



# A very British explorer

Chris Lee/Corbis

Miranda Haines talks to writer and explorer Hugh Thomson about his recent mountaineering expedition to a sacred mountain in the Indian Himalaya that is closed to all but a few climbers

As you read *The White Rock*, Hugh Thomson's modern adventure story about discovering Inca ruins in Peru, there's something in his style that makes you believe that you're there with him. And he's such good company that you're more than happy to accompany him as he hacks through the jungle, jokes with porters and suffers the indignity of not washing or eating properly for weeks.

The origins of Thomson's career as an explorer can be traced back to the time when he was working in a West London pub after studying English at Trinity College, Cambridge. One night, he heard tell of a ruin of an Inca fortress in the South American jungle that had been found and then lost again. Thomson tells me that some rudimentary research confirmed the story to be true: the explorer who'd found it forgot to take proper co-ordinates and the

jungle quickly regrew and covered it up again. "So I went to find it," he says.

Thomson belongs to a rare species of explorer. He's a writer who explores, rather than an explorer who writes. And it's his extreme humility in the face of both danger and extraordinary success that places him in the same tradition as Eric Newby. Their peculiarly English style of delivery – an explorer almost stumbling around jungle-clad gorges, tripping up Inca pathways that suddenly stop for no apparent reason and often wondering why on Earth they are bothering – is delightful and endearing.

Both men are the antithesis of what you'd expect from this mould. Neither is the tall, macho type; both are slight and have developed a strong sense of humour that hides a ferocious intellect and literary mind. In Thomson's case, it obscures an unusual determination to achieve the seemingly impossible.



Mark Simmons

**Top:** the summit of Nanda Devi, Uttar Pradesh, India, a Himalayan Shangri-la: **Above:** Hugh Thomson's style places him very much in the tradition of such British writers as Eric Newby

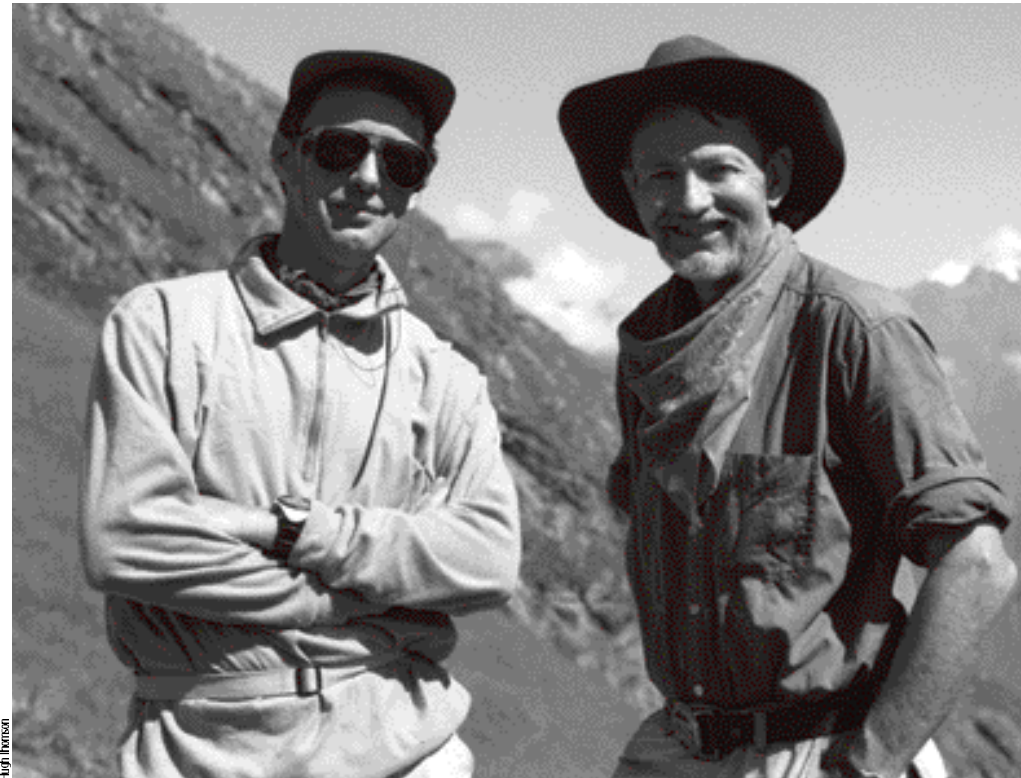
His latest book, *Nanda Devi*, describes how, despite a total lack of mountaineering experience, he joined a historic expedition to enter the inner sanctuary of Nanda Devi, a sacred mountain in the Indian Himalaya that has been closed to all but a very few climbers. In 2000, Thomson's friend Steve Berry, who owns a specialist travel company called Himalayan Kingdoms, managed to gain permission from the Indian authorities by putting together a team of such big names that they simply couldn't refuse. It included John Shipton, the son of Eric Shipton who, in 1934, first entered the Nanda Devi sanctuary with Bill Tillman; Ian McNaught-Davis, the former president of the International Mountaineering and Climbing Federation; and Narinder Kumar, who ascended the peak in 1964. It was a strong cast of characters, and in *Nanda Devi*, Thomson describes them and their campsite tales with relish.

"It was a very interesting book for me to write," Thomson tells me over a coffee in the large Bristol house that he shares with his wife Sally and their three young children. "It was a way into a whole area of mountaineering history. What interests me is the conflict between those who want to summit no matter what and those, such as Eric Shipton, who maintained the tradition of the wandering traveller who was happy to explore but didn't feel that burning need to put a flag on top of the mountain." Thomson chooses his words carefully and takes another sip of coffee. "When some of the Everest books came out last year," he continues, "they rather ducked the issue of why Shipton was passed over for the leadership in 1953. I certainly align myself with the old school."

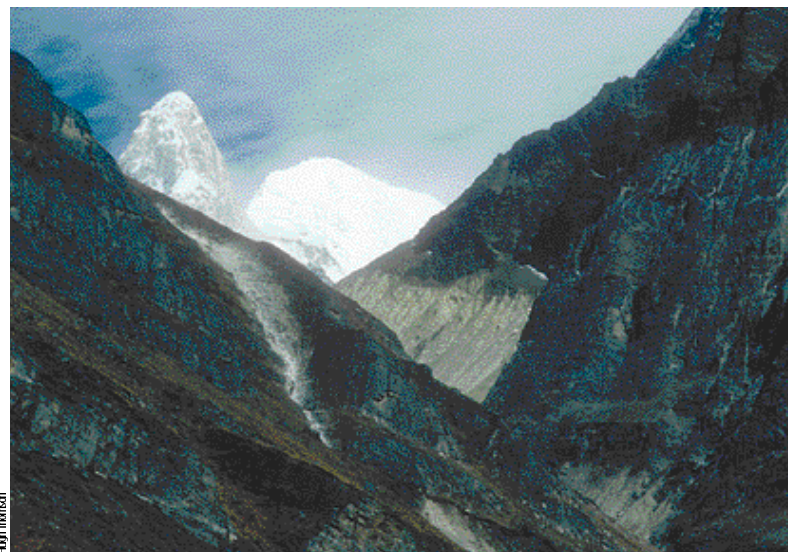
I ask him if this journey was a spiritual quest for him or simply a mountain to climb and a Shangri-La to discover. "I'm more interested in the idea of a hidden world, which is a very powerful myth," he says. "It's something I wanted to explore in literature, with the idea of paradise lost, and also see the place itself. We still have a need for that now, which I still think is quite important." Thomson pauses again, to measure the weight and route of his words. He unzips his fleece jacket and leans forward. "I'm very fond of a Buddhist



Courtesy of Brian McKelvie/Shipton



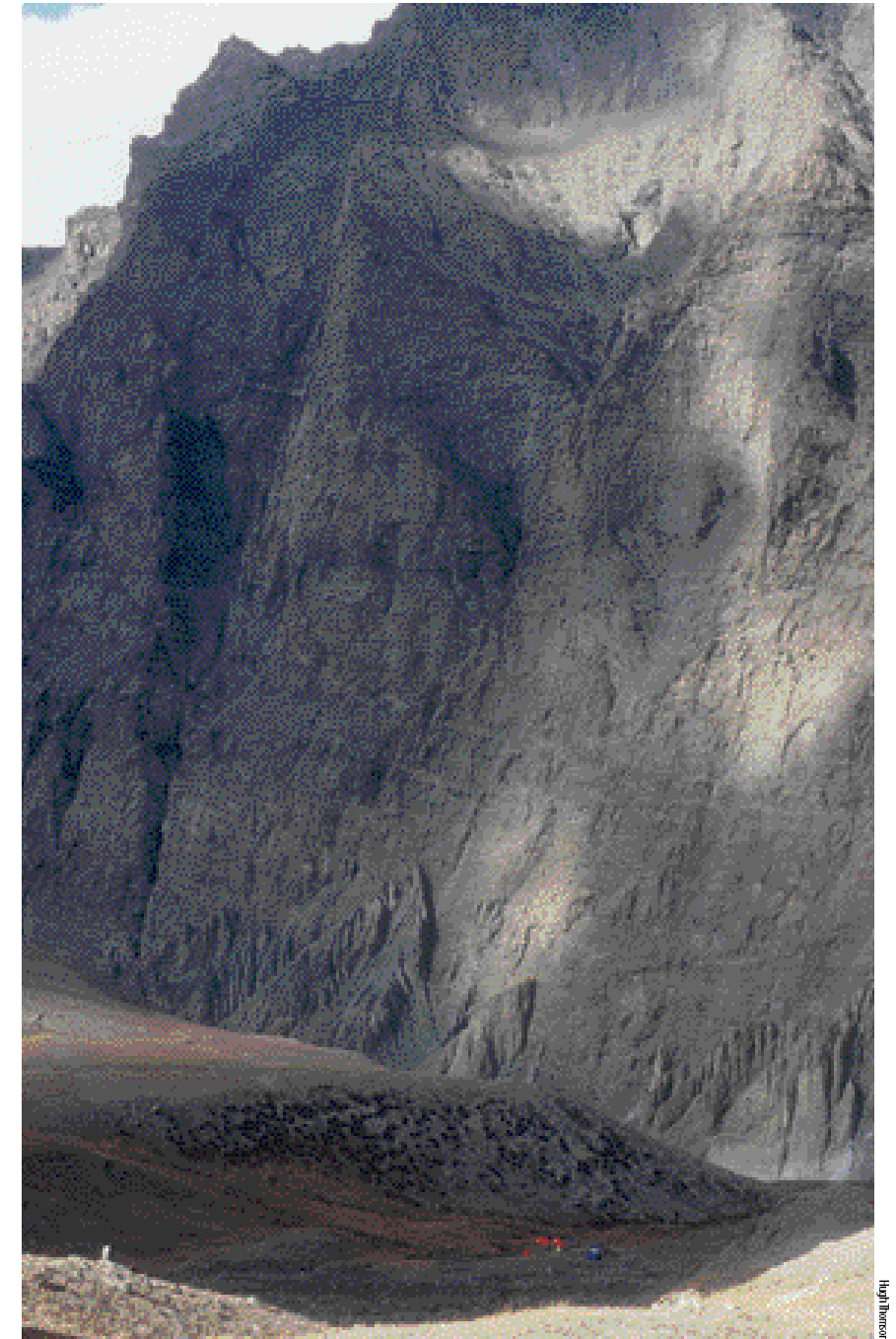
Hugh Thomson



Hugh Thomson



Hugh Thomson



Hugh Thomson

Clockwise from top left: Eric Shipton and Bill Tillman before reaching Nanda Devi in 1934; from inside the inner sanctuary, Thomson's team caught a rare sight of Changabang, the 'Shining Mountain'; scaling the Rishi Ganges Gorge, whose scale impressed Eric Shipton; the expedition camp dwarfed by the West Face of Nanda Devi; Thomson with Gary Ziegler during a visit to Peru in 2002

quote at the end of the book: 'When I was young, I believed that a mountain was just a mountain. Then, when I began the long process to nirvana, enlightenment, I realised that there was much more to a mountain and that it was a symbol of many other things. But now that I have achieved nirvana, I realise that a mountain is, indeed, just a mountain.' And that was a very strong feeling that you need to make the journey to see why you might not need to

make the journey. This was something quite important me."

Once inside the Nanda Devi sanctuary, the team finds sweeping high Himalaya pasture described by Shipman as "lush grasslands, roamed by thar and snow leopards, ringed by profiles of mountains". Here Thomson chooses to roam and wander alone – burying his copy of *Paradise Lost* – rather than undertake another punishing climb.

But despite the overwhelming romance of his own experience he's quick to mention his porters' comment that it was the best grazing for his goats he had ever laid eyes on. "I love it when locals put our Western enthusiasm in context," he says.

While he's there, Thomson also becomes aware of something darker. "The sheer West Face of Nanda Devi, all 10,000 feet [3,048 metres] of it still unclimbed, [is] sometimes described as

one of the last great challenges of modern mountaineering," he writes. "Looking up, with the eagles circling high above, I felt I was staring at the walls of Mordor. Someone would undoubtedly die trying to climb it."

The deaths and trials that such a sacred mountain have induced make *Nanda Devi* an exiting read. A most intriguing story emerges about the CIA planting a nuclear-powered spying device within 1,000 metres of the

summit before bad weather forced them to retreat. The climbers hid the generator on the mountain in 1965. In 1966, some Indian mountaineers were sent to finish the job and, to their horror, they discovered a large landslide had covered it. "It was completely lost," he explains. The story would be almost unbelievable were it not the totally dependable Thomson telling it.

"It was a good time to bring the CIA conspiracies to wider public attention



Hugh Thomson



Hugh Thomson


**Above:** Thomson's team at Huaca Mayo, an Inca site near Choquequirao, Peru, in 2001; **Above right:** Thomson rests above the Lower Rishi Ganges Gorge during the expedition to Nanda Devi in 2000

because it's one of those stories that have bubbled under for a long time and mountaineers have heard rumours of for years," he says. "Telling that story was interesting. Some of the older Indian mountaineers have been more vocal about it recently. For a long time, it was very difficult to get more information about it. But it's a strange story and I liked the quirks and fact that both an American and an Indian climber ended up doing solo ascents of Nanda Devi in the middle of all this nonsense and rising above the politics, which mountaineers are often good at doing. They did something so difficult in the knowledge that it would never be recorded and they would never get any kudos for it."

Together, we look over some charming hand-drawn maps of the Himalaya. When I make the mistake of thinking that the Srinagar near Rishikesh and Devra Prayag is the one in Kashmir, Thomson becomes animated and jumps up. "Actually, this is my favourite geographical mistake of all time." He then tells me the story of two Jesuit priests in Delhi who want to get to Tibet and ask the only man who's been there how to do it: "It's easy," says the man. 'You go to Srinagar and head north up the passes.' But they end up going to the wrong Srinagar. The person who told them meant this Srinagar, where they would have gone past

Nanda Devi. But the priests think he means Kashmir and go from Delhi to Kashmir and approach from western Tibet – an extra 1,600 kilometres out of their way. Such a tragic way to get a name wrong. It took them almost two years!" Thomson is clearly well tickled by the thought.

When he's not exploring or writing books, Thomson is an award-winning filmmaker. Among his credits are *Dancing in the Street: A Rock and Roll History* and *Indian Journeys*, which he made with the writer William Dalrymple. It's a combination that makes him happy, he says. "It's a very good balance with writing and I enjoy it very much – I need the two," he says. "But I also think that having made films has been terribly useful for the process of writing – being used to organising and story telling and interviewing techniques and I suppose having an eye, spotting the detail."

Since writing *Nanda Devi*, Thomson hasn't lost time in discovering another set of spectacular ruins in Peru called Cota Coca, a lost Inca site in an impassable canyon. The discovery made headlines around the world and John Hemming, ex-director of the Royal Geographical Society (with IBG) and an expert on the Incas, has long championed Thomson's work. This isn't the last you'll be hearing from him. 

■ For more about Thomson's writing visit [www.thewhiterock.co.uk](http://www.thewhiterock.co.uk)

## Hugh Thomson's CV

- 1960 Born in London
- 1981 Graduates from Trinity College, Cambridge with degree in English
- 1982 Leads first expedition to Peru, after which he briefly lectures at Bristol University. During a 14-year period at the BBC, Thomson makes a variety of documentaries and films, including the award-winning *Dancing in the Streets: A Rock and Roll History*
- 1996 Leaves the BBC to concentrate on a career that takes in writing, making films and leading expeditions
- 2000 Joins the special Millennium expedition to the Nanda Devi sanctuary between India and Tibet led by Eric Shipton's son John Shipton. Makes documentary *Indian Journeys with William Dalrymple*
- 2002 Makes headline news around the world as co-leader, with US archaeologist Gary Ziegler of an expedition that discovers Cota Coca, a lost Inca site in an impassable river canyon. Publishes first book, *White Rock*. Edits new edition of *Lost City of the Incas* Hiram Bingham's story of discovering Machu Picchu
- 2003 Returns to Peru with Ziegler, where they discover a hugely significant Inca site, Llactapata near Machu Picchu, using thermal imaging technology to photograph cloud forest from the air
- 2004 Publishes *Nanda Devi* and begins collaborating with Microsoft in Seattle on project to build a virtual-reality model of Machu Picchu