The Workmans: Travellers Extraordinary

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(*Plates 76–79*)

For much of this century that formidable American couple, Dr William Hunter Workman and Mrs Fanny Bullock Workman, have exercised a certain fascination on the mountaineering world. My favourite picture of the Workmans shows them at lunch, or rather tiffin, at 14,000ft on the Chogo Lungma glacier in the Karakoram. They are wearing pith helmets and sit formally at a little table, attended by a bearer wearing a puggaree of the correct design. They do not give the impression that, had you been passing, you would have been invited to take pot luck. In fact this picture encapsulates the strangeness of the Workmans. It is not only their achievement – the seven great Himalayan expeditions that they mounted between 1899 and 1912 – that is remarkable. It is also the extraordinary lengths to which they went to conceal every detail of their own personalities, feelings and indeed of their lives generally, except where these were concerned with marching across glaciers and up mountains.

During the past two years I have been fortunate enough to gain some access to this unknown region. I stumbled across what are, in effect, the Workman archives – a large collection of papers, photographs, newspaper articles and unpublished writings, together with the notebooks kept by both the Workmans during the expeditions. These papers had been in the possession of their daughter, the late Lady Rachel MacRobert.

Their background was patrician. She was the daughter of a governor of Massachusetts and he the son of a distinguished doctor. In both cases their education included polishing in Europe and their marriage, in a ceremony of almost royal splendour, was the social event of 1881 at Worcester, Massachusetts. After three years of marriage their daughter Rachel was born, and life as GP and fashionable wife continued until 1889 with no indication of the obsessive travel that was to be the most notable characteristic of their life together.

There were, however, subterranean rumblings. Some unpublished short stories by Fanny, dating from this period, bring her closer than any of her other writings. The heroine of 'A Vacation Episode' is a beautiful and aristocratic English girl who is bored with the Season, with her crowds of admirers, and with the restrictive attitude of her aunt. A determined young woman with plenty of money, she takes herself off to Grindelwald, where she rapidly becomes an experienced alpinist and infuriates her family by marrying an American. The dominant features of Fanny's life – restlessness, mountains, women's lib, and perhaps an awareness of her own plainness – are clear to see.

In the case of the Doctor, we may look for clues to his personality in the series of studio portraits, far more numerous than those of his less-than-beautiful wife, that start in 1881 and continue for more than 30 years. They show a handsome man, conscious of his good looks. The pose is a little theatrical, the mouth grim and set, the eyes betraying no interest in the observer but fixed fiercely on some distant horizon. A man not to be trifled with, not the life and soul of the party, but nevertheless a good man to be with in a tight spot.

After eight years, in 1889, the crunch came. Dr Hunter gave up work, allegedly on the grounds of ill health, and the Workmans left America, in her case for ever. In December of that year, in Dresden, the city that was to be the nearest thing to home that they were to recognise for the next 20 years, an event occurred which is, I believe, crucial to an understanding of the Workmans: their son, Siegfried, was born. The very existence of Siegfried seems to have been suppressed in all the published references.

Early in 1891 the Workmans discovered the so-called safety bicycle, which was to dominate their lives for the rest of the century. It is difficult, at this distance of time, to appreciate the immense impact of the advent of this new invention. It was made for the Workmans. The next year they almost achieved that state of perpetual motion that was to become normal. They cycled all over Italy, attended the Wagner festival at Bayreuth, and then went off to Switzerland. On 14 September Fanny climbed Mont Blanc, by the old route of the Grands Mulets and the Grand Plateau, and of course it was the guide, and not Fanny, who suffered from mountain sickness.

In 1893 they again cycled around Italy. On their return to Dresden disaster struck them. Siegfried, the little boy they had left at home, caught influenza. This developed into pneumonia and, at the age of 3½, he died. There remain several photographs of him, a clinical account by the Doctor of his illness and death, a valedictory poem by Fanny and a long-forgotten name given to a peak near the Biafo glacier in the Karakoram: the Siegfriedhorn. People deal with this kind of situation in different ways. It is possible that the Flying Dutchman life adopted by the Workmans after 1893 had something to do with this loss.

The following year they made their first excursion outside Europe, when they cycled round Algeria and first demonstrated their ability to cope with extreme discomfort. Next year they cycled round Spain. These trips resulted in their first two books. Their publisher, Thomas Fisher Unwin, had his knuckles rapped by the Doctor for putting a picture of the Workmans on the cover: 'We strongly object to any picture in which we appear.' Spain was followed by more cycling with Rachel, and Fanny climbed the Matterhorn with Peter Taugwalder, who had made the first ascent, with Whymper, in 1865.

On 7 November 1897 the Workmans left Marseilles for the still-mysterious East and 29 months of arduous travel. Their main object was to study the ancient architecture of India. A secondary objective, one suspects, was to engage in cycling on an even more colossal scale than was practicable in Europe and North Africa. It is surprising to realise that when they landed at Colombo it was their very first contact with the Indian subcontinent. He was then 50, she 38.



76. *Left*
Fanny Bullock Workman and her husband William Hunter Workman. (From *The Call of the Snowy Hispar*, 1910.) (p231)

77. *Below*
Upper Base Camp, 15,900ft, on the edge of the Hispar glacier. (From *The Call of the Snowy Hispar*,1910.) (p231)



They made a serious initial mistake. They decided to employ an Englishman as valet cum cycling luggage carrier, and much of Fanny's account of their six-week cycling tour deals with the shortcomings of this unfortunate individual. After a series of spectacular accidents, no doubt precipitated by the effect on his stability of the mass of luggage he was expected to carry on his handlebars, he finally cycled over a precipice in a rainstorm. He was observed standing, apparently unharmed, some 40ft down, but the cycle was lying 'maimed' (as Fanny described it) beneath a waterfall.

After this incident the Workmans and valet parted company by mutual consent, and from then onwards they employed native servants, though these were not always to their liking either. The index to one of their books carried the following entries under 'coolies': greed and laziness of, helplessness of, mutiny of, trouble with (eight entries under the last heading).[1] There is no denying that their attitude to those unfortunate enough to labour for them in the high mountains was unattractive. It compares unfavourably with the accounts of such contemporary travellers as Sir Martin Conway, who wrote with understanding and affection of the mountain people.

Early in January 1898 the Workmans landed in India, at Tuticorin, and started on a two-year marathon. Stage one was a meandering journey of 4000 miles from the southern tip of India to Srinagar in Kashmir. *Through Town and Jungle*[2] describes the Indian travels of 1898 to 1900, which eventually extended to 16,000 miles on the cyclometer. They described the last leg of the journey, the 198 miles from Rawalpindi to Srinagar, as a pleasant cycle ride of five days!

It was on arrival in Srinagar that they seem quite suddenly to have heard the call of the Himalaya. Their first Himalayan journey would be considered a formidable undertaking, even today, by modern trekking companies. The 250-mile trip from Srinagar over the Zoji La to Leh, made of course long before this became a jeep road, they regarded as so commonplace as not to be worthy of description. At Leh, they immediately set to work to organise a journey along the southern branch of the Silk Road to the Karakoram Pass (now closed for political reasons), an even more formidable undertaking.

Returning to Srinagar, they hurried off to Darjeeling. Their attempt to organise a trek to the foot of Kangchenjunga was perhaps their only reported failure to achieve what they set out to do. With their usual Olympian disregard for expense, they had ordered tents and a mountain outfit from London and no less a guide than Rudolf Taugwalder from Zermatt. However, I suspect that they fell out in a big way with the Political Officer in Sikkim. Certainly their account, brief and somewhat bitter, of their ten-day foray into the steaming forests below Darjeeling bears all the hallmarks of official obstruction.

The first six months of 1899 were spent cycling round Cambodia and Indonesia and by the end of June they were once more in Srinagar, poised for the start of the first of the seven great expeditions that were to be their life's work. They had engaged as guide the great Mattias Zurbriggen (Plate 79), the obvious choice since he had accompanied Sir Martin Conway on his great expedition of 1892. Almost immediately on arrival at Askole, Zurbriggen was called upon to show his mettle. There is a famous picture of him emerging from a crevasse having gone to the rescue of a sheep which, owing to 'some inadvertence', had

slipped from the copious footholds visible in the foreground. At the Great Snow Lake there was a further encounter with a crevasse. Unfortunately the Doctor was too busy helping with the rescue to set up his cumbersome apparatus and we only have an artist's impression. Even when emerging from the ice, Fanny is portrayed as being completely in command of the situation (Plate 78).

They reached the Hispar Pass, surely one of the world's greatest viewpoints, on a perfect morning and took a round of splendid photographs. They then devoted themselves to mountaineering in the area between Askole and the main Shigar valley. Here they christened two peaks: the Siegfriedhorn and Mount Bullock Workman, both names long forgotten. They also climbed a mountain they called Koser Gunge. The account of the ascent, made in a storm and marked by the loss of Fanny's topi complete with its specially made *Touring Club de France* badge, is unusually dramatic. This adventure completed the 1899 expedition.

There followed a quick whizz round Sumatra, Siam and Burma and the Workmans finally sailed for Europe, where they landed at Marseilles two years and five months after their arrival in Ceylon. One would have expected their first priority to have been to see Rachel, now 16, who had been at school at Cheltenham during her parents' wanderings. There is no mention of any such meeting in the notebooks; it seems their immediate action on landing was to mount their beloved bicycles and have a brief spin to Nice and back before taking train to Dresden. Rachel received a copy of *In the Ice World of Himálaya*[3] for Christmas.

Just two years after their return to Europe they again pedalled into Srinagar. The Chogo Lungma is one of the more difficult Karakoram glaciers, and it was a considerable achievement to fight their way as far as the upper basin in a season of exceptionally bad weather when they were, on occasion, stormbound for 60 hours on end. They also reached the Haramosh La and, thanks to Zurbriggen and good fortune, survived the ascent to what was clearly a hideously dangerous col at the head of one of the branch glaciers.

They returned to the Chogo Lungma the following summer, this time accompanied by the guide Cyprien Savoye of Courmayeur. They covered a great deal of ground around the head of the glacier and in the remote area between the Chogo Lungma, Hispar and Biafo glaciers. A problem with this expedition is to work out exactly where they went, as the map they produced differs in important respects from current interpretations. The surveying activities of the Workmans are wrapped in more dense obscurity than almost any other aspect of their lives.

They spent most of 1904–05 in Europe, and it was during this period that they developed their careers as lecturers – pursued with the same demonic energy as everything else they undertook. Hunter gave his first paper to the Royal Geographical Society in November 1904. Fanny offered to lecture in English, French or German, as required. An account of a triumphant lecture in Lyons mentions that 1000 people were crammed into the Palais des Beaux Arts and fully 700 were turned away. In November 1905 Fanny finally stormed the citadel of the Royal Geographical Society, and delivered a paper on the subject of the Hoh Lumba and Sosbon glaciers. Immediately afterwards they again sailed for the East.



78. *Left*
Fanny Bullock Workman emerging from a crevasse at Snow Lake. (From *In the Ice World of Himálaya*, 1900.) (p231)

79. *Right*
Fanny Bullock Workman and the guide Mattias Zurbriggen. (From *In the Ice World of Himálaya*, 1900.) (p231)



The fourth expedition was something of a diversion from their usual area of activity. They made a quick dash from Srinagar to Nun Kun and, displaying even less regard than usual for economy, they decided to overcome the problems presented by the 'natives' by employing no less than six porters from Courmayeur in addition to their guide Savoye. This expedition is notable for considerable mountaineering achievements on and around the great snow plateau, south of Leh, from which rise the twin peaks of Nun and Kun. It also became, in later years, the subject of a topographical dispute of exceptional bitterness even by Workman standards. The map accompanying their book *Peaks and Glaciers of Nun Kun*[4] is described as having been made by Dr W Hunter Workman from actual observation, with angles taken by prismatic compass. Years afterwards, the saintly Dr Arthur Neve, of the Mission Hospital, Srinagar, accompanied by no less a personage than the Lord Bishop of Lahore, carried out a considerable rearrangement of various features of this map.

The Call of the Snowy Hispar,[5] the account of the fifth expedition, in 1908, gives the impression that the Workmans had at last got the hang of organising these journeys; there is less of an atmosphere of perpetual irritation with their unfortunate companions and even, on rare occasions, a word of praise. Thanks to the efforts of Major Bruce, the Political Agent at Gilgit, they received VIP treatment from the Mir of Nagar, who was required to dislocate the lives of a considerable proportion of his subjects in order to meet the demands of the Workmans for food and transport. The Hispar is perhaps the most splendid of all the great Karakoram glaciers and some of the Workman photographs convey an overwhelming impression of the lonely magnificence of the region (Plate 77).

They were not the first explorers of the Hispar; in 1892 Sir Martin Conway had travelled the same route, discovered the Great Snow Lake beyond the Hispar Pass and travelled down the Biafo to Askole and Skardu. The Workmans, however, visited many of the side glaciers and the map prepared by their Italian surveyors greatly increased the topographical knowledge of the region.

The final chapter of *The Call of the Snowy Hispar* is of startling irrelevance. It deals with perhaps the most famous of the Workman battles: the case of the height of Huascaran. The opponent was worthy of their steel. Miss Annie S Peck was an American mountaineer of great distinction. In April 1908 she had ascended the lower summit of Huascaran in northern Peru, for which she claimed an altitude above 23,000ft. This claim meant that she was in direct contention with Fanny for the female alpine championship of the world. The Workmans tackled this problem with their usual energy and disregard for expense. A team of surveyors from Paris spent four months carrying out a detailed triangulation which established the height of the upper summit of Huascaran as 22,182ft. According to Fanny this confirmed her own claim to the title, based on her ascent of Pinnacle Peak in the Nun Kun massif, for which she claimed a height of 23,300ft. This has since been reduced to 22,810ft, which still gives her the edge on Annie by a few hundred feet.

It is generally accepted that the last two expeditions, of 1911 and 1912, were

in a different category from the earlier Workman journeys, partly because they broke more new ground and partly because of the higher quality of the survey work. Their last great book *Two Summers in the Ice-Wilds of Eastern Karakoram*[6] was not published until 1917 and is perhaps a little more human in tone than the earlier volumes. They decided each to write one half of the book and, a hitherto unheard of relaxation, to use the first person singular. Part one, describing the expedition of 1911, was written by the good Doctor who was always rather more relaxed, even in his personal notebooks, than was Fanny.

They started off as usual from Srinagar, crossed the Zoji La and on 4 July were half-way up to Kondus Nala. I mention this date because on that day their daughter Rachel, now aged 27, married the 57-year-old Sir Alexander MacRobert in York. Fanny in fact remembered the occasion in her notebook, but two days late.

They went on to take a quick look at the Sher Pi Gang glacier while Dr Calciati, one of the surveyors, and the guide Savoye continued on up the Kondus Nala and made a survey of the Kondus and Kaberi glaciers. The Workmans then hurried back down to the Shyok and up the long Hushe valley to explore the glaciers on the south side of the Masherbrum–Chogolisa range. To complete what must have been a very strenuous summer they returned to the Shyok valley and travelled east to the Bilafond glacier, which they ascended to the Bilafond La for their first view of the Siachen.

The expedition of 1912 was undoubtedly the Workmans' crowning achievement. They secured the services of Captain Grant Peterkin and Sarjan Singh of the Survey of India, who between them were responsible, during nine weeks of exceptionally good weather, for the triangulation of the Siachen glacier, which remains the basis of current maps. The two elderly Americans (Hunter was now 65 and Fanny 54) spent the two months in continuous strenuous travel, never below 15,000ft and, on occasions, as high as 21,000ft – a truly remarkable feat of physical endurance. The high point of the expedition was the ascent to the Indira Col, which they discovered and named. They were thus the first people ever to see that tremendous view northward towards the remote mountains of Chinese Turkestan. One cannot help envying them.

Their last book was extensively reviewed in the *Geographical Journal*, and it is sad that a considerable part of the review is devoted to criticism of the attacks made by both the Workmans on other explorers. The review ends with words that have to some extent become their epitaph: 'If they fail to reap their natural reward in the cordial appreciation of their readers it will be because of the lamentable temper they show in regard both to the explorers who went before them and to the people of the country in which they were allowed to travel.'[7]

This is fair comment. Perhaps the only excuse must be the ultimate one: the Workmans were as the Lord made them, and in their case He chose a very odd mould. He then ensured that their peculiar characteristics were reinforced by bringing them together. There is no indication that they lived in anything but perfect harmony, despite a rather chill quotation in the Commonplace Book of the 17-year-old Fanny; 'Make no man your idol for the best man must have faults, and his faults will usually become yours, thus adding to your own.'

Quite simply, the company of their fellow men was, on the whole,

disagreeable to the Workmans. This is made clear at numerous points in their writings, both published and unpublished, and extends throughout the range of the social hierarchy, from the governor of an Indian province, described by Hunter as 'a d.... f....', to the sick inhabitants of poverty-stricken mountain villages who annoyed him by begging for medicine.

On the positive side, they were people driven to a quite exceptional degree, and another entry in the Commonplace Book may be seen as a programme for their lives. Fanny had pasted in a copy of one of the bleakest poems in the language, Matthew Arnold's 'Self Dependence':

> For alone they live, nor pine with noting
> All the fever of some differing soul.
> Bound by themselves, and unobservant
> In what state God's other works may be,
> In their own tasks all their power pouring,
> These attain the mighty life you see.

There is little to add. They spent the years of the Great War in France where in 1917 Fanny became ill with heart trouble, finally dying in Cannes in 1925 at the age of 66. Hunter then returned to the United States, to Newton, Massachusetts, where he lived to be 91, still running a tight ship. The last entry in his meticulously kept personal account book is dated 1 October 1937, six days before his death. They remain a lonely, mysterious but essentially heroic couple. Let us hope they will not be entirely forgotten.

REFERENCES

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