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## Foreword to John T. Hitchcock Festschrift Issue

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## *Foreword to John T. Hitchcock Festschrift Issue*

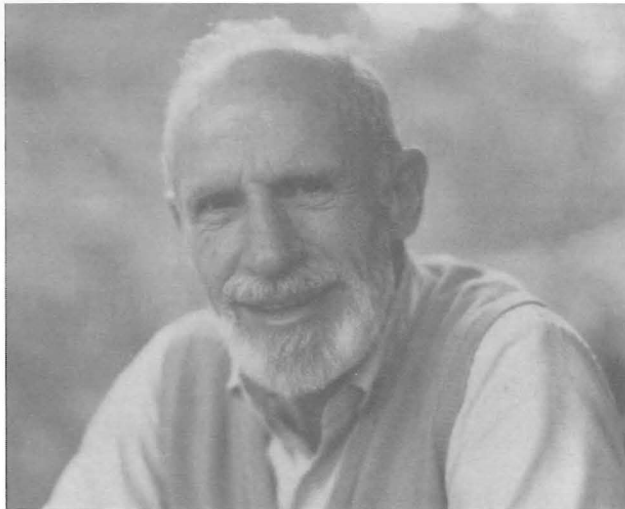
**James Fisher  
Carleton College**

The occasion of this Festschrift for John T. Hitchcock falls some 30 years after the beginning of the Nepal Studies Association, which John was instrumental in founding. John was also the first American anthropologist to work in Nepal—a remarkable fact considered in the light of the proliferation of anthropologists, from dozens of countries, working there now. It is all the more remarkable since in the 19<sup>th</sup> century Nepal agreed, by treaty, not to engage or retain any American subject for any purpose! So, it is an honor for us to recognize John's work as the truly pioneering effort that it was.

The panel that generated most of the papers in this volume was held on October 19th, 2001, at the annual South Asian Conference on the Madison campus of the University of Wisconsin. It was planned well before the June 1 palace massacres and the September 11 events of that year. Those events share similarities, at least in their sudden, unexpected, poignant, and catastrophic nature. But thinking about this panel more recently, I've tried to

ask myself what difference these events, and those associated with the Maoist insurgency, have made in the work all of us are doing in Nepal, and whether they shed any light on what pioneers like John did.

Anthropology has in many ways become transformed in its concerns and issues from what it was when John began working in Nepal, but rather than rendering the anthropology of those days obsolete, today's interests build on the work of people like John. Of course



anthropology is always reinventing itself—that's one of the problems with it. Reinventing anthropology may on the whole be a good thing, or at least good things can come out of it, but that doesn't necessarily or automatically justify the denigration of unreinvented—old—anthropology. As Fricke points out, John asked the best questions—those that are never completely answered. He was concerned with problems and tensions that directly affect people's lives. Such issues are not always successfully resolved, hence the events of recent times. It is a tribute to John that the papers in this volume show how scholars are still working on those fundamental questions.

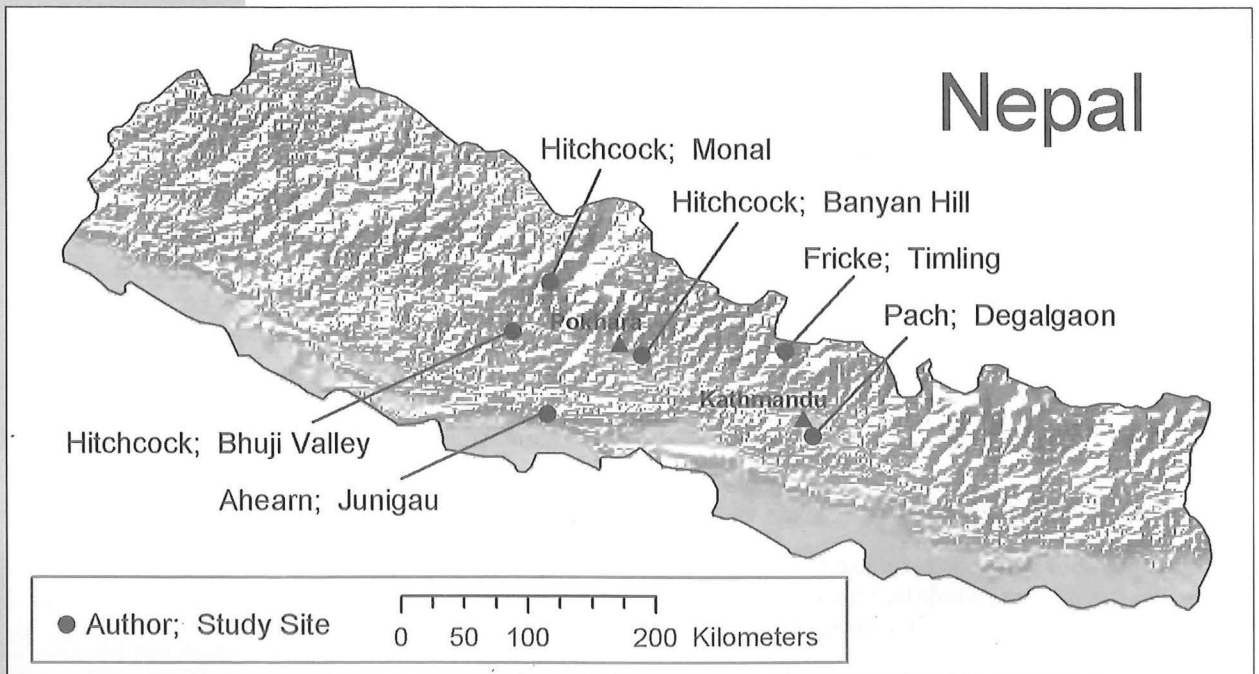
I think particularly here of John's major research interests in Nepal: ecology and shamanism. At first glance these seem like disparate fields, yet they are joined in his work in somewhat the way cosmology and elementary particles are joined in physics—the macroscopic and the

microscopic, or perhaps the doing and being that Fricke mentions. In any case, they both deal with culturally specific concerns with basic problems of human existence. Ecological problems, now so close to the American political surface, seemed remote when John began his investigations in Nepal. If the events of September 11 and following have taught us anything, it is that it would be impossible for Americans, and indeed for anyone, to know too much about the religions of the world, no matter how far removed from most American experience.

One of the impulses that John helped to set in motion, or at least to continue in motion, was the concern with shamanism, a world-wide phenomenon and one particularly widespread in Nepal. The importance of how forms of shamanism play out in the everyday lives of people is shown in the papers by Holmberg, Iltis, and Pach, Rimal, and Shrestha. It is a measure of the depth and breadth of shamanism, and of John's interests in it, that all three papers focus on entirely different aspects of it.

Similarly, as the energy crunch hits us, as it does from time to time, we are alerted to the importance of relating lifestyle to larger environmental considerations and uses once again. Here again, Tom Fricke's sophisticated demographic work over the years carries forth John's interest in the relation of human populations to the environments they occupy. Mikesell's paper clearly delineates John Hitchcock's intellectual genealogy and comparative rather than deterministic approach to ecology, and the importance of agency—to cite a more modern term—in refashioning culture in particular environments.

These papers draw a chain and compass across a frontier of research that has expanded enormously since John Hitchcock's initial forays in Nepal more than 40 years ago. It is an affirmation of his sharpness of vision that legions of researchers are still busy trying to answer the hard questions that he first posed.



map by Becca Heartwell