

# SHEBBEARE: ON THE SHOULDERS OF GIANTS

IT IS SAID THAT IF WE SEE FURTHER THAN THE ANCIENTS AND POSSESS GREATER KNOWLEDGE IT IS BECAUSE WE ARE JUST DWARFS SITTING ON THE SHOULDERS OF GIANTS WHO LED THE WAY.

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IMAGES: COURTESY OF THE ROYAL GEOGRAPHICAL SOCIETY

THAT CERTAINLY WOULD SEEM to be the case with MNS. The early presidents of the Society were persons of great achievement, not least our founding president E. O. Shebbeare. Shebbeare himself literally stood on the shoulders of giants. High on Mt Everest he gazed over China and Tibet, not once but twice. To top that off, he also often rode to work sitting on elephants.

Edward Oswald Shebbeare was born in 1884 in Wykeham, Yorkshire where his father was the vicar. The family had a strong connection with India; an uncle won the Victoria Cross during the Indian Mutiny, a nephew served in the Indian Army's famous Corps of Guides while other relatives were tea planters. Shebbeare himself went to Bengal in his 20's to work as a forester.

Like many young men of his time, Shebbeare showed an interest in the outdoors and his work enabled him to spend time in the hills and forests of Eastern India. Imagine Mowgli and The Jungle Book. Shebbeare's beat ranged from Bengal's lowland forests to the mountain forests bordering Bhutan and Sikkim. Besides forestry, he studied the fishes of the Himalayan streams, the reptiles and large mammals of the region – elephants, rhinos, tigers, gaurs and leopards. Using an elephant as scent camouflage, he found that he was able to approach, and even mingle with herds of wild gaur (seladang) and deer, which he found to be extremely useful when he needed game for the pot! Though he hunted, as most did in Victorian times, the critics of colonial India acknowledged that he was a dedicated naturalist and wildlife conservationist.

*North face of Everest  
from the Tibetan side.*





Shebbeare in Tibetan clothes and umbrella.

## EARLY DISCOVERIES

Travelling in the forests with his elephants, an activity he called “ghooming”, he observed animals and their natural behaviour. He saw the Golden Langur *Trachypithecus geei* in 1907, half a century before it was taxonomically described in 1953. We tend to think of the rhino as a slow lumbering beast but Shebbeare revealed it is in fact a fast mover and can hurdle a fallen tree like a horse! Ghooming came with its risks with tigers that sometimes attacked the elephants. The experienced rider, he tells us, stays on the elephant and lets it deal with the tiger. Inexperienced riders jump off which is what the tiger wants them to do. If the tiger jumps on the elephant’s head though, Shebbeare advises that “one must clout it with whatever is at hand” even if this is just an umbrella.

Working with the hill tribes of the Himalayas enabled him to observe their life and customs though he never forgot that he was a “sahib”. Shebbeare’s experience with tribesmen and animals led him to be appointed Transport Officer on the 1924 British Everest Expedition, one of the most famous expeditions in mountaineering history. It is possible that the legendary climbers George Mallory and Andrew Irvine reached the summit nearly 30 years before Sir Edmund Hillary.

Shebbeare returned to Everest in 1933 as Deputy Leader of the British expedition and despite his age climbed the North Face to 7100 metres. This was on the harder Tibetan side of the mountain. His organisational flair and his ability to speak to the Sherpa porters in their own dialect led to a demand for his services. He also supervised the logistics of the German expeditions to Kanchenjunga, the third highest peak in the world and one of the remotest. At a time of growing Anglo-German rivalry before the World War, being asked to assist the Germans was the highest possible praise.

A Himalayan expedition in those times was logistically as well as physically demanding. Nowadays, mountaineers fly to Nepal to start their climbing. In Shebbeare’s time, a hundred porters, cooks and climbers with 300 mules walked from India to Tibet over two months in a mile long column.

## SHEBBEARE BECAME A FOUNDING MEMBER OF THE HIMALAYAN ALPINE CLUB WHOSE LEADER, GENERAL BRUCE, WAS SAID TO HAVE BEEN THE INVENTOR OF SHORT TROUSERS. BRUCE CUT OFF THE LOWER LEGS OF HIS TROUSERS WHICH RUBBED AGAINST HIS KNEES WHEN CARRYING A GURKHA ON HIS BACK WHILE HILL TRAINING.

Shebbeare became a founding member of the Himalayan Alpine Club whose leader, General Bruce, was said to have been the inventor of short trousers. Bruce cut off the lower legs of his trousers which rubbed against his knees when carrying a Gurkha on his back while hill training. Shebbeare was an unconventional dresser too and usually wore shorts and canvas shoes without socks. Photographs of Shebbeare on Everest show him clad in Tibetan clothes wearing a horn shaped hat while other members of the expedition are dressed like English country gentlemen.

His relaxed dressing style got him into trouble when he was on the P & O ships that connected the Empire. Formal dressing was the accepted etiquette and he shocked the other passengers by not ‘dressing’ for dinner at the Captain’s table. When criticised they found him the next evening seated in white tie and tailcoat. Much pleased they joined him but when everyone got up to leave they saw below the dinner jacket the usual shorts and Bata shoes without socks!



## FORESTRY PIONEER

In the early 1900s forestry in India faced a crisis. Since the 19th century timber, especially teak and sal (*Shorea robusta*), was considered a vital export commodity. A rigorous and effective protection and management of forests was instituted which included removing tribal people from forest reserves as swidden (slash and burn) cultivation was seen as a threat to the valuable timber. But over time it was evident that the teak and sal forest was not regenerating as it should. Manual replanting efforts failed.

Shebbeare knew of a traditional system of intercropping known as taungya in which crops are grown next to or under the tree canopy. He advocated combining this with the tribal swidden

cultivation and bringing the indigenous people back into the forests. After logging the timber, the land would be burnt and crops planted. Two harvests later the tribes moved on to new sites allowing the forest to regenerate. He wrote that “fire appears to be the only real cure...” Today we are aware that fire is a necessary part of the regeneration for many environments. At the time it was radical thinking.

Once the authorities had been persuaded by Shebbeare and others, he started implementing the scheme. It worked and he later became Conservator of Forests. A history of forestry in India says

*“E O Shebbeare was a versatile officer of rare ability. He was responsible for the bold adoption of clear felling and taungya method of regeneration...His energy and optimism proved contagious to all his colleagues, with the result that excellent plantations, certified to be the best in India, of sal, teak, champ, and a number of other important species sprang up, almost simultaneously, in most divisions.”*

These developments were noticed by other colonies and as a result the taungya system spread across the globe. Today it is the basic model for almost every agro-forestry system in the tropics.

Throughout his colourful career, Shebbeare never lost his humour and a photograph that circulated in India at the time showed him working a field on a plough attached to an elephant.

## MALAYAN YEARS

But what did Shebbeare achieve in Malaya? As Chief Game Warden, one of his main tasks was the establishment of Taman Negara King Edward VII. While the impetus for the park came from Theodore Hubback, the actual job fell to Shebbeare in 1938. By 1939 there was a Park HQ at Kuala Tahan and 9 ranger posts from Merapoh to Sg. Spia in the south. It was another 64 years before Malaysia got its second National Park following MNS’s efforts at Endau Rompin.

Here, he continued his work with elephants. He once marched an elephant and calf from Kuala Kangsar over the Main Range to a new life in Taman Negara. The journey was done entirely through jungle up to the shoulder of Gunung Yong Yap then through the ridges and valleys of the Ber, Berok and Mu rivers. Their journey, assisted by the Temiar, took an entire month.

However, Shebbeare’s conservation work was soon to take a back seat to defence. He was in the Federated Malay States Volunteers and charged with a raising a jungle border patrol.

His jungle knowledge then led F. Spencer Chapman to ask Shebbeare to remain behind Japanese lines as a guerilla and he influenced Chapman to set up his first camp just north of Fraser’s Hill. Shebbeare himself lived in a bungalow at the Gap Rest House which gave him easy access to both sides of the Main Range.

However, the rapid Japanese advance cut Shebbeare off from Chapman and he was captured and interned. Chapman later found the bungalow ransacked and both Shebbeare’s scientific papers and the Society’s early records were destroyed. Today, little remains of the bungalow.

In a Singapore prison Shebbeare was reunited with other MNS members, future presidents Edgar, Madoc, Molesworth and committee member Gibson-Hill. Amazingly, considering the poor conditions, they embarked on a lecture programme on Malayan nature for other detainees and printed “Introduction to the Birds of Malaya”, later published after the war. After the Japanese surrender, Shebbeare’s first act was to tell a Japanese guard to take off his boots and give them to him. This pair of boots remained his for the next few years!

The Game Department could not immediately be reconstituted partly because rangers had been killed or could not be located. The dedication of Shebbeare’s rangers was outstanding. In one instance, a ranger, Zainal, refused to leave his ranger post and was killed by the Japanese. Losing men like these was catastrophic to the Game Department which Shebbeare headed.

Ironically, Shebbeare warned that wildlife were at a greater risk at that time than ever before due to the number of British officers keen to ‘bag trophies’. A temporary office was set up to register firearms and licenses to have some sort of control.

Just when civil administration had been restored, the Emergency started and the forests became communist hideouts. Taman Negara became a restricted area and game wardens now had to have military escorts that made their job quite difficult.

By this time, Shebbeare was 65 and he retired and returned to the UK via Bengal where he met Lord Casey, who was President of Bengal. Shebbeare organised a tiger hunt

for Casey and the events became the basis for his most well known book “Sundar Mooni”, the story of an Indian elephant from birth to maturity. It is a book filled with rare knowledge of how elephants descend a waterfall or how to off load an elephant from a ship to an island while still offshore.

Casey, used to dealing with powerful figures like Roosevelt and Churchill, found him to be “a very individual personality – tough and hard...when we arrived... he was attired in shorts and an old khaki shirt and his rawhide boots and socks. Someone said that the socks were overdoing it a bit and he said ‘Oh, you have to cut a bit of a dash on these occasions’.”

In his retirement, Shebbeare settled in Banbury near Oxford and wrote several books on natural history which continue to be cited today.

His enduring legacy is the forestry work he did in India and establishing wildlife sanctuaries, in particular, the Jaldapara rhino sanctuary which was critical in helping save the One Horned Asian Rhino from extinction. Even at that time Shebbeare noted that the rhino was threatened mainly due to the demand for it in traditional Chinese medicine. When the sanctuary was established, visitors went instead to observe the rhino and to take photographs, an early example of eco-tourism. Today one can ride still ride elephants while watching rhinos at Jaldapara.

How does one judge a life? Perhaps the assessment of those who knew him is best. His nephew Robert observed in the 1930s that the name of “Shebbeare Sahib” was known across the land. Anthropologists working with the hill people of India noted that the names of Shebbeare and some other officers have entered the oral histories of these people who praised them for their management of forests and stopping illegal logging.

Here in Malaysia, his obituary in the Malayan Nature Journal recorded that, “with his passing the Society and Malayan nature in general has lost a true friend”.

E.O. Shebbeare was MNS’ first president. Here is a complete list of the men who have filled the honorable position. 🐘

### THE PAST PRESIDENTS OF MNS

E.O. Shebbeare	<b>1940-1942</b>
A.T. Edgar	<b>1948-1950</b>
Dr. B.D. Molesworth	<b>1950-1951</b>
G.C. Madoc	<b>1951</b>
A.T. Edgar	<b>1951- 1952</b>
Dr. J.A. Reid	<b>1956 - 1959</b>
J. Wyatt-Smith	<b>1959 - 1962</b>
Dr. H.E. McClure	<b>1962 - 1963</b>
Dr. P.R. Wycherley	<b>1963 - 1964</b>
Dr. G.A. Watson	<b>1964 - 1965</b>
Wong Yew Kwan	<b>1965 - 1966</b>
Dr. E. Balasingam	<b>1966 - 1967</b>
Ken Scriven	<b>1967 - 1968</b>
Prof. N.S.Haile	<b>1968 - 1969</b>
Dr. T.C. Whitmore	<b>1969 - 1970</b>
Dr. P.R. Wycherley	<b>1970 - 1971</b>
Dr. J.A. Bullock	<b>1971 - 1972</b>
Mohd Khan B. Momin Khan	<b>1972 - 1974</b>
Dr. Francis Ng	<b>1974 - 1975</b>
Mod Khan B. Momin Khan	<b>1975 - 1978</b>
Dr. Salleh Mohd Nor	<b>1978 - 2006</b>
V. Anthony Conrad Sebastian	<b>2006 - 2008</b>
Tan Sri Dr. Salleh Mohd Nor	<b>2008 – present</b>