

Small expeditions in the Himalaya

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Ever since climbers first began to visit the Himalaya at the end of the last century there have been large expeditions and small ones. Mummery, invited to join Conway's lavish investigation of the Karakoram, preferred to go to Nanga Parbat with Hastings and Collie and a couple of Gurkhas. While the Workmans and the Duke of the Abruzzi were invading the Karakoram with their miniature armies, Dr A. M. Kellas was making some remarkable journeys of exploration in Sikkim and climbing peaks up to 7000m with only a few local porters for company. Between the wars there was a sharp contrast between the series of heavyweight expeditions to Everest, Kangchenjunga and Nanga Parbat, and the explorations of Shipton and Tilman or the success of Spencer Chapman on Chomolhari. During the so-called golden age of the fifties and early sixties when the majority of big Himalayan peaks were being climbed, most expeditions were large, for nationalism, denounced by the Alpine Club in the thirties, was more blatantly and internationally rife than ever it had been on the Eigerwand and Grandes Jorasses. But there were notable exceptions—the Austrians on Cho Oyu and Broad Peak, the British on the Muztagh Tower and the American 4-man attempt on Everest. The last 15 years have seen Everest firmly established as an international status symbol, permanently booked up 5 years in advance. Not only Everest but all Nepal's 8000m peaks have been repeated time and time again, confounding Longstaff's hope that once Everest had been climbed mountaineers would forget about mere height and 'turn to the true enjoyment of the Himalayas, most likely to be found at 20000ft or less'. More recently, the re-opening of the Karakoram by Pakistan has sent a fresh series of massive caravans winding up the Baltoro. At the other end of the scale, there have been the groups of 2, 3 or 4 men, posing as tourists in an effort to evade increasing restrictions, regulations and expense, unobtrusively penetrating the remotest corners of the Himalaya and making many fine first ascents among the lower peaks. Initially most of these small expeditions were Austrian or Japanese, but numbers of British climbers have begun to follow suit. This trend must have been strengthened by articles by Dennis Gray, Trevor Braham and Joe Tasker which have appeared in the *Alpine Journal* over the last few years, arguing basically that large expeditions are anachronistic. Dennis Gray in 1971 was describing the 'approach and style of application' of the first ascents of Annapurna and Everest as being 'as relative to this day as the stage coach to jet travel'. He went on to comment that 'to the discerning, success means nothing, only the way it has been achieved matters'. In this country, at any rate, a climate of opinion seems to have been created in which small expeditions are regarded as desirable, whether it be from the standpoint of personal satisfaction, the health of climbing as a sport or the ecology of the Himalaya. And yet large expeditions remain the norm in Himalayan climbing. Cast an eye down the long list of expeditions that every year visit the Karakoram and Nepal and you will find that the vast majority have at least 8 members, supported by Sherpas or high-altitude porters, employ over 100 porters to reach their Base Camp and cost many thousands of pounds. The table below is a break-down of expeditions in Nepal post-monsoon 1978:¹

¹ I am indebted to Miss Elizabeth Hawley for these figures.

Nationality	No. of expdns	Climbers	Ave. per expdn	Ave. per expdn Sherpas above Base Camp	
Japanese	9	90	10	51	5.5
French	5	45	9	39	8
British	4	17	4	—	—
German	3	60	20	23	8
USA	2	20	10	6	3
Swiss	1	13	13	9	9
Polish	1	20	20	—	—
Italian	1	14	14	4	4
	—	—	—	—	—
TOTAL	26	279	10.5	132	5

(19 of these 26 expeditions used Sherpas above Base Camp. Two of the German expeditions were commercial ventures attempting to take a total of 39 customers up a 7000m peak.)

This was the season of the Small Expedition as far as Nepal was concerned, with small British parties on Jannu, Nuptse and Annapurna II, and a 2-man Japanese expedition (albeit supported by 6 Sherpas) on Manaslu, all being closely watched by a sceptical bureaucracy. Yet the average number of climbers per expedition still works out at 10.5. Clearly, whatever the pundits say about small expeditions, climbers internationally are not convinced. Why should this be so?

I have to plead ignorance of the mechanics of organizing a large expedition and hope I will be forgiven if I am simplifying, but there seem to be certain discernible strands of logic influencing the initial conception. One is the need for publicity as an aid to raising funds. Despite the startling achievements of Reinhold Messner, it is still highly unlikely that the media would give the same publicity, before the event at any rate, to a small expedition as it would to a large one, whatever its objective, so organizers tend to think in grandiose terms from the start.

A side effect of publicity is the survival of nationalism in mountaineering, a fact to which the Nepalese Rules for Expeditions bear witness. The rules stipulate that the Liaison Officer should be equipped with a Nepalese flag to be planted on the summit alongside the national flag of the expedition. The officials of the Ministry of Tourism were genuinely puzzled that we should neither have nor want a flag of our own. 'But *all* expeditions have a flag', one of them remarked plaintively. Few expeditions nowadays are totally financed and organized on a national basis. But the requirements of the media are such that any expedition with a sufficiently formidable objective—and this can mean high rather than hard—and, above all, big enough to gain credibility, will soon become a national event, 'invested', as Shipton complained years ago, 'with a glamour foreign to the fundamental simplicity of the game'. Climbers become national figures and under strong pressure to succeed, if only because they know they have an audience; and success is interpreted in the same distasteful manner as an Olympic gold medal.

In some cases it is possible that the adulation accorded to success may even become a motive in itself. In Auden's 'Ascent of F6' Ransome demands of Gunn:

'You've thought enough about the ascent of F6 no doubt. . . . Have you thought about the descent, too: the descent that goes down and down. . . . Have you thought about the crowds in the street down there, and the loudspeakers and the posing and the photo-

graphy and the hack-written articles you'll be paid thousands to sign? Have you loathed them, and even as you were loathing them, begun to like it all? Have you? Have you?'

Most of you who have received this sort of treatment affect to despise it, yet I wonder how many do not secretly enjoy it, to some extent at least. For a few, it may even become addictive. But human motives are always complex and perhaps this aspect of expeditioning is best left an open question.

The principle that size inspires confidence is as true in the attracting of financial sponsors as it is in the apparently necessary preliminaries of winning over the media. The team must be large, equipment the best, the budget enormous, or the men of business will not be impressed. Heavy commitment to a particular sponsor, or a film or book contract dependent on success can exert a pressure similar to that of national expectations. And should there have been little publicity beforehand, the sponsor or sponsors will soon rectify the situation.

But whether it is financial obligation, an armchair audience or personal ambition of a not strictly mountaineering nature that is the original motivating force behind the size of a big expedition or, most likely, a blend of all 3, success becomes all important and no expense is spared to ensure it. Lavish plans become yet more lavish. To eliminate the possibility of human weakness and to enable the climbers to conserve their energy for the summit, Sherpas are employed to do the hard, and often the most dangerous, work (ferrying loads through the Khumbu ice-fall into the Western Cwm, for instance). All these people, both climbers and Sherpas, have to be fed, clothed and tented, and maybe supplied with oxygen as well to make assurance doubly sure, which means the endless carrying of a vast amount of food and equipment up the mountain—most of it catering for the carriers. Ropes must be fixed to make this process easier and safer and camps must be close together for the Sherpas to get there and back in a day. (Many modern Sherpas—and this is a reflection not on them but on their employers—are much more at home with a pair of jumars than with an ice-axe.) Finally, each camp must be connected by radio so that the whole gigantic operation can be efficiently directed from below (and, on the recent French expedition to Everest, so that the climbers could speak to their wives in Paris). All this costs an awful lot of money. The only element in success which cannot be bought is the weather and this, alas, is often the decisive one.

On some expeditions of this type an unconscious belief that there is safety in numbers seems to lull climbers into a false sense of security which influences their assessment of objective dangers. This could be one reason for the frighteningly high accident rate on the big peaks. Certainly, that sense of physical isolation, commitment, self-reliance, call it what you will, which is at once so disturbing and so exhilarating and which, if pressed, I would say is what mountaineering is all about, must be virtually nil until the summit bid. In this context, it is interesting to note Chris Bonington's comments on the climbing of Brammah I (6400m) in Kishitwar with Nick Estcourt: 'It had been a mountain holiday rather than an expedition and yet the climbing, without fixed rope and with a long summit push had, in some ways, been more committing than what we had experienced on Everest the previous autumn.'

The preconceptions, then, of journalists and captains of industry go a long way towards preserving that elephantine anachronism, the large expedition, and their support, once elicited, is interpreted in terms of more men, more equipment, more money. Another factor tending to make expeditions bigger than they need be is the

expense involved in gaining permission to climb. To a large expedition, the money involved is a bagatelle, but to an otherwise modest venture it can be crippling. In Nepal, for instance, you pay a peak fee of £500. Then you must fully equip a liaison officer. He will not go above Base Camp (in fact, of the three LOs with whom I have had dealings, a Pakistani, an Indian and a Nepali, not one has even got that far), but he must be equipped as well as the climbers and everything must be new. There are plenty of Sherpas in Kathmandu to tell him if he has not been given the very best—‘Aha! Only a Redline. We had those in the Ice-fall’—and they will probably buy the gear off him afterwards. To add insult to injury, he must be paid over and above his police salary (and at a higher rate), and insured. For the average Nepali sub-inspector it is like a cricketer or footballer being given a benefit match, and he is determined to make the most of it. Moreover, the LO cannot be left on his own at Base Camp, if he reaches it, so the expedition must employ a cook who also must be paid, equipped and insured. And because the LO’s main function is to send weekly reports to the Tourist Ministry, there has to be a mail runner as well. By the time these extra mouths have been fed and extra porters hired to carry their food and belongings, the expedition has been compelled to spend nearly £1500 for its peak and the doubtful benefit of an LO to organize its transport and porters. For a small expedition this could be well over half its total budget. The situation is very similar in Pakistan, though not yet so bad in India where the peak fee is lower and the LO is expected to return his gear. For a small expedition the temptation *not* to seek official permission can be well-nigh irresistible. One alternative is simply to increase the number of climbers so as to share the expense, on the assumption that they already own the necessary equipment; but many organizers are tempted into the vicious circle of publicity, sponsorship and even greater expense to ensure success.

A final factor making for large expeditions is lack of confidence. There are 3 essential attributes for a Himalayan climber: alpine experience, a strong stomach and the ability to acclimatize. The last is difficult to predict—many a fine climber has failed in the Himalaya on this count—though how you feel on top of Mont Blanc is, in most cases, a fair indication of how you will react higher up. The need for a strong stomach is not so bizarre as it may seem. Our excessively hygienic attitude towards food in the West leaves many of us unduly susceptible to any different forms of bacteria, not necessarily virulent ones. Yet to avoid all local food and drink is to take a lot of meaning out of the journey to and from the mountain which, for all but the most myopic, is as important a part of an expedition as the climb. General Bruce wrote, ‘One point to which I must again draw attention, and which is the most important of all for the explorer of the Himalaya and especially for the mountaineer—that is to have a really dependable digestion. . . .’ Finally, experience of alpine or other glaciated mountains is of far more value than great technical skill, which will rarely be needed. Anyone who has the physical fitness and the mental approach—in particular the refusal to be intimidated by appearances or scale (which is not the same as ignoring objective dangers)—to climb a *grande course* can attempt a Himalayan peak with a reasonable chance of success. But the Himalaya are now so accessible and have been described and photographed so alluringly that, not unnaturally, many people wish to climb there who do not possess these attributes. Lacking confidence in their own ability, or perhaps worried by the hazards of illness and altitude, they take refuge in numbers and the support (sometimes, indeed, the leadership) of Sherpas.

And so the large expedition still exists and, in all probability, will continue to do

so. Like Concorde, it will remain of immense importance to those involved, arousing admiration in the ignorant and indignation in the concerned. To me, it seems that the amount of money spent on the largest expeditions—£100,000 is not an unusually high figure—is shameful and quite unjustifiable. To argue that it is but a fraction of a big company's advertising budget or that far more is spent on football is beside the point when such a sum is not necessary to climb a mountain, however high or difficult.

Returning to small expeditions, confusion reigns over what exactly the term means. Nowadays nearly every expedition from this country pays lip service to the ideal—even the recent K2 expedition was described as small which, relative to other K2 expeditions, it may have been—yet some are clearly smaller than others. And is size gauged by number or expense, or both? It is possible for a 6-man expedition to cost half as much as a 2-man expedition with a more ambitious objective or more extravagant notions.

I wish to put forward a definition of a small expedition as one in which all equipment and food can be carried on its members' backs in a single load. Indeed, a provocative demon urges me to go further, to put my head on the block, and declare that *all* Himalayan expeditions should conform to this criterion. Such an approach to big mountains would mean that certain problems would have to wait until there were men and materials capable of overcoming them. But is that any different from saying that a rock-climb should be left for the man able to climb it free?

I would not insist that the expedition carry everything itself on the approach march, only that it should be able to do so if, for instance, the porters went on strike. Few of us from cold climates can cope at once with the fierce heat of the foothills, and it is difficult to appreciate the flora, fauna and culture of the country through which you pass with a huge load on your back. It could be argued that, by the same token, it is not possible to enjoy climbing a mountain with a load on your back and it is, therefore, only sensible to employ Sherpas to do it. I would reply that climbing—of any sort—is only partly to do with conscious pleasure and enjoyment and much more to do with those fleeting but highly-prized moments which, for the sake of argument, I shall call happiness:

'The moments of happiness—not the sense of well-being,
Fruition, fulfilment, security or affection,
Or even a very good dinner, but the sudden illumination. . . .'

Probably few of us have experienced quite the sort of revelation Eliot is talking about, but many would agree that on a climb where mind and muscle are being, or have just been taxed to the utmost, what they feel goes far beyond enjoyment, even if it is difficult to put into words and never lasts for long.

In the valleys the expedition can 'live off the land', saving its own food for higher up. This in itself will limit the number of climbers, for few Himalayan villages have the resources to feed large groups. Once the last village is left behind, the porters must be paid off, for now the expedition is living off its own fat (literally, no doubt, as well as metaphorically) and it will have to move faster than most porters are prepared to do. I have found it feasible to pack everything needed for 3 weeks in the mountains, with alpine-style mixed climbing in mind, into a 75 lb load. This is most easily done with a party of 3 crammed into a lightweight 2-man tent, as the cooking and climbing gear is no greater than it would be for 2. There

are plenty of other ways of saving weight. If I know it is all going on my own back, I personally carry no spare clothing except a pair of socks, and I am not convinced that a duvet jacket is necessary below 8000m. Several pounds can be saved by eschewing reflex cameras and additional lenses, and transistor radios, cassette tape recorders and the other means by which we insulate ourselves from our surroundings, are out of the question. Fuel can be saved by relying more on wood and dried dung, always available up to 3650m and often much higher, than on gaz or paraffin. It is worth remembering Tilman's advice that 'on any expedition, even the most serious, the tendency to take 2 of everything, "just to be on the safe side" needs to be firmly suppressed.' Tilman's words were endorsed by Lionel Terray, writing of the Alps just after the war when 'Both food and equipment were very much heavier than they are now, but above all we were weighed down by traditions as old as mountaineering itself. People always carried a little more food and gear than they really needed, "just in case"'. With the carefully designed pack-frames now on the market, it ought to be possible for climbers of average physique but sufficient determination to carry loads of 90 lb or more up to, say, 4000m. With greater care in the selection of food and equipment and a more drastic pruning of luxuries, it might well be possible for an expedition to be self-contained for 5 or 6 weeks. Admittedly, this would still impose severe restrictions on the ascent of a peak like K2 at the far end of the Baltoro glacier. But the effort would be worth making even there, for the right people; and for lesser mortals (myself definitely included!) there are plenty of easier and more accessible peaks in the Himalaya.

Load carrying is enjoyable only in a masochistic sense (though it often is enjoyable in that sense, believe it or not) but as with so many things, the reward is in proportion to the effort expended. For anyone who loves mountains and hates crowds, the satisfaction of travelling through wild, empty glaciated country, pitching a solitary tent every night in a new place and, perhaps, as the climax but not the end of the journey, reaching a summit, must surely be self-evident. Had Shipton and Tilman been able to exchange their Meade tents, Bergen rucksacks and sacks of flour and rice for the lightweight food and equipment now available, that is how they would have been climbing. 'The unattainable ideal to be kept in mind', wrote Tilman of the 1938 Everest expedition, 'is two or three men carrying their food with them as in the Alps.' The unattainable is now, I believe, attainable. I know it to be a perfectly feasible approach to small peaks up to 6500m and I can see no valid reason why it should not be applied to almost any peak; though I would echo Bruce's remark that 'the true enjoyment of the Himalaya . . . is to be found in the lesser ranges'. It is also a very cheap way of climbing. By turning a blind eye to officialdom, it is still possible to organize a 3-man trip to the Himalaya for £1000, including air travel.

Granted, with less time at your disposal you are at the mercy of the weather and the chances of failure are high; but, on the other hand, if you are not establishing camps and fixing ropes, a short spell of good weather will suffice to climb most peaks, as Messner has demonstrated several times. Without the compelling need to succeed that bedevils the large expedition, many climbers will admit defeat more easily than they would be allowed to if they were part of a team; but if survival is regarded as more important than success, this is not necessarily a bad thing.

And if you do fail, what of it? The personal rewards will have been great even if public acclaim is lacking. Mountaineering is, after all, a sport not a war, however much the language of the press may try to persuade us otherwise. Because the

World Cup and the Olympic Games display so many of the characteristics of war, perhaps that is all the more reason for mountaineers to avoid a similar confusion of ends and means. In the literature of the world, mountains have traditionally been sources of inspiration, symbols of aspiration to a better life and a refuge from the values of the market-place. The early mountaineers seem to have been aware that they inherited this tradition and trod softly over the mountains they loved. Today, not only businessmen in search of a quick profit but climbers like ourselves are trampling on them, dragging the market-place lock, stock and barrel into the hills, even into the Himalaya, right up to the summit of Everest.

Kohe Škhawr

Marek Brniak

In the summer of 1977 the Polish High Mountain Club of Wrocław organized an expedition to attempt Kohe Škhawr (7116m), the most famous of Hindu Kush highest peaks. The expedition was composed of 8 experienced mountaineers: Wojciech Jonak (doctor), Janusz Kulis (leader), Aleksander Lwow, Jerzy Pietkiewicz, Marian Sajnog (cameraman), Stanisław Waclaw, Krzysztof Wielicki and Jerzy Wilkowski.

On 29 July, by means of a hired van, the party reached a small village situated at the entrance to the Škhawr Valley. Five days later they erected the tents of their Base Camp at an azure postglacial lake in a wonderful flowering valley called Altrofe Khali (4050m).

The next day the expedition divided into parties of 2 each and went into the mountains. Their goal was to gain a height of over 6000m and spend at least 2 nights there to obtain acclimatization. On 7 August all the expedition members were back in the Base Camp. On the following day Lwow, Pietkiewicz and Wielicki approached the central pillar of the NE face of Kohe Škhawr while the rest of the expedition remained in the camp as a support party. A few days later, when the assault party was close to the summit and things looked fine Kulis, Waclaw and Wilkowski moved to the foot of a pillar situated in the right-hand stretches of the NW face of the Škhawr. On 13 August the central pillar party set foot on the summit and 2 days later they arrived safely at the Base Camp. On 16 August, after 4 days of climbing the other party also completed their route and took 2 days more to return to the Base Camp. On 20 August the expedition struck the tents and left the mountains.

Central pillar of the NE face of Kohe Škhawr The first ascent achieved by Lwow, Pietkiewicz and Wielicki on 9–13 August, 1977. The pillar is over 3000m high (4100–7116m). Average difficulties were rated Grade 3 to 5 intensified by very loose rock and lack of sound belaying. On many pitches however the difficulties came up to Grade 6,A0. The summer was fine and warm that year in Hindu Kush melting snow and exposing dry rocks but hollow formations were mostly filled in with ice that often assumed the shape of frozen cascades and huge icicles. All the rocky sections of the pillar were very dangerous due to stone avalanches the more so because the ropes used to dislodge loose rocks very frequently. The bottom part of