

W. G. L. Beynon

With Kelly to Chitral

London, Edward Arnold, 1896

Published in the immediate aftermath of the Chitral campaign of 1895, *With Kelly to Chitral* is one of the most engaging first-hand narratives of the military operations on the north-western frontier of British India. Its author, Lieutenant William George Laurence Beynon, then a young officer of the 1st Battalion, 3rd Gurkha Rifles, served as Staff Officer to Colonel James Graves Kelly during the celebrated march from Gilgit to Chitral. Beynon was therefore not a later historian reconstructing events from official papers, but an active participant in the expedition itself.

The background to the book was the political crisis that followed the death of Chitral's ruler and the ensuing struggle for control of the princely state. By March 1895, a British and Indian force at Chitral Fort had been placed under siege. The Government of India responded with two relief efforts: a larger force advancing from the south under General Sir Robert Low, and a much smaller but exceptionally demanding northern column under Colonel Kelly. Kelly's force advanced from Gilgit through high mountain country and severe winter conditions, crossing the snowbound Shandur Pass and ultimately reaching Chitral. Contemporary accounts quickly turned the march into one of the better-known episodes of frontier campaigning in the late nineteenth century.

Beynon's importance lies partly in the character of his testimony. In his prefatory remarks, he deliberately disclaims any ambition to write a conventional heroic chronicle. Instead, he sets out to record the actual texture of expeditionary life: the marches, hardships, food, weather, humour, discomfort and daily routines of British officers and Indian troops. That modest intention gives the book much of its enduring value. It preserves details that formal military despatches often omit and allows the reader to see the Chitral campaign not merely as strategy and movement on a map, but as lived experience.

The principal figure is Colonel James Graves Kelly, commander of the northern relief column, whose decision to advance across terrain regarded as exceptionally difficult became central to the campaign's reputation. Beynon himself emerges as an observant and personable guide to the expedition. The wider story also belongs to the Indian soldiers who made the march possible, especially the 32nd Pioneers, Gurkha troops, sappers, mountain gunners and local levies who operated under extreme climatic and logistical conditions. In the broader Chitral story, figures such as Sir George Robertson, Major Charles Townshend, Sher Afzul Khan and Umra Khan form part of the complex political and military setting in which the siege and relief unfolded.

As a historical source, the book is especially attractive because it stands close to the events themselves. It was published in 1896, only a year after the expedition, and

belongs to a small group of contemporary narratives that shaped public understanding of Chitral. Unlike more formal campaign histories, however, Beynon's account has an immediacy and informality that make it particularly readable. It is as much a document of late Victorian Indian Army culture as it is a record of a frontier campaign.

The present copy

The present Eye of the Beholder copy retains its handsome original red cloth binding, decorated in gilt, and presents very attractively. The principal text is complete through page 160 and is notably clean internally, with little evident foxing. The folding coloured route map is present, as are surviving illustrated plates examined in the copy.

The principal deficiency lies at the beginning of the volume: the title page and certain preliminary leaves are wanting. Since both a first and a second edition appeared in 1896, the absence of the title-page material prevents a secure determination of the precise issue from the surviving evidence alone. The copy should therefore be described conservatively rather than assigned an edition without qualification. The loss is bibliographically significant, but it does not diminish the considerable visual and historical appeal of the surviving volume: the main narrative remains intact, the important folding map is preserved, and the book retains the character of an attractive contemporary military account rather than that of a heavily compromised reading copy.

For a collector of the Indian Army, the North-West Frontier, Chitral, or the military history of British India, this remains a highly evocative contemporary object: a participant's account of one of the most celebrated mountain relief expeditions of the period, preserved in an appealing original binding and offered with its bibliographical deficiency fully acknowledged.