

December 2016

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Recommended Citation

Croston, Roger (2016) "Obituary: David Llewelyn Snellgrove (1920 – 2016)," *HIMALAYA, the Journal of the Association for Nepal and Himalayan Studies*: Vol. 36: No. 2, Article 18.

Available at: <http://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/himalaya/vol36/iss2/18>



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Obituary | David Llewelyn Snellgrove (1920 – 2016)

Roger Croston



David Snellgrove in his office. The thangka visible behind David of Sonam Lötrö, one of the Four Lamas of Dolpo, was given by him to the British Museum in 1989 along with another three in honor of Pasang Khambache Sherpa.

(The estate of David Snellgrove, date unknown)

David Snellgrove was one of Britain's most outstanding scholars of Tibet; a one-time advisor on Buddhism to the Vatican; a restless traveller and an observer of culture and religion in South and South-East Asia. An academic almost by accident, he enjoyed both fieldwork and library based research, producing what became standard textbooks in his field. He was often most interested in minority groups in his studies, an attitude suiting what he perceived as his own position as an outsider in social matters.

David Snellgrove was born in Portsmouth, England, in 1920. He spent his early years in Denmead, Hampshire, going to Christ's Hospital School, Horsham. His elder brother died in 1953 of injuries incurred during World War II. His elder sister, Una, awoke his interest in continental Europe by taking him to Germany in 1936, after which he earned a degree in French and German at Southampton University in 1939. After being conscripted into the British Army's Royal Engineers during the Second World War, and given his enthusiasm for mountaineering, he successfully requested a transfer to India where he hoped to climb in the Himalaya.

Trained as an intelligence officer, he was posted to Barrackpore, Bengal, in June 1943, from where, due to a bad reaction to the heat, he was soon medically evacuated to Leborg Military Hospital, near Darjeeling. During this first visit to the area and its Buddhist monasteries, Snellgrove found his calling in life; this time also served as his introduction to the languages, histories, and cultures of the Himalaya. Finding a copy of Charles Bell's dictionary of colloquial Tibetan, he decided to learn the language. From this point on, he used all his free time during his military service in India to visit the Himalayan foothills. He spent his leave in Kalimpong and Sikkim. Snellgrove continuously improved his skills in colloquial Tibetan with the help of a young Tibetan whom he employed. He discovered that having a guide and companion with reliable and detailed local knowledge was vital to learning more about the region, and, eventually, to his field research.

In Sikkim, Snellgrove met Sir Basil Gould of the [British] Indian Civil Service [ICS] who was Political Officer for

Sikkim, Bhutan, and Tibet. Gould had represented the British Government in Lhasa in 1940 at the enthronement of the 14th Dalai Lama. Gould unsuccessfully requested Snellgrove's secondment from the army to assist him. Snellgrove decided that the ICS could be a pathway to a worthy career but Indian independence ended this aspiration, for which he had passed the necessary examinations in 1946. On his return to England after Independence in 1947, he wanted to continue his study of Tibetan, but he found that no course existed. Instead, he went to Queens' College, Cambridge, where he studied Sanskrit under Professor Harold Bailey.

Following graduation, Snellgrove spent a year in Rome with Professor Giuseppe Tucci, after which he was appointed the first lecturer in Tibetan at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), University of London, in 1950. During this time he was completing his doctoral thesis, a study of the Sanskrit text *Hevajra Tantra* and its Tibetan translation. This was the start of an academic career, eventually leading to a professorship at SOAS and fellowship at the British Academy.

Snellgrove's research took him to the Indian Himalaya and Nepal ten times between his arrival at SOAS and 1983. Snellgrove recruited a highly educated Sherpa man, Pasang Khambache, who had studied at Tashilhunpo, Tibet, as an assistant in these endeavors. Pasang became an invaluable aid to Snellgrove's research, both in the subcontinent and England, over the next ten years. With funding from the Rockefeller Foundation, Snellgrove brought five Tibetan refugees to London in 1961, for three years, to further develop studies of Tibet and of Buddhism following the arrival in India of 90,000 Tibetan refugees, including the Dalai Lama, after a failed uprising against Chinese rule in 1959.

In 1966, together with Hugh Richardson, Snellgrove established the Institute of Tibetan Studies (later renamed the Institute of Buddhist Studies), in Tring, England. In 1967, he drove overland from London to India with three colleagues. They ended up in Bhutan, where he undertook research in the central valleys. In the late 1960s, he was invited to serve as a consultant on Buddhism to the Vatican's newly established Secretariat for non-Christian Religions. During this time, he considered ordination into the Roman Catholic Church to further the Secretariat's cause. Snellgrove's regular visits to Italy eventually led to a permanent move to Torre Pellice, Piedmont, in March 1984, after his retirement from SOAS in 1982.

By 1968, Snellgrove, now academically well established, was bestowed with Doctor of Literature by Cambridge

University; the following year he was elected to the British Academy. In 1974, Snellgrove planned a lengthy visit to Nepal with the young Polish scholar, Tadeusz Skorupski. Arriving in Delhi, they discovered that Ladakh had just been opened to foreign scholars. Seizing this opportunity, they observed the major Buddhist festivals in the monasteries throughout winter. Their research still remains the bedrock of continuing study of the area. Snellgrove's last research trip to the Himalaya, in 1979, again took him to Ladakh and Zaskar, both in the Indian state of Jammu and Kashmir.

Upon retirement from SOAS, Snellgrove turned to South-East Asia, making eleven visits to Indonesia and the Thai-Malay Peninsula. Finally, the Khmer Empire became the focus of his last active years of scholarship. He made regular visits between 1995 and 2008 to Cambodia and Thailand. True to his conviction that language is the key to observation, he learned Bahasa plus some Khmer which even he—an accomplished linguist—described as “fairly difficult.” In his final years of travelling, Snellgrove made Siem Reap a second part-time residence.

Unmissable in a social gathering, Snellgrove, was a lover of nature, good wine, chess, and cats. He is remembered by friends as a devoted yet demanding companion who could be egotistical, self-absorbed and a holder of firm opinions, but always an entirely worthwhile conversant and a fount of knowledge on the history of Buddhism throughout Asia.

Along with many research papers and reviews, Snellgrove's major publications include: *Buddhist Himalaya* (1957); *Himalayan Pilgrimage* (1961); *Four Lamas of Dolpo* (1967); *The Nine Ways of Bön* (1967); *The Hevajra Tantra* (1980); *Indo-Tibetan Buddhism* (1987); *Asian Commitment* (2000); *Khmer Civilization and Angkor* (2001); *Angkor, Before and After* (2004); *Religion as History* (2006). Along with Hugh Richardson, Snellgrove wrote *A Cultural History of Tibet* (1968); with Tadeusz Skorupski, he produced *The Cultural Heritage of Ladakh*. Volumes I and II (1977 & 1981); and for UNESCO he edited *The Image of the Buddha* (1978).

Richard Blurton, head of the South Asian section in the Department of Asia at the British Museum says of Snellgrove, “[His] scholarly legacy lies in his outstanding combination of inspired and persistent fieldwork with a mastery of textual and historical sources—along with a determination to see projects through to completion (primarily in the form of publication; in which he was relentless). Such broadly based skills, honed since his undergraduate days, are less common today in a world of ever-increasing specialization. He brought to his study of Buddhism a deep knowledge of his subject whether it was in Ladakh, Java,

or Dolpo, all grounded in research of local texts. He was fortunate that he lived at a time when later Buddhism, recorded first in Sanskrit and then developed in Tibetan, was becoming increasingly popular internationally, not least on account of the plight of Tibet. In his day, the sad position of Tibet, with its threatened Buddhist culture including the minorities within it, such as the exiled Bönpo, undoubtedly found a ready response in his psyche. He was aware that what he saw on his many journeys was fleeting and needed to be recorded while there was yet time. He could be personally impatient as many intelligent people can be. However, his insistence on the importance of intellectual endeavor, and his endless curiosity—especially as far as Asia is concerned—will long remain an inspiration to all those who knew him.”

In 2014 a new senior lectureship in Tibetan and Buddhist Art was named after David Snellgrove in the Department of Art and Archaeology at SOAS, funded by the Chicago-based Alphawood Foundation. His ashes were taken to Siem Reap, Cambodia, and interred close to a monastery at the Western Baray, at Angkor.

Roger Croston, a council member of the Royal Society of Asian Affairs, is an independent part time scholar who specializes in Westerners who travelled to Tibet before 1950. Since 1996 he has interviewed most of those still alive who witnessed the old Tibet, or their descendants, to research their collections of diaries, photographs and films. He has published numerous obituaries in journals and British national newspapers as this generation fades and has organized three audiences in 2008, (Oxford), 2009 (New York) and 2012 (London) for these ‘old hands’ and their families to meet the Dalai Lama in person. He has presented papers at various academic institutions, most recently at the 6th Beijing International Seminar on Tibetan Studies in August 2016.