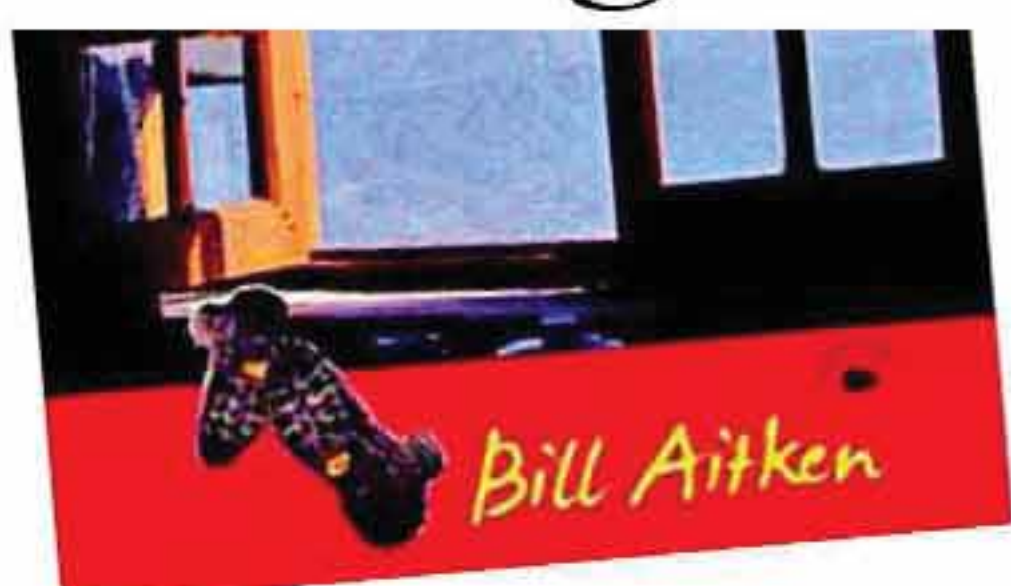




Moving on



Movement with a purpose is what we are most accustomed to, habituated as we are to to-and-fro for tasks we perform in our daily lives. All movement, however, is not routine-driven. To be able to route one's road and submit to the pleasures of knowing what comes along is something that does not happen often. In fact, it hardly does. When Bill Aitken moved out to trek and traverse the mountains in India, he wasn't moving towards a set destination, rather it was a ramble that he felt he could indulge in without thinking much about what came his way. Having spent the major part of his life in India, this Scottish traveller has seen the rough times oftener than what he has expressed in his writings. And the travel texts that he has penned, it is his deep sense of inwardness with the place and its ambience that textured the world with a vitality not easily discernible in such writings. In more ways than one, Aitken's experiences cannot be bracketed within the settled rubric of the 'travel writer', a formulaic designation that sums up the experience of movement in a nutshell. His understanding of

the realities of the everyday world and the differences that make places acquire character emerge in

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Bibhash Choudhury

clear lines across the pages of his books. In *Footloose in the Himalaya*, he lays down the dilemma that confronts the writer whose capital is the travelling that he does: "A travel writer has the quandary of writing about pristine places knowing his words are going to sully and spoil them by attracting hordes of people. There is no point in my railing at the lemming instinct in tourists. I have been guilty of the same urge myself." Such an admission is both critical and pragmatic. He is aware that the experiences of the places that he has been to cannot bear the stamp of credibility if the representation is driven by rhetoric. Rather, what is called for is a succinct and clear presentation of experience which draws from the direct interaction with the realities he has come across. Such realities need not be ones which conform to worldviews of a more acceptable nature. His concern extends to a humane understanding of situations that have their own operative logic. In subscribing to such a principle, he occupies the mantle of the observer whose keen eye picks up instances of life-patterns without adomment. This infuses the sense of immediacy to the world being viewed. Whether it is the narrative of the supernatural or the practice of customs specific of a region, Aitken's directness bespeaks of a felt experience presented through straight observation: "Ghosts in the Himalaya is a topic that could fill a book. This accounts for the widespread sacrifice of animals to the local godlings: he drinks the blood while the offerant has the meat."

Footloose in the Himalaya bears the stamp of the writer's life-story, covering as it does situations of the personal kind, each reference embedded to encompass a widening of horizon, with self-knowledge and the understanding of the world moving simultaneously. Wisdom acquired thus becomes an enabling measure through which responses are assessed and evaluated: "Pessimism is a sedentary shortcoming; by acting positively, you are willing something better to happen." *Footloose in the Himalaya* gains from the clarity of the thought and the honesty of the writing, borne out by the avoidance of frames which generally constitute stock arrangements in contemporary travel writing. The book's measure of the world viewed is, thus, an exercise within limits, restraint being one of the lessons that Aitken learns, which he so beautifully imparts in the course of his writing.

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