Frank Smythe: The Six Alpine/Himalayan Climbing Books

Bâton Wicks, £18.99

review by Gordon Stainforth for *The Alpine Journal*, 2001

I'll have to confess to always having had a slight prejudice against Frank Smythe, which I cannot quite put my finger on. His books have long since been out of print, and the few I read years ago failed to impress; the received wisdom was that they embodied a rather dated romantic mysticism. It was as if the undoubted prejudices against him in certain quarters of the Alpine Club in the fifties had somehow percolated all the way down to me. Or perhaps it was simply that the names of his books are generally so uninspiring: *Climbs and Ski Runs*, for example, must be one of the most humdrum titles ever to grace the front of a mountaineering book, giving no hint of the evocative writing that lies within. So it came as a complete revelation to me to reacquaint myself with Smythe's work in this superb new 944-page six-book omnibus of some of his best writing.

There are two main surprises. First, I had not previously grasped the full range of his climbing achievements. Although he was not an outstanding rock climber, I had forgotten about his contribution to the first ascent of the West Buttress of Cloggy (led by Jack Longland). But it was in the Alps and the Himalaya that he really left his mark. He made several very important first ascents in the Alps, including the Sentinelle Rouge and the justifiably named Route Major on the Brenva Face of Mont Blanc, and over a dozen first ascents in the Himalaya, including Kamet (the highest peak in the world to be climbed at that time), Nilgiri Parbat and Mana Peak - the final 800 feet of which he climbed solo when his companion was overcome with fatigue. He was also on several much bigger expeditions, attempting Kanchenjunga in 1930, and Everest in 1933, 1936 and 1938. On Everest in 1933 he reached 28,100 feet without bottled oxygen - again solo, when his companion (Shipton, this time) flaked out - a feat that was arguably one of the most impressive performances on Everest until Messner's solo ascent nearly fifty years later. He was determinedly opposed to the use of oxygen, as being both 'bad sportsmanship' and 'artificial, unnatural, and therefore dangerous.' He was certainly a bold climber, and on one occasion when he went for a summit the sherpas decided that 'undoubtedly the Sahibs were mad and especially Ismay Sahib (the nearest the Tibetan can get to my name).' Another contemporary wrote that although he was physically quite frail, when he was at great altitudes 'a new force seemed to enter him.'

But the biggest revelation is the quality of Smythe's writing. There are some quaintnesses of English, it is true - like 'benignantly' and 'rank bad mountaineering withal' - and not all the writing is of an equally high standard, but at his best a no-nonsense Englishness is miraculously combined with the intensity of a poet. It is full of vivid vignettes - of people's faces being lit up by a gust of flame from a camp fire, of lightning storms, of boulders falling in the

night and just missing his tent, and of towers of ice being illumined suddenly by the setting sun. His first trip to the Alps at the age of eight has all the evocativeness of Ruskin - but done with about one-tenth as many words. He can also be very amusing, as when Wood-Johnson has the 'brilliant idea' of trying to ride a yak - from 'a gentle, doormat-like creature it became possessed of seven devils' and sent him flying through the air, or on the subject of his skill at making 'hashes ... which Mrs. Beeton at her best could hardly hope to emulate. My record hash was compounded of eighteen ingredients; I remember it well because I was sick afterwards.' At times he is quite touching. When he buys a goat for camp food - which he dubs Montmorency, 'but why I cannot for the life of me recollect' - he finds that he has 'not known him above an hour before I regretted his fate; he was very intelligent, very affectionate, very fond of human society, very docile at the end of his lead, and he had the most pathetic expression, as much as to say, "Please don't kill me yet. Let me enjoy a little longer the sun, the air and the luscious grass."' Finally Smythe is, if you'll forgive the pun, very frank - especially about the merits and weaknesses of his climbing partners and porters, for he disagrees with 'the hide-bound convention that your companion on a mountain shall remain only a name.'

What raises Smythe's writing well above most mountain literature is the sheer breadth and depth of his interests; as well as climbing - and many of the climbing descriptions here are among the most gripping I have ever read - he is interested in the whole mountain landscape, the mountain people and their culture, and he has a near-fanatical passion for botany. And he is multitalented: as well as being a prolific writer (27 books), he is a fine photographer, and a musician capable of listening to a Tibetan melody and writing it down in four-part harmony.

He is also something of a philosopher. And it is here, traditionally - particularly among his colleagues in the Alpine Club, that Smythe has been held to have come unstuck. Lord Schuster said his observations were 'neither as original nor as profound as he seems to think', while Sir Arnold Lunn condemned him for attempting to 'construct a religion out of his mountaineering experiences.' And very recently I have heard another critic describe his ideas as 'wacky'. Looking at his writings again, I think this is very harsh, indeed entirely unsustainable. Smythe's wackiest idea is that he believes in God, an idea that has never gone down well with the scientific reductionists. I think also the fact that he was - as he himself confessed - an 'incurable romantic', interested in flowers and sunsets, made some of his contemporaries regard him as a bit wet. Smythe tells us that Ruttledge called him a 'blooming sybarite, only he did not use the word "blooming"', and he admits that he runs the 'risk of being labelled "sentimental" - a red rag this word to the bull of materialism.'

I think the so-called 'philosophical' aspect of Smythe's work needs to be looked at a little more closely. While he is certainly a religious aesthete he is scarcely the mystic that some have branded him. God is mentioned extremely infrequently, and then only in a very abstract way. Fascinated by one particularly delicate mountain flower, he simply remarks: 'Heaven knows how

it grows - and that I think is the correct answer.' There is nothing remotely intellectual or obscure about his beliefs. 'A clever friend once told me', he says, 'that "the trouble with you is that you feel more than you think." If this is so, thank God for my disability.... I am content to accept with childlike faith and delight the infinite beauties and grandeurs of the universe.' If this is a philosophy at all, it is a very gentle philosophy. True, there are clichés - there is a chapter at the end of *Climbs and Ski Runs* that amounts to little more than a re-write of Whymper's famous reflections at the end of *Scrambles* - complete with platitudes like 'on [the hills] we approach a little nearer to the ends of the Earth and the beginnings of Heaven' - but there are also some sincerely held beliefs with which many modern climbers would undoubtedly concur.

So what *are* his main beliefs? First, that climbing is not about 'conquests' - despite the title of his early book, *Kamet Conquered.* A mountaineer's '"conquests" are within himself and over himself alone.' Second, (in a splendid chapter entitled 'On Doing Nothing', in *The Valley of Flowers*), that 'to get a kick out of life, a man must sample the contrasts of life ... to appreciate the joys of activity it is necessary to practise passivity.... if he neglects inactivity, he neglects contemplation and we cannot appreciate Nature otherwise.' Third, against materialism and conflict, he advocates 'simple living in natural surroundings' as the means of freeing ourselves from 'the germs of unhappiness and frustration, which produce the particular fever of war.' (And for him the worst type of conquering attitudes were to be found in the 'foul plague of Nazism'.) Fourth, and very closely connected with this: that it is in the peacefulness of the mountain setting that we realise that 'we are part of a growth infinitely serene; why then should we not partake of serenity?' Thus he detests the noise of guided parties on the Dent du Géant who render 'the still morning ... hideous by triumphant catcalls and other offensive noises.' And, in the 'incredible silence' that he experiences alone on the summit of Mana Peak, he feels that 'to shout would be profane.' And, finally, on such occasions Smythe often becomes aware of what he calls a 'Presence ... some supreme Purpose', and senses that 'in some inexplicable manner' he has been brought 'into closer touch with the creative forces out of which we have been evolved.' That is Smythe's 'philosophy' in a nutshell.

Now, this is all a matter of taste, but I personally enjoy such 'old-fashioned' reflections - it is only the 'politically correct' who would cursorily dismiss such ideas as being past their 'sell-by date'. And his purist attitudes to climbing anticipate the likes of Messner or Fowler.

Perhaps the most successful book in this collection - in which all the main themes and strengths of Smythe's writing seem to come together in a perfectly balanced and beautiful way - is *The Valley of Flowers.* After his second unsuccessful Everest expedition, he returned the following year, 1937, to the Bhyundar Valley, in the Garhwal Himalaya, which he had already dubbed the 'Valley of Flowers' when he first discovered it in 1931. Here his great theme of living a life of contrasts finds its fullest expression. The merit of Garhwal, he says, is that the climber can 'spend the morning on the snows and the afternoon amid the flowers. In such contrast lies the spiritual essence of

mountaineering. The fierce tussle with ice-slope and precipice and complete relaxation of taut muscles on a flower-clad pasture; the keen, biting air of the heights and the soft, scented air of the valleys. Everest, Kangchenjunga and Nanga Parbat are "duties", but mountaineering in Garhwal is a pleasure - thank God.' Here, in the peace and quiet of this mountain paradise, previously unvisited by Western man, Smythe not only makes a number of very impressive first ascents, but is also able to spend a lot of time collecting flowers. His enthusiasm is infectious. Of *P. candollii*, for example, he says '... you must see this plant on a misty day, when it seems to attract the distant sunlight to itself, so that its thin almost transparent petals glow as though illumined from behind. Even if you have little or no interest in flowers, it demands that you pause and pay tribute to its beauty and to the Divinity that raised it among the barren rocks.' Viewed from the Valley of Flowers, the 'distant combative world' that he reads about in the papers he receives by mail seems 'utterly fantastic ... it was as though I were looking down on an ant-heap that had gone completely crazy.' He is deeply impressed by the Himalayan peoples who say: '"We don't want your civilisation ... for wherever it is established it brings unhappiness and war." It is a terrible indictment and it is true.'

It is fitting, then, that the last book in the collection features Smythe's last mountaineering trip before the Second World War, and that on the very last climb he makes before the outbreak of war - the Innominata Ridge on Mont Blanc with Jim Gavin - they are accompanied by four young Germans. There is a striking camaraderie between them as the two parties keep overtaking each other, with the Germans warning them of falling ice and later offering them 'candied fruit, which we accepted gratefully'. The Germans, 'all ardent Nazis', were 'fit, active young men, and their leader was of that strikingly handsome type that Germany so freely produces.... it is one of the greatest tragedies the World has seen that a political ideology ... should imbue such men with its vicious principles.' But the ambience of the holiday had been one of 'such peacefulness' that 'the thought of war, which, had we but known it, was only a few day's distant, seemed so absurd, so fantastic, so completely and utterly inappropriate, as to be unbelievable.' Smythe does not labour the point: as they descend, the thunder begins to growl and 'a few days later Europe was at war'.

The book ends with some useful appendixes, including an outline of the whole of Smythe's climbing career up to the War, a list of all his writings, a detailed account of Smythe's petty but unpleasant feud with the 'touchy' and 'disputatious' Graham Brown ('the only enemy I have ever made'), and several of Smythe's own articles, including a scathing attack on the use of mechanical aids in climbing ('the same spirit as that which dynamites a trout pool.')

If the book has any real weakness it is that, except for a very meagre and mean-spirited affair by Sir Arnold Lunn, who was clearly jealous of a rival's achievements, there is no brief biography of Smythe. We are not told how he came to die at the early age of 49, though there *is* a mysterious and minuscule footnote on the very last page intimating that there will be a 'later volume' covering the years up to his death. On the plus side, the book is very well

illustrated with both archive and modern photographs, and it is peppered with useful maps and diagrams, which Smythe's original volumes lacked.

All in all, this adds up to a magic, monumental work that is astounding value at £18.99. Diadem and Bâton Wicks have done the mountaineering world a great service over the last 15 years in producing these omnibuses of out-of-print works by such luminaries as Shipton, Tilman and Muir, and this is perhaps the most attractive to date. I urge anyone interested in mountains, mountaineering, indeed the whole mountain landscape and culture, to read this exceptionally rewarding collection.

© ***Gordon Stainforth***