TWENTY-FIVE YEARS OF SCHOOLBOY EXPEDITIONS IN THE HIMALAYAS

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THE title of this talk was suggested in haste and when I saw it in print a week ago I realised that it sounds bombastic. I apologise for it. Indeed it is also inaccurate; for unless scrambling up their foothills can be called climbing in the Himalayas, it is not true to say I have done twenty-five years of it with schoolboys. When I joined the staff of the Doon School in 1937 I started taking boys up hills of 8–10,000 ft., and skiing in Gulmarg in the winter—Nandu Jayal was one of the first to come with me—but it was not till after the war that I took any climbing in the summer to heights of over 17,000 ft. I ought also to mention that this paper has been typed at speed and largely from memory, which I hope has been reliable.

In 1937 it seemed that only foreigners climbed in the Himalayas for fun, and I remember when I started week-end scrambles continuous cries for 'water' until I said I would beat anyone who mentioned the beastly stuff again. Once two boys, one now a distinguished colonel and the other almost an ambassador, arrived at the end of a fifteen-mile trek, having consumed on the way all the delicacies, while John Martyn and I carried the heavier foundations to a meal. Our supper of dry chappatis and unsalted potatoes was somewhat silent and sombre. In those days boys would not drink from mugs or eat from spoons that had been used by others. Some would not touch sausages, others beef. Once, when spending the night in a forest rest house I warned the party not to use the thunder box as we had no sweeper. The next morning I found . . . well, the offending pot was solemnly passed from hand to hand and emptied in the forest. No one remained *sans peur et sans reproche*. Nowadays all tinned meat is agreed to be mutton, the cook alternately stirs and tastes the soup with the same spoon, and mugs are often shared.

The first Doon School expedition with boys was taken by Holdsworth and Martyn while I was away at sea. Before that Martyn and I had explored the approaches to Bandar Punch and crossed from Gangotri to Badrinath in 1937. We took with us some of Marco Pallis's porters

from Harsil and the Sherpas Rinsing, who later died in Chitral and was one of the strongest climbers I have known, and Tenzing. Both were 'Everest Tigers' but rates were cheaper in those days and the whole seven weeks only cost us Rs. 700 each. Tenzing moved beautifully and was obviously destined to be a fine climber, but if I asked his opinion on a route he would merely reply 'Sahib's hukum'. It was only after I had been on two further expeditions with him that he would freely discuss pros and cons. Bandar Punch was an unplanned detour while we waited for the arrival of our Inner Line pass, which, even in those days was necessary, though much easier to obtain than it is now.

In 1938 Martyn and I did some exploring in Lahoul. On one occasion we climbed up a side valley from Patseo and descended on the Baralacha La as night fell. Owing to inaccurate map-reading, or as I prefer to think, an incomplete map, we had misjudged the distance. We had waded through deep snow much of a hot day, and in a very dark night had to smell our way back to Patseo down the goat track.

In 1940 Holdsworth, who had joined the staff of the Doon School, led Martyn and me on a first ascent of Mankial, a mountain in Swat of about 18,000 ft. that looks very lovely from the plains. I had been invited to cross into Chitral and join the Scouts on a reconnaissance of passes across the Hindu Kush which, it was suspected, were being used for gun running. There I joined Rinsing and Tenzing again and had a wonderful holiday with the party led by Captain White, Commandant of the Scouts. In the valleys, where we played polo—their equivalent of cricket—in every village, we were joined by Lowis, the Political Agent, and on the heights we were met by scouts with great baskets of asparagus, peaches and grapes. I paid for this enjoyment by developing sprue which laid me low for a year, but it was worth it.

I did not climb again till after the war, but in 1946 Holdsworth, Nandu Jayal, by then a subaltern in the Sappers, John Munro, an ex-pupil from my earliest days of teaching, whom I had run into by chance after he had escaped from the Japanese in Hong Kong and made his way across China, and Chengappa, a boy in the school, made an attempt on Bandar Punch which was foiled by bad weather. Tenzing was with us and Nandu had almost persuaded him to become his batman when I intervened and said he should stick to climbing. Just at that time this didn't seem to offer many prospects, but I was able to get him a job as mountaineering adviser with the Indian Army Winter Warfare School for a year or two, and this tided him over the lean period till his services were in demand for greater things.

1948 was a year of trekking rather than any serious climbing. Of the party, Martyn could only spare a short time and Gurdial Singh had to return to attend a family wedding. The two small boys from the Doon School who came with us, the Koregoakar brothers, were without climb-

ing boots and we could not find any to fit them; so they wore gym shoes which they soon kicked through, and I seemed to spend most evenings trying to sew up the toes. We caught trout in Dodital and climbed Darwa Top, something over 15,000 ft. Then Martyn and the boys had to return. I am afraid the latter had found it all rather easy and formed a false impression, for when they later went to Europe, having got into difficulties on Mont Blanc—after all it was no higher than Darwa Top—which also they tried to climb in gym shoes, they were lucky to get away with a guideless ascent of the Matterhorn in somewhat stouter cricket boots. Gurdial and I continued across the hills, a delightful wander to Harsil, from where he too had to return. There I picked up some porters, one of whom had crossed with us to Badrinath in 1937. I found them gambling with strange coins which turned out to be a private issue by the adventurer, Wilson, who built for his seven wives the fine house now used as the Harsil Dak bungalow. One side of them was embossed with fleurs-de-lys, and the other bore the inscription: 'J. Wilson. Harsil. One Rupee.' We continued over the Lamkhaga Pass into the Baspa valley where I had a very long and fruitless day in search of trout reputed to grow well over 7 lb. The water was dirty and I followed it down to Sangla vainly hoping to find a clear junction. The walk back was longer than I had expected. Then we crossed the Borasu Pass and descended into that fairyland, the Harki Doon, which I had long wanted to visit. From it I climbed onto the ridge separating it from the Tons Valley and had my first view of the Black Peak and Bandar Punch from the north. I had found an ideal area for small expeditions.

In 1950 Bandar Punch was climbed at last. It is not a difficult mountain but various people had been falling down different parts of it for some years. Our party consisted of Bill Williams, Roy Greenwood, Gurdial Singh, for whom it was a first high climb, Jagjit Singh, his young brother, three Sherpas, of whom Tenzing was one, and myself. I look at with envy or read about with green eyes those who have a whole winter to plan an expedition, to sort their stores and make numbered lists of the contents of their boxes. I have never had time to start all this till the end of the summer term, and then want to get away as quickly as possible so as to reach the mountains before the monsoon. On June 6 we packed till 2 a.m., slept, and set out by 4. By 5.30 p.m. we reached Darasu by bus and found an entry in the Bungalow book made by Bill Williams twenty-three years before when he was a lieutenant. Three days later we were at Dodital, where we caught forty-two trout before dark. Four days later we had pitched camp at 16,000 ft. and two days after that we had stocked and moved up to a camp at 18,000. The next day we chose a place at 19,500. Gurdial's boots were giving trouble, so I took him back to 16,000. This was sad for both of us, but he had made a very good start as a climber and now that he has spent a week at the

South Col I hope he has forgiven me. The next day I climbed to the top camp and nearly got carried away by a bit of cornice that came off as I was crossing an icy gully below it. I know the feeling about lone climbing, but I wanted to get out of my blood a desire to make a first ascent of a twenty-thousander. Meanwhile Roy, Tenzing and Tenzing's brother, on leave from the Gurkhas in Malaya, were completing the ascent. As I reached the top tent it started to snow hard and I had to wait for the return of the summit party. The four of us spent an uncomfortable night in the tent for two, which the next morning was almost buried in snow. We had to come down carefully. We carried on climbing for another fortnight or so, and one day I had what I consider the best rock climb of my life. During this I was leading up a little cliff when my hold came away and I fell into Tenzing's arms. He thought it vastly amusing, but it was some time before my legs stopped trembling. The total expenses for the expedition were Rs.5,606 or about £110 a member.

Later that year we attempted something that cannot qualify as mountaineering though it was an experiment to see whether one could speed up one's return. I had a war disposal naval inflatable landing craft. We took this on a bus to Devaprayag and launched it at the junction of the Alaknanda and Bhagirathi and floated down in it to Hardwar. Later still we used it down the gorge of the Jumna where we were twice upset and were lucky that no one was hurt. I do not recommend this method of Himalayan travel though, trying it, I learned something of the difficulties of inter-service co-operation. We got stuck behind a waterfall which poured into the boat. I knew it was unsinkable, but shouted: 'Bale. Bale out!' The adjutant of the Joint Service Wing of the National Defence Academy, just back from a course in parachute jumping, shouted even more urgently: 'Don't. Stick in. Hang on!'

In 1952 John Martyn and I took a joint party of Doon School boys and J.S.W. cadets to the Harki Doon. We did not attempt anything very ambitious but we had a very enjoyable time rock-climbing, skiing and exploring as far as the passes at the ends of the Marinda and Hata ki Gad that meet there, and up the main valley and on to the Jamdar Bamak. We also climbed onto and along part of the western ridge of Swargarohini—far enough to see that an approach to the peak from that side was not possible. We helped, too, a party from the Survey of India with their map making, though I think the food we were able to supply to them and the warm clothes we lent were more welcome than our attempts at triangulation. I had long been trying to persuade the Surveyor General to fill in the blank on the map which covered this area and he had at last agreed to do so. The map has been classified 'Not for issue' and I have been unable to get hold of a copy. Such are the annoying ways of those responsible for security.

The next year I took a party of seven Doon School boys to the Tons valley in an attempt to climb the Black Peak, or, as the Survey will I think wrongly have it, Banda Punch I, 20,956 ft. high. One of the boys, Inder Cheema, the Sherpa Pemba and I got very near to the summit when an icy and very strong wind turned us back. Cheema, who was only sixteen, was wearing only grey flannel trousers and a sports coat and his climb from 17,500 ft. to well over 20,000 ft. in conditions that became very unpleasant was as good an effort as I have seen.

Two years later another mixed party, this time of Doon School and Mayo College boys, including Narandra Singh of the former and Mahesh Mathur of the latter, came again to the Tons valley. We were joined by Lieutenant Jagjit Singh, and as he had only a few days leave he went ahead with the Sherpas Pasang and Chetan but was prevented from reaching the top of the Black Peak by a very heavy fall of snow. I was able to finish it off eleven days later with the Sherpas, but the boys had found the height a bit too much for them. It was a year of unusually abundant and late snow and the route from the bend in the main glacier went straight up the ice-fall we had had to circumvent in 1953, but which now made a steep and exciting ski run. Indeed we had some magnificent skiing including a run from about 20,000 ft. to below 14,000.

While at camp at the bend in the glacier a note had arrived from below that Don Soughan, who was joining us on his way back from Australia, and two more Doon School boys, Ranganathan and 'Winston', who under his proper name Sö Hkan Hpa has since done some good rock-climbing in the British Isles, had reached the highest village, Oshla, with six mules. Apparently they had eaten so much on the approach march that the loads were comfortably transferred to five porters. They sent up a message asking for instructions and warning us that they had only Rs. 80 left in cash. Three days later they joined us at 'Glacier bend camp' together with 'Doggie'. The latter had attached herself to us on our march up and we had become rather fond of her, though the Sherpas disapproved as she made off with anything she could get her teeth into, including a tin of butter. She had climbed to over 20,000 ft. with Jagjit and had been sent down with him when he left, but she was a determined mountaineer, and she deserted him to come up again with the second party. Once more her eyes were inflamed from snow glare, but she was full of enthusiasm and still had no respect for the quartermaster. At night, if allowed, she would creep into a tent, but the warmth she gave out was counterbalanced by the fleas. We wondered if she could be descended from the dog that accompanied Draupadi and the Pandavas when they ascended Swargarohini, their legendary path to heaven. But if her feats were a surprise we were even more astonished when we found the glacier, up to 16,000 ft., covered with the corpses of locusts. We were far from those parts of India subject to their unwelcome

attentions, and how they got there we could not think: blown perhaps in a storm?

During the next three days the two Doon boys with Chetan did a first ascent of the 18,000 ft. peak on the left side of the glacier at the turn, while Don, Pasang and I climbed another eighteen-thousander on the east Swargarohini ridge to find that the mountain would not 'go' from that side. We all then crossed into the Harki Doon, a long day with walking made tricky by ice. There we found a Gujar camp and were assured of good milk, curd and butter. Of the scenery one of the party exclaimed: 'The Bandar Punch valley is grand; this is enchanting.' The whole expedition for nine members cost Rs. 5,740.

The next year we went on what was largely a skiing expedition up the Baspa valley. There was some doubt about the new position of the Inner Line, for which we had not asked for a pass, and we had to restrict ourselves to the country below Chitkul. At Sangla I was again disappointed as the famous trout had all been bombed, but we found that the Frontier Police had a better use for their hot bottles than as water containers. The local hooch, strengthened with what tasted like dissolved rubber, was not, however, altogether unwelcome after a particularly long and hot day's march. We had some splendid skiing from passes of between 16,000 and 17,000 ft., and climbed an easy mountain. The expedition remains memorable for me because of a stone I took from a 'mani' wall for the school museum. When I showed it to Justice Gopal Khosla, with whom we stayed at Simla on our return, he solemnly advised me that it might bring misfortune. I am never quite sure of the Khosla family, for I have been caught out by their leg-pulls, but when, driving down to the plains, the trailer broke loose from the jeep nearly causing a nasty accident, and the rest of the party chanted 'the stone, the stone', I began to wonder; and after the following term, one that had seemed fuller than usual of alarums and excursions, I decided to send the stone back. A boy who lived in the area promised to replace it safely on the wall, and I handed it over to him. Half an hour later he phoned me frantically from the station to say that he had lost his ticket!

In 1958 a party of thirteen included Ganju, a Mayo College master now attempting Panch Chuli, Dr. John Moor, Allan Berry and Clough, experienced climbers from New Zealand who had joined our staff for two years, and eight boys. We hoped to climb Swargarohini and were much better equipped than usual owing to a generous gift from the Mount Everest Foundation, but we could not afford Sherpas, though that did not worry us unduly as by then we had considerable faith in the men of Oshla. However, throughout the expedition we suffered from porter trouble. They said the mountain was taboo and I wondered if the number of our members had anything to do with it. We failed to climb Swargarohini but did a good deal of reconnaissance and felt fairly

sure we had found the best route to try to climb. On this, some 1,200 ft. below the summit, the forward party stuck in a snowstorm below a gendarme up which they could not find a way; but all had carried loads from base at 11,700 ft. to a camp at 14,800 and nine of the party from there to a camp at 17,300; six, of whom two were on skis for their second day only, climbed to a pass of over 16,000 and skied down to 12,000; eight crossed the 15,000 ft. pass into the Harki Doon in a snowstorm when thunder and lightning were simultaneous and we wondered whether we ought to abandon our ice-axes, and eight made an attempt on a most attractive 17,000 ft. peak we called the 'Finger', and were only stopped, not far below the top, by iced-up rock, which made progress too dangerous for any but experts. Achievement, but not endeavour, was hampered by extraordinary weather. Five times, right into June, snow fell and lay below 10,000 ft. We also had two curious experiences: the party in camp at 17,300 was disturbed by a dog at night. Its tracks were there in the snow in the morning; but on this expedition no dog was seen above the sheep pastures. Also, one night, when two tent-fulls of us were encamped up the Jamdar Bamak, the glacier of the God of Death, we were disturbed by pebbles falling on the tents although they were not overhung by any cliff, and by their ropes being violently pulled and the tents shaken, although there was no regular wind blowing. It was all very curious!

The next year we went to Chamba, restricting our party to twelve: six boys, an Army doctor, an English lecturer from Pilani, and four Mayo College masters who included Peter Lloyd, on a year's exchange from Uppingham, and Lowry Maclean, a school leaver from Eton who had come to us under the British Council's excellent arrangements. We planned to cross the Sach Pass and climb in the Pangi valley, but lack of finance and time when we found the Sach Pass under deep snow made us decide instead to stay in the Pir Panjal whose sharp peaks and narrow valleys are less lumpy and grand than those of the Himalayas. On the way by mule transport to Tissa one of the animals, deliberately so it seemed to me, off-loaded a sack of sugar and another of bedding and my rifle down a 200 ft. cliff into a stream. Why is it that it always seems to be the sugar that falls into rivers ? Three of us were bringing up the rear. One was sent on with information of what had happened and it took some time to retrieve the loads. When we had done so it was raining and too dark to proceed safely over the track broken by numerous landslides. We begged shelter in a lonely hut, but finding it occupied by a leper, thought it wiser to try to sleep on the roof. The soaked sleeping bags gave some shelter but we derived more comfort from the thought of the rest of the party shivering in Tissa. In fact they had been made warm and comfortable under hospital blankets. We did not achieve anything noteworthy on this expedition, but we had some pleasant climbing and

a lot of good skiing after penetrating up a steep-sided, narrow valley to the top of a pass over which we put our feet just into Pangi so that we could say that we had been there. We had spent several days skiing at a camp at only 9,300 ft., but when the weather cleared moved up to 12,300 to one of our coldest but most dramatic camping sites. We were on the edge of a great rock cirque, below us the narrow valley, and above the open snowfields and mountains from which the wind whistled down to drive us early to bed. On our way home the local school at Tissa put on for us a very enjoyable entertainment, including mountain folk songs and dances; and they defeated us at volley-ball. Some months later a party of them came to stay with us at Mayo College. One of their items had been a skit in which a government clerk employed a porter to cross the Sach Pass. By the time they got to the top, the clerk was carrying the load and the porter had on all his warm clothes. Many of the school children must have been related to porters; others were no doubt sons of clerks. It was fun to see them laughing at themselves, and no doubt incidentally at us.

In 1961 I set out, in some trepidation, on my thirteenth Himalayan expedition. I had been shaken when, at the last moment, the party had also swelled to thirteen members, and when the day before we left a tooth over an abscess being extracted under gas had broken and the doctor (there was no dentist available) had appeared to apply hammer and tongs for the next half hour. Worse still, we found that our lilos, packed away carefully dusted with French chalk, had perished in the Indian heat, and we were unable to replace them with anything as comfortable for sleeping on snow. On the road to Simla, while changing a bearing which had broken in the jeep trailer and watched by the apparently friendly but otherwise disinterested crowd that gathers on such occasions, my attaché case was removed from the jeep and I lost my camera, reading glasses, various odds and ends that one needs on a journey, as well as over Rs.1,000 of the expedition's funds. In Simla we were joined by two Sherpa instructors, Pasang and Dan Kumar, kindly loaned by the Himalayan Mountaineering Institute in Darjeeling, and from there we set out for Chini, now called Kalpa, where we had been invited by an old Doon School boy, Squadron-Leader Nalni Dhar Jayal of the Political Service. The road from Wangtu was the most terrifying I have ever driven along—or rather, up and down. To get by we had to remove our spare wheels and foot plates; and, to squeeze under the overhangs, windscreens had to be lowered. Fuel-pump trouble caused my jeep to stall on the steepest ascents and, my hand brake having broken down, Pasang had to sit with a rock on his lap and jump out and put it behind a wheel whenever we spluttered to a stop. My master in charge of agriculture was one of the party: a not over-energetic person who in camp proved more reliable as a cook or taster

than as a climber, but the sang-froid with which he drove his jeep, and the admiration for him with which this filled me, has led me to be, perhaps, too patient with the slowness with which he collects a flock of sheep to improve the turf of our football grounds and incidentally the finances of the mess.

We had thought of attempting Chini Kailas, a beautiful unclimbed peak of 21,240 ft., but examination of its face from Kalpa across the Sutlej convinced us that it would have to be attempted from the other side, at least while avalanches were pouring down it; and to reach this side we had neither the time nor the funds. We therefore had to content ourselves with the slopes on the right bank. They offered some excellent skiing and a peak of about 17,000 ft. which was climbed by two parties including the younger Mathur brothers and our school leavers, John Edmundson and Howard Thompson. Down it one of the Sherpa instructors managed to bring one party in a snow-slip that developed into an avalanche, but without greater mishap than the loss of ice-axes and goggles. The party had left camp at 4.30 a.m. and we had seen them on the summit at 3.30 p.m. Fortunately for our nerves their descent was obscured by clouds, but in the evening we set out to meet them as their return was overdue. We had climbed about 1,000 ft. when we saw them on the slopes above, lurching, glissading and rolling. They were obviously very tired.

One morning we were astonished to see a lone skier on the slopes above our camp at 11,800 ft. He proved to be the local schoolmaster, a Bengali who had held a commission in the Royal Garhwal Rifles during the war. He had bought a second-hand pair of steel-edged skis and had taught himself how to use them from Vivian Caulfeild's *Ski-ing Turns* and a more modern book by Peter Lunn. I was myself brought up on the first and I was delighted not only with Mr. Mitra, but also at seeing again, after nearly forty years, that skiing classic put into action.

Last year, at this time, I was skiing in Kashmir. I found that climbing on skis from 10,000 to 13,000 ft. was about as much as I could manage and after a week of this we were tempted down to the fleshpots and trout fishing of the valley.

The new roads, built partly as a result of economic planning and partly for defence against the Chinese, are bringing the mountains much nearer and reducing the expenses of approach, though the week or so's march in from bus head of earlier days was a very pleasant part of an expedition, and brought you to base really fit. Growing numbers of young Indians now go climbing in the mountains. There are some dangers of status competition, and I wish there were more of those enjoyable expeditions to the multitude of peaks between 18,000 and 21,000 ft. instead of to the more newsworthy giants, but many schools and colleges now encourage parties to climb in the holidays, and many

groups go trekking across the foothills. Rock-climbing is growing in popularity, and at Mayo College we have been very fortunate to benefit from the experience of school leavers from Rugby, particularly John Edmundson and Charles Clarke, encouraged to come to us for a year by John Tyson and Dr. Hamilton. It has been fun to take part in the growth of all this in the Doon School and Mayo College.