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### **Shipton & Tilman: The Great Decade of Himalayan Exploration**

By Jim Perrin

Shipton & Tilman: The Great Decade of Himalayan Exploration. Jim Perrin. Hutchinson, 2013. 412 pages, black and white photos. Hardcover, £25.

The highest ideals of mid-20<sup>th</sup> century mountaineering have been summed up in the phrase “brotherhood of the rope.” These ideals were embodied in such famous climbing partnerships as that of Toni Kurz and Andreas Hinterstoisser (many Alpine first ascents, ending badly for both of them on the Eiger North Face in 1936), Charlie Houston and Bob Bates (American K2 expeditions of 1938 and 1953), and Tom Hornbein and Willi Unsoeld (Everest West Ridge, 1963). These were friendships grounded in common goals, shared values, and above all in the bonds of a trust so absolute that each individual climber was literally willing to put his life in his partner’s hands.

Perhaps the most celebrated of all such partnerships, and certainly among the most productive in mountaineering accomplishment, was that of Eric Shipton and Bill Tilman. The two Englishmen met, improbably, in Africa in the late 1920s. Shipton, nine years Tilman’s junior, was already an experienced climber thanks to several seasons in the Alps. Tilman was a novice at climbing, but had a formative experience of a different sort, shipping out to France in 1915 as a newly commissioned, 18-year-old artillery officer, wounded, decorated for bravery, and somehow surviving for three years on World War I’s western front, where junior officers like himself had a normal life expectancy of less than a month.

In Africa, in the late 1920s, the two climbed Kilimanjaro, Mt. Kenya, and several peaks in the Rwenzori range. In the 1930s they leapfrogged into the front rank of the world’s mountaineers when they joined up again in the Himalayan ranges, including a shared Everest expedition and a surveying reconnaissance of the K2 region. But their most famous exploit lay in the discovery of the route via the Rishi Gorge through the barrier ring of mountains that blocked access to the inner sanctuary in which stood 25,643-foot Nanda Devi, the tallest mountain in India’s Kumaon Himalaya. Jim Perrin, author of the new dual biography *Shipton and Tilman: The Great Decade of Himalayan Exploration*, calls the 1934 Nanda Devi reconnaissance, “the most radical and successful enterprise in the annals of mountain exploration.” On that expedition, Shipton and Tilman were the “first human beings to enter into one of the world’s most sublime natural shrines.”

The subjects of Perrin’s biography emerge as two very different men who, if it were not for the climbing bond, would probably never have met or become friends. Shipton, Perrin writes, represented “an energetic Romantic individualism,” while Tilman was a withdrawn and stoic figure, one with “a stately and disciplined Augustan outlook.” As his fame grew, Shipton became something of a lady’s man, while Tilman was a life-long bachelor with a reputation as misogynist. And it was Shipton who emerged as the ranking figure in Britain’s quasi-official mountaineering hierarchy, the man whom the Alpine Club and Royal Geographic Society turned to repeatedly in attempts to secure the first ascent of Everest’s summit for a British climber.

But differing temperaments and career paths aside, Shipton and Tilman shared two essential characteristics. One was a preference for small, lightweight expeditions rather than the huge siege campaigns that were then the fashion in Himalayan mountaineering. The second was that they were both gifted writers, and together left a legacy of some of the best expeditionary mountaineering accounts ever written. And it is largely thanks to Jim Perrin and to Mountaineers Books that their accounts remain in print today, as H.W. Tilman: The Seven Mountain-Travel Books and Eric Shipton: The

An accomplished climber in his own right, one of Britain's best known travel writers, and author of one of my favorite recent biographies of a mountaineer, *The Villain: The Life of Don Whillans* (winner of the 2005 Boardman Tasker prize), Perrin is certainly well-qualified to write this account of Shipton and Tilman's lives and achievements—particularly since he befriended Tilman in that climber's last years. Through a close reading of the expedition accounts, of private correspondence, and Shipton's unpublished notebooks, Perrin traces the growing bonds between the two men. In the African climbs, Shipton was the expert, Tilman the novice. By the time they explored the Nanda Devi sanctuary, they were equals: "There is a growing mutual trust and reliance here, a recognition of pooled perceptions and shared responsibility."

Perrin's biography has many virtues, but it also has its limitations. He is a self-indulgent writer, with a penchant for irritable, confusing, and sometimes bizarre asides (he obviously has a strong dislike for George Leigh-Mallory, and for Wade Davis, author of a recent history of the 1920s Everest expeditions—neither of which he bothers to explain to his readers.)

From a historian's perspective, the worst example of this kind of thing comes in the chapter discussing the first ascent of Nanda Devi in 1936. Shipton was off on another Everest expedition; Tilman, with a party of British and American climbers (the latter including Charlie Houston), retraced the path through the Rishi Gorge to the base of the mountain. Then, in a brilliant coup, Tilman and Noel Odell reached the summit, establishing an altitude record that would last for the next 14 years.

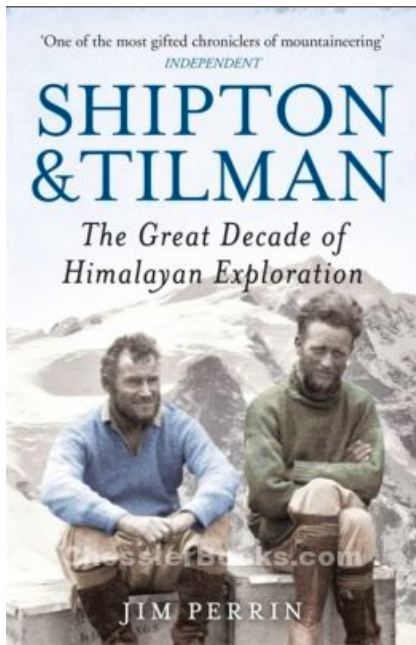
Shipton warmly congratulated the Nanda Devi climbers in subsequent public statements. Did he harbor some secret resentment that he wasn't along to share the triumph? Perrin thinks so, and says he has the evidence to prove it. In 1981 he received a letter from an American mountaineering researcher (now deceased), quoting from memory a telegram from Shipton he found in the Bill Tilman papers deposited at the University of Wyoming. The telegram was sent to Tilman at the Planters Club in Darjeeling, written immediately before the British-American expedition left for Nanda Devi. "He [the American researcher] stated that it read thus: 'Tilman. Bugger you. Shipton.'"

That doesn't sound much like the Shipton of *The Six Mountain Travel Books*, who preferred to employ a kind of gentle irony when poking fun at his companions. The telegram's existence certainly puts a different spin on the Shipton-Tilman brotherhood of the rope. Perrin calls the man who found the telegram and reported its contents "an unimpeachable witness." So for him, the telegram's existence, about which his knowledge is, he admits, third-hand, is treated as a serious piece of historical evidence. He suggests that it was "intended as a joke...of a very Freudian kind" (which is to say masking hostility.) Perhaps. But personally I would have checked with the archivists in Laramie to confirm the existence and wording of the telegram. In fact, after I read this section of Perrin's book, I did check with the archivists. It doesn't exist.

Is Perrin's biography worth reading? Absolutely. Is Perrin absolutely objective and reliable? Given his penchant for curmudgeonly license, unfortunately not.

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## Images



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