
Volume 24

Number 1 *Himalaya; The Journal of the Association
for Nepal and Himalayan Studies No. 1 & 2*

Article 22

2004

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Recommended Citation

Fisher, James F. (2004) "Book review of 'Peter Aufschnaiter's Eight Years in Tibet' edited by Martin Brauen," *HIMALAYA, the Journal of the Association for Nepal and Himalayan Studies*: Vol. 24 : No. 1 , Article 22.

Available at: <http://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/himalaya/vol24/iss1/22>

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PETER AUFSCHNAITER'S EIGHT YEARS IN TIBET

MARTIN BRAUEN, EDITOR

REVIEWED BY JAMES F. FISHER

Readers of Heinrich Harrer's *Seven Years in Tibet* (or viewers of the Brad Pitt movie by the same name) will remember "that other guy" who was always lurking in Harrer's background. The man was Peter Aufschnaiter. The reason Aufschnaiter's book has one more year in the title than Harrer's is instructive. Harrer fled Tibet with the Dalai Lama in 1951, but Aufschnaiter was so enamored of everything about Tibet – its landscapes, people, and culture – that he found it hard to tear himself away. He left Lhasa and continued his travels, but kept close watch on the Chinese and managed to stay a little ahead of them for another year, before finally dropping over the Nepalese border. Wanting to stay as close to Tibet as he legally could, he lived most of the rest of his life in Kathmandu. He died in his native Austria October 12, 1973.

The book consists of 25 short, chronologically arranged chapters, plus prefatory material and appendices, but it also contains many of Aufschnaiter's meticulous maps (including his town plan for Lhasa), drawings, sketches, photographs, and itineraries of what he calls his excursions, but which today we would call expeditions. Anyone interested in the history of Tibetan exploration will find this material fascinating. Perhaps no other westerner spent as much time learning as many interesting things about everyday life in Tibet as did Aufschnaiter. He knew peasants and nomadic herders as well as the Dalai Lama and members of the nobility. He worked for the Tibetan government for several years, planning and constructing its first irrigation canal, conducting experiments designed to improve the quality of local crops, improvising Tibet's first air strip, and making archaeological discoveries. Contemporary travelers to the areas Aufschnaiter visited will be rewarded

by instant access to his precise measurements and insightful observations.

As a prominent mountaineer (he had led an expedition to Nanga Parbat before his arrest as an enemy alien in British India in 1939) he not only mapped and measured Tibetan peaks, but took an interest in their names. He puts forth the interesting idea that the name Chomo Langma refers to Makalu rather than to Everest. He argues further that Everest never had a native name at all, simply because it was not much noticed by local inhabitants.

I would like, if I may, to end this review on a personal note. I met both Harrer and Aufschnaiter in Kathmandu in the mid-1960s: Harrer the ebullient, self-promoting raconteur; Aufschnaiter the quiet, modest recluse. He lived his entire life as simply and unencumbered by material possessions as possible. His reticence to talk about Tibet was as well known as Harrer's desire to spin spell-binding stories long into the night. Perhaps because I had just spent a year in Dolpa, Aufschnaiter admitted me to the small circle of people with whom he would discuss his experiences. He talked of assembling his vast collection of notes and photographs and maps into a book, but his organizational powers may not have permitted him to complete this ambitious project. Those interested in life in Tibet as it was in the years immediately before the arrival of the Chinese at mid-century can be thankful that the friends and colleagues Aufschnaiter left behind gave final shape to this valuable contribution.

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*Peter
Aufschnaiter's
Eight Years in
Tibet*

compiled and
edited by Martin
Brauen

Bangkok: Orchid
Press, 2002
208 pp.



Father and son

Photo: Ted Savage