
Looking Back

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Down and Out in Kathmandu and Bombay

And the end of the fight is a tombstone white,
with the name of the late deceased,
And the epitaph drear: 'A fool lies here
who tried to hustle the East.'

Rudyard Kipling, *The Naulahka*

Early in December 1964, at the end of an expedition to Gauri Sankar, I was camping on my own in the grounds of the British Embassy in Kathmandu. Don Whillans and the other four members of our team, Ian Howell, Dez Hadlum, Ian Clough and Terry Burnell, determined to get home for Christmas, had departed just a few days earlier in our expedition Land Rover to begin the drive back to England. I had travelled out by the same means, while Don had accompanied the gear by ship, train and road to Nepal. It was now my job to escort our remaining stores back to the UK, travelling in reverse order.

In those days the Nepalese customs were merciless and you paid duty on the stores you used up: food, fuel, or ropes, and any items such as a tent abandoned damaged in a storm. Everything else had to be crated and taken back to where it had come from or you faced severe financial penalties. In the early 1960s there were no trekking agencies and very few expeditions, so there was little or no market for high-priced climbing equipment and personal effects. This, then, was the daunting task that faced me.

I had two shipping crates, each weighing several hundredweights, to get from Kathmandu to Bombay, but before their lids could be nailed down I had to clear every single item with HM Customs. This took many days of patient negotiation, but life did have its compensations. First and foremost was my situation in the Kathmandu Valley, with outstanding views while I moved around its environs on foot from a base camp in the grounds of the British Embassy. The ambassador, Mr Duff, had arranged for me to be served breakfast, the full English variety, in my tent on a tray, with the food set on silver platters with a royal crest engraved upon them and a beautiful china tea service alongside. All this was delivered each morning by a bearer in full dress uniform.

The weather in December was stunning, cold enough at night to wake up each morning to a ground frost, but pleasantly warm during the day. The atmosphere was crystal clear with little in the way of pollution from the wood fires used for cooking and heating in the city. The Kathmandu Valley was enchanting, with no tourists to speak of, for entry into the

country was tightly controlled. A visitor's visa allowed travel just within the Valley itself and there was accommodation available only in a single hotel. This was the famous Royal which had the only bar in town, the Yak and Yeti, run by an archetypal, thickset and heavily-jowled White Russian named Boris. He had, I was told from several reliable sources, escaped the Russian revolution, riding a mule laden with gold and crossing the main Himalayan chain to reach this Shangri-La. One night, after a few beers, I challenged him with the truth of this story. He smiled enigmatically and assured me that he was 'only a poor man trying to make a living'. In an alcoholic mood of bonhomie I sympathised with him because my own funds were rapidly diminishing, and I had no idea whether I had enough money to get home again to Yorkshire.

Before I could set out to test my penny-pinching skills, relying on our scant remaining funds to blag my way to Bombay, I had to shrug the customs men off my back. They were probably giving me a hard time because Whillans, on arriving in Nepal with our gear by road, had been involved in a physical confrontation with some of their colleagues at Raxaul on the frontier with India. Perhaps not such a good idea when dealing with bureaucrats.

But there were further compensations for these delays. I used to toddle off down to the huge building where the government was housed in the old Rana palace, the Singha Durbar, and sit and drink tea and have a chat with the Foreign Minister, himself a Mr Rana. He was a tiny, jolly, friendly old chap whose family had ruled Nepal for a hundred years. He dressed traditionally and as we drank our tea he schooled me about the country and its history. Kathmandu had then about 100,000 inhabitants and the whole valley probably five times that number. This is a huge area and to travel out to one of the small towns on the perimeter could take hours. It was also a journey back in time to almost medieval conditions. The airport at Gauchar – 'Cow's Field' – was small and couldn't take jet planes. There was a single road out of the valley, the Rajpath completed in the late 1950s, leading south towards India.

Mr Rana could not understand why Western people were always in such a hurry, and he assured me that once all the formalities had been completed I would be allowed to leave with my precious boxes. Meanwhile, why not enjoy myself, explore the valley, find out more about his country's history and people and make new friends?

Boris was not the only escapee in Kathmandu at that time. It was like a frontier town, and camping down on the banks of the Bagmati River were many Tibetans. They were not then allowed into town in any numbers. In fact the Nepalese were quite frightened of them, but the man in charge of their welfare as the commissioner for refugees was Peter Aufschneider, the man who had led the German 1939 Nanga Parbat expedition, of which Heinrich Harrer had been a member. With Harrer, he had later escaped from a British internment camp in India to reach Tibet and Lhasa.

Reading Harrer's *Seven Years in Tibet* you do not find out much about this interesting man, and it was not clear to me what his exact role had been in that famous adventure. Now I feel privileged to have met him. I was introduced to him by Erwin Schneider and was subsequently invited to visit the Tibetan refugee camp, which was extensive with hundreds of men, women and children living in primitive conditions of extreme poverty. The thing that initially impressed me about the man, apart from his physical presence – he was a big fellow – was his command of languages. He seemed to be able to speak so many. Tibetan of course, but all the other local dialects, and we held a discourse in the Yak and Yeti speaking in a mixture of several European tongues. His knowledge of the Nepalese languages and Tibetan was so good that he was the advisor on place names to the government on what were to be the first complete maps of Nepal, an exercise then under way and led by Schneider and Kinzl.

It was fascinating to hear from Peter at first hand about his participation in the early attempts on Kangchenjunga (1929 and 1931), and about the 1939 Nanga Parbat expedition. His party had reconnoitred the Diamir flank, had found a possible route and had intended to return to attempt it in 1940. Most interesting of all were the stories about his escape from India and his years in Tibet. The thing that remained uppermost in his mind from this escapade was the journey from Dehra Dun to Lhasa when he and Harrer had crossed the Himalaya and journeyed for many months to reach their goal. He was neither a critical nor a bitter man. The mood he struck was one of serene gentleness, which perhaps his life in Tibet had developed. He was obviously totally committed to his work with the Tibetans who had fled the Chinese occupation of their homeland. However he did warn me not to accept the whole of the story as portrayed in Harrer's book. He pointed out that without him it was unlikely that the latter would have been successful in reaching Lhasa and getting accepted there, for Peter was the linguist and had been East several times before 1939, whereas Harrer had not. Furthermore, Harrer had over-dramatised their roles and positions in Tibet. But it was also obvious that Aufschnaiter was not seeking any kind of redress, and still thought well of his companion. He would not be drawn any further and changed the subject to ask me about our trip to Gauri Sankar during which we had actually been inside Tibet while high on the mountain.

Erwin Schneider was someone I kept running into, either in the Royal Hotel or about Kathmandu, and we became friends. He was then working on the mapping of the Rolwaling Himalaya and he was keen to get as much information a possible from me about the Gauri Sankar area. I may be wrong but I think in that era no one had the depth of knowledge of the mountains of the world, or had made so many important first ascents as he had. He seemed to have been everywhere, for he was one of the pioneers of the Cordilleras Blanca and Huayhuash in Peru, the Pamirs, and of course the Himalaya. Along with his colleague Hans Kinzl he was a cartographer

of the highest ability – the Austrians were the official map-makers to HM government – and their maps of Mount Everest, the Cordillera Blanca, Mount Kenya and so on set a standard that others were to follow. Later I felt privileged to be invited to Innsbruck in 1965 to visit their map-making department, and to watch them working on a section of the Rolwaling map aided by some of my transparencies from the northern side of the range.

I imagine that as a young man, Erwin was a bit of a Whillans figure. The stories about him on the disastrous 1934 Nanga Parbat expedition, when he emerged along with Peter Aschenbrenner as the lead climber, are ones of a pushy, aggressive and very determined character. In old age he still looked like a bit of a bruiser, squat and physically powerful, but by the time I knew him he was avuncular and very kind to me. To hear from him first-hand about that 1934 expedition was gripping. He and Aschenbrenner reached over 25,000ft and were within striking distance of the summit, still feeling fit and strong. But due to poor organisation, and a lack of back-up in the supply chain, they were forced to descend. It was during this descent that a storm of the utmost ferocity hit the mountain, and six Sherpas plus Merkl, the expedition leader, Wieland and Welzenbach all died.

The story is well known and has become one of the most written about and analysed events in mountaineering history. Claims have been made that Aschenbrenner and Schneider abandoned the porters, and skied off down the mountain to save their own skins.* Knowing Erwin as I did after our time in Kathmandu, I find this hard to believe, for the storm they were in was one of those that comes along perhaps once in a generation. The only explanation I can think of for what happened is that the effects of altitude and Himalayan conditions were not as fully understood then as they were later. And the European climbers of that time had come to an exaggerated opinion of a Sherpa's ability to withstand cold and hardship, and to move around safely in a mountain environment.

In terms of technical climbing experience they were near novices, and once Europeans had acclimatised, Sherpas were not superior to them physically. But because of their hardiness, willingness and outstanding good nature, a myth had grown up that they were able to withstand any amount of bad weather conditions. I can imagine how Erwin would think that on such easy ground, down which he could ski, these hardy hill men would have no difficulty in following them. Whatever the truth as to their motivation, Aschenbrenner and Schneider did come to regret their decision and tried several times to get back up the mountain to execute a rescue. But each time they were beaten back by snowfall and avalanches.

*** Editor's note:** These allegations were largely accepted among older Sherpas in Darjeeling and were repeated to the Editor by Ang Tsering, who died in 2002 and was the last Sherpa to make it off the mountain in 1934, having also been on Everest with Mallory in 1924.

It was meeting Erwin that made me want to go to Peru. He sent me photographs of Alpamayo, pointing out that despite claims to the contrary by a Franco-Belgian team that had included Claude Kogan, its north ridge had still not been successfully climbed to the main summit. This party had actually only reached the north peak, but in bad weather had mistaken this for the top.

Erwin had been one of the mentors to Hermann Buhl, and when the latter and Kuno Rainer had been amongst the first Austrians to visit the Western Alps after the war, he had accompanied them. It was obvious that he had the highest regard for Buhl, but he was surprised when I told him my opinion that apart from our own stars, Brown and Whillans, this Austrian climber had had more of an impact on British mountaineers of my generation than any other.

'What was he really like?' I asked him one night in the Yak and Yeti after a few beers.

He thought for a while and replied: 'A good singer and guitar player, so he was good company!'

Someone I also kept running into was Kathmandu resident Jimmy Roberts. Jimmy had been military attaché at the Embassy and was a former Gurkha officer. Then recently retired, he had been with the Americans on their successful Everest expedition the previous year. For our attempt on Gauri Sankar he had been very helpful, hand-picking four of the best Sherpas to go with us.

He had an encyclopaedic knowledge of the Himalaya. After our near success on Gauri Sankar, when Whillans and Ian Clough had nearly succeeded in climbing the north face of the mountain, I had become interested in trying one of the higher mountains by such a route. After talking with Jimmy and Erwin about this possibility, I settled on the South Face of Annapurna of which the former produced a fine photograph. As soon as I saw it I decided that this was to be it, for running the height of the face was a spur similar to the Walker on the Grandes Jorasses. Before I left Kathmandu I went to see Mr Rana, and gained a promise of permission for this route, but it was not to be. An incident the following year stopped my plan dead in its tracks. A group of Tibetan Khampas attacked a Chinese baggage train. A Westerner, who was also a mountaineer of sorts, filmed the fighting and his film was smuggled out of Nepal inside a diplomatic bag. This led to a confrontation with China and the closing of Nepal to mountaineers almost until the end of the decade.

In retrospect Kathmandu in 1964 was poised on the edge of the biggest change in its history. India and China, with the USA putting up the largest number of dollars, were all vying for influence and offering to fund aid projects. And the British in their own quiet and quaint way were also, as the original and oldest foreign power in town, doing their best to keep up with these competing forces. One initiative taken by Britain under the Colombo Plan was to set up the first printing plant in Nepal. Because of

my background in the industry I was invited along by Mr Duff to observe its progress. The sight that greeted me on arrival was incredible. The operation was set in a huge yard, which looked more like a brick works than a printing press. A Brit by the name of Mr Page was in charge and he was teaching the Nepalese involved how to set lead metal type. Arranged around the yard were heaps of letters, a huge pile of 'As', in another pile 'Bs', and in yet another 'Cs' and so on. The compositors had their sticks and were wandering from pile to pile trying to set up words. I was gobsmacked to learn later from Mr Page in the Yak and Yeti that he was charged with printing for the first time the laws of Nepal. He was expecting later that week to receive via India two Heidelberg cylinder printing machines and had been given about three years to finish the job. Through the diplomatic bag he was getting a regular supply of Johnny Walker, so he and I became friends as I commiserated with him over a dram or two about the difficulties he was facing.

Another British initiative I came across while hanging out in Kathmandu, was a plan to introduce the Nepalese to the works of William Shakespeare. A cast of locals directed by a thespian imported by the British Council were to perform Macbeth and I was invited along to this performance in an assembly hall not far from the Singha Durbar. Unfortunately for the actors, it had a tin roof, as well as a stage.

The night was unusually cold, even for December, and it looked stormy as I walked along to the venue from the Embassy where we had gathered for a pre-performance drink with the cream of the diplomatic corps. No sooner had the performance started than it began to hail and then thunder. Sitting at the back of the hall all I could hear was the crash of huge hailstones on the roof, which sounded like an enormous drum being beaten again and again. This continued on and off for most of the evening but putting on a brave face at the end of the performance, which few if any of the audience had heard, Mr Duff congratulated the cast and declared the evening a resounding success.

It was after this performance that I met my first-ever hippy in the Yak and Yeti. In 1968, when I was again climbing in the Himalaya and taking up a travelling fellowship around India, they were ten a penny, but in 1964 in Kathmandu she was a trailblazer. Sue had come from California to seek enlightenment. A wonderful blonde goddess of 21 from Los Angeles, she was looking for a guru, and I think she found him. The next time I saw her she was with someone who looked a little like the Maharishi of Beatles fame. She was following two paces behind him wearing a sari, bedecked in beads and bangles and walking barefoot through the bazaar. She carried a drum which she kept hitting at irregular intervals.

After an introduction by Jimmy Roberts I went to visit Willi Unsoeld, who was then head of the Peace Corps in Nepal. Willi was still learning to cope with the loss of most of his toes after his great climb the year before of the West Ridge of Mount Everest with Tom Hornbein. It was impossible to

be indifferent to Willi. He was a muscular Christian, a professor of religion and philosophy no less, and he soon made me aware of this fact. Bearded, powerfully built, he seemed to me unorthodox. If it had not been for his higher religious calling, I could have imagined him embracing the hippy lifestyle. He had not been in post long, but already he was the subject of gossip amongst some I talked to in Kathmandu; how he simply sent his Peace Corps volunteers out into the villages of Nepal in a sink or swim approach. Most seemed to survive the experience and do well, which was probably Unsoeld's intention. I found him an open and enthusiastic talker and his story of the Everest adventure held me enthralled. But he seemed to me, like so many Americans to those of us who grew up as part of the working class in northern Britain, a mixture of obvious goodness and earnestness, but heavy on sentiment and with not a trace of irony. I couldn't imagine Joe Brown talking like that, but then Willi grew up in a different country and another culture.

At last I was given the all clear by HM Customs to nail down my boxes, and I set out with my cargo, riding in a Sikh's lorry to the Indian border. As we left the Embassy the whole staff turned out to see me off. I had a lump in my throat as I waved goodbye to them all. The Duffs had been more than kind and I owed them a debt of gratitude. But in all truth my main concern was how I was going to travel to Bombay to catch the boat back to Liverpool.

The first leg of the journey set the pattern for what was to follow. It took two days to get from Kathmandu to Raxaul, with the road best described as challenging. I already knew what to expect for I had travelled up and down to the Indian border in a lorry when Whillans arrived. Thanks to his difficulties with the Nepalese authorities, he arrived in Kathmandu minus our gear, which was impounded. I had to go down and retrieve it. It was an adventure just to travel this route, and the way was littered with wrecks and lorries in various states of disrepair. All movement had to finish before dark since it was judged too dangerous to drive at night. I slept with the driver and his mate in the lorry, and arrived hungry and tired at Raxaul late on the second day.

Moving the crates into the railway station waiting room, where I spent the night lying on them for security, was a major operation, and took the effort of twenty men. I was living off bowls of rice and mugs of sweet tea. Next day I got a shock trying to book through to Bombay on the train. It transpired that I could only book to Benares and there had to change stations onto another railway line, and then pay from there to Bombay.

Later that same morning the boxes were loaded into the luggage car of the Benares train, again by twenty hired men. Riding third class to conserve what few rupees I now had left, I became very worried as the train rumbled southwards. The boat journey would be alright because I had the return ticket that Don had come out on, and the shipping line was carrying our gear for free, but had I enough funds to get me to Bombay?

If you have never travelled third class in India you may have missed out on a life-changing experience. I still thank my good luck that this took place at the end of December and not in July. If it had been hot I might not have lasted the course.

Getting from one railway station in Benares to the other, across the city, with my two boxes carried by twenty porters, created a sensation. And when I paid them, the hired hands must have thought me the meanest sahib this side of the Ganges. I had to sleep on the boxes again, but lying in this elevated position set on the station platform, I felt like a potentate compared to the mass of Haridjans sleeping in their thousands around me. It was the only home they knew.

The last leg to Bombay was totally without comfort, taking the best part of two days, in the most cramped, uncomfortable conditions one could imagine. The smell of human sweat and excreta hit the olfactory senses like a Whillans right-hander.

Arriving in Bombay I spent the last of my rupees getting the two crates moved from the railway station into the shipping company's go-down. What a relief! But the boat home was not leaving for another five days, and what do you do for that length of time with no money, without a single anna? And as I became ever more hungry I decided I would have to try to steal some food. I was also worried where I might sleep in Bombay, somewhere that I would be physically safe.

I spent the first night sleeping on the pavement outside the Taj Mahal hotel. Believing this to be the finest hotel in India I assumed the area around it would be secure. I woke up in the early hours when a pair of hands tried to pull the rucksack I was using as a pillow from under my head. I jumped up and screamed, and a little boy of about eight or nine ran off terrified.

Next morning and now desperate with hunger, I walked back down to the harbour, and found, quite literally, salvation. I came across the Red Shield House, the Bombay headquarters of the Salvation Army. I staggered inside, weak from lack of food and drink, to be greeted by a major from Barnsley. Ever since, I have had a high regard for the Salvation Army, for they fed and watered me, and offered shelter until the boat sailed for Liverpool. I had to clean the toilets and join in with the hymn singing in return.

The boat trip, taking place during the festive season, chugged slowly back to Britain, calling at Karachi, Port Sudan, Aden, Suez, Naples, Cyprus and so on. I had little or no problem, being the object of charity from my mainly wealthy fellow passengers, eating and drinking like a trencherman. When I arrived in Liverpool five weeks later, Don Whillans and Terry Burnell were waiting on the quayside as our shipping crates were unloaded. They soon had them broken open and the gear stuffed into the expedition Land Rover, which they had driven back to the UK.

'Don't think I came here to meet thee,' Whillans informed me. 'I've only come to get me bloody gear!' I had left home eight months earlier, travelling out for six weeks by road, spending ten weeks in the mountains, and then the wait in Kathmandu followed by the long journey home alone. 'Yer can drive,' Don decided, handing me the keys. Expeditions these days just aren't what they used to be.