

**From: *Mountain Bound, Writings from the Himalaya*, Edited by Lucia de Vries, Kathmandu: Vajra Books 2018, ISBN 978-9937-623-91-9**

## **Introduction**

*“Wondrous happenings. Miracles and myths. Saints and devils. People holy and profane, all of whom I had come to know and love in successive reincarnations of myself. For it was given to me to return year after year, and to find in the Valley of Kathmandu my personal Shangri-la.”*

When journalist, artist and photographer Desmond Doig landed in Kathmandu in 1954 it was love at first sight. He would continue to travel, often to other destinations in the Himalaya, but Nepal was to be his ‘Shangri-la’, which he regarded as his long lost home, and the place where he wanted to spend the rest of his life and be remembered.

Desmond Doig was not the only one. Throughout the ages, people from all walks of life felt the urge to travel to the Himalaya, captivated by a landscape located somewhere between earth and sky, a testimony to the endurance of human spirit.

Through its combination of stunning beauty, extreme climate and unique cultural and religious traditions no other part of the world appeals to the adventurous and spiritual heart as much as the Himalaya<sup>1</sup>, considered terra incognita till deep into the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Throughout the centuries foreigners travelling or living in the Himalaya, be they explorers, administrators, missionaries, mercenaries, mountaineers, spies or mystics, shared their experiences with audiences back home. From the memories of the British Raj, to contemporary accounts inspired by a stay in the mighty mountains, a large body of literature has been produced by those who adopted the Himalaya as their (temporary) home. By sharing their unique experiences with armchair travellers back home these pioneers became guides into an unknown world, far removed from the comforts and certainties of Western society. A world that would steal the hearts of those who longed for new discoveries or for a mystical, harmonious place, isolated and far removed from the industrialized world.

### **Terra Incognita**

This anthology presents a selection of writings from the Himalaya in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century. The changes that took place on the roof of the world during these two centuries are epic. When Captain Samuel Turner published his account of a journey into Tibet and his meeting with the infant Panchen Lama in 1800, Tibet and large parts of the Himalaya were largely unmapped. That quickly changed: the race for filling in the blanks was on. By 1998, the year American researcher Ian Baker discovered the largest waterfall in Tibet’s Tsangpo Gorge, a source of myth and geographic speculation for over a century, the last white spot on the Himalayan map was finally erased.

During Turner’s days it took half a year to reach India from England by boat. Preparing an expedition could take months or even years. Accommodation, apart from local homes, was unavailable; the famous ‘dak bungalows’, serving travellers with connections to the East India Company, were built only in the 1840s. Supplies and outfits generally were purchased in Europe, and shipped to India.

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<sup>1</sup> The term ‘Himalaya’ is used to identify the greater Himalayan Region or the mountain range which stretches from Afghanistan in the East and Bhutan in the West. It includes the Korakoram and Hindu Kush mountain ranges. Himalaya or Himālaya is derived from Sanskrit and means "the abode of snow" (hima is "snow", ālaya means "abode"). Himalaya is both single and plural. The Himalaya stretch across six nations: Bhutan, China, India, Nepal, Pakistan and Afghanistan.

At the end of the 20th century travelling to the Himalaya became a matter of catching a flight, travel to the road head by vehicle, and enter the mountains with the help of GPS or quality maps. Provisions became available locally and comfortable lodges with extended menus and foam mattresses developed along most routes. The journey from Calcutta to Shigatse and back which took Turner and his contemporaries a year, nowadays can be done in a day or two. While Turner's only means of communication was through messengers who hand-carried letters to his office in Calcutta, today's travellers are almost instantly connected through (satellite) phones and internet.

What has not changed though is the nature of the landscape, glorious but unforgiving, and the awe and reverence which so many of us experience in the presence of the highest mountains on earth. 'Memsahib' Nina Mazuchelli experienced it when in the 1860s she explores the Himalayas from Darjeeling and notes: "[a]s I stand in these vast solitudes I do so with bent knee and bowed head, as becomes one who is in the felt presence of the great Invisible." Explorer Francis Younghusband felt it when he first set eyes on the Himalaya in 1884: "[t]his world was more wonderful far than I had ever known before. And I seemed to grow greater myself from the mere fact of having seen it. How could I ever be little again?"

Climbing legend George Mallory was well aware of the power Mount Everest had over him. "I can't tell you how it possesses me," and "at what point am I going to stop?" he wondered in his letters. Michael Hollingshead, hippie par excellence, was on a high when arriving in Kathmandu in 1969. "The spell of the Himalayas was upon me," he confessed. "The beauty of my surroundings began to penetrate a hardened carapace, for these mountains had begun to exercise a magic thralldom all their own." And it was no one less than Salman Rushdie, who gifted us with a magic description of "a mountain, especially a Himalaya, especially Everest," as "land's attempt to metamorphose into sky; it is grounded in flight, the earth mutated--nearly--into air, and become, in the true sense, exalted."

### **Where there be dragons**

It is strange to think that the world's highest mountain massive was hardly a part of the Western consciousness in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. The Himalaya were mentioned by Herodotus, who refers to Tibet as 'a desert north of India where great ants in size somewhat less than dogs, but bigger than foxes throw up sand heaps full of gold as they burrow.' Even in the 18<sup>th</sup> century little quality information was available; most early explorers created their own maps along the way. Altitude sickness was believed to be created by 'poisonous vapours' and there was always the danger of being attacked by 'wild men', the yeti. A cloud of ignorance hung over the world's highest mountains.

Among the documented Western adventurers who dared to enter the 'World of Ice and Snow' in the 17<sup>th</sup> century were European monks. Jesuit and Capuchin monks risked their lives in their quest to find the 'lost tribes of Israel'. Although some missionaries managed to establish mission posts in places such as Lhasa, Guge, Kathmandu and Leh, sooner or later they were ordered by local rulers to leave. Visitors were generally unwanted; local rulers tended to consider foreign visitors as barbarians, polluters or spies, or all three. The adventurous monks' notes and drawings found their way to monastic libraries where they were read by a small group of specialists but remained largely unknown to the public. But this was soon to change.

Until the 18<sup>th</sup> century Westerners tended to avoid mountains whenever possible. These 'boils' on the earth's complexion were believed to be homes of dragons and fairies, seducing visitors into their untimely death. The climbing of Mont Blanc in 1786 proved to be a turning point. Soon climbers and adventurers geared up for the exploration of the greater Himalayan ranges, often described as the 'Indian Alps'. This coincided with the Golden Age of exploration and the expansionist plans of the British East India Company.

In the eighteenth century the British Empire rapidly expanded its territory in the East. After the fall of the Mughal Empire, the Indian region consisted of a patchwork of a multitude of kingdoms. Its rulers were hopelessly divided. Slowly but surely the East India Company established a territorial foothold in the region; by the 1850's Britain ruled over most of the Indian subcontinent. Getting a stronghold in the Himalaya proved to be more challenging. Some princely states, including Kashmir, remained directly under the rule of its earlier rulers and only indirectly under British control. Nepal remained fiercely independent, but had to put up with a British Resident. Tibet suffered a number of confrontations with the British, the most notorious one being an invasion led by Sir Francis Younghusband, but remained independent until the Chinese invasion of 1959.

Explorers and those with commercial, academic or spiritual interests took advantage of the Company's increased influence. Some were directly employed by the Company, others requested permission through the British administration and local rulers to explore 'new' territory. The establishment of the Royal Geographical Society in 1830 sparked the desire to solve the world's remaining geographical mysteries.

It was within this period that Mount Everest came into being. In 1852, members of the Great Trigonometrical Survey of India calculated the height of the mountain to be 8,842 metres, making it the highest mountain in the world<sup>2</sup>. After an American claimed to have reached the North Pole in 1909 and a Norwegian the South Pole in 1911, the race began for what became known as the Third Pole. Everest became known as "the most coveted object in the realm of terrestrial exploration.'

### **A taste for altitude**

The desire to fill the blanks on the roof of the world coincided with the change of heart in regards to altitude. The Victorians, already interested in the exotic and unexplored, develop a taste for risk-taking. Mountains become the ideal place to develop character. Heights have spiritual and artistic qualities, and are considered good for mental and physical health. Younghusband noted that mountain people are 'bright and cheerful' and 'not grave and sedate' like the people of the plains. 'Outdoorsy' women like Isabel Savory encourage their contemporaries to go on hikes: "What a good feeling it is to be fit and well: to have your nerves steady and your head cool; to awake every morning revelling in the almost fizzing air!"

Exploring the Himalaya was not exactly an easy task. Here there was a solid range of high mountains stretching five hundred kilometre from south to north, their passes high and difficult and their inhabitants divided into hostile kingdoms. Though local traders and pilgrims had been crossing the mountains for thousands of years, there were hardly any trustworthy maps of the area. Victorian explorers, often disguised as hermits, pilgrims or monks, suffered extraordinary hardships probing the passes of the Himalaya, Karakoram and Hindu Kush, looking for new scientific discoveries, new territory or possible trade routes.

Himalayan explorers became the film stars of their time. Their books were inevitable bestsellers; their pursuits led to fame and medals. Most of them were British; of all the great expansionist powers, Britain seemed most keen on marking the unmapped parts of the Himalaya. Explorers such as Alexander Burns, William Moorcroft, Thomas Manning, Francis Younghusband, Godfrey Thomas Vigne, Joseph Dalton Hooker, Clements Robert Markham, Frank Kingdon Ward and Frederick Marshman Bailey were heroes in the books of the Empire.

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<sup>2</sup> Until then other mountains were believed to be the highest during different time periods, particularly Chimborazo, Ama Dablam, Nanda Devi, Dhaulagiri and Kanchenjunga

But other powers applauded their own explorers. Russia had Nicholas Przewalski. France cultivated Gabriel Bonvalot, Jules Léon Dutreuil de Rhins and Victor Jacquemont. Germany applauded the Schlagintweit brothers, Günter Oskar Dyhrenfurth, Matthias Zurbriggen, Peter Aufschnaiter and Heinrich Harrer. Austria was represented by Charles von Hügel, Carl Diener and Herbert Tichy. Switzerland saw its mountain guides hired by Himalayan explorers, as well as mountaineers in their right, such as Günter Oskar Dyhrenfurth and Erhard Loretan. Swiss geologist Toni Hagen became an expert on Nepal. Italy produced Ardito Desi, Giuseppe Tucci and Reinhold Messner. The Dutch followed the adventures of mountain-explorers Philips and Jenny Visser, and the Swedish of course had Sven Hedin.

America caught up with the European explorers in the 1890s, when William Woodville Rockhill enters the Himalaya, followed by William Hunter and Fanny Workman.

And the list goes on. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century virtually every country was represented by travellers and mountaineers exploring the Himalaya, each one awarding their celebrated 'first' to climb Mt Everest.

### **Great Game**

But it wasn't always a sense of adventure, mission or curiosity that motivated Himalayan exploration. There was politics too.

At the end of the nineteenth century imperial Russian expansion threatened to collide with the increasing British dominance on the Indian sub-continent. During this 'Great Game' the vast unmapped Himalayan territory suddenly became of crucial importance. As a result, throughout Central Asia, the two great empires played out a subtle game of diplomacy and espionage.

This was when the spies and 'pundits' came in. British officers, disguised as pilgrims, charted unexplored territory, sending their findings back through messengers. Veterinarian William Moorcraft, managed to survey large areas and explore the potential for trade with remote mountain regions. Army officer Alexander Burnes is believed to have been a double agent – trading information with both the Russians and the British.

Additionally native Indian 'pundits' were hired to traverse the Himalaya to survey unexplored mountain areas. Some were later were hired or educated by western explorers. "When the story of Asian exploration is finally and worthily written," noted journalist Perceval Landon, "the work of these lonely spies must receive a place of honor second to none."

The Russian-British conflict always threatened, but never quite managed to break out into direct warfare. The markation of the Russian-Afghan border resulted in the end of the Great Game. With most mountain passes mapped and measured, the Himalaya officially ceased to be terra incognita. However, even though maps significantly eased navigation, Himalayan travel remained a dangerous pursuit.

### **Himalayan hardships**

The accounts of early travellers make it clear that accidents, disease and death were constant companions in the Himalaya. Many an explorer had to lie low for a few months to recover from ill health. Journalist Andrew Wilson found himself warding off scorpions, snakes and wild bear when recovering from acute dysentery in Ladakh. "Only those who have experienced acute dysentery can know how dreadfully trying and harassing it is; and the servants of the heroic Livingstone have told how, in the later stages of it, he could do nothing but groan day and night," he lamented.

Other visitors faced ill treatment. Upon his return, artist Henry Savage Landor claimed to have been starved and tortured during imprisonment by the Tibetans. The young traveller even endured a mock execution: "You have come to this country to see ... This, then, is the punishment for you!" and with these dreadful words the Pombo raised his arm and placed the red-hot iron bar parallel to, and about an inch or two from, my eyeballs, and all but touching my nose." Landor left his captivated audience shivering.

Some were even less lucky. The young botanist dandy Victor Jacquemont enjoyed drinking champagne and insisted on changing twice daily, even in the remotest of places. However, after spending four months collecting plant and animal specimen in Kashmir, Jacquemont fell sick and died at the age of 31.

William Moorcroft, the vet turned explorer-diplomat, together with his companion George Trebeck survived numerous Himalayan ordeals but succumbed to fever in Afghanistan in 1825. Moorcroft's death in remote Turkestan was clouded in mystery, so much so that some claim they saw him in Lhasa after his death.

An even sadder fate befell Canadian missionary Susie Rijnhart. After setting off with husband Petrus Rijnhart on a travelling mission across the Tibetan mountains in 1989, the young doctor suffered one loss after the other. First her baby died, probably due to altitude sickness. A few days later the caravan got attacked by mountain brigands and left destitute. Susie's husband left for a nearby camp to ask for help, but failed to return. The young missionary arrived at a mission post two months later – now a widow and grieving mother.

## **Reducing hardships**

In order to reduce possible hardship many colonial travellers went into great lengths to create a feeling of a 'home away from home'. Those who could afford it tried hard not to compromise on their physical comfort. Back in 1783 Samuel Turner greatly surprised the Tibetan Regent and his officers when he showed them his 'iron canopied bedstead, with its European furniture'. Not only had the British representative himself been carried across the Himalaya in a palanquin by porters, his complete bedroom furniture too was transported on the backs of bearers all the way from Calcutta in East India to Shigatse in West Tibet.

While other explorers did not go to the extent of moving their entire bedroom, those with the means did not cut back on the number of servants and supplies, carried by large herds of yaks and mules. It took veterinarian-explorer William Moorcroft a whole year in assembling eight tons of supplies, including "portable necessary-houses", £4,000 worth of trading goods and a field hospital, well stocked with medicines and equipment. The supplies were carried by a careful selection of horses, mules, and camels. The expedition consisted of no less than 300 persons, including Gurkha soldiers, orderlies, grooms, carpenters and cooks.

In the 1830s, Austrian nobleman Baron Von Hügel set off for Kashmir accompanied by sixty bearers, close to 40 servants and seven ponies. Apart from a hookah, carried and lit by a Hookahburdar, the party carried preserved meats, wines 'and drinks of various kinds' and preserved fruits and sweetmeats.

The most pompous outfit however was that of Emily Eden's brother Lord Auckland, Governor-General of India. His entourage counted 12,000 staff, as well as a fair number of elephants, camels, horses and bullocks, serving no more than nine Sahibs and Memsahibs. Emily Eden did not feel entirely comfortable with the entourage, and noted: "We feel so certain that people who live in houses, and get up by a fire at a reasonable hour and then go quietly to breakfast, would think us raving mad, if they saw nine Europeans of steady age and respectable habits, going galloping every morning at sunrise over a sandy plain, followed

by quantities of black horsemen, and then by ten miles of beasts of burden carrying things which, after all, will not make the nine madmen even decently comfortable.”

Mountaineers especially faced major challenges when preparing their high altitude explorations. William and Fanny Workman, in the absence of light weight trekking equipment, compact cameras, dried food and modern medicine, “carried flannel-lined Mummy tents with ground sheets sewn in and well-padded eider sleeping sacks enclosed in outer ones of camel hair or army blankets.” Even these ‘state of the art’ tents and sleeping bags could not keep them warm despite sleeping with all their clothes on. They were also forced to carry “heavy, cumbersome Kodak equipment and scientific instruments, screwed steel nails into the soles of their boots” and wore “heavy tweed clothes, pervious to the icy winds and leaden when wet.”<sup>3</sup>

Making oneself at home in the Himalaya did however not entirely depend on equipment. The botanist Joseph Hooker felt quite content in his tent, a blanket thrown over the limb of a tree. It did have a proper bed, couch and table. “The barometer hung in the most out-of-the-way corner, and my other instruments all around,” notes Hooker. “A small candle was burning in a glass shade, to keep the light from draught and insects, and I had the comfort of seeing the knife, fork, and spoon laid on a white napkin, as I entered my snug little house, and flung myself on the elastic couch to ruminate on the proceedings of the day, and speculate on those of the morrow, while waiting for my meal, which usually consisted of stewed meat and rice, with biscuits and tea.”

Other travellers were less endowed and took the risk of travelling with a few companions and animals. Women travellers such as Suzie Rijnhart and Alexandra David-Neel were accompanied by just one servant, and few supplies. The Japanese monk Ekai Kawaguchi probably qualifies as history’s most independent traveller: he crossed the Tibetan Plateau with just two sheep, employed to keep him warm and night and to carry his belongings in the day.

### **Hillstations and dak bungalows**

Beethoven in Darjeeling, Sunday lunch in Simla, house boat holidays in Kashmir. Himalayan hillstations which fell under direct or indirect British rule were soon transformed into perfect holiday destinations, which enabled British residents to escape the heat of the plains and for Himalayan explorers to experience a sense of home.

French botanist Victor Jacquemont travelled from France to Simla, where he spend some time in the presence of French champagne and dancing girls. "Isn't it strange to dine in silk stockings in such a place, to drink a bottle of Rhine wine and another of champagne every evening," he wondered.

Artist and novelist Emily Eden accompanied her brother George, who served the Crown as Governor General, to Simla. Her descriptions of everyday life of a woman resident in a hill station were filled with delightful gossip: “We went to our ball last night – it was pretty; the room was hung round with such profusion of garlands....but what particularly took my fancy was a set of European soldiers dressed up for the night as footmen...and they carried about trays of tea and ices...you cannot conceive what a pleasant English look this gave to the room.”

Rudyard Kipling was captivated by Simla, the summer capital of the British administration, for his own reasons. He describes it as a time of ‘pure joy’, in which ‘every golden hour counted’.

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<sup>3</sup> Quoted from Luree Miller’s ‘On Top of the World, Five Women Explorers in Tibet’, New York: Paddington Press, 1976

"It began in heat and discomfort, by rail and road. It ended in the cool evening, with a wood fire in one's bedroom, and next morn--thirty more of them ahead!--the early cup of tea, the Mother who brought it in, and the long talks of us all together again. One had leisure to work, too, at whatever play-work was in one's head, and that was usually full," Kipling remembers.

Not only hill stations provided with a welcome break from mountain travel; dak bungalows acted as little islands of comfort in the unforgiving mountains. These official rest houses, first built in the 1840s, greatly eased travel among British officers and other overseas travellers. 'Dak' travelling not only guaranteed not only accommodation at every forty, fifty miles, it also provided for fresh relays of bearers for those traveling by palanquin at certain intervals. The bungalows greatly increased access to the mountains. The Pindari glacier in Gahrwal for instance became the most frequently visited Himalayan glacier since in the mid-19th century a route with dak bungalows at suitable intervals was developed from Almora.

Dak travelling also allowed tourists to visit the Himalaya, something which John Murray cashed in on when he started publishing his 'Handbook for Travellers in India' in 1857, listing the bungalows and the availability of tinned beans and sausages. By 1875 journalist Andrew Wilson remarked that "old ladies of seventy, who had scarcely ever left Britain before, are to be met on the spurs of the Himálya."

Access to the Himalaya further improved by the improvement of walking trails and the construction of railways. In 1880, the new railway to Darjeeling replaced, in the words of Andrew Wilson, '11 hours by rail from Calcutta, four hours on a river steamboat, 124 miles in a dak gharri, bullock shigram or mail cart, then 14 miles on horse back, or in a palanquin to the foot of the hills,' from there the traveller 'by similar means of carriage' still had to get to the top.

### **A place of imagination**

Travel in many ways does not so much discover worlds but reconstructs them. The Himalaya like no other place in the world acts as both a geographical and imaginary area, a backdrop for the West's projections.

The Himalayan pioneers were strongly influenced by the 'zeitgeist', the perceptions of the region and its people and culture back home. In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the Himalaya, particularly the more inaccessible and unexplored areas such as Tibet, spoke to the imagination of the Victorians as a sacred landscape, a place that is both natural and cultured, marked by noble simplicity, far removed from the industrializing West.

This was also a time of cultural acclimatization. As documented by the historian William Dalrymple, many visitors went 'local'. They not only abandoned their European clothing and habits, they also had no difficulties with cohabiting and having sexual relations with the locals. Many of the 19<sup>th</sup> century authors had mistresses or wives, with whom they fathered children, who were either raised locally or send back home. By the time Western women started coming to Asia as the wives and daughters of British officers, the tide had turned, but this did not stop some from having romantic liaisons, one famous example being Edwina Mountbatten, wife of Viceroy Louis Mountbatten, who courted Jawaharlal Nehru.

The openness to Himalayan culture, influenced for instance the way British representatives perceive their meetings with the high lamas of Tibet. When meeting the Panchen Lama, the second most powerful 'Pope' of Tibet, young revenue officer Bogle notes: "I endeavoured to find out, in his character, those defects which are inseparable from humanity, but he is so universally beloved that I had no success, and not a man could find in-his heart to speak ill of him." After their meeting the two men keep up a warm correspondence until their untimely

deaths. Bogle is believed to have gotten romantically involved with a female relative of the High Lama, with whom he fathered at least two children.

Bogle's visit is followed up with a meeting with the reincarnated Panchen Lama by Samuel Turner in 1783. He too is deeply impressed with the Lama, who is an infant but is believed to understand everything. Interestingly, Turner appears to agree: he reads aloud the official message and notices how "[t]he little creature turned, looking steadfastly at me, and nodded with repeated and slow movements of the head as though he understood and approved every word.'

How far these highly educated men would go to embrace Tibet's spiritual supremacy, becomes clear when the Regent of Tibet conducts a divination. According to Turner, 'however strange their doctrines may be found, yet I judge, they are the best foundation on which we can fix our dependence.' The divination ruled: "Set your heart at rest; for though a separation is about to take place between us, yet our friendship will not cease to exist."

### **Mutual attraction**

While Europe's and Russia's fascination with the Himalaya continued, the people of the Himalaya developed a curiosity for the west. In Nepal, a Hindu kingdom which, apart from a powerless British resident did not allow any western visitors, a ruler with a fascination with Britain. His name was Jung Bahadur and he was the founder of the Rana dynasty. A visit across the ocean was deemed impossible by Hindu religion: crossing the ocean was considered as impure as death. In 1850 the forward thinking prime minister took his chances.

Accompanied by priests who were to carry out complicated purification rituals and numerous servants, Jung Bahadur sailed to London, where he became a star attraction. British high society could not get enough of the ruler dressed in silk uniforms topped with jewel-decked head gear. It was rumoured that he wanted to buy Queen Victoria by paying King Albert her weight in precious stones. After his return, Jung Bahadur codified the legal system and introduced enlightened measures such as restriction of bodily punishment and abolishment of torture. From now on Rana palaces looked like those of the French aristocracy, including tiles, pianos, chandeliers and cars imported from Europe and carried across the Himalaya by thousands of human carriers. Nepal-Britain relations improved considerably; British royals and residents were now regularly invited to join the Ranas on luxurious hunting trips in the terai, the lowlands of Nepal.

One of the first to be invited was young student Laurence Oliphant. His father is stationed as chief judge in Ceylon – one of the countries visited by Jung Bahadur on his way back to Nepal. Oliphant received a royal treatment; he viewed the country from the back of an elephant or from inside a palanquin carried by Nepalese porters. He is asked to capture wild elephants, decapitate a buffalo and witness Jung Bahadur's marriage to a new 'missis'. His conversations with the prime minister are as exotic as the ruler's clothes and habits, for instance when watching his collection of paintings: "'See,' said Jung, enthusiastically, 'here is the Queen of England, and she has not got a more loyal subject than I am.' Then turning to the picture of the man with the keen eyes and high forehead, he remarked, "That is my poor uncle Mahtiber Singh, whom I shot; it is very much like him.'" Oliphant assumes that Jung Bahadur (who assassinated his uncle) has ended his 'uncivilised' life of barbarities and crimes after his recent visit to 'civilised' England. His canny, somewhat arrogant observations made the Empire proud.

### **A different tone**

In the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century however, attitudes began to change. The East India Company was turning into a colonial power and started developing prejudice against its 'subjects'. At the same time, the sexual licence of 18<sup>th</sup>-century London was being replaced by a Victorian sense of morality. Evangelical missionaries with little sympathy for Hinduism,

Buddhism or Islam began to arrive in India. Disputes over borders deteriorate diplomatic relations. The tone of the Himalayan visitors changes: the people marked by 'noble simplicity' now are called 'barbarian'; mountain Hindus increasingly are described as deceitful and treacherous.

Emily Eden, for instance, though having reservations about Britain's presence in India, shows a typical discontent for the 'natives', describing 'the little green Ghoorkas', as 'the most hideous little soldiers in the world'. Young traveler Oliphant copies the condescending, imperial tone of his times and describes the Nepalese as 'excessively stupid, and horribly good-humoured.'" Both visitors make an exception for made for the Indian rulers, with whom the Europeans like rub shoulders; Eden gets on well with Maharaja Ranjit Singh, while Oliphant considers Nepal's ruler Jung Bahadur Rana as 'a glorious fellow' and 'thoroughly European'.

But old myths die hard, and the tide shifts again in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, when the isolation and ancient culture of the Himalaya once more becomes the object of fascination. In the 1930s, during the depression, Madam Blavatsky captures her audiences with what she claims are telepathic messages from mystics meditating in caves in the Himalaya. In the same period James Hilton's novel *Lost Horizon* becomes a huge success. The West's longing for a lost kingdom in which aging slows down and peace can be found, surges.

In the 60s the hippie movement rediscovers ancient spirituality, including Hinduism and Buddhism. Himalayan 'power places' such as Chitral, Mainali, Rishikesh and Kathmandu are among the favourite stops on the hippie trail. In the wake of thousands of disillusioned youth, the Beatles visit the Maharishi in Rishikesh and Cat Stevens and Bob Seger find inspiration in Kathmandu. Enthused with psychedelic experiences, the Himalaya firmly place themselves in the western imagination as a spiritual marketplace. Among the visitors whose written account make a deep impression on western audiences are Paul Burton, Lama Govinda and Peter Mathiessen.

The increased interest in ancient spirituality coincides with the exodus of Tibetan refugees. Among them are highly advanced Lamas, who now started to disseminate their teachings in the West.

### **The fascination continues**

Only during the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century did the Himalayan region become more accessible. Nepal opened its doors for foreigners in 1949, while Ladakh followed in 1974. Tibet only became accessible to tourists in the late Seventies. Improved access and facilities resulted in a significant increase in adventure and spiritual tourism.

On one fine day in 1953, the "most coveted object of...exploration", Mt Everest, suddenly was in reach. Edmund Hillary and Tenzin Norgay "moved onto a flattish exposed area of snow with nothing but space in every direction" and looked around in wonder. To their immense satisfaction, they had reached the top of the world!" The ascent marked the start of the exploration of the Himalayan peaks by mountaineers from across the world.

Today ultra-modern clothing, European-style food, soft mattresses, the presence of telephone and social media, quality medical care, hot showers and apple pie have reduced the hardships that visitors to the Himalaya must endure. Increasingly remote Himalayan regions are opened up by roads. Luxury hotels and supermarkets follow. The people of the Himalaya, who used to travel for pilgrimage and trade, increasingly find their way to the plains and abroad to supplement their income. Traditional values and ways of life are under tremendous pressure. Climate change further endangers vulnerable communities and landscapes on the roof of the world.

Yet, the attraction to the world's highest mountain range is as great as ever. Even the 21<sup>st</sup> traveller, who might have flown in, checked into Facebook, carrying various gadgets, when seeing the snow-capped Himalaya for the first time cannot help but be captivated, and be able to relate directly to Nina Mazzuchelli, who got up one night in 1869 to try to describe the view from a nearby hill:

*“...the stupendous peaks, with their miles of virgin snow, were standing out sheer, stately, and solemn, like giant phantoms against a darkling sky, where pale stars were feebly shining...the effect against the still dark and opaque sky, whilst the world beneath was also hovering between darkness and dawn, was precisely that of their having been kindled by some mighty hand, for as yet only the extreme points were illuminated, and the glaciers and the vast rocky valleys...were wrapped in that mysterious ghost-like gloom impossible to describe, and which must be seen even to be imagined.”*