
MICHAEL WARD

The Everest Sketches of Lt Col E F Norton

(Plates 15–23)

Of all the leaders of British expeditions to Mount Everest, Lt Col (later Lt Gen) E F Norton who led the 1924 expedition was the most talented. He was an excellent climber and organiser, with a great knowledge of natural history, and a gift for writing clear, simple and lucid prose.

When in May 1922, with Somervell and Mallory, he made the first attempt to reach the summit, little was known about the effects of altitude and the highest point previously reached was 24,600ft. They were entering a new and dangerous world. Many scientists believed that it would be impossible to get any higher without supplementary oxygen and, judged by modern standards, their clothing and equipment were primitive – no more than would be sufficient for a normal climbing day in the European Alps.

In 1924, Bruce became ill soon after the party left Darjeeling and Norton took over the leadership. The story of this attempt is one of extraordinary perseverance against misfortune, and of great achievement against heavy odds, of near success and final tragedy. Despite being extremely fatigued from their exertions at lower levels, Norton and Somervell climbed without supplementary oxygen to 28,000ft, when Somervell became ill and had to stop. Norton continued alone to the Great Couloir at 28,100ft and his description of this epic climb is a classic not only for its account of the ascent but also because of its detailed and accurate description of the effects of extreme altitude.

Because he was so modest a man, few outside Norton's family knew that he had a considerable talent for painting and had filled a book with sketches from the 1922 and 1924 expeditions. I found this out quite by chance when talking to Bill Norton, his son, at the Cambridge Alpine Club Dinner at Clare in 1991. Some weeks later, on 11 May, I visited Norton's widow Joyce, who at 90 was extremely spry, active and vigorous. She let me read her husband's diary as well as look at his sketch book. Sadly, she died in October 1992.

On his solo climb to 28,000ft Norton, who had been well schooled in climbing steep, loose and dangerous rock near his family chalet above Sixt, describes in his diary part of the traverse towards the Great Couloir as being so steep that his shoulder almost knocked against the mountain: and here his widow demonstrated by standing in the fireplace with her shoulder brushing the mantelpiece! In some places, too, the rock was overlapping like the tiles of a roof and so loose that the holds had to be replaced after use.

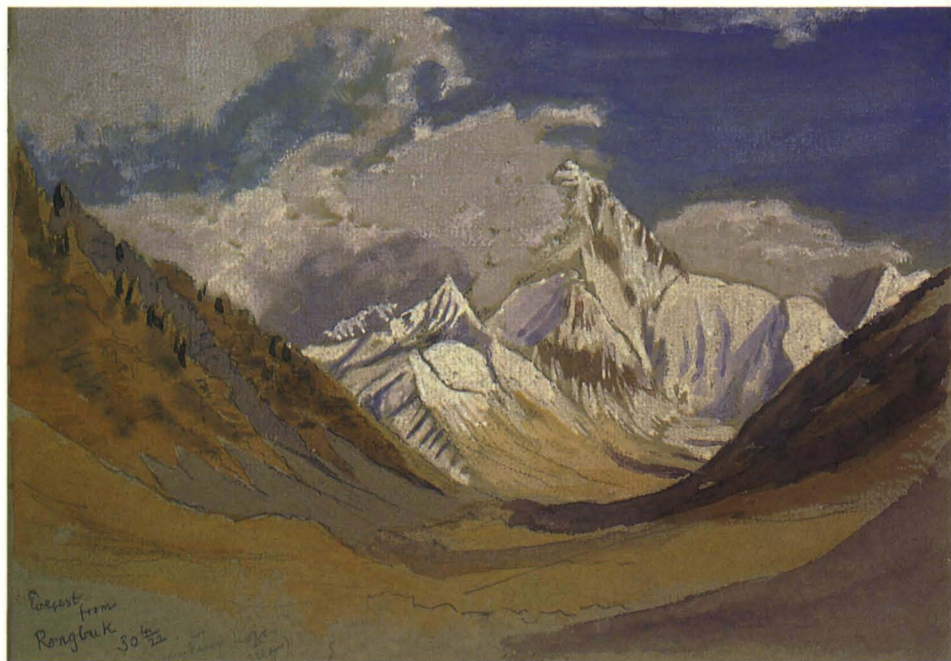
Norton's sketches cover many aspects of the 1922 and 1924 expeditions and 20 have been photographed for the archives of the Alpine Club. The selection reproduced here (Plates 15–23) show their calibre. We are privileged to see them.



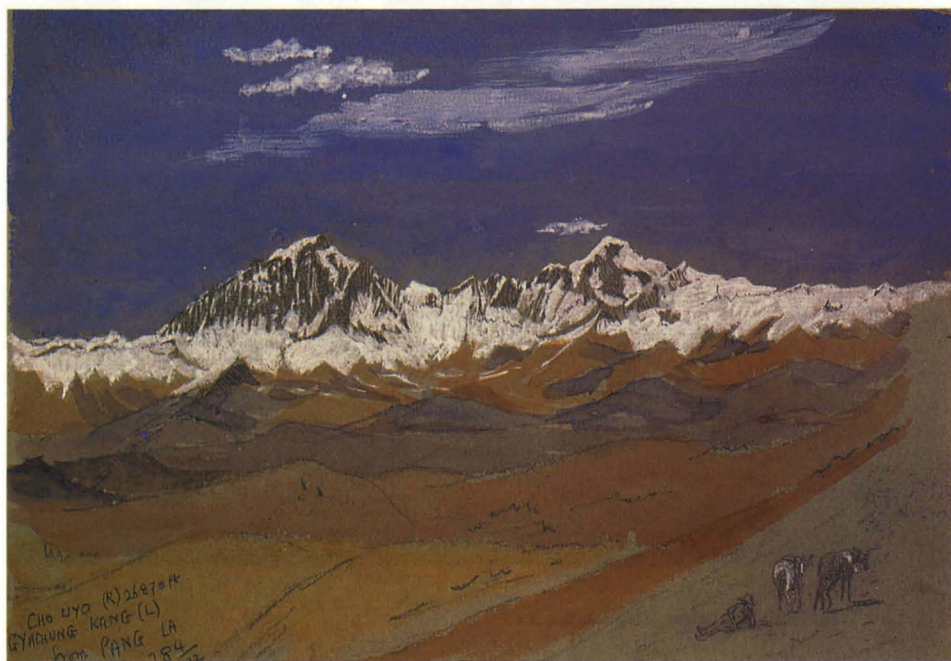
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Cho Traki
from just below
Jelep La

15. Cho Traki from just below Jelep La, 2.4.22

Plates 15–23 are sketches by Lt Col E F Norton done on the 1922 and 1924 Everest expeditions. The captions are as they appear in the sketchbooks. (p82)



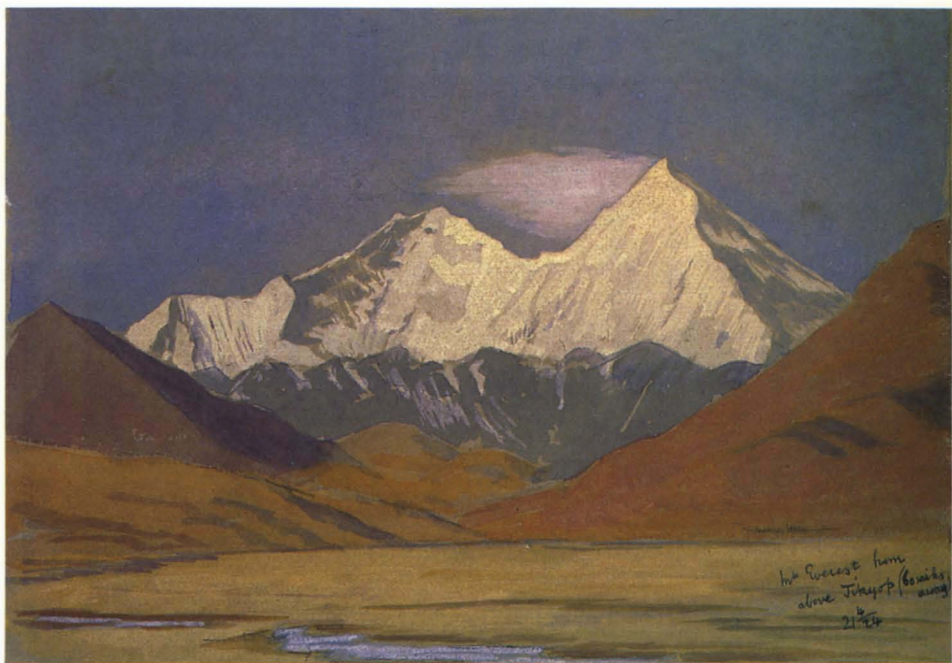
16. Everest from Rongbuk, 30.4.22



17. Cho Uyo (R) 26,870 feet, Gyachung Kang (L) from Pang La, 28.4.22



18. Chomolhari from Jelep La, 1.4.24



19. Mount Everest from above Jikyop (60 miles away), 21.4.24



20. Hazard, Noel, Geoff Bruce, Mallory



21. Tibetan figure



22. Gaurisankar, 26.6.24



23. Goodbye to the Plateau (*Primula sikkhimensis* and *Pink polygonum*),
30.6.24