
DAVID SEDDON
In the Shadow of Nanga Parbat

T H Somervell in the Rupal Nallah



The 'rapid sketch' of Nanga Parbat that Somervell made from bear the Tragbal pass on 19 May 1933. (Courtesy of Tony Astill)

By early 1933, Howard Somervell (1890-1975) was almost desperate to see the Rupal face of Nanga Parbat¹. He had seen the Kangshung face of Everest and the north-east face of Chomo Lonzo in 1922 and the north face of Nanda Devi in 1926. He was to write, 'I longed to see the immense southern precipice [of Nanga Parbat]', to 'enjoy Nanga Parbat, not to climb it – to paint it, not to struggle with it.'

With his wife and two young sons in the United Kingdom, an opportunity arose to fulfil this ambition. In early May, Somervell set off alone on the five-day rail journey from Cape Cormorin to Rawalpindi, followed by a two-day bus journey to Srinagar. There he had arranged to stay with Dr Eric Neve (1861-1946), brother of Dr Arthur Neve (1859-1919). For many years the Neve brothers had provided medical care to the people of Srinagar and Kashmir. They were both climbers and between them had achieved many first ascents in Kashmir. Eric Neve introduced Somervell to a local hunter,

1. T H Somervell, *After Everest*, Hodder & Stoughton, 1936, pp156-9.

Abdullah Ganai and his son Aziz. Father and son had been porters variously with the Duke of Aosta and Bullock Workman expeditions and most recently with the 1932 German-American expedition to Nanga Parbat. Over the next few days, Somervell and Aziz Ganai climbed Mahadeva and other peaks either side of the Sind valley.

On 17 May, his party of four travelled by covered boat across Wular Lake to Bandipur. Somervell noted '... the delicate blue beauty of the Pir Panjal to the south east'. Two days later, they reached the summit of the snow-covered Tragbal pass to be rewarded with a distant view of Nanga Parbat. Somervell recorded the next few days in both breathless prose and sketches. He must have been aware that he had not only climbed higher than the summit of Nanga Parbat in 1924 but, at camp six on Everest, had slept higher as well.

Friday 19 May: 'Up at 5.30 ... and trudged up to the [Tragbal] pass. The sky was cloudless in all directions, and as we got higher peak after peak appeared, until at the top we saw one of the finest mountain panoramas I have ever witnessed. There was a long succession of summits to the west and towering over everything else Nanga Parbat rose clear and majestic to the north. A bitterly cold wind was blowing, so we could delay on the top [no] longer than enabled me to take a few photographs and did a rapid sketch of Nanga Parbat'

A few days later, and in deep snow, his party crossed the Burzil pass, before descending to the village of Das Khirim and the Astore valley.

Wednesday 24 May: 'A varied march, at first through rather ordinary scenery until the terraces of cultivated land at Das Khirim are reached, and then the Nanga Parbat begins to appear. I went high up on the valley side to get a good view, and was rewarded by a magnificent one. What a mountain it is! Quite unlike any other I have seen, so far above anything else – 26,000 feet in a district where most things are 13,000-16,000.'

Thursday 25 May: ... gorgeous views of Nanga Parbat, sixteen miles away to the northwest. It was cloudless and absolutely clear, and every detail of Nanga's magnificence was plain. Needless say I tarried here for sketching and photography.'

On Friday 26 May, Somervell climbed into the Kamri valley to the east of the Burzil pass. From about 5,000m, and across two pages of his sketch-book, he painted a dramatic panorama of Nanga Parbat and its east ridge as far as the middle Chongra peak. At 23cm × 56cm, this is perhaps Somervell's largest known watercolour.

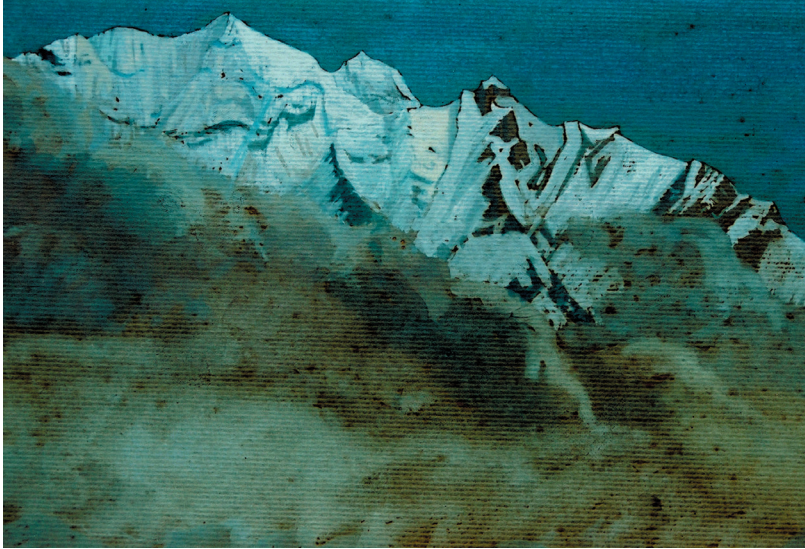
Nanga Parbat burst into full view in all its magnificence. What a mountain it is! The main peak at the western end sends down colossal 15,000 ft precipices to the Rupal Glacier, and the ridge extends to the east for some 10 miles presenting a succession of beautiful subsidiary peaks, with the wonderful ice-architecture only to be seen in the higher Himalaya.'



Nanga Parbat from Das Khirim painted on 24 or 25 May. All pictures are watercolour unless described otherwise.



Nanga Parbat, Rakhiot and Chongra peaks from the Kamri valley, 26 May.



Rupal face of Nanga Parbat, 27 May.

Before returning to Srinagar, Somervell climbed high on the south side of the Rupal Nallah, possibly climbing what is now known as Rupal Peak, and spent an hour or so on the summit.

Saturday 27 May: Up at 4.15 ... to climb a mountain opposite Nanga. Nanga Parbat from here is simply amazing. The actual precipice from the top to the Rupal Glacier, is some 15,000 feet high. In the evening the clouds gathered round and presented, I think, the most beautiful sight I have ever seen anywhere. It was simply indescribable. I tried a sketch, but though it was a fairly successful one, it was impossible to get an inkling of the beauty, as so much depended on the actual luminosity of the clouds.

On 29 May, Somervell and his companions crossed the Kamri pass in deep snow, before re-tracing their steps to Srinagar.² He returned to south India with a folio including nine watercolours (23cm × 28cm) sketched between 19 and 27 May, including the first and third pictures in this article. This folio remained unseen until sold at auction in 2021. In addition, he painted four larger watercolours (26.5cm × 35.5cm), including the second and fourth images seen here. These were exhibited at the Alpine Club in 1936.

Somervell may have seen Nanga Parbat again, albeit from a distance. In 1951, during his last long period of service as a surgeon in south India between 1948 and 1953, he may have visited Gulmarg, a hill station in the Pir Panjal, south of the Kashmir valley. Two pictures seem to show Nanga

2. Ibid. See also: T H Somervell, 'A Pilgrimage to Nanga Parbat', *Fell and Rock Climbing Club Journal*, vol 10, 1934, pp89-100; T H Somervell, 'Some Minor Expeditions in the Himalayas', *Himalayan Journal*, vol 13, 1946, pp28-40.



Nanga Parbat from Gulmarg, 1951. (Courtesy of Lakeland Arts Trust)



An oil painting of Nanga Parbat from 1952. (Alpine Club)

Parbat from this viewpoint, one dated 1951 and an oil dated 1952. The latter is in the Alpine Club Collection and for many years had been catalogued, incorrectly, as 'Kangchenjunga'. In 2006, this picture was exhibited at the Alpine Club. Mike Westmacott and George Band were able to provide the correct identification as Nanga Parbat. A second oil picture may remain with the family. Somervell exhibited nine watercolours of Kashmir and Nanga Parbat at the Alpine Club in 1936 and a further six oils and four watercolours at the Club in 1954.

- I am grateful to Tony Astill (www.mountainpaintings.org) for his help with illustrating this article.