
TREVOR BRAHAM

Kangchenjunga: The 1954 Reconnaissance

By the end of 1953, the Himalayan 'Golden Age' had properly begun. Three 8000-metre mountains had been climbed, leaving eleven still unclimbed. Two others were climbed in 1954, two more in 1955, and three in 1956. By 1960 all of them had been climbed except Shisha Pangma, situated in Tibet (also known as Gosainthan), which a Chinese expedition climbed in 1964. British expeditions distinguished themselves by climbing the highest and third highest of these: Everest in 1953 and Kangchenjunga in 1955. An Italian expedition in 1954 climbed K2, the second highest.

Douglas Freshfield, Alpine Club President between 1893–1896, was the first mountaineer to take a serious look at Kangchenjunga when he travelled round the mountain in 1899; and it is significant that two out of the three routes that he suggested have now been climbed. The first was from Pangpema, via the North Col, situated between the Twins and Kangchenjunga, and the North Face, which he described as 'the only direct route not impracticable'. The second route he spotted was via the Great Ice Shelf on the SW face, the route by which the mountain was first climbed in 1955.

Frank Smythe ruled out both routes as impracticable. He believed that it was only via the NE spur that the mountain could possibly be tackled. This route was tried by two German expeditions led by Paul Bauer, which were defeated after two very gallant attempts made in 1929 and 1931. In 1930 Professor G O Dyhrenfurth led an international expedition to the north side, but they were frightened off by frequent avalanches falling from the N face, one of which killed a Sherpa porter.

The first expedition to the SW face was Swiss, organised in 1905 by Dr Jacot-Guillarmod. He invited the infamous Aleister Crowley to join them because they had been together in the Karakoram a few years earlier. A route was attempted via a snow slope below the main icefall, which guards the approach to the Great Shelf on the SW face. Descending this snow slope late one afternoon, a rope of six were trapped by an avalanche and four were killed: the Swiss Lieut Pache and three porters were buried at the foot of the route.

The SW face was not visited again until 1920, when Harold Raeburn explored the head of the Yalung as well as the Talung glaciers. He visited the 1905 base camp site, and also examined the approach to the Talung Saddle from Sikkim and Nepal, but he didn't actually do any climbing.

Our expedition in 1954 owed its origins to Gilmour Lewis' visit to the Yalung glacier in 1951 and, principally, to Lewis and John Kempe's climbs from the Yalung valley in 1953. On that occasion they were able to examine both the upper part of the SW face of Kangchenjunga and its lower approaches via the Yalung glacier. John Hunt, just returning from Everest, took a keen interest in this. He heard about our plans for a reconnaissance in 1954 and requested us to send him a report on our return. Later he chaired a Mount Everest Foundation sub-committee which approved the launching of the 1955 expedition.

I think only a visitor, someone who actually goes there, can hope to experience the startling effect produced by the view of Kangchenjunga seen from Darjeeling. It is a vision that seems almost unreal. We were a privately organised and financed party of six, including a non-climbing doctor, and we started from Darjeeling on 10 April with 65 porters. A fortnight later we set up our base camp at the head of the Yalung glacier. We intended to examine three possible routes as lines of approach to the Great Ice Shelf. We first visited the foot of the 1905 route, finding remains of the old base camp site and the memorial to Pache and the three porters. The snow slope above it on the left side of the Lower Icefall, that had caused the avalanche disaster in 1905, struck us as being particularly dangerous-looking at the time, and we decided to leave it alone, at least for the time being. We then shifted to the Talung Icefall. We were hoping to get through this icefall and into the Talung Cwm, which would give access to a hogsback ridge leading to the southern end of the Great Shelf. We made several attempts to get into the cwm, but we eventually decided that the avalanche danger was too great; and we found that the icefall kept changing substantially from day to day.

We finally shifted our attention to the lower section of the main Kangchenjunga icefall. A route was found up its left-hand (eastern) buttress and a camp was set up almost at the top of the buttress. From there, we tried to get out on to the upper part of the icefall, but were unable to find a safe exit. It seemed to us that this lower section terminated in a central icefield leading to the upper section of the icefall, which, though steep, provides a direct route to the Great Shelf. Later on, from the slopes of Talung Peak, looking across at the mountain, we noticed a ramp to the left above the lower icefall, which was the key that provided the 1955 expedition with access to the upper section of the icefall, and to the Shelf.

Following the first ascent of Kangchenjunga in 1955, twelve years elapsed before a second ascent was made in 1977 by an 18-man Indian army expedition, who finally, 45 years after Paul Bauer's attempts, ascended the NE spur leading to the North Ridge which enabled them to reach the summit. It was another two years before Doug Scott and his four-man party in 1979 made the third ascent, via the North Col and North Face, the first without oxygen. In 39 years between 1955–1993 a total of 29 ascents have been made of the Main Summit of Kangchenjunga, of which 17 were

made from the south-west, eight from the north, and four via the NE spur. Almost 100 ascents of Everest have been made during the same period; and I think about 27 ascents of K2. It is worth recording that British parties who made the first and third ascents of Kangchenjunga, and also the Indian 1977 party, left the highest point untrodden, respecting a Sikkimese request. I am not sure whether the same degree of restraint was exercised by later less sensitive climbers!