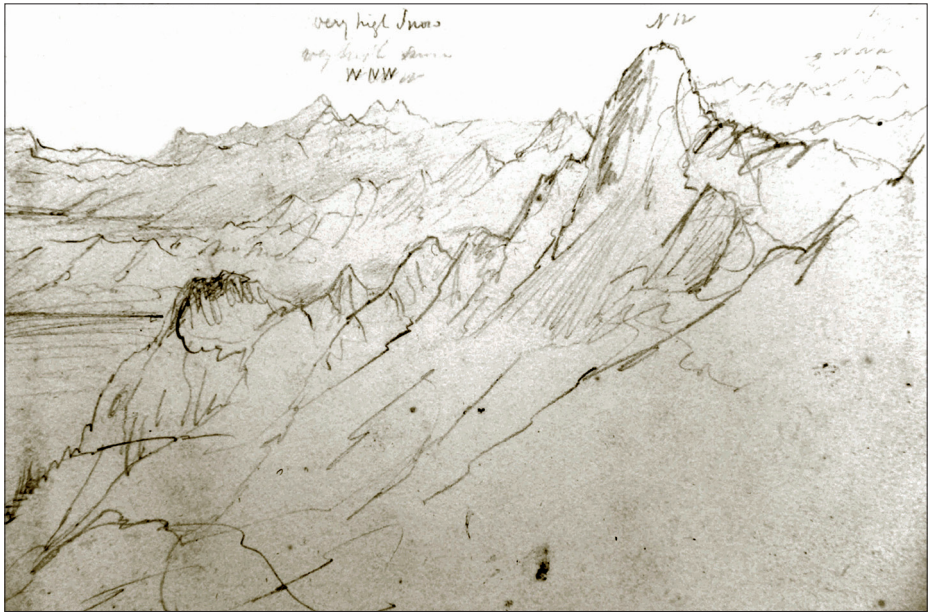
STEPHEN GOODWIN

Everest Revealed?

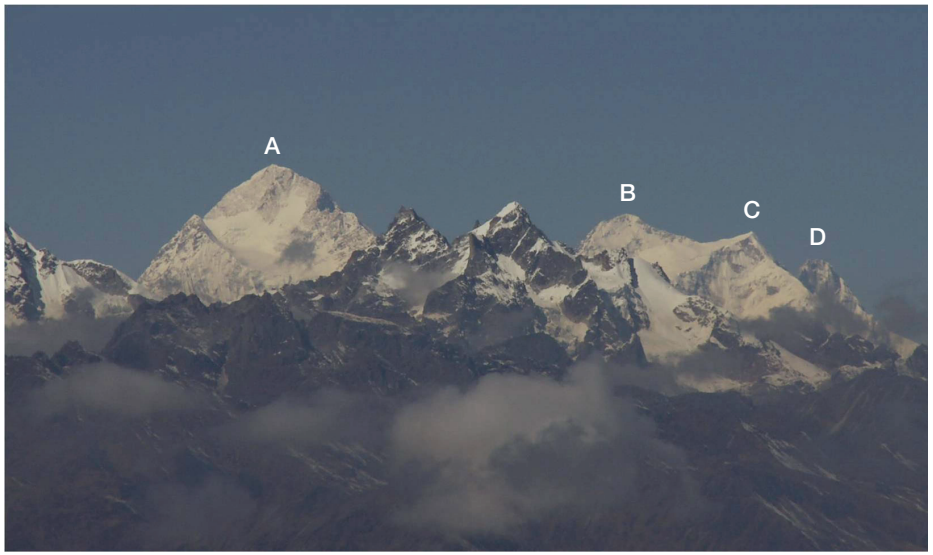


140. Sketch by Joseph Dalton Hooker from 'Choonjerma pass', Nepal, 1848. (*Courtesy of Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew*)

Is this 1848 sketch by Joseph Dalton Hooker the first recorded view of Mount Everest by a European? Drawn in situ on the 'Choonjerma pass' – now generally referred to as the Mirgin la – in eastern Nepal, it has, for many years, lain unidentified in the archives at the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew. Its 'discovery' adds one more facet to the remarkable accomplishments of Hooker during his three years of exploration and research in the eastern Himalaya.

The Mirgin la is an old trade route linking the valley of the Simbuwa Khola, flowing from the Yalung glacier on the south side of Kangchenjunga, to the valley of the Ghunsa Khola, draining the mountain's west and northern flanks. Reaching some 4500m, today the pass is used by trekkers linking the routes to Kangchenjunga's north and south base camps.

Hooker and his party crossed southwards from the Ghunsa valley on 5 December 1848, the botanist rhapsodising about the view in his *Himalayan Journals* and comparing the sunset to the effects achieved by J M W Turner.



141. 'Gigantic forms': the upper east face of Makalu (A) dominates this view westward from the region of the Mirgin la. Everest is marked B with the South Summit just visible, C is Chomo Lonzo Main and D and is reckoned to be Chomo Lonzo Middle. Lhotse is hidden by the foreground rock peak. (*Courtesy of Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew*)

> *As it [the sun] sank, the Nepal peaks to the right assumed more definite, darker, and gigantic forms, and floods of light shot across the misty ocean, bathing the landscape around me in the most wonderful and indescribable changing tints. As the luminary was vanishing, the whole horizon glowed like copper run from a smelting furnace, and when it had quite disappeared, the little inequalities of the ragged edges of the mist were lighted up and shone like a row of volcanos in the far distance. I have never before or since seen anything, which for sublimity, beauty, and marvellous effects, could compare with what I gazed on that evening from Choonjerma pass.*

Hooker had earlier noticed what he called 'the most lofty group of mountains in Nepal' lying 'a little to the north of west'. They were subtended at so small an angle that he could not measure them with a sextant, however he added, 'judging from the quantity of snow, [they] must be prodigious'.

Though the crossing is today generally referred to as the Mirgin la, there are actually three passes and a good deal of uncertainty over their respective names and heights. For what it's worth, the Nepa 1:100,000 map I used for a crossing in 2001 gives the northernmost pass as the Sinion la (4440m), the central pass as the Mirgin la (4480m) and the southernmost, and highest, as the Sinelapche la (4640m). However our Sherpas called this last one the Sinion la. According to Chandra Das, the name Choonjerma refers to none of these passes but to the terrace between the Mirgin la and the southernmost pass, and means 'collection of cascades'. For the trav-



142. Watercolour by Walter Hood Fitch, c1850, based on Hooker's observations from Choonjerma pass. (*Courtesy of Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew*)

eller, it is the sense of traversing a rough moorland balcony, crags to the east and wooded valleys and distant peaks to the west, which is strongest.

Hooker's impressions of the scene were captured in a watercolour (above) by Walter Hood Fitch, the botanical artist who illustrated Hooker's writings. Believed to have been painted in 1850, it captions the view as from the Choonjerma pass and the height as '16,000 ft', which seems a bit high, but gives no information on the distant peaks.

The watercolour appears to include Makalu and the Everest group, though it would be another two years (1852) before Radhanath Sikhdar, the Bengali chief computer, rushed into the office of the surveyor general of India and declared he had 'discovered the highest mountain in the world', and 15 years before the name 'Everest' was adopted by the Royal Geographical Society.

Hooker was director of Kew between 1865 and 1885, and it was there, at the end of 2010, that a documentary filmmaker, Peter Donaldson, unearthed Hooker's Choonjerma sketch and its significance was realised. Written above Makalu and the Everest group are the words 'very high snows WNW'. These are presumably the same peaks he writes of in his journal as being 'a little to the north of west'.

Whilst it is possible earlier illustrations or sketches may exist, attempts by Kew's illustration team to locate anything have been fruitless. Professor Stephen Hopper, Director of the Royal Botanic Gardens, said: 'We have a vast collection of illustrations here at Kew and curation is an ongoing job. It is always wonderful when we turn up a hidden gem of such historical importance. To our knowledge there are no other earlier representations of Everest by a European, in which case, this discovery could be one of the most important findings in Kew's archive.'

GEORGE RODWAY & JEREMY WINDSOR

Ama Dablam – 50 Years On

March 2011 saw the 50th anniversary of the first ascent of Ama Dablam. The ascent via the south-west ridge by Bishop, Gill, Romanes and Ward arguably marked the beginnings of technical alpinism in the Himalaya. However, in the years since, hundreds of mountaineers have reached the summit and the route is now regularly climbed by commercial expeditions using fixed ropes and the support of Sherpas. Ama Dablam's reputation today as a trade peak stands in stark contrast to the perception of those who first tried to climb it.



143. The 'Silver Hut' (at 5800 m) with Ama Dablam in the background. The south-west ridge route is roughly up the left-hand skyline. (*Courtesy of Jim Milledge*)

Until Michael Kennedy's excellent article on Ama Dablam in *Alpinist* no. 10,[1] it would have been all too easy to overlook the unique early history of this striking peak. Set in the heart of the Solu Khumbu region of Nepal, Ama Dablam first came to the attention of western mountaineers in the early 1950s as they essayed a route to the south flank of Everest. In his book *Summit: 150 Years of the Alpine Club*,[2] George Band recalls New Zealander George Lowe commenting during the 1953 Everest expedition, 'that peak [Ama Dablam] will never be climbed' (p.168). This was a reasonable prediction given what was to follow a few years later. The