



# Before and after Everest

A Loan Exhibition of Paintings and Drawings by  
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## Foreword

Howard Somervell almost died on June 4th 1924, whilst descending the north face of Everest, at the end of an exhausting day when he and Edward Norton established a world altitude record which would remain unchallenged for decades. He had been plagued all day by a rasping sore throat and now his airway suddenly became totally blocked. He had almost resigned himself to death by asphyxiation when he managed to self-administer a Heimlich manoeuvre, coughing up the blockage and gulping thankfully at the fresh air flowing once more to his lungs. Norton, some way ahead, was mildly concerned by Somervell's delay but assumed, as he wrote afterwards, that his companion must have stopped to do some sketching!

Norton's remark was perhaps tongue-in-cheek, but that nonchalance sums it all up. These were supremely bold pioneers, but they were amateur mountaineers, with many other interests and talents. Somervell did stop



*Somervell's photo of Norton climbing towards the summit of Mount Everest*

frequently on Everest to draw and paint, later working up his sketches into large oil paintings, whose bold abstracted forms have some similarity with the work of his contemporary Nicholas Roerich, whom he met in Sikkim. He also composed some of the music to John Noel's film of the 1922 Everest expedition. All this he achieved while following a successful career as a surgeon, first on the Western Front, later as a medical missionary in India.

Of all the early Everest pioneers, Howard Somervell is the one I would most like to have met. By all accounts a modest and supremely compassionate man, he had great talents and I am delighted that his particular talent as an artist is now being celebrated by the Alpine Club.

**Stephen Venables**

The Alpine Club President 2004-7

## Before and After Everest, the Art of Howard Somervell

Howard Somervell was born in Kendal in 1890 and is best known for his role as a mountaineer who was one of the leading climbers on the 1922 and 1924 British expeditions to Everest. He was a surgeon, who devoted the rest of his working life to the people of South India as a medical missionary. He was also an acclaimed artist, especially of mountain scenes and other landscapes. He carried a sketchbook almost everywhere he went and would later use the sketches as a basis for his oil paintings. Many of his mountain paintings are based on sketches and photographs he made on his climbing expeditions to Everest, other Himalayan mountains and the Alps. He developed his art practice over many years, particularly while serving as a surgeon in the Royal Army Medical Corps. on the Western Front in 1916-18, during which time he was able to go out sketching with the war artist William Rothenstein, who had a strong influence on his technique. After he resigned from the RAMC in 1920, Somervell spent the summer months climbing in the Alps, and then went to Scotland, where, with Graham Wilson he traversed the Cuillin Ridge in Skye. It was these climbing exploits that established his mountaineering reputation, resulting in him being selected for the 1922 Everest expedition. Travels in India following this expedition led to his decision to spend his working life helping the poor at Neyyoor Hospital in what is now Tamil Nadu State.

Howard and Margaret Somervell had three sons, James Lionel (1927-2009), David Howard (1929-2021) and William Hugh (1935-47) and after almost forty years of service as a medical missionary, Howard and Margaret retired to the Lake District, where Howard painted prolifically in the studio of his home in Ambleside, but he also travelled to many parts of the world.

This exhibition has come to fruition following several years of planning and discussions among likeminded individuals who all share the same conviction that Howard Somervell is an underrated artist and that what is overdue is a small but first-rate curated exhibition



*THS sketching at Everest Base Camp in 1922*

of selected pictures to celebrate his achievements as a landscape painter. The date for this exhibition has been planned to coincide with the 50th anniversary of Somervell's death.

Recent research, undertaken by Dr. David Seddon, foremost expert on the art of T.H. Somervell, has resulted in further discoveries, and work is ongoing. A comprehensive new biography, written by Graham Hoyland and published by The History Press will greatly add to our knowledge of this extraordinary man. It is our hope that Somervell's art will once again stand alone and be valued in its own right, as it was in the past by





1915 THS as Officer Cadet

Roerich and Rothenstein and be seen as integral to the path of mid-twentieth century British landscape painting. Somervell is far from being just a topographer of the Himalaya and the Alps. The limited palette and close tonality of his oil technique combine to create a ‘soft-modernist’ language in landscape paintings that are, in their way, as quintessentially English and of their period as the landscapes of John Nash or the Art Deco inspired GWR Railway posters of the 1930s.

Howard Somervell was a polymath, a man of remarkably broad-ranging talents; he was also a man of strong faith and great humility who gave away some of his best work to friends. His art production was prodigious: according to David Seddon it amounts to many hundreds or even thousands of works – if one includes all the pastels and watercolours. Our wish is that this exhibition will highlight the very best of this heroic man’s achievements as a hitherto unsung unofficial war artist and landscape painter of distinction.

#### HOWARD SOMERVELL THE PAINTER

Theodore Howard Somervell (1890-1975) was born at 9 Vicarage Terrace, Nethergraveship, Kendal on 16 April 1890. He was the eldest son of William Henry Somervell (1860-1934) and Florence Howard (1865-1938), daughter of Theodore Howard. WH Somervell was chairman of the Somervell Brothers shoe factory in Kendal and by the standards of the time, a wealthy man. He was perhaps the first man to own a car in the Lake District. The Somervell factory was the principal employer in Kendal and WH Somervell was known as a generous man who would look after his workers and their families in times of hardship. His other children were Joyce Rachel (1892-1973) and Leslie William (1895-1958).

As a boy, Howard Somervell was encouraged to sketch by his father, a competent watercolourist and a collector of modern art. A studio photograph exists of Somervell, aged six or seven, with paint tray in hand. He was soon painting local scenes in Kendal and as an undergraduate exhibited at the Cambridge Drawing Society in 1910.

Over his lifetime, Somervell painted many hundreds if not thousands of paintings. Of some 540 titles that have been identified, 201 are of the Himalaya or Tibet. Of these, many date or relate to the 1922 or 1924 Everest campaigns. As well as being a leading member of the expeditions, Somervell was, as an artist, actively engaged in recording the mountain landscape, and the high plains of Tibet through which they passed on the approach to Everest.

During the Everest years, Somervell seems to have been more active in 1922 than in 1924, especially between late March and late July 1922 which was, perhaps, his most prolific period. Of the rest, there are 54 paintings of India, 86 of the Alps and other mountain ranges, 86 of the Lake District, 23 of Scotland and Wales, and others from all over the world. These figures can only be a guide to his total output.

#### TECHNIQUE AND INFLUENCE

A great source of influence on Somervell was the Russian painter, explorer and mystic Nicholas Roerich (1874-1947). Somervell described him as ‘...the greatest mountain painter alive...’ Roerich travelled through India and North America in the 1920s before settling in the Kulu-Manali Valley where Somervell stayed at his house for a few days in September 1944 (see p. 35) Other influences included Somervell’s father, Lakeland artists such as Alfred Heaton Cooper (1863-1929) and his son William (1903-1995) and also the mountaineer, soldier and co-leader of the 1924 Expedition, Edward F. Norton (1884-1954).

Somervell wrote that the aspiring mountain artist must first draw his mountain, simplifying detail, ‘cubifying’ as he put it. In *The Assault on Everest, 1922*, he described the colour and atmosphere of Tibet.

*The air in Tibet is clear to an extent unimagined by a European, clearer even than the air of an Alpine winter. So peaks and ridges 30 or 40 miles away are often almost in the same visual plane as the foreground of the landscape. .... It is this lack of atmosphere which makes pictorial representation of these Tibetan scenes so very difficult; the pictures I made on the course of the Expedition have all had one criticism from many different people – “there is no atmosphere.” Many as are the demerits of these pictures, this is the one merit they have; and if they had an “atmosphere” they would cease to be truthful.<sup>1</sup>*

A anonymous reviewer of the five pictures Somervell exhibited at the Alpine Club in 1929 wrote: *“TH Somervell’s pictures of the Himalayas give the impression of an amazing technique, perfect drawing. Restrained colouring, vast distances and heights. Excellent!”*

And when the mountaineer and scientist, Frank Smythe, was climbing Mount Kamet to the northwest of Nanda Devi in 1931, Somervell’s pictures came to mind: *‘It was a brilliantly clear, frosty morning, and as the sun lit the pinnaled ridge and slowly stole down the long slopes of*

*reddish rocks and scree, I was forcibly reminded of Mr. T. Somervell’s paintings of the valleys in the neighbourhood of Everest. There were the crude, almost bizarre colourings, in which reds and yellows predominate. The shadows were hard-edged, like shadows thrown by an electric arc lamp. Such a scene would induce despair in a conventionally-minded artist. To those used to the diffused lighting and soft atmospheric effects of Europe, Somervell’s paintings appear harsh and brutal in their lighting and colouring. Yet, were they to see the country for themselves, they would realise that only by brutal daubing can the spirit of these strange valleys on the edge of Tibet be transferred to canvas.<sup>2</sup>*

#### SKETCHES AND WATERCOLOURS

Somervell was a prolific watercolourist and sketcher in pastel and many of his watercolours are painted on brown Kraft paper.<sup>3</sup> As early as 1913, he sometimes used a French laid paper made by Michallet and he also favoured Ingres paper.<sup>4</sup> Watercolour was his favoured medium in Tibet, the Himalaya and India. He often used bodycolour – watercolour mixed with gouache – in preference to pure watercolour and also used pastel, either alone or in conjunction with watercolour. This semi-opaque technique helped him when transcribing his watercolour sketches into oil paintings in the studio.

In a note to his 1936 exhibition, Somervell wrote that a picture must ‘communicate something the artist wishes to say’ as well as being ‘in some measure descriptive of its subject’.<sup>5</sup> Although Somervell sold many paintings over his lifetime, he might not be regarded as a ‘professional’ artist in the strict sense of the word. But freedom from financial considerations allowed him to develop his style as he wished. Many regard his paintings of the great Himalayan peaks and Tibet as a unique record, and an important part of the heritage of the history of mountain art. Probably no other artist applied a personal form of ‘cubism’ to the high mountains in such a consistent and authoritative way as Somervell, especially in his later works, and he deserves more recognition as an artist in his own right.



## WORLD WAR I SKETCHBOOKS

Although Somervell made very few oil paintings of WWI, preferring instead to paint the magnificent mountain scenery and majestic architecture that he loved, he kept sketchbooks from his war service as an Army surgeon that offer a fascinating, yet often sobering record of his experiences. (see p. 16)

As well as scenery in Provence, the sketches made during this time include views of places visited on their travels through central France. The sketches display a certain naivety of style, when compared with those from later in the war.

The intensity of the fighting and the number of casualties left little time for any leisure activities in those months of 1916 but the sketches of the towns and villages in particular show increasing levels of destruction. There are also sketches showing the weapons of war (see p. 17) and their effects on people, buildings and the landscape.

After the Armistice in November 1918, Somervell was assigned to the Army of the Rhine, which marched through Belgium and across into Germany. His sketchbook from this time is captioned “*Belgium and the Ardennes – Mons to Nideggen. The march from W Front to the Rhine Nov-Dec 1918*” and includes more detailed comments on each of the views.

## EVEREST AND THE HIMALAYA

When the 1922 Everest expedition arrived at their base camp, Somervell assisted with the organisation of stores for transport to higher camps whilst others prospected the route. He was impressed by the outline of Everest and was struck by the cubist appearance of the northern aspect of the mountain.

On 12th and 14 May, Somervell walked to the Rapiu La from camp III. (see p. 21) Mallory wrote in *The Assault on Everest, 1922*:

*‘His (Somervell’s) most important activity when we were not on the mountain was sketching. His vast supply of energy, the number of sketches he produced and oil paintings besides, was only less remarkable than the rapidity with which he worked. On May 14th he again walked over the uncrevassed snowfield by himself to the Rapiu La. Later on, I joined him, and as far as I could judge, his talent and energy were no less at 21,000 feet than on the wind-swept plains of Tibet’*

From the Rapiu La, Somervell would have seen views of the Kangshung Glacier and the east face of Everest as well as Lhotse and Makalu. (see pp. 20, 24) These he sketched and photographed.

It is possible that Somervell may have painted some 180 pictures during the two Everest expeditions plus others in later years, particularly of Everest as seen from Rongbuk. (see pp. 21, 28) A surviving catalogue from 1923 gives some insight into what he painted during the 1922 expedition. Catalogues of the 1926 Redfern Gallery exhibition and an exhibition at the Royal Geographical Society (RGS) following the 1924 expedition have sadly not survived.

Maybe 50 pictures from 1922 and about 19 from 1924 survive and only four of the eight pictures to illustrate *‘The Fight for Everest: 1924’*.

It is likely that Norton and Somervell had already discussed which paintings were to be used in the account of the expedition and a ‘shortlist’ of twelve was eventually reduced to seven, together with reproduction of a large oil of Everest dating from 1922, then hanging at the RGS. Somervell may well have considered this the best example of his many paintings of Everest from Rongbuk.

*The Fight for Everest: 1924* was published in June 1925 and although well received there was some comment that Somervell’s paintings had not been adequately acknowledged. Curiously, Hinks, the ever-divisive secretary of the Mount Everest Committee, had been somewhat lukewarm about Somervell’s paintings and at

one stage did suggest to Norton that he might like to include some of his own sketches.

In 1926 Somervell’s father arranged an exhibition of his son’s pictures at the Redfern Gallery in London. William Rothenstein (1872-1945) opened the exhibition and wrote an introduction to Somervell’s work in the catalogue.

Somervell had sketched with Rothenstein on the Western Front during the First World War and in *After Everest*, he wrote of Rothenstein:

*I got to know him well. We often went out sketching together, and his care in drawing accurately everything that he drew at all impressed itself on my young and rather careless mind. From him I learned to appreciate even the humblest objects in nature with respect and his influence has ever since been with me, leading me to appreciate beauty to an extent I never could have reached had he not become one of my friends.<sup>6</sup>*



*Sketching in a village in Sikkim, 1922*



## THE LAKELAND FELS

After almost forty years of service as a medical missionary in the south Indian State of Tamil Nadu, Somervell retired to the Lake District. In retirement, he continued to paint scenes of Tibet and the Himalaya, using photographs he had taken many years earlier as well as the fells and landmarks around his home. Over the years he exhibited a total of 136 paintings at the annual exhibitions of the Lake Artists Society [LAS] from 1920 onwards and, following his return from India, he exhibited with LAS almost every year until his death in 1975.<sup>7</sup>

In Somervell's Lake District pictures, almost every fell and hillside is represented: (see pp. 45) scenes of Great Gable, Wetherlam, the Langdale Pikes, Helvellyn and Dale Head (753m) – a fell north of Honister Pass.

The artist Julian Cooper remembers that Somervell's work at the Lake Artists Society's annual exhibitions often stood out from the usual Lakeland landscapes because the subject-matter might also be of the Himalayan, Alpine or Tatra mountains. Somervell was a familiar figure in the Heaton Coopers' home:

*Howard's oil painting of the Matterhorn (see p. 41) stood above our mantelpiece at home, and I grew up admiring the powerful way he had of simplifying mountain forms, similar in vision to my father's watercolours, but by using body colour and oil his paintings had more physical presence. I remember once going to his house above Ambleside where he gave us a private slide show. When he and Peggy moved to their new house further down the hill I recall a box in the porch filled with an assortment of his unframed paintings done on the brown paper. I last saw Howard in 1974 standing outside the Chenil Gallery in the King's Road in Chelsea when I was passing by. He invited me into the Gallery where a private view of his paintings was in progress.*<sup>8</sup>

## INDIA AND THE EAST

Working as a missionary surgeon there, India played a central part in Somervell's life and was an abiding subject in his sketching and landscape painting. Indeed, for someone who spent the best part of his working life in the southern state of Tamil Nadu, India was not a romantic dream but a day-to-day reality. Although knowledgeable about Hindu beliefs and spirituality, Somervell was at no point seduced by Eastern mysticism and remained strongly committed to Christianity throughout his life. The vagaries of Indian ways, their hypocrisies and superstitions, are recorded in detail in Somervell's three autobiographical accounts.

In *After Everest*, he reminisced about a three-month period of travel in India, beginning in Darjeeling in August 1922 when he journeyed 'to see as much as possible of the architecture and the customs of India.'<sup>9</sup> The Taj Mahal failed to impress, having what Somervell felt to be a 'great fault of design' which made it 'an ugly building', but he was greatly impressed by 'the Buddhist buildings of 2,000 years ago' at Sanchi and the 'really marvellous sculpture' at Ellora and Mamallapuram.<sup>10</sup> As a British foreigner, he was spat at in the sacred city of Benares (Varanasi), but was more perturbed by

*...the vice, deceitfulness, and degradation of generations of "holiness" stamped indelibly upon the faces of priests in a particularly sacred temple; and the simple countryman with eager devotion bathing in the Ganges to wash away his sins, far fewer and more venial than those of the priest who (for a fee) bade him to do so.*<sup>11</sup>

He continued his journey to the extreme south of India where he spent ten days at Neyyoor in what was then the Kingdom of Travancore (later State of Travancore, now part of Tamil Nadu). This changed the whole course of his life and he returned to India in October 1923 as head of the London Missionary Society's Neyyoor medical missions (see p. 14) As he worked tirelessly on operations in the hospital, his early interest in the architecture

and customs of India developed into a much deeper understanding of the Indian people and of rural village life. Consequently, the paintings and sketches that he produced over the period c.1925-1961 are predominately quiet village scenes or the lush, cultivated landscapes of Tamil Nadu's sub-tropical interior: (see p. 44) a receding patchwork of paddy fields, punctuated by the vertical accents of palm trees, set against a background of crags and mountains below a towering cloudscape.

Somervell used his camera extensively to document village life in what was then an under-developed and very rural part of India and also took his sketchbook with him when he was away from Neyyoor. He sketched at the hill stations of Kodaikanal and Yercaud, Kokkal, Calicut (Kozhikode) in Kerala and Pulivendula in Andhra Pradesh.<sup>12</sup> He later became associate professor of surgery at Christian Medical College, Vellore, a post he held until his retirement in 1961.

Somervell continued to exhibit almost until the end of his life, both in London and as a longstanding member of The Lake Artists Society. The artist William Heaton Cooper was a close friend and fellow member of the Fell & Rock Climbing Club. Julian Cooper remembers that

Somervell's paintings stood out, 'distinguished by their strong and simplified forms, reminiscent of cubism, and influenced by Nicholas Roerich and perhaps by Ferdinand Hodler... He was an important and distinctive figure in the Club and the Society, with the Everest reputation adding to his aura.'<sup>13</sup> Following his death in 1975, Margaret Somervell continued to show her husband's paintings. In 1979, she opened an exhibition of selected Himalayan paintings at Abbot Hall Gallery and, in 1981, gave three paintings for exhibition at the Fell & Rock Climbing Club to mark its 75th anniversary.<sup>14</sup>

Frustratingly, aside from his autobiographical accounts, no diary from any point in Somervell's life has ever been made public. And there are many exhibitions for which there is no record, or at best, an incomplete account. There is no trace whatsoever of an exhibition which was probably held at the RGS in 1925 which is surprising, given that the RGS hold extensive archives of so many of its activities. There is only a partial record available of the Redfern Gallery exhibition of 1926 and, disappointingly, nothing has come to light about his solo exhibitions at the Alpine Club in 1969, 1971 and 1974. Many uncatalogued pictures remain.

<sup>1</sup> CG Bruce, *The Assault on Mount Everest, 1922*, (London: Arnold & Co., 1923), see TH Somervell, Chapter XIII, *Colour in Tibet*, pp.309-312.

<sup>2</sup> *Kamet Conquered*, ES Smythe, V. Gollancz, London 1932, p.113.

<sup>3</sup> Kraft paper is a kind of brown paper made through a special process invented in Prussia in the late nineteenth century. The name derives from the German word for 'strength' but because it is made from wood pulp, Kraft paper can darken overtime; something that is observable in many of Somervell's watercolours.

<sup>4</sup> The French artist Georges Seurat used Michallet paper for his drawings in Conté crayon.

<sup>5</sup> DJ Seddon, *Something the Artist Wishes to Say*, p.229.

<sup>6</sup> TH Somervell, *After Everest, The Experiences of a Mountaineer and Medical Missionary*, (London: Hodder and Stoughton), 1936 and later, p.29.

<sup>7</sup> See catalogues of the annual exhibitions of the Lake Artists Society, Armitt Museum and Library, Ambleside.

<sup>8</sup> Julian Cooper, *An artist remembers*, 2024.

<sup>9</sup> TH Somervell, *After Everest*, p.75.

<sup>10</sup> TH Somervell, *After Everest*, p.76.

<sup>11</sup> TH Somervell, *After Everest*, p.69.

<sup>12</sup> Somervell's son and daughter-in-law were working as medical missionaries in Pulivendula.

<sup>13</sup> Julian Cooper, *An artist remembers*, 2024.

<sup>14</sup> *Jammu* (oil), *Garhwal* (watercolour) and *Great Gable*.

## A Brief Biography of Howard Somervell



Howard with his infamous fur cap

### THE MOUNTAINEER

Somervell began climbing in the Lake District as a young man and joined the Fell and Rock Climbing Club (FRCC) in 1915. From 1921-24 he was a FRCC committee member. Somervell’s exploits in the Alps and on Mount Everest are well documented. He visited the Alps in the winters of 1910, 1911 and 1912 and first climbed there in 1913. After the First World War, he returned to the Alps in 1919 where he met Noel Odell on the Mer du Glace. In 1920 and with various companions, including Bentley Beetham, he climbed the Grand Chamois, Aiguille du Midi, Dent Blanche and traversed the Matterhorn and Zinal Rothorn before moving on to the Dauphiné where

he climbed with J.H.B. Bell, amongst others. Despite this not unreasonable tally of peaks, his application to join the 1921 Everest expedition was turned down.

In June 1920 he visited Scotland with his brother and Somervell, although accompanied part of the way, was the first to complete a solo traverse the Cuillin from Glen Brittle to Sligachan. In 1921 he was elected to the Alpine Club and amongst his supporters was Noel Odell. The Alpine routes he completed in his 1921 season included the Grepon and traverses of the Matterhorn, Weismies and Portjengrat, Mont Blanc, Dom-Taschorn and others.

### EVEREST 1922

Somervell was working at University College Hospital in London when he heard that he had been invited to join the 1922 Everest expedition. He would have to travel to Darjeeling at his own expense but once there all further costs would be met by the expedition committee. When he travelled out to India with the 1922 Everest expedition this would be the first of possibly ten voyages he would make to India by sea. The achievements of Somervell on Everest in 1922 and 1924 are well known and these include altitude records in both years, the rescue of porters from the North Col in 1924 as well as the highest ever photographs and sketches.

In *After Everest* he gives his own account of the infamous avalanche of 7th June 1922 which killed seven porters and ended the third attempt on the summit of the expedition of that year. With Mallory and Norton, he had already taken part in the first summit attempt and on 21st May reached almost 27,000 feet without supplementary oxygen. Somervell recorded that the initial walk of half a mile from Camp III to the foot of the slopes leading to the North Col took 2 hours through ‘...*snow of a most unpleasant texture...*’ but higher up the ‘...*snow trod firmer... we were gaining height more rapidly than we thought the condition of the snow would allow.*’<sup>15</sup> Once on the initial slopes below the North Col, Mallory, Somervell and

Crawford excavated trenches to see if they could trigger an avalanche. Unable to do so and feeling secure they began with one porter to climb up towards the North Col. The angle of the slope began to ease and with the firm surface underfoot, their spirits rose. Somervell was leading and about 600 feet beneath the North Col when

*‘with a subdued report ominous in the softness of its violence, a crack suddenly appeared about 20 feet above me. The snow on which I was standing began to move, slowly at first then faster.’*<sup>16</sup>

Somervell and his rope were lucky. They were able to extricate themselves but the thirteen porters below were less fortunate. The avalanche swept nine of them over an ice cliff and into a crevasse. Seven were killed.

Somervell and Crawford left the expedition a few days before its departure from Rongbuk to explore the valleys and mountains along the watershed between Sikkim and Tibet, north of Kangchenjunga. This area may not have been visited since Freshfield’s expedition of 1899. From Kampa Dzong (see p. 17) they crossed into Goraphu valley (see p. 38) and made their way westwards into the Upper Lhonak valley and in all, and in spite of the monsoon, they climbed five peaks over 18,000 feet before crossing the Lhonak La and reaching Kalimpong.

### EVEREST 1924

Considered to be one of the ablest climbers in the party, Somervell was selected for Everest in 1924. Nevertheless, the slopes leading up to the North Col must have been full of foreboding for porters and climbers alike and if anything, the weather was worse than in 1922. On May 23rd, and with Camp IV on the North Col only just established, Hazard returned to camp III with the disturbing news that four porters were marooned at camp IV. Of course this expedition is remembered for the loss of Mallory and Irvine on June 8th and not for the rescue of the porters on May 24th but it is interesting to

speculate as to what must have gone through the minds of Norton and the others at Camp III in the hours before the rescue. Norton selected his most able climbers, Mallory and Somervell for the rescue, and he must have appreciated that if an accident befell them, the expedition would also be as good as over. The following morning, they brought down four frightened, frost-bitten men with no little demonstration of cool and courageous mountaineering skill on the part of Somervell.

Eight days later on June 1st, Somervell and Norton, with Odell, Irvine and six porters in support moved up to camp IV. Camp V had already been established by Bruce and Mallory. After breakfast prepared by Irvine, Norton and Somervell occupied camp V on June 2nd and the following day, and with three porters, for the first time established camp VI. On June 4th, Norton and Somervell, without supplementary oxygen, reached a height of over 28,000 feet with Norton going a little higher than his companion and reaching what is now known as the Great Couloir.

During Norton’s solo effort, Somervell took two of the most remarkable photographs in mountaineering history. One photograph shows him leaning heavily on his ice axe. The other shows him making progress towards the Great Couloir (see p. 2). The altitude Norton reached was 8,570 metres (28,120 ft). This was not surpassed for another 28 years, until Lambert and Tenzing reached 8,611 metres (28,251 ft) on the south side of Everest during the 1952 Swiss expedition to Everest.

They returned to Camp IV the same day. On 5th June, Somervell descended, alone, to Camp III and then to Base Camp but not before Mallory had borrowed Somervell’s Vest Pocket Kodak camera. Norton who was snow blind remained in Camp IV. While Norton and Somervell had been engaged in their summit attempt, Mallory and Bruce had organized as many of the porters as were available to transport oxygen cylinders and apparatus to the North Col.



Mallory and Irvine left Camp IV for their summit attempt on 6th June Mallory and Irvine were last seen by Odell on 8th June. After their loss, Somervell wrote to Mallory’s widow, Ruth, from Darjeeling and he wrote an obituary of Mallory for the FRCC Journal.

In the deliberations that followed the rescue, Norton records in *The Fight for Everest: 1924* that the climbers would eschew the use of bottled oxygen altogether as the apparatus and cylinders had yet to be transported to the North Col. However, after establishing camp V with Geoffrey Bruce, Mallory had descended to camp III specifically to expedite the transport of this equipment to camp IV. Norton and Somervell were not great ‘believers’ in bottled oxygen but could they perhaps have climbed higher if this had been available to them?

AFTER EVEREST

Although not involved in any major Himalayan expeditions after 1924, Somervell continued to explore and climb, sometimes with family and friends, sometimes on his own. In 1926, Somervell, Hugh Ruttledge and Roger Wilson explored the eastern and northeastern side of Nanda Devi (see p. 36). and attempted a peak on the frontier with Tibet. In 1928 he was in Sikkim for an unsuccessful attempt on Pandim and with his companion ill, he climbed and sketched alone on a number of peaks to the south of Kangchenjunga. In May 1933, while his wife was in England, he travelled over the Tragbal and Burzil passes wanting to ‘*enjoy Nanga Parbat, not to climb it - to paint it, not to struggle with it...*’ From the Rupal Nallah, he climbed a number of lower peaks.

Somervell took leave from his work in India between June 1935 and October 1936. In 1935 and with his brother and Bentley Beetham he visited the Tatra mountains. On his return, he lectured to the FRCC about the Tatras at the Alpine Club in London. In early 1936, he met Frank Smythe to discuss the forthcoming Everest expedition. Somervell thought it might be possible to place a camp



Howard at 80

in the Great Couloir that Norton had reached in 1924. In 1936 he also visited the Chamonix valley, probably with his family, and sketched the Argentiere Glacier and the peaks above it. Following his return to India in November 1936, he visited Simla in 1937 and in January 1943, he returned to Darjeeling and took a party which included his wife and youngest son, Hugh, onto the Singalila ridge. He described himself as ‘*sketching at every opportunity.. I began sketching before sunrise when it was so cold the brushes froze.... and I had to do pastels until the sun came up.*’ and again, ‘*From Gaurisankar in the west to Siniolchu in the east, every detail in that glorious panorama was visible .... one simply had to drink it all in*’ (see p. 29).<sup>18</sup>

Somervell visited Kulu in autumn 1944 on his own (see p. 34). and the following year was back in the United Kingdom where he continued to rock climb and even put

up new routes with his brother and Bentley Beetham. In 1951, he climbed in the Valais Alps with his surviving two sons, Jim and David, then both medical students, and climbed the Pointe de Zinal and the Wellenkuppe with some of their student friends. With parties from the FRCC, he visited Fort William in May 1955, completing a traverse of Aonach Eagach and painting on the slopes of Carn Beag Dearg above the town. In 1957 he and his wife were in Ullapool and Dundonell, then in Ballachulish in May 1960 where he climbed Buchaille Etive Mhor. In 1962, he was again in Fort William and climbed Ben Nevis and may well have visited Torridon in 1970, just five years before he died.

THE SURGEON

Having read Natural Sciences at Cambridge, graduating with a double first in 1912, Somervell then continued his medical studies at University College, London, graduating in 1915.

When war broke out in August 1914, Somervell, like many other medical students considered enlisting as a combatant officer but was advised by Sir Frederick Treves (1853-1923) at the War Office to qualify as a doctor. The London Gazette records that he was commissioned from the University of London Officer Training Corps as a Captain in the Territorial Army on 19th June 1915, the year that he qualified as a doctor.

Somervell joined the 34th Casualty Clearing Station, West Lancashire Regiment (34 CCS) in 1915. 34 CCS crossed the Channel to Le Havre on 10th November. They were based at Carcassone and then Marseilles from December 1915 to January 1916, possibly in preparation for service in Salonika or the Near East.

From May 1916, 34 CCS, now with four surgeons, was part of the 3rd Army some ten miles behind the front line at Vecquemont, between Amiens and Albert. Shortly before the beginning of the Somme offensive,

their establishment was increased further to 16 medical officers. Once the battle began, on 1st July 1916, the medical services were overwhelmed. In the first twenty four hours, 3,000 wounded soldiers were brought to 34 CCS. Three days later the total seen had increased to a staggering 10,000. Somervell wrote:

*Never in the whole war did we see such a terrible sight. Streams of motor ambulance a mile long waited to be unloaded. Though many ambulance trains went out at one side of our camp, the wounded had to lie not merely in our tents and shelters and in the adjacent farm buildings, but the whole area of the camp, a field of five or six acres, was completely covered with stretchers placed side by side, each with its suffering or dying man upon it. Orderlies went about giving drinks and food and dressing wounds where possible. We surgeons were hard at it in the operating theatre, a good hut holding four tables. Occasionally we made a brief look around to select from the thousands of patients those few fortunate ones whose life or limbs we had time to save. It was a terrible business. Even now I am haunted by the touching look of the young, bright, anxious eyes as we passed along the rows of sufferers.*

*Hardly ever did any of them say a word, except to ask for water or relief from pain. I don't remember a single man in all those thousands who even suggested we should save him and not the fellow next to him. Silently beseeching they lay, as we rapidly surveyed them to see who was worth saving. Abdominal cases and others requiring long operations simply had to be left to die. Saving a life by amputation, which can be done in a few minutes, or saving of limbs by the wide opening of wounds had to be thought of first. There, all around us, lying maimed and battered and dying was the flower of Britain's youth – a terrible sight if ever there was one, yet full of courage and unselfishness and beauty.*<sup>19</sup>

By 1915, the major issues that faced the Army medical services in France were complex and grossly contaminated wounds, rapidly spreading gas gangrene and the challenge of preventing and arresting infection. The mortality of delayed amputation was between 70 and 90



per cent and over 41,000 amputations were performed on servicemen during the First World War. During major offensives, CCSs would be stationed next to one another and take wounded soldiers in rotation, with one CCS receiving patients who were sick rather than wounded.

In the winter of 1916-17, 34 CCS was treating many hundreds of soldiers with trench foot and Somervell subsequently wrote a paper on his experiences observing that tetanus could complicate this condition.

By September 1918, the German army on the Western Front were retreating. 34 CCS war diary records for September 1918, *‘another heavy day with many gassed cases’* as the Germans used gas as a defensive weapon. Somervell was seconded to other CCSs, certainly 3 and 48 CCS and possibly others. The war diary of 34 CCS records that he was also gaining experience in using X-rays as an aid to localisation of bullets, foreign bodies, including shrapnel, as well as fractures. By the autumn of 1918, the German army was in full retreat and on 11th November, Somervell was on leave walking with his brother in Langdale when he heard that the Armistice had been signed. Upon transfer from 34 CCS, his commanding officer recorded that Somervell had been with that unit almost since its formation and had worked tirelessly and with great technical versatility, particularly in the periods of July 1916 and March 1918. He was twenty-eight years old, had been qualified for just over three years with perhaps two and half years’ experience of operative surgery.

Somervell had indeed gained immense operative experience during his time at 34 CCS. Many years later he devoted a few pages to the technical aspects of surgery of gunshot wounds to the stomach. After nearly four years of service, he finished the war with the rank of Captain and a mention in dispatches.

As much as Somervell had been horrified at the death and injury caused by the war, he acknowledged that his skills as a surgeon and his skills in the use and interpretation of X-rays had benefitted enormously.

INDIA

After the 1922 Everest expedition, and with £60 pounds in his pocket, he travelled through India visiting Benares and Sarnath, Delhi, Agra and Gwalior. He eventually arrived at the town of Neyyoor in the southern tip of the sub-continent. There, he had arranged to meet a surgeon at Neyyoor Hospital by the name of Stephen Horatio Pugh FRCS who he had first met in England. With the help of local Indian doctors, Pugh had already transformed Neyyoor hospital into the largest surgical centre south of Madras. At Neyyoor and for just ten days, Somervell took on some of Pugh’s workload and was struck by the appalling poverty and the need for medical care. He returned to Britain in October 1922 and in April 1923, the film of the 1922 expedition was screened at the Albert Hall where Somervell delivered a lecture to accompany it. Despite being offered a senior post at University College Hospital, he had decided that his life’s work should be at Neyyoor. Somervell applied to join the London Missionary Society (LMS) in March 1923 stating that:

*Neyyoor in India is by far the most needy and the most suitable for my variety of work(ie surgical)*<sup>15</sup>

One of his referees was Murray Webb-Peploe who had been a colleague in the RAMC and at UCH and his application was accepted. On October 3rd 1923, and perhaps just a year after his return, he sailed for India with medical supplies, an oil generator, modern lighting equipment and X-ray apparatus, with the hope that by December he would be established in Neyyoor. He had already obtained permission to take leave for the 1924 expedition to Everest.

The work of Somervell at Neyyoor General Hospital in southern India is described in three books and these give some insight into the culture and complexities of life in southern India at a time when the end of British rule in India was inevitable. Suffice to say that he was not just a general surgeon. Somervell was orthopaedic surgeon, anaesthetist, obstetrician, physician, pathologist and

public health doctor. By the mid-1930s, Neyyoor Hospital had 180 beds and over 3000 major operations were being performed every year, some 600 for cancer.

Somervell’s X-ray equipment was the only kind available to many millions of people in southern India and any disease that could be treated by surgery was, of course, where Somervell’s expertise lay. The great range of surgery that Somervell could deploy is something that the surgeons of today would simply not experience. This included anything from amputation of the leg for sarcoma to drilling holes in the long bones of the leg to drain infection. He wrote papers on subjects as diverse as trench foot, diabetes, the surgical management of tuberculosis and cancer and developed a particular and lifelong expertise in the management of duodenal ulcers, carcinoma of the jaw, tuberculosis, cholera, malaria and hookworm as well as leprosy.

No surgery was performed on Sunday save for emergencies but the pressures of such work should not be underestimated. He once saw 150 new patients in thirteen hours, some 12 to 15 patients an hour. Although supported by surgeons trained in India who could themselves perform amputation, appendicectomy and gastroenterostomy (an operation ‘bypassing’ an ulcer), Somervell would frequently bear the responsibility for the workload of the hospital alone.

A bungalow was available to him and his family in Kodaikanal, a hill station some 6,000 feet up in the Palni

Hills of South India and Peermade, another hill station, was within easy reach. Many of the missionary staff in the area would take local leave in Kodaikanal with its club, reading rooms and tennis courts. He was a founder member and later Vice-President of the Himalayan Club and a member of the Trivandrum Club in south India.

It is impossible to do justice to the full scale of Howard Somervell’s achievements in a brief catalogue essay. The truth is that Somervell’s physical strength, academic and surgical expertise, and accomplishments in the fields of music and art allowed him to live many lives in one lifetime. His record of achievement in the medical world extended well beyond his mountaineering exploits and relatively few are aware of his scholarship in transcribing and analysing Tibetan sacred music and folk tunes. No doubt he did not conceive of these as separate facets of his personality since what underlines and unites all of his accomplishments is a deep and unshakeable Christian faith out of which comes humility. It is said that he played his violin to critically ill patients in the wards of Neyyoor Hospital, believing in the power of music to relieve pain. In the breaks between long hours of surgery he would play cricket in the street with local boys. These acts of kindness were not for show and went unnoticed except to the people whose lives he touched, and it is said that when news of his death reached Neyyoor, local people processed in mourning through the town. All that this modest catalogue and the exhibition which accompanies it can do is to illuminate another facet of this fascinating and inspiring man.

<sup>15</sup> TH Somervell, *After Everest*, p.62.  
<sup>16</sup> TH Somervell, *After Everest*, p.63.  
<sup>17</sup> Somervell TH, *Some Minor Expeditions in the Himalaya* Himalayan Journal 1946: 13: 28-40.  
<sup>18</sup> TH Somervell, *After Everest*, pp.26-27.  
<sup>19</sup> Archive of the London Missionary Society, School of Oriental and African Studies, London





*Péronne, Somme  
Valley, France.*

pen and watercolour,  
15 x 23cm  
dated and inscribed  
*PERONNE 1917*  
Private collection, England.

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*Ruins in a town, Somme  
Valley, France.*

pen and watercolour,  
15 x 23cm  
dated and inscribed  
*KULTUR, 1917*

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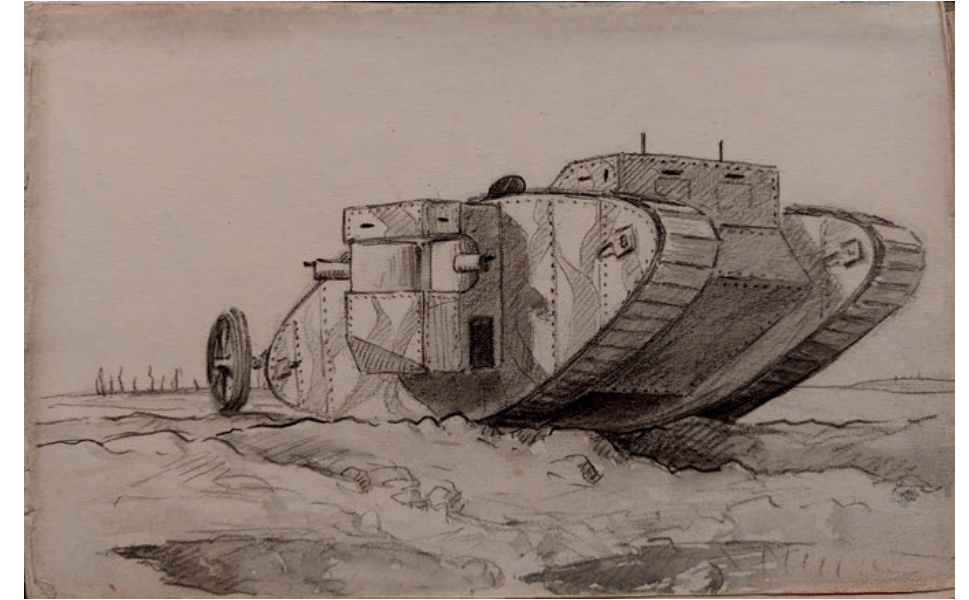
Somervell's intriguing reference to *Kultur* is a deliberate pastiche of the enemy's perceived ideas of 'civilization' brought about the shelling and destruction of communities, both sacred and civilian. Another way to interpret this inscription is an obvious statement of pointlessness in the conflict.

Private collection, England.

*A Mark I Tank.*

pencil,  
15 x 23cm  
Private collection, England.

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*The Fort at Kampa  
Dzong, Tibet.*

watercolour, 27 x 36cm.  
signed  
Private collection, England.

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Somervell would have painted this watercolour of the fort at Kampa Dzong between 11th and 15th April 1924. The size of the fortress-monastery is apparent, stretching back to a water tower seen right of top-centre. The angles and shapes of the building would have appealed to Somervell.







*Everest from Rongbuk, Tibet.*

oil on canvas, 49.8 x 61.3cm.

signed and dated 1922 and inscribed on a label on the verso *Everest from North with Basecamp (North Face)*

Private collection, England.

#### PROVENANCE

T.H. Somervell and by descent, 1922-75

Dr D.J. Seddon, 2021-

#### EXHIBITED

Possibly at Alpine Club, London, 11-30 Dec. 1922

Possibly at Alpine Club, London, 21 Jan -6 Feb. 1923

Possibly at Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge as part of *Hill and Mountain Pictures* 24 Feb -12 March, 1923.

Possibly as *Everest from Rongbuk*, Alpine Club, London, 1936

Alpine Club Centenary exhibition, London, 5 Nov-5 Dec. 1957

*Everest from Camp 1922*, Abbot Hall, Kendal, 17 Jan-16 Feb. 1967

*Everest Base camp, North Face*, catalogue no 37, Abbot Hall Gallery, Kendal, Feb 7 -7 March, 1976.

Abbot Hall Gallery, Kendal, 21 April, 1979

#### LITERATURE

Frontispiece of *After Everest*, 1936 (cropped)

*Everest from Rongbuk – a tale of two pictures*, Alpine Journal, 2022

*Before and After Everest*, Simon Pierse (online), 2024

*First on Everest; the Life of Howard Somervell*, Graham Hoyland. The History Press, 2025

The picture shows the moraines of the Rongbuk Glacier, and the glacier itself to the right of centre. The Yellow Band, the Norton couloir and possibly some of the rock pinnacles of the northeast ridge are also visible.

In *After Everest*, Somervell records painting six oils and over ten watercolours of this view of the mountain. (see p. 21) These would all have been painted in the week or so after the expedition arrived at its basecamp on 1st May 1922. Three of the six oils are accounted for, but all the watercolours are now untraced. This picture was in Somervell's personal collection until he died, and must have been his favourite picture of this view. His widow subsequently exhibited it in 1976 and 1979. A photograph exists of Noel Odell inspecting the picture in 1979.

In *After Everest*, Somervell wrote '*Its (Everest's) outline is stately rather than fantastic, and its dignity is the solid dignity of Egyptian buildings....*' and '*Everest is, on its northern aspect, rather a cubist mountain, and to one who, like myself, is of modern tendency in artistic appreciation, it offered constant satisfaction as a subject for numerous sketches.*'



*Tre Cime de Lavaredo.*

oil on canvas, 60 x 45 cm.

Private collection, England.





*East Face of Everest from Peak at 6833m.*

oil on canvas, 49 x 74 cm.  
signed and dated 1924  
The Alpine Club, London.

EXHIBITION

Possibly as *Shoulder of Everest*, 1936 Alpine Club, London  
Possibly as *Southeast Face of Everest*, 1954 Alpine Club, London  
*Something the Artist Wishes to Say*, Brewery Arts Centre, Kendal, 2006  
*Everest 1921-1953*, Alpine Club, London, 2014  
*Everest by Those who were There*, Alpine Club, London, 2024

LITERATURE

*T.H. Somervell* Dr D.J. Seddon. Royal College of Physicians, London; Royal College of Surgeons, London and Alpine Club, 2016  
*Everest by Those who were There*, 2021  
The Alpine Journal 126; 287, 2022

*North Col of Everest*

pastel, 22 x 29cm  
indistinctly signed and  
labelled on the verso:

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Pastel drawing made by  
T.H. Somervell at 27,000 ft.,  
27 May 1922. A remarkable  
example of acclimatisation  
and probably the only  
existing drawing made at  
such a height.

Private collection, England.



*Mount Everest seen  
from Shilling, Tibet.*

watercolour and gouache,  
21 x 29 cm.  
signed and dated 1922 and  
inscribed *View of Everest  
from Shilling, 80 miles away*  
Private collection, England.







*Looking from the North Col of Everest.*

oil on board, 122 x 201cm

signed and dated '1924-47'

Rugby School, Warwickshire.

#### LITERATURE

The Alpine Journal, 2020

*Before and After Everest*, Simon Pierse (online) 2024

The view is looking northwest from the North Col, or Chang La (7020m) and shows at least five identifiable peaks. On the skyline, from extreme left, is Gaurisankar (7134m) and to the right, Cho Oyu(8201m) and Gyachang Kang (7972m). Khumbutse(6636m), the next mountain west of Everest, is seen above the Lho La (6006m), and behind it, Lingtren(6749m) and the rounded bulk of Pumori (7161m). To the left is the western flank of Everest and to the right the slopes of Changtse (North Peak, 7583m). The main Rongbuk Glacier lies lower centre, and to the upper centre is the West Rongbuk Glacier leading to the Nup La (5835m).

This is one of Somervell's largest pictures and may have been painted as a commission for Rugby School although the school have no record of the circumstances under which the painting was acquired by them. It has hitherto never been exhibited and in 2018, it was indeed consigned to auction in London as *On the way to Everest*. Once a more accurate identification was given, thankfully the school opted to keep the picture in its collection.

In *After Everest*, Somervell recorded his attempts to take a photograph from Camp 4 on the morning of 2nd June 1924, shortly before he departed for camp 5 with EF Norton and supporting sherpas as follows:

*'The third attempt was successful and produced a photograph of the northwest shoulder of Everest with the shadow of the North Peak on the glacier below'*

This photograph was included in *After Everest*, and twenty-three years later may have provided inspiration for this painting. Somervell was living in England between April 1945 and February 1948, and, for at least part of that time, was in Cambridge. Somervell may also have been inspired to paint on such a large scale by the work of Nicholas Roerich, a Russian painter and writer, whom he had visited in 1944. Somervell admired Roerich's paintings a good deal and especially his large format Himalayan mountainscapes. In fact, Somervell thought him the *'...greatest mountain painter alive'*

As Simon Pierse has observed of Roerich:

*'Roerich's tempera paintings demonstrate similarity in style with those of Somervell. In their suppression of detail and emphasis on the 'main lines' of mountain 'architecture' the two artists shared a common pictorial language perhaps showing the distant influence of Cubism. Roerich's paintings combine a representation of the physical grandeur of the Himalayas with intimations of their physical mysteries. Somervell did not develop such themes of mysticism in his paintings which are mostly on a smaller scale than those of Roerich.'*





*East Face of Everest.*

oil on canvas, 50.5 x 70cm

signed and dated 1924, inscribed on verso (frame) *AH40*  
and on a label from 1976: *Everest unclimbed East Face.*

Private collection, England.

PROVENANCE

T.H. Somervell, 1924-75  
Mrs T.H. Somervell, 1975-76  
Daphne Lester, 1976-2006  
Dr David Seddon, 2006-

EXHIBITION

Possibly exhibited as *Shoulder of Everest*, Alpine Club, London, 1936,  
Possibly exhibited as *Southeast Face of Everest*, Alpine Club, London, 1954,  
Abbot Hall Gallery, Kendal 1976

LITERATURE

*T.H. Somervell*, Dr D.J. Seddon. Royal College of Surgeons, London and Alpine Club, London  
*Something the Artist Wishes to Say*, The Alpine Journal, 2005  
*A Century of Cambridge Mountaineering*, Ed. Henry Edmundson, 2019  
*The Unseen Somervell*. Alpine Journal, 2020  
*Before and After Everest*, Simon Pierse (online) 2024  
*First on Everest*, G Hoyland. History Press, 2025

Somervell walked from Camp III (approximately 6500m) to the Rapiu La (6548m) northeast of Everest on 12th, 14th and 16th May 1922. On the last two of these excursions, he was accompanied by George Mallory. In *The Fight for Everest: 1924*, Mallory commented on Somervell sketching at the Rapiu La and yet the only sketch that seems to have survived is a pastel sketch of Makalu from the Rapiu La, held by one of Somervell's descendants. (see p. 21) This picture and the one belonging to the Alpine Club, (see p. 20) dated 1924, were inspired by the view of the east face of Everest from this high col.

In *After Everest* Somervell wrote:

*‘Whatever may be the route by which the world’s highest mountain is eventually scaled, I am certain that it will not be by these south-east cliffs of grooved ice and pounding avalanche. A more terrible and remorseless mountainside it would be hard to imagine.’*

It is highly improbable that these pictures were completed during the 1924 expedition. It is much more likely they were completed at Neyyoor in India either before or after the Everest expedition that year. Indeed, they may have been part of a consignment of some fifty paintings Somervell sent to his father in November 1924.

Technically, the first picture has a more accurate composition than the second. The first shows Fantasy Ridge, highlighted in white, running diagonally from lower left to top right. Everest, although not the summit itself, is seen at the top right of the canvas whereas the Alpine Club’s version has the summit of Everest located perhaps too close to the upper righthand corner. Nonetheless, both pictures vividly portray the plunging ridges and precipices of Everest against an ultramarine sky.

Fantasy Ridge joins the northeast ridge of Everest beneath the three pinnacles and below the point at which the north ridge joins the northeast ridge of the mountain.

Stephen Venables has made the following observations on the first picture:

*‘I can see Peak 38 (7591m) and Shartse (7444m) out at the left (of the picture), and the Fantasy Ridge rising up to the shoulder of the northeast ridge (of Everest). The face (as depicted) is really a sub-facet ... on the right hand of the Kangshung Face facing east-northeast.’*

At some point during the 1922 or 1924 expedition, John Noel must have also visited the Rapiu La as glimpses of Fantasy Ridge and the Kangshung face are seen in the opening sequences of the film by Noel of the 1924 expedition, *‘The Epic of Everest’*.





*Nanga Parbat from across the Vale of Kashmir:*

oil on canvas, 45 x 80cm.

The Alpine Club, London.

Provenance

Presented to the Alpine Club by Somervell in 1955

EXHIBITED

Possibly one of two Nanga Parbat oils exhibited, Alpine Club, London, 1954

Centenary Exhibition, Alpine Club, London, 1957

*Kangchenjunga: Imaging a Himalayan Mountain*, Alpine Club, London, 2005

*Something the Artist Wishes to Say*, Brewery Arts Centre, Kendal, 2006

Incorrectly catalogued in AC Collection as *Kangchenjunga from Darjeeling*, in 2006 this picture was correctly identified by Mike Westmacott and George Band as Nanga Parbat.

LITERATURE

*Imaging a Himalayan Mountain*, Simon Pierse, 2005.

Himalayan Journal, 2006

*In the Shadow of Nanga Parbat*, The Alpine Journal, 2023

*Before and After Everest*, Simon Pierse (online), 2024

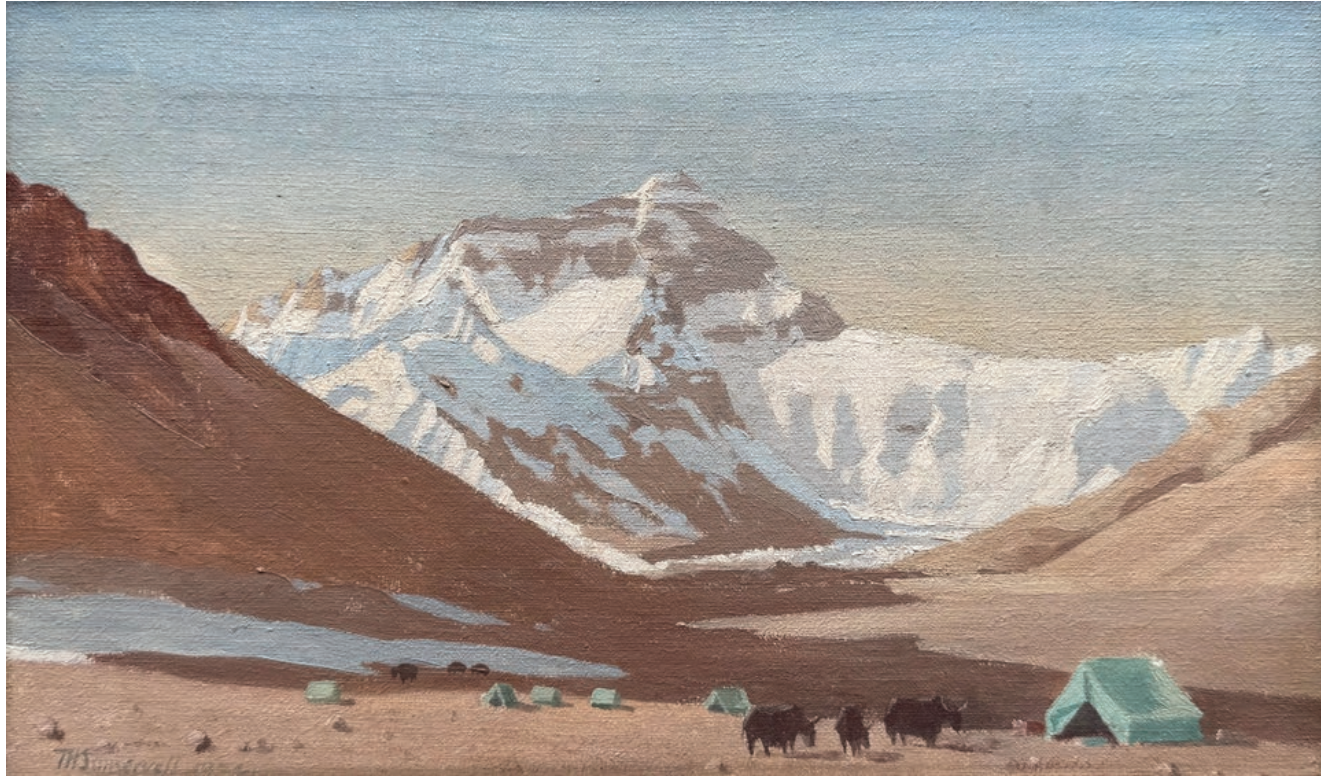
On Friday 19th May 1933, Somervell wrote:

*‘We started at 5.30, just as dawn was breaking and trudged up to the (Tragbal) pass. The sky was cloudless in all directions, and as we got higher peak after peak appeared, until at the top we saw one of the finest mountain panoramas I have ever witnessed. There was a long succession of summits to the west and towering over everything else Nanga Parbat rose clear and majestic to the north. A bitterly cold wind was blowing, so we could delay on the top (no)longer than enabled me to take a few photographs and did a rapid sketch of Nanga Parbat.’*

From *A Pilgrimage to Nanga Parbat* by TH Somervell. FRCC Journal 1934, vol 10, pages 89-100.

This view of Nanga Parbat (8126m) was painted looking across the Vale of Kashmir. The Mazeno Ridge is visible on the left with windblown snow streaking away from the summit. The ten-kilometre Mazeno Ridge was first traversed in 1912. A similar view in watercolour dates from 1951 although it’s not clear whether Somervell visited Kashmir that year. There are seven surviving watercolours of the nine Nanga Parbat ones known to have been sketched.





*Everest from Rongbuk, Tibet.*

oil on canvas, 21 x 35cm,  
signed and dated 1924  
The Alpine Club, London.

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*Jannu, Nepal.*

oil on canvas, 30 x 46cm.  
signed and dated 1943  
The Alpine Club, London.

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EXHIBITION

Possibly exhibited at Lake Artists Society, 1964  
National Mountaineering Centre Exhibition, Rheged, Penrith, 2002  
The Alpine Club, London, 2003  
*Something the Artist Wishes to Say*, Brewery Arts Centre, Kendal, 2006

Jannu (7710m) or Kumbhakarna was first climbed in 1962. Although considered an outlying peak of the Kangchenjunga massif, it is a separate mountain. This view from the east, shows the mountain brightly illuminated by the morning sun.

Somervell walked with his family on the Singalila ridge in 1943. As well as this oil painting almost certainly painted *en plein air*, there are two watercolours of Jannu dating from that year which have never been exhibited.





*Nanda Kot, Kumaon Himalaya, India.*

oil on canvas, 40.6 x 50 cm.

signed and dated 1927-196

inscribe verso: 'Nanda Kot Long - distance from near Almora'

Home to the Hindu Goddess, Parvati 'Nanda's Fortress' is a 6,861 metre-mountain which lies nine miles to the southeast of Nanda Devi.

The doctor and naturalist on the 1922 Everest Expedition, Tom Longstaff, first attempted an ascent in 1906 but it remained unclimbed until 1936, and subsequently new routes have been opened up on the mountain. The high Pindari Kanda pass, Nanda Kot itself, and the ridge proceeding south from the peak together form the divide between the Pindar and Ghori Ganga River valleys, with Dana Dhura Pass connecting the two sides. The Kaphni (or Kafani), Pindar, Lawan, and Shalang Glaciers drain the south, west, north, and east sides of the peak respectively.

Private collection, Wales.



*Kangchenjunga  
from Darjeeling.*

oil on canvas,  
44 x 74 cm

Private collection,  
England.

#### PROVENANCE

T.H. Somervell and by descent

#### LITERATURE

*First on Everest*, Graham Hoyland, History Press, 2025

Somervell turned to Kangchenjunga as a subject many times in oils and in watercolours numbering to nearly two dozen versions (see pp. 32, 33) He would have seen and in fact completed a circuit of the mountain in

1922. He saw it again in 1924 and his final view of the Everest and Kangchenjunga massifs was in January 1943. This composition includes five peaks, from the left: Jannu (7710m), Kabru (7388m), Talung Peak (7349m), Kangchenjunga Main Summit (8586m) and Pandim (6691m). Although not as visible, clearly identifiable on the picture itself are Kangchenjunga Central (8482m), Kangchenjunga South (8494m) and Kangchenjunga West or Yalung Kang (8505m).





*Kangchenjunga seen from Darjeeling, India.*

oil on board, 78 x 119 cm  
signed and dated 1939  
The Downs Malvern, Herefordshire.

LITERATURE  
*Himalayan Climber, Himalayan Artist*, Dr. D.J. Seddon, Himalayan Journal 2006  
Dr. D.J. Seddon, Alpine Journal, 2006  
*T.H. Somervell*, Dr. D.J. Seddon. Royal College of Physicians, London; Royal College of Surgeons, London and Alpine Club, 2016  
*The Unseen Somervell*, Dr. D.J. Seddon, Alpine Journal, 2020  
*Before and After Everest*, Simon Pierse (online), 2024  
Alpine Journal, Dr. D.J. Seddon, 2020

Somervell’s mother died in October 1938 and Somervell returned to Kendal for her funeral. He is likely to have remained in the UK until 1939. Given its size, it also seems likely that

this picture was painted in Britain, rather than India. One of Somervell’s larger paintings, he presented it to the Downs Malvern, Colwall where his sons had been educated and where his cousin Geoffrey Hoyland was headmaster between 1920-1940. However, the biggest of all his paintings of Kangchenjunga was painted in 1938, presumably when Somervell was working as a missionary surgeon in Neyyoor. It remains in the hospital to this day.

The Kangchenjunga massif is some forty-five miles from Darjeeling and here the panorama includes: (from left) Jannu (7710m), Kabru (7388m), Talung Peak (7349m), Kangchenjunga (8586m) and Pandim (6691m).

*Kangchenjunga - evening light*  
oil on canvas, 39 x 48 cm  
signed and dated 1949  
Private collection, England.

PROVENANCE  
T.H. Somervell and by descent  
This may be the last of eight known oil pictures of Kangchenjunga that Somervell painted and this is the only picture which shows the massif in an evening light.



*A Tibetan monastery*  
oil on canvas, 60 x 40cm.  
Private collection, England.







*Kulu – Shikar Beh,  
Himachal Pradesh, India.*

oil on canvas, 46 x 62 cm.  
Private collection, England.



*Kulu Weissborn,  
Himachal Pradesh, India.*

oil on canvas, 41 x 51cm.  
signed and dated 1944,  
inscribed on verso *Kulu  
Weissborn 1944-46*  
Private collection, England.



*The Aiguille du Grepon, Chamonix.*

oil on canvas, 75 x 50 cm  
signed  
Private collection, England.

*The Grepon* commemorates the death of an Oxford undergraduate, John Doncaster Hoyland (see fig.) on Mont Blanc's Innominata ridge on 23rd August, 1934. Hoyland had climbed the Grepon, a 3,450-metre granite spire above Chamonix a few days earlier. He was the son of Somervell's cousin Jack Hoyland and a medical student at St Peters Hall, Oxford. John Hoyland had shown great promise as a climber and was the first to repeat *Longland's Climb* on Clogwyn d'Ardau. He hoped to be a contender for the Everest expedition of 1936. For many years this picture was in the possession of the Downs Malvern, Colwall but has now been returned to the Hoyland family.



*John Doncaster Hoyland  
(1887-1957)*

#### LITERATURE

*Something the Artist wishes to say*, Dr. D.J. Seddon, The Alpine Journal, 2005

*Himalayan Climber, Himalayan Artist*, Dr. D.J. Seddon, Himalayan Journal, 2006

*T.H. Somervell*, Dr. D.J. Seddon, Royal College of Physicians, London, 2016

*A Century of Cambridge Mountaineering*, Ed. Henry Edmundson, 2019

Kulu, now known as Hanuman Tibba, stands at 5932m. General Charles Bruce thought it the 'Weisshorn of Kulu' when he saw it in 1912. It was climbed on 23rd June 1912 by Heinrich Fuhrer and a Sherpa and subsequently it was only climbed for the second time in 1966, and this may have prompted Somervell to paint this picture. The north face of Hanuman Tibba is shown here from across the Solang Nullah.

Somervell visited Kulu in 1944 and in an extract from *The Fell and Rock-Climbing Club Journal*, (1946,14: 195-9) his diary entry reads: '...in the morning... I went up two of the small peaks near the Chandrakanni Pass, with gorgeous views .....of the very fantastic and impressive peaks to the east, and the quiet beauty of the Weisshorn and other Kulu mountains to the west.' A further entry from Longmans Miscellany (1945, pp.10-11) dated Thursday 28 September 1944 records:

*'Clouds came over north and east, but south and west were the loveliest views of the Kulu Weisshorn..... Did several rough sketches, no time for paint. The most glorious day, views, shapes and colours of mountains etc'*

Whilst there, Somervell stayed with Nicholas Roerich for a few days. He may well have met Roerich in London in 1919 or Darjeeling in 1924 and is likely to have known of Roerich's Asia Expedition of 1925-29. This picture, and some of Somervell's later mountain paintings demonstrate a clear influence from Roerich's style.





### *Nanda Devi, India.*

oil on canvas, 84 x 111cm

signed and dated 1959

Abbot Hall, The Lakeland Trust, Kendal.

#### EXHIBITION

Possibly exhibited at Lake Artists Society, 1959

Possibly exhibited at Abbot Hall Gallery, Kendal, 1967

Abbot Hall Gallery, Kendal, 1979

#### LITERATURE

Lake Artists Society Annual Exhibition Catalogue, 1990

*Something the Artist wishes to say*, Dr. D.J. Seddon, The Alpine Journal, 2005

*Himalayan Climber, Himalayan Artist*, Dr. D.J. Seddon, Himalayan Journal 2006

*Before and After Everest*, Simon Pierse (online) 2024

The two distinctive peaks in this picture are Nanda Devi East (7434m) and behind it, Nanda Devi (7816m). This is the largest and easily the finest of four known oil pictures of this beautiful mountain and was used to illustrate the cover of the Lake Artists Society annual exhibition catalogue in 1990, the centenary of his birth. It was exhibited at LAS in 1959 and in late 1962, Somervell gifted his *Nanda Devi* to Abbot Hall Gallery, but not wanting visitors to think that it had been foisted on the gallery he sold it to the deputy director for a token shilling or half-crown:

*'By late 1962, I was ensconced as Deputy at Abbott Hall(Gallery). We wanted one of his (Somervell's) pictures*

*and he decided that he would give his largest oil of Nanda Devi. But he didn't want subsequent visitors to the gallery to think that he had 'foisted it' onto us, so we were made to pay half-a-crown or maybe a shilling in order to say we had 'purchased it'. It is wonderful to see it hanging tonight.'* Mary Birkett OBE at the opening of *Something the Artist Wishes to Say* in 2006.

Nanda Devi was first climbed by Bill Tilman and Noel Odell in 1936. Nanda Devi East was first climbed by Louis Dubost and Tenzing Norgay in 1951 with the first traverse of both peaks completed in 1976. Interestingly, Tenzing considered Nanda Devi East the most difficult mountain he had ever climbed.



### *View from the top of Mount Fuji, Japan.*

oil on canvas, 44 x 82 cm

signed and dated 1961

Private collection, England.





*Kulu – Tibetan border,  
Himachal Pradesh, India.*

oil on canvas, 60 x 75cm.  
Private collection, England.



*Peaks at the head of  
the Goraphu Valley,  
Sikkim, India.*

watercolour and  
gouache, 23 x 33cm  
signed and dated 1922 and  
inscribed *Peaks at the head  
of the Goraphu Valley*  
Private collection, England.

*Peaks near Nanga Parbat.*

watercolour and  
gouache, 27 x 37 cm  
Private collection, England.



*Rainstorm over Kyetrak.*

watercolour, 22 x 26 cm.  
Private collection, England.

This was painted a week after  
Mallory's disappearance.







*Laluni Jot, Himachal Pradesh, India.*

watercolour, 39 x 58 cm

signed and dated and inscribed *THS Laluni Jot 1971*

Private collection, England.



*Matterhorn – North Face, Switzerland.*

oil on board, 39 x 58cm.

signed and dated *THS 1965*

Private collection, England.

#### PROVENANCE

William Heaton-Cooper and by descent

#### EXHIBITION

Abbott Hall Gallery, 1965

#### LITERATURE

*Before and After Everest*, Simon Pierse (online), 2024

Somervell traversed the Matterhorn in 1920 with Bentley Beetham and others. He painted the famous peak perhaps nearly a dozen times in oils, and at least seven such pictures survive, including this one. By contrast, his watercolours of the Matterhorn are rare with only two known to date.





*The Valais Alps seen from  
Pigne d'Arolla, Switzerland.*

oil on canvas, 30 x 63cm  
signed and dated 1951

Both in composition and palette terms, Somervell came as close to emulating Roerich's painting style in this fine panorama of the Valais Alps as in any other of his pictures. As one of his most striking Alpine pictures, the Dom and the Täschhorn on the left flank the Matterhorn with the Weisshorn to its right in a swirl of ultramarine-violet hues and yellow ochre clouds.

Private collection, England.



*Above the Davos Valley,  
Engadine, Switzerland.*

oil on canvas, 57 x 75cm  
signed

In *Everest from Rongbuk* (see p. 18) Somervell referred to the 'solid dignity of Egyptian buildings' and in this Engadine mountainscape, the peaks take on a far statelier and 'Himalayan' aspect than their size or altitude would suggest. Partly as a function of looking down on the miniscule climbers in the centre of the composition, *Above the Davos Valley* is reminiscent of his Nanda Devi and Nanga Parbat panoramas.

Private collection, England.





*Paddy Fields near Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu, India.*

oil on canvas, 70 x 79cm.

Private collection, England.

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Traditionally entitled as *Mountains of Travencore near Neyyoor* this picture in fact represents a view near Coimbatore according to a label on the verso



*Castlerigg and Blencathra, Lake District.*

oil on canvas, 32 x 42 cm

signed and dated THS '73

Private collection, England.



*Side of Dale Head from Robinson, Lake District*

oil on canvas, 31 x 45cm

signed and dated 1974

Private collection, England.





*Francis Helps (1890 - 1972)*  
*Two portrait studies of Howard Somervell*

pencil on paper 29.2 x 22.8cm and respectively 35.6 x 25.4 cm  
 signed, inscribed and dated Tibet 1924, the first inscribed on  
 the reverse: *2 A Ch..man visited us selling "Favourite House"*  
*cigarettes 2 / a 1000! / I bought 10,000 for my sherpas.' / '1 Somervell*  
*smoking they all smoked a lot / on the expedition, conversation*  
*was very learned, / Mallory was academic, and revolutionary*  
*/ I had a tent of my own. I had to make 20,000ft of film.'*

The second signed, inscribed and dated *Tibet 24 /*  
*Francis Helps* and further inscribed and numbered *Dr*  
*Howard Somervell / training as a doctor, skilled surgeon, /*  
*from lake district area. Own K Boot Co / Kemble. / 32*

Private collection, England courtesy of John  
 Mitchell Fine Paintings, London.



Francis Helps served as the official artist on  
 the 1924 Mount Everest Expedition and his  
 subsequent work was exhibited at the Alpine  
 Club in 1925 (*Exhibition of Paintings and*  
*Photographs by Francis Helps and Capt. J. B. L.*  
*Noel from the Mount Everest Expedition 1924,*  
 Jan.-Feb. 1925). Having trained at the Slade  
 School of Art under Henry Tonks and Fred  
 Brown and he too served in France with the  
 Artists' Rifles in the Great War. Helps taught  
 at the Royal College of Art in the 1930s and  
 was elected a member of the Royal Society of  
 British Artists in 1933.

## Acknowledgements

With no commercial angle, a loan exhibition is often  
 still the most rewarding way to celebrate an artist's life  
 and legacy. Nevertheless, the process of collating works,  
 requesting the loans and sourcing a suitable venue - or  
 venues - can be time consuming. It relies entirely on the  
 generosity and wholehearted cooperation of all involved.

In this instance, united by an admiration of Howard  
 Somervell's intense life reflected in his paintings, his  
 heroic service behind the lines in World War One, in the  
 mountains and on the operating tables of his hospital in  
 India, many individuals and institutions have offered a  
 wonderful level of support.

A sincere thank you is due to the following people who  
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First and foremost, Tom Somervell, grandson of the  
 painter, has worked tirelessly to bring this project to  
 fruition to mark a half-century since Howard Somervell,  
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 enabled the exhibition to go on display at the Heaton

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 the logistics for the exhibition due at our gallery in  
 September.

### William J. Mitchell

Keeper of Pictures, The Alpine Club,  
 London, June 2025



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THE ALPINE CLUB

The Alpine Club has promoted the interests of mountaineers since its foundation in 1857. The Club owns an extensive collection of paintings, drawings, photographs and artefacts relating to the mountains and holds exhibitions and lectures in its London and other venues throughout the year. The Alpine Journal ([alpinejournal.org.uk](http://alpinejournal.org.uk)) is a record of the activities and interests of its members and is published annually.

JOHN MITCHELL FINE PAINTINGS

William Mitchell is Keeper of Pictures at the Alpine Club and runs John Mitchell Fine Paintings which was founded in 1931. Now in its third generation, it remains an independently owned family business dealing in European and British pictures from the seventeenth to the twentieth centuries. Since 2001, William has held an annual exhibition of Alpine paintings entitled *Peaks & Glaciers*.

HEATON COOPER

The landscape painter William Heaton Cooper (1903-1995), founded the Studio in Grasmere in 1938. His own father, who settled in the Lake district in 1895, was the post-impressionist painter Alfred Heaton Cooper (1863-1929). Julian Cooper (b.1947) is the third in this generation of painters. The Heaton Cooper Studio Archive Gallery shows members of the Heaton Cooper family as well as both contemporary and historic art.





JOHN MITCHELL  
FINE PAINTINGS  
EST 1931

