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Book review of 'A History of Nepal' by John Whelpton

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A HISTORY OF NEPAL

JOHN WHELPTON

To a surprising extent, the current turmoil in Nepal revolves around debates about Nepal's history. Who has benefited from the state? Who has lost out? What has over 50 years of development accomplished? What holds Nepal together? Addressing many of these issues, John Whelpton's *A History of Nepal* provides a good opportunity to reflect on the history of Nepal. The following three reviews are both short discussions of Whelpton's book and discussions of what historians can and should think more about. Thank you, John Whelpton, for encouraging us to think about these issues.

Tom Robertson, *Book Review Editor*

REVIEWED BY BERNARDO MICHAEL

John Whelpton's *A History of Nepal* takes up the task of writing a general history of the country that covers the past 300 years. Whelpton knits together the themes of national and cultural identity, the environment, and cross cultural contact to produce a valuable introduction to the history of the country. The first chapter provides background information on the role of the environment and the inswinging Parbatiya and Tibeto-Burman population migrations that produced the rich cultural and linguistic diversity that is distinctive of the region. Whelpton also describes the processes that led to the creation of states, big and small, in the Himalayas. The role of caste, religion, ethnic identity, and state formation is taken up in greater detail, in the second chapter, within the context of the expansion of the hill kingdom of Gorkha and the emergence of Rana authority in the nineteenth century. The rise to power of one branch of the Ranas (the Shamsheer Ranas) and the various political and administrative developments in the country between 1885 and 1951 is the focus of the third chapter. The next two chapters cover the growing influence of the Shah monarchy in Nepali politics, the establishment of the Panchayat system (1960-1990), and the modernization of Nepal from the downfall of the Ranas in 1951 to the reintroduction of multiparty politics in 1991. While the Shah kings exerted considerable influence in Nepali politics their dominance was never complete

as they faced opposition from a range of forces—domestic and foreign. In foreign relations, the Nepali state tried to play a balancing game between India, China, and western governments with India usually playing a determining role. Within Nepal, the regime faced opposition from a number of political groups informally organized into parties. Chapter five takes up the role played by bikas (development) in the emergence of contemporary Nepal. Whelpton covers a range of issues related to economic and infrastructural development. While advances were made in many sectors (agriculture, industry, education, and tourism), the pace of growth and change was slow and uneven, despite the massive injection of foreign aid. The next chapter examines the various changes in Nepali society and covers the four decades following the dismissal of the Rana regime. A number of themes are covered in rapid succession—the persistence of caste and religious sentiments, the growing importance of ethnic and linguistic nationalisms, gender inequality, modern education, social customs, and cinema. The seventh and final chapter addresses the post 1991 period, and the general stalemate that seems to have plagued Nepali politics since then. Whelpton discusses the persistent infighting between the various political parties, the continued importance of the monarchy, the rise of the Maoist movement, and the massacre of the Royal family in 2001. A large

A History of Nepal

John Whelpton

Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005.

A HISTORY OF NEPAL REVIEWED BY JESSICA VANTINE BIRKENHOLTZ

John Whelpton's *A History of Nepal* was not written in response to the ever-escalating political climate in Nepal or as a background piece to the complex political, economic, and social forces giving way to Nepal's present political standoff. Nevertheless, it is a timely and long overdue reassessment of Nepal's socio-political history, one that reveals a past that helps to make sense of its contentious present, rather than the standard genealogical accounts.

A History of Nepal offers an accessible, readable account written for a general readership. This intended audience does not, however, jeopardize the comprehensive and insightful nature of Whelpton's work, making it also a valuable resource for scholars of Nepal and South Asia.

In his introduction, Whelpton identifies four central themes that run throughout Nepal's history and, in turn, his account of that history: 1) the nationalist approach Nepalis have taken in understanding and interpreting their own past; 2) the varied relationship between people and the physical environment with which they struggle to control, exploit, and survive; 3) Nepal's "status as a cultural contact zone," i.e., a "yam stuck between a rock and a hard place," namely, India and China, but also as a refugee for immigrants and the odd world traveler, and; 4) the development of a "sense of common identity" among the peoples of Nepal, which centered largely on acceptance of a particular brand of Hinduism and on the Nepali language. This account encourages the reader to ponder the possible tensions between these four themes and their implications for not only the current conflict and the future for a democratic Nepal, but for all nation-states, which are continuously imagined and reimagined.

Although he manages to summarize some 2000-plus years of history in less than 300 pages, a glance at the table of contents reveals Whelpton's emphasis is on the post-Rana period after 1951, of which his knowledge and insights are particularly salient. Whelpton opens with the standard, albeit rather rushed, general background chapter covering Nepal's diverse geography, topography, and population, and the whole of the ancient and medieval periods. Chapter Two discusses the Gorkha conquest in 1769 of Nepal, which then referred only to the Kathmandu Valley, and the ensuing—but contestable—political unification of the three city-state kingdoms of Kathmandu, Patan, and Bhaktapur and eventually areas

even beyond the present political borders of Nepal today. Chapter Three advances to the period of the Rana autocracy, 1885-1951, for which Whelpton astutely weaves accounts of the numerous royal court intrigues characterizing this period. Despite the undisputable tyranny that most Nepalis and scholars attribute to the Rana reign, he delineates with surprising evenhandedness the many factors precipitating the fall of their regime in 1951.

Whelpton truly seems to settle into his element in the following three chapters, each of which focuses on a set of different umbrella issues during the next politically charged and troubled period spanning 1951-1991. In Chapter Four he tackles the return of the monarchy as an active, involved institution and its struggles with the political parties, and the introduction of democratic ideals and governing practices after Nepal opened its political borders in 1951. Chapters Five and Six shift gears away from the explicit blow-by-blow political battles and intrigues of the period and concentrates on the development of the economy and environment (Five) and socio-cultural changes such as those in the media and education sectors (Six) in the modern nation-state of Nepal. In the final chapter, Whelpton turns to the pressing issues of "democracy and disillusionment" in Nepal since 1991, which canvases the aftermath of the popular 'People's Movement' of 1990 and the rise of the Maoists and the rebel insurgency that continues to ravage Nepal today.

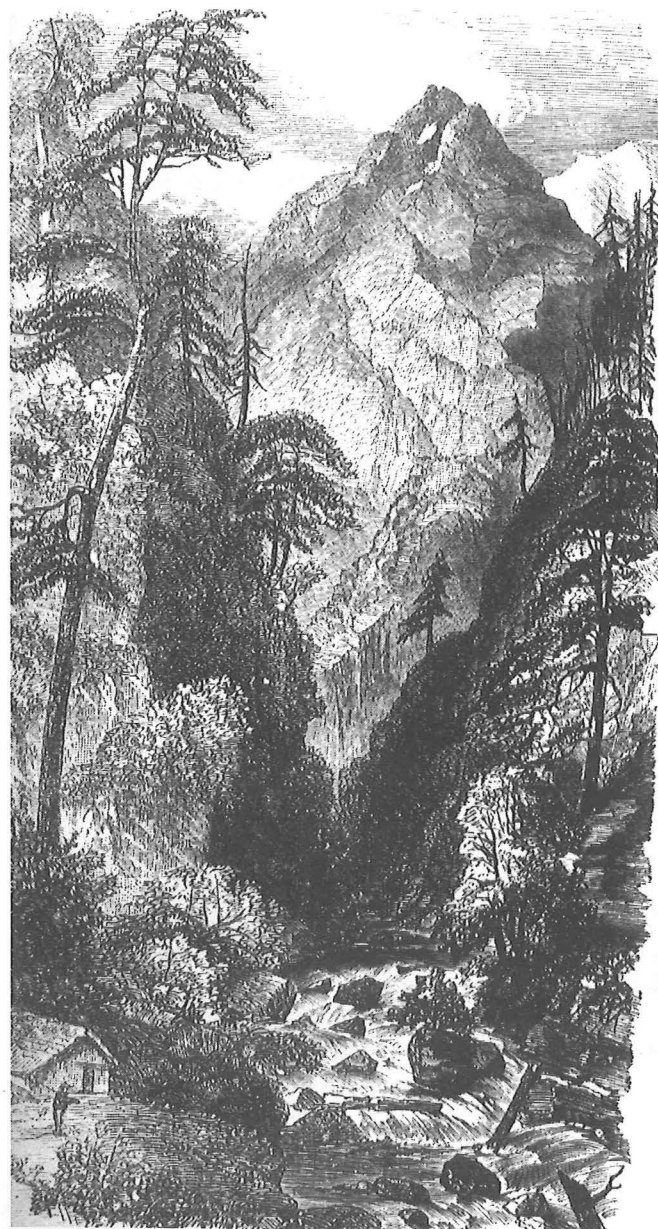
In addition to the central historical narrative articulately presented—though not without a number of errors that will easily be corrected before a second printing—Whelpton includes a basic timeline of key events throughout Nepal's history, which again is particularly detailed from 1951 onward. He also provides genealogical tables of the two dominant ruling families in Nepal's history, the Shahs and the Ranas, and concise bibliographical notes on key historical figures.

A History of Nepal is an excellent primer that fills a lacuna of English language scholarly works on the rich and complex history of what was, until May 2006, the "world's only Hindu kingdom." Nepali historiography traditionally is little other than a political roll-call of members of Nepal's elite and high-caste society. Yet while this political history cannot nor should be dismissed, Whelpton also reflects on the implications and consequences of Nepal's political genealogy for a

broader history than that of kings and prime ministers, but without aiming or claiming to be a comprehensive compendium of ethnic histories. People interested in these alternative social and ethnic histories are enticed with enthralling but selective introductions to them, yet are ultimately left wanting for more complete accounts. Similarly, the brevity of Nepal's history prior to the Gorkha conquest is striking when compared with the increasingly detailed description of Nepal's post-unification, and particularly post-Ranarchy, history. While it would have expanded the work significantly and thus may have not been practical to consider in further depth these two periods/aspects of Nepal's rich history, Whelpton's focus unfortunately reinforces the commonplace practice of equating modern day Nepal's history with that of the politics and *thulo maanchhe* of the historical Nepal, today's Kathmandu Valley.

Nevertheless, particularly in light of the current conflict taking its toll on the land and people of Nepal, Whelpton's presentation and insights in *A History of Nepal* succeed in his stated aim of enabling his readers to gain "from a country's history a deeper understanding of its present and of its future potential" (5). One can only hope that Nepal's history does in fact reveal glimmers of future potential, rather than reflections of a troubled past.

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number of illustrations, maps, and tables supplement the text. A listing of key events, genealogical tables, biographical notes, and a glossary provide valuable additional information on the country's history and politics.

In many ways, Whelpton's book constitutes a welcome new voice in the writing of surveys of Nepali history. Previous works by authors such as D.R. Regmi, Rishikesh Shaha and Baburam Acharya among others were largely narratives of events that focused on discussions of state formation, royal personalities, foreign affairs, and general administration. While Whelpton's focus remains the Nepali nation-state, he broadens the scope of the book by including social, economic, and environmental themes that allow him to insert discussions on caste, ethnicity, gender, religion, and women. His narrative is also sensitive to the cultural differences that define the various communities inhabiting the hills and plains of the country and one finds frequent references to the historical role played by Kiratis, Newars, Tamangs, Tharus, and other ethnic groups. However, his discussion of state formation in the Himalayan foothills in the eighteenth century, organized as it is, around the theme of the unification of Nepal (see Chapter 2), might have been better treated as the process of the expansion of Gorkha. After all, it is Gorkha that expands and colonizes far flung regions such as Garhwal, Kumaon, and even parts of the Tarai. Whelpton's reference to the Tarai as being, in many ways, a colony governed by the ruling elite from Kathmandu merits further investigation (see page 58). It is unclear if this understanding can be applied to the entire Tarai, or perhaps to certain parts of the Tarai, such as its eastern sections where the Gorkhals subjected indigenous groups such as the Tharus and the Kiratis. Nevertheless, this understanding of internal colonization forming an important stage in Gorkhali state formation is a welcome insight already affirmed by scholars like Kumar Pradhan and Mahesh C. Regmi.

A survey text such as this with its focus on the Nepali nation-state and developments inside the country tend to lose sight of the incoming and outgoing cultural and historical flows that transcend the geographical boundaries of any nation state. While Whelpton is sensitive to this fact, further discussion of such flows and their impact on Nepal society could be helpful. The transnational movements of Nepali labor and the activities of the Nepali diaspora around the world could be explored further. In many ways, the idea of Nepal could be stretched to include areas that stand outside the conventional boundaries of the country. The book's title "A History of Nepal," could also be modified to a "History of Modern/Contemporary Nepal" since the subject matter is mostly confined to the past 250 to 300 years. Some minor errors could be rectified: Subhas Chandra Bose not Sarat Chandra Bose (p. 70); two dates of 1950 (p. 70) and 1951 (p. 88) are provided for the founding of the Nepal Congress out of the merger of the Nepali National Congress (Koirala faction) and the Nepali Democratic Congress; the East West Highway (Mahendra Rajmarg) was completed in the 1990s and not the 1970s (p. 137). Finally, a brief introduction on trends in Nepali historiography and how this text fits within these trends would have benefited readers.

These minor suggestions aside, John Whelpton's *A History of Nepal* is a valuable survey of the history of the country over the past 300 years. It presents a new and coherent narrative that achieves a fine balance between thematic and factual content that clearly distinguishes it from previous works of the same genre. It incorporates recent research on this region to give us a birds-eye view of the history of the country. Both specialists and non-specialists will find in *A History of Nepal* an accessible and balanced introduction to the country's history.

Bernardo Michael, Assistant Professor of History and Director,

A HISTORY OF NEPAL REVIEWED BY TOM ROBERTSON

THE ORIGINS OF NEPAL'S DEVELOPMENT PROBLEMS

As a historian, I'm very pleased to see John Whelpton's *A History of Nepal*. At a time when exactly how to understand Nepal's history has become a key bone of contention in the struggle to determine Nepal's future, Whelpton's book provides a concise, thoughtful, and very useful English-language synthesis of the country's past.

Although in the future I hope to see histories of Nepal that focus less on the politicians and policies of Kathmandu and more, sources willing, on the cultural, social, and environmental histories of places around the country, Whelpton does a great job of narrating and analyzing his important slice of Nepal's history. This book provides many Oh-now-I-get-it moments, as well as numerous insights into the idiosyncratic patterns that make up Nepal's political culture.

I was disappointed, however, by one aspect of Whelpton's interpretation. In Chapter 5, Whelpton focuses on Nepal's development history since 1951. Overall this section is sound: Whelpton's historical view allows us to see that, despite many failures, Nepal did experience limited but significant advances in health, education, and infrastructure—progress that our cynicism about development sometimes obscures. What disappointed me about Whelpton's discussion was that, although in the introduction he stated that Nepal's poverty results from "many factors," in this section he blames only one: relentless population growth (3, 122-123).

Of course, no one can deny that Nepal's population rose dramatically during the middle decades of the twentieth century. In 1954, Nepal was home to 8.4 million people; by 1991, that number had increased to 18.5 million. And few would doubt Whelpton's claim that Nepal's agricultural production lagged behind this growth. But Whelpton doesn't help us understand that Nepal's population history and its development problems were far more complicated than numbers alone indicate.

To begin with, Whelpton tells us little about what caused this population growth; he treats population as an independent causal force, not as a dependent variable intertwined in

complicated feedback loops. As in most countries, Nepal's population climbed because death rates dropped while fertility rates remained where they were. But why did fertility rates remain steady? Was it, as some might think, the ignorance, irresponsibility, and promiscuity of the mostly poor families who have many children? Or, as is more likely, did the stability of Nepal's fertility rate owe to other factors—the demands of an agricultural economy, the poor health system, the lack of old-age pensions, the lack of education and power for women, and societal norms promoting male children? To be fair, Whelpton doesn't imply the first set of factors, but, unfortunately, neither does he provide the background we need to fully understand the causal force to which he gives so much weight.

More importantly, Whelpton's emphasis on population growth prevents us from understanding all the causes of Nepal's development woes. There is no consensus among the experts about the link between high population growth rates and poor development performance. Moreover, by single-mindedly stressing the problems caused by population—what, without full explanation, appears a mostly biological force—Whelpton overlooks the social and political factors involved: governmental incompetence and corruption, elite domination, and donor incompetence and neglect. This has important consequences. Blaming the problem on demographic forces makes Nepal's poverty seem, at best, inevitable, or at worst, the result of ordinary villagers' poor judgment. Either way, it takes the responsibility out of the hands of politicians, elites, and foreign actors. The "intractability of the [overpopulation] problems," not "the nature of a particular regime," Whelpton writes, may have been "the most important factor retarding progress" in Nepal (79).

It doesn't make the critic a Maoist to point out that such claims understate the political incompetence, economic exploitation, and social exclusion that Nepalis have lived with for too long, and detract from an otherwise excellent contribution to Nepal studies.

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