

Story of a bird book: its journeys and owners¹

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"I have an idea that Khamba Jong has become a sort of scientific playground with botanists, geologists, ornithologists, mineralogists, etc., sticking their heads out behind every rock ..."

Reading that sentence in Lord Curzon's² letter to Lieut. Col. Francis Younghusband (the Political Commissioner of the British Expeditionary Force to Lhasa) in August 1903 (French 1994), one cannot fail to notice a certain sense of optimism and triumph concerning the British Mission underway in Tibet. Curzon handpicked several key functionaries of the Mission, and Capt. Herbert James Walton (1869–1925)^{3,4}, who had performed meritoriously as the medical officer during the relief of Peking in 1900, was one such appointee. Based on Walton's proven extra curricular abilities, Lord Curzon also assigned him the mantle of botanist-cum-ornithologist.

Walton was a dedicated professional, and had no difficulty in establishing the first three allopathic dispensaries in Tibet at Yatung, Gyantse, and Lhasa. But from the moment he entered the Khamba Jong plain on 28 September 1903, he realised that he was in a previously untrodden avian realm. Indeed, the first major reference book that also covered the ornithology of Tibet, the first part of H. E. Dresser's *"A manual of Palaearctic birds,"* "... in order to furnish a complete account of the ornithology of the Palaearctic Region" had appeared on the bookshelves in London only around July/August 1902.

One copy of this book came in the possession of Walton, which bears the inscription in his hand on the top right corner of the title page "H J Walton | Khamba Jong | 1903." Our curiosity deepens considering the shipping time from London to Calcutta, and then to Gangtok, on to Thangu, over the Kongra La (5,242 m a.s.l.), and another 50 miles to Khamba Jong! Obviously, Lord Curzon was leaving nothing to chance, and his personal intervention alone could have made this first historic, and time-bound, journey of that book possible. Walton was among the last to withdraw from Khamba Jong in mid November 1903, and re-enter Tibet via the Chumbi Valley over the Yak La.

Unlike at Khamba Jong, this time the Tibetans contested the Expeditionary Force's march to Lhasa, first in the Chumbi Valley itself, and next at Gyantse. The Book, in a manner, also witnessed the action, which ultimately ended the month-long siege of the monastery, and Lieut. Grant of the Gorkhas won the VC. So the Book ultimately arrived a Lhasa, war weary, and much, much travelled, across the oceans, across the width of the Subcontinent, over the "roof-of-the-world", in full view of Kangchenjunga in the West, and Chomalhari on the Eastern flank (7,310 m a.s.l.), thence

across the Brahmaputra, ultimately reaching the "Forbidden City", under the shadow of The Potala, on 3 August 1904!

Approximately seven weeks later (23 September 1904) Walton, and the Book, retraced their steps back to India, but over a new pass, the Jelap La. We do not know for sure, but it would be most probable that the handpicked officers (Walton included) would have headed for Calcutta to be personally debriefed by Lord Curzon who had a job at hand to satisfy his peers at Whitehall, London about the achievements of his pet obsession.

Calcutta was least suited for a war-exhausted soldier to recoup and write a narrative of the past fifteen months. So Walton was stationed at Manipur from 1905-1908 to benefit from its salubrious surroundings and moderate climate. And it is most likely that the Book acquired its antiquated, new binding at the improvised weekly market of Manipur town!

The draft of "Birds of Southern Tibet" by Walton may have been completed in 1905, but before submitting it for publication in *"The Ibis"* Walton proceeded on home-leave, perhaps to consult the bird-skin-collections both, at Oxford, and the British Museum. The article was thus published in two installments in 1906.

Did the Bird Book make the 1905–06 to-and-fro journey also? There is no evidence but in all probability it did. However there is stronger probability that during the next home leave in 1909 (a) the Book did accompany Walton to London (b) Walton who was a member of the British Ornithologists' Union (He joined the BOU in 1899 & resigned in 1921) gave a talk on birds of southern Tibet (c) Hugh Whistler who had qualified for the Imperial Indian Police in 1909 met him at the BOU talk and (d) Walton passed on the Bird Book to Whistler, a budding ornithologist who in due course would append to his name F.L.S., F.Z.S., and M.B.O.U.!

Whistler, the Bird Book, and Walton leave London and journey to India between December 1909 and February 1910. Disembarking at Bombay, Walton spent the next four years at Saharanpur while Whistler reported at Phillour (the present day Punjab Police Training Academy) as he was assigned to the Punjab IP Cadre.

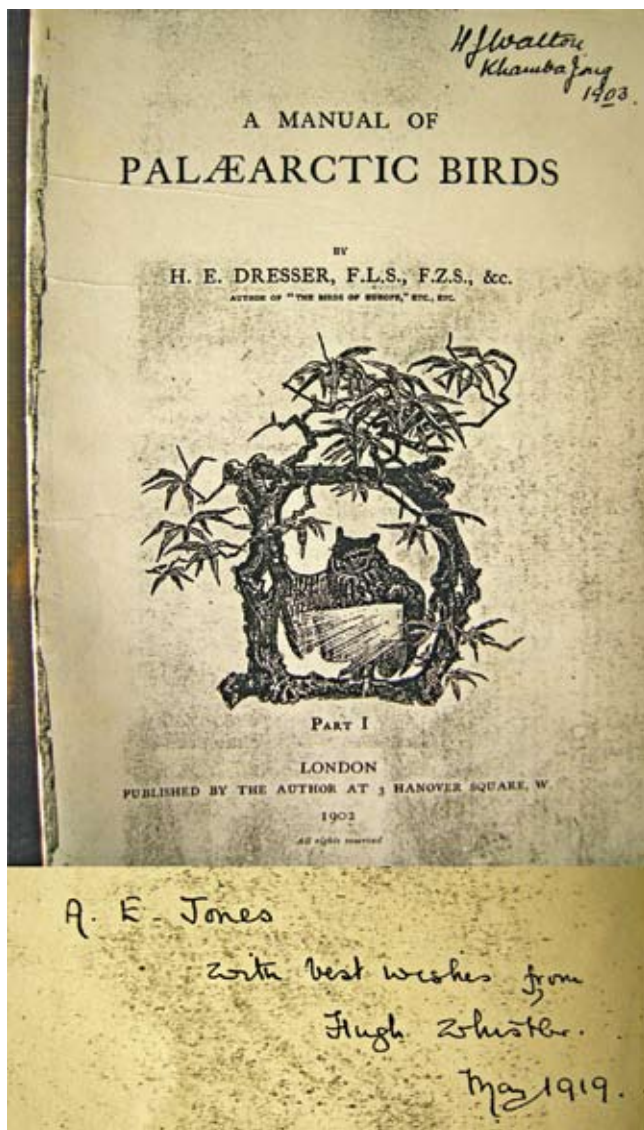
Walton now faded from reckoning and over the next few years, Whistler (a) "became the recognized authority on everything connected with birds in India, (b) those in authority did not discourage his hobby since the search for birds took him into out of the way places seldom visited by IP officers in the ordinary routine of duty (!), and (c) the great store of knowledge Whistler accumulated was periodically communicated to the Bombay Natural History Society and *The Ibis*". Little wonder that The late

¹ This is a partly historical, partly fictional recreation of the history of a book's journeys in South Asia. The meetings between Walton and Whistler, and Whistler and Jones, are a presumption by the author derived from the recorded dates of movements of Walton to UK and within India as also of Whistler between 1909 and 1920.

² Lord Curzon (1859–1925), Viceroy of India.

³ Wynne 1969.

⁴ Allen (2004) inexplicably refers to Capt. H. J. Walton as "Capt. H. G. Walton."



Inscriptions of H. J. Watton, and Hugh Whistler.

Salim Ali goes on record in his autobiography that Whistler was one of his Gurus and in fact reproduced at the end of the Book the detailed guide-lines that Whistler gave him for conducting Bird-Surveys in various regions of India!

In the process, the Book further journeyed extensively within India, that is NW Frontier Provinces, Kashmir, Kangra, Lahaul, Kullu, etc. Now the Book acquired its last known owner and the lead as to "when, where, how and who" is provided by Whistler in his own hand on the title page itself.

Whistler gifted the Book to Alexander Edward Jones (1878–1947) in May 1919. And the place of transference would have been Simla, by then the Summer Capital of the Raj under Lord Curzon's patronage. "A. E. Jones, Civil and Military out-fitters" catered to uniforms, formal and informal apparels for the Civil Services and the Army from an imposing shop on the Simla Mall, adjoining the 'Davicos,' an exclusive restaurant thronged by colonial big-wigs, and the princes of India. Much like the physicians bedside talk, A E Jones too would not be lacking in engaging Whistler, his client, in polite conversation.

Now Jones was in his own right more than an amateur

naturalist where birds and butterflies were concerned. But he would have further profited both from Whistler's conversations and also from the Book as a reference-check. So in 1919, Jones published the first exhaustive Checklist of the Birds of Simla (282 spp.) in the *Journal of the Bombay Natural History Society*.

I chanced upon the Book bearing the inscriptions of H. J. Walton from Khamba Jong (Tibet) 1903 and Hugh Whistler's to A. E. Jones of May 1919, in a Government office in 2002, which unfortunately holds only the first part of this two-volume work. By nightfall I had had it photocopied (500 pages) and dispatched one complete set to Aasheesh Pittie the bibliographer from Hyderabad.

Highlights from Walton's ornithological report:

- A. First of all Walton gave the most graphic and captivating description of Khamba Jong, "... a Tibetan fort about fifteen miles from the frontier ... The surrounding country consists of an undulating plain covered with low wormwood scrub and coarse grass. The Himalayas, with the conspicuous peaks of Mount Everest, Kinchenjunga and Kinchenjhau, close the view to the South. A chain of low hills forms the Northern boundary, separating the plain from the Sang P River Valley ... The mean elevation ASL is 15,200 ft."
- B. His checklist of the birds up to Lahsa is of 126 spp., and the number of skins/specimens collected were 2,047. Walton states, "... the following notes on the birds of Southern Tibet are very incomplete ... My professional work with the Commission claimed the greater part of my time ... given better opportunity, I should have been able to increase my list considerably ..."
- C. "It was a puzzle to me to account for the presence of such large number of Finches, certainly their diet can have had little of variety about it and must have consisted of no more than seeds of coarsest grasses, yet the birds kept fat and lively". And one which was new to science was named *Propasser Waltoni* (Sharpe, *Bull. Brit. Orn. Club*, XV, page 95, Jul 1905)."
- D. Walton expressed his gratitude among others, "... to Colonel Sir Francis Younghusband, K.C.I.E. for the active interest he took in my ornithological work." And rewards his benefactor with, "*Cinclus Younghusbandi* (Walton, *Bull. Brit. Orn. Club*, XV, page 02, Jul 1905)."
- E. "... The only species of Goose that I saw was the Bar-headed Goose ... The most numerous ducks were Pintails and Mallards ... Ruddy sheldrake were in immense numbers ... They were almost ludicrously tame ..."
- F. "... Presumably most of these wildfowl had wintered in India, but it is certain that few, if any of them had made their way to Tibet up the Chumbi Valley. In that case I could scarcely have failed to notice them a Tuna ... There can be little doubt that the main migration-route in Southern Tibet lies along the Tsang Po (Brahmaputra) Valley ... And Go via Assam ..."
- G. "... Lhasa itself was somewhat disappointing in that it yielded few new species. However, I saw and obtained there, for the first time in Tibet, Moorhens. Coots and Wrynecks ... the new Rose Finch (*Carpodacus Waltoni*) occurred also at Lahsa."
- I. Every specimen is painstakingly labeled, for instance:

"23. LANIUS TEPHRONOTUS

No.101.... adult. Khamba Jong, 15,200 ft, Sept 25, 1903.

No.1731...imm. Khamba Jong, 15,200 ft, Oct. 7. 1903.

No.1955... adult. Gyante, 12,000ft May 3, 1904.
No. 2019... adult. Lhasa, 12,200 ft Aug 24, 1904.

In full moult"

Thereafter follows a description: "... This was the only Shrike seen in Tibet. The Tibetan name is 'Jo-nak' ... "

Only if the Book could speak of its exotic, historical journeys, and extraordinary owners, leading to its present ignominy, a hundred and seven years after publication, what an enchanting, epochal narrative that would make.

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Whistler, Hugh Whistler's son. I would also like to thank Ralfe for trying to locate information for this note.

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Red-tailed Wheatear *Oenanthe chrysopygia* in Uttarakhand

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The Red-tailed Wheatear *Oenanthe chrysopygia*¹ is a winter visitor to the Indian Subcontinent, where it occurs from the beginning of October till end of March. Its strongholds in India are the arid, semi-arid, and semi-desert areas (Ali & Ripley 1998). Baker (1924) described its winter distribution in the Indian Subcontinent as, 'North-West India, West of the Jhelum River, Sind, Cutch, Northern Guzerat and Rajputana as far East as Jodhpur'. Vagrants have been recorded as far south as Goa (Lainer 2004). The eastern-most records are from Nepal, where it has been recorded twice (Giri & Choudhry 1997; Inskipp 2006). There are a few records of the species from the Himalayan foothills, and nearby areas of northern India. A bird was collected on 29 September 1912 at Sairee, close to Shimla (Dodsworth 1913; Jones 1919). It was recently recorded at Chandigarh (Singh 2005). It has been listed for Rajaji National Park, Uttarakhand as winter visitor with unknown status (Pandey *et al.* 1994).

On 25 September 2006, at 0745 hrs, from atop a domestic elephant, MS briefly saw a wheatear with rufous in its rump and tail. It flew low, from boulder to boulder, in an almost-dry stream bed, known as Jhina Sot (29°26'55.19"N 78°53'36.33"E) at 316 m, situated at a distance of 100 m from Jhina forest resthouse, on the southern periphery of Corbett Tiger Reserve. On the morning of 26 September 2006 MS searched for the bird again. At 0810 hrs, he spotted it perched on a big boulder in the stream bed, where it had been seen the previous day. It regularly

flew down to the ground to pick up insects. MS observed it for an hour, while it fed within a radius of 50 m. A small pool of water in the semi-dry stream, and the surrounding area, was its feeding territory. The bird chased insects on ground, with wings, and tail, stretched open. Some of the big rocks and boulders were its favourite perches. It occasionally perched on the sand banks and nearby lantana bushes. If approached, while it was on the ground, it ran a little distance before flying low to a nearby rock or boulder. MS observed the bird again from 1510 to 1730 hrs, when DC also photographed it.

Red-tailed Wheatear is 'distinguished in all plumages from other wheatears occurring in the subcontinent by rufous-orange lower back and rump and rufous sides to tail' (Grimmett *et al.* 1998). The rump of the bird seen was rufous. The lateral basal panels on uppertail were same colour as rump, as described by Cramp (1988). Central black panel on the tail joined a broad black sub-terminal band. Pale rufous colour of the vent extended as prominent rufous on the basal two-third of the undertail before it joined the broad black sub-terminal. There were thin rufous terminal bands on uppertail and undertail as shown in the illustrations in Cramp (1988). The bird had a strong black bill, dark iris, glossy black tarsus, prominent dull white supercilium that was broader in front of the eye, black rear eye-stripe, rufous-brown ear-coverts, and dull white chin and throat. The upperparts were sandy, or grey-brown with greyer sides of the neck and shoulders and pale buffish breast, buffish belly and flanks.

This is the first record of occurrence of a Red-tailed Wheatear in Corbett Tiger Reserve, and the Kumaon Hills. It was not

¹ For long treated as a conspecific of *O. xanthopyrma*, but now elevated to full species level (AERC TAC 2003; del Hoyo *et al.* 2005; Rasmussen & Anderton 2005).