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## Review of Lost World

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## REVIEWS AND REJOINDERS

**Amaury de Riencourt.** *Lost World: Tibet.* 1987, updated edition of original 1950 issue. New Delhi: Sterling Publishers. 335 pages, with added introduction and epilogue; glossary, index, sixteen monochrome plates, one map.

The present decade has seen Tibet opening its doors to foreigners wider than ever before. With the gradual relaxation in Chinese policy it became possible for foreigners to enter the region not just through China in closely-shepherded groups but from Nepal and, whether as groups or as individuals, with progressively greater freedom of movement. The heyday of unrestricted (within certain limits) travel in Tibet was probably 1986, before the government's anxieties about footloose travelers turning up in the most obscure parts of the country resulted in measures to curtail this phenomenon. Since the Lhasa riots of October 1987 and of February 1988, and the ensuing Chinese alarm about outsiders' sympathy with the Tibetan cause, it is unlikely that official tolerance of wandering aliens will be restored in the foreseeable future.

But tourists (at least those who cannot afford the exorbitant fare of the flight) will continue to ply the now familiar road between Kathmandu and Central Tibet. Among other towns they will visit Gyantse, and they will visit Lhasa. And if they have read Amaury de Riencourt's *Lost World* they will be consumed with envy of someone who was able to spend several months in the country and to see these places in their full splendour four decades ago.

It is scarcely possible to imagine that the Gyantse described by de Riencourt is the same town as that seen by the visitor today. (Since he came from Kalimpong via Phari he did not visit Shigatse, as the present-day traveler from Nepal would.) Gyantse's Palkhor monastery was 'swarming with red-robed lamas' and appeared as 'a heap of buildings rising up in tiers to the summit of the hill, some three hundred feet above the plain. Out of this great amphitheatre, gold plated roofs glisten in the sun...' (p.57). The author does not say so, but there were about fifteen hundred monks at the time (admittedly quite small by the standards of the great Lhasa monasteries), and sixteen colleges around the main hall and the Newar stupa. When the present reviewer first visited Gyantse in 1985 there were seventeen elderly monks, though their numbers had swelled to over thirty by 1987. Of the sixteen colleges, fourteen have been razed to their foundations.

De Riencourt arrived in Gyantse during what was probably the spectacular summer festival called Damag (*mDa' dmag*), and he gives a lavish description of the displays of archery, horsemanship and dancing, a scene decorated by prosperous Tibetans 'dressed up in long flowing robes of silk brocade; the luxurious multi-coloured gowns trailed on the dusty ground and each of them raised a small cloud of dust...' (p.51). After many years of abeyance since the 19~s the Damag has been reestablished. In its present form it consists of football, archery, and a one-kilometre straight horse race. The men wear track suits.

More impressive than Gyantse is the author's description of Lhasa. His first impressions alone are very different from those of the modern traveler. For de Riencourt, Lhasa is a wonderland of pageantry from the moment of his formal reception by Hugh Richardson, the British Resident, through his succession of audiences with Tibetan hierarchs (including the young Fourteenth Dalai Lama), protracted luncheon parties and visits to the flourishing religious centres of the capital. Communication is possible 'through the mediation of the foreign-educated George Tsarong, who has been assigned as his interpreter. On entering Lhasa today, the first striking edifice which the visitor sees on the surrounding hills is not Drepung monastery but a collection of huge metal petroleum storage tanks. The medical college on Chakpori has of course long been replaced by a television transmitter; the Norbu Lingka is practically overshadowed by the Lasa (*sic*) Holiday Inn, the surroundings of the Potala are a showcase for socialist realist architecture, and rumor has it that the Jokhang,

Tibet's most sacred building, is shortly to be designated a museum. More nostalgically-inclined visitors have been known to weep on entering the city.

Lest the present reviewer be accused of reactionary tendencies, it ought to be emphasised that the contrasts given here should not be taken as a criticism of Chinese policies in the region (unless a link can be established between politics and aesthetics. While de Riencourt, on the other hand, makes no bones about his political sympathies, in the epilogue added to the present edition he identifies 'an even greater and more insidious menace than Chinese persecution ever was: tourism' (p.319). Now this comes as something of a surprise. While we may sympathize with his fear that tourism may lead to a 'trivialisation' of Tibetan culture by the reconstruction of monasteries as mere 'shells', it is not true that this reconstruction is entirely for the benefit of tourists - why else should there be government sponsorship (albeit limited) for such restoration in restricted areas? It should also be remembered that many Tibetans see tourism as an important link with the outside world and acknowledge that police and army excesses are likely to be more moderate when perpetrated under Western eyes. Finally, there can be no doubt that it is the opening of the region to tourism that has been responsible for the present surge of foreign interest in Tibet: and I would venture to suggest that it is this interest alone which can justify the reappearance of *Lost World* after thirty-seven years.

Reference has been made above to de Riencourt's vivid accounts of life in Tibet, whether he is describing beggars around the Jokhang or the surreal spectacle of a film on African pygmies being shown at the British Residency as educational entertainment for Lhasa high society. And if any reader has misguided notions about the idyllic nature of the Tibetan administration at the time these should be dispelled by the aura of intrigue and ponderous officialdom that pervades his meetings with state dignitaries in the aftermath of the Reting rebellion. One beneficial outcome of the Tibetan diaspora of 1959 was the sudden accessibility of the country's culture and literature, and foreigners' understanding of these domains has made great advances since that time. An important result of this has been the demystification of Tibetan religion: not a denial or mere rationalisation, but a serious attempt to approach its depth and complexity on its own terms. In this respect *Lost World* is severely anachronistic.

Probably for the benefit of his prospective readers de Riencourt represents his journey in the stereotypic terms of a spiritually-motivated quest to 'the most mysterious city in the world, an earthly foretaste of endless nirvana' (p.105). His representations of Tibetan mysticism consequently have an 'Orientalist' turn (in the pejorative sense of that word) insofar as they are to a large extent a reconstitution of Western received ideas and are clearly intended to impress rather than inform.

This 'mystical' section of the book (which follows some fine descriptions of oracles in action) covers chapters twenty-three to twenty-six. The debt to Evans-Wentz in chapter twenty-four and the more general influence of Alexandra David-Neel are obvious, but neither is acknowledged. The more sensational ideas are put into the mouth of an unidentified lama with whom the author has a night-long interview on the roof of the 'Dragon lamasery'. No doubt the author did have an audience with a highly-ranked lama on the subject of Tibetan mysticism: but the interview, as presented here, is frankly incredible. The lama's discourse, which spans two chapters, deals with all those subjects which Western readers would have been most hungry to hear about - telepathy, 'wind-running', 'psychic heat', levitation, ritual magic, consciousness-transference and the like, without even a mention of their place in the Buddhist scheme. His descriptive powers also lose their original touch here and descend to unworthy clichés. For example: 'The Precious One looked at me or rather through me once more. His gleaming eyes bored into my subconscious mind which he surely knew far better than I did, weighing my Karma...' (p.268), and so on *ad nauseam*. The mystical atmosphere of this exclusive, private, master-disciple session is marred by practical inconsistencies which leave the reader unconvinced. How for example, did they communicate? The insinuation is that there was direct dialogue: 'I suddenly had the impression that my brain was empty. I could not even remember if the Rimpoche had been talking or whether he had simply sent thoughts racing through my head without having uttered a word' (p.275). The concerned reader concludes that telepathy is an unlikely medium for the conversation. The Rimpoche does not speak English, de Riencourt speaks no Tibetan and, if the interview did indeed take place in freezing cold (unlikely in a Lhasa summer) through the night, we cannot help feeling a surge of sympathy for the unacknowledged but long-suffering interpreter George Tsarong.

Most irritating are the author's misrepresentations of the less exotic aspects of Tibetan religion. Beyond Gyantse de Riencourt and his Sherpa sardar Chumpa visit

the small lamasery of Gyabrang. The monks were Red Hat lamas or *dukpas*, who belong to the unreformed sect and are in opposition to the *gelukpas* or Yellow Hats... Red Hats are allowed to drink and to marry. In spite of his contempt for these heretics, Chumpa went in and proceeded with his religious work....' (p.75).

Throughout the book there is a fairly consistent designation of all Kargyupas as *dukpas* (actually one of several subsects of the Kargyupa school) and a confusion of both with the Nyingmapas. Concerning Chumpa's 'contempt for these heretics', as a Sherpa he was almost certainly a Nyingmapa or a Kargyupa himself, so contempt on his part is unlikely.

There are also a few stunning errors in geographical detail. On p.99 we are told that the Tsangpo River 'springs out of Kashmir'. On p.128 the author corrects himself, only to make an even worse blunder, in stating that 'this lifeline stretches from Lake Manasarovar in the east to the bend of the Tsang Po towards India and the south'. We must assume that it was sheer oversight on the author's part to place Manasarovar in the east (instead of the far west) of Tibet, and an editorial lapse that did not spot the mistake.

De Riencourt is at his most fluent and authoritative when he writes on political and historical matters. The notes on the dust-jacket suggest that he has wide experience as a journalist of foreign affairs, and this shows in his chapters on the historical relations between Tibet and its neighbours and also in his epilogue. More thorough studies of the issues are available now, but his treatment of them provides a useful counterpoint to his personal observations, which remain the highlight of the book; for whatever shortcomings there may be in the work, it must be conceded that the Tibet of 1947 has disappeared, and no amount of careful research or balanced writing can produce first-hand images of that lost world.

Charles Ramble