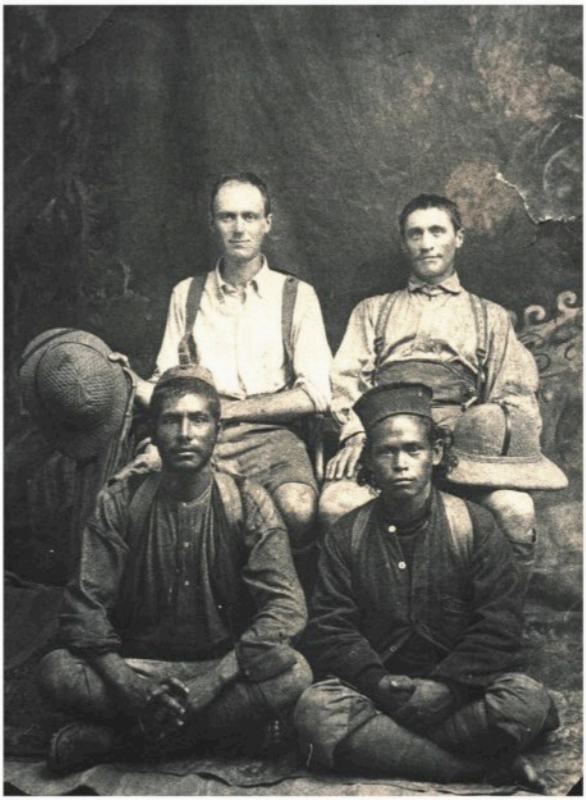
History

'The Khylas Mountains and village of Pangi 3 miles above Chiné on the Sutledge', Constance Gordon-Cumming, 19 June 1869, watercolour and body-colour, 48.2cm x 72.5cm. *(Christie's via Bridgeman Images)*

PETER FOSTER

Charles F Meade



Charles Meade, left, with Pierre Blanc and two porters, en route for Kamet.
(Courtesy of Jasper Meade)

In 1898 Himalayan mountaineering was in its opening phase and there can have been few schoolboys at the time pondering the problems of climbing at high altitude but 17-year-old Charles Meade was one. He had been reading Conway's account of his pioneering expedition to the Karakoram six years earlier, and Professor Mosso's recently published treatise on the physiological effects of altitude, *Life of Man in the High Alps,* of which he wrote enthusiastically to his grandmother:

> *I am delighted with it. It agrees with all my theories of ascending Mt Everest, and goes one better. He says it is possible.*

Fifteen years later, Meade's series of attempts to climb Kamet (7756m) in the Garhwal Himal would prove to be a significant milestone in the story of climbing in the Himalaya. Elected to membership of the Alpine Club in 1904, vice-president in 1934 and honorary member in 1965, he died in 1975, aged 93. His brief obituary in the *Alpine Journal* provides scant detail of his long life and achievements; this biographical sketch fills that gap.

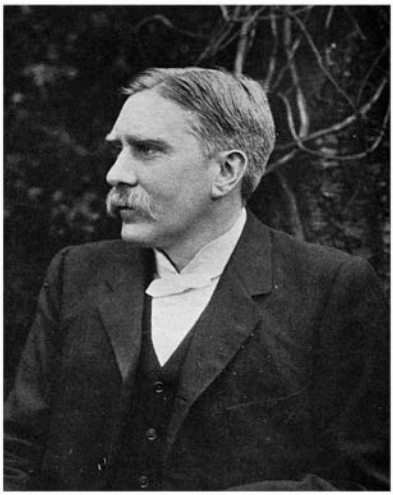
Charles Francis Meade was born in 1881. His father, the Hon Sir Richard Meade, was the second son of the third Earl of Clanwilliam. The Meades were a long-established family of Irish landowners but the first Earl (1744-1800) had 'dissipated to the last guinea' a 'noble fortune' on 'stableboys [i.e. the turf] and mistresses'[1] and Charles's grandfather had been obliged to forge his own career. A friend and political associate of Lord Castlereagh and the Duke of Wellington, he was appointed ambassador at Berlin (1823-27) and his son, Charles's father, followed him into the diplomatic service, attaining the position of permanent under-secretary of state at the Colonial Office. Tragically, Charles's mother Caroline, née Grenfell, died just a week after his birth.

Meade was schooled at Eton. A boy's experience of late Victorian Eton was formed largely by his house, the community of 30 or 40 boys in which he lived day to day, and the character of the master in whose charge he had been placed. Meade's housemaster was Arthur C Benson who combined school mastering with prolific writing[a] and would subsequently become a fellow and then master of Magdalene College, Cambridge. Benson was popular with parents and pupils; kindly and humane, rarely resorting to corporal punishment, he was held in great affection by the boys. A critic of the prevailing dominance of Latin and Greek in the school's curriculum and abhorring the passion for organised games and the glorification of athletic success, he gained a reputation as a radical. He was also homosexual but guarded against abusing his position of trust and pursuing physical relationships. Instead, he formed romantic attachments to older boys and young men, 'wooing his students to the very edge of propriety.'[2] His crushes included Meade's cousin, Julian Grenfell, future war poet, and later at Cambridge, George Mallory.

Given his interest in his charges it seems likely that Benson would have learned of Meade's enthusiasm for mountaineering and would have talked of mountains with him, for he was a member of the Alpine Club. He had been elected in 1895[b]; his application mentions ascents of the Matterhorn and Eiger, and 'all Skye mountains except Inac[cessible] Pinnacle'. But he gave up serious mountaineering in the following year after surviving a near-death experience when, having fallen into a crevasse, he was almost strangled by the rope:

a. His prodigious output included essays, poetry, novels, ghost stories, a two-volume biography of his father, the Archbishop of Canterbury and, incidentally, the words to Elgar's Pomp and Circumstance March No1 – 'Land of Hope and Glory'.

b. He remained a member of the Club until his death in 1925; curiously the death of this distinguished man passed unnoticed in the pages of the *Alpine Journal*.



Meade's housemaster at Eton, A C Benson, c1899. *(A H Fry)*

Suddenly it dawned on me that I was doomed … The strange thing was that I had no sense of fear … I had no edifying thoughts. I did not review my past life or my many failings …

But he spared a thought for his house at Eton, wondering 'how my pupils would be arranged for.'[3] According to Geoffrey Winthrop Young, Benson's guide, Clemenz Ruppen, faced with the prospect of being dragged into the crevasse by his client had been on the brink of cutting the rope: 'Benson never knew the whole story! Clemenz told it me during our long talks in night bivouacs.'[4]

From Eton, Meade went up to Balliol in 1899 when the college was enjoying considerable prestige and success. H H Asquith, prime minister and Balliol man, famously observed that graduates of his college were distinguished from lesser souls by their 'tranquil consciousness of effortless superiority'. But this atmosphere of self-confidence and entitlement was tempered by an enthusiasm for Fabian socialism, and Meade's tutor, A L Smith, historian and future master of Balliol, was the movement's most 'energetic prophet' within the college.

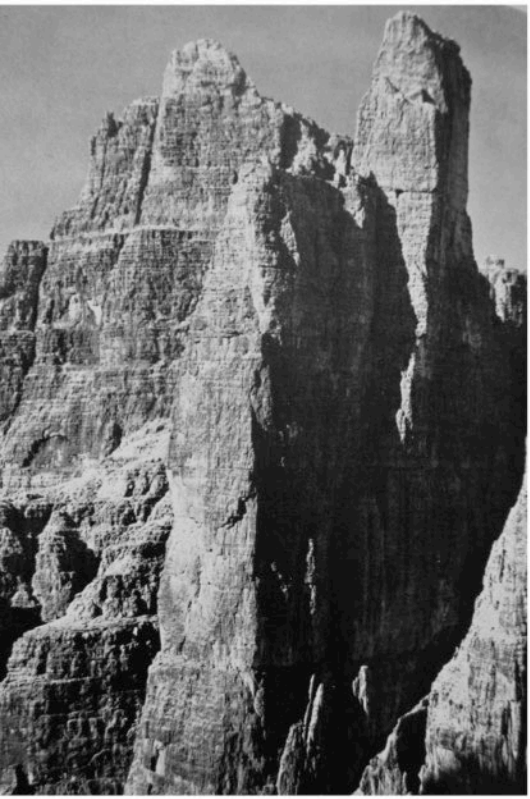
Meade approached undergraduate life by 'working steadily' though he was 'careful not to overdo the quantity [because] brain fever would be a terrible illness to get,' and faced with choosing a future career, he dreamt of mountains.

I think I have settled as far as I'm concerned to go in for diplomacy. You see I might get Lima or some nice out of the way place as secretary or something near some range of high mountains where I could spend part of my holidays exploring.

But a diplomatic career proved disappointing and was short-lived; he served for eighteen months as honorary attaché at Tangier:

I can't say that I dislike it more than like it at present. If one is up to one's neck in the European Colony one can scarcely be immersed in the East. There is an awful lot of work at present …

On the outbreak of the First World War, Meade, aged 33, volunteered immediately, obtaining a commission in the Surrey Yeomanry, a Territorial



Guglia di Brenta from the south-west. The variation climbed by Blanc and Meade starts from the right hand end of the ledge beneath the summit on the sunlit south-west face and follows the line between sunlight and shadow.

cavalry regiment whose honorary colonel was his father-in-law, St John Brodrick, Viscount Midleton and former secretary of state for war, but an early entry in the diary, which he kept intermittently throughout the war, reveals his ambivalence:

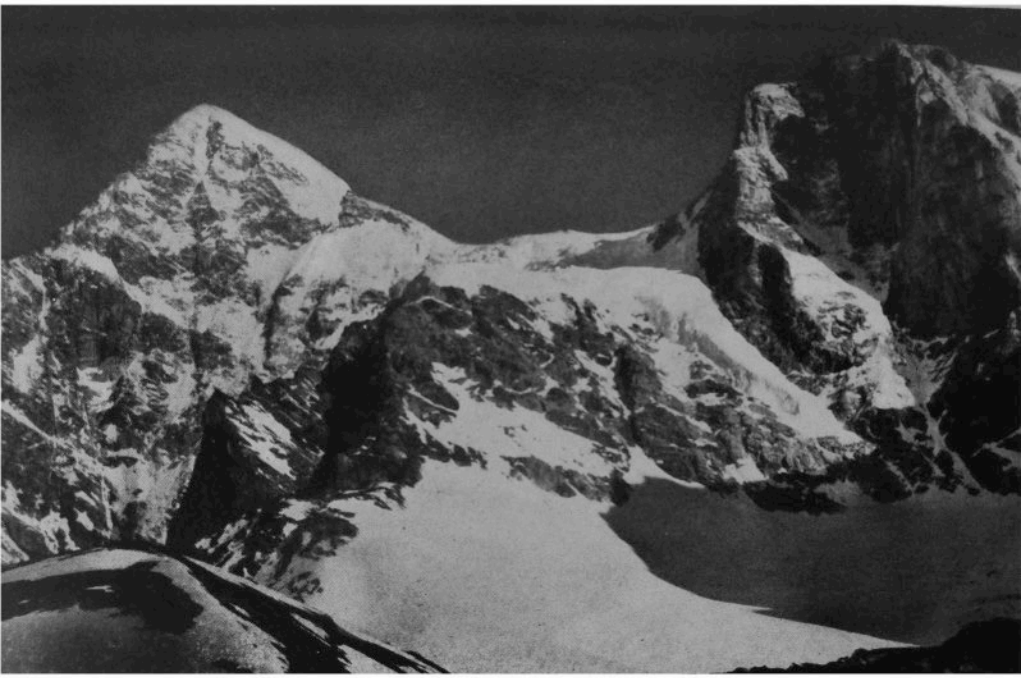
I have no curiosity (which some people have) to know how great a coward I can be. I've been to the Alps and Himalayas and I know. The idea of perishing as a pawn in the game of the lunatic Warlords is humiliating. I prefer pestilence to modern war. The latter does not do its work so neatly. I must say I never thought that military glory would have come my way … [c]

After two years in training camps in the south of England, Meade joined his regiment on the Struma front in Macedonia, 'a sideshow within a sideshow', where he led mounted patrols – a last hurrah for the cavalry – into disputed territory which occasionally resulted in an exchange of gunfire, which he likened to ski jumping, combining 'the maximum of fear with the minimum of risk'. Of combat generally, he wrote with a twist of irony:

I can't imagine that fighting can frighten me any more than I have been frightened by climbing. Of course when in a desperate fix climbing you must pull yourself together if you can and climb better than you ever have before, and so save your life. Perhaps under similarly desperate conditions of fighting one might instinctively apply the same principle and run better and further that you've ever run before and so get court-martialled.

As the war progressed his contempt for the army and its generals grew:

c. These sentiments could not have been in starker contrast to those of his Grenfell cousin, Julian, who in October 1914 wrote to his mother: 'I adore war. It is like a big picnic … I've never been so well or so happy.' Julian was killed a year later.



Kamet, left, and Abi Gamin with Meade's col between them. *(C F Meade)*

The army is a miserable affair ... It is the worst infliction perpetrated on us by the Germans ... The danger for the high command is that one day a subordinate (probably a regular soldier) may do exactly what he is told. In that case it is all up with everybody concerned.

His antipathy to formal regimentation of thought or conduct ensured he remained a subaltern for the duration.

A few years after returning from the war, Meade acquired the Montgomeryshire estate of Pen-y-Lan and its management would be his principal occupation. 'For those who knew him at Pen-y-Lan,' wrote a friend of his later years, 'he comes most easily to mind in his 18th Century library, standing in front of a great wood fire. He bore an astonishing resemblance to portraits of his distinguished ancestors on the library walls, and when he spoke of mountains and mountain dwellers, one caught the tempo and flavour of an earlier age.'[5]

Meade's first Alpine climb had taken place in 1897 when, aged 16, he was on a family holiday in the South Tirol. 'Papa has actually agreed to let me go to the top of some easy mountain, probably the Cinque Torri,' he wrote excitedly to his Grenfell grandmother, and continued:

The colours of the peak are wonderful. One big one looks as if a bottle of claret had been upset over it and the wine was tracking down. Other parts of

Officers of 21st Surrey Yeomanry in 1914. Meade is in middle row, second from left.

it look as if they were made of gold. … It has one great advantage: it looks absolutely inaccessible.

Three years later, following a walking tour through the Vanoise and ascents of Aiguille de la Grande Sassière, Mont Pourri and the Aiguilles Rousses, he had been hooked by the Alps ('I am craving fearfully for next year to see them again.') and alpinism: 'Climbing for me must soon begin in earnest.'

Meade spent the next three summers enthusiastically climbing across the Alps and in 1904, aged 23, was elected to the Alpine Club. He was proposed by his uncle Willy, W H Grenfell, public servant, exceptional sportsman[d], created first Baron Desborough. Amongst Meade's supporters was his Eton housemaster, Benson. His application lists more than 70 expeditions, principally in the Graians, Dauphiné and Dolomites. After an absence of two years while he was in Morocco, Meade resumed his frenetic pace and by the end of the 1909 season his assiduously compiled personal record lists 119 expeditions. Most of his climbs had been by established routes[e] but in 1909 he was inadvertently involved in making a new and desperate variation up the final section to the summit of the Guglia di Brenta, also known as Campanile Basso, the spectacular 300m spire in the Dolomites.

d. Amongst his more extraordinary feats, he had stroked an eight across the Channel and swam across the pool beneath the Niagara Falls, twice, the second occasion in order to prove the first to disbelievers.
e. In 1903 he made the first descent of the NE arête of the Jungfrau. The first ascent was made by a Swiss party in 1911.

The first ascent had been made in 1899 but during the succeeding 10 years there had been few further ascents. Meade and his guide, Pierre Blanc, had made good progress to within 50 vertical metres of the summit when they missed the way, lured, like so many since, onto difficult ground by the sight of two ring pegs. To reach the first peg from the terrace on which they had arrived, required combined tactics at the start. From his position standing on Meade's head, Blanc launched himself onto the steep wall above and inched his way towards the first peg where he untied the rope from his waist and threaded it through the ring, repeating the procedure at the second, and eventually found a belay directly below the summit. Meade was now faced with the second's nightmare, an exposed traverse beneath an overhang: 'I was obsessed by anxiety lest the rope ... swing me off sideways across the precipice to dangle to and fro like a pendulum over the revolting abyss into which I had so long been gazing.'[6] And worse, the rope had jammed above him. As he ascended, the slack 'dropped in a great coil' and should he have fallen the resulting violent jerk would have pulled Blanc from his stance and both of them 'would inevitably fly off into space.' The passage (now graded V/A0) was negotiated safely and the summit reached with enormous relief. The extremity of the situation just overcome was emphasised by their later discovery that the climber who had placed the two pegs only a few weeks earlier had slipped from a point above the second, the rope had snapped and he had fallen 300m through the air to his death.

Meade paid three visits to the Himalaya in 1910, 1912 and 1913 to explore the approaches to Kamet and attempt to climb it. On each he was accompanied by Blanc, of whom Meade wrote: 'the ideal companion for Himalayan mountaineering is a friend like Pierre with whom one can quarrel furiously without causing disastrous results.'[7] Meade and Blanc had first climbed together in 1901 and over the succeeding years forged a friendship that surpassed the usual relationship between client and favourite guide and lasted a lifetime. When their serious climbing days were over, Blanc was often invited to stay at Meade's Welsh home and together they walked over the local hills.

But on 12 April 12 1913 they had just arrived in Bombay, as Meade recalled:

> *... at three o'clock in the morning I suddenly awoke with the sensation of lying in a warm bath. The darkness was profound, but, just outside the cabin, a deafening clamour of Hindu mail-sorters throwing mail-bags about the deck signified that the P&O liner in which my guide Pierre Blanc and myself had been travelling, was at the end of its journey ...*[8]

And he was glad to be back in India en route for the Himalaya, for he had been enchanted by 'the double spell of those two most potent magics, the snow-mountains and the East'. After two days sweltering across the Indian plains by rail they reached the cool of the foothills, and on 1 May set off on foot for Kamet. Meade's pleasure in the trek is apparent from his account,

so sharply observed and vividly described:

> *... in the early morning, the pine-trees were dark against a white sunrise; already we heard the staccato shouts of the ploughmen urging on their little oxen; below us among the tree-tops there still lingered streaks of cool night-mist, almost as blue as wood-smoke. The air was fresh as water ... [and] in a clearing of the jungle, there glimmered ... an apparition so dazzling that it took us some moments to realize that what we saw was a pink rhododendron tree in full bloom, lit up by the first rays of the rising sun, so that all its thousands of flowers shone like jewels.*[9]

They arrived at their base camp at about 4,850m on the Kamet glacier on 7 June and were immediately weather-bound for two weeks.

At one o'clock in the morning of 21 June they launched their summit bid:

> *There was a crystal clear quality in the moonlight, and the snow was sparkling like diamonds in its rays. The Bhotias were bubbling with energy and high spirits; like us they were relieved that the long period of waiting was over.*[10]

Their intention was to 'rush' the mountain – there would be no establishment and stockpiling of intermediate camps – and by 10 o'clock they had reached 6,100m where they pitched two tents: one for Meade and Blanc; seven porters occupied the other. But Meade had developed acute mountain sickness, which, together with fresh snowfall and the cold, halted them for 48 hours. On 24 June they pressed on again over more difficult ground, snow-covered rocks and a steep snow and ice slope which necessitated a prolonged bout of step cutting by Blanc, to reach an easy-angled glacier-plateau up which they laboured:

> *The endless monotony of toiling up the bleak slopes of this ghastly plateau through an increasing depth of powdery snow, and under a burning sun became a torment.*[11]

A second camp was made at about 7,000m, one hundred metres below the col, which now bears Meade's name, between Kamet and its neighbouring peak, Abi Gamin[f], and from which a steep but straightforward snow slope leads to the summit 600m above. Next day, Meade, Blanc and three Bhotias set out for the top but Meade, still struggling with the effects of altitude, soon gave up; Blanc and the porters pushed on to the saddle before turning back, exhausted. Although unsuccessful in reaching the summit, Meade had solved the question of the correct route, the answer having eluded Longstaff, Slingsby and Kellas, all of whom had made prior exploratory visits. His 'dashing raid' contrasted with the ponderous tactics employed

f. Meade identified this peak as Eastern Ibi Gamin in his article on the Kamet group's nomenclature for the *Alpine Journal* 1920 (vol 33, p70). Smythe, in his account of the first ascent of Kamet, followed Meade, but the most common modern name is Abi Gamin.

Meade and Pierre Blanc at Zermatt station. *(Courtesy of Jasper Meade)*

by Frank Smythe's 1931 expedition which made the first ascent following Meade's route: six climbers, 41 porters and five intermediate camps established over a fortnight.

Meade's experience of climbing in the Alps and Himalaya made him eminently qualified to be invited to join the Mount Everest Committee, convened in January 1921 to organise the first expeditions to reconnoitre and attempt the mountain, and yet it seems he was not considered automatically for membership of the expedition. He was just 40 years old, five years older than Mallory but 15 years younger than Harold Raeburn, who was appointed climbing leader. It's possible he had simply counted himself out. With three young daughters, family responsibilities may have weighed with him. Or in the light of his difficulty acclimatising on Kamet, perhaps he saw no prospect of going high.

With Percy Farrar, Meade shared the responsibility for equipping the expeditions – a thankless task. Whilst he was grappling with the problems of the quality and quantity of essentials such as clothing and tents, Meade was interrupted by more trivial matters: Raeburn wanted an alarm clock. His request was forwarded by the committee's secretary, Arthur Hinks, who added a characteristically sarcastic aside:

Raeburn asks for an Alarm Watch to wake himself up in the morning … This comes into your side of the equipment. The President [Younghusband] suggests that something to rock him to sleep is more likely to be necessary.[12]

And inevitably there would be criticism of what was provided. Mallory's complaints resulted in an improved two-man tent, lighter and easy to erect in high winds, which was christened the Meade. It was essentially a modified version of the Whymper tent with a flysheet and was still in use on Everest in 1953. As Mike Parsons noted in *Invisible on Everest*, Meade's 'perceptions on equipment … are frustratingly absent from his own writings.'[g] Following the return of the 1922 expedition Meade, who had now settled in Wales, resigned from the MEC but continued to take an active interest in the conduct of subsequent expeditions. He was a protagonist in the wrangle between the Alpine Club and the MEC sparked by the controversy around the choice of leader of the 1936 expedition (see *AJ* 124, p129), and a vocal advocate of the merits of small expeditions.

Throughout the 1930s Meade was a keen observer of developments in climbing in the Alps and Himalaya and contributed a number of essays on mountaineering to non-specialist periodicals such as *Cornhill Magazine* and *Blackwood's Magazine,* several of which were included in his first book, *Approach to the Hills,* published in 1940. Meade disapproved of the 'recklessness of life', 'predilection for mechanization' and the spirit of 'bitter nationalism' and competition displayed by the 'new adventurers' but unlike Col Strutt, who castigated them in the pages of the *Alpine Journal*, he allowed: 'it is possible that those who have a more conventional outlook on life than the new adventurers might find there is something to be learnt from them.'[13] But he believed: 'mountaineering is a pursuit in which the sporting instinct may enter at times, but the deepest motives behind it are a longing for adventure, a love of nature, and a sentiment that can only be called mystical.'[14] The last of these, 'the longing for perfection', Meade considered 'the strongest of the motives that can lure us into the hills.' He explored and developed this view through the writings of philosophers, poets and mountaineers in his book, *High Mountains,* and it is clear that mountains provided him with a special 'happiness' which even in its most dilute form had 'more significance in it than the mere satisfaction produced by spending an agreeable holiday.'[15]

In the early evening of 1 June 1953, the telephone rang at Meade's home in Wales. The caller was Sir Alan 'Tommy' Lascelles, a good friend and distant relation, who was also the Queen's private secretary. The news of the first ascent of Everest had just been received at Buckingham Palace and Lascelles, knowing of his 'cousin's' lifelong interest and involvement with Everest affairs, had telephoned to pass it on before the public announcement. 'Charlie, they've gone and done it, Everest has been climbed,' he said.

To which Meade replied simply, 'What a pity.'[16]

g. Eric Shipton had no luck trying to elicit information. 'The "Meade" tent is really a smaller edition of the "Whymper",' he wrote in *Upon That Mountain*, 'and is named after the well-known mountaineer C F Meade – I have asked him why, but he could not enlighten me.'

Acknowledgement

I wish to thank Jasper Meade for his help and hospitality and for his permission to reproduce quotations from CFM's unpublished letters and diaries.

Endnotes

All unreferenced quotations are from CFM's letters and diaries.

1. 'Introduction to Clanwilliam/Meade papers', Public Record Office of Northern Ireland, 2007, p5.
2. P & L Gillman, *The Wildest Dream*, London, 2000, p28.
3. A C Benson, *Along the Road*, London, 1926, p87.
4. A Hankinson, *Geoffrey Winthrop Young: Poet, Mountaineer, Educator,* London, 1995, p55.
5. R Fedden, *Alpine Journal* 81, p270.
6. C Meade, *Approach to the Hills*, London, 1940, p36.
7. Ibid p214.
8. Ibid p189.
9. Ibid p205 & p212.
10. Ibid p245.
11. Ibid p251.
12. Hinks to Meade, 18 Mar 1921, RGS EE 38/1.
13. C Meade, op cit, p102.
14. Ibid p100.
15. C Meade, *High Mountains*, London, 1954, p9.
16. J Meade, personal communication.