
WILLY BLASER AND GLYN HUGHES

Kabru 1883

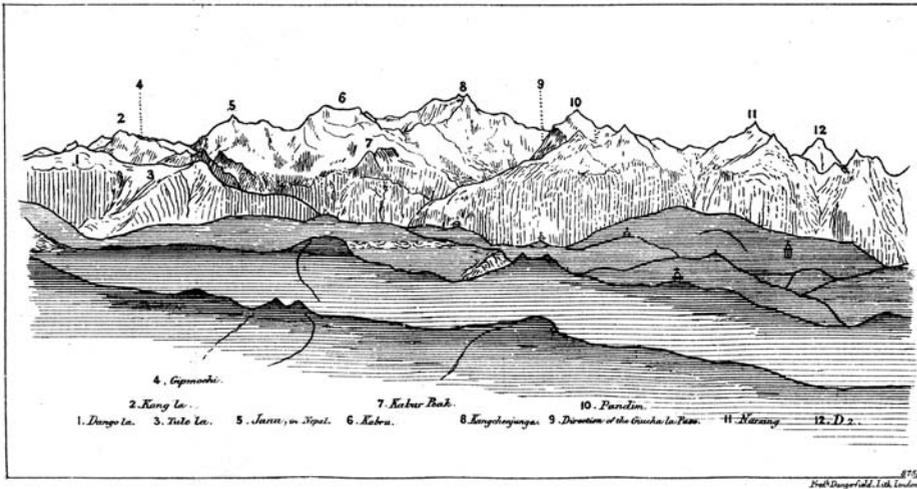
A Reassessment

Shortly before 2pm on 8 October 1883, W W Graham, Emil Boss and Ulrich Kauffmann stood some 30 to 40 feet below the summit of a peak to the south of Kangchenjunga. The actual top was an ice pillar. Graham believed they were within an ace of the first ascent of Kabru (7338m) and estimated their height at 'within a few feet of 24,000 feet'. The height then accorded to Kabru by the Great Trigonometrical Survey was 24,015ft. The trio had recorded the highest altitude yet reached by mountaineers. However within a year doubts were expressed and have persisted down the decades such that the first ascent of Kabru is now generally credited to Reginald Cooke in 1935¹. But is that fair? After reassessing the evidence, Willy Blaser and Glyn Hughes have concluded it is time for a rehabilitation of Graham and his Swiss companions.

William Woodman Graham was a young law student (born about 1859) with an impressive record of ascents of major peaks in the Alps. In July 1882 the Sella brothers, with three guides, had made the first ascent of the lower summit of the Dent du Géant, making use of iron stanchions and fixed ropes prepared by the guides over the previous four days. Three weeks later Graham, with Chamonix guides A Payot and A Cupelin, took advantage of the Sellas' staircase to repeat the ascent. They then lowered themselves into the gap between the two peaks and, using combined tactics, completed the first ascent of the higher north-east peak. This apparently did not endear him to the members of the Alpine Club who blackballed him when he applied for membership later that year.

The following year Graham made his historic journey in the Himalaya. This has been universally accepted as the first instance of travel to the Himalaya with the main object of climbing mountains 'more for sport and adventure than for the achievement of scientific knowledge'. His lack of scientific rigour was to allow some to doubt their achievements. All details of the journey given below, including place names and heights, are taken from Graham's own account ².

Graham left Darjeeling on 23 March accompanied by Joseph Imboden, a guide from St Niklaus, and marched to Jongri, in the south of the Kangchenjunga massif. From here they crossed the Kang La (17,000ft), and climbed an unnamed peak they estimated to be more than 20,000ft high. They returned to Jongri, from where they trekked north over the Guicho La (over 16,000ft) to the Talung glacier, amidst the main peaks



PANORAMA OF THE KANGCHENJUNGA RANGE FROM DARJEELING.
(From a sketch published at the Surveyor General's Office Calcutta 1882.)

170. Panorama sketch from AJ XII (1884-86)

of the Kangchenjunga group. They retreated to Jongri in heavy snow. Weather conditions were poor, most of the coolies were unwell, and the last straw was when one of them burned Graham's boots while trying to dry them. They returned to Darjeeling, and Imboden, unwell and homesick, was sent back to Switzerland.

Graham had arranged for Emil Boss, of the Bear Hotel in Grindelwald, to find a replacement for Imboden, but Boss decided to join Graham himself, and brought the guide Ulrich Kauffmann with him. This was particularly fortunate, as Boss was a very experienced alpinist himself, an officer in the Swiss Army, and the previous year had very nearly reached the summit of Mount Cook with W S Green and Kauffman. Kauffman was reputedly 'one of the fastest step-cutters living'. The trio left Darjeeling on 24 June for the Garhwal, where they hoped to attempt Nanda Devi. Their first attempt on the Rishi Ganga failed, and they turned their attention to Dunagiri (7066m / 23,182ft), on which Graham and Boss reached an estimated height of 22,700ft, in sight of the summit only 500ft above before retreating in the face of 'biting hail and wind'. It was the first time any of them had reached such a height, and they reported no 'inconvenience in breathing other than the ordinary panting inseparable from any great muscular exertion'. They also experienced no symptoms of altitude sickness.

The attempt on Nanda Devi was then resumed via a different approach on the north bank of the Rishi Ganga. But once again they were repulsed. Graham was highly critical of the 1 inch to the mile map of the region, finding 'one whole range omitted, glaciers portrayed where trees of 4ft thickness are growing'. This criticism goes far towards explaining some of the subsequent confusion as to which mountains they actually described. Next they successfully ascended a peak indicated on their map as A21 (22,516ft), which they called Mount Monal, because of the number

of snow pheasants they saw on it. Finally they attempted a peak in the Dunagiri range shown as A22 (21,001ft), but were turned back by technical difficulties at a height estimated at more than 20,000ft. Thus ended the second phase of Graham's adventure, and the party returned to Calcutta to prepare for their *pièce de résistance*, another trip to Sikkim.

This time they had great difficulty securing good coolies in Darjeeling, and had to make do with 'rather a scratch pack'. Progress was slow and it took nine days to reach Jongri. The weather was very poor with heavy rain, but in spite of this they explored the west side of Kabru, satisfying themselves that there would be little chance of success here. On 6 September they tramped up into the glen immediately south of Kabru in search of some *argali* or mountain sheep (*Ovis ammon*) reported to be there. They returned the same day empty-handed, but convinced that the south side of the mountain would be even more difficult than the western. After further delays due to porter trouble, they moved camp a few miles north to Ahluthang at the foot of the Guicho La, and the rain continued. On 19 September they left camp to climb Jubonu, but were driven back by heavy snow. On the 23rd they crossed the Guicho La with the intention of climbing Pundim from the north, but found it quite impracticable, so returned to camp again. Eventually the weather cleared on the 29th, and next day they set off to climb Jubonu due east of their base. They camped at about 18,000ft, left at 4.30am, and reached the summit (5936m / 19,475ft) at 11am. Graham described the climb as being 'incomparably the hardest ascent we had in the Himalaya'.

By now the party had climbed one peak (A21) of 22,516ft, one of 21,400ft (not detailed here), reached about 22,700ft on Dunagiri, and more than 20,000ft on another (A22). They had also crossed a number of high passes, and covered a great deal of ground. Graham had also climbed an unnamed peak of more than 20,000ft during his first trip with Joseph Imboden. They were obviously now very fit, well acclimatised, and ready to make a further attempt on Kabru.

Having explored the western and southern flanks of the mountain, without identifying a practical route, the trio now reconnoitred the eastern face, and set off for their attempt on 6 October. Their highest camp was reached on the second day, and was estimated by aneroid and comparison to be 18,500ft. They left at 4.30am the following day, starting up a long couloir, with loose snow threatening avalanche, and continuing up a steep ice slope leading to the foot of the peak itself. From here they enjoyed nearly 1,000ft of 'delightful rock-work' to within 1,500ft of the eastern summit. The last slope was described as pure ice, but because of the recent heavy snowfall there was a coating of frozen snow up which Kauffmann was able to cut steps. Graham felt that the ascent was only possible because of this coating.

He records reaching the lower summit of Kabru at 12.15 and estimated its height to be at least 23,700ft. The speed of their ascent was to be a point of contention later. 'The glories of the view were beyond compare,' he

wrote, and they could clearly see Everest to the north-west. They continued along a short arête and after 90 minutes reached a point 30-40ft below the main summit, which Graham described as 'little more than pillar of ice'. Daunted by the 'extreme difficulty and danger of attempting it', and a shortage of time, they left a bottle at their highest point and descended with difficulty to camp.

Even Kabru was not enough for this energetic party and on 13 October they crossed the Kang La, and climbed a peak of nearly 19,000ft from which they examined Jannu. They concluded it was too late in the year for an attempt and returned once again to Darjeeling. So ended Graham's remarkable adventure.

The carping begins...

On 9 June 1884 Graham read a paper describing his Himalayan trip to the Royal Geographical Society. This was published in the Proceedings of the RGS, and also in the *Alpine Journal*². In it Graham was highly critical of the maps of the Nanda Devi region, describing the 1 inch to the mile map as 'highly inaccurate'. He also quotes an earlier traveller (Kennedy) who termed the maps as 'beautifully inaccurate'. Graham said the then new map of Sikkim was 'a work of admirable accuracy up to the snow-line', however because the Survey officers had no training or skills in the arts of mountaineering, their maps 'suffer when they come to the delineation of the ground above snow level'. He suggested that officers should be given alpine training before taking up duties in the Himalaya.

The evening after Graham's presentation at the RGS, Emil Boss, who had been present at that meeting, spoke to the Alpine Club³ about the ascent of Kabru, amplifying Graham's own account, and confirming that their ascent had only been possible because of the favourable snow conditions. He also expanded on Graham's comments on the maps then available. Boss was very well qualified to comment on this subject; as an officer in the Swiss army he was very familiar with the study and use of maps of mountain regions.

Boss was highly complimentary of the accuracy of the Great Trigonometrical Survey (GTS) of India in general. He also spoke favourably of the then new two mile to the inch map of Sikkim, which he said was 'as good as any map of such a district made by men not, in the Swiss sense, mountaineers could well be'. Of the maps of Kumaon he was severely critical. He expanded on Graham's suggestion that survey officers in training be given training in Switzerland in icemanship and map-making in glaciated areas. Following Boss's address Douglas Freshfield made further comments on the status of maps of the Himalayan regions, which were expanded on in the *Alpine Journal*⁵. He agreed that the criticisms by Graham and Boss were entirely justified. Freshfield also proposed the formation of a Himalayan Club to encourage travellers to publish their own studies of particular areas.



171. From left to right: On the right of black cone is Kabru South (7317m), Kabru North (7338m), below is the round summit of Kabru Dome (6600m), Forked Peak (6108m) and Kangchenjunga (8598m). (Willy Blaser)

We have no doubt that Graham's and Boss's criticisms were intended to be constructive, but they were clearly not seen that way in the corridors of the Indian Survey Department. In an article in *The Pioneer Mail*⁴, an anonymous correspondent, describing himself as 'for nearly 30 years a wanderer in the Himalayas', and who had read Graham's RGS paper, poured scorn on his claims. There is no record of Graham himself responding to this article but Douglas Freshfield certainly did. In a vigorous and witty response in the *AJ* he takes apart the arguments of the 'wanderer' with great relish, and confirms his total support for the accounts of Graham and Boss.

Martin Conway seems to have missed or ignored Freshfield's article. In the section on Mountaineering that he wrote for *The Encyclopaedia of Sport* in 1898⁶ he repeated accusations made by the 'wanderer', dismissed Graham's claims, and claimed that he himself, together with Bruce, Zurbruggen, and two Gurkhas, took the 'record' for the greatest height yet reached (23,000ft) on Pioneer Peak, Karakoram, in 1892. Freshfield again took up the cause, rejecting Conway's arguments in the *AJ* of February 1898. The pair locked horns further on the issue in the May *AJ*⁸ of that same year. Freshfield seems to have been the clear winner of the debate, as in a later edition of the *Encyclopaedia* in 1911⁹ Conway, co-authoring the Mountaineering section with George Abraham, supports Graham's claims: 'Amongst other great feats, this party climbed almost to the top of Kabru (24,015ft), and, strange to say, until 1909 this remained the record for altitude.' Conway now makes no mention of his own claim to the altitude record.

Next to join the debate was Norman Collie, in *Climbing in the Himalaya and other mountain ranges* published in 1902¹⁰. Writing of Graham's account Collie said: 'Anyone who will take the trouble to read his account of the ascent of Kabru cannot fail to admit that he must have climbed the peak lying on the south-west of Kanchenjunga, viz Kabru, for there is no



172. Kabru South and Kabru North taken from Dzongri Alm. (Willy Blaser)

other high peak there which he could have ascended from his starting point except Kanchenjunga itself.'

However, there were still doubters. In a paper in the *AJ*¹¹ in 1905 entitled *Some Obstacles to Himalayan Mountaineering and the History of a Record Ascent*, William Hunter Workman described how he had reached 23,394ft on Pyramid Peak in the Karakoram in 1903, which he claimed as the altitude record. In a footnote he dismissed Graham's claim thus: 'The contention that Mr. Graham reached an altitude of 24,000 feet has, on various grounds, whether rightly or wrongly, been so strongly disputed that it must be regarded as far from proved, and therefore the altitude mentioned cannot properly claim a place among those acknowledged to have been made.'

In the absence of Boss (now deceased) and Graham (whereabouts unknown¹²) Collie again leapt to their defence, as did Edmund Garwood in the absence of Freshfield abroad, in the *AJ*¹² of 1904-5. Garwood quoted Freshfield's belief, forthrightly expressed in *Round Kangchenjunga*, that, 'Much of the criticism bestowed on it [Graham's ascent] has arisen from crass ignorance of mountaineering.' On Freshfield's return, the battle with Hunter Workman continued in the pages of the *Alpine Journal* until the editor finally called time in 1907. It is worth pointing out that Hunter Workman's argument was never that he did not believe Graham's ascent, but simply that without adequate scientific confirmation the ascent was not proven.

If more support from a highly respected Himalayan mountaineer was

needed it came from Tom Longstaff, in a paper in 1906¹³. We can do no better than quote him in full. 'A well-known Indian official of my acquaintance, who was in Darjeeling at the time of Graham's visit, says now, and said then, that he fully believed in Graham's bona fides, but thought he had mistaken Kabur (15,830ft) for Kabru (24,005ft), an opinion which has since been quoted by others. Now, for anyone who is a mountaineer, and has seen Kabru, it is impossible to believe that Graham, Emil Boss, and Kauffmann could make any mistake as to which peak they were on. They may have been imposters, but they could not have been mistaken: my point is that we have no tittle of evidence that they were either. Any climber who will carefully study Graham's paper in its entirety, especially if he knows the country at all, cannot but be struck by the strong internal evidences of truth which it bears. That he did not suffer from mountain sickness is no proof of bad faith. That he made little pretension to scientific knowledge is no evidence that he was not a very competent mountaineer. I would add that, particularly in India, it is unwise to believe tales and rumours to the discredit of other people. To quote them is distinctly rash.'

We think it relevant to mention here the Norwegian near-ascent of Kabru in 1907. In the autumn of 1906 two young Norwegians went out to India with vague intentions to climb in the Himalaya. Carl Rubenson's climbing experience was limited to Norway, and his companion Monrad-Aas had never before climbed any mountain. Rubenson gave a full account of their trip in a paper read before the Alpine Club on 2 June 1908, and reproduced in the *AJ*¹⁴. They settled on Kabru as their objective, but reaching Jongri too late in the year to make an attempt on the mountain, went off travelling in the East 'lazy beyond measure'. They returned to India in August 1907, and after the usual preparations left Darjeeling on 16 September. Curiously they found the scenery in Sikkim 'not very different from that in Norway'. They established their base at Jongri, and set about climbing the mountain via the Kabru glacier to the south, an approach apparently rejected by Graham's party. Progress was very slow, partly because of problems with supplies and porters, and presumably also lack of fitness and acclimatisation. However from a high camp at about 22,600ft they were eventually able to reach a point 50 or 60ft below the summit before they were turned back by strong winds. Interestingly Rubenson, like Graham before him, reported that they 'did not suffer any real physical inconveniences'.

Regarding Graham's ascent, once again it is worth quoting in full Rubenson's comments: 'As for myself, I must confess that I found it hard to realise that Mr. Graham could have made such progress as he claims to have made in one day; but Mr. Longstaff on his last expedition proved that such rapid progress was not impossible, and I do not venture to dispute Graham's statements any longer.' This refers to Longstaff's account of the ascent of Trisul¹⁵ in which he reports a similar rate of ascent to that reported by Graham on Kabru. According to Eva Selin in her paper in a recent *AJ*¹⁶ this ascent by the Norwegians provided the inspiration for the founding of Norway's own alpine club, the Norsk Tindeklub.

¹² According to Walt Unsworth's *Encyclopaedia of Mountaineering* (1992), little is known of Graham's later life. He is said to have lost his money and emigrated to the USA where he became a cowboy.



173. Kabru South and Kabru North taken from Yuksum. (Willy Blaser)

Conclusion...

Summarising the above, those who declared themselves firmly on the side of Graham's party in the dispute include Freshfield, Collie, Longstaff, Garwood and Rubenson. Those against include Conway, who apparently later changed his mind, and Hunter Workman, who made it clear that he didn't say they hadn't climbed Kabru, but that it was not proven. Is it a coincidence that both Conway and Hunter Workman subsequently made claims to have made the highest ascents to date, claims which would have been invalid if Graham's Kabru ascent had been accepted?

We are left with the challenge which started off the whole dispute, that by the anonymous 'wanderer' in the *Pioneer Mail*⁴. He raised five specific objections (our rebuttal in *italics*):

1. That an ascent of Kabru from Jongri in the south would be impossible, the south side being 'a succession of precipitous faces of sharp rock where an ibex could not possibly find a footing'. *Graham's party also rejected this approach, which is why they climbed Kabru from Ahluthang in the east.*

2. One of the native guides was reported to say that 'while at Jongri, the tourists (sic) made an excursion northwards towards the snows, and returned the same evening to their camp. If so they could only have gone as far as a peak called Kabru'. *The party was based at Jongri for several weeks, and made numerous excursions from there, including the one on 6 September when they visited the glen on the south side of Kabru, and returned the same day. Possibly this particular informant was only at Jongri for a limited time.*

3. According to 'wanderer', 'There is no evidence that Mr Graham went

anywhere unaccompanied by his native guides'. *It is clear from Graham's account that the climbers were never accompanied by native guides above their higher camps.*

4. Describing the aneroid carried by Graham, 'wanderer' states that 'this instrument is only available for altitudes up to 8,000 feet; its accuracy beyond this limit may be doubted'. *Graham states: 'I carried with me an aneroid barometer by Solomons, graduated to 23,000 feet. The heights it gave corresponded, where comparison was possible, within, generally, 100 feet with the G.T.S. Heights up to 14,000 feet. Above this, measurements taken with it had only a differential value. It was compared and corrected at Calcutta between each of the three tours here described.' It is clear that Graham was well aware of the limitations of his aneroid, but that these were far less serious than 'wanderer' claimed. Also, as Longstaff pointed out¹³, in respect of Graham's ascent of Mount Monal and near ascent of Dunagiri, 'the altitude of neither of these mountains, nor any others mentioned in Graham's paper, is affected by the fact of the climber having or not having a barometer, or a dozen barometers, with him? They have been triangulated by a succession of most competent surveyors during the space of the last 90 years.'*

5. Finally 'wanderer' notes that Graham named peak A21 Mount Monal on account of the number of snow pheasants seen on it and deduces that as the altitude range of monals is 8,000 to 13,000ft, the mountain climbed could not be higher than this. *Graham, of course, did not claim that the monals were seen on the summit of the mountain, so this argument is irrelevant.*

It is hard to take any of these arguments seriously, so what was the motive behind 'wanderer's' attack? Freshfield⁷ puts one argument well: 'The point of view of the average official mind is the same all the world over. It has been tersely summarised in these doggerel lines:-

I am *the* old inhabitant,
And what I cannot do you can't.'

'Wanderer' was clearly in sympathy with the Survey Department, if not actually employed by them, and took Graham and Boss's constructive criticism badly. More difficult to understand, in view of the overwhelming support for Graham's claims by a majority of the serious Himalayan explorers and mountaineers of the day, and the triviality of the arguments of an anonymous critic, is why the doubts persist?

The verdict of Kenneth Mason, a former Superintendent of the Survey of India, and Professor of geography at Oxford University was clearly an influence here. In his important history of Himalayan exploration and mountaineering¹⁷ Mason points out that doubt had been thrown on the validity of Graham's claim, citing staff of the Survey of India (no surprise there), Sir Martin Conway, and 'others in England'. He seems to have been unaware that Conway had completely changed his position to one of support for Graham's claim. He then names a number of people (Freshfield, Collie, Garwood, Waddell, Longstaff and Rubenson) who 'have argued for or against the claim', however fails to point out that of these only Waddell



174. The Kabru peaks, Talung and Kangchenjunga . (Roger Payne)

argued against, the rest being strongly for. The specific evidence that Mason cites for believing that Graham had mistaken the mountain that he was climbing was that he made no mention of the Kabru glacier, turned with time-consuming difficulty by Cooke in 1935. Well Graham did mention it, in his account of their sortie on the south side of Kabru on 6 September², describing it as ‘one mass of broken glacier’, and rejecting it as a practical line of ascent. Graham’s route was a totally different one.

Once again the doubts of the Survey Department had been allowed to predominate over the convictions of a considerable body of eminent mountaineers. We believe it is time to put the doubts to rest, and give Graham, Boss and Kauffmann their due credit for an extraordinary achievement.

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6. *The Encyclopaedia of Sport, Volume 2*, Lawrence and Bullen, 1898, 27.
7. *Alpine Journal* XIX February 1898, 48-54.
8. *Ibid* XIX May 1898, 159-166.
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10. *Climbing in the Himalaya and other mountain ranges*, Douglas, 1902
11. *Alpine Journal* XXI August 1905, 506.
12. *Ibid* XXII November 1905, 626-8.
13. *Ibid* XXIII August 1906, 204.
14. *Ibid* XXIV November 1908, 310-321.
15. *Ibid* XXIV May 1908, 120.
16. *Ibid* 113 2008, 257-263.
17. *Abode of Snow*, Kenneth Mason, 1955, Rupert Hart-Davis, reprinted 1987, Diadem Books, 94-5 and 274-5 (1987 edition).