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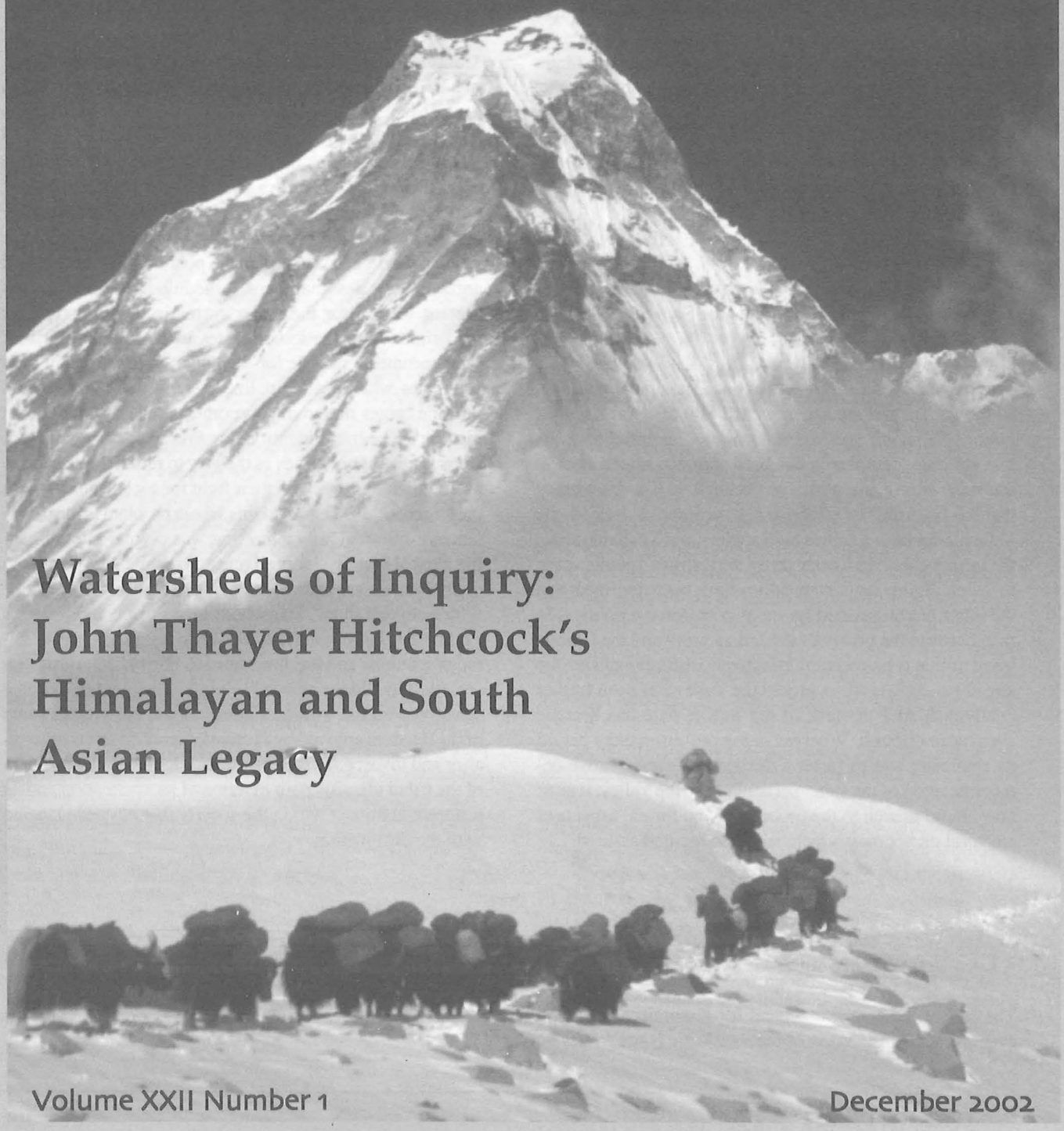

Watersheds of Inquiry: John Thayer Hitchcock's Himalayan and South Asian Legacy

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A Taste Shared: Reflecting John Hitchcock and the Good in Fieldwork[1]

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What is this I am doing? . . . What do I say I am doing? Many of my countrymen have heard of your country; many served with you in the war and admired you. But few know anything about you really. I have come to learn so that I can tell them. . . . Your children will know nothing [without a history] about their forefathers and how they lived. The answers: Why should your countrymen or our children want to know how we live? Our children should be glad to forget it. . . . They are very clear why I am here. To earn money . . . though they may add, to cover any conceivable insufficiency, that it must also be for "name." How not admit this?

John Hitchcock,
Fieldwork in Gurkha Country[2]

Those questions do not, of course, go unnoticed by those of us to whom they are posed. Questions of fact are easy; we reply with the knowledge we have acquired. Questions that have moral implications are harder to hear, are not so easy to answer, and, for many of us, persist long after they have been asked—indeed, become our questions, posed to ourselves.

Robert Coles,
Doing Documentary Work[3]

The best questions are those that are never completely answered. We hold them, like broken pieces of quartz, to the sun and twist them one way and another. The time of day, the season, and the angle of our holding all work together to reveal some new detail, some new possibility. Compare those to the other questions. There are those that lay their answers down in front of you, only waiting for time to focus your eyes. These stay around a while. We often come on both the question and its answer days, months, or years after the first intuitive asking. And there are also the questions of fact. These easily answered ones are the most forgettable, the ones that barely recur because the act of answering seals them forever. All three sets animate our work as anthropologists and our lives as people. It's the paradox of our discipline, concerned with the human condition and all it implies, that we often use these last as the measure of how well we do with the others.

"But the key question for men is not about their own authorship; I can only answer the question 'What am I to do?' if I can answer the prior question, 'Of what stories do I find myself a part?'"

Social scientists are notoriously skittish about the best questions. We settle on fact, even when we count it as slippery. We settle on how to get it, even though the how is related to the why. We keep a ledger that separates science from art, even though art lends the emotive power that allows science. The authors of a book (King et al. 1994) I sometimes use in my graduate seminars insist that qualitative and quantitative studies are underlain by a common logic. These authors think of themselves as mediators, calming the roiled waters of a long argument. But even as they make the claim, they exclude the questions that they call "philosophical." These are precisely those questions that every fieldworker must ask: those that turn on the researcher herself, those that follow from the "What is this I am doing?" that find their way into field journals.

We all have them. Whether in reflective scribblings that break our field accounts of everyday life or in the quiet moments of exhaustion when the talking around us fades into background, the primary questions come to us. These are the ones about selfhood and purpose and who we are. The ones that get elided in the methodological focus on how to do it. I look at my own twenty year old field journals and am surprised to find how my own mood and feelings tracked pathways cut before me, how my own words echoed John Hitchcock's from another twenty years earlier:

> I am frustrated. I crouch on the porch, the pleasant steam of my coffee rising in the evening sun. I look north to the mountains, to the Ganesh Himal, to the snowfields, the monsoon-fed green of the lower slopes. I listen to the constant sound of falling water—this valley of waterfalls—and unformed sentiments, thoughts, move inside of me, ready for articulation, waiting to be carved into some *mane* wall for others. They leave me with my coffee's breath—gone into the mountain air. And I'm left like a mute, with only feeling and the fleeing notion that I have something to say but lack the skill to say it. I want to say things about freedom and choice—these grand sentiments that come to me as I hunker on the terrace overlooking the village. I think often of why I'm here and what I can make of it. Too much self-absorption! (*Timling Journals*, 21 July 1981)[4]

And I see that my uncertainties then about the legitimacy of these thoughts and feelings resulted in a sudden cut to the apparent work at hand: Too much self-absorption!

It's easy to see why these questions are avoided in social science. Our disciplines seek the steadying answers that allow us to move on. Questions about what we are doing and why we are doing it too quickly slide into philosophy and, worse from the point of view of these skittish scientists, to questions of the moral and the good. Easier to keep to questions of method. And even our tenuous forays into the ethics of field research too quickly turn on a list of behaviors. We emphasize what we ought to do rather than reflect on what we should be.

There is pleasurable irony here. After all, every serious anthropological consideration of culture insists that no behavior can achieve coherence, and no analyst can understand that coherence, absent such pivotal understandings as what it means in a given setting to be a person, to act in terms of some notion of good, or to be a part of a narrative sequence of other meaningful behaviors. Appeals to these truths happily cross into philosophy.[5] More rarely do they turn their analysis to social scientists as people.

Storied Lives

> *Man is in his actions and practices, as well as in his fictions, essentially a story-telling animal. He is not essentially, but becomes through his history, a teller of stories that aspire to truth. But the key question for men is not about their own authorship; I can only answer the question "What am I to do?" if I can answer the prior question, "of what stories do I find myself a part?"* (MacIntyre 1981: 216)[6]

More than many, John Hitchcock's life and work forces us back to the best questions. Soon after he retired from active teaching at the University of Wisconsin in 1982, Al Pach and I wrote a short retrospective of John's contributions to Himalayan anthropology (1984). I followed up with a discussion of his place in cultural ecological studies in another publication (1989). These necessary accounts have the quality of fact. They detail the fit of John's research within the community and nail down how we build on it in our contemporary work. But by themselves they focus on the man's doing rather than his being. In doing so, they cheat us of the lessons we can learn.

Moral philosophers have a way of talking about the person that opens us to these lessons. Their phrase is the narrative unity of a life. Anthropologists have picked up the notion, too. We organize our lives through story. Our meanings lie there waiting to be heard. Of course, there are different kinds of stories. Some are barely stories at all, mere summaries or vignettes that imply something more. These are the ones that tell a community how to appreciate their honored ones. They are often fragments used to capture the smaller lessons that, strung together, approach a whole. Poorly done, they run dangerously toward sentimentality. Well and more complexly done, they gather like trickster tales or the story cycles of desert saints.

Similar to these are the personal tales, still told by others, that begin the binding of lives one to another. No longer communal, they are the work of singular memory and the beginning of lessons for the memorist. Lying at the intersections of lives, these stories take their flight from intimacy and personal knowledge. They hold mysteries known best to the teller.

More beautiful still are those stories we tell ourselves about ourselves. These are our answers, always moving and growing, to our questions of who we are, of being rather than doing. We judge them by how well they cant toward truth, an angled approach that is always changing to account for growth. These stories tell us about character, "the necessary condition for us to be able to 'step back' from our engagements," as Stanley Hauerwas describes it (1981: 271), to step back, reflect, and move on. These are stories of hopefulness, making sense of disappointment, giving meaning to and renewing the struggle.[7]

All of these are required if we are to learn from John and to share his meanings by weaving them into the fabric of our own. I tell some of them here with no misapprehension that I have a privileged view. I knew John less well than some and better than others. That I knew him at all is warrant enough to join with others, even John himself through his writing, in the construction and partaking of his life.

Communal Stories: John as We Knew Him

Every village's portrait of itself is constructed, however, not out of stone, but

Figure 1. Pokhara villagers below Machhapuchhare and Annapurna II (Photo by Michael Clarke)