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1952 EXPEDITION TO WESTERN NEPAL

By OLEG POLUNIN

Luncheon lecture, illustrated by a film and slides, given to the Royal Central Asian Society on Wednesday, October 14, 1953, Admiral Sir Cecil Harcourt, G.B.E., K.C.B., in the chair.

The CHAIRMAN: It is my pleasure today to introduce to you Mr. Polunin, who has very kindly come to lecture to us this afternoon. Mr. Polunin by profession is a master of Charterhouse, but in his spare time he goes off for the sort of thing he is going to talk to us about this afternoon.

He carried out a previous expedition to Nepal in 1949. His expeditions were primarily botanical, but today he is going to talk more about the country and the people.

I THINK that before I start the narrative of the expedition it would be just as well to give you a short outline of the previous explorations that have taken place in Nepal.

As most of you are no doubt aware, Nepal has been—and still is—very much a closed country to European visitors. It was as late as 1814 that the first direct contact was made with Nepal when the Gurkhas, in an aggressive mood, sent military sorties southwards over the borders in an attempt to annex British Indian territory in the Gorakhpur district. A small expeditionary force was sent into the treacherous Nepal terai to deal with these able fighters from the hills. As a result of this minor war and the treaty that followed in 1816, the King of Nepal agreed to allow a British representative to take up residence in Katmandu. From this developed the firm and prolonged friendship that we have held with this remote country. The Nepalese have, however, continued to guard their country jealously and only a few selected people have been allowed to travel to Katmandu, and no Europeans have been given permission to travel in the mountainous districts before 1949.

In outlining the exploration of the flora and fauna of the country, there are a few names I should mention. Wallich, the great Asian botanist, stayed a year in Katmandu in 1820-21 and made a classic collection of plants. He was not allowed to travel outside the valley, but he sent out native collectors who brought back specimens from the surrounding mountainous districts—particularly from Gosainkund. His extensive collection from Nepal was a landmark in the study of the Himalayan flora. It is only quite recently that we have been re-collecting some of the plants that Wallich found over a hundred years ago.

Then mention must be made of Sir Brian Houghton Hodgson, who for over twenty years was the British Resident in Katmandu. He made extremely fine collections of mammals, birds and reptiles, and he contributed 127 papers on the fauna of the Himalaya. He was perhaps even better known as a scholar of Sanscrit Buddhist manuscripts, and he formed a large collection which is distributed among the museums and libraries of the world.

The first authentic scientific expedition to the mountains was made, as far as I am aware, by Sir J. D. Hooker in 1848. He travelled from Sikkim up the Yangma valley to a high pass leading into Tibet. He made an important collection of plants and wrote a memorable account of the journey in his Himalayan Journals.

From the botanical point of view, two native collectors should also be mentioned. They are Lall Dworj and Sharma, who collected plants and seeds from central and eastern Nepal between the years 1927 and 1937. Their collections were sent back to this country where they caused a great deal of interest, for they included many species which had never before been seen. Among them were species of *Primula* and *Meconopsis*—some of extreme beauty—and from their gatherings of seed a few have now been established in our gardens as rare and exotic plants.

Consequently, until 1949 we had but a tantalizing glimpse of the flora and fauna of the more remote parts of Nepal given to us by the people mentioned above and by other explorers and mountaineers who had, in some cases surreptitiously, spent a few days within Nepalese territory.

The new era of exploration began in 1949, when the Nepalese Government came to favour the policy of allowing a few selected European parties to travel in the remote parts of the country. I think I am right in saying that the first of the more extensive expeditions took place in 1949, when H. W. Tilman led an expedition—of which I was a member—to the Langtang Himal, lying north of Katmandu. Thereon followed a series of expeditions, mostly mountaineering and exploratory, but in a number of cases a certain amount of primary collecting of plants and zoological specimens was carried out. I should like to emphasize that the enumeration of species is all that we can hope for from these first collections.

In 1950 there followed Tilman's and the French expedition to Annapurna; the Everest reconnaissance expedition in 1951; the Swiss attempt on Everest and the British Cho Oyu expedition in 1952; while the present year has seen not only the conquest of Everest but several other expeditions to the mountains, as well as journeys of anthropologists, ornithologists, etc., who are making a start on the investigation of the many problems of life in Nepal.

The 1952 botanical expedition, about which I shall speak, selected an area which was quite unknown. The film which I am going to show you, and which I must explain is an amateur affair of my own, was taken in country which no European has ever before visited.

The region to be explored lies between the Karnali and the Kali Gandaki rivers, a highly mountainous area, mainly in the provinces of Salyana and Jumla. The expedition was largely botanical and it was sponsored by the British Museum (Natural History) and the Royal Horticultural Society: its aim was to make a full collection of plants growing in this area. Herbarium specimens—*i.e.*, dried plants—were collected for the Museum and live plants and seeds for the Royal Horticultural Society.

The expedition members were Mr. L. H. J. Williams of the Natural History Museum, Mr. W. R. Sykes from the Royal Horticultural Society

Gardens at Wisley, and myself. We took with us six native plant collectors, kindly arranged for us by Mr. F. Ludlow.

We planned to make our base at Jumla and from there split into three independent parties in order to investigate as wide an area as possible.

There were many initial difficulties in planning such an expedition. From Katmandu we could get no reliable information about porters, food, or even the kind of currency used. About Jumla, our prospective base and the capital of the province of that name, the only information we could obtain was that the people were called Jumlies and that in the winter they came down to the lower villages, bringing partridges and other birds to sell! But important details such as the possibility of being able to exchange currency or of buying quantities of basic food like rice and flour were not known to us. One great asset was, however, the Indian Survey maps—made by native surveyors—which we found very useful. But, as you will see, Jumla proved to be a well-chosen base for our exploratory journeys.

[A film describing the expedition, entitled "The Nepal Himalaya," was then shown, and Mr. Polunin gave the following commentary.]

From the railhead of Jarwa, in India, we took to our feet and penetrated the first low range of hills in Nepal—the Siwalik. We collected forty coolies to carry our thirty-six collecting boxes and stores of "luxury" foods like butter, sugar and tea. After each day's march we had to engage a fresh lot of coolies, which caused endless delays and minor difficulties. The journey to Jumla took us twenty days. The first part lay through the low country of the terai and outer foothills. We passed through dense Sal forests and across hot dry slopes of Chir Pine and cactus-like Euphorbia. A race of people called the Tharu lives here: their villages are situated in the valleys and they cultivate rice, maize and other cereals. They are able to withstand the virulent form of malaria which occurs in this low-lying district—the Nepalese hill races will only pass through these regions in the dry or cold seasons. The Tharu carry their loads by a yoke across the shoulder, while the hillman uses the familiar headband or "namlo."

There were many rivers to cross and a number of methods were adopted. The first large river was crossed by dug-out canoe carrying three or four passengers, so that you can imagine the time it took to take across our party of nearly fifty and our equipment.

On the fifth day we climbed higher into evergreen oak forests. Numerous villages occurred here, and wherever the gradient of the slope allowed cultivation there were many terraces.

In early spring (March) harvesting of the winter crops was in progress in the lower valleys. Very primitive methods are adopted. The women cut off the ears of corn with small curved sickles—in Central Nepal I have seen them pull off the individual ears with two bamboo sticks. The ears are tied into little sheaves and laid on the mud roofs of the houses to dry, while in wet weather they are stacked and covered in birch-bark for protection against rain. Flailing is the regular method of separating the grain from the chaff. Winnowing is done in the wind, while grinding is carried out with small hand grindstones or by water mills; in some cases

the grain is pounded with heavy wooden trunks in a hole in a rock. The flour is generally mixed into a dough and made into a thick pancake and is often eaten with chillies and salt. We did not find this very digestible and made our own bread with dried yeast. Rice was our second staple food.

In spring the narrow terraces were also being prepared for the summer rice crop. Ploughing is done by ox teams pulling a light wooden plough in which even the ploughshare is made of a hard kind of wood. The only iron articles widely used were small single-handed hoes and sickles. After ploughing, the terraces are irrigated—water often being carried over dykes in wooden aqueducts—then the flooded fields are churned up with a kind of long-pronged harrow; they are now ready for planting.

A short fishing sequence shows one method by which fish are caught in the middle hill rivers of Nepal. In a fast run where there is a considerable fall in water level, small artificial waterfalls are constructed by placing bamboo rods across the flow of water. The fish collect in the fast water below and attempt to leap the waterfalls, which are 6 to 8 feet high and beyond their powers. When fish are required a net is thrown into the pool and the fish are driven into the net. Generally several youths jump into the pool and drive the fish from under the waterfall. The fish—a species unknown to me, I am afraid—went to form a very bony curry.

Bridges are very rare indeed. One spanned the Bheri river below Jajarkot. It was carried in pieces by coolies from Jarwa, eighty miles away, and erected on the site by Indian engineers. It came from Aberdeen, Scotland!

We visited for the first time the town of Sallyana. Here there is a bazaar, and on our shopping expeditions we were accompanied by a hundred or more inquisitive villagers, who obviously had never seen anything quite like us before. We were equally interested in them, and such a following had the advantage that no shopkeeper would dare to overcharge us with so many present at the deal. There is a Governor, elected by the Government at Katmandu, and a small number of local militia stationed at Sallyana, but no regular troops.

North of Jajarkot the hills and passes grew progressively higher. To reach Jumla we had to cross a pass of over 13,000 ft. in height. It was in deep snow in early April. To get to it we climbed through heavy forests of Himalayan silver fir and birch. The scarlet-flowered tree rhododendron was coming into bloom, while primulas were in flower in the meadows.

The pass could only be crossed by night, when the snow was firm, and accompanying us were many flocks of sheep and goats carrying loads. Each animal had two saddle-bags tied across its back. They contained grain—about 30 lb. of it—which was to be taken to the higher villages, where it was exchanged for salt from Tibet. Several shepherds attended each flock, and they too were heavily laden with cooking and camping equipment necessary for months of travelling in the high mountains. Fierce sheep dogs—a protection against bears—followed each party.

Jumla lies at 7,624 feet above sea level in the fertile valley of the Tila river. It is surrounded by low hills covered in pine forests while round the horizon there are a number of higher mountains, snow-covered in April; the Great Himalaya lie further back, out of view. This town is the

administrative centre of a district the size of Wales. It has a Governor, appointed by Katmandu, a wireless operator, a number of local officials and a small local militia force. A school has recently been started and there is a small bazaar, but there is no doctor or hospital. As there are no roads or transport other than man portorage, a relatively small amount of trade is carried on. Architecturally the place is disappointing. The temple with its tin cupola and tall flagpoles is the only vertical feature. The houses are low with flat mud roofs; only the Governor's "palace" has two stories.

We happened to be in Jumla during the August festival—Jantra—and I was fortunate enough to film the various dances. The populace collected each afternoon in the court of the Governor's palace and for an hour or two before sunset there was much dancing and music-making. It was not a simple matter to interpret the dances, but the Governor did his best to explain to us what was happening—he was the only English-speaking person in the province. On the first day the children dressed up as cows for the "cow festival" and shuffled in formation round the courtyard. At the same time a maypole-like effigy, carried by a dancer, swung into the centre; to it were attached ribbons. Each dancer held a stick in one hand and a ribbon in the other, and while the maypole twisted and turned the dancers circled round holding the ribbon and beat the sticks of the adjacent dancers. The maypole was surmounted by the image of a human figure and from its arms hung clothing. We were informed that these were the clothes of a wealthy person who had died during the previous year and that the dance was commemorative of this person.

On the second day the children were rouged and powdered and they performed the "rice-planting festival." It was a simple figure in which the stooping motion of planting rice was apparent. There were also a number of other dances danced by youths, such as the Gurkha dance, which, I was told, the soldiers dance on their return from service in other countries. The "English" dance was a comic affair in which the dancers, with umbrellas and suspenders over their trousers, strutted about to the first few bars of the tune "Coming through the rye."

On the third day the "military and shikar festival" took place. In this there was a fine Tibetan mask with long flowing mane and glinting mirrors set in a fearsome face. An agile male dancer danced in this mask and struck many frightening attitudes at the audience.

There were other small groups of dancers showing their paces while these main dances were going on, and most of the time there were three separate "bands" playing hard. The official militia band consisted of European drums and clarinets, but the peasants of the surrounding villages brought in batteries of long native drums, and there was a third hybrid band with melodion, cymbals and drums in the Indian style.

On the eighth day, the Governor informed us, the god Siva fights and overcomes the Devil in the streets of Jumla, but, alas! we were not able to wait to see this culminating spectacle.

From Jumla, Williams, Sykes and I took separate routes. As I owned the ciné camera, it follows my route; this was to cut through the Great Himalaya and explore the Tibetan-like country to the north of the main range. I took two plant collectors and several Jumla militia men for escort

and planned to be away for two months. I travelled eastwards to the Barbung Khola and soon found myself in very steep country. A faint track ran across the great cliffs of the gorge or dropped down among the huge boulders of the river bed. Towering two miles above me were the snow and ice peaks of the Himalaya, 20,000 to 25,000 ft. high. The Dhaulagiri Himal formed a screen to the monsoon and there was a sudden change in climate, vegetation and human culture. I passed from alpine meadows and heavy forest to dry stony slopes covered in low-growing shrubs; and from a Hindu to a Buddhist community. Groups of gaily coloured chortens and long lines of mani walls appeared suddenly in the wilderness of rock and cliff, and rounding a bend one sometimes came across a small village surrounded by narrow terraces with strips of bright green corn. Bhotia tribes inhabit these villages during the summer. They cultivate a little corn, but most of their time is spent bringing in yak-loads of salt from over the high passes in Tibet.

I was able to photograph a tented trading post where the Bhotia bartered his salt with the shepherds who brought up grain from the lower villages in the foothills. The small sheep saddle-bags are exchanged for large horse-hair sacks and each yak will carry 150 lb. over passes exceeding 19,000 ft. The highest pass over which I saw sheep carrying loads was over 18,000 ft.

Chharkabhotgaon was the highest Bhotia village and it was situated at an altitude of over 17,000 ft., according to the map. The houses were built in the form of tall castle-like towers and each was surmounted by piles of brushwood, for there are no forests in this semi-arid area and fuel is very scarce. On each side rose steep, stony hillsides to the mountain tops, which were at the general level of over 20,000 ft.

On my way westwards I crossed several passes of over 19,000 ft. and at one point went up to the Tibetan border at the Marem Bhanjyang pass (19,600 ft.). Even at this altitude there were flowering plants. A vast landscape of brown mountains with an occasional summit in snow stretched before me, and I could just see a corner of the Chungphari Tal—a lake in Tibet with a salt depot in the vicinity.

I was unable to continue my journey westwards, as the onset of the monsoon had made some of the river crossings impossible. I went southwards instead across the Great Himalaya again and eventually returned to Jumla.

Mr. POLUNIN showed a final film sequence and some slides of some of the most attractive plants that were collected. He explained that in making these collections it was necessary to gather plenty of material of each species, and where possible whole plants should be collected. One of the greatest problems was that of drying the specimens—the quicker and more carefully they were dried the better the results. The specimens had to be changed every day into fresh drying paper, and this would often mean three or four hours' work daily on changing papers alone. Seeds were collected and dried in the sun. After separating the seeds from the chaff they were stored in the dry in cloth bags. The seeds and live plants were flown back from India. On the return journey the crucial time was the slow march through the low-lying hills on the borders of India, where

conditions were moist and hot; if there was no delay here plants could often survive the journey unharmed.

A total of over 5,000 herbarium specimens were deposited at the Natural History Museum, while 150 gatherings of seeds and about 250 live plants were sent to the Royal Horticultural Society for culture at their gardens at Wisley and for distribution.

The CHAIRMAN: Our time is nearly up, but we have about three minutes left, so there is an opportunity if anybody wishes to ask a question or make some brief remarks.

Colonel COBB: Did Mr. Polunin come across any game?

Mr. POLUNIN: The only things we saw were the blue sheep; and there were, of course, bears.

Colonel COBB: Red?

Mr. POLUNIN: No; black. I also remember seeing a wolf, but that was all.

The CHAIRMAN: In the absence of any other questions, I know you would wish me now to thank Mr. Polunin very much indeed for coming here and giving an interesting lecture and showing wonderful pictures. He has given a wonderful description of this little-known and entirely primitive country and we are very grateful indeed.

