MICHAEL WARD

The Great Angtharkay: A Tribute

(Plate 76)

Angtharkay was the most famous climbing Sherpa of his generation and a major figure in Himalayan exploration. His name will always be linked with those of Eric Shipton and Bill Tilman, for it was with them that he took part in a series of now legendary expeditions in the 1930s that explored key areas of the Himalaya and Karakoram. In 1950 he was sirdar to the French expedition that made the first ascent of Annapurna, the first 8000m peak to be climbed. For this achievement Angtharkay was awarded *La Légion d'Honneur*, and became the first Sherpa to receive a European honour.

Both Shipton and Tilman had the highest regard for him. Shipton wrote of him in *Upon that Mountain*: 'We soon learned to value his rare qualities, qualities which made him outstandingly the best of all the Sherpas I have known. He had a shrewd judgement both of men and of situations, and was absolutely steady in any crisis. He was a most lovable person, modest and unselfish and completely sincere, with an infectious gaiety of spirit. He has been with me on all my subsequent journeys to the Himalayas, and to him I owe a large measure of their success and much of my enjoyment.'

I first met Angtharkay at Jogbani on the Nepal border in August 1951 at the start of the Everest Reconnaissance Expedition of that year. He was just about 5ft in height and knock-kneed, though well built. When listening, he had a habit of absentmindedly plucking non-existent hairs from his chin for, like most Sherpas, he had no facial hair. His face was impassive, but his eyes were alert and he missed nothing. Unlike the rest of the Sherpas, who retained their pigtails, his hair was cut short and he wore European clothes.

Quickly and with little fuss he had our expedition organised and we set off for Sola Khumbu in the middle of the monsoon. It was an eventful journey. A flash flood swept away a vital bridge and split the party, which then had to trek to Namche Bazar by separate routes. Immediately afterwards, as we were climbing a cliff path, we walked through a large hornet's nest, and one porter was stung so badly that to avoid the swarm he leapt off the path, luckily landing in the upper branches of a tree which broke his 50ft fall. Unfortunately the medical box was on the other side of the river, so I could only prescribe alcohol as a painkiller and morale booster. Monsoon rain added to our misery, but within a few moments Angtharkay had conjured up an ancient crone, straight from the opening scene of

Macbeth, who gave us a bamboo 'pipe' of venomously strong Rakshi and soon we all felt much better. On arrival at Namche not a load had been lost.

On our way up to the foot of the icefall, Angtharkay, who knew the peaks on the Tibetan side of Everest well from his expeditions in the 1930s, failed to recognise them from the southern, Nepalese valleys with which he had been familiar since childhood. Our exploration of the Khumbu Icefall was stopped at the entrance to the Cwm by an immensely wide and deep crevasse that stretched from the West Ridge of Everest to the lower cliffs of Nuptse, and to get across would have involved bringing up a camp and then trying to climb down from one side and up the other. Angtharkay was adamant that no Sherpa should be asked to carry a camp through the icefall, for already an avalanche had nearly killed the whole party. But we could clearly see that the route to the South Col up the slopes of Lhotse was feasible and, in any event, being so lightly equipped we would not have been able to get to the Col itself.

On our return to Kathmandu we crossed the Menlung La and explored the 'blank on the map' of the Menlung basin. As we descended to the Rongshar valley, our Sherpas suddenly realised that we were a long way inside Tibet. We planned to cross back into Nepal by descending the Rongshar gorge at night to avoid detection. By moonlight, we passed through a Tibetan frontier village and stopped just before dawn at a place that we thought was in Nepal. We were wrong. Our tracks had been seen and, within an hour, a group of Tibetan levies armed with muzzle-loading guns with antelope-horn rests, and brandishing swords had 'captured' us.

As the Tibetans approached us the shouting started. Not to be outdone, our Sherpas replied, Angtharkay leading the onslaught with Messianic vigour. After about ten minutes he came over to us and suggested that we poor Europeans – Shipton, Bourdillon, Murray and myself – should retire a suitable distance whilst he and the other Sherpas sorted things out. Twenty minutes later he returned: 'Everything is settled,' he said, but added with a broad grin, 'I'm afraid it will cost seven rupees to buy them off.' Ten rupees had first been demanded, but this was considered by Angtharkay to be too high; the shouting had been the negotiations.

At the time, this incident was treated light-heartedly and is not mentioned in Shipton's book on the 1951 Reconnaissance Expedition. But it was potentially rather more serious, for Shipton had just left the Foreign Office, I was in the army, and Tom Bourdillon was a rocket scientist. In other words, all three of us were connected with the British Government. Only Bill Murray was a free agent. The incident certainly played an important part in Shipton's decision in 1952 not to attempt Cho Oyu by a route wholly in Tibet, and risk being captured again.

Angtharkay was born in 1907 at Kunde in Khumbu and later migrated to Darjeeling. His first expedition was with the Bavarians in 1931 on Kangchenjunga. In 1933 he was with the British Everest party and was



Left

76. Angtharkay
(*Eric Shipton, 1951*)
(p182)

Below

77. John de Vars Hazard
surveying,
Everest 1924.
(*Salkeld collection*)
(p224)



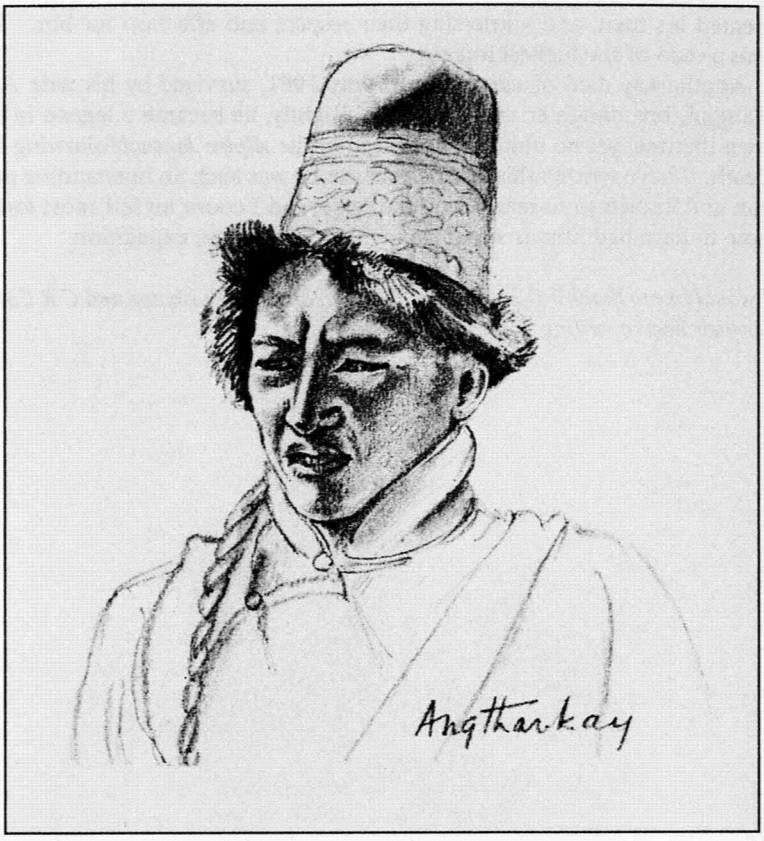
one of the tigers who carried Camp VI to over 27,000ft. In 1934 he was chosen by Tilman and Shipton, together with Sen Tensing (also with us in 1951) and Nursang, to take part in one of the boldest of all their Himalayan adventures – the exploration of the Nanda Devi Sanctuary.

In 1935 Angtharkay was with the Everest Reconnaissance party that climbed more peaks above 20,000ft than had ever before been ascended worldwide. That expedition also reached a higher point on Everest than the 1936 party, who were plagued by atrocious weather. In 1935 he was also with C R (Reggie) Cooke on Kabru. Because Cooke regarded him as the most reliable of the Sherpas he 'stupidly left him in charge of Base Camp and did not take him to the summit'. Angtharkay was also a phenomenal load carrier and once took an ill coolie's load of 80lbs, added it to his own and carried it up 4000ft. In 1936 he was with Shipton on his reconnaissance of the northern approaches to Dunagiri; he also accompanied Major Osmaston of the Survey of India on a photographic survey of the Nanda Devi basin.

In 1937 Angtharkay was again with Shipton and Tilman during their exploration and survey of the Shaksgam region to the north of the main Karakoram watershed between K2 and the Shimshall Pass. He took part in the 1938 Everest Expedition as sirdar, and he was in the Karakoram with Shipton and Tilman in 1939. By that year he was an established sirdar – number 19 on the role of Sherpas – and one of the first recipients of the Himalayan Club's coveted Tiger Medal and an outstanding mountaineer in his own right. He was just 31 years old.

There were few expeditions during the Second World War and Angtharkay had to look elsewhere for a living. By the end of the war he had become a transport agent in Darjeeling, providing ponies, cooks and porters for small local treks and expeditions.

In 1949 Nepal opened its borders and in 1950 Angtharkay was sirdar on the successful French expedition to Annapurna led by Maurice Herzog, visiting Paris afterwards. In 1951 he was sirdar on the Everest Reconnaissance Expedition already described and in 1952 he was sirdar with the Cho Oyu party. Later he took part in a reconnaissance of Dhaulagiri and joined Bernard Pierre on Nun. In 1953 Angtharkay stayed with C R Cooke and his family in England, but found the West very confusing. He was also with Dr William Siri on the American expedition to Makalu in 1954. In the same year he was one of seven Sherpas chosen as instructors at the newly-opened Himalayan Mountaineering Institute at Darjeeling. With the other instructors he went to Rosenlaui in Switzerland to the climbing school of Arnold Glatthard, and spent in all two years at the Institute. Also in 1954 an autobiography of Angtharkay, the first by any Sherpa, was published in French. In this he recounted his exploits with such modesty that without firsthand experience of high-altitude climbing, it would be hard to appreciate the calibre of his exploits.



After leaving the Himalayan Mountaineering Institute, Angtharkay became a successful contractor building roads in Western Sikkim, and in 1962 he returned to Nepal. In the same year he was sirdar to the second Indian Everest Expedition on which, at the age of 55 years, he reached a height of 27,600ft. In 1966 he bought a tract of land south of Kathmandu, situated at 8000ft just below the pass on the old motor road from the terai, and here he farmed, grew vegetables and herded buffaloes. In addition, he built a beautiful house in Kathmandu for his family and later started a trekking agency, Nepal Trekking. C R Cooke, for whom Angtharkay acted as bearer towards the end of the Second World War (and whose daughter Marjorie he taught to ride a bicycle), considered that he was 'one of the bravest, most intelligent, and adventurous of all the young Sherpas'.

Trevor Braham writes of an expedition that he made with him in Sikkim: 'It was his enthusiasm and ability that provided the main driving force, and I learnt much about human relationships by watching the way in which he

treated his men, and witnessing their respect and affection for him. He was a man of the highest integrity.'

Angtharkay died of cancer on 27 July 1981, survived by his wife Ang Yangjin, one daughter and four sons. Rightly, he became a legend in his own lifetime, yet no obituary appeared in the *Alpine Journal* following his death. I have written this tribute because he was such an outstanding person and known to so many mountaineers, and I count myself most fortunate to have had him as sirdar on my first Himalayan expedition.

I would like to thank J O M Roberts, T H Braham, Dorjee Lhatoo and C R Cooke for their help in writing this article.