



The Himalayan News

A NEWSLETTER OF THE HIMALAYAN

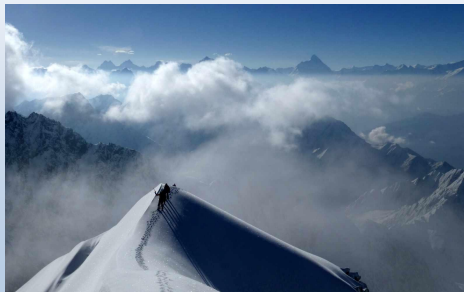


SEPTEMBER 2018 ISSUE 4

**PILGRIM ON THE SNOWS – THE
GARHWAL ROMANCE OF
FRANK SMYTHE**
Priyadarshi Gupta



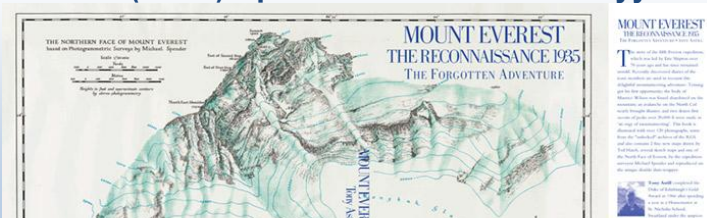
**VISHNU WERE HERE –
EXPLORING A NEW RANGE IN
THE GARHWAL**
Martin Moran



**EYE TO EYE WITH A SNOW
LEOPARD IN LADAKH**
Suniti Bhushan Datta



BOOK REVIEW: EVEREST 1935 BY TONY ASTILL
AVM (Retd.) Apurba Kumar Bhattacharyya



BOUQUETS AND BRICKBATS
Feedback from our Readers





A panorama of Manaslu Base Camp in Nepal - Photo Jurgen Langer

EDITORIAL

With great pleasure, we welcome you to the fourth issue of The Himalayan News.

As we write this editorial, the mountaineering and trekking fraternity are extremely alarmed over an order of the High Court of Uttarakhand preventing overnight camping in the high altitude meadows of Uttarakhand. Most of the treks in the Garhwal and Kumaon need camping facilities and this order, in effect, ends a large number of trekking and climbing routes in this region. Apparently, the reason for this order was the permanent camps set up in the 'bugyals' of the Garhwal by certain trekking companies and the large numbers of trekkers passing through these camps degrading and damaging the fragile eco system of the high Himalaya. While the court order is welcome in a sense, but a blanket ban is not desirable. There needs to be some regulation, both of the trekking companies as well as the number of trekkers, and hopefully some suitable solution will be worked out soon.

In this our fourth issue, respected author and mountaineer Martin Moran recounts his explorations in the Garhwal in alpine style. Wild life biologist Suniti Datta had the experience of a lifetime when he came face to face with a snow leopard in Ladakh earlier this year. The Himalayan was privileged to have access to many of Frank Smythe's personal memorabilia thanks to his son Tony Smythe and our President Priyadarshi Gupta pens a fascinating account of Smythe's romance in the Garhwal including his climb of Kamet. Mountain historian Tony Astill digs deep into the archives to present an account of the 1935 Everest Reconnaissance which had the team members climb a large number of peaks in the 6000 metre range. The book is reviewed by AVM (Retd) Apurba Kumar Bhattacharyya.

The autumn season in the Himalaya is almost here and for many of us this is the time when we visit the mountains. It is also the festive season with Durga Puja, Dashain, Dussehra and Diwali.

We wish you all happy climbing and trekking in the months ahead.

Sujoy Das

Rupamanjari Biswas

Editors

PILGRIM ON THE SNOWS

Priyadarshi Gupta



On the Banke Plateau

That Kumaon and Garhwal should be especially consecrated to the gods of Indian religious mysticism, is easily understandable. Is there any region of the Himalayas, or even of the world, to excel this region in beauty and grandeur? - Frank Smythe

Famous mountaineer-explorers have always been drawn to the eternal snows by seemingly unfathomable forces of nature. Despite being aware that the slightest misstep could lure them into the black hole of a bottomless crevasse or risk being swept off an icy ridge to a painful death, these illustrious mortals have plodded on undeterred through uncharted terrain, climbing high and afar on difficult and dangerous mountain peaks and passes. Frank Smythe (FSM) was no exception to this order. These were a rare tribe of climbers who were willing to brave the mercurial moods of the mountain gods in their bid to be the first to leave their footprints on a mountain top.

FSM was amongst the first of mountaineers, who had realized the pecuniary advantages of serious photography and book writing for

supporting his wanderlust ways. Having rejected a career as an engineer (for the sheer lack of interest in its mundane offerings), and goaded on by astute book publishers, he plunged upon a career of mountain travel writing - much to the dislike of the then conservative English mountaineering establishment. While other mountaineers filed reports in mountaineering journals for climbers, FSM sought to reach out to a broader array of readers. 'Kangchenjunga Adventure' was a super hit and there was no stopping him. His strength lay in the fact that his writing style is so vivid and picturesque, that even a non-mountaineer would get easily transported into the pristine snows through the subtle medium of his words. A typical sample from 'Kamet Conquered' reads: '...the forest fell away, a dark green sheet, into the blue trough of a valley. The wooded hillside

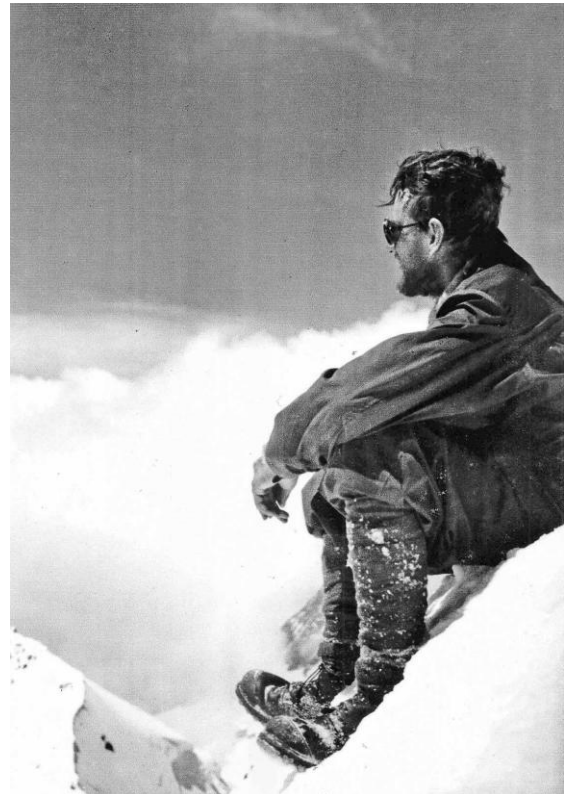
rose again half a score miles away, and so continued ridge on ridge like deep sea rollers, breaking at last in foamy snow on the external peaks of the Himalaya. His colourful and descriptive prose coupled with an eye and feel for artistic finesse makes for most enjoyable reading. FSM's literary ability made him a Himalayan litterateur of the highest genre. A further illustration is the descriptive of his descent from the top of Kamet, late in the day: *'The sun's last glare lit peak and snowfield: valleys filled with purple. A star glittered. Slanting rays of sun, flooding the Tibetan plains in golden radiance, threw into sharp relief numberless little crags and hills, until it seemed we were looking over the rim of our conventional world into another and unconventional abode of cities and villages constructed at the behest of some Epsteinian demons. The eastern horizon was given over to a tropic night; a broad evening band of deepest purple flooded range after range.'*



The Kamet team - Greene, Holdsworth, Beauman, Shipton, Birnie, FSM in front with Nima Tendrup and Achung

Like all committed mountain climbers, FSM would delight at the pleasure of the physical exhilaration experienced at the end of a difficult climb. Yet he also seemed to experience an inner spiritual kindling whilst on the mountain tops. A subtle awakening that instilled in him a sense of detached indifference to the objective risks associated with serious mountaineering. This enabled him to push himself to undertake greater risks in the mountains. His soul however seemed to

crave for beyond the mere joy of the feel of rock, snow and ice. In his writings we come across bursts of introspective outpouring of a restless soul in the quest of his inner peace. A climber who sought to travel into the hills to introspect on the inner mountains he needed to climb in his own life! A key to this appears in 'The Mountain Top': *'On a hill it is possible to*



FSM on the summit of Mana peak

sense the unity and continuity of life, a rhythm that sends men and worlds on their way...when I am on a hill it seems to me that my consciousness, the very essence of spirit, expands to blend with the universe. It is in such moments of spiritual exaltation that we lose all fear.' He also wrote in 'Kamet Conquered': *'As I watched the daily miracles of dawn and sunset along the snows, I could feel the strange exaltation and mystification that comes to some in the presence of great mountains. I knew, as the Indian knows when they turn their eyes towards the snows, that the mysteries of life and death must be sought from there.'* His thoughts seem to align very

closely to the experiences of other mountain pilgrims who were not necessarily mountain climbers. As per the words of Lama Govinda Anagarika (Way of the White Clouds): *'...the very atmosphere is filled with life and song; the hills are resolved from mere masses of snow, ice and rock into something living. When this happens the human mind escapes from the bondage of its own feeble imaginings and becomes as one with its Creator.'* Even a poet's expression seems rather similar. American poet, Eunice Tietjens had crafted beautiful words in her poem 'The most sacred mountain': An extract reads: *'Space, and the twelve clean winds are here: And with them broods eternity – a swift white peace, a presence manifest. The rhythm ceases here. Time has no place. This is the end that has no end.'*



Envelope of everlasting flowers sent by FSM from Badrinath in 1931 to his mother in law

About a decade ago, Mr. Meher Mehta & I had made contact with FSM's son, Tony Smythe, a seasoned mountaineer in his own right. In the course of our interactions, one fine day, I was truly delighted to receive a 'boxful of memorabilia' (relating to FSM) from him. This brief feature is a dedication to the memory of the legend Frank Smythe and his remarkable photography, with select images from the box of memorabilia. Most of these images relate to his remarkable 1931 and 1937 journeys into the lap of the Garhwal Himalaya. In the course of these journeys, FSM developed a deeply romantic and spiritually inseparable attachment with this central Himalayan region. In 'The Valley of Flowers' FSM frankly confesses: *'In Garhwal I met a true civilization, for I found contentment and happiness. I saw a life that is not enslaved*

by the time-factor that is not obsessed by the idea that happiness is dependent on money and materials. I had never before realized until I camped in the Valley of Flowers how much happiness there is in simple living and simple things'.

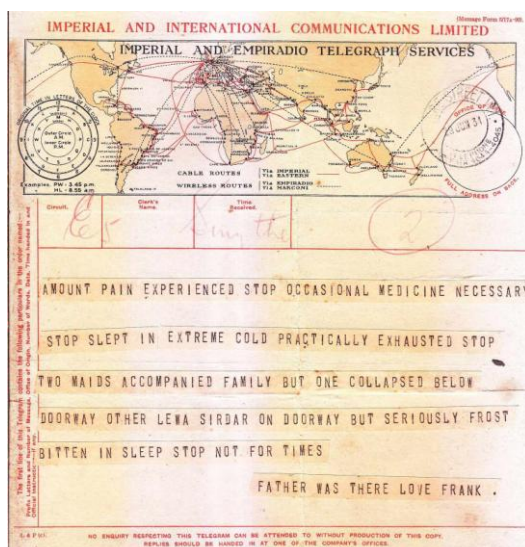
Tony Smythe's mother Kathleen (FSM's first wife), was a highly skilled pianist. She was however a very self-sacrificing lady, who would put herself out for others. She had very limited interest in accompanying FSM on his travels. In this feature, we show her photograph with FSM in happier times. FSM had sent dried everlasting flowers collected by him from the Arwa valley, to his mother-in-law in 1931 (part of the memorabilia received by us). While we have presented here the photograph of the two Anna stamped envelope (with Frank Smythe's own hand written comments on it), we have desisted from opening the hard cover entombing these flowers. Perhaps - when they turn a hundred years or so!

In 1931, his primary objective was Kamet (7756m) – with a determined British team that he was leading. This venture proved to be an outstanding success. Based on the experiences gained by C.F Meade and Dr. A.M.Kellas on the Meade's Col approach to Kamet, they laboured up this route to eventually gain its summit. Their achievement on Kamet (that included putting indigenous porters on the top), brought him International prominence, since in 1931 Kamet was one of the highest peaks ascended in mountaineering history. We present here images of the British climbing team and the very hardy and efficient porters and also images of the two paged original telegram (included in the box of memorabilia) that he had sent, from Badrinath to his wife Kathleen in secret code for informing the Times about their success. The translation of code reads:



Nanda Devi - Peter Oliver in the foreground 1937

'Inform Times immediately expedition on summit of Kamet June 21st. Owing tiredness porters only twenty three thousand feet Camp V STOP Remaining Two thousand five hundred feet took three men nine hours to climb STOP Weather excellent but snow very bad and certain amount wind experienced STOP Occasional step cutting necessary STOP Descend in extreme cold practically exhausted STOP Two porters accompanied expedition but one collapsed below summit, other Lewa Sirdar on summit but seriously frost bitten in descend STOP Not for Times -Smythe was there Love Frank 29th June 1931'

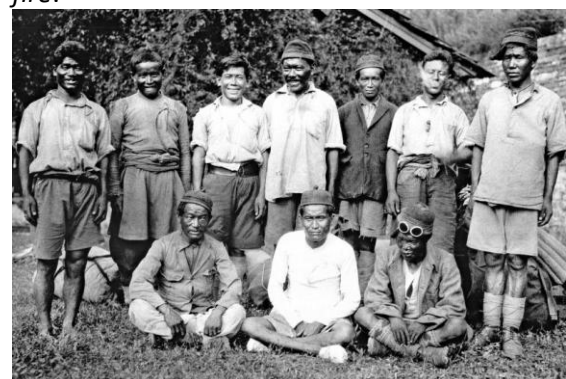


Coded telegram sent by FSM to his wife after the success on Kamet

After Kamet, they set off to the Dhaul valley and crossed the Zaskar range by the Bhyunder

Pass in their bid to explore the principal tributaries of the Ganga. In the bargain, they literally tripped into the now famous Valley of Flowers. In his own words: *'The Bhundar valley was the most beautiful valley that any of us had seen.....We remembered it afterwards as the Valley of Flowers. Often in dark winter days, I wandered in spirit to these flowerful pastures, with their clear- running streams set against a frieze of silver birches and shining snow peaks. Then once again, I saw the slow passage of the breeze through the flowers, and heard the eternal note of the glacier torrent coming to the camp fire through the star filled night.'* FSM along with Eric Shipton and two porters climbed Avalanche peak (6443m) that lies south of the Kalindi Khal. True to its name, they were struck by avalanches and FSM suffered from injured ribs!

He returned to this beautiful valley in 1937. Relaxing by the warmth of campfire, smoking his favourite pipe, he would often seek to unwind and introspect. He writes – *'The fire of birch logs burnt perfectly, red and blue flames with scarcely any smoke, and in its light the faces of the men stood out from the darkness against a still darker background of forest. The moon became apparent, a brilliant crescent riding overhead; it silvered the snows and glaciers and lit the gathering dew with a cold fire.'*



The porters of the Kamet expedition 1931

He undertook exploratory climbs on Rataban (6166m) and several unnamed peaks in the Bhyundar valley, climbing free and fast. He

scaled Nilgiri Parbat (6474m) which he described a fine snow and ice peak with a beautiful but very sharp summit. He also climbed Mt Deoban (6855m) and Pt. 6570m (also called Bidhan Parbat). He roped up with Peter Oliver and they sought to access the imposing Mana peak through the moraine swept Banke glacier of the Banke Plateau. However success eluded them and they crossed the Zaskar Pass (Gupt Khal) to attempt to climb Mana from its south. On the final climb on Mana, Peter Oliver tired out a little below the summit and FSM continued on alone to eventually make the first ascent of Mana peak (7272m)(1937). He acknowledged that it was one of his toughest climbs! At the lonely summit, while absorbing the beautiful Himalayan vista, what struck him most was the silence that permeated all around (photo of FSM on Mana summit is featured). *'...the silence of space and eternity'* as he reflects. His writing of his summit experience may indicate once again that FSM was not immune to experiencing flashes of an inner vision. He reflects in the 'Valley of Flowers': *'I was conscious of something greater than silence, a Power, the presence of an absolute and immutable Force, so that I seemed on the very boundary of things knowable and things unknowable. And because I have felt this more than once before on the high mountains I know that death is not to be feared, for this Force is a part of Heaven and a part of us; how else should we be aware of it? From it we have been evolved; into it we quietly and peacefully return'*.

Mana was followed by Nilkanth in August 1937. This was another remarkable attempt by him with Peter Oliver. The East face of this beautiful 'blue throated mountain' looms like a celestial watch tower over the sacred pilgrimage centre of Badrinath. Photograph of Nilkanth's East face – gloriously lit by moonlight, is a most endearing image. They attempted to climb Nilkanth along its SE ridge (a ridge that is long and has as many as seven pinnacles along with a 300m rock slab

adorning it), belaying each other on these tricky pinnacles. Theirs was an audacious light weight attempt on an incredibly tough route to the top. The SE ridge still remains unbridged- notwithstanding the several attempts on it after this exploration of 1937. However, what is most intriguing is the fact that in the Scottish Garhwal Expedition 1992 report (AJ), it is contended that as per the description of his climb on Nilkanth, FSM and Peter Oliver may have reached the fourth pinnacle – the furthest that any subsequent team had reached till then. Writes Graham Little (AJ): *'If Frank and Peter did indeed reach the crest of the 4th Pinnacle as can be inferred from his narrative and his description of their final view towards the great rock barrier and the summit snow and ice slopes of Nilkanth, then one can only marvel at their route finding, the speed of their ascent, their relative indifference to loose rock and their technical proficiency. Truly mountaineers well ahead of their times!'*



Kamet and Mana peaks from Nilkanth 1937

After Nilkanth, they turned their attention towards Dunagiri (7066m), which FSM

considered to be one of the finest looking peaks in the Central Himalaya after the goddess Nanda Devi. They accessed it from the Rhamani valley, and climbed in the very wet month of September. They failed to succeed on Dunagiri largely due to unfavourable weather conditions. Two wonderful takes taken from Dunagiri are presented here, one of Nanda Devi (7816m) and the other of Changabang. (6864m).

Towards the third week of September, they parted ways and FSM returned to his favourite Bhyundar valley. The change in the environment, with the advent of autumn is rather poetically portrayed by FSM: 'Here and there were fields of millet ripening to a deep magenta, and the hillsides were tinted with brown and gold. The predominant note was the intense stillness. The streams after their turbulence had regained tranquility; the weather, freed from its recent passions, had lapsed into a profound peacefulness; the air was entirely without movement, and a great hush had fallen on hill and valley.'



FSM with wife Kathleen 1931

FSM passed away at a youthful age of forty eight. Out of various options in hand in 1949, he chose the still unclimbed Mukut Parbat and went to Darjeeling to arrange his team of Sherpas. FSM unfortunately contracted cerebral malaria. Tenzing Norgay in his autobiography had written that while in his hospital bed, FSM seemed to be totally defocused and kept rambling about his innumerable mountain travels. His conditioned worsened, and his (second) wife Nora flew him back to England where he died at the Middlesex hospital, London on 27th June 1949.

FSM's love for the mountains and writing ability was imbibed by his son Tony Smythe. In recent correspondence, Tony Smythe reminisced on his father, 'Living in the Lake District, my wife Sonia and I can almost see the Langdale valley where my dad began his own climbing. He was a tough and reckless person, but he got away with it all, I am pleased to say- otherwise I wouldn't have been here!' He has recently turned 84. But, he still walks the hills with his wife, in the Smythe-ian way of keeping fit! Like his father, he has a deep love for India and its diversity. Tony's son Simon has taken to cycling and works for a Cycling magazine.

(All images have been used with the kind permission of Tony Smythe)

Priyadarshi Gupta is the President of The Himalayan.

VISHNU WERE HERE - EXPLORING A NEW RANGE IN THE GARHWAL

Martin Moran



Summit ridge of Snowcock peak 5532m

Much of the Indian Himalaya is still unexplored. The Indian Mountaineering Foundation has recently lodged the details of 256 6000m peaks with the Home Ministry for addition to its 'open peaks' list. If we look below 6000m the potential is multiplied many times over.

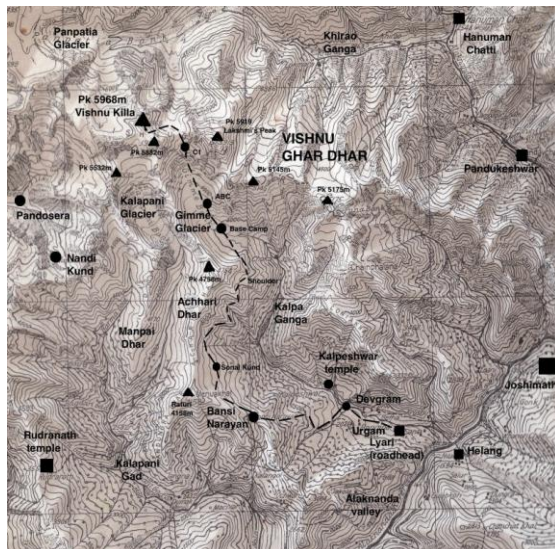
Remarkably, some unclimbed ranges sit slap in the middle of honeypot areas, as if passing trekkers and climbers are blinkered to the obvious.

Vishnu Ghar Dhar – the range of Vishnu's abode – is one such oversight, a beautiful

sprawl of a dozen five-and-a-half-thousanders in full view from the verandas of Joshimath. This range lies to the south of the Chaukhamba massif and harbours four of the Panch Kedar temples in its valleys and ridges – Kalpeshwar, Rudranath, Tungnath and Madhyamaheshwar. The Nandi Kund trek route crosses the dissected southern flanks. The peaks are complex, serrated and heavily glaciated. Two major ice-flows snake south from the crests – the Gimme and Kalapani Glaciers. Though doubtless known to local shepherds, neither had

been trodden by mountaineers prior to 2016.

Sometimes I can't believe my luck in spotting such opportunities. Exploration and several ascents could be completed within three weeks, a major plus in the promotion of lesser heights. Recruitment was not a problem. British employers will often grant a three-week leave slot. By going in early spring I reckoned that winter's snow cover would ease the approaches and we would have the pleasure of seeing the rhododendron in full bloom.



We journeyed up the Alakananda valley on 1st May. The resurgence of springtime was signalled in the purple blossom of jacaranda trees on the roadsides. Leaving the NH 58 15km before Joshimath we climbed into a peaceful world of pastoral harmony at Urgam. Fields of ripe wheat were arrayed across wide slopes between 2000 and 2400m altitude shaded by huge horse chestnut trees. Before commencing our trek we paid homage to Shiva at Kalpeshwar temple where the tresses of his hair are revealed in the rock. The Gimme Glacier was our objective for the 2016 trip. The snout was little more

than 12km from Kalpeshwar but a direct valley approach was prohibited by landslips dating to the 2013 flood catastrophe. Taking local advice, we trekked west up the cobbled trail to Bansi Narayan temple then attempted to traverse the steep flanks of the Acchari Dhar ridge-line to gain the Gimme.



Kalgot village on trek to Bansi Narayan

Bansi Narayan campground was besieged by rhododendron in flower. Afternoon clouds cleared to reveal the vast depths of the Joshimath valley and the great peaks beyond – Dunagiri, Nanda Devi, Trisul *et al.* Many local folk from Urgam were out on the slopes of Acchari Dhar, in search for the lucrative caterpillar fungus *keeda jadi*, a powerful steroid highly prized in the Chinese medicine market. A single sprig is worth Rs 250, a kilo can fetch Rs 40,000. The *keeda jadi* craze has transformed the economies of hill valleys in Uttarakhand. No locals wanted to carry loads for us. The tables of economic power had turned! No longer can foreign trekkers set their price! We brought in a bunch of inexperienced and youthful porters from the Nandakini valley who didn't know the way and struggled with 20kg loads.

After losing several hours lost among crags and rhododendron jungle storm-

clouds were brewing. Buoyed by advice that we could cross the shoulder of Acchari Dhar in a couple of hours, we pushed on. A vicious thunderstorm with snow-squalls broke at 4pm, stranding the party across the vertiginous slopes. The porters' clothing was woefully inadequate. Suddenly, we had a crisis. The Annapurna circuit tragedy of 2014 came straight to mind.

I told the porters to dump loads and head back. A mass retreat ensued. We scoured loads to find tents for ourselves. An exposed grass ridge offered the only possible camping spot, and tents were hurriedly erected on sloping perches. Some members spent the night without sleeping bags. The storm abated at nightfall and the last porters got back to Sonal Kund camp at 11pm, but thankfully all made it. All but four deserted our cause next morning; we were left with 500kg of gear strewn across the cliffs in random dumps. For three days and through further thunderstorms we worked like Trojans to move the kit over the shoulder and down to a base camp at the foot of the Gimme Glacier. Despite open temptation for pilfering, every item of equipment arrived at base camp over the following week.

Base camp was a beautiful boulder-studded meadow fed by vigorous freshwater streams from the melting snows. The Gimme Glacier curved up into an impressive icefall and at its head lay a 5300m col. Our main goal was Peak 5968m, the highest in the range according to our Survey of India map.



Dawn on ascent of Vishnu Killa

Despite some misgivings in the party I declared the left-side of the icefall as acceptably safe for a night-time ascent. We left at 1am and emerged in a shadowed glacier bowl at 5200m. While the others set camp my colleague Francis Blunt and I forged onwards, striding across a solid snow crust for another kilometre to reach the col at 5360m. The bulwarks of Parvati Parbat and 6596m Nilkanth rose across the gulf of the Panpatia valley. The sunlit crown of Peak 5968m shone bright up to our left, accessible with a descent of a hundred metres to its northern glacier.

We began the summit bid at 11.30pm, anxious to utilise every hour when the snow crust was frozen. We fixed a rope to slide over the cornice below the col. The night hours passed in a serpentine ascent of the glacier, weaving round huge crevasses and ice walls. We met the dawn at 5700m on the upper slopes. The eastern skyline was punctured by the spears and obelisks of the great peaks of the Nanda Devi range.

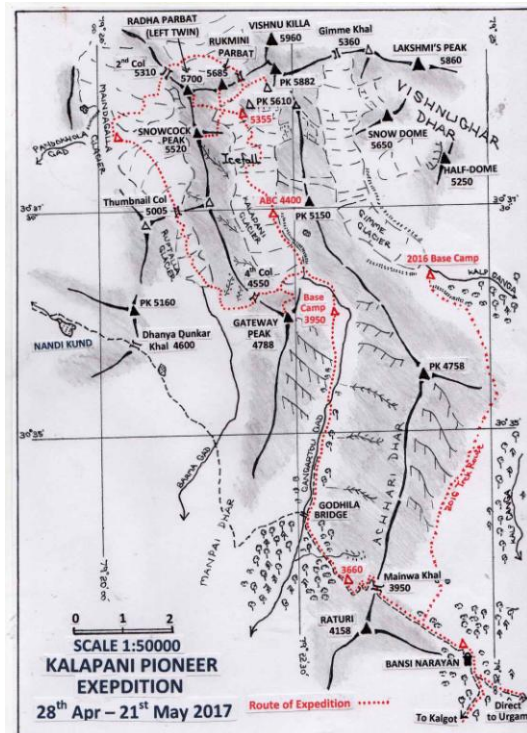
The summit dome was ringed by a cornice. With the aid of two axes and a timely push on her bottom from the others below, our third leader Adele Pennington heaved up the overhang. The

rest of us followed, including our high-altitude porters Heera and Mangal, for whom this was one of their cherished local summits. The name Vishnu Killa – Vishnu’s citadel – was mooted. The only disappointment was that our GPS recorded the altitude as a mere 5960 metres rather than the 5968m we expected!



Kalapani glacier from Snowcock peak

Going back just a year later was a risk. The repeat might never match the excitements of that first foray, but we had seen so many exciting peaks and glaciers from Vishnu Killa that temptation was too great to resist. Our objective in 2017 was the reclusive Kalapani Glacier, hidden by a twist in the narrow approach valley, but ringed with unclimbed summits between 5500 and 5800m. As in 2016, the winter snows had been copious leaving every peak above 4500m coated with solid *névé* snow, just as we wished.



From Bansi Narayan we had to cross the 3950m Mainwa Khal into the Gangartoli Gad, but our horses became bogged in slush and mud and had to be unloaded 500 metres above the valley floor. The same four porters who had saved us in 2016 once more came to our aid and within four days we got a base camp set at 3900m in the jaws of the upper valley.

The gorge opened at the glacier snout to reveal an icefall half a kilometre wide and high. We mistimed our ascent and became trapped by the morning sun at half-height. On slumping exhausted on flatter ground at 5300m we unpacked to realise that our five-day ration packs had been left at base camp. To complete our misery a spectacular thunderstorm broke as we put up the tents. May-time weather is typically unstable.

A day was spent retrieving the food and then we settled in to three magical days of peak-bagging. We could reach the foot of the peaks in less than an hour, the routes

took another three and we could be back in our tents for lunch just before the daily storms broke. The climbing was sublime and at this altitude we could thoroughly enjoy the technicalities.



We climbed twin peaks – 5700m and 5685m – on successive days, suggesting the names Radha and Rukmini Parbat respectively in honour of two of Krishna's consorts. A second ascent of Peak 5532m was made just minutes after our own by a waddling snow-cock, who stared quizzically at our gathered summit throng.

As our food ran low we agreed on one final adventure, to break out over the Kalapani watershed and make a ring of the peaks on their northern side. Here a virgin plateau fed an ice stream that funnelled through a gorge into the Panpatia Glacier.

With trepidation and a frisson of excitement, we descended steep slopes to the ice plateau. While the snow crust held firm we hastened round the backs of the

peaks and crossed a second col which gave access to the Maindagalla Glacier on the Pandosera flanks. We made camp before midday and another almighty storm broke forth, pelting us with hailstones for the next eight hours. At midnight I clambered out of our tent and from under the pall of storm-cloud I spotted the lights of villages somewhere far down the Kedarnath valley to the west. The storm was lifting.

By 3am the skies had completely cleared. The new snow was a foot in depth and made a breakable crust. To the south a third 5000m col was guarded by a thumbnail tower of rock. This was our way home. Three gruelling hours of trail-breaking brought us to the crest and the return of familiar views. A fourth col gave access to the Kalapani Glacier snout and we were back to base in time for lunch.

The discoveries of these two short trips have revealed a new playground for Indian mountaineering, where technical training can be undertaken at modest altitude on good rock with upwards of a dozen attractive peaks, at all desired standards of difficulty. Several remain unclimbed; miniature mountains by Himalayan standards, but the entire better for that. I'll leave the field for others to enjoy for now, but I still wonder about that rock citadel that we spotted on the Panpatia side.....

***Martin Moran** is a British mountaineer and mountain guide, who over 35 years and 27 expeditions has built up an intimate knowledge and lifelong passion for the mountains, peoples and culture of the Indian Himalaya.*

EYE TO EYE WITH A SNOW LEOPARD IN LADAKH

Suniti Bhushan Datta



"The mountains will remain magnificent even without wildlife, but when the last snow leopard disappears from the icy crags; an intangible aura of mystery will vanish too."

Dr. George Schaller

For those in search of it, it sometimes takes years of endeavour to even merely catch a glimpse of a snow leopard. Peter Matthiessen who, in the 1970s accompanied the naturalist Dr. George Schaller into the vast wilderness of the high Tibetan plateau in search of one, found spirituality instead (sometimes a far more elusive quest!). But, the snow leopard eluded him. He wrote about this adventure and his experiences in his now-famous, award-winning book, *'The Snow Leopard'*

In March of this year I found no spirituality, but I did however, find a snow leopard!

It was a birthday present from my sisters that found me, after the mandatory 48hr period of acclimatisation in Leh, bouncing along the dirt

track to the hamlet of Ulley. This tiny and isolated community, high in the mountains of western Ladakh, is one of several that were identified by the Snow Leopard Conservancy-India Trust (SLC-IT) as part of its community-based conservation effort to safeguard the snow leopard. Remote mountain villages like Ulley and their environs are the best places to spot the snow leopard. These cats are something of a villain to the inhabitants of the high mountains, because of their propensity to prey on valuable livestock- yaks and cattle. As a result, they were often poisoned and otherwise persecuted.

SLC-IT has, over the years, turned the villain into a hero and now, instead of persecuting the snow leopard, the local villagers form

teams that actively track the animal, as well as other wildlife. Tourists, who brave the arctic cold of the Ladakhi winter, can stay at these homestays, the reward being the possible glimpse of a snow leopard. The model has been very successful and brings in a good income for the villagers, incentivising conservation. They also instituted an insurance programme to compensate for livestock preyed on by snow leopards.

And so it was, that my excellent and experienced local driver/spotter/guide/advisor, Angchuk-le, in between negotiating rugged roads lined with fractured stones, informed me enigmatically and with a twinkle in his eye, that perhaps I would be luckier than most! Trying to suppress my excitement and being a good birdwatcher, we nevertheless stopped along the way to look at a magnificent Golden Eagle that swept over the valley at eye-level and flocks of tiny Red-fronted Serins that seemed completely unmindful of the cold wind.



The valley of Ulley

We reached Ulley at mid-day and dumping my rucksack in the thickly carpeted and comfortable room, I grabbed some warm clothing and my camera and ran out to the car, where Angchuk-le was waiting impatiently. He told me that a snow leopard had killed a baby *Dzo* (yak-cow hybrid) from one of the huts further up the mountain and, while she had eaten at the kill in the morning and retreated up the boulder mountainside to hide in a rocky crevice, there was a good chance she would come down again.



The hut in question was a small farm-holding where Namgyal, the owner, had a few stony fields where he grew potatoes and barley, as well as kept a few *dzos* and a large bull Yak in stone sheds. The snow leopard had broken into one of these sheds early that morning, and taken the *dzo* calf. The kill was lying barely 50m from his house. He seemed quite cheerful in the circumstances, and welcomed the bunch of people who had crowded into his courtyard to catch a glimpse of the cat. The cat in question was an older female, obviously popular because she had been named '*Gyamo*' by the locals, which means 'queen' in Ladakhi. She was sitting inside a deep crevice formed by two enormous boulders. At first glance, she looked like one of the numerous stones scattered around the slopes and it took a little imagination to believe that, that was in fact the animal that I (and several others) had come such a long way to spot! Even through a 60x spotting scope, she looked not unlike a small mound with ears. It was (relatively) warm in the afternoon sun, and she showed no signs of moving from her perch. So we waited. The sun sank lower and lower to eventually disappear behind the Zaskar Range, and a biting cold wind started up.

Just as everyone, shivering and with noses and ears turning blue with the cold, wondered whether the queen would make an appearance, she got up and stretched languidly before, in the fluid motion of a seasoned athlete, loped easily down the mountain and approached the kill. I was at this point, looking through the viewfinder of my camera with its 60x zoom lens. As she

came up to the kill, she seemingly looked straight at me. To describe that moment as thrilling, would be a proverbial understatement. Cold wind and numb fingers were forgotten as *Gyamo* and I locked gazes for those few seconds, before she got down to the important business of eating her kill.



Tibetan wolf

As a wildlife biologist, I have spent much of my adult life tracking and studying wildlife, seen tigers, leopards and elephants at close quarters; but, that singular moment when I came eye to eye with a snow leopard was just beyond description! As the first stars winked in the darkening sky, everyone retreated to the warmth of the home stay, leaving *Gyamo* to finish her dinner in peace. It was a very special evening.

I subsequently spent several more days watching *Gyamo*, feeding on the ever-diminishing *dzo* kill, and chasing away opportunistic foxes and magpies. I was also fortunate enough in the coming days, to see a Tibetan wolf, Ibex, Argali (a species of wild sheep endemic to Ladakh) and many birds that brave the Ladakhi winter.

But, as my return flight climbed out of the Leh valley and I looked down at the frozen landscape, I wondered how many more *Gyamos* there were, walking the icy crags. I hope that with the continued efforts of the SLC-IT and the people of hamlets like Ulley, to quote Dr. Schaller, these beautiful cats continue to add an aura of mystery to these high mountains.



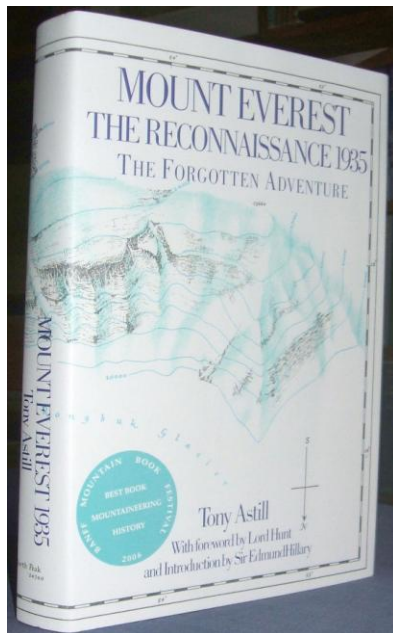
Ladakh Urial

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BOOK REVIEW

MOUNT EVEREST: THE RECONNAISSANCE 1935 BY TONY ASTILL
AVM (RETD) APURBA KUMAR BHATTACHARYA

Tony Astill compiled notes from individual diaries of the members & carried out in depth research on the extensive exploration & climbing activities in the Everest region in 1935. This book is an outcome of this effort. While chapter-1 deals with the objectives, team selection & permission formalities,



chapters 2,3 & 4 describe travel to Darjeeling, selection of sherpas & movement to Lachen via Gangtok & thereafter into Tibet.

The book makes a mention of selecting a 19 year old Sherpa without any experience on the mountain but recommended by veteran Ang Tharkey. Shipton's interview with the boy yielded no response since he knew only Bhotia language but Shipton selected the boy because of his infectious smile. The boy was none other than Tensing Norkay whose life changed forever after he became the first man on Everest in 1953. He was attached to the survey team of this expedition which he gladly accepted.

The team was selected primarily based on the objective of the mission & Eric Shipton was the obvious choice to lead because of his experience in the Himalayan high mountains in Garhwal region(1931 Kamet & 1933 Everest) & his Spartan approach to the mountains. Other members were Bill Tilman (an army man armed with bar to Military cross, a sense of humour & a close

associate of Shipton), Dan Bryant (skilled ice climber & skier from New Zealand), Charles Warren (medical officer & climber-1935,1936 & 1938 Everest), Edmund Wigram (tough climber & medical student-1935 & 1936 Everest), Edwin Kempson ("the walking sahib", mountaineer & explorer) & Michael Spender(conceit but brilliant stereo photogrammetric surveyor).

Activities of the team gathered momentum after the members reached Sar in Tibet when Shipton divided the members in small groups & subgroups. The survey team, lead by Spender along with Charles, surveyed Nyonna Ri & Ama Drime area extensively while Shipton, Dan, Tilman & Wigram climbed most of the nearby peaks above 20,000ft. During these climbs, they took photographs which would later help Spender in his mapping process. Spender could not carry out photogrammetric study in Nyonno Ri area as the local authority imposed restriction since Nyonno Ri area was considered a holy place. Weather condition was not favourable always for survey station or for climbing but the members seldom spent time inside tents. They would snap slightest clear weather opportunity to complete their job. Most of the members maintained notes which Tony Astill has frequently quoted in the book. In fact, the lengthy notes written by different members of the team only duplicated same information in the book which could have been screened.

It was noticed that Spender was equipped with better survey equipment as compared to 1921 exploration where Heron had to deal with equipment of that era. As far as climbers' equipment was concerned, not much of improvement was visible in either protective or technical gear. Climbers were seen wearing similar boots with clinkers, putties, tweed jackets similar to those of 1920s. They carried ropes, lines & karabiners only & had to resort to step kicking or step cutting with ice axe pick or adze heads on snow/ice slopes which was time consuming. Therefore the climbers looked for

routes where rock climbing could be done since most of them were used to climbing on rock faces in Europe. They judiciously avoided risky snow or ice slopes to avoid accidents & incidents. Modern iron mongers were non-existent at that point in time.

Beyond Rongbuk, Shipton's next target was North Col & beyond towards Everest. He was the only



experienced climber on this face (1933) which was considered to be highly avalanche prone. 1933 expedition had dumped food some 100 meters above camp-III. On his way to the food dump, Charles discovered the body of aviator Maurice Wilson near the food dump. Maurice was on North Col in 1934. He was not a trained mountaineer. Shipton decided to do the funeral service by wrapping his body in his tattered tent & lowered him into a deep crevasse. Shipton also erected a makeshift memorial using Wilson's Ice axe. Tony Astill must be complemented for his effort in

bringing out the strange story of Maurice Wilson extracted from Wilson's diary & the diaries of members of the expedition.

The book brought out Shipton's mountaineering wisdom which guided him to abandon his desire to proceed beyond North Col due to rotten monsoon snow condition above 23,000ft., type of which took lives of several Sherpas during Mallory's expedition in 1922. Dan agreed with Shipton & thought that North Col was a death trap. Some members were disappointed since they aspired to be selected for Everest expedition of 1936. Shipton, instead, decided to carry out extensive survey & climbing activities in North West of Everest & Kharta region.

Three teams explored North western side of Everest which was visited by Mallory in 1921. Bill & Edmund surveyed the North West ridge & opined that it was not possible to climb the mountain from this face. But they could see western Cwm in the south. Similarly, Shipton & Dan had a clear view of the Khumbu icefall & the western Cwm from the Col between Pumori & Lingtren. Spender & Charles set up the survey station at Leo La from where they too saw the Khumbu icefall & the western Cwm. What the author did not mention in the book or was not aware of the fact that Tensing also saw the icefall & the Cwm from Leo La & pointed towards Solo Khumbu to Charles & Spender (as told to me by Tensing in 1964). Tensing had to wait for another 18 years to fulfil his dream to be on top of Everest in 1953.



Kharta region was a free field for the team for next couple of weeks where apart from establishing many survey stations & carrying out accurate mapping of the region, Shipton & his team climbed a number of peaks above 20,000ft. One feature stands out during their climbing effort that

the Sherpas were not part of any climb. Sherpas either carried loads or performed as cooks or acted as personal servants. Today, the role of Sherpas has changed on Everest where they mostly act as guides. The expedition team members climbed a staggering 26 peaks above 20,000ft including Kharta Phu (23,649ft) in three months between 11th June & 17th September, 1935. Out of these, 24 peaks were climbed for the first time. Tilman (15 peaks), Edmund (15 peaks), Dan (9 peaks), Charles (6 peaks), Kempson (4 peaks) & Shipton (10 peaks). This was possible because of small team of two members each climbed peaks with bare minimum logistics. Shipton's philosophy was proved beyond any doubt. Alpine style mountaineering was born without Shipton even realising it. All these climbed peaks have been meticulously marked by Tony Astill on the map attached to the book.

The author took pains in tracing a note from Spender's diary in his morose state & published the same in the book (Page-262). On that day, Spender was in a different mood & perceived everything to be bad around him. He learnt the Hindusthani word "Kharab" for "bad" from one of the Sherpas & used it 11 times in his diary! May be such an outburst in his diary was because of his dislike for Shipton & his spartan way of managing an expedition. The author also took pains in collecting Tilman's daily food intake (18oz per day on an average) which finds mention several times in his book. There was however no inference drawn from this food chart. The question is why only Tilman's food intake & why not others?

While doing the review, it was felt that there was an abrupt disconnect on the activities on Kellas Rock peak in page 204 with an annotation (Activities of this party continue on page 213). Remaining activities on Kellas peak continues from page 213 onwards. The reader will therefore be compelled at a later stage to revert back to page 204 to follow survey activities. The rationale behind this sudden change over of pages by the author is not understood.

First 40 odd pages in two chapters dealt mainly with profiles of individual members which could have gone as appendix to avoid monotony in the initial stage. The two hand sketched maps attached as appendix were of immense help in following the expedition activities. The contour map however was mostly illegible & was of no use.



Notwithstanding few observations as above, Tony Astill has done an excellent job in bringing out the incredible exploration cum expedition of 1935 Everest to the public in graphic details. Compiling the narratives of events from the diaries of members & reproducing it in the form of this book involved remarkable research work starting from 1921 to 1933 Everest expedition for which the author must be complemented & commended. Black & White photographs were of excellent quality & remarkably good in clarity.

The book, "MOUNT EVEREST; The Reconnaissance 1935- The Forgotten Adventure" is a must read book if Eric Shipton's philosophy of Alpine climbing in the Himalaya is to be followed. A NEW copy of the book is available from the author at astill.tony@gmail.com (GBP 30 + GBP 10 for economy post).

AVM (Retd) Apurba Kumar Bhattacharyya is a mountaineer and former principal of Nehru Institute of Mountaineering, Uttarkashi.

BOUQUETS AND BRICKBATS

Tony Astill

Thank you for your newsletter issue 3.
Spectacular Photography!

Uma Prasad Dutta

An aptly edited periodical with amazing photography worth preserving.

Bill Aitkin

Thanks for the photography edition whose wide spectrum stuns with the artistic hand of the Himalaya. Doug Kofsky's commentary reminds us that "Nature is the footprint of the Divine." As a progression of peaks can become as monotonous as the accounts of those that climb them I like most Sridhar's remarkable portfolio on Ladakh's frozen oddities. He manages to capture the mood and threat of deep freeze and the exact feel and texture of unforgiving ice. I think the rhododendron trees in spring caught by Ashok are en route to Tungnath from Chopta. For me Ivan Fodor's black and white series stand out paradoxically as more true to their subject than coloured versions of the same would (Sujoy excepted!). Could this be due to the ever changing subtleties of weather patterns which impact black and white less? I admire the ass busting tenacity of mountain photographers and imagine their success lies in proportion to their suffering. I salute them all.

Mirella Tenderini

I thank you very much for sending me the issues of The Himalayan News. I congratulate with you, Sujoy Das and your collaborator for the high quality of photos and writing. I wish a lot of good things.

Samaresh Mukherjee

I found all snaps are visual treat for eyes, solace for mind, but, some of them appeared to me almost surreal, unbelievably extraordinary. **Special mention: The Great Trango Tower-Karakoram, Frozen Tsomo-riri-Ladakh, autumn vista of the Sneffels Range-Colorado, Sunset b/h Capitol Peak-Colorado, Hathi Parbat-Uttarakhand.** It's indeed a collection item. Great Job. Kudos. Looking forward to receive future issues.

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