A Plant Hunter in the Himalayas

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, came across in the Botany Library of the Natural History Museum, London.

By Mark Turin

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 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 Chetti, Borah, and the like have in fact in the recent past had very close relationships with the Bhotea [sic] peoples to the north.’ On occasion, Stainton ventured 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 red-tiled 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.’

Mark Turin, MA is completing his grammar of the Tangmi language, spoken in central eastern Nepal. He is currently affiliated to the Department of Social Anthropology, University of Cambridge and is manager of the Digital Himalaya Project. markturin@compuserve.com

By Mark Turin

Villagers from the alpine zone of Nepal.

One of Adam Stainton’s Nepali helpers pressing specimens of a minute primula.