Arts



152. John Innerdale, *Chomolhari and ruined Dzong from base camp*, watercolour, taken from John's Bhutan journal, 1997

JOHN INNERDALE

The Hidden Kingdom

A Painter's Story

We leave Kathmandu at midday and fly due east to Bhutan. At once we are amid spectacular snowy peaks and the moustachioed pilot of our Druk Air plane of the King's flight keeps us informed and entertained. Paro, he says, is the toughest airstrip to negotiate in the world and as he speaks I am kneeling at the feet of two Bhutanese monks in an attempt to take photographs through their window; what must they be thinking?

Diana and I are sitting close to George and Susan Band. It is the 1991 Alpine Club expedition to Bhutan comprising nine mountaineers and nine trekkers (among whom 10 are AC members) hoping to attempt a group of unclimbed peaks in the remote Basingthang region of the eastern Himalaya.

As we fly past Mount Everest, George begins an unforgettable commentary. Using binoculars he points out historical routes, identifies and remembers details of the 1953 expedition. We can see the South Col clearly and could that be the Hillary Step? Probably not. As we pass I notice the wispy afternoon clouds beginning to glow around the summit.

Later we pass close to Kangchenjunga. I sit captivated as George points out the route he took, tells the story of the final crack close to the summit with Joe Brown, reminds us of the momentous day when he and Joe looked across to Makalu, Lhotse and Everest, resisting the temptation to venture on to the summit of the 'Untrodden Peak'.

We begin the descent in a series of steeply banked turns, between ever-closer mountainsides, finally gliding gently into the Parucho valley, winding sinuously and shimmering in the afternoon light. The airport is tiny, hand-painted in bright primary colours, with a picket fence. A single room barely copes with our party, but everyone is calm, peaceful, smiling.

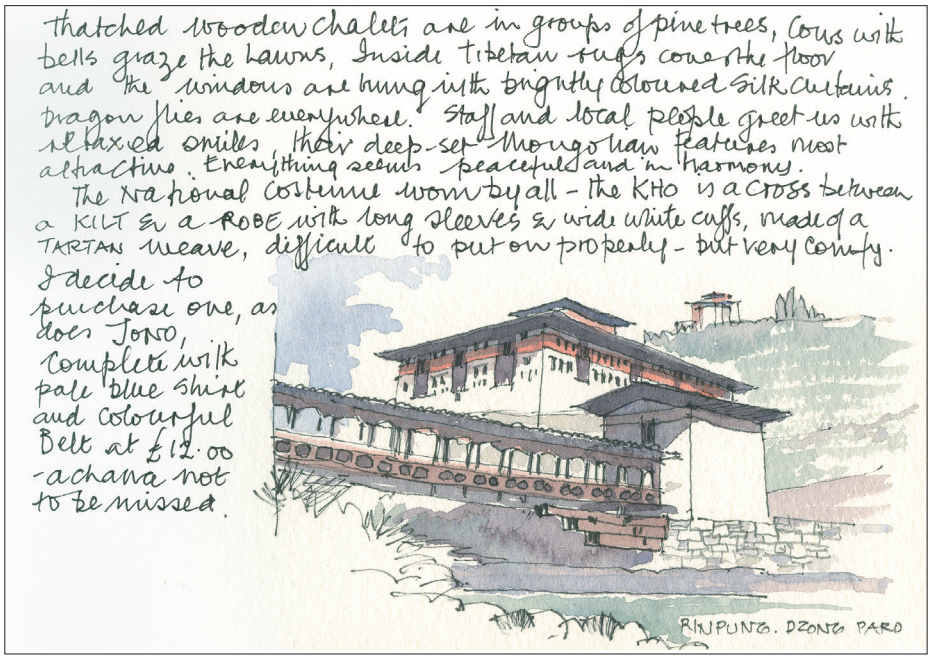
I manage a quick sketch; as unofficial expedition artist it is the first of numerous attempts to capture the place, the people and the landscape of the Kingdom of the Thunder Dragon.

Weight limitations restrict my palette to eight watercolours and six water-based chromacolours. Capturing the essential characteristic of mountains has long posed me problems. Usually seen from some distance in a constantly changing light they have to be illustrated on a small canvas or watercolour pad. The translucency of the pigment, speed of drying and the way the paper captures the ambient light of the landscape makes watercolour the most satisfactory medium.

The aim of the expedition is to combine nine trekkers and nine mountain-

eers together in a walk-in with an extended trek for the non-mountaineers during the climbing phase of the expedition, together with some cultural sight-seeing at the beginning and end. The trekkers split off at Lingshi and continue along the strenuous but spectacular Laya-Gaza to Punakha and Thimpu, arriving the same day as the mountaineers.

The trek begins in the Paro valley - an enchanting place. It's bucolic nature enhanced by the transparency of the air and the silence. The houses here are considered to be the most beautiful in the country, mostly three stories high, gaily decorated in rich vibrant colours, shingled roofs covered with chillies drying in the sun.



153. From John Innerdale's Bhutan journal (1991), showing Rin Pung Dzong with cantilever bridge in foreground.

Along the way children are emerging from school, wearing uniform in the style of the national dress, which by law everyone must wear. Men wear a *gho* and women a *kira*, which look like a cross between a kilt and a dressing gown. It becomes clear that the rich deep colours woven into national dress are used in the general decoration of buildings. These are pure, warm, peaceful colours, easy to paint.

We cross a giant cantilever bridge, emerging into a valley with walled-in paddy fields. Here and there vast farmhouses stand handsomely on the hillside. They are elaborately carved and painted, fret-work panels enclose ventilated roof spaces supported by finely dressed, tight stonework. We pass fields of millet, alpine flowers, English garden flowers and abundant

marijuana. Swallow Tailed and Bhutanese Blue butterflies surround us as we walk.

I am aware we have come to a very special place. The thin atmosphere enhances the landscape, intensifying the colours, emphasising the effect that 'purple, violet and ultramarine blue has on everything we see'. *Ruskin*

We stop at the Rin Pung Dzong, a fortress built in 1646, the outer walls of which are trapezoidal masonry, six storeys high. This is Himalayan architecture of a cyclopedian style and scale. We speak in hushed tones as monks in crimson robes surround us praising Buddha with their chanting. A gong is sounded, an old monk emerges with a whip and boy monks

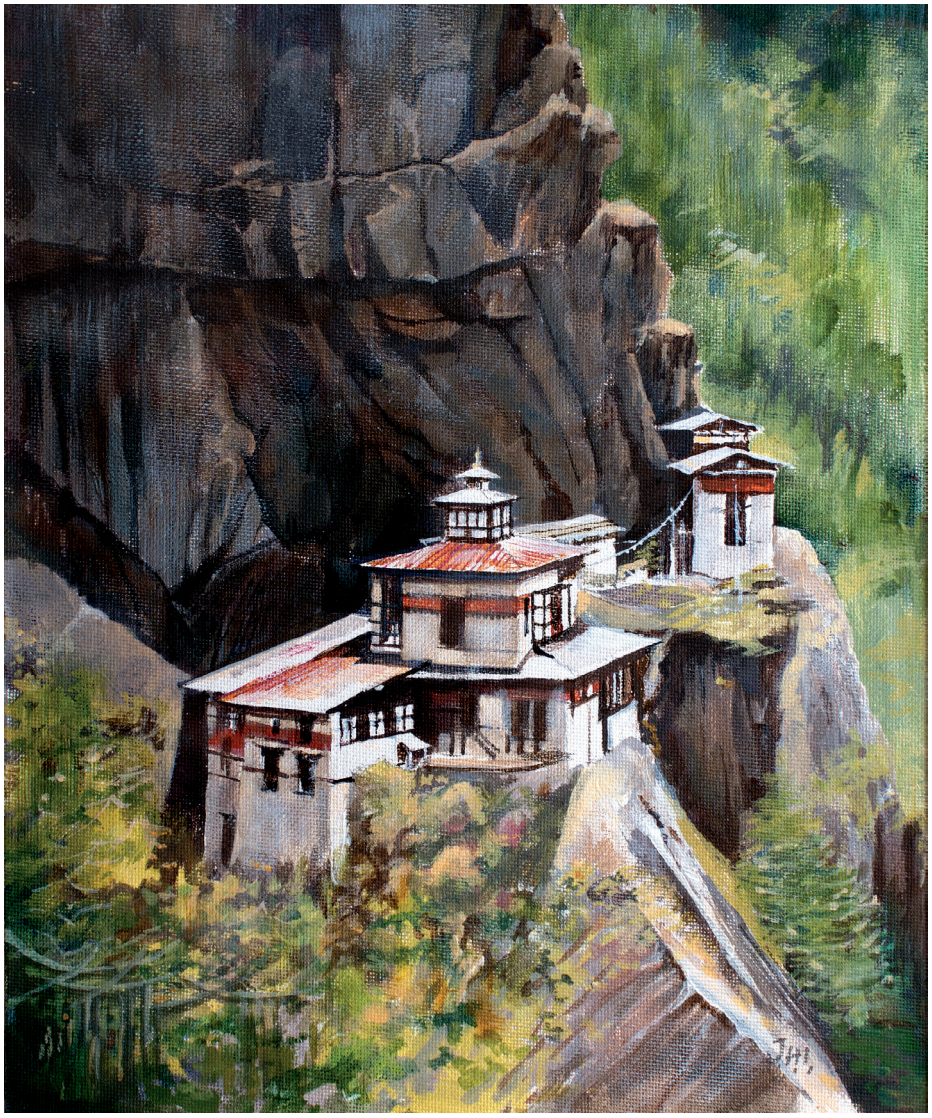


154. John Innerdale, *Rin Pung Dzong, Bhutan*, watercolour 31 x 23 cm, 2007.

scamper quickly away. I make a sketch of the courtyard with deep purple shadows, blood red decorations set against cobalt violet sky. Monks form a chattering, happy queue as they enter a chapel.

We continue along the valley rising through resin-fragrant woodland, passing numerous white-washed chortens. These represent Buddha's mind and are consecrated. At last we cross a meadow and climb through a forest of oak and rhododendron to a plateau festooned with white fluttering prayer flags.

We look across a deep valley to the black cliff face upon which the Taktsang Lhakhang clings, overhanging the valley 800 metres below. This breathtakingly beautiful view is an unmissable chance to paint. It is the



155. John Innerdale, *Taktsang temple, Bhutan*, chromacolour, 26 x 32cm, 1991.

most venerated pilgrim site of the Himalayan world. Known as the 'Tiger's Nest' it is an intensely spiritual place where in the eighth century, Guru Rinpoche miraculously flew on the back of a tigress from Tibet to convert the Bhutanese to Buddhism. I am reluctant to leave this place and before doing so spin the prayer wheel in the nearby chorten, the bell ringing with each turn of the drum, sending blessings out ceaselessly.

The following day we assemble at the Drugyel Dzong, a burnt-out castle

where Bhutanese armies locked horns with Tibetan invaders.

We load up 35 ponies and for several days follow the river through forest and meadow acclimatising until reaching the Chomolhari base camp. This is where the adventure begins.

Chomolhari's south-east face towers over the camp, blindingly white. As I attempt to paint this majestic view, there is an inner tension; is the attraction more as a climber than an artist? The links are strong but which is the dominant?

I am confronted with a vast white vertical surface which I'm attempting to record on a small white vertical surface; so where to begin? As usual, with the sky, which dominates so much of my work.

Leaving the camp we climb to the summit of the Nyile La (4890m) eventually leading to the unclimbed summit of the Nyile Le (5090m) and from here together with Band, Lovatt and Langmuir I can see the entire northern range bordering Tibet including Jitchu Drake (6989m), Tserim Gang (6526m), Takaphu (6523m) and Garula Kang (6574m).

The final day, before the climbers and the trekkers part company, is spent visiting the Lingshi Dzong. It is a gem; built in 1668 it has been under siege several times by Tibetans and its masonry walls are peppered with holes for defence. Beneath are prison cells to house temple robbers. I enjoy a leisurely afternoon sketching and painting in the shadow of a comfy wall accompanied by a lonely monk who hums and whispers to me as I work.

The following morning five of the nine climbers set off over the Yale La (4940m) to the Basingthang valley, traversing high above the river Chu to an idyllic base camp site. Our team of Singye (sirdar) and six assistants set up the village of mess, cook, toilet and five sleeping tents. This is a most happy energetic team who for two weeks looked after our every need. Here too is a perfect location for landscape painting. As we acclimatise the weather is set fair and we work out a strategy to set up two tented camps for each group of mountains. This will enable as many of us as possible to attempt significant routes.

With the arrival of four more climbers we are now ready to go. The first party of Band, Blacker, Langmuir, Mould and Nixon make the first ascent of Ngum Tang Gang III (5640m). Over the next 10 days first ascents are made of Wohney Gang (5589m) by Mould, Lovatt and Langmuir and Ganae Gang I (5487m) and Ganae Gang II (5460m) by Nixon, Band and the Innerdales.

On our rest day at base camp, George Band and I climb the Riburi Ridge where George finds a perfect set of blue sheep horns. I manage a half day painting the Wohney Gang headwall and the Ganae Gang group. As I work George explains the geological history of the range we have climbed, revealing what lies beneath the snow and ice that I am struggling to portray.

The face of Ganae Gang is wondrous, with the sun setting and a golden light emphasising the shadows from the ridge. I sit entranced painting in haste as a deepening blue Bhutanese sky emphasises and compresses the shadows. As the light fades we reach base camp to find Eric, Jerry and



156. John Innerdale, *Lingshi Dzong, Bhutan,* watercolour 17 x 14cm, 1991.

Peter back from their abortive attempt on Peak 5567, which was part of the exploration around the Pubukang glacier from Camp III. Here we came across footprints of blue sheep, bear, pugs of snow leopard and large prints of a biped that Singye says are 'Mountain gorilla or Yeti'. I photograph these, placing my ice axe beside them to give true scale. They are massive.

After a relaxing walk out we are reunited with the trekkers for a week of relaxation, some celebration, visits to important monasteries and spectacular *dzongs*. Eventually we journey across the kingdom to Bumthang to enjoy the annual 'Black Hat' Buddhist Festival of Dancing, yet another chance to paint and absorb the beauty, peace and harmony of the Kingdom of the Thunder Dragon.

Later, on our return to Paro, we visit the Minister for Home Affairs and put before him a list of the mountains the expedition has climbed together with proposals for the names of each peak, hitherto shown as altitude points on the simple map we had of the region. These are translated into Bhutanese, are accepted and now form part of the updated survey of the country.

Note: An account of the climbs accomplished as part of this expedition appeared in *AJ* Vol 97, 'Exploring in the Hidden Kingdom', by Peter Mould.

TERRY GIFFORD

Noyce's Cambridge Mountaineering Poets

FR Leavis dominated my formative years at Cambridge and his stringent approach to criticism effectively delayed my publishing, if not actually writing poetry, for decades. When so few writers, and even fewer poets, could be admitted to the Leavis canon, how could any contemporary young scribbler hope to write 'literature'? Of course, for such intimidating delays the literary world should be, not only grateful, but more relieved than it could imagine. My early poetry was an extended recovery of the long-stifled expressions of adolescence. But, having broken through several glass cornices, assailed the mountains of the mind and glimpsed the real cliffs of fall, no-man-fathomed, and wanting to deal with that steep as far as is personally possible (i.e. up to HVS), I'm an advocate of mountaineering poetry. Either seeking control of language at the edge, or being playful with the dangerous sublime of forms, mountaineering poetry claims a space for man's 'mounting spirit in his bone-house', to continue the Gerard Manley Hopkins metaphors. It is to poetry that we turn to understand the pull of mountains, sometimes in the guise of prose. And it is the editors of the glossy magazines and journals who are scared stiff by the stuff, bold mountaineering gatekeepers that they are. But no such fear in that most astute of literary mountaineers, the Kingsman, Wilfrid Noyce, whose anthology, *The Climber's Fireside Book* (Heinemann) published posthumously in 1964, I'd like to revisit to consider the eight Cambridge mountaineering poets he included there.

If you're still with me, I'd better come clean. None of my books of mountaineering poetry has been short-listed by the Boardman Tasker judges. I was not a student of Leavis's at Downing in the 1950s, but I was taught in the early 1960s by recent students of Leavis who'd got jobs at the Cambridge Grammar School for Boys (notably by Frank Glover Smith, later of Sussex University, who let us Sixth Formers doing English listen in the lunch-hour to the first records by one Bob Dylan – not altogether irrelevant here). Then I went to Sheffield to train to be a teacher because, first, it was a real place like those where most of the working people of England lived and, second, it was close to crags.

The Boy Scout leaders who ran a troop up Newmarket Road in Cambridge had taken us to the Lakes and hired Des Oliver to take us climbing on Glaciated Slab in Combe Ghyll. To these two inspirational forces - Leavis disciples and Scout leaders - at work outside the university for the children of college servants like me, I am only now learning to be truly grateful. By such wonderfully strange and generously given routes