

J.T.M. GIBSON
(1908-1994)

'You gave so much pleasure... a completely natural schoolmaster in full blast, the kind of activity one has as a young man vainly hoped to conduct, and which I have occasionally seen in just a few of the scores of men I have myself selected for the staff of Cheltenham, Shrewsbury and Sandhurst.' Thus H. H. Hardy, a former headmaster, wrote to Jack Gibson in 1952.

And a hundred memories of Jack Gibson 'in full blast' come crowding in: animating a classroom, yodelling in the mountains, on the ski slopes, driving his jeep and swearing at the lorry drivers or stopping for a 'pee and a pipe', cycling, camping, tending his sweet-peas, shooting and fishing, exploring the hills around Ajmer for suitable rock climbs, rehearsing a play, negotiating for a raft on the Jumna by nonchalantly waving a ten rupee note, sailing, writing directly to Pandit Nehru to get a consignment of climbing equipment through the Customs without paying duty, wheedling a sailing boat for Mayo out of the Navy, decrying the politics and morality of the modern world, coaching a group in fencing, charming a group of parents, offering generous hospitality way beyond his means, turning a blind eye on a senior boy sneaking his sherry, showing infinite patience with a youngster in trouble, explaining in rusty French to the *patronne* of the Auberge at Lac Tannay how he used to carry his skis up there from the Rhone valley, gnashing his remaining natural teeth because he had forgotten his false ones in a tobacco tin in a London hotel before setting out on a gastronomic cruise, conducting a voluminous correspondence, always ready to do the unusual and the unconventional. 'A Renaissance man', one of his former students called him.

Above all, his tremendous gusto. Everything he did was with enthusiasm and verve — 'at full blast.' It was for this that he was a hero to generations of boys at the Doon School and at Mayo College, who continue to repeat legends about him, the legends growing with each telling. And why not? That's how it should be with a legendary figure.

A few facts. John Travers Mends Gibson was born on 3 March 1908, son of a naval officer, and was educated at Haileybury and Cambridge where he got his half blue for

fencing — and later almost made the British Olympic team. He joined the staff of Chillon College (near Montreux in Switzerland) in September 1929 with responsibility for winter sports; he also taught history. 'These were the happiest years of my life,' he once said, but one suspects that he made most of his years happy ones. He skied and climbed with the Swiss Alpine Club; this included the Javelle of the Aiguilles Dorees, 'one of the more difficult climbs, so was a great experience for me and quite an honour being asked to go on it,' he wrote. He contributed an article recalling his adventures to the *Alpine Journal*, 1986.

The economic depression hit Chillon College, and Jack left, but had decided that teaching was what he wanted to do; so he went on doing this at Ripon Grammar School from 1932 to 1936. He continued his skiing holidays at Morgins in the Valais (where he claims to have seen the future King of Siam running naked in the corridors of his hotel, chased by an ayah). It was there he met Sir Malcolm Hailey, Governor of the U.P. and President of the Himalayan Club, who encouraged him to apply to the Doon School. He was accepted and told to study the teaching of geography before coming over. He joined the DS as housemaster in January 1937 and India was his home till his death on 23 October 1994, 57 years later.

On leave from the DS, he served in the Royal Indian Navy Volunteer Reserve from 1942 to 1945, and as Principal of the Joint Services Wing, Dehra Dun and Khadakvasla, when it was set up in 1949 until 1951.

One of his proudest moments was in 1992 when the three Service Chiefs, all former students of his, flew in to Ajmer to pay tribute to him. In a letter of 14 September 1992, he wrote, 'My only bit of interesting news is that about a month ago, the Chiefs of all three Services came to see me here with their wives. They had all been cadets of the first course of the JSW when I was responsible for academics. The General, Admiral, Air Chief Marshal paid me a very great compliment... They had to fly in separate helicopters and to come from the helipad in separate bullet-proof cars. The local army had guards all over the place and my house was thoroughly searched.'

In 1953 he was appointed principal of Mayo College and

in his 15 years there, completely revitalised that noble institution, increased the number of boys from 140 to 586 with a long waiting list, democratised it, raised its academic standards, and established himself as a legend. In 1960 he was awarded the OBE by the British Government, in 1965 the Padma Shri by the Indian Government; a rare instance of someone honoured by both Governments.

He had a very strong sense of family and was deeply attached to his parents and to his sister. He wrote regularly and in detail to his mother; she kept his letters and this enabled him to write *As I Saw It*, published in 1976, covering the period from his arrival in India in January 1937 till his retirement from Mayo in February 1969. He followed this up with *As I Saw It From Shanti Niwas*, 1992, covering the period 1969-1984.

Jack loved the mountains and was a mountaineer in the real sense. He loved being in the mountains: climbing, walking, camping, trekking, and above all, skiing. 'You will never convince a skier that there is any sport to compare with skiing,' he once wrote in an article on 'Summer Skiing in the Himalayas'.¹ In his very first summer in India, he spent seven weeks in the Himalaya with John Martyn, on Bandarpunch and crossing the Gangotri-Alaknanda watershed. Since then, he was a regular visitor to the Himalaya, mostly to the Garhwal, with skiing holidays in Kashmir and Switzerland for good measure.

But his major achievement was not the conquest of major peaks but the initiation of generations of boys to mountaineering and skiing. His article on 'The Harki Doon' in the H.J. XVIII, 1954 describes three visits to the region he had made his own; twice with parties of boys to whom he taught skiing and climbing. (He made further visits later.) They skied down from 14,800ft, and 'must be almost the first party to learn at such a height,' he wrote. The 'completely natural schoolmaster' got more satisfaction out of teaching mountain skills to youngsters and imbuing them with the love of the high hills than in setting off to conquer high peaks himself. Though in his article 'An Unclimbed Mountain', in H.J. 39 — 1981/82 he did express his longing to climb Swargrohini; and he did achieve the first ascent of Kalanag, the Black Peak.

1. *The Times of India*, 28 July 1956.

When I visited the Har-ki-Doon area in 1956, the men of Osla village spoke with reverence of the *Burra sa'ab* who used to walk up the snow slopes with his skis the moment camp was set up.

On various occasions on his way to England, he stopped off in Switzerland to ski. Once he brought a couple of his students to Veysonnaz in the Valais — then a new resort, now on the World Cup circuit — and we spent several glorious days, with Jack using skis made to his design by the Forest Research Institute of Dehra Dun, a wonder to all. I think he quite enjoyed the amazement he aroused!

In 1960, he came in April when the snow had disappeared from the lower slopes and I suggested a mountain itinerary starting from the Aiguille du Midi (reached by telepherique) 3800m down the Vallee Blanche and the Mer de Glace, traversing a heavily crevassed icefall. Jack hadn't skied for over a year and wasn't used to the bindings of the rented skis which clamped your heels. Though a commonly used trail, I was worried because on the same trip the previous year, one of my companions had slithered on an icy patch into a crevasse and fallen some 8 m. Luckily there were five of us to pull him out with only a broken ski as damage. Jack did it all in magnificent style and with his usual gusto; though he claimed to be exhausted at the end, he had enough energy to make caustic and audible comments on the stiletto heels of the girls who passed the cafe in Chamonix where we were having a welcome beer.

Jack was President of the Himalayan Club, 1970-73. Thus he represented the HC at the Meet in Darjeeling to mark the 20th anniversary of the climbing of Everest. In his speech he spoke of the relations of the HC with the Indian Mountaineering Foundation, and ended with words that bear repetition: 'Mr. Sarin (President of the IMF) has agreed that any reports we send him of misuse of the environment will be forwarded to the relevant government department, and pressure put on it to put things right. Therefore, if anyone on trek or expedition finds shrubs or trees being overused as fuel, or finds litter left unburied, or that sort of thing, we would be glad if he would let us know.'

On his first expedition in 1937, John Martyn and Jack Gibson had Tenzing with them, and Jack and Tenzing struck

up a life long friendship.² Tenzing was with Jack on two further expeditions to Bandarpunch, which Tenzing dubbed 'the Doon School Mountain': in 1946, accompanied by R. L. Holdsworth ('his clothes and equipment are unsuitable for heights being mostly pre-war and worn out') and Nandu Jayal; and in 1950, accompanied by Gurdial and Jagjit Singh and others. It was typical of Jack that when Gurdial felt unwell on the last lap to the summit, he 'unselfishly volunteered to be the one to go down with him', as Tenzing put it, leaving the others to get to the summit he had coveted for so many years.

And it was Jack who recommended Tenzing as special instructor in mountaineering to the Operational Research Section of the Army. Tenzing refers touchingly several times to 'my old friend Mr. Gibson' in his autobiography. And it is pleasant to read that on 27 January 1961, Jack 'had Tenzing and his daughter to lunch at the Gymkhana Club in New Delhi. I hadn't met him since he climbed Everest and it was a splendid reunion. He was quite unchanged and unspoiled and said the right thing when he exclaimed that I wasn't looking at all an old man.'

Jack had the knack of getting on with all sorts of people, exemplified by his warm relations with his servants. Samuel was his faithful retainer for several decades; after Samuel's retirement, Tansukh took over. Both of them did well by him, and he did well by them, enabling them to acquire houses of their own, making sure that Samuel stopped increasing his numerous tribe, and helping to educate Tansukh's son.

When Jack took over Mayo its finances were in bad shape. Jack refused any increase in what was a pitifully small salary for the job until the financial situation could be straightened out and the staff and employees could be paid more adequately. After his retirement, the General Council had to authorise a large increase in the Principal's salary in order to get any worthy successor.

2. In a letter of 3 August 1989 written from England, Jack said, 'I paid a visit to Brigadier Osmaston (now over 90) who put John Martyn and me on to Tenzing and Rinzing for our first expedition — Gangotri to Badrinath with the summit ridge of Bandarpunch on the way — and he was in great form, though a bit weak in his legs, as I am becoming.'

Jack had many passions besides mountains. Gardening was one. He wrote in his Christmas letter of 1986, 'As I write this, I look across my verandah at two rows of splendid flowers: Chrysanthemums, Phlox Drummondii, Antirrhinums, Ageratum, Violets, Alyssum, miniature Roses, and Chinese Chillies....' and the litany continues. His mountain articles are also full of the joy of Alpine flowers. And one touching photograph taken in 1990 was of him with 'a Redvented Bulbul that now comes and perches on my knee and eats banana from my hand. It started last winter with crumbs on the floor of my veranda, and when I came back from Mussoorie in August it came to me again demanding food.'

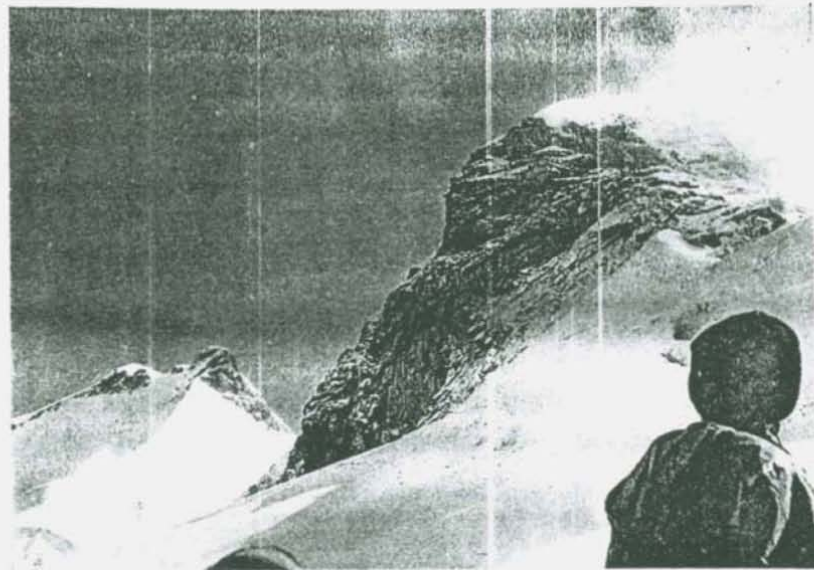
As 'a completely natural schoolmaster', he once wrote, 'The excitement of teaching is when you see that an idea has become clear to someone.' And in an article on teaching in November 1989, he said, 'The first problem for a teacher is, I believe, to awake interest in those he is teaching and to make them keen to find out and understand for themselves rather than rely on text books.'³

He himself was described as an 'inspiring teacher with a great zest for his subjects.' But Jack taught a great deal more than classroom subjects. In everything he did, he conveyed a sense of transparent honesty, of integrity, of the avoidance of hypocrisy, of the importance of being true to oneself. In a world grown hardened to moral corruption, this is well worth remembering.⁴

In some ways, Jack was the 'last Englishman in India.' He came ten years before independence and stayed on 47 years after it, rendering dedicated service to the country of his adoption. His name is often linked with those of Martyn and Holdsworth; he was the last survivor of that triumvirate who could occasionally be seen sitting on Martyn's lawn in kurta-pyjama, Holdie with a Pathan pugree, having their evening drink and smoking a hookah. Jack was the last English Principal of Mayo College; he was the last English President of the Himalayan Club. He spoke at the Darjeeling Meet in 1973

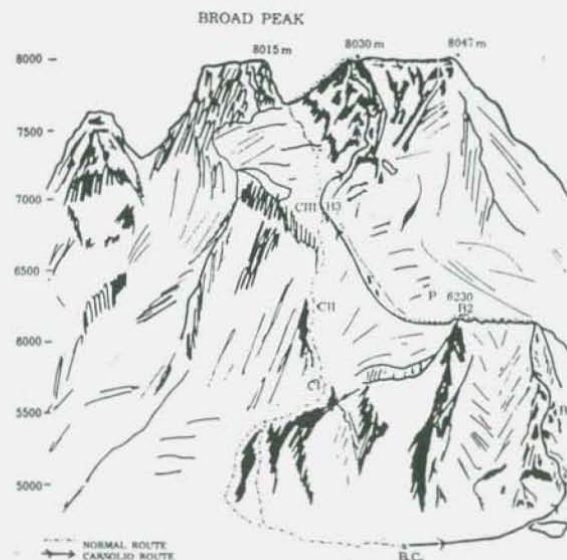
3. *Doon School Weekly*, about December 1989.

4. In a letter of 23 June 1986, he wrote, 'I watched on TV Argentina beat England at football and was horrified to see members of the latter team fouling; politicians don't tell the truth; corruption is widespread; etc. And what a mess poor old India is in.'



Illustrated Note 5

Mana (7272m) was attempted by an Indian team led by Milind Pote. Approaching from west they reached 6400m on a subsidiary peak (6541m) enroute to Mana on 28 August 1994. West face of unclimbed Mana NW (7092m) on left.



Illustrated Note 6

Broad Peak (8047m) was climbed by a new route on the west face, solo, by the Mexican climber Carlos Carsolio. He reached the summit on 9 July 1994 after a 25-hour push.



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on behalf of the Indian delegates and said 'I feel greatly honoured; though not an Indian, I have lived in India for 36 years'. He was the last — and for most of the time, the only — English resident of Ajmer, formerly a very British enclave in the heart of Rajasthan. He was the last Englishman to be accepted completely as a friend by almost all the former ruling houses of that chivalric region. He must have been just about the last Englishman to have been honoured by both the British and Indian Governments.⁵

'The end of an era' has become a cliché but Jack Gibson's passing does have a significance for the British connection with India. It is certain that this association brought some harm; it is equally certain that it also brought much that was good. Jack's life exemplified the good; he lives on in the hearts and minds of thousands of Indians whose lives touched his.

I knew Jack Gibson for 56 years and we were on dozens of joyful excursions together in the Alps and in the Himalaya: climbing, trekking, rafting, skiing or just revisiting scenes of former exploits. My admiration and affection for him grew with each passing year. I have not only said good bye to one of my closest friends but to a part of my own life.

AAMER ALI

Photo 52

BARRY C. BISHOP
(1932-1984)

Noted climber, scientist and scholar Barry C. Bishop was killed in a one-car accident on 24 September 1994. He lost control of his car near Pocatello, Idaho.

When I try to paint a picture of my father, I am at a loss; there are so many parts to him and my emotions wash over me to confuse my thoughts. However, the more I reflect on my father, the more I come back to a quote by

5. J.A.K. Martyn had also received the OBE (1958) and the Padma Shri (1984). He died in 1984 and his obituary in H.J. Vol. 41, (1983/84) was written by Jack Gibson.