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Review of *The Prisoner of Kathmandu: Brian Hodgson in Nepal, 1820–43* by Charles Allen

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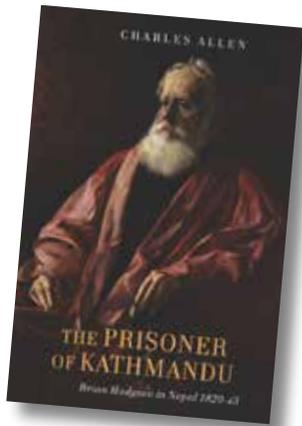
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The Prisoner of Kathmandu: Brian Hodgson in Nepal, 1820-43.

Charles Allen. Chicago: Haus, 2015. 320 pages. 20 color plates, 30 halftones. ISBN: 9781910376119.

Reviewed by Douglas Ober

In 1818, when a ‘clever, mollycoddled seventeen year old’ (p. xi) from Cheshire named Brian Hodgson arrived in Calcutta to begin his work for the East India Company, Britain and Nepal’s relationship was far from docile. Only two years earlier the Treaty of Sugauli had been signed, concluding a series of bloody clashes between Parbatiya soldiers and Company men. Of the Treaty’s many stipulations, one required that a British Resident be assigned to the kingdom. When the Assistant to the Resident died unexpectedly only two years later, Hodgson, having already been deemed unfit to handle the heat of the plains, was sent to one of the most remote districts in John Company’s growing empire.

Like most diplomatic postings, Hodgson’s professional life in Nepal, as Assistant to the Resident (1820–28), Acting Resident (1828–33), and Resident (1833–43), was consumed by political and economic affairs. Yet a British diplomat’s life in early mid-century Kathmandu could be terribly isolating: political tensions were high, distrust was rampant and his movement in the kingdom was restricted. These prison-like conditions (which denote the title of the book) were taxing but according to Charles Allen, they also helped set in motion Hodgson’s budding scientific interests.

By the time Hodgson left Nepal in 1843, he had published essays on nearly all things Himalayan, from linguistics and zoology to paper manufacturing and bird migrations, religious history and botany. Allen tackles these topics with tremendous clarity, revealing the wider world of Orientalist thought, communication technologies and the political backdrop through which Hodgson conducted his research. As a naturalist, for instance, Hodgson’s contributions were immense: in addition to making the first scientific identification of the Himalayan blue sheep (*bharal*), he debunked the popular European myth of the unicorn, arguing that it had been confused with the ‘bicornate Antelope,’ or Tibetan antelope whose scientific name (*panthelops hodgsonii*) still today bears Hodgson’s stamp. In fact, by the time Hodgson was in his thirties, some thirty new species

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Douglas Ober on *The Prisoner of Kathmandu: Brian Hodgson in Nepal, 1820-43*

had come under his gaze, from the Speckled Pigeon (*columba hodgsonii*) and Tibetan Sand Fox (*vulpes ferrilata hodgsonii*) to the Giant Flying Squirrel (*peraurista magnificus hodgsonii*). None of these findings could have been accomplished had it not been for the deleterious hunting expeditions and personal collections of live animals kept in both the Nepalese king’s and Hodgson’s own menagerie—Thar goats, wild dogs, rhinoceroses, hornbills, khalji pheasants, Nepalese cuckoos.

When not measuring wild cats (*felis manul nigrepecta hodgsonii*) and Tibetan partridges (*perdrix hodgsoniae*), Hodgson traveled to local villages and temples. His enthusiasm for classification extended to local populaces and he wrote at length on local tribes, caste groups and religious communities. Like many ethnographers of his time, his anthropology was often flawed and according to Allen, he was one of the first writers to classify Gurkhas as a martial race (p. 136).

As an antiquarian, he amassed an incredible collection of religious paraphernalia: *thangkas*, amulets, images (*murti*), prayer wheels, and other ritual instruments. Most notably, the massive collection of Sanskrit manuscripts that Hodgson acquired and shipped to Calcutta, London, Paris, and Oxford, would eventually form the nucleus of the most important Buddhological work of the nineteenth century, Eugène Burnouf’s *Introduction à l’histoire du Bouddhisme Indien* (1844). Hodgson’s

interest in material culture also led him to commission local artists to draw hundreds of monasteries and *stupas* across the valley. Many of these historical images, excavated from archives across the globe, have been reproduced in the book and Allen provides brief, but insightful glimpses into the lives of the local figures that supported his research. His “premiere illustrator,” for instance, was a little known *citrakār* (painter), Raj Man Singh, a literate Newari Buddhist who broke with local conventions and “learned to draw with the pencil and with pen and ink rather than sticks of charcoal, to work on smooth Europe-derived watermarked paper rather than a mix of buffalo horn glue and white clay laid on canvas, to abandon the single hair brush of the miniaturist for the less fine European paintbrush, to paint with European watercolours in place of the more limited local palette of colours derived from minerals and plants, and to employ the *camera lucida*” (pp. 150-51).

Hodgson was more than just a collector. With his “old Baudha” (p. 90), Amritananda, a brilliant Newari pandit as his guide, Hodgson provided the English-speaking world with some of the first accounts of Vajrayana Buddhism (pp. 90-113). While Hodgson believed Buddhist tantra to be a corruption, a swift fall from the unfettered purity of ‘original Buddhism’, his respect for Amritananda was tremendous but not without controversy. Hodgson discovered that the information

provided by Amritananda was often at odds with accounts published by European Orientalists. Over time, Hodgson’s penchant for Amritananda’s interpretations made him a kind of subaltern of Orientalism. The Oxford Boden Professor of Sanskrit, H.H. Wilson, for instance, called Hodgson a “waspyish animal” whose writings were “tedious and uninteresting to give any analysis” (p. 96).

When at its best, *The Prisoner of Kathmandu* is to be praised for its fantastic writing and rich review of Hodgson’s scholarly contributions. The text is richly illustrated with numerous images of nineteenth century Nepal, including dozens of black and white sketches, several pen and ink outline drawings, an array of fantastic watercolors painted by local artisans, and images of rare manuscripts. As a whole, the reader is treated to an abundance of engaging sources pulled from disparate archives (although as a popular book, citations are frustratingly thin or altogether omitted).

Where Allen drifts into more troubled waters is in his often obstinate romanticizing of the British Orientalists. As with his earlier works, he sees this book as part of “a process of rehabilitation” (p. xiv): an effort to reclaim the history of Orientalism from the Saidian narrative of knowledge, power, and representation. Orientalists like Hodgson, he argues, have been the “victims” of “reverse stereotyping... their pioneering work traduced

by lazy and even mendacious [postcolonial] scholarship with more than a tinge of racism about it..." (p. xiv). Allen is not a professional academic and he rarely wavers into these kinds of theoretical discussions but his failure to read Hodgson's scholarship within the context of current streams of academic thought will leave many readers frustrated. Those looking for more critical analyses will be better off turning to the collection of critical essays edited by David Waterhouse as *Origins of Himalayan Studies: Brian Houghton Hodgson in Nepal and Darjeeling 1829-1858* (London: Routledge, 2004), or K.L. Pradhan's *Brian Hodgson at the Kathmandu Residency: 1825-1843* (Guwahati: Spectrum, 2001). While much of *The Prisoner of Kathmandu's* contents are found scattered throughout the pages of these works along with W.W. Hunter's seminal biography, *Life of Brian Houghton Hodgson* (London: Murray, 1896), Allen's work is nonetheless magisterial in its composition, an accessible, yet informative read. At times too, his romantic portrayal adds a wonderful touch, such as in his coverage of Hodgson's rarely discussed marriage to a Muslim woman with whom he fathered two (or perhaps three) children. Indeed, like Hodgson himself, readers will likely find themselves trapped in Kathmandu long after turning the final page.

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