

# TOUCHING UPON THE HIMALAYA

*Excursions and Enquiries*



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**BILL MITKEN**

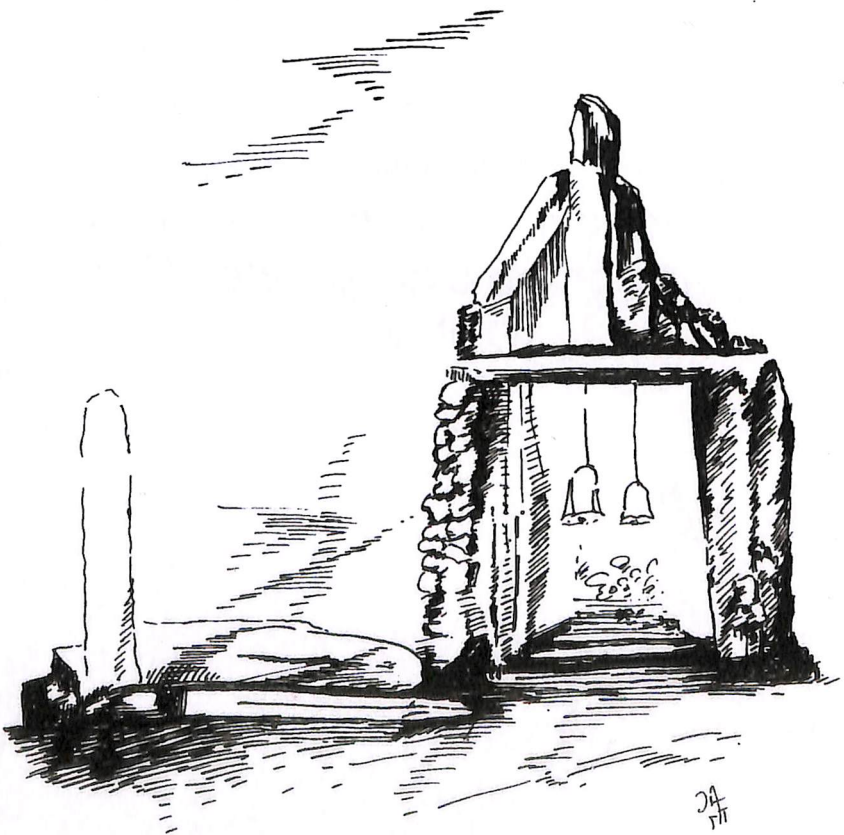
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## About the Author

Bill Aitken was born in Scotland in 1934, studied comparative religion at Leeds and hitch-hiked overland to India in 1959. In 1972 he became a naturalized Indian; he joined the Himalayan Club in 1981 and served as hon. librarian. After twelve years spent in the Kumaun hills he now lives in Garhwal. His books on the Himalaya include: *Seven Sacred Rivers*, *The Nanda Devi Affair*, *Riding the Ranges*, *Footloose in the Himalaya*, *Mountain Delight*, *Zanskar*, *1000 Himalaya Quiz*. Other works include *Exploring Indian Railways*, *Branch Line to Eternity*, *Literary Trails*, *Divining the Deccan*, *Sri Sathya Sai Baba*.



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Bill Aitken

Sketches by  
Geeta Kapadia



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## Foreword

Like that perennial question 'Why climb a mountain?', many times I ask myself, "Who is the real Bill Aitken?" To the former, the traditional answer is: "Because it is there". But there are no easy answers to the latter, because Bill is generally *not* there, great traveller that he is, and when not on the move, shuttles between New Delhi and Mussoorie whilst I live in Mumbai.

To me, Bill is foremost a philosopher at heart—a true lover, may be worshipper of the Himalaya. His knowledge and understanding of the range is almost like that of an ancient sage's. When he first came from Scotland, he lived for a long time in an *ashram* at Almora. His experiences in the *ashram*, the Indian way of thinking and India the country overwhelmed him (his philosophical zeal will soon be seen in his forthcoming writing on Shri Satya Sai Baba). Later he travelled through the range on a motorbike, staying with workers and labourers on the road, eating at small *dhabas* and observing everything from war zones to holy temples. His experiences on his motorbike allowed him to interact with the common people, the *paharis* (hill-folk) and plainsmen.

The second facet of Bill is his love of the Indian Railways. He has studied its meter gauge system, its steam engines, not to forget his several journeys on the various hill railways all over India. Today he is an authority on the Indian Railways and was asked by railway authorities to write a commemorative when they celebrated 125 years of its existence.

On motorbike or by rail, Bill also travelled extensively in the Deccan range in southern India. It is perhaps the second most important range after the Himalaya and certainly older than it. His observations of its ancient traditions are unique. He has fond affection for the sacred rivers, too. A Hindu wedding is solemnized by a Sanskrit couplet, which requests the seven sacred rivers to witness the occasion. Bill has understood its nuances, its importance and written about it.

As a writer he is unparalleled and has published various books covering topics as diverse as mountains in general, Nanda Devi in particular,

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literature or life. He has written several articles in the newspapers and journals. As the editor of the *Himalayan Journal* I do not like to publish the annual issue without a contribution from him. His writings are a monumental record for posterity. They have made the Himalaya, particularly the middle Himalaya, its people and its legends, come alive. We owe a lot to Bill.

Amongst many other things he loves to watch cricket, sip beer and relish good food. Often, at a Delhi restaurant, we have done all three at once! Sometimes by the time that we'd finished the beer and a pizza, the entire cricket team has been bowled out. And all the while he'd been enthusing me with new ideas to last another year.

He addressed a large gathering of mountain lovers in Mumbai during the annual seminar two years back. In between several slide-presentations and mountain movies, his half-hour, simple speech on a relaxed approach to the Himalaya titled, "A Lateral Approach to Himalaya", won the day. The same evening, at an after-dinner speech, he was listened to with rapt attention by an enthralled audience, for his talk generated plenty of laughter.

The present collection of his articles were published in the *Himalayan Journal* (we use his full name W.M. Aitken) and they cover a wide variety of subjects. Who else could have written about trekking in rains, war in the mountains, the search for the real name of Everest, *gaddies* or even about the different hats worn by the people of Himalaya and the reasons for it? These articles, like his books, are based on his travels and his keen observation.

Inspired by his articles we recently trekked with him to Budha Pinath in Kumaun. As we ended our trek at Ganai-Chaukhutia, in a busy bazaar, Bill suddenly called me aside. He pointed to a marble plaque near a bridge. It read, "Pattis of Chaukot and Gewar. From this village 134 men went to the Great War of 1914-1919. Of these 112 gave up their lives". A post box hung near it and in between the hustle and bustle of bazaar, Bill had noticed this historical item.

Bill has generously agreed for his articles in the *Himalayan Journals* to be published as a book and even donated all income generated from it to the Himalayan Club. He is always generous with his friends, in more ways than one. His life has been well lived, its spectrum vast. It is no wonder that after decades of knowing him, I am still confused about his real personality. Perhaps the articles contained in this book will give some answers to the readers to my question, "Who is the real Bill Aitken?"

Will real Mr. William McKay-Bill-Aitken get up please ?

Mumbai  
11th July 2004

HARISH KAPADIA





## Preface

A travel writer's greatest pleasure is to know some readers respond to his enthusiasms even when they appear, as in these treks and queries, to concern themselves with fairly run-of-the-mill subjects and destinations. To be reprinted from the *Himalayan Journal*, *Kolkata Section Souvenir* and *Newsletter* is a signal honour that may raise a few eyebrows because of the ordinariness of the author's endeavour. But it can be argued that a selection of articles that appeals to ordinary mortals was overdue. One reason I suspect why the Club (that has the potential to host a huge membership in view of the legions who passionately love the Himalaya) has not yet crossed the thousand-member barrier is because of the lopsided perception that the high Himalaya is the preserve of what Dinesh Purandare on a recent trek called "terminal machismo," the juvenile urge to prove (as in the monotonous targeting of the summit of Everest) that "mine is bigger than yours." And if the summit is *that* marvellous, why don't the *ustads* share space with Chomolungma and spend their retirement years there?

The title *Touching the Himalaya* is chosen to emphasise that even casual contact with the hem of the range can leave the visitor with a lasting thrill. The special magic I found on my first visit to Kausani in 1960, I discover remains just the same after forty years. It was to seek to rescue the delights of the lower parts of the Great Range from such insensitivity too often flaunted by the grossly muscular/technical types that these articles were originally penned. It is hoped they will appeal to the moderately endowed trekker of both sexes keen to enjoy the Himalaya for its own sake and alive to the importance of long-term perspectives.



There is the risk of sophistry in those who argue the *Abode of Snow* starts at the snowline. As a resident of the range I feel a hard-to-describe affinity with the lower and middle ranges precisely because of the interplay between—and matching character of—the terrain and people. Recently in early March 2004, while climbing from Kausani to Pinnath alongside the ethereal spread of Trisul, Nanda Devi and Nanda Kot, floating mid-heaven in detached majesty, strangely I never once thought of those who had climbed them—Longstaff, Tilman or Martin Moran. (The latter's HJ article describing a moonlight marathon after a midday feast is my all-time favourite.) I only hope these famous names experienced on the summit the real pleasure our mixed bunch of plains trekkers and *pahari* porters felt at 9063 ft.

Further raised eyebrows seem in order regarding the incongruity of the author's status as an honorary member alongside some of the aforementioned modern greats. As hon. librarian I had deemed it fit to resign from the Club after a member wrote to Penguin Books threatening to sue us for my supposed theft of a photograph from one of his books for the cover of my *Nanda Devi Affair*. I demonstrated to the would-be suer that my slide of Nanda Devi includes *more* of the Devistan ridge than is evident in his photograph (thus making it physically impossible to have been stolen), but in spite of this conclusive evidence (provided ten years ago), withdrawal of the false charge is still awaited.

Posturing on high ground whether moral or Himalayan becomes a bit absurd after a while and I had no hesitation, when invited later, to rejoin on prestigious (and ideal Caledonian) terms. Or so I thought until a lady member whose opinions I value suggested my decision was worthy of a "slimeball." People tell me its very hard to please everyone, and I have to take their word for it, since I never tried very hard. And those rash enough to express strong opinions can hardly complain when others voice theirs.

This collection is the brain child of Harish Kapadia. Three of us were descending in the cool of early morning from the summit of Pinnath through thick forest to the clearing at Bichuli Khatta with an ecstatic view of Nanda Devi amidst rhododendron trees in full bloom. In this expansive setting Harish agreed to pursue the editorial side, Tanil Bhai would examine the business end and I would tackle

the issue of copyright. So infectious was the editor's enthusiasm that he immediately began to click what he claimed would be the cover shot for the book.

On our return to the plains I was promptly posted copies of my articles towards the end of March and forwarded them for the opinion of my publishers, with a cautionary prayer "Let's see what Nanda Mayi decides." To my astonishment both Karthika of Penguin and Anuradha of Permanent Black phoned immediately to clear the proposal by early April. Thus the major part of the project, thanks to the inspirational overhang of Nanda Devi, was accomplished within a month.

To inspire is the chief characteristic of the Himalaya; it quickens our breath and stirs the dimension of eternity latent in our human integration. In spite of the understated object of the Club (penned by and for stiff upper lips) to "encourage and assist travel and exploration", the *Himalayan Journal* by and large has managed to capture some of the essential flavour of the Shivalaya and several of its contributors' excursions have registered the true wonder and awe of the range in their attempt to do justice to this inspirational quality that can be found even on minor forays.

Some may find the Enquiries too post-colonial in their critiques and feel I have unfairly targeted men (like Professor Kenneth Mason and Sir George Everest) who are only guilty of being true to the values of their age and clime. However care has been taken when marshalling the facts to acknowledge along with the shadow side the professional genius of these outstanding contributors to our scientific understanding of the Great range. At least these studies explode the myth that the sublimity of the Himalaya automatically rubs off on to the viewer. We have to work diligently for that beatitude and outer peaks summited often are symbolic statements of an inner drive to discover the profundity of our being.

The recent trek to Kumaun provided a thoroughly enjoyable short but stiff outing to Tarag Tal to celebrate my impending three score years and ten. I can think of no finer place to be than middle Kumaun in spring and to add to the grandeur of the surroundings, was the congenial company of Club members plus Har Singh & Co., Harish's internationally acclaimed porters. This brief expedition in the space of three days managed to turn the water of urban existence

into the wine of adventure. If these reprinted excursions (hopefully minus alarums) manage to arouse an inkling of that rare spirit, their purpose will have been served. To heighten that mood, the pen and ink sketches of Geeta Kapadia capture something of the mystique of the middle ranges.

A few comments, additions, deletions and corrections have been made to the original articles where called for and several dumb printing errors have been dumped.

Mussoorie 2004

BILL AITKEN

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*Excursions*





From Choor

From 50



# 1

## *More of the Lesser*

I have long had a bone to pick with the editor of the *Himalayan Journal* for plugging the upper reaches of the Great Himalaya to the exclusion of almost all else. If the aim of the Himalayan Club is to extend knowledge of 'adjoining ranges', legally there is no way the editor can overlook the existence of the Lesser Himalaya no matter how mean he finds their contours or how measly their height. The trend to ignore lesser aspects of the range (not to mention avoidance of the brief to encourage 'science, art and literature') is increasing in centimetre columns each year. Volume 43 of the HJ was entirely devoted to higher things and could have had for its motto 'Life begins at 26,000 ft' (or *Up yours*, depending on your point of view).<sup>1</sup>

As a corrective to the malady of bypassing the most fruitful parts of a mountain—the lower slopes where things grow, when the chain gang of porters' feet let them—I set out in April 1987 to have a look at the intriguing Himalayan feature called Churdhar. This is said to be the highest of the peaks of the Lesser range and assumes Guinness Book proportions when it also happens to be the highest peak nearest to the plains and the highest peak furthest from the

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1. The editor takes the point, but offers no apologies since he remains at the tender mercies of the authors who contribute the articles. He can aver that no contribution has been turned down because of its modest height and in fact the hunt is on for the lesser known peaks of the ranges covered by the Journal—the problem lies with the climbers who have need to satisfy their egos, not with the poor editor who is perpetually on his knees begging for 'suitable' material.—Ed.



permanent snow line. It's name 'Churdhar' which means 'the ridge of the sweeper' is also modified to 'Chur Chandani' referring to the moonlight glinting on the snow. Seen from the plains this mountain mass holds some snow for seven months of the year and confirmation of its humble status before the feet of the distant abode of snow would no doubt be seconded by the HJ editor.

One can see 'the Choor' as the British used to call it, from Mussoorie and Shimla and from Chandigarh and Saharanpur. Standing near the watershed of the Satluj-Yamuna, this area is rich in geological riddles and in fossil finds. Young and old rocks clash in a confusion of colour on the map of morphochronology. Travelling through the old princely state of Sirmur whose northern boundary the Sweeper guards is to pass from featureless foothills where good building stone is at a premium to a place where it is least required—on the summit of Churdhar. Huge outcrops of granite emulate the geology of the Great Himalaya. Most sources seem agreed that the summit crags are five feet under 12,000.

Finding information about how to reach the Choor was difficult to come by since it lies in an area little visited and less liked, judging by the fact that the Himalayan Car Rally tried the Haripurdhar run in 1986 and found it too grisly for self-respecting vehicles to repeat. The bus I took from Dadahu and the steep mountain road to Haripur had not been matched and either the chassis of the former needed to be shortened or the bends of the latter widened. At a point halfway where a truck had been standing in the middle of the road blocking the way for four days, I met a party of local medical officers which seemed appropriate for the high risk rate in which the bus passengers stood of getting heart attacks.

The only sensible account seemed to emanate from Yadavindra Public School whose Chandigarh branch supplied me with mileages and a map which showed that White was wrong in believing Churdhar marked the Indus-Ganges watershed. In fact it lies east of the Giri, which rising at the roots of Hathu circumvents the Chur and joins the Yamuna not far from its meeting with the Tons, which drains the other flanks of the massif. I also learned that it was the founder of YPS, Maharaja Yadavindra Singh of Patiala who invented the sport of white water running of this same stretch of the Giri. What began as '*lilo-baji*' in the 1920s reached fruition in 1959 in a

full-fledged rubber dinghy expedition down the Giri to Dadahu in the monsoon.

The Chur according to Lt White 'is the most lofty eminence belonging to the secondary Himalaya, running south of the great snowy range and from whatever point it may be seen forms a grand and prominent object, towering majestically amid a host of satellites'. I had been intrigued by White's sketches of the temple architecture of the surrounding villages and wondered if this style had survived 150 years of earthquakes, progress and the urge to say it with cement. By one of those delightful flukes the person I plonked down next to in the bus happened to be from the last village on the approach to Churdhar from the northern face. Having gained a height at Haripur only a few thousand feet short of the summit I felt my stomach sink as the bus wound its way back down to Baggi on the embryonic road to Chaupal. That left us with a steep pull up to the village of Kanda-Banah which we didn't reach, despite all my cursing in the dark, till 9 at night.

That night I looked gloomily across at the lights of Mussoorie which seemed just 15 minutes away, though I had left them a full three days ago for the endless tortured scream of bus engines which if translated into passenger shared feelings would read *bloody hell!* Next morning I was thrilled to look down and see White's village just below the forest bungalow, recognisable from the temple.

A villager crossing the ridge agreed to put me on it. I could make out the top of Churdhar above the thick tiers of conifer by the streaks of snow in the gullies. We must have been some 4000 ft from the top which the villagers placed at a distance of 10 miles. I soon learned why. Within two hours of setting out I was gasping on the ridge with the steepest part of the climb over and only 2000 ft to go. One could enunciate a (lesser) mountaineering law from this experience. 'For those who wish to ascend vertically in the shortest possible time compatible with future progress on a less inclined plane, take as your companion a hungry villager desperate to reach home for his morning meal.'

It was a marvellous place to be on a marvellous morning. For the first time I saw the full beauty of Swargarohini and what the local school master called the 'backside' of Bandarpunch. The angle of the latter's pyramid effectively cut off the eastern panorama of Garhwal



depriving me of the Bhagirathi Sisters (peaks) two of whom White lists in their imperial incarnation as St George and St Patrick. Left to the missionary mentality of some early surveyors we might have had the Himalaya renamed as the Indian Alps.

The easy ridge I followed up was littered with full grown trees capsized by the wind. The stick I picked up wasn't needed, for the only living thing I saw was a jackal on the way up and a monal on the descent to Nahura (Naura) on the south side of the mountain. I reached the temple around midday and resisted offers of food from the *pujari* since I wanted to get to the top before the clouds came down. A large *dharamshala* proves that the temple is very popular with local pilgrims but access from the south is not possible till May. Normally snow clogs the northern approaches but on the Chur the temple has been placed nearly 1000 ft below the top.

So far everything had been too good to be true and I wondered why everyone had advised me not to underestimate the Chur. Now there were deep snowfields which by midday had become unpleasantly soggy. Escaping to the granite crags meant an energetic detour with scraped knees since I was dressed only in shorts and tee shirt. By 1 p.m. I had made it to the cairn on top surmounted by a large cement image of Shiva to take the peak into the 12,000 ft league. Shimla lay to the northwest and a glitter of water to the southwest may have indicated Chandigarh. Everywhere the ridges of the Lesser range seemed arid, almost desiccated. This was in contrast to the superb forests around the feet of the Chur. In all directions thick conifer stands plunged down to the Giri and the Tons and above them all stood this impressive head of granite.

It was while thinking that the summit reminded me more of the Greater than the Lesser (Himalaya) that I looked down to discover my retreat over the south side of the mountain. I gulped as I saw no route, just a circling sweep of very steep and very virgin snow. Quickly I tried to work out a line between linking outcrops of rock that would get me to the rhododendron bushes that offered some braking power to the involuntary glissades my treadless footwear invited. The black clouds that threatened fortunately were not serious and after a lot of hysterical scrabbling and embarrassing impalements I was able to extricate myself with self-respect not entirely in tatters.

Suddenly from the cold unfriendly mood of the snow one was back among growing things and a scintillating mauve rhododendron was the next best thing to a victory trumpet. Once on the broad trail to Nahura it seemed only an idiot could get lost and I felt I had answered enough challenges for one day. Then the well-defined path dissolved into an unused trail. It took a whole kilometre of descent to accept that I was lost. As I sweated back up I enunciated another law for lesser altitudes: 'Bewilderment is the natural son of optimism'. Cursing my way back to the point of confusion I sat and counted up to the prescribed number for dismissing folly. Then weighing carefully the navigational evidence, was poised to plunge entirely in the wrong direction when I heard a call. The very first Gujjar of the season had arrived to save me crashing down through thick jungle to the Giri. Pointing out a bald ridge to the southeast he urged me not to waver one inch from its line. Within an hour I descended quite literally on to the roof of a shop in Nahura. There I was told that plans were afoot to keep the Gujjars out and make the Chur a musk-deer park. From Kanda-Banah I had walked 26 miles and proved to my own satisfaction that Churdhar was in more ways than one a chip off the old (and Greater) block.