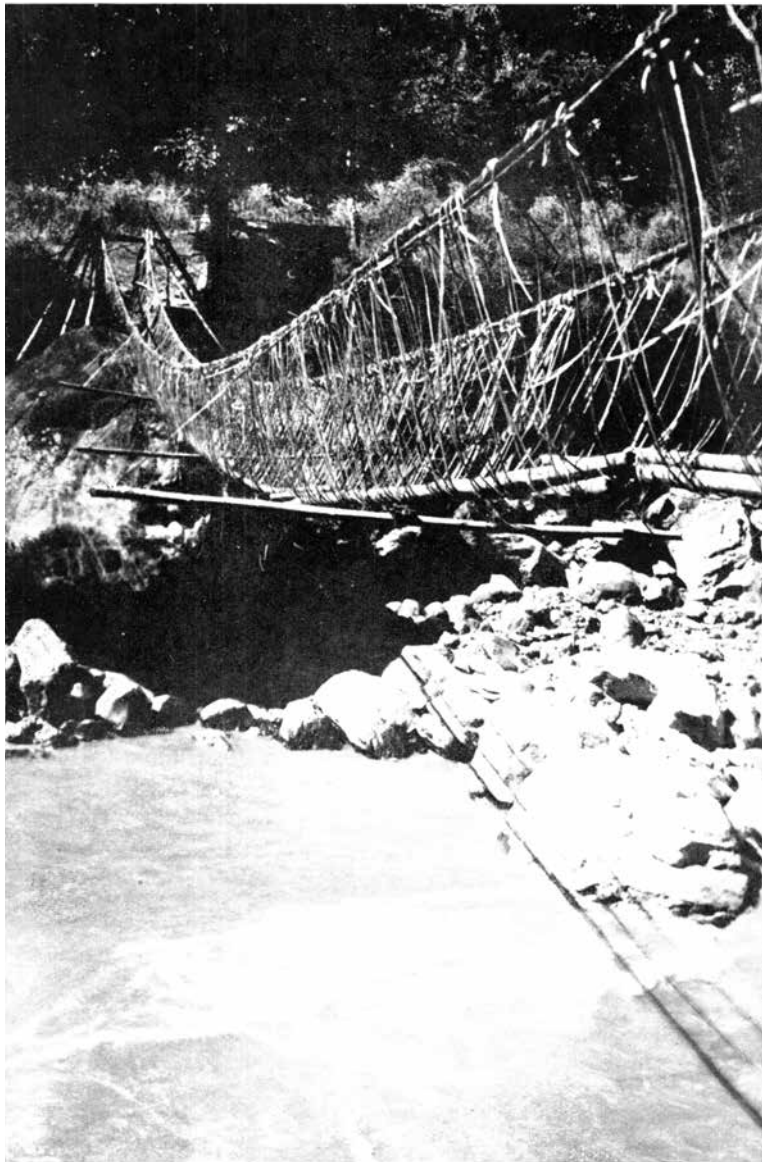
WHEN MEN & MOUNTAINS MEET

H. W. TILMAN



Cane suspension bridge, Sikkim type,
bamboo footrail, no circular supports

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Simon Yates

There are few people who truly deserve the title 'legendary', but Harold William Tilman certainly does, being both one of the greatest mountaineer-explorers of his time and arguably the best expedition writer ever. However, these two accolades barely scratch the surface of Tilman's very busy life.

Bill Tilman started his adult life by serving as an artillery officer on the Western Front in the First World War, while still a teenager. After the war, he went to Kenya and set up his own flax and coffee plantation—hacked by hand from the forest. There he met fellow plantation owner Eric Shipton and they made the first ascents of the twin summits of Mount Kenya, as one of their opening acts in what would become one of the most celebrated partnerships in the history of mountaineering. When he came to leave Africa, rather than catch the train to Mombasa to board a ship home, he cycled 3000 miles to the West African coast and embarked there; at the time there were barely any roads.

From 1934 through to 1950, Tilman made a series of expeditions to the Himalaya for which, as a mountaineer, he is best known. These included two trips to Mount Everest, and the most notable of his climbing achievements, the first ascent of Nanda Devi in 1936, which remained the highest peak climbed until the French ascent of Annapurna in 1950. In 1937, Tilman's first book *Snow on the Equator* was published, and would be followed by six other mountain-travel books that detail this period. He travelled the length and breadth of the Himalayan chain during this time, as much interested in the exploration of new mountain terrain as in bagging peaks. Tilman and Shipton were also admired for the style of their expeditions, trying to go as lightweight as possible and living off what was available locally. In an era that was characterised by large expeditions with an even larger

logistical supply chain, this was very innovative and not adopted as the norm until decades later.

Tilman's mountaineering explorations were rather rudely interrupted by the Second World War and as a reserve officer he soon found himself back in uniform—this time as a middle-aged man. He served in France, Iraq, the Western Desert and then, in the latter part of the war, with partisans in Albania and Northern Italy. *When Men & Mountains Meet* documents his wartime experiences as well as a rather disastrous trip to Assam before the war began. Although the mountaineering achievements in this volume are negligible, this is my favourite Tilman book. Why? I feel that in the wartime section of the book we learn more about Tilman's character as he is plunged into circumstances that are not of his own choosing. What shines through is his stoic sense of duty—to his country, the cause of freedom, and the people under his command; and what is also very apparent is his incredible bravery.

In 1950, Tilman decided that his best days as a mountaineer were over, and turned his focus instead to sailing and mountain exploration, which continued until his death in 1977. He documented this period in a further eight sailing-mountaineering books, which became as cherished by sailors as his previous books were by mountaineers. Tilman was lost at sea in the South Atlantic as an eighty-year-old under circumstances that were never explained. In many ways, it was a fitting end to the man and the life he lived.

In an age obsessed with celebrity, where every banal action is recorded on social media, Tilman comes along as a welcome antidote—his lifetime of extraordinary adventure and achievement recorded in sparse prose, laced with gentle irony, dry humour and timely quotation. Some people of this age might argue that he comes across as reserved, or even stiff-upper-lipped, but those willing or able to tune into his way of expression will soon realise that this is not so. Tilman was a man who lived his long and productive life with humanity, and told his remarkable story with humility.

I hope you enjoy *When Men & Mountains Meet*.

Simon Yates
July 2015

Preface

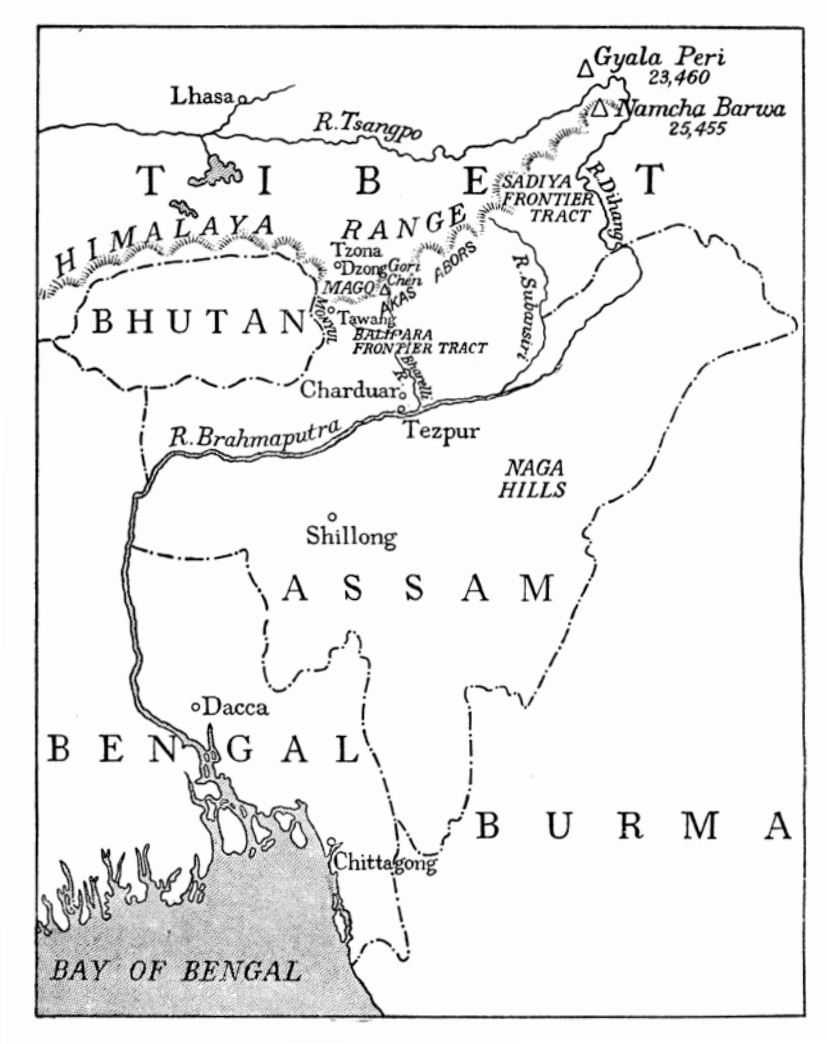
In nearly half this book—namely, the chapters dealing with Albania and Italy—there is no mountaineering, but the mountains are there nevertheless. It was fitting, and in accord with tradition, that those who cherished the spark of freedom and finally fanned it to a blaze should have lived for the most part in the mountains of those mountainous countries. In order to forestall an obvious criticism I should like to point out that it is this part only of the book which prompted and, in my opinion, justified the choice of Blake's lines from which the title is taken.

My grateful thanks are due to Dr R. J. Perring of Ryton for his great help in revising the first draft. I am also indebted to H. Swire's book, *Albania: The Rise of a Kingdom*, for some facts about that country.

H.W. T.
December 1945

PART ONE

Peacetime



Map 1: Sketch map to illustrate Assam Himalaya

CHAPTER I

THE ASSAM HIMALAYA

THE TOTAL LENGTH OF THE GREAT Himalayan chain from Nanga Parbat in the west to Namcha Barwa in the east is some 1500 miles. Of this the Assam Himalaya, as defined by Burrard and Hayden in their standard work, *Sketch of the Geography and Geology of the Himalaya*, occupy about 450 miles. These, however, include the Himalaya north of Bhutan; if we consider only that part of the chain between Assam and Tibet the length is about 250 miles.

Of all the Himalaya these are the least known, and it is not difficult to understand the reason. From the Assam-Bhutan frontier for a distance of 250 miles eastwards to the Brahmaputra valley there is only one way over the Himalaya to Tibet, or even as far as the main range, and the existence of this route was not even suspected until the opening years of the present century. Between the last tea gardens and rice fields of Assam and the crest of the Himalaya is a wide belt of heavily forested foothills inhabited for the most part by savage tribes—Miji Akas, Silung Abors, Daflas. The reputation of these tribes, the difficult country, and an extremely heavy rainfall, discouraged closer inquiry until it was gradually realised that between the Bhutan-Assam frontier and the Bhareli river, a distance of some forty miles, the country was not occupied by violent men inimical to strangers, but by peaceful tribes allied to the Bhutanese called Mönba, Sherchokpa, and others. Through the interest and exploration of various Political Officers from Assam, this corridor, known as Mönyul, was slowly opened up. Through it have passed travellers like Col. F. M. Bailey and Major H. T. Morshead in 1913 and Kingdon-Ward in 1935 and 1938.

The journey of Bailey and Morshead in 1913 was extremely interesting, for it cleared up one of the outstanding problems of Asiatic exploration. It was only in 1912 that the discovery of Namcha Barwa by Morshead and the determination of its height as 25,445 ft. had surprised the geographers, who had thought that there could be no peaks

above 20,000 ft. north of Assam. A year later Morshead and Bailey discovered the great gorge between Namcha Barwa and Gyala Peri, 23,460 ft., by which the Tsangpo forces its way through the Himalaya to become the Dihang and later the Brahmaputra of Assam. The question of where the Tsangpo flowed after leaving Tibet was the most interesting problem of Asiatic exploration in the last decades of the nineteenth century. Several well-known 'pundits', native explorers and surveyors employed by the Survey of India, had been engaged on its solution. Three of the most famous were Nain Singh, A.K., and Kinthup. In 1884 Kinthup was dispatched from India to Tibet with orders to cast marked logs of wood into the waters of the Tsangpo in the hope that they might be recovered in the Brahmaputra later on. This rather fond hope came to nothing.

It is interesting to note that the discovery of a great peak, or rather two great peaks with only fourteen miles between them, at the point where the Tsangpo breaks through to the plains, confirmed a conjecture of Burrard and Hayden who, in the first edition of their book, 1907, wrote: 'The Sutlej in issuing from Tibet pierces the border range of mountains within four and a half miles of Leo Pargial, the highest peak of its region; the Indus when turning the great Himalayan range passes within fourteen miles of Nanga Parbat, the highest point of the Punjab Himalaya; the Hunza river cuts through the Kailas range within nine miles of Rakaposhi, the supreme point of the range. It will form an interesting problem for investigation whether the Brahmaputra of Tibet has cut its passage across the Himalaya near a point of maximum elevation.'

In their journey in 1913 Bailey and Morshead entered Tibet from Assam by following the course of the Dihang until they were stopped by the gorge east of Namcha Barwa. By a detour to the north they rejoined the river, the Tsangpo as it is called in Tibet, and followed it down past Namcha Barwa to a point less than thirty miles from the place at which they had left it. After this they moved west along the Tibetan side of the Himalaya and returned to Assam by the Mönyul corridor route.

In 1935 and again in 1938 Kingdon-Ward travelled extensively in Mönyul and on the Tibetan side of the Assam Himalaya bringing back many new plants and seeds and much new geographical knowledge.

In 1934 and 1936 Messrs Ludlow and Sherriff, starting from Bhutan, travelled through Mönyul into south-eastern Tibet, also collecting plants and seeds.

The position then in 1939 was, that of the mountains themselves little or nothing was known except that the major peaks, that is, those over 20,000 ft., had been fixed trigonometrically from the plains of Assam. Even the Assam-Tibet frontier had not been defined. It was assumed that it followed the crest line of the main range until in 1912 it was discovered that Mönyul, which is south of the Himalaya, was being administered by Tibetans. In 1913, by some arrangement between the Governments concerned, all the districts south of the Himalaya were ceded to India, but nothing was done to administer the ceded territory, which remained, until 1939 at least, to all intents Tibetan.

Just to the east of the Mönyul corridor, or 'Tibetan Enclave' as it might be called, lies a group of some dozen peaks over 20,000 ft. Only four bear names, which are all Tibetan in origin: Gori Chen 21,450 ft., Kangdu 23,260 ft., Chiumo 22,760 ft., and Nayegi Kansang 23,120 ft. These were the mountains which I hoped to explore, and some of which I hoped to climb. Nothing is known of them and nothing has been written about them, for unlike many other parts of the Himalaya they have no place in the religious history of India. No temples or shrines adorn the banks of their rivers, no pilgrims visit them, no traditions enrich them.

I like to think I can see as far through a brick wall as most people, and in the latter part of 1938 it seemed clear to me, as to many others, that war was inevitable. This affected my plans for 1939. Shipton was returning to the Karakoram to continue the work which we had begun in 1937, and I should very much have liked to join him. But we should be extremely isolated, almost beyond recall in fact, and Shipton's plans necessitated staying out the following winter. I was not so abandoned yet as to consider being beyond recall an advantage. Moreover, the War Office, after twenty years of deep thought, had just remembered they had a Reserve of Officers, of which I was one, and had announced a scheme for their training. I decided therefore that by August 1939 I must be home. This ruled out the Karakoram, and my choice fell upon the Assam Himalaya as being the most accessible and the least known region for exploration.

This would be my sixth visit to the Himalaya, and though occasionally I had qualms about such indulgence, I had so far managed to stifle them without any severe struggle. The appetite grows as it is fed. Like the desire for drink or drugs, the craving for mountains is not easily overcome, but a mountaineering debauch, such as six months in the Himalaya, is followed by no remorse. Should such a feeling arise then one may echo Omar's *cri de cœur*,

> Indeed, indeed, Repentance oft before
> I swore—but was I sober when I swore?

Having once tasted the pleasure of living in high solitary places with a few like spirits, European or Sherpa, I could not give it up. The prospect of what is euphemistically termed 'settling down', like mud to the bottom of a pond, might perhaps be faced when it became inevitable, but not yet awhile. Time enough for that when the hardships common to mountain travel—the carrying of heavy loads, the early morning starts, living or starving on the country—were no longer courted or at any rate suffered gladly.

Having fixed upon the Assam Himalaya as my objective, I had to decide how to get there and what to do there. Obviously the greatest prize for a mountaineer was Namcha Barwa, and a very useful job could be done making a reconnaissance with a view to climbing it another year. It would be necessary to get permission to enter Tibet, but even if one were not allowed to go to Namcha Barwa, the best approach to the Gori Chen group, my second string, was from the Tibetan side. Indeed, when these tentative plans were made on the way back from Everest in July 1938 I was not aware of any other way.

Passport difficulties are not confined to what we call the civilised world. For some of the lesser known parts of Asia entrance is even more troublesome; Tibet is a case in point. Most of the stock of good will of the Tibetan Government as well as the patience of the Indian Government in evoking it is used up by the Mount Everest expeditions. A favoured few can sometimes get in by using the direct-approach method, and one or two omit all formalities and just go in, presenting the Tibetans with a *fait accompli*. The difficulty about this is that if the Tibetan authorities resent this intrusion, the invader is easily checkmated by the local headman who will be told to refuse his

unwelcome guest all means of transport. Exceptions have been made. On the way back from Mount Everest in July 1938 I met at Tangu in north Sikkim a party of German scientists led by a Dr Schaefer. They were officially working in Sikkim, but by a direct approach to a high official from Lhasa, who happened then to be just on the other side of the border, they were invited into Tibet where they spent several months. Strange stories of their behaviour were current when I came across them again in a train in India the following July. They must have got home just in time.

For the necessary permission I applied to Mr B.J. Gould (now Sir Basil Gould), British Resident in Sikkim. He had recently been to Lhasa on an official visit and was as well liked by the Tibetans as by the numerous British mountaineers whom he had helped so often. He had been instrumental in obtaining permission for the last two Mount Everest attempts. At that time he was at Yatung in the Chumbi valley, for which place I started immediately on reaching Gangtok, the capital of Sikkim. It is a two-day march with a rise of 2000 ft. to the Natu La (14,000 ft.). Having finished my business I returned to Gangtok in one day, as I was pressed for time, taking fifteen and a half hours for the forty-three miles including halts. I mention this to show that though men coming off Mount Everest are usually in very poor condition, often with dilated hearts, recovery does not take long.

Mr Gould was not very hopeful about either permission for my own journey or for another Mount Everest attempt. Apparently some emphasis had been laid on the fact that 1938 was to be the last time we should ask, and a dispute over the Tibet-Assam boundary (Mönyul as mentioned above) was in progress.

This setback made it essential to visit Shillong, the pleasant hill capital of Assam, 5000 ft. up, where Sir Robert Reid, then the Governor, afforded all possible help. In northern Assam the frontier tracts are what are called Excluded Areas. The one with which I was concerned was the Balipara Frontier Tract which is administered by a Political Officer drawn from the Assam Police who is directly responsible to the Governor. The tract is divided by an 'Inner Line' into administered and unadministered territory, of which the latter is by far the larger portion. The administered territory corresponds roughly to the short strip of plain between the Brahmaputra and the foothills; the unadministered

comprises all that from the foothills to the Tibetan border which is supposed to follow the MacMahon line of 1914. The tribes to the north of the Inner Line, Daflas, Akas and Miris, are primitive people with no desire to respond to the soothing influences of civilisation. They receive subsidies contingent on their good behaviour, and for many years they have given us no trouble. Occasionally the Political Officer has to visit them (with a strong escort) to settle disputes, generally by mild persuasion, sometimes by force. The hill tribes are allowed to cross the Inner Line for peaceful purposes, trade or work, but no plainsmen may cross it without a special permit. Few, of course, wish to. As Mr Churchill once remarked when questioned about the efficacy of anti-shark measures in the Pacific, that 'H.M. Government was entirely opposed to sharks', so the tribesmen of those parts are entirely opposed to strangers.

The H.Q. of the Political Officer for the Balipara Frontier Tract was at Charduar, twenty miles north of the Brahmaputra. Permission to cross the Inner Line and to proceed to the Gori Chen area on the Tibetan border was readily obtained, and the Political Officer promised assistance in finding the necessary porters for the first stage of the journey.

All therefore was set for the 1939 campaign; it remained to decide what form this should take. Should it be mountaineering alone, or should I try to bring back something more substantial than a feeling of 'something attempted, something done' by collecting enough data for the making of a map? Would this necessarily add to the conviction, of which I was already assured, that the time had been well spent? Hitherto I had played no very active part in the more technical side of the three expeditions in which map-making had been the main object; in fact, I had on occasion regarded these activities rather as a benign but not too patient uncle might regard his nephews playing trains on the table on which he was shortly expecting his lunch.

Of course, as Lord Conway said, 'in all high mountain climbing there is an element of exploration'; and since the Gori Chen group was as yet unvisited this element would be considerable. But nowadays the explorer who brings his modest offering to the temple of science (may its worshippers increase) in the form of a dirty, illegible sketch, or an incoherent verbal description, is thought a little uncouth. Shipton's

whole-hearted conversion to the side of the big battalions was of long standing; and I might have to forgo my admiring sympathy with Mummery, one of my heroes, who in the preface to his *Climbs in the Alps and Caucasus* expressed himself thus: 'I fear no contributions to science, or topography, or learning of any sort are to be found sandwiched in between the story of crags or seracs, of driving storm or perfect weather. To tell the truth, I have only the vaguest idea about theodolites, and as for plane tables, their very name is an abomination. To those who think with me, who regard mountaineering as unmixed play, these pages are alone addressed.' If you can call mountaineering an act of violence, which I think you can, then Mummery's forcibly expressed philosophy is greatly strengthened by a dictum of G. K. Chesterton (another of my heroes), who was admittedly no mountaineer, but who certainly had the root of the matter in him when he wrote: 'Almost any act of violence can be forgiven on this strict condition—that it is of no use at all to anybody. If the aggressor (or mountaineer) gets anything out of it, then it is quite unpardonable. It is damned by the least hint of utility or profit.'

This time I had to reckon with another factor which forbade my taking such a detached view as formerly about the 'scientific' side of an expedition. In the absence of a suitable companion I proposed going alone with a few Sherpa porters. Who they would be I could not tell, so that I might easily find when I arrived that I was unable to do as much climbing as I had hoped. Moreover, without a companion to act as stimulant or counter-irritant it would be an advantage to have something to occupy the mind in the many hours sometimes necessarily spent in camp. On a long expedition the active mind becomes dull, the dull becomes cataleptic. I decided, therefore, to modify my high principles and attempt a modest survey with one of Mummery's abominations, a plane table—but not too much zeal.