Letter from . . . Darjeeling

The going is still good

DEREK MEYERS

British Medical Journal, 1979, 2, 321-322

Behind the palace of the ex-king of Sikkim an archery contest was in progress. The bows were simple long bows without the elaborate counterweights favoured by Olympic sportsmen. Before loosing the arrow the bowmen flexed forward at the waist, angling the bow at about 45° to the ground. The target seemed very small for the range—some 200 metres—and nobody hit it, though one wild shot scattered a group of small boys sitting on the path nearby. It was a sunny day, without enough wind to lift the Sikkimese flag—and this is the only place where it can be flown, because now the country is part of India.

Gangtok, capital of Sikkim, is not so much attractive as interesting. Along the main street, Mahatma Ghandi Marg, a great variety of people walk and work—Tibetans, Nepalese, Bengalis, Punjabis, a good number from South India. Tailors use their treadle sewing machines on the footpath; porters swinging plaited leather loops with which they carry heavy loads on their backs wait for business; between two shops a tall thin man passes urine in a high silvery arc; a group of lads sit on a row of boxes, one picking nits from another's scalp; cars and trucks toot with characteristic bad road manners; and over it all towers the serene figure of Ghandiji with dhoti and staff. Europeans are rarely seen, but arouse no interest.

Cordial receptions

A short detour on the way to Gangtok takes one to the celebrated Rumtek Monastery, headquarters of the Red Sect of Buddhism and presided over by His Holiness the High Lama, fourth incarnation of the Most Venerable Drukpa Gyaltrul. The monastery was built by monks from Tibet who had left their homeland in flight from the Chinese. They had a full library and numerous carvings and other articles of religious importance—according to the guide, 250 horses made up the baggage train. Demonolatry plays a large part in Buddhism, and so it was not surprising to find a side chapel full of figures of Mara the Evil One, their headgear ornamented with carved human skulls. But, as in churches of other denominations, the great god Mammon was worshipped too. A long piece of cloth hanging down from a table which could have passed for an altar was patterned with 100, 10, and 1 rupee notes, presumably as a hint to the faithful to pin the real thing on.

Seated in a reception room in his official residence, His Holiness was blessing his people and my guide invited me to join the queue. As it happened, I was not at all well that day, and, after walking up the steep hill, felt much worse. The

trumpeters, their cheeks distended to the size of melons, were playing outside the reception room. The music was loud and discordant, the instruments had the range and tunefulness of bagpipes, but as I listened I began to feel better, and by the time I was at the doorway of the reception room was well again. I presented the attendant with the traditional karte and received a knotted yellow ribbon in return. The Lama and I looked directly at each other, we both smiled, I bowed from the waist, and he inclined his head by way of cordial greeting to a caller from another land. On the way out I took a brochure from an attendant, and read that those who were attuned to the spiritual radiance of His Holiness would be cured of their ills. Before getting back into the car I looked for the gentlemen's retiring room, to which my nose led me without difficulty. In contrast to the tastefully appointed quarters of the High Lama, this latrine was the most disgusting sight I have ever seen in quite a lot of travelling.

The Himalayan Hotel at Kalimpong began its career as a stately home and the proprietress, now aged 76, has spent much of her life there. Her father was British Resident in Lhasa and the big friendly lounge contained many mementos of that strange country. Among her books was the 1907 edition of the official *Gazetteer* of the Darjeeling region of West Bengal. It was news to me that, like Singapore, Darjeeling was a creation of the British—in this case, practically the creation of two men, Captain Lloyd and Dr Campbell. The area was seen as a place in which to escape the unhealthy climate of Calcutta, and as a strategically located point to separate Nepalese, Sikkimese, and Bhutanese, who did not always live in peace with each other. Dr Campbell soon discovered that Darjeeling was well suited to the growth of tea, which he introduced from China. It must have taken a strong constitution to survive even the mild conditions there, as the old graveyard contains many stones recording the death of infants and many adults under 35 years. I suggested to my hostess at Kalimpong that she should write her memoirs, but I do not think she ever will—more's the pity.

Way to the mountains

The most convenient way to get to Darjeeling is to fly from Calcutta to Bagdogra and then proceed by car. The name Bagdogra means place of roaring tigers, but few if any tigers are in the area these days, because clearing much of the forest has deprived them of their normal habitat. The car trip takes three hours, the rail journey seven, on a two-foot gauge track, built largely on what was the old cart road—not a remarkable engineering feat, because there are no tunnels and few cuttings. For many years, it was the easiest means of passenger and freight transport and paid large dividends to its owners, and is still used by several trains running in both directions each day. Darjeeling railway station is scarcely one of the world's major marshalling yards; even so, two signs in English state that photography is prohibited. Luckily I didn't see them before I had taken pictures of some of the little locomotives, built as long ago as

1898, and with attractive names such as "Himalayan Bird" and "Mountain Lady."

When I went to the office of Summit Tours in Laden La, some of the staff thought that Father McDonald had come back, and on looking at his photograph I could see why. This well-known gentleman was a teacher at North Point Christian Brothers' College in Darjeeling and he started the North Point Alumni Association, which runs Summit Tours as a co-operative. Father McDonald had been transferred back to America, but the office was still in good hands—the principal being a man of great competence, and the guides mostly college graduates. My own guide had majored in history and economics, had hopes of an appointment in the Bank of India, and spoke perfect English; we spent many hours solving our countries' problems, which were remarkably similar.

An hour by bus from Darjeeling is the township of Manebhanjang, the starting point for a walk around the Singalila Ridge—a fairly easy trek up to 12 000 feet around a circuit that can be covered in eight days, though an extra day or two to appreciate the countryside is well worthwhile. The high point of the trek—in both senses of the word—is Sandakphu, from where one can see an unbroken line of mountains from well east of Kangchenjunga to far west of Everest and Gauri Sanker. From here, the Everest group is dominated by the enormous bulk of Makalu; the South Col, Lhotse, and Chomolongo stand out clearly, as do the five separate peaks of Kangchenjunga, and the attendant twin peaks of Kabru and Janno are also distinct. Autumn is the photographer's season with hard clear skies, but spring gives a bonus of flowers—rhododendrons up to 50 feet tall in full bloom, magnolias, daphne, and orchids, while on the terraced hillsides wild flowers secure earth walls between rows of crops.

Much of the walk lies along the border between Nepal and West Bengal. Each day one met the local people, some walking

in groups, some with their herds of goats. One man, better dressed than the average and carrying a European rucksack, stopped me. "Where you from?" he asked. "Australia," I replied. "I been to Rockhampton," he said. He was an ex-Gurkha paratrooper and had taken part in a combined exercise with Australian Forces at Tin Can Bay on the central Queensland coast. Another traveller, though scarcely as cosmopolitan, came to my tent. As I could not understand what he wanted, I took him across to see my guide. From his pocket he took a folded green banknote, gave it to the guide, who gave it to me. I had not seen one for 11 years: mot tram dong—100 piastres Vietnamese, but not worth a cent in any other country. His unfortunate wife had sold their wheat crop for what she believed to be 100 rupees, about \$10 in Australian currency, a considerable loss in that part of the world.

My guide, cook, and porters were a happy bunch. Good relations were cemented early in the trek when the cook got a typical attack of gout in the left first metatarsophalangeal joint. On each successive trip my medical kit has got smaller, but luckily I had a bottle of mefenamic acid. He took four tablets with his evening meal, four more before bed, and was much better by morning. A few cotrimoxazole tablets helped a policeman with a urinary infection, and a mug of water and a large piece of Kendal mint cake aided a distressed Indian student who very likely was feeling the altitude. The porters were Nepalese—short men and lightly built, but of tremendous strength. According to my guide they usually worked as labourers in Darjeeling, but were keen to go on trek because, as porters, they received three times their usual rate of pay. Total reliability was expected of them and was cheerfully given.

Evelyn Waugh said how glad he was that he had travelled when the going was good. The going is still good—very good by jumbo jet—but who can say how long our world will have so many open borders?

A mother of 40 has suffered from generalised and sometimes painful oedema for 10 years. No cause has been found and strong diuretics effect only a temporary improvement. What treatment is advised?

This sounds like the so-called "idiopathic" oedema syndrome, which tends to affect women, particularly professional women and those with an obsessional concern about their appearance. The cause is not known: factors such as hormonal imbalance and abnormal leakage from capillaries have been postulated but never proved. Treatment is unsatisfactory. Recent work by MacGregor *et al*¹ may shed some light, as well as providing a useful summary of what we know at present. Briefly, they believe that the oedema begins as a result of sudden fluctuations in food intake, so that large amounts of sodium and carbohydrate lead to retention of sodium and water. Eventually diuretics are started and the renin-angiotensin system is permanently stimulated, so that when they are stopped oedema returns until plasma renin and urinary aldosterone concentrations fall to normal in about three weeks. In effect diuretic treatment has created a vicious circle, and MacGregor *et al* showed that most patients lost their oedema once they had got over the initial withdrawal phase. A few do not, and these can be treated by sodium restriction (25 mmol/day), though not for too long. Other aspects of the diet should obviously be attended to.

¹ MacGregor, G A, *et al*, *Lancet*, 1979, 1, 397.

I work in an area where there is a large Asian immigrant population. Some of these children appear younger than their stated chronological age, and it has become customary for the skeletal age to be determined radiologically. This practice of exposing children to radiation is causing me concern; of what value is it in the absence of bone disease?

The estimation of skeletal age is of little help in determining chronological age of immigrant children. Even for British children, where standards of skeletal age for chronological age exist, the variation of skeletal age at any given chronological age is around ± 2 years and so

the estimate of chronological age is imprecise. For immigrant children there are no standards, and there is the additional problem that undernourished children will have a delayed skeletal age, but not, of course, a delayed chronological one. The skeletal age, especially under these conditions, does indeed tell you something of great importance physiologically and perhaps educationally too; but it does *not* tell you the chronological age. The supposed risk of one hand x-ray film has been grossly exaggerated. The exposure is about 4 millirads, which is the same exposure that is received to the whole body by 10 days' skiing in the mountains, since natural radiation increases as one ascends. (It is also received in five trips in an ordinary aeroplane from London to New York and in two trips in Concorde.) People 20 miles from the recent Harrisburg nuclear disaster were subjected to the equivalent of 1½ hand x-ray examinations every hour for a long period; yet the administration did not see fit to recommend their removal from this exposure.

Is Freon (fluorocarbons) a health hazard if used regularly, say, in cleaning electrical equipment?

Freon is the generic name given to a wide range of fluorocarbons, of which the most widely used are trichlorofluoromethane and dichlorodifluoroethane. These compounds are of low toxicity compared with the corresponding chlorinated or brominated hydrocarbons because of the great stability of the C-F bond. At high concentrations, however, they may induce narcosis. Thus, dichlorodifluoroethane will cause dizziness in man at a concentration of 5% and unconsciousness at 15%. Therefore, these compounds should be used only when the ventilation is sufficient to keep the concentration within the threshold limit value (1000 ppm in the case of dichlorodifluoroethane). There are no long-term toxic effects so far as is known. If fluorocarbons are heated, either in a flame or by coming into contact with hot metal, they decompose. Substances liable to be released include hydrofluoric acid, hydrochloric acid, phosgene, and carbonyl fluoride—as unpleasant a collection of toxic materials as one could wish for.