From the Archives: Margaret Oldfield’s Description of a Royal Wedding in Nepal

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Margaret Oldfield was the wife of Henry Ambrose Oldfield, who served as the surgeon in the British Residency in Kathmandu from 1850 to 1863. Henry Oldfield is known to scholars of Nepal as the author of Sketches from Nepal (1880), which describes Nepal as it was during the mid-nineteenth century. Kanak Dixit observes that Jang Bahadur and Oldfield were apparently on good terms, for Jang allowed Oldfield to accompany the army to the northern frontier during the 1855 war with Tibet, and Oldfield, a dedicated artist, took the opportunity to paint a number of scenes that illustrate for us what a Nepali army on the march looked like (Dixit 2008:371). In fact, Dixit notes that Jang gave Oldfield a good deal of latitude to travel where he pleased in Nepal, and the numerous landscapes and architectural studies Oldfield painted give us a glimpse of Nepal during that period (see Oldfield 1975). Jang’s treatment of Oldfield was perhaps different from that meted out to other members of the Residency, for according to Whelpton, he allowed the British Resident and his staff access only to “strictly limited areas” (2005:47). Manandhar argues however that Jang, who depended on British support, pursued a far more friendly policy towards the British Resident than any of his predecessors; the Resident “was allowed to make tours of the Tarai and the border areas to inspect the boundary pillars and settle extradition cases; and he and his staff were invited to social celebrations and hunting trips” (2005:14).

Margaret Oldfield accompanied her husband to Nepal, and the following letter preserved in the British Library, to her relatives at home in England, describes the wedding of Jang Bahadur Rana’s daughter to the crown prince of Nepal. This is very likely Trailohya, the son of King Surendra (king from 1847-1881), who was married to three of Jang’s daughters (Whelpton 2005: 236), although he died before he could ascend the throne. The daughter described in the letter is probably Tara Kumari (b. 1851), who, according to Rishikesh Shaha, was married to Trailohya in 1856 [sic] (Shaha 1990: 244). In addition to describing the pomp and circumstance of a royal wedding in Nepal, we are given a glimpse into the nature of Jang’s relationship with the king (of whom Mrs. Oldfield paints a very unflattering portrait) and into the new, elite culture emerging in Rana Nepal: the Grand Pianos imported for Jang’s wives, along with a French piano teacher, and the western dress and the other commodities of elite European consumption.

The wedding described in this letter took place against the backdrop of a major crisis that was consuming Jang’s attention at the time. The Sepoy rebellion had broken out in India in May, and Jang had offered 50,000 troops to the British to help put it down (Jain 1972: 141). Although Jang was the real power in Nepal, the formal prime ministership was held by his brother Krishna Bahadur, following his own resignation of the office in favor of his brother Bam Bahadur (who died on May 25, 1857) following the conclusion of the war with Tibet (see Jain 1972: 134-139). Whatever Jang’s reasons for stepping down, the Company government refused to recognize his authority after his resignation, dealing only with the king and the formal prime minister. Krishna Bahadur had also made a half-hearted offer of help, which the British Resident, George Ramsay, had accepted (without consulting his superiors in Calcutta, who then instructed him on June 12 to withdraw his acceptance) and which acceptance Jang considered to be a slight to himself, the real power in Nepal. Later in June however, the situation in the plains deteriorated, and the Government of India reversed itself, asking Ramsay to seek military assistance from the Nepal darbar. Jain writes that Ramsay did so during the marriage procession of King Surendra’s son on June 25th, described in Mrs. Oldfield’s letter (Jain 1972: 144-45), meeting with both Krishna Bahadur, formally the prime minister, and Jang. The day after his daughter’s wedding, Jang resumed the prime ministership, and was free once again to deal directly with the British.

This letter, from a collection of letters written to Henry Oldfield’s mother in England between 1846 and 1866, indicates the cordial relations that appear to have existed between Jang Bahadur and the Residency staff. It is reproduced here with the permission of the British Library. Some of the divisions into paragraphs are my own, to make the text easier to read.
Kathmandu,
July 8th, 1857

My Dear Oldfield,

Having had a very gay life for two days, since I last wrote to you, I have a great deal to tell you, and if I delay it longer, I may forget the details in a great measure. This gaiety consisted in our seeing the public part of a native wedding. The marriage was on the 25th June, the bridegroom being the King's eldest son, the young heir apparent, aged 9 years, and the bride being Jang's eldest unmarried daughter, aged six years. Before, however, I tell you any of the details, I must just tell you what a native wedding is like. It always lasts two days and throughout those 2 days of course a great deal of rejoicing and feasting takes place. On the first day the bridegroom goes to the house of his bride, where all the religious part of the ceremony takes place, and on the second day he returns to his home, taking with him his bride; she generally remains with him for a few days, and then returns to her father's house until she is about 13 or 14 years of age, when she rejoins her husband for good. In Nepaul as well as in England, the marriage of the heir apparent to the throne is a rare, and therefore very grand, event. We, of course, only saw the public part of the ceremony, no stranger ever being admitted to the religious part, but what we did see, is more than any English ladies have ever been allowed to see before and we enjoyed (it) immensely. The Resident and his suite (Captain Byers and Harry) had to go both days officially and to form part of the procession, we 2 ladies (Mrs. Byers and I) of course, couldn't go officially and should therefore not have seen anything of it, if it had not been for the kindness of Jung Bahadoor, who invited us to his house, from there to witness, on the 1st day, the arrival of the bridegroom, and on the 2nd day, the departure of both the bride and the bridegroom. From the fact of our accepting such an invitation, and we two ladies spending 3 or 4 hours at Jung's house, without any Englishman being within 3 miles of us, and at such a time as the present, shows how safe we feel ourselves up here, and what confidence we have in the Nepaulese government...
About 5 o'clock in the afternoon of June 25th 1857, a very handsome English-built close carriage (with a large gilt sun on it by way of a coat of arms) came to the Residency for Mrs. Byers and me, another carriage came for the 3 gentlemen (and) 3 or 4 Elephants for the office people to take (us) all to the Durbar. Jung sent a native officer who spoke English to accompany us ladies (Mrs. B & myself) and act as Interpreter. We drove off in grand style, with 2 or 3 outriders, straight to Thappatully, (Jung's house) and on arriving there were met on the stairs by Jung himself, who helped us out of the carriage and giving each a hand, led us upstairs to a very large, handsome room, built after his return from England, and therefore, quite English in appearance; the whole of the furniture was beautiful; the carpet a very handsome English one, and in the centre of the room stood an immense candelabrum that nearly reached to the ceiling; there were plenty of chiffoniers with large mirrors behind them, and two superb grand Pianos, one an Errand, the other a Broadwood. Jung led us up to the end of this room, and seated us on a very nice sofa, seating himself by us, and talking to us through his Interpreter. After we had rested a few minutes, Jung asked us to come into an adjoining room, where some fruit was prepared for us. This room, which is on a rather lower level, than the larger one, we descended into by carriage steps, which is rather a shaky mode of communication. The whole table set out was quite dazzling to look at, it was so completely covered with very handsome plate of all kinds, the Holy Communion Service (of course, Jung does not know what it is) Racing Cups, and all manner of beautiful vases, mixed up together. There were about 6 little glass dishes of different fruits spread for each of us, & Jung brought us with his own hands, not permitting a servant to wait upon us, a little silver tube of iced mango with which he filled our cups several times.

After we had finished, he took us again to the same large room, and then asked us if we would allow him to introduce his wives to us, for, as there was no gentleman with us, he had no objection to their being seen. We, of course, were only too happy, and he went and brought out 4 of them (who were evidently waiting) he led them up one by one, and introduced them to each of us separately, making them shake hands with us, and telling us what King's daughter each was. His favorite (who was also much the best looking) is the Coorg Rajah's daughter, whose sister has become a Christian and is living in England. He then told the Maharanees, or principal wife, to lead Mrs. Byers by the hand, and the Coorg one to lead me to the Pianos. Mons. Chavdon, who teaches them music then made his appearance, and these two Ranees (Queens) began to play some polkas and Waltzes for us, sometimes both pianos together, and sometimes separately. Jung placed us on chairs between his wives, so that while they were playing we had a good look at their dress. The skirts (with no crinolines under) were a kind of brown net, so completely covered with gilt lace flowers that you could only see a thread or two of net, their bodies were tight velvet, of a dark red or purple colour, covered with gold lace, and they had a kind of thin gauze veil with gilt sprays on them, thrown about them in a native way. Their head-dresses were most costly, the hair was drawn tightly off the face, and hung down their backs in one thick, long plait. The Coorg Ranee wore a most lovely tiara of diamonds and emeralds, in the form of a large bunch of flowers, very like those belonging to the Queen of Spain in the Exhibition of 1851, but much more splendid. They all wore necklaces and bracelets of most beautiful diamonds, emeralds and pearls and well as their rings worn one on each finger outside a pair of white thread gloves, so when they played, each took off 10 superb rings, and a pair of washed white thread gloves! Jung himself was very pleasingly dressed... After his ladies had played for us they had to depart, as the bride required their attendance. Jung then took us round the rooms, and showed us all his pictures of himself, his wives and brothers, and two likenesses of our Queen and Prince Albert, which were sent as a present to the Nepaulese King, but which Jung has managed to get. In an adjoining room was a beautiful bed (the wooden part of it had been carved by a Nepaulese) covered with velvet, & on each side, and over the head were immense mirrors, reaching from the top to the bottom, and there was a lovely little ivory wash-stand, with two solid silver basins & ewers, and in a kind of recess, some of Jung's coats were hanging, which he showed us with pleasure...

At last the procession began to arrive. It was past 8 o'clock, & quite dark. The first detachment consisted principally of men carrying something like tables with paper ornaments and lights, accompanied by a great noise of native music, and some dancers whom [sic] we were told, were going to perform a tragedy and comedy, which consisted in standing all in a row, and sending their arms, first to one side, & then to the other, in a most ridiculous and awkward manner. Then came the band, really playing very well, then a crowd of female attendants (singing) (from the Durbar) and in the midst of them was carried a sacred symbol. Immediately behind them, was the little bridegroom, in a beautiful gilt Palanquin. Then came the elephants, the 1st with the King and his father on it; the trappings of the elephant beautiful and he was an immense animal. Directly behind them the elephants with the British Resident, Capt. [lyers] & [array], then a quantity of other elephants, with native officers, etc… When the elephants knelt for the British officers to dismount, Jung gave the signal, and the band played “God Save the Queen.” Then he asked us if we would allow him to go down and receive the King, the bridegroom and the English gentlemen, whom he soon brought back to us—while the little bridegroom was carried off to the private apartments for the religious part of the ceremony to take place. You would have been amazed to see the three Englishmen dressed in native Kingcobs caps with shawls wrapped round their persons, presents from the King, which, however, they are not allowed to keep. After some fireworks, we returned home, passing about 12,000 troops, drawn up on the parade, who fired a great deal, only stopping to let us pass…
On the 26th June, about 4 ½ o’clock, the same handsome English-built close carriage came for Ms Byers & me and another for the three gentlemen, and the same native officer to interpret also. On arriving at Thappatully he met us on the steps and said in a most emphatic manner, “How do you do,” that being nearly all the English he knows. He gave us each a hand and led us upstairs to the large room we were in the day before. In a short time the 3 gentlemen arrived, & after talking with them for a short time Jung asked us if we would like to go on an elephant with the procession and he would accompany us. Of course, we were only too glad to do so. The band while we were waiting for the[m] was playing very nicely on the balcony, and Jung introduced us to a number of different officers of rank, who were all dressed most richly, their tunics being of either dark blue or green velvet covered with gold lace, and in their caps and on their belts, most beautiful ornaments of diamonds [sic] & emeralds, the size of bird’s eggs! Jung himself was very plainly dressed as he had no official or public part to perform, it not being “etiquette” for the father of the bride to take any part in the ceremony so he was at our disposal for the whole of the time. His dress was a simple white tunic and no ornament at all about him, with the exception of a very pretty light green velvet cap covered with gold lace, and a necklace of emeralds the size of pigeons’ eggs and tied with a nasty old bit of blue cord! The mixtures of some of the officers’ dresses were very queer, many of them wore old white or black thread gloves and one had on galoshes with no shoes under them, anything to be a little like the English! Jung has beautiful little feet and always wears very neat little high heeled boots with elastic sides, and ladies size! He now took us down to the courtyard to mount the elephant waiting for us there. He was a splendid animal, & with very handsome trappings on him.

The procession was now ready to start, & as (We did not form part of it we [went] first of all.) The palanquin with the little bride in it, surrounded by a crowd of female attendants, who were singing, and in the centre of whom was carried the sacred symbol, was followed by the Palanquin containing the bridegroom, and he again by his brother in another palanquin. Behind these came the elephants, the 1st with the King and his father on it, the next with Major Ramsay & a native officer, and then one with Captain Byers & a native officer, then one with Captain Blyers & an officer, and another with H[arry] and another native officer, and behind them a quantity more. The howdar we were on was a kind of small platform, with brass rails round it, we had to sit down with our legs straight out before us; Jung sat at the end of my feet, and the interpreter sat at Mrs. Blyers’ feet, and we sometimes headed the procession [illegible], also went in and out of it as we liked so as to get a good view of the part of the procession behind us. When we passed the Parade ground on which were 12,000 troops drawn up, they all gave us a military salute, and Jung ordered the band on the parade to play “God save the Queen” in honor of us two ladies, very polite wasn’t he? He told us we might feel ourselves quite safe up here, as he would take care of us, in fact he considered himself the life guard of the ladies, as Mrs. Byers & I now always speak of him as our Lifeguard.

When we arrived at the Durbar (the court, that is, where the King and bride-groom live) we dismounted, and Jung seated us in a kind of verandah so that we might see the rest of the procession arrive. In the meantime, he was most active in keeping off the crowd, pushing and hitting them with his own hands, and then taking a quiet smoke at his large gold pipe, that was carried after him. The prince (the King’s brother) came and asked us after our health (through the officer who spoke English). He talked a great deal to us and was quite merry. At last the officer translated to us in a very grave manner, that Jung said he was of opinion that England was famed for its beauty, this was a compliment to Mrs. B and me. Then he said he thought the English were very clean, and he went on to tell us about the weddings he had seen in England, & all manner of things, so that we enjoyed our trip on the elephant with him very much indeed. The crowd in the city and everywhere was tremendous and the noise of the native music sometimes was deafening. Even Jung put his hands to his ears and laughed. We arrived before the rest of the procession some 10 minutes, but at least it came—first of all the palanquins with the bride and bridegroom, they went into the house, and then came the elephants, first of all the King’s then the 3 English gentlemens’ [sic] and when they dismounted, the band played again “God save the Queen.” Jung then took us up one by one to the King and his father and presented us to them. The King is completely under Jung’s thumb and is a weak imbecile-looking man though quite young. The old King looked quite daft, & was dressed in a long white petticoat which gave him very much the appearance of an old nurse. Jung made them each shake hands with us, which they didn’t much like, at all events it is the first time in their lives they have ever shaken hands with English ladies! We then had to hold out our pocket-handkerchiefs, the King put a little ottar [sic] of rose on them, that always being part of the ceremony either of introduction or departure. Then Jung took hold of mine & Mrs. Byers’ hands again and led us inside the Durbar where the palanquin with the bride & bridegroom were; he took us up first to the palanquin of the bride and told her to shake hands with us; she was such a pretty little girl (only 6 years) but magnificently dressed & covered with beautiful ornaments of diamond’s & emeralds, the size of some of the officers’ dresses were very queer, many of them eggs and tied with a nasty old bit of blue cord! The mixtures...
is thought to be very valuable by them, but the old King who looked quite wild, put it at the extreme end of my handkerchief and it rolled on to the floor, however I took no notice, and was only very glad that it did for they are nasty things to carry & dirty your gloves.

We were then handed to our carriages by Jung and returned home, this was about 8 o’clock. After we went home there was a great deal of firing as on the preceding evening, but very considerately they waited until we were home on account of frightening the horses. We are the first English ladies who have ever been allowed to witness a native wedding, shake hands with Jung’s ladies or be introduced to the King and his father, this last part which was of course by far the greatest honour, we liked the least, for they are such an imbecile-looking couple, both under Jung’s thumb. He (Jung) is now the Prime Minister again, I daresay you heard that last year he vacated that office in favour of his brother who died the other day and became a Maharajah or great King of some little provinces, but he is now Minister again, and the poor weak little King has nothing but his title (I am afraid you will hardly understand this long story, but I never could compose (excepting on birds ?!) but I enjoyed extremely the whole proceeding, something so new, and quite an excitement in our every day life. I like Jung very much indeed, he is such a complete gentleman, and has no forced politeness about him, it is all quite natural. He does not know any English excepting a few sentences such as “How do you do”—“Come here”—“Shake hands”—“Sit down” and I don’t know any Hindoostanee that I can speak to him, my little knowledge being merely confined to giving a few orders to the servants, and inferiors are addressed in quite a different way to superiors...

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The MSS ends abruptly here. It is most probably a copy made by the writer of two letters she has written, one kept for her own purposes, perhaps that of a diary, as it describes a significant event in her life in Kathmandu. Most of the rest of her correspondence deals with domestic matters, although there are some accounts of events in India and her reactions to the Sepoy rebellion (for example, in a letter of August 12, 1857, “The British are, & will be fighting for their very existence, & cannot stop until they have exterminated the entire sepoy race, man, woman & child”). The transcript has been edited in pencil, apparently by Mrs. Oldfield herself, as the writing appears the same. At the bottom of the letter, in the original handwriting is the following: “Two letters written to Emma Oldfield & Rev. Oldfield [sic] Prescott by M.A.O. July 1857, Ktmandoo.”

REFERENCES


