

**Sport and
Service
in Assam
and
Elsewhere**

Lt. col. alban wilson

During the last few decades, there has been a considerable growth of interest in the history and culture of India during the nineteenth century. A large number of Universities, Colleges and research institutes all over the world but especially in Europe and North America have introduced oriental subjects into their curricula for degree, higher level and post graduate studies. This has created a huge demand for source material on the art, architecture, culture, religions and philosophy of the eastern world, much of which is out of print or not easily available now.

One of the major problems encountered by scholars doing research on India especially the eastern part of this country is the non-availability of primary source material. In this context the facts and figures produced in this book will go a long way in focusing attention of the workers in the field. The author Alban Wilson was an army officer and served Assam for three decades in the last part of the 19th century. He describes various sport and fishing stories of Assam and the adjacent states - specially of Meghalaya, Manipur, Abor areas, Mizoram and Nagaland. The book also flashes sidelights on the geography, social history, flora and fauna, and cultural aspects of the people of North Eastern India.

“ Thus all alone by the woud and wold
I yield myself once again
To the memories old that, like tales fresh told,
Come flitting across the brain.

“ No game was ever yet worth a rap
For a rational man to play,
Into which no accident, no mishap,
Could possibly find its way.

“ There's danger even where fish are caught
To those who a wetting fear ;
For what's worth having must aye be bought,
And sport's like life and life's like sport—
' It ain't all skittles and beer.' ”

—“ Ye Wearie Wayfarer,” ADAM LINDSAY GORDON

Sport and Service in Assam and Elsewhere

By **LT.-COL. ALBAN WILSON, D.S.O.** ::

(Late 1st Batt. 8th Gurkha Rifles)

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WITH 20 ILLUSTRATIONS



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FOREWORD

SPORTSMEN with rod and gun and the general reader—that most important patron of authors—will find much to interest them in my friend Colonel Alban Wilson's book. It gives me much pleasure to write a few words about it because he asked me to do so, although it is quite unnecessary. The reader who begins the first chapter will finish the book—not all at once, because one must do other things beside read in the twenty-four hours; but I can vividly imagine the pleasure with which the reader, after filling his pipe, or lighting her cigarette, will resume the perusal of this charming chronicle of sport and service of a British officer of our wonderful Indian Army, one might say in most parts of India. All my life nearly I have enjoyed the stories of life in our Indian Services which have made "Blackwood" so famous. Occasionally I have asked my friend Mr. James Blackwood if some extra steep story was true. All he will say is, "That *was* a good one, wasn't it!" Although so interesting and varied, one feels all the time in reading these "Service Recollections" of life in India that it is a true tale; also that the author modestly never magnifies his own part. Here is a delightful fishing story which exemplifies this.

Colonel Wilson was fishing a fine river, the Dhansiri, near Nichuguard. He says:

"Whilst I was fishing, a native came and spun me various yarns about the enormous fish a sahib had caught there the previous year, one of which was so large the narrator had to take his clothes off to help to land it. From further inquiries I elicited particulars which showed that this angler could be no other than myself, and as on this occasion

I had killed nothing over 6 lbs., I suggested that this 18-pounder would have grown to 80 lbs. by the time the next sahib came along."

When reading these "Recollections" as they appeared week by week in my paper, the *Fishing Gazette*, it seemed hardly possible that these experiences of almost a lifetime should have taken place after the writer's first communication to it, which must be nearly thirty years ago, and I suppose I must have had something from his pen nearly every year. Although some wished there was more about fishing, it has been delightful to find how many of my readers have expressed the pleasure with which they have read these "Recollections." Without ornamentation, the style is pleasantly clear and straightforward; in reading, I seemed again to be sitting enjoying a smoke after lunch on the bank of a lovely Yorkshire trout and grayling stream while listening to my friend's account of life and sport in India—and in this country.

In one respect it was pleasanter after dinner, and after seeing some of my host's bewildering collection of trophies of all kinds, because, while everything was perfect out there by the river, there was one big fly in the ointment: all the time when fishing (with a game knee which made even walking difficult) and when lounging on the bank watching the Colonel put his favourite and my favourite "honey-dun bumble" over inquisitive grayling—all the time I was conscious of the presence in that earthly paradise of the embodiment of all the worst bulls I have ever seen or imagined. Of course, after tigers, snakes, crocs., etc., the Colonel did not seem to mind bulls. "Yes," he had "*seen* one about." An hour or so later, when he was a mile away and I was in the bed of the little stream surrounded by high banks trying to get a dry fly over a good trout, there was a roar behind me, and on looking round, within fifteen yards there was the bull, bellowing, tearing the ground up, and doing everything a bull does when he is angry and giving you notice to quit. I "quot," as the

Yankees say, and got out of sight round the bend as soon as my game knee would permit. After that the place seemed infested with bulls. It takes the edge off the pleasure of trying for a rising trout when you feel that any moment you may get a rise yourself from a bull. Since then I have become a member of the Zoo—to study their habits. The Colonel—who was as hard as nails and could get over the ground like one of his beloved little Gurkhas, seemed to think my friend's action was more bluff than business; but I was not surprised when I next met him to hear him say, "You remember your bull? He chased me off the big meadow the other day." I said, "Thank God you had not got a game knee!"

R. B. MARSTON.

PREFACE

I have been much complimented by the wish of Messrs Hutchinson and Co. to publish in book form these articles, some of which appear by permission of the *Fishing Gazette*, from whose editor, Mr. R. B. Marston, I have received much help and encouragement. Some others in slightly altered form saw daylight first in the Indian papers, particularly the *Pioneer*.

In writing these yarns, the happy days spent with my regiment and the cheerful company of my men, whom I shall never meet again in this life, have been vividly recalled to memory. Before I retired I had no idea that I should miss the men so much; they were constantly with me for the best part of thirty years, both in peace and war, and did all they could to help in my work and sport. There is not one, no matter how queer a character he may have been, of whom I do not retain some pleasant recollection.

Forsan et haec olim meminisse juvabit.

ALBAN WILSON.

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Sport and Service in Assam and Elsewhere

CHAPTER I

EARLY EXPERIENCES—FISHING IN THE MAHL—SHILLONG— SCORE OFF THE DOCTOR

NEARLY thirty-five years ago, when serving with a British regiment in the Punjab hills, I was asked if I would like to be appointed to a Gurkha regiment, stationed in Assam. My "skipper" was a shrewd and somewhat ferocious individual, commonly called "Mac," so I went off to see him, and, finding him in a fairly good temper, asked his advice about accepting the billet.

He replied: "Assam is a first-rate place for all kinds of sport, the planters are first-class fellows, as a rule, and there is generally an expedition of some sort going on, but I believe most fellows there have had D.T., or else are sickening for it, so you'll have to be careful! Still, as you are thinking of the Indian Army and are fond of sport, you could do far worse than go there, especially as Gurkhas are excellent fellows to soldier with." So my application went in without further delay.

Mac was a great character, and we subalterns all stood in great awe of him. He was an enormous man, a strict disciplinarian and good at his job, though at times he was very crusty. His type has long since disappeared from the Service. He could put away a dozen or more whisky pegs during the day, with a glass or two of Madeira after lunch and a bottle of

port after dinner without seeming any the worse for it, but we used to observe with great interest during the hot weather how, as soon as he had swallowed a peg, it seemed to reappear in pearls of perspiration on the top of his bald pate. This, he assured us, was a very healthy sign. He sometimes suffered from asthma, and generally had an attack after a difference of opinion with the mess sergeant, a not infrequent event, as he was perpetually president of the mess committee, being a great authority on all matters connected with food and drink.

One night, being seedy, he did not come to mess, but turned up at orderly room next morning, followed by a very nice little fox-terrier, which no one had seen before. Mac hated dogs, or said he did, so he was asked where he got it from. "God knows, my dear fellow!" was the reply. "I had a fearful go of asthma last night, couldn't sleep, so had to lie in a long chair, sweating like a pig. This nice little thing came up to me, so I patted it on the head, don't you know, and then it got up on to the chair, and licked my face, and hasn't left me since."

Someone remarked that it was a wise beast, for it evidently knew where it could get whisky-and-soda for nothing, at which Mac got so annoyed and coughed and spluttered so much that we thought he was going off in a fit of apoplexy.

He was a blunt diplomatist, too. A regiment was coming into the station that never made honorary members of its mess. Our colonel said it was very awkward, as he was certain they would want to be honorary members of ours for a few days till they settled down, and would be sure not to return the civility in any way.

"Don't you worry about that, sir," said Mac. "You leave them to me. Someone will soon come round and ask, and, as mess president, I know how to fix him."

Mac was ensconced firmly in the ante-room when an officer of the expected regiment walked in and, after some conversation, suggested it would be a convenience if they might use our mess for a few days. Old Mac said he had no doubt it

would, but his regiment put on frills a bit, too, and never made honorary members of any regiment that did not return the compliment, which he understood they never did. The visitor said this was quite a mistake. Of course, if we made them honorary members, they would do the same to us.

Mac said, "That is a bargain, so I'll give you the card now to save trouble."

He did so, the officers fed with us for a day or two, and we received a similar invitation from them written on a sheet of notepaper, which rather went to prove it was a circumstance not provided for, as is usual, by a printed card. I have never heard of that corps ever making others honorary members, unless they wore the same coloured uniform as themselves. The colonel afterwards told Mac he ought to have been in the diplomatic service.

From Murree, where we were stationed, I made my first trip after mahseer. A fair-sized river, named the Mahl, flowed into the Jhelum, about 20 miles off, which could easily be reached in a day. It was a beautiful, rapid stream with a rocky bottom, flowing through forest-clad hills. Near the mouth, close to an old ruined fort, was quite a comfortable bungalow, built by the Rajah for the accommodation of anglers. The pools were named after those on the Tweed; for instance, Sprouston Dub, which was close above the bungalow. This was a convenience for noting where one had one's sport, in the book provided for the purpose—but the river bore little resemblance to the Tweed. The water was clear and held good fish, which would take almost any artificial bait, but the natural frog was considered the most killing of anything. Personally I had most luck on the spoon, which I had never used at home. In a week I had only one blank day, and caught altogether 22 mahseer, of which five were over 10 lb., one being 21 lb. I lost a good many through their sulking and cutting the line on the sharp ledges with which the bottoms of the pools were covered, but learnt what a fine fighting fish the mahseer is.

In the junction pool were enormous fellows up to 40 lb. and 50 lb., which would look at nothing with a line attached, though quite ready to swallow bananas, lumps of dough, or frogs as fast as one threw them in. Whilst watching these fish the coolie in attendance recounted a yarn of some sahib who had played a monster here for the best part of a day before it broke him, and, strangely enough, shortly afterwards this coolie found the identical spoon jammed amongst the rocks, an enormous thing about 5 in. long and evidently home-made.

A few weeks later I proceeded to Assam and joined the headquarters of my new corps at Shillong, a delightful little place lying amongst pine-forests at an altitude of about 5,000 feet. In those days it was the fashion for the local battalions to be split up into detachments all over the province, and we had something like seven or eight in different places, consequently of ours, the colonel, the adjutant, the doctor and myself were the only officers at headquarters. My duties at first consisted almost entirely of sitting on the range, of which I had what is vulgarly termed "a bellyful," for there was no one else available for musketry. This had its good points, however, for it gave me a great interest in rifle shooting, and I learnt a lot about the men and their language. The Snider, with which we were armed, was not much use for accurate target shooting, but its chief merits were that it was almost impossible to smash it, and if its bullet did hit a man, it stopped him there and then.

Every day going to my work I had to pass the doctor's house. He was an Indian and married to one of his own kind. One morning as I was passing there was an extraordinary mass of rugs and skins piled up on his tennis court within a few yards of the road, and it was moving slightly. Heaving a clod into this to clear up the situation, I was amazed to see a dark female face shoot out, which glared balefully at me, whereupon I apologised and moved on. On the way back from the range I met the C.O., who looked at me in rather a queer manner and said: "The doctor has been to orderly room and reported

you for stoning his wife. What the deuce do you mean by such behaviour?"

I answered: "I didn't stone her, sir. There was a great heap of rugs on his tennis court heaving up and down, so I just put a bit of earth into it to see what it was, and evidently disturbed his wife, who was under it."

"Well," said the colonel, "don't do it again, and I'll tell the doctor that I don't think it at all fitting for an officer's wife to lie about in the open so near a public road."

Our medico had evidently tried to score off me, and before long an opportunity occurred of getting one off him. One evening it appeared in orders that a board would assemble at the Hospital, 44th Gurkhas, at 8.30 a.m. next morning, composed as under, for the purpose of reporting on the condition of two screens, verandah and one mat, door, as is the official way of describing such articles). President, one officer, 43rd Gurkhas, one officer (myself) and the medical officer, 44th Gurkhas.

The president and I were there in time, but the medical officer was not, so we came to the conclusion, after examination, that the verandah screens and doormat were unserviceable through fair wear and tear and should be replaced by the State, made out the proceedings of the board and signed them. The president then went off to his breakfast, so I wrote out a new set of proceedings, setting forth that the board were of opinion that the state of the articles examined was due to the culpable neglect of Surgeon A. B. 44th, that his not attending at the time appointed was practically an admission of the same, therefore his reasons should be given in the space provided below, and sent this off by an orderly. Whilst waiting for an answer I began to read the volume of medical regulations lying on the office table, and there, to my intense delight, found it laid down that, at that time of year, the medical officer should attend hospital at 7.30 a.m., so felt I had a trump card up my sleeve in case my Aryan brother saw through the proceedings sent him and thought of logging me again.

After a while he arrived, and with him the doctor of the 43rd, both with swords on, which were not usually worn by the Indian Medical Service for ordinary duty.

The latter said at once, "A. B. isn't responsible for replacing this stuff." A nudge and a wink were no good, for he continued, "I'll show you the proper regulations for condemning hospital furniture"

"I don't care a blow about that," I answered, "A. B. has broken all sorts of regulations by not being here at 7.30."

"There is no regulation about that," said the 43rd man, who was new to the country.

"Isn't there?" said I. "Read that, then," pointing out the paragraph just discovered.

A. B. read it and murmured, with much anxiety, "What *shall* I do? What *shall* I do?"

"Sign this," I suggested, pulling out the real proceedings, "and don't come late to a board again, or you may be entangled in great trouble."

On this the other man laughed and said he knew it was a joke all along, on which I remarked I was sure he did, and had put on his sword and walked nearly a mile to tell me so. Our man was much relieved at having got off so easily.

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