

Adam Stainton's Cultural Observations

A Plant Hunter in the Himalayas

Research >
South Asia

The early field botanists working in the Himalayas, such as Frank Kingdon-Ward, George Forrest, Major George Sherriff and Frank Ludlow, were respected for their thoroughness as collectors of little-known flora. Less well-documented is the attention that these 'plant hunters' gave to the cultural details of the communities whose villages and pasture lands they entered. Unlike many early anthropologists working in Nepal, who chose to focus on one region or ethnic group, the botanical collectors roamed across the country, often covering a number of districts and climatic zones in a matter of weeks. Where they may have missed the depth of rich ethnographic detail, they made up for this in regional breadth, and were both sufficiently informed and well-positioned to compare the agricultural patterns or housing styles of the different communities they encountered. One such explorer was J.D.A. Stainton, whose field note manuscripts from journeys to Nepal in the 1960s, I came across in the Botany Library of the Natural History Museum, London.



By Mark Turin

One of Adam Stainton's Nepali helpers pressing specimens of a minute *primula*

Adam Stainton, born in 1921, was one of the second wave of botanists to work in the Himalayas. The first recorded botanical explorations of Nepal date to the early 1800s, but extensive exploration of the Kingdom of Nepal only became possible with the opening of the country to foreign visitors in 1950. Stainton first visited Nepal in 1954 as part of an expeditionary team alongside Leonard How, John Williams, and William Sykes. Their stated objective was to gather a comprehensive collection of pressed specimens and thus to build a lasting record of the flora of the region. Stainton came from a family of lawyers and whisky distillers, a

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Villagers from the alpine zone of Nepal

background that provided him with enough financial security to pursue his interest in botanical exploration without being dependent on funding from scholarly institutions.

He made a great contribution to Himalayan botany, despite being virtually self-taught. Stainton was also an accomplished photographer, taking more than 4,000 slides on his travels. On his later field trips to Nepal in the 1960s, he took a number of 16 mm cine reels illustrating the plants and people he encountered.* He remained, however, a most private man, and his *Memoirs*, published in 1988, three years before his death, reveal little about his character or personal ambitions. It was a pleasant surprise to discover that his field notes bear witness of both a developed sense of humour and an eye for social observation. This short article offers a few culturally and historically revealing citations from his expedition notes from Nepal in the 1960s.

Stainton was careful to subdivide his writings into different sections, and his accounts invariably commence with a reference to the porters he hired. In *General Notes on Travel* from his 1964 expedition, we learn that he 'used Sherpa porters almost exclusively, and paid them at the rate of 6 rupees Nepali per day. They were mostly friends or relatives of our respective Sherpa sirdars, and as a result we were entirely free from porter troubles throughout the trip. Occasionally delays due to the social importance of *chang*-drinking in Sherpa country were a small price to pay for freedom from any further transport problems'. This description offers an interesting contrast to an experience from the previous year, on a trip to West Nepal. In Dolpo, he writes, while 'porters were not difficult to obtain, and were very cheerful and willing: a European visitor who had preceded me a short time before had paid a rate of 8 rupees, so that there was no prospect of getting any porters for less'. This Dolpo expedition was not without tensions, one of which he describes in detail: 'From Tarakot to Tukucha I paid a rate of 10 rupees per day. Porters from Mukut crossing the high pass into the Kali valley attempted to increase this rate when at the top of the pass by giving me the alternatives either of paying more or of being abandoned there. They were surprised to find that in such circumstances I preferred abandonment, and in the end they completed the journey at the agreed rate.'

His interest in, and respect for, the Sherpa communities he encountered deepened over time. In 1964 he noted that throughout eastern Nepal, there was 'no doubt that the Sherpa areas are very much richer than most other parts', while of Rolwaling he wrote that 'the people are Sherpas, and compared to the Sherpas of Khumbu who have become somewhat sated with mountaineering expeditions they are an unsophisticated and very cheerful community'. 'Since 1949', he continued,

'Khumbu has been visited by so many mountaineering expeditions that its people show a considerable degree of sophistication. They possess a wealth of climbing equipment, and it is not unusual to be addressed in English by persons dressed in European style'. Describing the porters they hired in Kathmandu for a journey to West Nepal the following year, Stainton noted that 'these Sherpas viewed the ways of the local people with some surprise. Having myself travelled in Sherpa country the previous year it was very evident to me that the Sherpa people are a much more progressive community than these inhabitants of West Nepal'. While interested in the cultures and languages of the people he met on his travels, Stainton did not present himself as an expert. His one-time travelling companion, Tirtha Bahadur Shrestha, a well-respected botanist from Nepal, wrote in an obituary: 'Adam never spoke Nepali nor did he make any attempt to do so.'

While languages may not have been his forte, Stainton's interest in the morphology of plants also manifested itself in his attention to architectural structures. He wrote: 'One of the pleasant features of Dolpo, and a great contrast to other Buddhist areas in Nepal is the excellent state of repair in which all religious buildings and monuments are kept. The red, grey, orange, and white wash with which they paint their *gompas* and *chortens* adds much colour to the scene. Some of these *gompas* are orthodox ones and some of the Pon-po [sic] sect; they alternate with a frequency confusing to all except an expert Tibetologist.' Stainton remained, however, wary of reductive logic: 'It is tempting to assume that these flat roofs indicate a drier climate here, but one is hardly justified in doing so without further knowledge of the cultural background of the villagers.'

Stainton recorded a number of the socio-cultural changes affecting the communities he met on his journeys. In the late 1960s, established Himalayan anthropologists were beginning to talk of cultural transformations and of Sanskritization, a process which the botanist also noted: 'Any traveller to Nepal soon appreciates the tendency of people to upgrade themselves in reply to questions about their caste. I suspect that some of the people who for the benefit of the inquisitive say that they are Chetri, Borah, and the like have in fact in the recent past had very close relationships with the Bhotia [sic] peoples to the north.' On occasion, Stainton buried entertaining asides in his otherwise serious field notes, as illustrated by his thoughts on the Tharu inhabitants on Dang, who '...live in long spacious one-storeyed houses with reed-thatched roofs, and they decorate them with symbols and pictures drawn in wash or carved in wood in a distinctive style. These decorations have an antique appearance, but amongst birds and beasts carved on a wooden well-head at Tulsipur which seemed to be of great age I observed a stylised but perfectly recognisable carving of a DC 3. The airstrip on which the aeroplane from Katmandu [sic] lands is close by'. <

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Information >

Digital Himalaya is a pilot project to develop digital collection, archiving, and distribution strategies for multimedia anthropological information from the Himalayan region. Based at Cornell and Cambridge universities, the project began in December 2000. The initial phase involves digitizing a set of existing ethnographic archives comprised of photographs, films, sound recordings, field-notes, and texts collected by anthropologists and travellers in Tibet, Nepal, Bhutan, and the Indian Himalayas from the beginning of the twentieth century to the present. Please take a look at www.digitalhimalaya.com

Note >

* The Digital Himalaya Project recently digitized an hour of Stainton's 16 mm cine footage.