been cut. The cliff ended on a minor hilltop, from where, like Cortès, the 16th-century Spanish conquistador, I beheld a breathtaking view. The whole width of the icefall and a major part of the plateau were spread out before me.

Late that afternoon we set up a base at 3200 metres, about two kilometres below the snout of the glacier. Above us was the northern edge of the plateau guarded by a series of icefalls. Three laden Kandiwals who passed on their way down to Mirshahi said that they had set out from Kalam the day before, which seemed an encouraging prospect for our return journey.

Three days were spent searching for a suitable entry point to the plateau. A camp was placed at 4400 metres on moraine at the western edge of the icefall about 275 metres below the plateau. After spending most of our second morning, unroped, searching for a way through a labyrinthine zone of crevasses and tottering seracs, I had to inform my sole companion, Rahimatulla, who followed me unerringly, that it would be unsafe to continue. The slopes of the central peak, a dominant feature on the plateau, looked near enough to be hardly more than a rifle-shot away from where we stood about 150 metres below. I knew that I had run out of time, and felt beaten and dispirited. Packing the tent, we returned to base the same evening, skirting round the glacier snout that formed an impressive ice

cave about 40 metres high. Our walk back was enlightened by rich displays of yellow ragwort and purple epilobium flourishing on the damp shingle flats. It was obvious that during an earlier age the glacier had spread over a much wider area of the valley floor, probably covering it completely.

According to the cheerful claim of the Kandiwals, our return journey to Kalam should have taken a day and a half. Our somewhat unambitious party spent two nights camping out during the steep descent, but I found the journey pleasant rather than otherwise. On leaving our base we began a steady six-hour climb westward to reach the Shoho pass (4420m), situated on the watershed. The descent on the Swat side included a slope of névé terminating with a crevasse just narrow enough to be jumped, followed by a stretch of moraine. Lower down, finding a small meadow – and with everyone seeming *hors de combat* – we camped there, the porters having expressed some harsh words about the Kandiwals' easy route. Fuel being unavailable, Sobhan tried, ineffectively, to burn the peat-like tufts which he dug up around the site. We were in the upper Shoho valley, whose river is fed by streams flowing from three small glaciers to the north, south, and west. Around us lay enormous slabs of sloping rock bearing scars of ancient glacier action.

At 6.30am the next morning, I set out alone up the north glacier to reach a minor point of 5000 metres situated on the Shoho Watershed. The climb, mostly on mixed névé and rock, took three hours. From the summit cornice there was a steep fall of 1000 metres into the Siri Dara Valley. The view provided the perspective I needed to study the plateau and its peaks, giving me the impression that if my search for a passage onto the plateau had been made slightly further to the south-west, a practical entry would have been found. It was my turn to suffer the fate of Moses, who, from the heights of Mount Pisgah, was granted a glimpse of the promised land, but was not permitted to enter. That privilege was granted two years later to a party of four young Cambridge climbers.<sup>9</sup>

My Yusufzai porters were congenial and likeable companions,

<sup>9</sup> Henry Day, John Peck, Richard Isherwood, and Hugh Samuel were remarkably successful, climbing six peaks above the plateau and making the first ascent from the north of Mankial, the highest of the Siri Dara Group in the south-west corner.

scrupulously honest and ready to adapt cheerfully to my plans, which must have seemed to them singularly odd. Of my three escorts, Sadiq was unquestionably the best; he was tough, reliable, dutiful, and loyal. Mam Seth, sturdy and rugged, never hesitated to make his best efforts to solve any problem that might arise. Sobhan, a clownish character with a sense of humour, tended sometimes to attach greater importance to his personal convenience than his duties.

At Saidu Sharif I visited the Waliahad to thank him for the part he played in bringing about the success of my journey. He was pleased and surprised to hear about the Siri Dara Plateau, which encouraged him to recommend to the Survey of Pakistan the need to carry out a modern survey of his state, an undertaking that began two years later.

It is a saddening thought that after almost a century of peace and calm, a contented population benefitting from wise rule in the State of Swat has been drawn inevitably into the backlash of violence and murder that now seems to be endemic across Pakistan, a country to which, without a shot being fired, Swat ceded its independence. Currently, the presence of tourists, even from Pakistan, is discouraged, owing to warlike conditions prevailing in the Swat Valley.





# 1961 *Tribal Country*

In order to understand the traditions and customs of the Pathan tribes who dwell in the territories stretching for over 800km from north to south along the mountain regions that separate Pakistan's North West Frontier from Afghanistan, a few introductory remarks would be appropriate. Looking back at the history of British involvement with the region, the character of the tribes has changed little over the past century and a half. Essentially, the tribesmen were, and are, resentful of outside intrusion into their traditional way of life, which they will defend by whatever means, usually violent, to preserve. The period covered by my three brief visits was a bridge between the disappearance of the British, and the emergence of divergent influences during the decades that followed. Present-day problems on the other side of the Pakistan border, and the infiltration of al-Qaeda paramilitary units from Afghanistan into tribal territories, led to Pakistan's closure of sections of its border, the implementation of which is difficult, if not impossible, owing to the extent of mountainous terrain, and to the potential for covert, even overt, protection of infiltrators by tribal sympathisers. During the British period in India, the Pathan tribesmen, with shifting loyalties, had always been difficult to control, a weakness that the rulers of Afghanistan were only too eager to exploit in order to serve their own interests.

The early years of British rule over the North West Frontier presented serious problems. The army was well aware that although it held the so-called 'link-lines' – beyond which British authority did not prevail – the Pathan tribesmen ruled the remainder with a fanatical determination to preserve their customs and independence. Trouble often flared up over tribal resentment following the building of trunk roads, on the grounds that better roads led to bigger invasions into their territory by foreigners. Tribal raids were covered with a cloak of righteousness; they robbed from 'infidels' who pos-

essed much greater wealth. Their territory was held under British protection, whose long-term objective was to attempt to reform as well as to punish. Across the border to the west was a power seeking opportunities to embarrass the British. In the mid-19th century, mutual respect, good relations, and even friendship was cultivated between a handful of enlightened men in the British military and administrative services and sections of the Pathan tribes. Their names stand out – the Lawrence brothers, Henry, George, and John; James Abbott; Herbert Edwards; Harry Lumsden; and John Nicholson – referred to as the ‘Titans’ of the Punjab, whose service on India’s North West Frontier was always fraught with danger. Sir Olaf Caroc, the last British governor of the province in 1946-7, refers in one of his books to a quotation from an earlier authority: ‘The life of the frontiersman is hard and he treads it daily on the brink of eternity.’ In 1857, John Nicholson died at the age of 35 during the siege of Delhi; in the same year, Henry Lawrence died in the siege of Lucknow. The names of the ‘Titans’ are still alive today in Pakistan, having been attributed to towns, colleges, and monuments.

The ancient history of the region is indelibly linked with the names of Alexander, Ghengiz Khan, and Tamerlane, none of whom were wholly successful in subjugating the territories of the frontier tribes, although the Mongols (Moghuls) passed through their territory to create a powerful empire which ruled India between the 16th and 19th centuries. In the mid-19th and early 20th centuries, the British regarded the North West Frontier as an almost insoluble problem. Political and military authorities were regularly engaged in a series of minor campaigns and skirmishes throughout the tribal areas that stretched from Khyber in the north to Waziristan and Baluchistan in the south. The British had to accept that some elements of the population were irreconcilably hostile, while others, some of whom credited the ruling authority with justice and mercy, were allowed a degree of independence in their internal affairs, and occasionally received payments to quell unruly behaviour or violent raids by tribesmen intent on robbery and murder. Domestic and civil issues were settled by traditional *jirga*, a council composed of tribal elders, which conducted a form of rough justice in accordance with tribal codes. Nevertheless, a foreigner entering a society

in which each homestead was a fort faced the risk of a fanatic's knife or bullet. A governor-general remarked in 1879, 'A friendly tribesman is one who only shoots you at night, whereas a hostile one shoots in the daytime as well.' The tribal code of honour was rigorously observed, based on the Mosaic law of an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. Every man carried a rifle; and a youth attained manhood only after his weapon had achieved what he believed to be a rightful revenge. Then, as now, the preachings of *mullas* (*nuullahs*) – religious teachers – induced incitement to violence, as did agents of the powerful Amir of Afghanistan who found it convenient to harbour turbulent tribes between him and the ruling authority on the other side of his border. An important arms factory existed at Jamrud, 14km west of Peshawar, manufacturing copies of British, Russian, and U.S. weapons, which are the proud craving of adult males who develop the skills of expert marksmen at a young age.

Around 1900, the British raised armed and disciplined forces composed wholly of local tribesmen. Known collectively as the Frontier Corps, or Scouts, they comprised Pathan men belonging to a variety of tribes and clans from many sectors and were commanded by British officers. Travelling light, moving far and fast, sniping undercover in familiar country, they were usually able to subdue unruly elements. Their operations involved high risks; and if intertribal loyalties or enmities played a part, gamekeepers sometimes turned into poachers.

My introduction to the Khyber region took place in May 1961, barely six months after my arrival in Pakistan, when a fellow traveller on the sea voyage from Liverpool to Karachi suggested a weekend trip. I readily agreed because I was interested to visit the mountains of the North West Frontier populated by the proud and fierce Pathans, about whom I had heard and read a good deal. Our weekend tour took us from Lahore, along the route leading 450km northwest to Rawalpindi. Not far from there, the main road to Peshawar crosses a spur of the Margalla Hills through a narrow breach known as the Margalla Pass. On top of a prominent point above the pass stands a tall stone monument, visible from afar, raised as a memorial to John Nicholson, who fought and won a fierce battle there in

1848. Our journey took us across three of the country's large rivers, the Chenab, the Jhelum, and the Indus, which descend from the hills southward toward the alluvial plains of Sind. Bridges originally built in the early 20th century were still giving sturdy service, carrying railway and motor traffic, occasionally restricted to one-way movement. There were views of low hills with sometimes a hint of the higher mountains of Kaghan and Swat beyond. The Indus River passes through a gorge at Attock, the bridge across it is of historical significance as the gateway to the North West Frontier.<sup>1</sup> When we drove across we were signalled through by military guards stationed at both ends. At Warsak, 60km north-east of Attock, a major dam was constructed on the Indus River by an International Consortium in the 1970s to augment Pakistan's fast-growing need for increased power. We halted briefly at Peshawar, jostling in the market place with the crowds who represented a wide range of ethnic mixtures. Apart from the arms factory at Jamrud nearby, Peshawar possesses a relatively new university, where Pakistanis from the plains mingle with tribesmen from the hills. In 1960, at the age of 70, Noel Odell, the last person to have seen George Mallory and Andrew Irvine high on Mount Everest in 1924, took up a geology professorship there prior to his retirement in 1962.

Leaving the plains at Peshawar, we began to climb a well-designed and picturesque road leading to Torkham, 55km away, which marks the Pak-Afghan frontier just beyond the Khyber Pass (1180m). A railway, British-built over a century ago and still in service, connects Peshawar to the town of Landi Kotal, where the British maintained a civil and military district headquarters. The brown foothills through which we passed, with an occasional cover of bush and scrub, provided a perfect screen for trigger-happy snipers wishing to demonstrate their objection to the presence of foreigners. Above this zone are rocky hills rising here and there to minor tops scanning a wide range of country and valuable as picket points for seeking out raiders and enemies. At small villages in between, the population tend their cattle and orchards, and raise crops of wheat, maize, and barley,

<sup>1</sup> It was originally built with boats lashed together, and was the scene of bloody battles. The bridge changed hands during the Indo-Sikh wars of 1848-9, was secured by the British in 1857, and was damaged during the 2nd Afghan war of 1879-80.

irrigated by ingenious canal systems. The climate of the region is severe, providing scorching summers and freezing winters.

At a small cluster of mud-built houses on the way up, I noticed an almost biblical vision of women drawing water from a well. Halting the car, I walked to about 150 metres of the group and photographed what seemed to me a unique setting. Returning to the car I heard hasty footsteps behind and found myself facing an enraged tribesman. His tirade in Pushtu was incomprehensible, but it did not take much imagination to realise that he had been highly incensed by the crime I had committed in photographing a group of village women outside their dwellings. The reproof, which disconcerted me, was justified. It provided my introduction to the etiquette of the country, and I was relieved that the aggrieved man accepted the sincerity of my apology.

Perhaps unwisely, we made further stops on the isolated road through the mountains to record environmental scenes scattered with solitary homesteads, several of them topped with outlook towers, and to examine tablets prominently placed on rock outcrops above the road inscribed with the names of British regiments, many no longer in existence, commemorating battles that they had fought during the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

Landi Kotal, situated at 1072 metres, has been, and remains, a major caravanserai since time immemorial, used by commercial and military traffic on journeys through the Khyber Pass. The pass has been a traditional zone of conflict. During the first Afghan war (1841-2) it was the sole exit route to India for the British garrison comprising about fourteen thousand soldiers, civilians, and camp followers, who, having been permitted to march out of Kabul through the winter snow, were annihilated on their way to the pass by Afghan riflemen lying in wait for them at Jalalabad – it was one of the greatest disasters suffered by British forces during their occupation of the subcontinent.

Halting at Landi Kotal, we walked through the large open market filled with the stalls of traders dealing in foodstuffs and a wide variety of local and foreign merchandise, including arms. Mingling with the crowds, exclusively male, we were approached by a mixed group of Pathans, one of whom, clean-shaven and more refined in

appearance and dress than the others, expressed a friendly interest in our travels. He was armed with a very superior revolver, worn in a leather belt around his waist. In my innocence I asked whether I might examine it. Such a request from an unknown and untrusted foreigner must have appeared to him and his Pathan companions as an act of unprincipled folly. He looked ill at ease, studying me intently for a moment. Could I be sincere, or was I merely stupid? He lifted the weapon from his belt, I heard the click of a safety catch, then I felt the weapon in my hands. It was only later that I appreciated the degree of trust implied by his action.

At Shagai, below the Khyber Pass, a fort built by the British in 1928 included a cemetery containing the graves of British servicemen which were surrounded by flower beds and cared for by a Pathan orderly, which seemed a generous tribute to former enemies. Our final stop was at the pass, where armed sentries permitted us to proceed on foot for about 300 metres to a steel chain placed across the road at the entry point to Afghanistan. We were able to fulfill a request from a group of Pakistan frontier guards accompanying us by photographing them, but they were disappointed that we were unable to provide them with an immediate copy of the result.



# 1967 *Tribal Country*

In the winter of 1967, Norman Norris, who was stationed in Multan, agreed to join me on a short journey to Takht-i-Sulaiman,<sup>1</sup> a mountain group situated at the southern end of the political agencies of Kohat, Bannu, and Waziristan. Deserts cover almost the entire region, populated in the south by Marri and Bugti tribes, and in the north by Sherani and Waziri tribes. Above the deserts rise scattered groups of sandstone mountains. The Zhob Range to the west, which is partially forested, is inhabited by diminishing herds of wildlife. The peak of Takht-i-Sulaiman (3385m), the highest in the area, rises north-east of Fort Sandeman. Robert Sandeman, whose grave lies near the fort that bears his name, played a crucial role between 1857 and 1877, knitting together the Baluchi and Pathan tribes and clans, establishing close relations between tribal chiefs through whom tribesmen were pressed into service as levies, pre-dating the creation of the Frontier Scouts further to the north. As deputy commissioner of the district of Dera Ghazi Khan, situated south of Dera Ismail Khan with Punjab to the east and Sind in the south, Sandeman adopted his own methods of friendship and understanding as a solution to disputes between tribes. Sometimes contrary to orders from above, he risked his life by visiting tribal chiefs and heads of clans, gaining their respect and the trust and friendship of the people. He was to a large extent responsible for ending looting, murder, and civil wars between tribes. His reputation, which still survives, is illustrated by a remark once attributed to a leading tribal chief: 'It is no use fighting Senaman Sahib: he knows everything and turns up everywhere.' Sandeman's father was Colonel Robert Sandeman, who commanded an Indian regiment during the Sikh wars of 1845-6 and 1848-9, and during the uprising

<sup>1</sup> The Throne of Solomon.

of the Indian army in 1857, his son serving in that year as an ensign in his father's regiment. Those early years were filled with instances of sons following fathers and brothers into the political and military services of the East India Company and the Queen's Army.

Norris and I set out by car from Multan in mid-January 1967, crossing the Chenab River over the creaking wooden planks of an old cantilever bridge that carried the railway line as well as wheeled traffic in both directions on a turn-by-turn basis. Driving 180km north along the east bank of the Indus river, we arrived at the main crossing point which, in winter, consisted of steering the car through the dried-out channels of the riverbed on a marked route of about 19km to reach the west bank.

At 2.30pm, we halted at the rest house in Dera Ismail Khan for lunch, with the Sulaiman Range visible in the west. Driving 60km along a dust and gravel road took us to Daraban Fort, situated at the end of the plain, where a notice attached to a chain informed us that we were about to enter Sherani tribal country. The point being unguarded, we merely had to lift the chain to pass through, which we hoped might seem suggestive of a friendly reception beyond. An undulating gravel road led south, climbing gently for 25km with the Sulaiman mountain range sharply outlined under a clear sky. It was almost 6pm that evening when we reached Darazinda fort, a prominent feature strategically poised on a hillcrest above the road.

We had reached the headquarters of the Frontier Constabulary, occupied by a detachment of armed militia under the command of a *subedar-major* (non-commissioned officer), from whom, to our relief, we received a warm welcome. Our arrival had not been announced in advance, and our journey of almost ten hours must have given us a disreputable appearance. Hospitality for the night was freely offered in the clean and comfortable quarters of the guest house attached to the fort, and two militiamen were placed at our service as orderlies. We discussed our plan to climb to the top of Takht-i-Sulaiman, an ascent of 2135 metres, which was approved by the *subedar-major* who undertook to help with arrangements for a local guide. Later, our orderlies produced a good dinner. Seated outside in the tranquil atmosphere of the fort, we watched the fading sunset colours on the Sulaiman Range, welcomed the cooler air of twilight and the emer-



gence of myriads of stars piercing through a peerless sky, musing on the good fortune that had brought it all about.

Departing from the fort at 7.30am, we drove 13km along the gravel road which serves as a highway for a thrice-weekly bus service to Quetta via Fort Sandeman. Halting at the village of Ragasar, situated at the foot of our mountain, we left the car with my Pakistani driver to await our return the following evening and sought the village headman who had been advised to provide a guide. Two men were engaged, and a third was added for good measure at no extra cost. The climb on the east side of the mountain up boulder-strewn tracks began directly above the last dwellings of the village.

Ascending 1200 metres in three hours, we reached a high summer pasture covered with light scrub, patches of grass, and old sheep droppings. We reckoned that we were about halfway up the mountain, and our escort indicated that it would be difficult to find a suitable campsite higher up. It was a beautiful evening and from our balcony situated above the wide, brown plain there was an extensive view. An examination of our route for the next day showed that a steep rock section formed the upper part of the mountain. The night air turned chilly and water was obtained by melting ice from a small stream nearby. The men seemed content, playing melodies on a primitive flute after their evening meal, which consisted of unusually large and heavy *chapattis* (flat, round bread baked on an open fire) made from brown wheat flour. We provided them with tea. One of them, armed with a huntsman's rifle, stated that *markhor* (horned wild sheep, *capra falconeri*) were fairly common in the hilly forest of Zhob. Their carefree lives and simple joys heightened our awareness of the difference between their world and ours. In that environment it seemed hard to tell which was the more desirable. Not long after sunset they wrapped themselves into homespun woollen shawls and settled down for the night.

The top of the Takht-i-Sulaiman Range was reached after a three-hour climb the next day in glorious weather. The section directly above our camp provided an interesting scramble of 500 metres that required occasional handholds. Beyond that, leading to a ridge running from north to south, were two cliffs of firm sandstone provided with primitive but adequate aids in the manner of *via ferrata* (without

the security of metal structures bolted into the rock), comprising wooden ladders and handrails ingeniously woven together with rope strands held fast to each other and to the rock. They were less precarious than they looked. The men danced gracefully up, referring to them as *sherani sarak*, or a Sherani pathway, which ended at a col on the ridge. Following banks of consolidated snow on the less steep west face below the ridge, we arrived at the top of the highest peak crowned by a *ziarat* (a religious Moslem shrine), which our escorts were jubilant to have reached in winter. An hour was spent seated on the highest point of the Takht-i-Sulaiman Range, absorbing silently in the sharp and clear atmosphere the barrenness of hundreds of kilometres of the sandy plain below dotted with empty brown hills in every direction, broken only in the west by the contrasting dark green of the Zhob forest.

The descent seemed like an anticlimax. Leaving the summit at noon, we were back at the campsite three hours later where we dawdled in the afternoon sun over tea and a snack before setting out for the final descent to Ragasar. After almost three hours, our foot-weary group stumbled over a moraine-like path in total darkness on the last stretch to the village, where we were welcomed by the headman with steaming cups of sweet tea.



# 1970 *Tribal Country*

The Honourable Charles Granville Bruce arrived in India in 1889 at the age of 23 as a lieutenant appointed to serve in the 5th Gurkha Rifles. On his retirement 32 years later, he was granted the honorary colonelcy of his regiment, an honour that he greatly prized. In 1892 he joined Martin Conway's pioneering expedition to the Karakoram. Three years later, when AF Mummery arrived in India with Norman Collie and Geoffrey Hastings to attempt Nanga Parbat, Bruce met the party at Astor and was invited to join them, together with two Gurkhas from his regiment.<sup>1</sup> During his army service Bruce took part in several campaigns in the tribal areas of the Khyber and North Waziristan against Afghan invaders and rebel tribesmen, where he organised and trained men to work as Frontier Scouts in the hills that comprise the major feature of their country. He selected them for their wiry physique, fleetness of foot, and skill as marksmen. In later years, when asked about his Frontier experiences, he once replied, 'I think I have run away from every tribe on the Frontier at one time or another.' He loved mountains, making several visits to Sikkim and the Kulu and Kaghan Valleys, and was deeply revered by his Gurkhas, with whom he conversed in fluent Gurkhali. As a General, Bruce was perhaps more widely remembered for his leadership of the Everest expeditions of 1922 and 1924.

Peter Oliver, Frank Smythe's companion in Garhwal in 1937 and a member of the expedition to Everest in 1938, spent part of his Indian Army career attached to the South Waziristan Scouts, where he kept fit by scouring the hills with groups of his men 'for the good of their souls and to teach them that they are not the only people

<sup>1</sup> Both of them, Raghobir and Goman Singh, perished with Mummery during his search from the south for a pass leading to the north side of Nanga Parbat.



Pony caravan fording the Chatru stream. Spiti 1955.

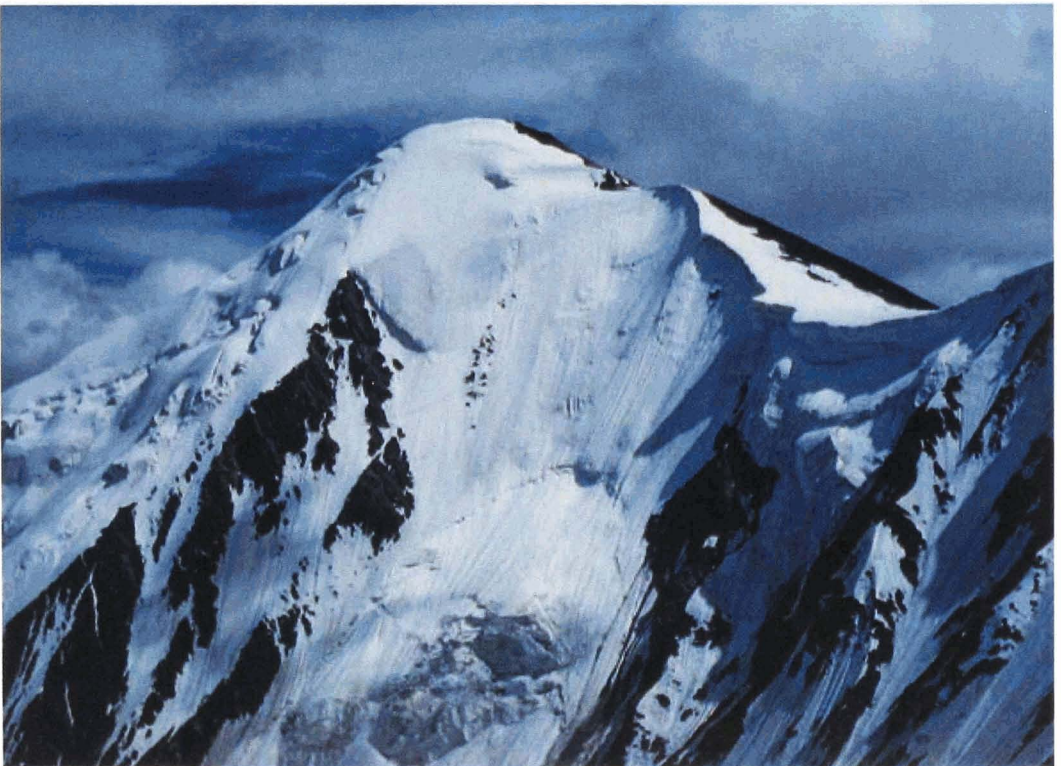


The Kanzam Pass (4550m) leading into Spiti, 1955. Lahul peaks behind.





Upper Ratang Valley approaching meadow. Peak 6010m is on the left. Spiti 1955.



Peak 6010m from camp above the meadow at 5300m. Spiti 1955.



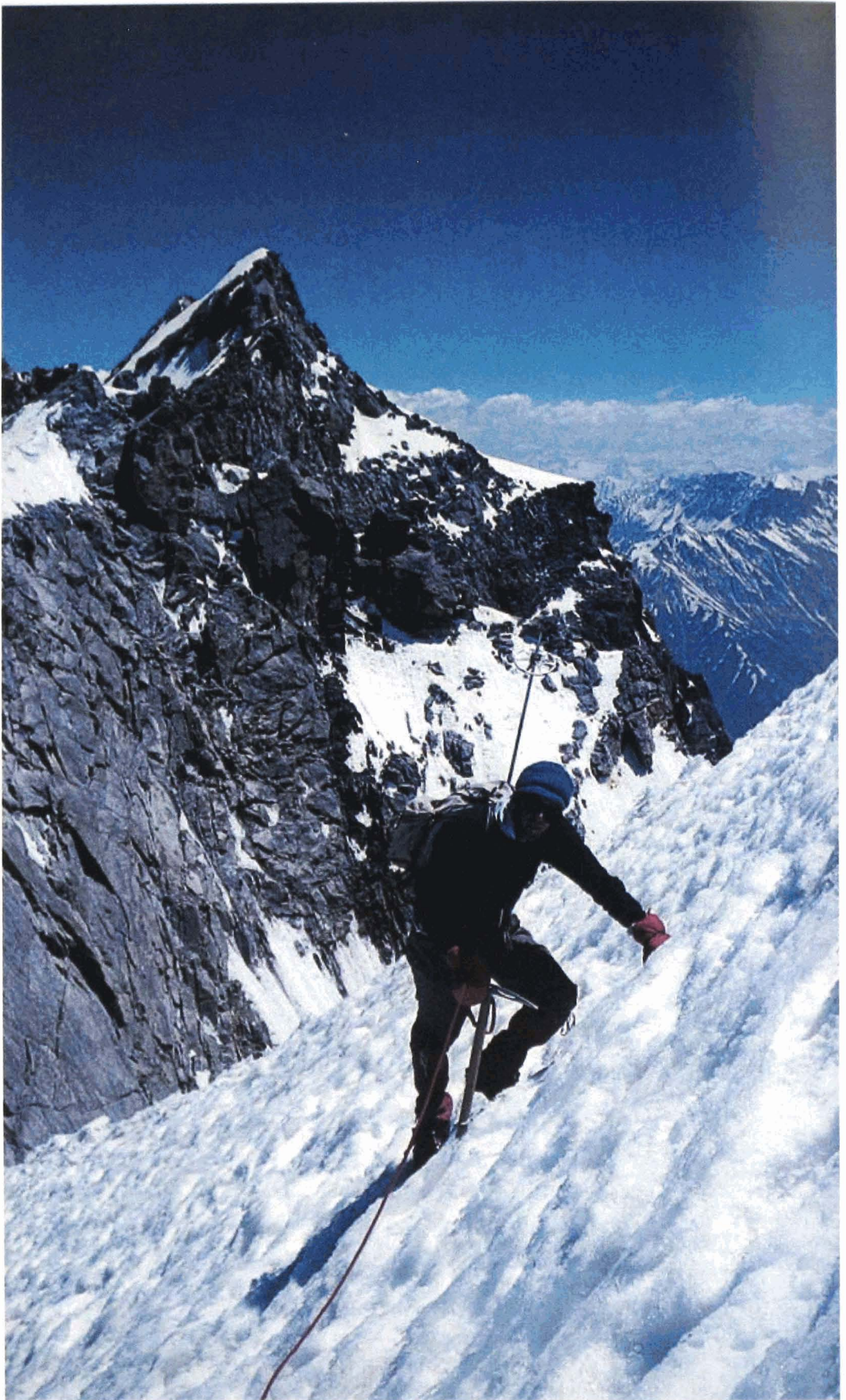


Mali-ka-Parbat North Peak (5223m) left, South Peak (5290m) right. Saif-ul-mulk Lake, corner right below. Kaghan 1967.



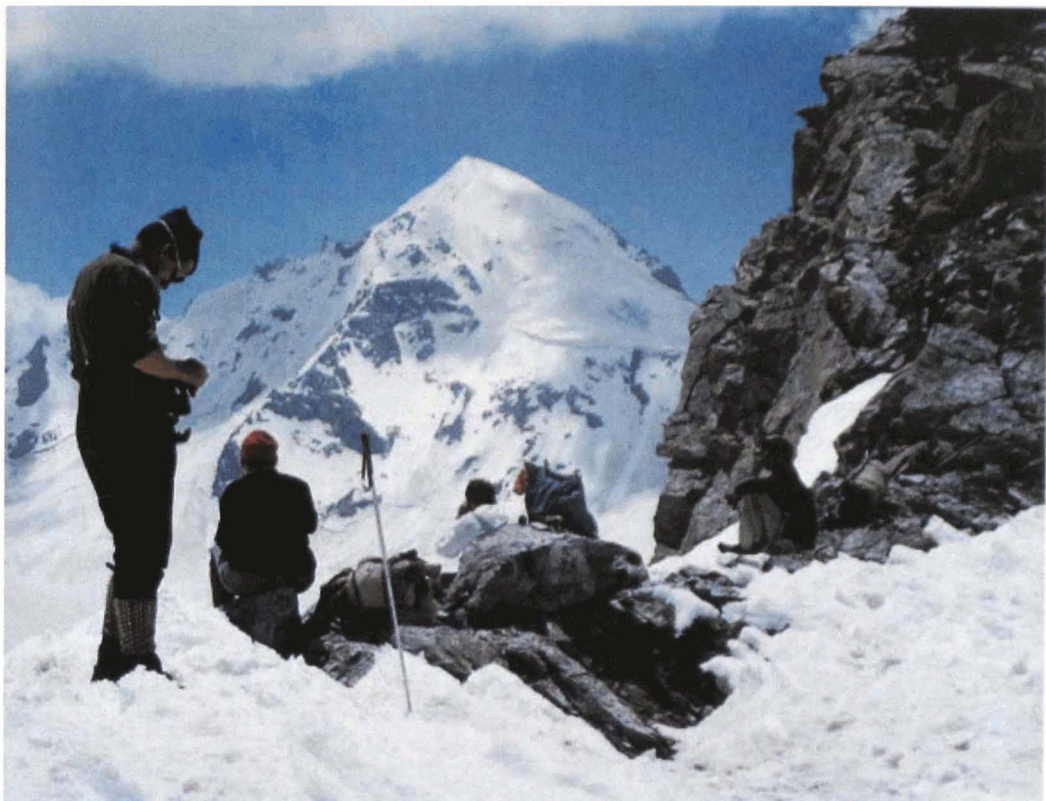
Mali-ka-Parbat from Burawai Peak. Kaghan 1965.





F Höflin climbing north-west face leading to south summit of Mali-ka-Parbat. North summit visible behind. Kaghan 1972.





Siran II (5012m) from Siran Col. Kaghan 1972.



Siran I (5290m) from Siran Glacier. Kaghan 1972.





Laden porters leaving depot camp for base. Sunshine lighting north face of Minapin Peak. Karakoram 1958.



The route from base to Camp 1 in the basin above icefall. The lower slopes of Minapin are on the right with Sumayar on the left. Karakoram 1958



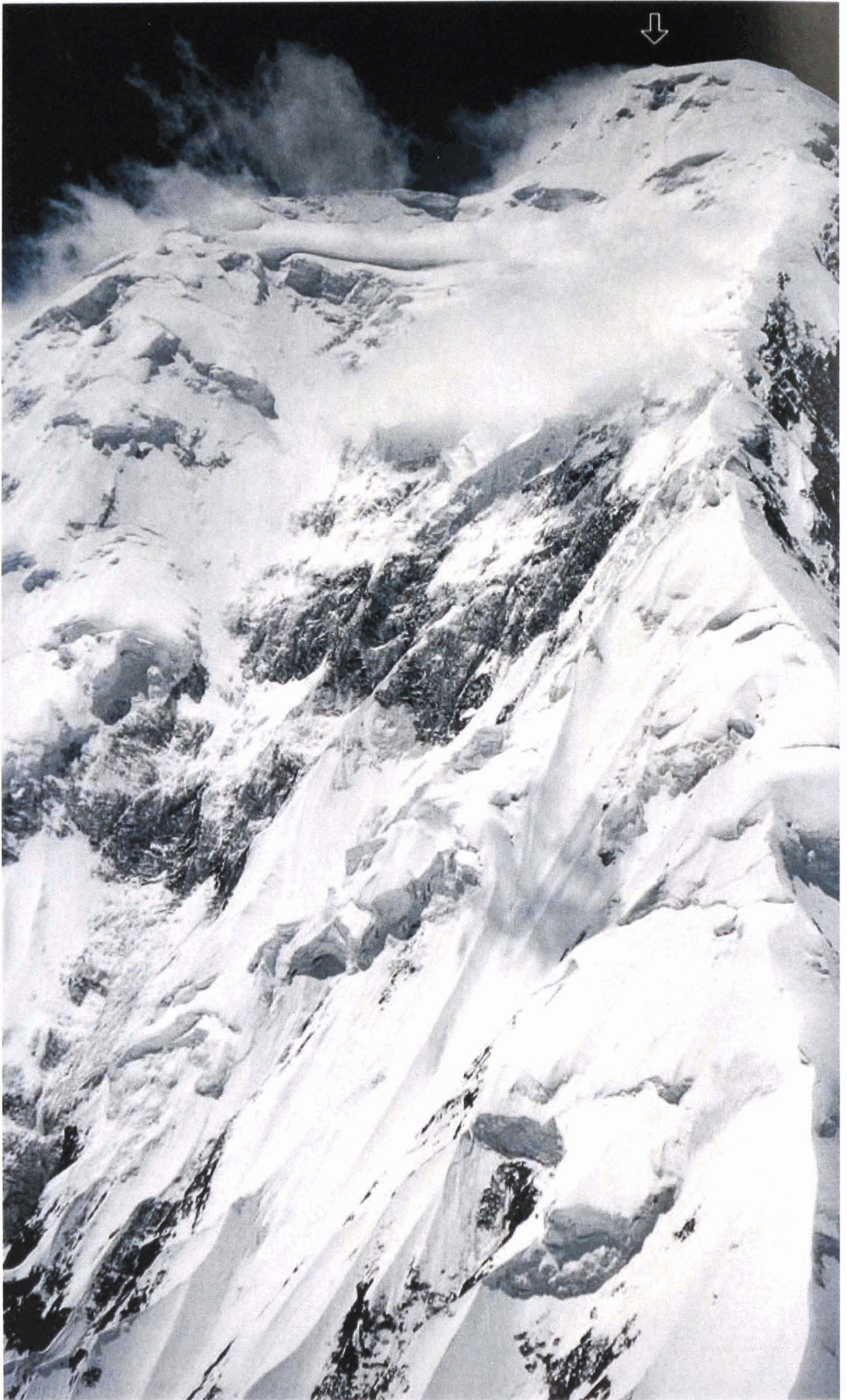


Ted Warr and Chris Hoyte leaving Camp 2 for the west ridge of Minapin. Karakoram 1958.



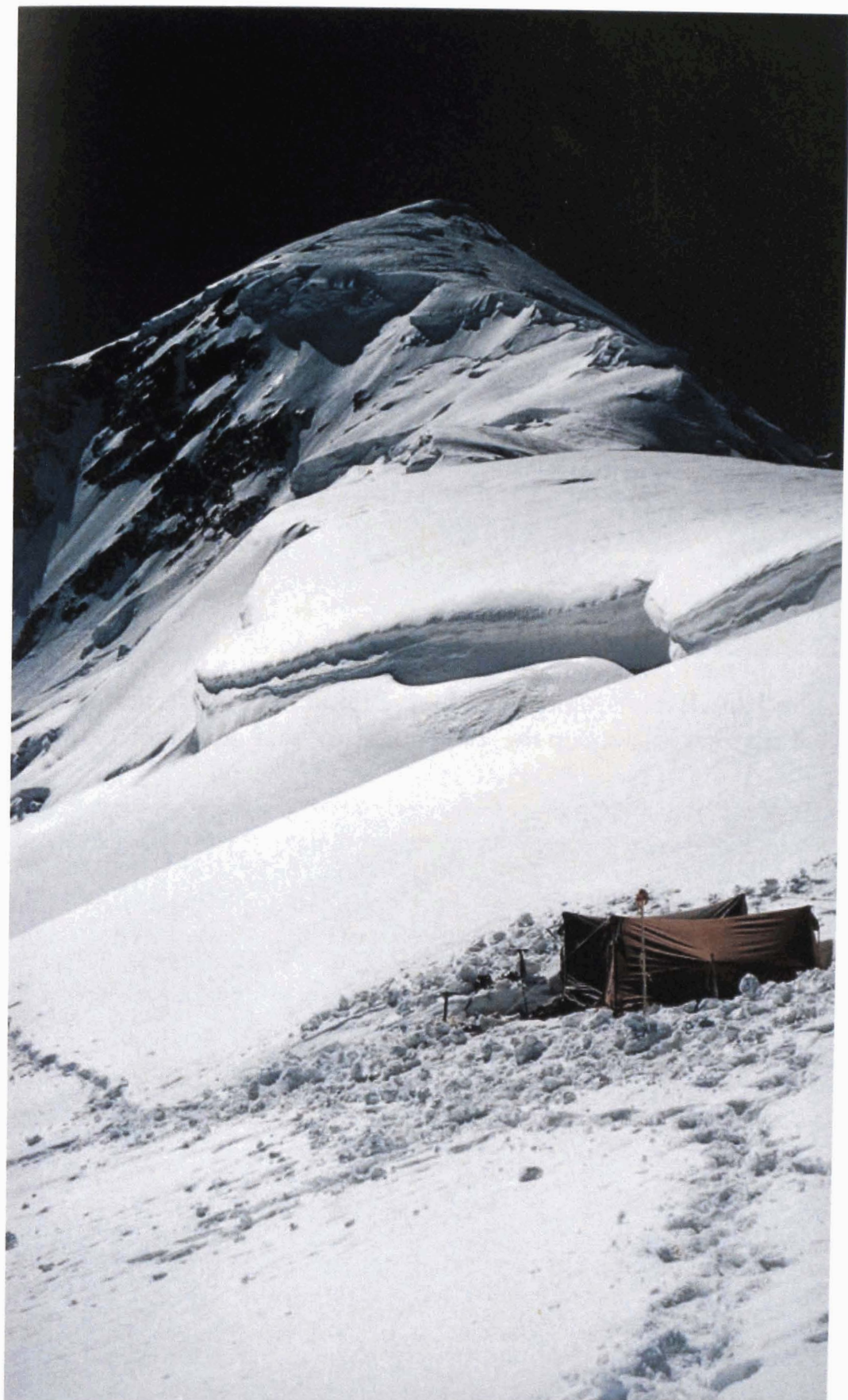
Sumayar Peak from Camp 2 on the north face of Minapin. Karakoram 1958.





North ridge and summit plateau of Minapin from top of Sumayar. Arrow indicates actual summit. Karakoram 1958.





Camp 3 below the west ridge. Karakoram 1958.



Camp 4 on a level shoulder at the foot of sunlit slopes. Warr and Hoyte were last seen halfway up the snow dome above. Karakoram 1958.

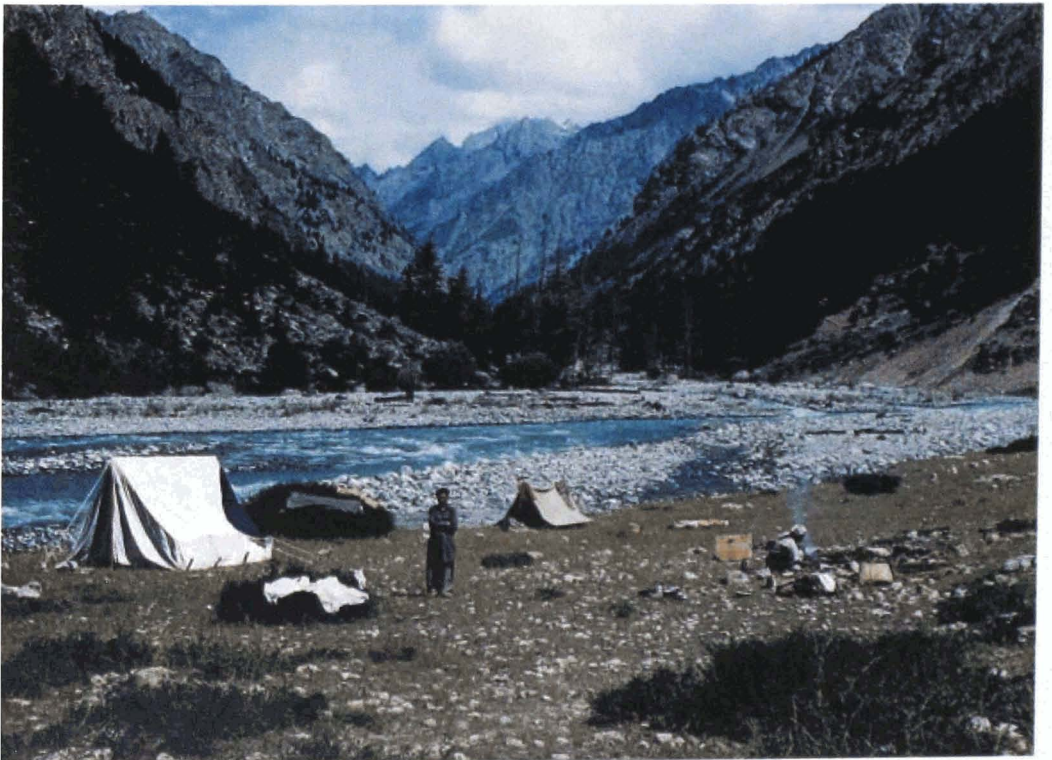


Militiamen approaching Matiltan Fort. Swat & Kohistan 1962.



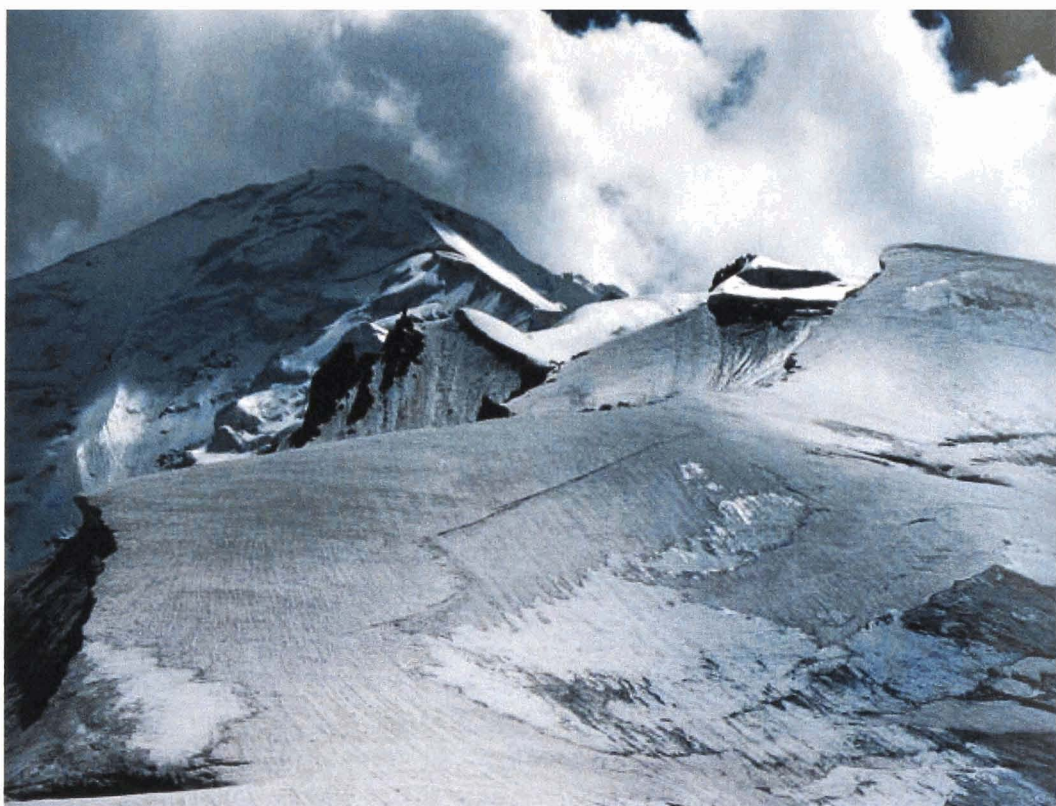


Upper camp placed in snow basin (centre). Falak Ser behind. Swat & Kohistan 1962.



First camp at Paloga. Swat & Kohistan 1962.





Approaching Falak Ser's north ridge. Swat & Kohistan 1962.



First glimpse of Siri Dara Peaks from Paloga Pass. Swat & Kohistan





Ascent to camp below Siri Dara Plateau. "Breithorn" behind. Swat & Kohistan 1962.

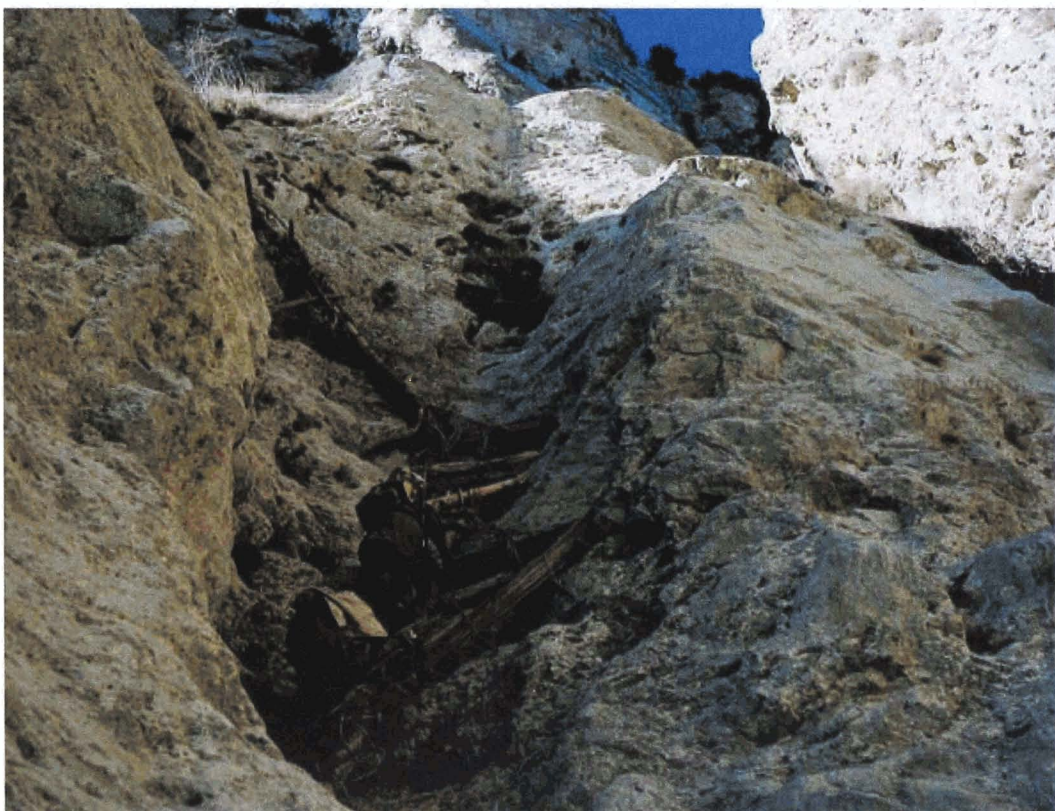


First view from above of Siri Dara Plateau. (Part) Breithorn left, central peak right. Swat & Kohistan 1962.



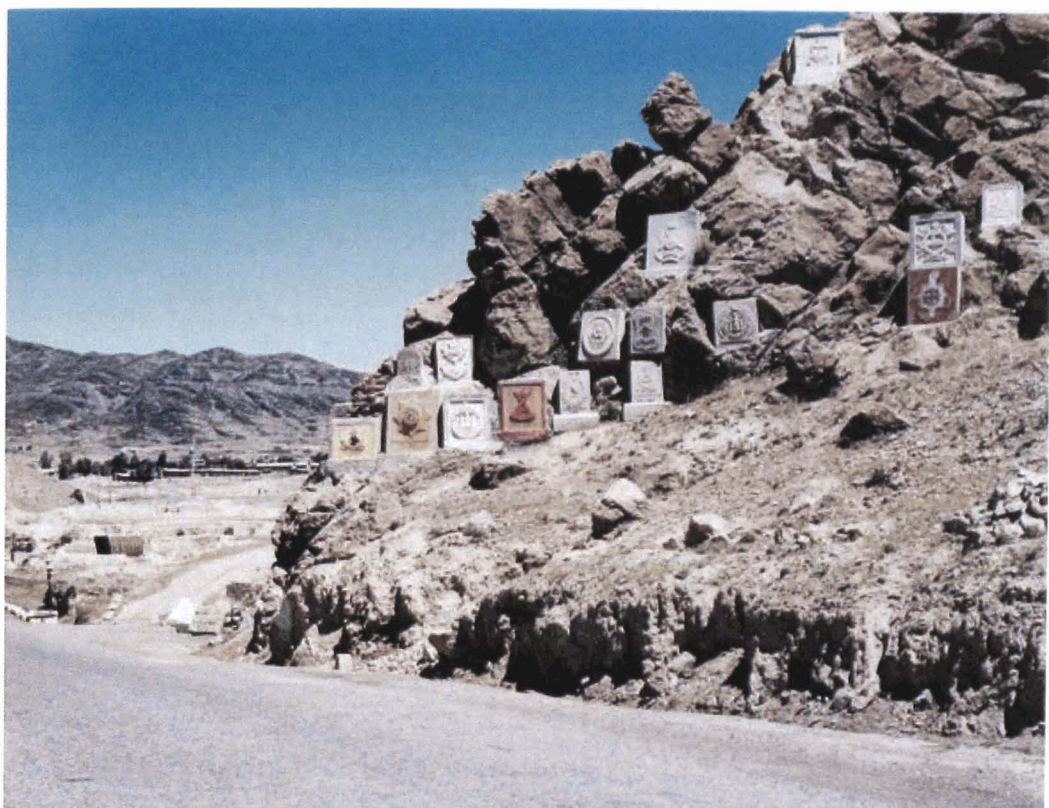


Yusufzai armed escorts: Mam Seth (left) and Sobhan (right).  
Swat & Kohistan 1962.

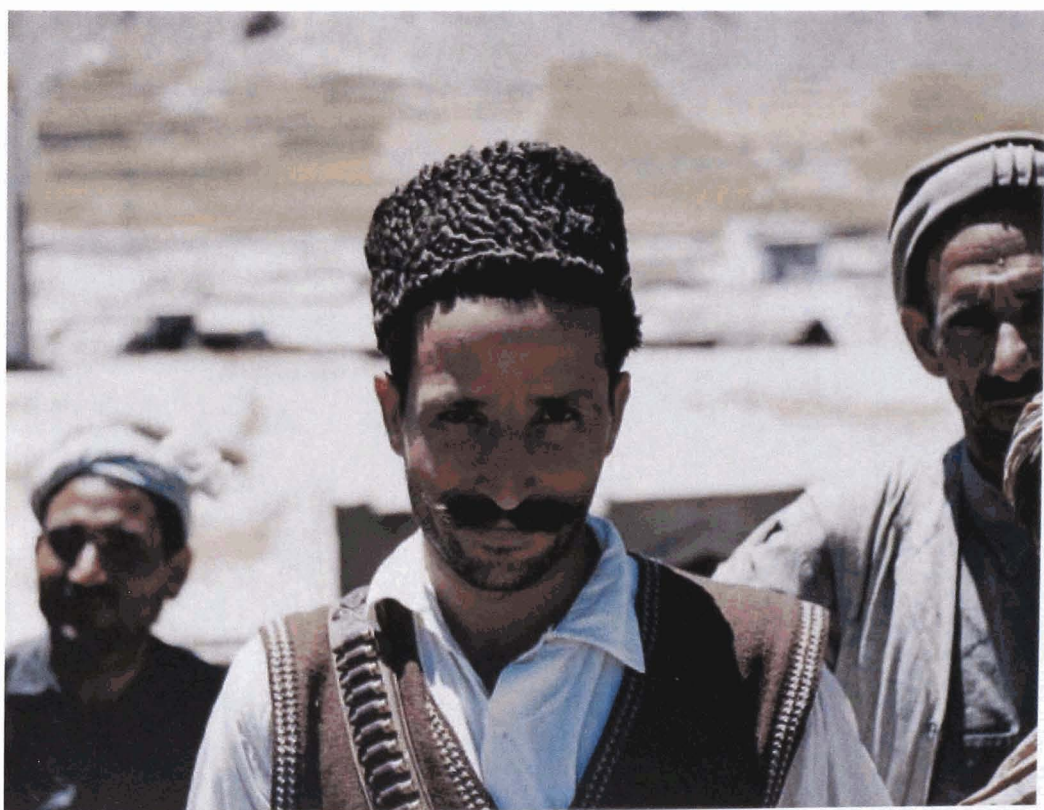


Sherani Sarak. Tribal Country 1967.





British regimental plaques on the Khyber Road. Tribal Country 1961.



In Landikotal Bazar. Tribal Country 1961.





At the top of Takht-i-Suleiman (3385m), South Waziristan. Tribal Country 1967.



Motor road from Peshawar to Khyber Pass. Tribal Country 1961.

who can walk over hills.<sup>2</sup> He once walked from Razmak to the top of Mount Shuidar, 16km away and 1830 metres above, in two hours and 40 minutes. Razmak is an isolated post in the heart of the South Waziristan hills, 40km from the Afghan frontier. It is inside a fortified area and was the target of frequent raids within and across the frontier – a state of affairs that has greatly degenerated today leading to more serious consequences. In 1970, Oliver's exploit on Shuidar struck me as being an interesting way to spend a weekend away from the summer heat of the Punjab Plains.

At the end of March I set out by car from my station near Multan, accompanied by my Pakistani driver and equipped with a rucksack carrying food and water for a few days. The 200km drive to the Indus River took five hours, including a lengthy wait on its east bank for a primitive ferry, which, at the time, provided the only means of crossing to Dera Ismail Khan, an important town situated on the opposite bank of the river. The crossing point was approximately 15km wide where the waters of the river coursed through several seasonally changing channels. Downstream from there, 300km below in the hot Sind Plains at Panjnad where five rivers – the Indus, Jhelum, Chenab, Sutlej, and Beas – meet (*panj* = five, *nad* = meeting point), the combined waters are harnessed at the Sukkur Barrage, where electricity is generated to meet Pakistan's growing industries in the province of Sind. It was 11am by the time I drove through Dera Ismail Khan. Half an hour later we entered the bustling town of Tank, situated at the foot of the hills and reputed to be the third hottest place in the world. Tank was the winter headquarters of Pakistan's south-west agency and contained a hospital, schools, and a few small industries. The town was crowded with the comings and goings of a resident population engaged in agriculture and was a transient zone for the exchange of merchandise and arms; it was also a hotbed for covert political intrigues between overtly friendly neighbours within proximity of their common border.

Waziristan has been described as a land of difficult hills containing deep and rugged defiles. It is the home of trigger-happy Mahsud

<sup>2</sup> Lieutenant Colonel PR Oliver was killed in action in Burma in 1945 while commanding a battalion of the 13th Frontier Force Rifles.

and Waziri tribesmen who have a reputation for being among the wildest on the Frontier, and the fiercest opponents of the presence of outsiders in their territory. After the end of World War I, from a mixture of Waziri tribes, the Tochi Scouts were formed by the British in the north, and the South Waziristan Scouts in the south. They were disciplined and effective forces serving under British officers, and a keen rivalry grew between the two. This temporary harnessing of the tribes was an improvement which subdued some of their earlier activities when unpredictable incidents were not uncommon, including the murders of a British commanding officer and a district political agent.

Beyond Tank the road climbs into the foothills through unspoilt wooded country, attractive owing to its seclusion, where practically no other wheeled traffic was met. I was beginning to feel how much I was enjoying myself and visualising the pleasures that lay ahead, when I met an unavoidable obstacle in the form of a sentry post with closed gates guarded by a group of armed soldiers. I was requested to show my pass. I had no pass. Not having anticipated the need to obtain one, some quick thinking was required. Searching inside my rucksack with feigned unconcern, I produced my passport. The NCO to whom I handed it would probably have been unable to read English, or he could have been impressed by the royal coat of arms on the front cover. Handing the document back, he saluted smartly and signalled an orderly to open the gates. It pleased me to think that his action might have owed something to an ancestor who had served under British officers. My relief was palpable and my reputation probably gained several notches in the esteem of my driver. The road continued to climb through a lonely area ideally suited for an ambush or an unexpected shot from a sniper's rifle. If my driver, a Punjabi from the plains, entertained feelings of alarm, he did not express any. I was crassly unaware of any sense of danger, counting on the respectable appearance of my uniformed driver and civilian vehicle to see us through.

A strategically situated fort was built by the British at Jandola in 1923 to house the headquarters of the South Waziristan Scouts. Wana, the last habitation near the Afghan frontier, is 70km away to the west, and the large town of Miranshah, the home of the Tochi

Scouts, is 80km to the north, containing a fort, schools, a hospital, small industries and, during the British period, an RAF station. TE Lawrence, or aircraftsman Shaw as he was known then, was stationed at Miranshah in 1928. Owing to a broken-down truck, he spent a night with officers at their mess in Jandola, presenting them with a copy of his book, *Revolt in the Desert*, inscribed with an apology because of its battered condition. In a letter written from Miranshah he described the town as 'a no-man's land ... like falling over the edge of the world.' The strategic position of this town has grown enormously in significance of late, owing to the support provided to infiltrators from Afghanistan by tribal sympathisers.<sup>3</sup>

Reaching Jandola at 1pm, I approached a neat, white bungalow surrounded by a well-kept garden. It seemed to be the sort of place where I might obtain information about the state of the road to Razmak, 45km away to the north, and the possibility of finding accommodation there. I was met by an orderly who informed me that this was the officers' mess, and enquired whether I had an appointment with his chief. I explained my requirements and he disappeared to convey my message. While I stood on the veranda admiring the blossoms in the garden, a youngish man in casual civilian dress approached, introducing himself as Major Mumtaz, in command of the military post, and expressing surprise at my presence. 'How did you manage to reach this point?' he enquired. 'You are not supposed to be here without a special permit.' He modified his remarks by adding that nothing personal was meant. 'Foreigners are permitted occasionally to enter tribal zones, but only with the provision of an armed escort.' 'Could he provide one?' 'That would take time, and would need to be referred to a higher authority.' The major seemed eager to help, but was powerless to do so. We had reached an impasse. With disappointment written across my face, he decided to stretch the rules by telephoning to the political agent at Tank. 'You must appreciate,' he explained, 'that this is dangerous tribal country. If we let you through we are directly responsible for your personal safety.' The political agent at Tank was less than accommodating. His cries

<sup>3</sup> At Jandola in August 2007, tribesmen beheaded a Pakistani soldier, one of 16 captured by them, threatening that more decapitations would follow if ten men of their clan, held in Pakistan for suicide attacks, were not released.

of alarm that I had got so far were audible through the telephone; he demanded that I should return without delay. Thus ended my plan to climb Shuidar. Major Mumtaz expressed his goodwill by inviting me to lunch at the mess, and by advising the checkpoint below to expect my return and to permit free passage.

Although my experiences on the North West Frontier of Pakistan relate to a period of relative calm that prevailed there almost 50 years ago, about two decades after the British had departed from the sub-continent, the episode reveals how fragile the control of the tribal areas by the central authorities was even then.

Judging by the past history of the region it is not surprising that the Pathan tribes who dwell in the frontier regions of Pakistan – with their tribal codes, clans, propensity for switching allegiances, and hasty resort to aggression and violence – continue to be a source of embarrassment to Pakistan as they were to the British. Current information provided by the media about the relationship between the tribesmen and their Afghan neighbours comes as no surprise; the elements for such an evolution have always been in place. Turbulent conditions in Afghanistan are not a new phenomenon, having existed to a greater or lesser degree throughout the country's past and recent history, while vendettas and unrest have been, and remain, a recurring problem between the Pathan tribes themselves. That North and South Waziristan now appear to be largely under the influence of religious fundamentalists from across the border appears to be an established, if officially unapproved and unadmitted, fact in spite of assurances to the contrary given to the Islamabad government by a few tribal chiefs. The 400km distance separating Islamabad from an 800km-long mountain frontier virtually places the activities of the tribesmen beyond the scope or power of central authority. Attempts on the spot by the Pakistan army to impose some degree of control have resulted in bloody battles between opposing forces. With fundamentalist elements violently threatening to spread their beliefs and ideals across the world, Pakistan occupies a high place on the list of the world's danger areas.







1965 *Kaghan*

Looking back on my three visits to the Kaghan valley between 1965 and 1972, I regret having focussed solely on its highest mountain, Mali ka Parbat (5290m), tending to ignore the existence of smaller groups of peaks and glaciers spread across its northern region, of which some had not been fully explored and, with few exceptions, none had been climbed. In terms of height, the mountains seem insignificant, but they conform to the alpine character of the valley, are easily accessible, and are, or were, a perfect playground for seekers of secret places as yet untrodden in the tradition of the explorers of the European Alps during the mid-19th century. Size and scale are considered important for mountain climbers, but for those who derive genuine pleasure from the mountains, they are not necessarily the principal attraction. Although my single-minded efforts resulted in the second ascents of the north and south summits of Mali-ka-Parbat, they deprived me of the enjoyment of acquiring a closer acquaintance with other mountains forming part of the Kaghan Alps, and of wilder opportunities for treading new ground.

The Honourable CG Bruce, who first visited Kaghan in 1890, was a regular visitor to the valley during the early years of the 20th century,<sup>1</sup> admitting to having spent some of his happiest days there. Accompanied by AL Mumm and the Swiss guide Maurice Inderbinnen in 1907, he climbed Shikara (4875m), but did not attempt to climb the highest peak, which he referred to as the 'giant' of the valley. That label might seem exaggerated, but it is not inappropriate since the mountain towers above its neighbours and presents a challenging aspect from every direction, its closest contender being almost 300 metres lower.

The Kaghan valley is approached via Rawalpindi and Abbottabad to Balakot, the largest village situated beside the lower reaches of

<sup>1</sup> At that time Kaghan was experiencing regular raids from "Wild Kohistanis" on its western borders.

the Kunhar river, near its junction with the Jhelum river flowing south-east into Kashmir. Balakot was at the epicentre of a devastating earthquake in the autumn of 2005, which virtually wiped out the village and resulted in an estimated loss of life of over 70,000 people. The earthquake was followed by a series of landslides that destroyed roads, bridges, fields, cattle, homes, and much of the neighbouring area, causing the total loss of the livelihood of its inhabitants. International help was made available in the form of medical aid, shelter, and food to support the surviving population living in tents during severe winter weather. More than one year after the disaster there was little change in the living conditions of the survivors bereft of their lands and possessions. Not all the financial aid pledged was received. The rebuilding of Balakot might never take place. Seismological examination has shown that the area, situated above a weak crust line, is tectonically unsound and vulnerable to recurring earth tremors. Plans have been studied for construction of a new town further to the south-east toward Muzaffargarh, near Pakistan's border with Kashmir.

The waters of the Kunhar river have their origin in a number of subsidiary streams issuing from the small glacier systems in the north that enter the main valley from the east and west. At the top of the valley, about 120km north of Balakot, is the Babusar pass (4170m). The road leading to it, suitable for four-wheel-drive vehicles, is usually open from July to October, sections of it including a series of wooden bridges having to be rebuilt every summer after the melting of the winter snows. The pass used to provide the main link to Chilas and Gilgit, but its importance began to diminish after the opening in the 1970s of the Indus Valley highway, jointly constructed by Pakistan and China. The people of the lower valley were traditionally agriculturists who cultivated on terraced and well-irrigated fields crops of wheat, maize, vegetables, and fruit, which provided them with a comfortable level of subsistence. Larger tracts of land and some of the forests were held by hereditary owners, the *Sayyids*, who generally exercised a benevolent authority over their tenants. During the summer, nomad families migrated up the valley, driving their horses, sheep, goats, cows, buffalos, and poultry to green pastures situated south of the Babusar pass, which they occupied until driven down by cold autumn winds.

A topographical survey of the valley was carried out by the Survey of India in 1926 when five months of fieldwork and the establishment of 15 triangulation stations resulted in the publication of the first maps. Owing to the proximity of the larger Kashmir mountains to the east, the Kaghan area tended to be overlooked by trekkers and climbers, although trout fishing in the Kunhar river was said to be superior to that in Kashmir and attracted regular summer visitors.

RL Holdsworth of the Doon School in Dehra Dun provided me with information about Mali-ka-Parbat, having made two attempts to climb it in the 1930s from the north-west, one of which almost succeeded. But he was not the first. In the late 1920s, Captain BW Battye, accompanied by Gurkha soldiers from his regiment, appears to have approached the mountain from the north-east and climbed the north peak (5223m) that is connected by a narrow ridge about two kilometres long to the higher south peak (5290m). I have been unable to trace any record of Battye's ascent. The south peak was first reached by its north-west face in 1940 by Lieutenants Willoughby and Price on a spell of leave from army service during World War II. There appeared to be no further information about attempts to climb the mountain.

In 1965, when planning a two-week holiday in Kaghan with John Austin, a civil engineer working in Lahore, we decided to examine the original ascent route which rises over 2000 metres above the lake of Saif-ul-Muluk. There is a legend about a fairy princess who was banished to its depths by her father for marrying a mortal with whom she had fallen in love. If true, her icy remains may have survived the ordeal since the lake is frozen for about six months every year.<sup>2</sup> Saif-ul-Muluk Lake at 3125 metres had become a popular destination for tourists who were able to reach it by vehicle in under an hour from the tourist centre of Naran (2425m), situated halfway up the valley from Balakot.

When Austin and I first walked up to Saif-ul-Muluk from Naran

<sup>2</sup> The tale recalls an earlier legend about a lake, no longer in existence, below Mont Pilatus (2121m) in Switzerland, which was visited by monks in the 16th century seeking to discover the body of Pontius Pilate, which was believed to have been deposited in the lake after his death.

along a snow-covered track on 19 June, 1965, the outlook was bleak and frigid. We camped on a platform above the icy surface of the lake with the shadowy sentinel of Mali-ka-Parbat filling the background. The day before we had made a pre-dawn start from Lahore by car in a temperature of over 30°C, travelling through Balakot to Naran after overcoming, with the aid of road workers, three narrow snow passages, the remainder of winter avalanches which still covered steeper sections of the hillsides. Beyond Naran the valley remained in the grip of winter, and six weeks was the earliest estimate given for the reopening of the motor road to the Babusar Pass. Six porters were engaged at Naran, two of whom were retained: Marwali Jan, an experienced *shikari* (hunter), and Abdul Rashid, a keen youth probably on his first engagement. The walk from Naran took four hours through pinewoods, finishing steeply toward the point where the lake came into view. Our campsite had the disadvantage of full exposure to the wind. A small wooden refuge by the lake was locked, and the meadow beyond was under heavy snow, practically concealing a small cluster of huts occupied by herdsmen for about three months during the summer.

Our first day's outing above the west side of the valley to examine the north-west face of Mali-ka-Parbat found us struggling through knee-deep snow for about four hours, learning very little except that we were probably too early to launch a serious attempt on the mountain. Austin complained of chest pains that evening and decided to have a rest day. The following morning, accompanied by the porter Abdul Rashid, I moved up mixed rock and snow on the east side of the valley toward a ridge topped by two rocky points of 4500 metres. About 300 metres below the ridge, we stopped at a belt of unstable rock, partially snow-covered which felt thoroughly unsafe. On the descent, Rashid slipped on an icy patch fetching up about 25 metres below, fortunately unhurt, but having broken Austin's ice axe in an attempt to brake his slide. Back at camp Austin was running a temperature and decided to descend to Naran accompanied by Marwali Jan.

The next day was spent inspecting snow conditions at the foot of Mali-ka-Parbat's north-west face. It did not surprise me to find the 45-degree face icy with a thin snow cover, and it seemed evident that nothing useful could be achieved by extending our stay at Saif-ul-

Muluk. On the way back to camp, half buried at the foot of a steep snow gully, we came upon the remains of a *capra ibex* (ibex); its legs and spine were shattered, probably by an avalanche, but the head, with horns measuring one metre, was in prime condition. When friends admire it mounted on my wall at home, I hasten to add that the fine creature to whom it belonged was not the victim of a hunter's rifle, but of a natural disaster.

On 25 June we left Naran moving north up the valley. During the 15km walk to Battakundi (2680m), I was joined variously by three separate Kaghanis, who discoursed volubly about their lives and sought a reciprocal response about mine. The road was filled with importunate groups of nomads, demanding alms and medicine, who had begun their seasonal migration to the upper grazing grounds with herds of livestock. Austin, who had obtained a ride in a jeep from Naran, reached Battakundi late that afternoon.<sup>3</sup>

The following day our party of four moved further north to the small bungalow at Burawai (3050m), which we occupied for three nights. Although situated only 13km beyond Battakundi, an additional five kilometres were added by a detour that was required to get there, owing to the collapse of two wooden bridges over the flooded Jora stream, which joins the Kunhar river from the south. The scene above the tree line was wild and barren; winter snow lay in patches everywhere and innumerable tributaries and torrents raced down the folds and cracks in the ochre-coloured hills on both sides of the valley to reach the main river.

The day after our arrival, plodding up deep snow on the slopes above the Jora Valley to the south-east, we topped out on a sharp ridge from where, barely six kilometres away to the north, a small glacier basin was visible, enclosed by a ridge containing two peaks of 4865 metres and 4912 metres. Setting out at 7am the next day with Marwali Jan, Austin and I crossed the Kunhar river over a footbridge, gaining access to the Burawai glen, at the entrance to which were a few empty herdsman's huts. Peeping through occasional grassy patches above the snow were delightful splashes of colour provided

<sup>3</sup> Sir Aurel Stein, the Central Asian traveller and archaeologist, had camped here at the turn of the 20th century when he began writing his memoirs surrounded by the picturesque hills and forests of Battakundi.

by crocuses, primulas, and forget-me-nots. A snow-covered moraine led us toward the basin at the foot of the twin peaks. Marwali Jan, wearing primitive gaiters, complained of cold feet and was not eager to continue. Arriving at a col between the two peaks, we reached the top of the southern peak to be greeted by a mountain panorama including a new aspect of Mali-ka-Parbat seen from the north-east, standing out as the obvious 'giant' of the Kaghan Valley. The northern aspect of the latter was sufficiently alluring to lead me there not long after, as related below. From the summit on which we stood, situated on the north-west crest of Kaghan dividing it from the Indus Valley, I was able to identify Mankial, Falak Ser, and the Siri Dara peaks in Kohistan, with the impressive bulk of Nanga Parbat dominating the view on the northern horizon. In brilliant weather we were provided with a fine panorama of valleys, glaciers, and mountains occupying upper sectors of the Kaghan region to the east and west. An hour later we returned to Marwali Jan, seated on a rock platform above the moraine, who said that he had watched most of our climb. Descending below the snowline, the contrasting green of grass and flowers in the late afternoon seemed, as always, to be one of the many rewards of a long day above the snowline. Supper at the Burawai rest house that evening was accompanied by a touch of Drambuie, which Austin had saved for just such an occasion.





1967 *Kaghan*

The view from Burawai Peak in 1965 of the northern aspect of Mali-ka-Parbat was suggestive of an unfinished adventure in the Kaghan valley. I discussed plans with friends in Pakistan, including Norman Norris, who had just returned with Austrian mountaineer Wolfgang Stefan from a visit to Swat in 1967, when they made the first ascent of Miangul Sar and climbed Mankial. Norris seemed extremely fit and was eager to visit Kaghan. Among other expatriates working in Pakistan on engineering and building projects, it was not always easy to co-ordinate short spells of local leave. Gene White, an American civil engineer working in Multan, expressed interest and decided to join us with his wife Betsy, along with their two-year-old son Eric. I agreed to a request from the Karakoram Club in Lahore to include one of its members, Abdul Rauf, a geography student at Punjab University, who had done some mountain trekking but no climbing.

Our party of six set out from Lahore on 1 July, three weeks later than I had done two years earlier, reaching Balakot in the late afternoon. We found the turgid waters of the Kunhar river swollen to levels well above normal, owing to copious spring and summer rainfall. The six-hour drive by jeep to Naran the next day was mostly on a dry road cleared of all traces of winter snow, in contrast to my first experience, but beyond Naran the road was still closed to wheeled traffic. On 3 July we set out with our caravan of two diminutive donkeys, a pony for Eric, and two porters, one of whom seized a bag weighing 7kg as his choice of a load, a privilege of which he was soon denied. During the walk to Battakundi we were greeted by groups of villagers tilling fields and digging irrigation channels for their maize and wheat crops. The caretaker of the rest house, learning that we were heading south for the Dadar valley, told us that apart from a party of six foreigners who spent one night on the Chitta glacier a

few years earlier, it was rare for tourists to visit that area. That glacier was our principal objective as a possible approach to Mali-ka-Parbat, as it might have been for the earlier party. The Dadar valley looked interesting with a group of four small glaciers to the south, the Siran, Burji, Khabanar, and Jora, above which rise a line of peaks ranging in height from 4800 to 5000 metres, as well as two passes, Thod Gali and Kalapani Gali, occasionally used by shepherds to drive their flocks over to Kashmir.

A short walk from Battakundi the next day led us to the entrance of the Dadar valley, which we found still covered with patches of winter snow. Rocky sections, boulders, and unbridged streams caused problems for the donkeys, one of which dropped its load, fortunately without damage to itself or the contents. At 3250 metres on a broad meadow near the junction of the Siran and Burji streams we found a campsite on grass. Nearby were three small huts and a mosque occupied by a family of landowners from Balakot, one of whom was a *maulvi* (muslim teacher). They were helpful and hospitable, permitting us to set up our cookhouse and mess inside their mosque, with two reservations: no shoes and no smoking. I can still picture the *maulvi*, a patient figure seated outside each evening, wrapped in a homespun woollen shawl waiting for the appointed sunset hour to make the day's fifth and last call to prayer.

The day after our arrival was spent in a reconnaissance of the Chitta glacier, which, from an old sketch map, we gathered flowed north-east from Mali-ka-Parbat. Norris, White, Rauf, and I, accompanied by two porters, moved up the valley to the south, searching the slopes to our right for signs of a glacier. Instinct rather than conviction led us up a hanging valley containing a small stream whose source was not visible. We followed it up a slope of mixed grass and scree ending 450 metres above at a large patch of snow. The latter drew us forward into an enclosed glen covered with grass and gentians. Uncertain whether we had been misled, we discovered that the glen swept sharply out of sight to our left. There being no other option, we followed it and, rounding a corner, found ourselves facing the terminal moraine of the Chitta glacier. A steep ascent above its snout led us to the object of our search. Directly ahead to the south-west stood the white pyramid of Mali-ka-Parbat – no longer

an image on a photograph, but an accessible mountain. Viewed at close quarters, we were encouraged to find that there appeared to be no major difficulty in making an ascent from this side.

While Betsy White remained with Eric at our Dadar base, the four of us spent the next two days building and occupying two camps at 3800 metres on the Chitta glacier and at 4750 metres in a snow basin at the foot of the north ridge of Mali-ka-Parbat. From the higher camp we climbed to a gap on the ridge in order to study as much as was visible of the way ahead. The sharp ridge upon which we stood fell in an almost vertical drop of 1800 metres to the Saif-ul-Muluk valley, where the mirror-like lake reflected the afternoon sun. The view beyond included Nanga Parbat, Haramosh, Batura, and nearer at hand, the mountains of Swat and Kashmir sharply outlined in a clear sky.

Having decided that a rope of two would be safer on the narrow and exposed ridge, the honour was given to Norris and White. On 9 July, a wake-up call was agreed at 4.45am and the two of them departed from Camp 2 at 5.45am on a cloudless morning. We were able to follow their progress for the next two hours, during which they gained 400 metres before passing out of sight. They then moved out onto the 45-degree north-west face, climbing three rope lengths of mixed snow, ice, and rock to reach the north summit of Mali-ka-Parbat. We spotted them at 8.30am and answered their calls. The route from there to the south summit continues along a narrow and exposed ridge for a distance of about one kilometre, dipping appreciably before rising to the south summit. Opinions were divided about whether to continue. Norris was in favour of doing so, judging that any obstacles on the ridge could be traversed on one side or the other. White was diffident, estimating that four to five hours would be required for the ascent and return. The time factor proved decisive, and it was agreed that they should turn back. If Captain Battye and his Gurkhas had reached the north summit by this route, Norris and White could claim theirs as a second ascent. We considered it doubtful whether, without the support of an experienced climber, Battye would have continued along the exposed ridge to the south summit. Norris and White descended safely to camp two hours later. With two unladen porters having arrived during the late

morning, we decided to clear both camps, enabling everyone to return to Dadar the same evening. Two days later, on our departure for Naran, we were unable to persuade our hosts at Dadar to accept any payment for their help and hospitality during our visit of almost one week.

At Naran on 12 July, the fine weather continuing, we hired a jeep for a visit to Saif-ul-Muluk, which we found dressed in full summer garb. The meadows surrounding the shepherds' huts were green, the shrill call of marmots and the occasional cuckoo could be heard, and the rest hut by the blue waters of the lake was filled with a stream of tourists. After scrutinizing the exposure and grade of difficulty of the ridge connecting the two summits of Mali-ka-Parbat, we were unanimous that the right decision had been taken to forego the traverse to the summit 68 metres higher.

Seated below the mountain in the warmth of a sunny afternoon, it was obvious that the most direct way to the highest point would be from this side directly up the north-west face, similar to the route taken by the first ascensionists. Although delighted with the success of Norris and White's ascent, and the generally satisfying outcome of the expedition, I was unable to suppress a desire to return once more in order to round off my engagement with Mali-ka-Parbat.



1972

*Kaghan*

It was the photograph taken from our Burawai summit in 1965 of Mali-ka-Parbat and the peaks of the Siran Basin that drove me back to resume my encounter with the 'giant' of the valley. Five years were to pass before I was able to do so. In between I spent a month in 1968 in the mountains of northern Chitral with Sally and Michael Westmacott, exploring the Chutidum glacier and the south side of the Lunkho peaks. I also spent three weeks in 1970 in the Naltar valley north of Gilgit, from where I crossed the Daintar pass, visiting the upper basin of the Karengi glacier south of the Batura group. I was joined by three young climbers from England, two of whom climbed a 5460-metre peak situated on the Ishkuman watershed. In 1971 I had married, and it gave me immense pleasure to introduce my wife Elisabeth to the Himalaya. She was not a newcomer to mountains, having been introduced to climbing at an early age by her father who was a keen mountaineer. We spent a glorious week above Astor at a forest rest house situated on a wide, green plain at 3000 metres encircled by pine and fir trees. From there we traversed both ridges enclosing the valley, gaining impressive views of Nanga Parbat 15km away with the upper section of Hermann Buhl's 1953 route and the familiar Silver Saddle clearly visible. Our first son was born one year later, and during the summer heat in the Punjab plains we occupied a picturesque cottage in the pine-clad hills beyond Murree above the small village of Dunga Galli.

Two previous visits to Kaghan had fitted easily into a fortnight's summer leave. Access was easy and plans were simple, or as Shipton and Tilman liked to say, they could be written down on the back of an envelope. Plans for a third visit that had been discussed earlier now began to crystallize. My wife's brother, Frederick Höflin, preparing for his final medical examinations in Switzerland, came out to join us. Norman Norris was also keen to do so with his wife

Jean, although half afraid that a recent knee injury might restrict his climbing. Wolfgang Stefan, stationed in Karachi, strengthened and completed our party of six with his wife Helga. Because my wife never complained, I had not realised how thoughtless it was of me to have left her alone in the cottage with our six-month-old son. It was only much later that I learned to emulate her unselfishness and tolerance.

At 6am on 17 June, 1972, our party set out from the cottage, reaching Naran at 4pm that afternoon in two 4x4 vehicles, after having negotiated four narrow snow-covered stretches on the still-wintery upper sections of the road above Balakot. The next day we walked up to Saif-ul-Muluk lake with two pack animals and three porters, one of whom was the caretaker of the rest hut, which he opened for our use, although the interior was dust-laden and disorderly after its long winter closure. At 5.30am on a clear and cold morning, Stefan and I left the hut to select a site for a base camp above the Saif-ul-Muluk glacier, with the intention of examining the Siran Basin for a training climb prior to attempting Mali-ka-Parbat, leaving the others to follow later in the morning with the porters. Walking past the frozen lake, we moved easily up the hard snow crust covering the valley. Beyond the glacier snout, following its course gradually eastward, we passed round to the south side of Mali-ka-Parbat. On the left bank of the moraine at 3650 metres, finding a sheltered site for a base camp, we halted for a second breakfast after a walk of three and a half hours, planting a flag there to mark the site for the others. Moving south-east up moderate slopes of névé, we reached a prominent col at 4250 metres where we built a cairn. The col provided an easy descent into the Siran Basin, directly above which rose Siran II (5012m), which would provide an ideal training climb.

Two tents were occupied in the Siran Basin at 4050 metres on 21 June, and the following day, after a climb of under four hours, Wolfgang and Helga Stefan and Höflin reached the top of Siran II. A cairn was found there, left by the first ascensionists in 1969, John Winning and Keith Stott, who had approached the mountain from the south. On the same day, joined by a porter, I climbed the lower of two small peaks (4343m), situated above our base. On 23 June, the entire party reached its higher neighbour (4495m), including Norris, who was



partly handicapped by his injured knee. From these twin peaks we were able to examine the steep and rocky southern side of Mali-ka-Parbat.

On 24 June, while the rest of the party cleared base camp and returned to Naran, Stefan and Höflin departed for Mali-ka-Parbat, bivouacking on a rock platform below the north-west face at 4300 metres that afternoon. A pre-dawn start on the 25th enabled them to benefit from frozen conditions on the face, up which they cramponed at an average angle of 45 to 50 degrees, taking six and a half hours to reach the south summit (5290m), leading through on the rope and fixing a single ice screw. Special care was required during the five-hour descent by the same route, owing to the melting of the surface snow overlying ice. They then crossed the Siran col, descending into the Siran basin where they bivouacked that evening near the foot of the unclimbed Siran I (5030m), which provided them with an enjoyable ascent of four hours the next day. Building a cairn on the summit, they left behind an empty tin of Emmental cheese containing their names. Descending that evening to the Dardar meadow where we had our base in 1967, they were hospitably received by a group of three local men residing there, who generously provided them with a meal – their own supplies of food and drink having run out.

The party was reunited at Naran on 26 June, and at 6am the next morning, driving through Balakot for the last time, we reached our forest cottage in time for tea. During our ten-day venture we had crossed a new pass, made the first ascents of two small peaks above our base and of Siran I, and made second ascents of Siran II by a new route, and of the south summit of Mali-ka-Parbat. We had taken full advantage of a period of fine weather during which the mountains provided us with ten days of unmixed pleasure. With overall expenses split, individual shares of the total worked out at a cost much below those of my two earlier visits.

Each of my three visits to the Kaghan Valley provided, in their own way, very satisfying experiences, which were shared with congenial companions. During the period in which they occurred, the valley was beginning to recognize its tourist potential. This received a severe setback after the 2005 earthquake disaster that destroyed

Balakot. The valley is no longer frequented by trade caravans heading over the Babusar pass toward Chilas and Gilgit. Tourism should begin to flourish again when Pakistan recovers from its present civil and political difficulties. There is no dearth of interest among younger groups in Pakistan to seek adventure in the attractive mountain groups rising to the north above the valley.





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During the twilight years of the British Raj Trevor Braham spent much of his boyhood in India where, in the mid-1930s, he attended a boarding school in Darjeeling for four years. Dwelling within sight of the magnificent spectacle of Kangchenjunga and its satellite peaks exerted a strong influence upon him, arousing later ambitions. Early toughening under a rigorous Jesuit regime provided an unceasing reminder of the need for self-discipline and a sense of humour. At the end of World War II his father's company, exporters of food grains and oilseeds in Calcutta, took him on as an apprentice. He did not find the work stimulating, but found that spells of leave were easier to negotiate.

After early trips to Sikkim he joined the Himalayan Club marking a threshold of half-a-lifetime of adventures and activities in the mountain ranges spread across the northern regions of the Indian sub-continent, from Sikkim in the southeast to Chitral in the northwest in an environment very different from the present day. His halcyon years extended from 1942 to 1972, part of which corresponded with the Himalayan Golden Age in the 1960s when an international frenzy developed for climbing the world's highest mountains.

*Himalayan Playground* is Braham's final memoir of a period of mountain exploration that will never be seen again. This is his homage to a time when mountaineers regarded these ranges as something more than mere targets to be ticked off on a list of things to do. As Doug Scott notes in his foreword to this book:

**'He looks back to those times 60 years later with deep appreciation for all that the mountains have given him. He went to the mountains not to seek material objectives or accolades but for those "rewards that only mountains possess the power to grant ... free from the clamour and complexities of everyday life". The vast majority, if not all mountaineers to some extent, will readily identify with this wellspring to adventure, even those pushing out beyond the limits that Trevor Braham set for himself.'**



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Front cover: Camp 3 on west ridge of Minapin, 1958. Photo by Dennis Kemp.

Rear cover: Cambridge Expedition to Spiti, 1955. Photo by Peter Holmes.