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*A Distant View of a Snowy Range:  
Freshfield and Sella on the Tour of Kangchenjunga, 1899*

Paul Kalmes

*A distant view of a snowy range . . . has a strange power of moving all poets and persons of imagination*

Douglas Freshfield

The border between Nepal and Sikkim contains some of the most forbidding terrain on earth. The third-highest peak on the planet, 28,169-foot Kangchenjunga, dominates the region from any perspective. Seventy miles to the west is the Everest group, site of the first, fourth, and fifth highest mountains on earth. Clustered around Kangchenjunga is a host of smaller but still impressive mountains, such as Kabru, Siniolchun, and Jannu, that would have no rivals in any other range. Although today these mountains have all been mapped and climbed, they have lost virtually none of their essential allure.

The history of early European travelers in Nepal has its share of unusual characters. One was the British mountaineer Douglas Freshfield, who in 1899 organized his Tour of Kangchenjunga. Always ambitious, Freshfield had numerous objectives in mind for this trip, among them a reconnaissance of the passes around the great peak, an assessment of the climbing potential on Kangchenjunga and surrounding mountains, botanical, geographical, and geological research, and a comprehensive photographic documentation of the region. For the photography he enlisted the best mountain photographer we've had yet, the Italian Vittorio Sella.

Knowing Sella's capabilities with a camera in the mountains, Freshfield realized that the visual record would be unsurpassed in scope and content. Sella was that rare combination of explorer, artist and technician. He had virtually invented high mountain photography at a time when camera gear was prohibitively heavy and delicate. Imagine carrying a 40-pound camera and 13"x16" glass plates as film up into the high reaches of the Alps or the Caucasus of Russia. He and Freshfield had gotten to know each other through Freshfield's sponsoring of a show of Sella's photographs in London in 1890, and had maintained contact throughout the decade. When Freshfield began seriously considering the

Tour of Kangchenjunga, he knew there was only one choice of photographer. Sella's two decades spent refining high-mountain photography served him well, and he returned with an unprecedented visual record of the Kangchenjunga region. Freshfield was also not disappointed with the results of the trip, and his account of the expedition, **Round Kangchenjunga**, from which these excerpts are taken, is a classic of its genre.

It began with a letter in late 1898:

30-11-1898

*Dear Signor Sella,*

*Do not trouble yourself overmuch by my suggestion. I am an uncertain person balancing possibilities - If I can see my way to leave England for 6 months I should be more disposed to do so. Could I hope to get you to bring your equipment and experience, I am very lazy and inefficient in making elaborate preparations. Very possibly my idea will soon become a plan - Still it is just worth our while to turn it over in our minds as an idea ... I have got a cold in the head and feel rheumatic & wholly incompetent today, I have not been up anything since Mt. Perden last year: but I should like to see those great peaks and to go round Kangchenjunga. I have thought so for 20 years & how it is getting, perhaps it has got, too late!*

*Yours truly,*

DWF

Sikkim was a natural selection for Freshfield. He had opened up the Caucasus to mountaineering in the 1860's, and the Kangchenjunga area had the requisite attractions of unexplored terrain, tremendous mountains, and the exotic pull of Asia. As he wrote about his destination,

My choice of Sikkim was governed by a very simple and obvious consideration. To be quite frank

with the reader, though I am ready to do my humble part in investigating the laws of nature, I love 'the glories of the world' best. I have always traveled and climbed for scenery first, for science afterwards, and - let me add - for all that is included under the modern term 'record,' last.

Even today, to contemplate an extended trip in this region is an ambitious prospect. To do so nearly 100 years ago was proportionately more ambitious, mountain travel in those areas at that time involving far more unknowns. Freshfield had the requisite panache not just to contemplate but to create such a journey. His expedition has few rivals for audacity and accomplishment, and stands as a model upon which modern travelers could base their own trips.

For all his interests in the various aspects of the people and places he visited, the mountaineer in Freshfield predominates; indeed, his profuse descriptions could almost be an endorsement for the mountaineer's life:

[T]he gaze of the mountaineer soon returns to the snows. The picture, so long dreamt of, so often studied in black and white, is at last before his eyes in all its glory of color and aerial perspective. A certain complacency perhaps mingles with his admiration. For we all have our vanities, and the mountaineer's is to cherish a serene conviction that he alone can properly understand and appreciate the divine architecture. Of course his claim is in a strict sense preposterous. A distant view of a snowy range ... has a strange power of moving all poets and persons of imagination. What his technical knowledge does for the mountaineer is to lift him for the moment to this upper level of intelligence. He knows by experience what the few discover by intuition, and the many never discover at all, the remoteness and the gigantic dimensions of the natural objects brought within his range of vision.

Taking three weeks on the trail from Gangtok, the capital of Sikkim, Freshfield's group went from the jungles in the foothills to the snowy wasteland of 20,000' Jongsong La. Conditions were considerably different than those found in the Alps of home. They drew the worst possible weather straw, experiencing a so-called '100-year snowfall' which completely changed their planned ascents of peaks they encountered.

Weather notwithstanding, one never knew what other obstacles might impede the progress of the group:

Presently we were alarmed by a message that Signor Vittorio Sella was ill, and required assistance. Fortunately he appeared in person soon afterwards, not much the worse for an indisposition which he attributed rather to diet, to 'too much cold boiled yak,' than to the effects of altitude.

But Sella had his pride. In his own copy of **Round Kangchenjunga** he penciled in next to this sentence,

"*Era necessaria questa notizia?*" (Is this note really necessary?). One cannot miss the disgruntled tone in which he must have written this. Regardless, Sella and Freshfield maintained the gentlemanly distance that their friendship required, each respecting the other as preeminent in his field. Neither lacked the force of personality needed to accomplish the tasks they set themselves.

Freshfield and Sella had an admirable range of interests and expertise, something found only rarely today. Without too great a stretch, one might call them renaissance men. They found the indigenous people they met to be as interesting as the mountains they were exploring. Sella created affecting and honest portraits of natives wherever he went, and Sikkim and Nepal were no exception. Freshfield also developed a feeling that might fall short of affection but could certainly be called respect for a different way of seeing the world, one based on an adaptation to a harsh environment rather than an attempt to subdue it. The opening paragraph of **Round Kangchenjunga** lays this view out:

For primitive man the inanimate hardly exists. The so-called savage is the most thoroughgoing of animists. He recognizes a living personality in every conspicuous natural object within his daily round. Slowly and reluctantly, one by one, the goblins who haunt the earth, the demons who lurk in each fantastic crag or boulder, the gentler spirits of the streams and groves, retire before the advance of civilization and science. But the human imagination, as much as the human body, needs a playground, and at the same time the human intellect resents a void. The uninhabitable regions, the pathless tracts of sand or snow, the desert and the glacier, become consequently the refuge of the Unseen Powers of the Universe.

The Lepchas and Bhotias of the Kangchenjunga region impressed Freshfield as admirable examples of a simpler form of humanity, unpolluted by Western values. He was a keen observer of the indigenous people, at least by the usual standards of the documentation of mountaineering trips. Certainly they have their foibles and irritating habits but Freshfield forgives these '[c]hildren of the forest, true Arcadians':

The Lepchas are the aborigines of the Sikkim valleys. They possessed the land from time immemorial until three hundred years ago. Ethnologists tell us that they are Mongolian, but their closer affinities lie with other primitive hill-tribes rather than with the coarser modern Tibetan stock. Children of the forest, true Arcadians, they live, not in villages, but in separate clearings, sunny plots of maize, barley, and millet, surrounded by groves of orange trees and plantains and clumps of enormous bamboos. Their dwellings are square wooden huts, raised on platforms for protection from snakes and wild beasts, and covered with thatched roofs that project to form rude verandahs, where the golden pods of maize are, as in the Italian Alps,

frequently hung out to dry. Their great resource and material for all purposes, from houses and bridges down to mats and drinking cups, is the bamboo. Of ornaments of all kinds, particularly silver chains, beads, necklaces, and amulets, they are very fond. The sexes are often indistinguishable at first sight. Men and women dress alike in a loose shirt and striped kilt or petticoat, both part their hair in the middle, wearing it, the men in one, the women in two, pigtailed. 'If - I quote Sir Joseph Hooker - 'they serve a good hillman like themselves, they will follow him with alacrity, sleep on the cold, bleak mountain, exposed to the pitiless rain, without a murmur; lay down their heavy burden to carry their master over a stream, or give him a helping hand up a rock or precipice.' Most of their paths are ladders or precipices, and steepness seems a matter of indifference to their abnormally developed muscles and hardened limbs. Yet the outward form of the race is effeminate. Their gentle demeanour and kindly manners at once strike the traveler, and his first impression generally holds good when he comes to know them, though their childishness has also its provoking side. . .

These Bhutias, Tibetans who in times past have come south and settled either in Nepal or Sikkim, are as a rule, where the race is not mixed, regular Tartars with high cheekbones and small, twinkling eyes. Their broad faces wear a habitual air of jollity, but they are great comedians and masters of the most varied expression. One of our men frequently reminded me of the late Mr. Buckstone in Tony Lumpkin. They are sturdy in build, noisy in manner and turbulent in spirit, but, so far as my experience goes, not ill-conditioned when properly handled. Far more energetic than the Lepcha, they are supplanting the weaker race.

Their women are thickly built and comely only in early youth, but none the less given to personal decoration. They wear prodigious earrings and delight to cover their broad bosoms with silver and amber ornaments. In the intervals of other occupation they are generally spinning.

The hills are dotted with Gumpas or monasteries where Lamas or monks, not less idle than those of the West, preach and practice a degraded Buddhism, in which demon-worship is the most prominent feature. Their craft consists in an elaborate system of charms and devices by which the machinations of the monsters, whose terrific figures - drawn with a grotesque force that does the native artists credit - adorn every temple, may be defeated, and the Lamastery enriched.

### **Siniolchun and Jannu**

The real reason Freshfield went was to see the mountains, and he could not have been dissatisfied with the impact they made on him. Siniolchun and Jannu are two jewels among the many scattered around

Kangchenjunga, peaks with peers but no superiors anywhere in the world. Freshfield, only the second European to see and describe these views, leaves little doubt of his sense of awe, although it is tempered neatly by continuous comparisons to the Alps and his penchant for Pisgah views. These two peaks are certainly among the most spectacular in the world, and Sella captured them as no-one else ever has.

Siniolchun, 6881 m/22,570'

I am afraid that any attempt to give a picture of the scene set before us must be equally hopeless. The first fact I must ask the reader to grasp is that Kangchenjunga and Siniolchun stand twelve miles apart, that they occupy relatively to the Zemu Glacier the situations the Jungfrau and the Aletschhorn do the Aletsch Glacier. At the [lake] we had been approximately in the position of the Concordia Hut; we were now in the position of the Eggishorn.

Siniolchun, therefore, had superseded Kangchenjunga as the centre of the landscape, and no nobler centrepiece can be imagined. Though only 22,570 feet high - nearly 6000 feet lower than Kangchenjunga - Siniolchun, owing to its symmetry and proportions, and also to the splendid encrustation of its precipices in a fretwork of snow and ice, has impressed the few ... who have as yet approached it as the most superb triumph of mountain architecture. To the neighbouring peaks it is as Gotti's Tower to the rest of the Italian Domes and Campanili.

[F]rom the slopes of the Thangshung La, Siniolchun is in full view from base to summit. Let the reader picture an Aiguille Verte, or Dent Blanche, twice as large and with double the amount of snow and ice clinging to its cliffs, and he will still be far from realizing the beauty of the most beautiful snow mountain I have ever seen, possibly the most beautiful snow mountain in the world.

Siniolchun is, for the climber, the ideal snow mountain; the throne where

*'Power dwells apart in its tranquillity,  
Remote, serene, and inaccessible'*

Inaccessible! . . . Who can tell? The story of the Alps and Caucasus seems to show that every virgin peak must sooner or later meet with its conqueror. From the saddle between Simvu and Siniolchun - on which but for that inexpressibly inopportune snowstorm I might already have been standing - some slope or rib may be revealed by which a more fortunate mountaineer will one day attain to the last surge of the fantastic snowy eave that hangs over those shining cliffs. Let him be careful to treat that snow with due respect, or in more senses than one he may enjoy a Pisgah view.

No less formidable in its visual impact, the mighty Jannu is overwhelmingly large and enjoys a reputation among mountaineers as one of the most desirable summits on earth. Startlingly steep on

almost every side, this peak is indeed "a most attractive monster":

Beyond and behind Kabru to the west rises Jannu, the rock peak of the group, a great round tower crowning the end of a bastion of crags. The outline may suggest a sphinx, or a lion couchant. Too steep to hold snow except on its ledges and shoulders, it is to the critical appreciation of a connoisseur in mountain forms a most attractive monster.

[T]he giant mountains of Nepal, stretched in a wide curve, extending all along the line of the northern horizon from a point nearly due west to the base of Jannu. Some, the more distant, were tinged as with pale gold, others shone in silvery light. Wherever the nearer range dropped, fresh peaks and horns shot up over its unknown and untrodden passes. Below the bright belt of new-fallen snow on which I stood the

great spurs of the mountains were spread out, range beyond range, clothed in the brown and amber of autumnal woods and pastures ... while far, far away to the south, a vague sea of pale sunlight and diaphanous, rainbow-tinted haze indicated the position of the plains of Bengal.

In the foregoing sentences I have made but a poor attempt to transmit to lovers of great mountains some faint image of the general impressions made on me by this noble view. . . I have been fortunate above most men, not only in seeing many such Pisgah views in the Alps, the Caucasus, and the Pyrenees; in Italy, in Corsica, and North Africa ... the view from our 'point of observance' was not a complete panorama like the views from the highest summits. It possessed something to impress minds that only the more gigantic and startling effects of scenery can rouse to any admiration. It had Jannu. . .



*Lepcha Travelers in Sikkim (Photograph, 1893, by Vittorio Sella)*