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EDWARD OSWALD SHEBBEARE

(1884-1964)

Edward Oswald Shebbeare, who died suddenly at his home near Banbury in August, 1964, was a Founder Member of the Himalayan Club. He was Assistant Editor of the Journal from 1930-1933, Vice-President from 1933-1934 and a member of the Committee from 1936-1938.

He was educated at Charterhouse and joined the Indian Forest Service in 1906. During his 32 years of service, most of which was spent in Bengal, he contributed greatly to forestry in India and when he retired as Senior Conservator of Forests, Bengal, in 1938, his name had become a byword. From India he went to Malaya as Chief Game Warden, he was a Prisoner of War in Singapore from 1942-1945 and then went back to being Game Warden until his retirement to England in 1947.

He won for himself a permanent place in the annals of Himalayan mountaineering during the twenties and thirties as Transport Officer to the 1924 and 1933 Everest Expeditions and the German Expeditions to Kangchenjunga in 1929 and 1931.

V. S. Risoe

E. St. J. Birnie writes:

I first met him in 1929 in Darjeeling when he was assisting Dr. Paul Bauer in the Bavarian attempts on Kangchenjunga and was fortunate enough to be in the same expedition with him when the Tibetan Government again, after a long period of nine years, gave permission for Mr. Hugh Ruttledge to lead an Expedition to Mount Everest in 1933.

Dealing with the rough mountain men of Tibet, who supplied us with our yaks and donkeys, was a task which needed immense patience and good humour. Any sign of irritation could be disastrous. Shebbeare surmounted all these difficulties with ease. His sense of humour captivated these tough hillmen and ensured the safe passage of the Expedition to the Base Camp.

No man could have been a greater asset to an expedition and his kindly manner made him loved by all his companions whether they were the Sherpa or Bhutia 'Tigers' of Everest or his fellow climbers.

His task was, of course, that of Transport Officer but he was capable of anything. In spite of this, it was with some surprise that Smythe, Shipton and I saw him climbing alone towards the top of the North Col of Everest on June 3rd, the day we were forced to descend from the higher camps. 'What are you up to?' we asked. He waved and plodded slowly on, reached the Col, had his tea and a pipe, looked at the magnificent panorama of mountain scenery, and returned safely down those precipitous ice slopes, achieving an ambition of years !

The North Col is 23,000 feet in height and this was a superb effort for a man of 49 years of age.

Dr. Raymond Greene writes :

No one who marched across Tibet with Shebby in 1933 will ever forget his perpetual good temper, complete imperturbability and remarkable knowledge of natural history. His control over the porters was complete and unquestioned and invariably friendly. They loved him as a father. Though already too old to go high on Everest, he was the toughest member of the party. Physical discomfort was not withstood: it was ignored. I don't think he ever felt uncomfortable. He had a wonderful sense of humour which, although always kindly, delighted in 'deblimping' It is said that on one journey to India in a P. & O. liner, in which in those days social customs were as strict as in any vessel of the Royal Navy or any Royal Court, Shebby appeared at dinner in a khaki shirt and shorts and a pair of gym shoes. Summoned before the captain next morning he unsmilingly apologized. That evening he was the first down to dinner, clad in tails, white waistcoat and white tie. It was only when, having arrived first, he left first, that the other passengers realized that he was still wearing shorts and gym shoes. The captain gave in.

He seemed to those who continued to see him after the last war that he had been unchanged by his terrible experiences as a prisoner of war in Japanese hands. One would have expected that to so free a spirit confinement only would have been intolerable. Yet he was still calm, humorous and unperturbed. He drifted quietly into old age and, still mentally and physically well, literally fell asleep in his own garden chair.

Dr. K. Biswas, Editor, Himalayan Journal, writes:

I came in contact with E. O. Shebbeare during the early part of my tenure of service in the then Royal Botanic Garden, Calcutta, along with the late Captain Kingdon Ward. My acquaintance with him ripened into great intimacy for our common interest in the study of the flora of Bengal with special relation to the vegetation of the Terai and Duars and the plants of Darjeeling and Sikkim Himalayas. In fact, in his publication of the floristic studies of the then undivided Bengal I had the privilege of identifying many of the plants collected by him and furnishing him with necessary information on their systematic aspect during the preparation of his comprehensive forest flora of Bengal. This is a valuable contribution towards our knowledge of Bengal plants written by him after the publication of the book on 'Bengal Plants' by Sir David Prain in 1901-3. He was not only a botanist of a high order but equally a good ornithologist and naturalist.

I am in full agreement with what has been stated above about his character and personality by Mr. Birnie and Dr. Greene. His was a character by itself-fearless but amiable, enduring all who came in contact with him, simple due to his constant association with natural surroundings of the forest. Once he told me a little story which proved his great courage. He was strolling on a February day in the fog near Sukna forest. He climbed up the side of the road emerging out of the tall grasses and landed himself face to face with a huge tiger sitting on the road only 5/6 feet away. He was as composed as ever and stood still. The tiger stood up, watched his old friend, as he used to say, and moved away wagging his tail.

In Shebbeare's demise Bengal has lost an experienced forest officer who set up a tradition in the forest service by his pioneering work in those days in the development of forestry, not only in Bengal but in India also.