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# A MAN OF THE FRONTIER: S. W. LADEN LA (1876- 1936): HIS LIFE AND TIMES IN DARJEELING AND TIBET

BY NICHOLAS RHODES AND DEKI  
RHODES

Kolkata: Mira Bose, 2006. xi + 89 pp. \$20.00 (cloth), ISBN  
978-81-901867-2-8.

REVIEWED BY PARSHOTAM MEHRA

For any meaningful discussion and understanding of relations between British India and Tibet in the early twentieth century, the name and role of S. W. Laden La must figure prominently. Scion of a Sikkimese Bhotia Lama family and an Anglophile to the core, he entered the Indian Imperial Police service at a young age. Because of his linguistic skills—English apart, he spoke excellent Tibetan and a host of Darjeeling dialects—and amiable personality, he soon emerged as a close confidant of the Raj, which he helped to tide over numerous ticklish situations. He made himself useful during his first such mission when he crossed over into Tibet in the wake of the Younghusband expedition to Lhasa (1903-4). More important, he was a close associate of Charles Alfred Bell who had succeeded John Claude White as political officer in Sikkim in 1908 and who eventually played a major role in bringing Tibet closer to the Raj. Bell was the principal British officer who liaised with the thirteenth Dalai Lama during the latter's little over two years of exile in Darjeeling (1910-12). Serving as police chief, Laden La emerged as Bell's right hand man. He ran all kinds of errands for the god-king and his sizeable retinue of a couple of hundred people.

Later when the Tibetan ruler returned home with his land in near-chaos—in Lhasa and the country as a whole, a rebellious Chinese soldiery was at loggerheads with an outraged Tibetan populace baying for its blood—Laden La was deputed to tide over a well-nigh explosive situation. His initial mission to accompany the Dalai Lama was vetoed in Whitehall as tantamount to direct interference in Tibet's internal affairs, albeit he was allowed to stay put in Gyantse to serve as a long distance advisor to the Tibetan ruler. Constraints notwithstanding, Laden La managed things reasonably well to help evacuate a large bulk of the rabble of an army without a drop of blood being

shed. Moreover, he was able to bring about a meeting and a modicum of understanding between the Dalai Lama and his estranged colleague, the ninth Panchen Lama. Considering their long tale of misunderstanding and lack of mutual trust—detailed in this reviewer's study of Tibetan polity—this was a singular feat of diplomatic skill and political finesse.<sup>1</sup>

In the early 1920s, Bell visited Lhasa as a personal guest of the reigning thirteenth Dalai Lama, with Laden La serving as an important member of his entourage. Laden La's role in gaining permission for the 1921 Reconnaissance Expedition to Mount Everest earned him the fellowship of the prestigious Royal Geographical Society in London. Not long after, he spearheaded the Raj's new policy of putting Tibet on a modernization drive. He organized an army and a police force, opened a school, prospected for fabled mineral wealth, and sent some boys to England for education. Laden La chaperoned the first contingent of four boys—who proved to be the last—to British shores. More to the point, he was the first non-Tibetan to raise from scratch and command Lhasa's police force (1923-4). Sadly for him, and for Tibet, the experiment was a non-starter, largely because of the Dalai Lama's stiff opposition. Not only did it encroach upon the vested interest of the monks to maintain law and order, but it also took away their freedom, they felt, to manage things their own way. In the final count, however, it was the Dalai Lama who refused to take a stand and, fearing for the worst, caved in to the monks' bullying and blusters to save his own throne.

Toward the end, in 1929, a piquant situation arising out of the unwarranted detention of a Nepalese by the Lhasan authorities on suspicion of being a spy threatened to explode, with the Gurkhas prepared for full-scale hostilities. Insofar as the Raj had intimate relations with both of its neighbors, any such development would have played havoc on a sensitive frontier. Despite a certain cooling of relations between the Dalai Lama and the British in the late 1920s, New Delhi hastened Laden La, though unofficially, to visit the Tibetan capital to downplay the incident and forestall what could have been an ugly situation at best and an invariable catastrophe at worst. His biographers indicate that the visit was "a remarkable success." For not only was a hot war between Nepal and Tibet averted, but also the "path (was) cleared" for an improvement in relations between Britain and Tibet (p. 54).

Interestingly, Laden La was close to the person of the thirteenth Dalai Lama and corresponded with the ninth Panchen Lama, then living as an exile in Guomindang China. This biography reproduces the text of a letter that the Panchen Lama wrote, which Laden La received while he was still in the Tibetan capital in March 1930. And, there were, we are told, some more exchanges between the two. It was not only Tibet and its affairs in which Laden La was so adept. Nearer home, he also was deeply involved in the

events among the hill people of Darjeeling. He advocated *inter alia* separating the district from the plains of Bengal, an agenda remarkably similar to that of the more recent campaign for hill autonomy. Laden La was also a devout Buddhist and spent much of his time and patrimony helping local religious institutions and a number of social causes.

His biographers have repudiated roundly two major charges leveled against their subject. First, they argue against the common claim that, as Lhasa's police chief, Laden La was involved in a conspiracy (c. 1924) with some Tibetan officials to stage a coup of sorts by divesting the Dalai Lama of some of his temporal authority. Second, they challenge the idea that he had helped himself to funds that did not belong to him. The fact that Laden La continued to enjoy the confidence and trust of the Tibetan ruler to the very end of his days suggests the falsity of the first accusation—that he was a conspirator against the Dalai Lama. The riches that he acquired were an inheritance from an aunt and not the wages of any wrongdoing on the police officer's part.

The book, authored jointly by Laden La's granddaughter and her English husband, provides a useful contribution to a better understanding of some major events in Tibet's relations with the Raj in the first three decades of the twentieth century. It also furnishes interesting details of why the modernization drive in Tibet drew a blank. Well produced and lavishly illustrated, *A Man of the Frontier* draws heavily not only on Laden La's own massive papers, but also on the British National Archives (formerly the Public Record Office) in London and an impressive array of secondary sources. It boasts a number of plates and some rare photographs, and affords revealing insights into some of the major events in which the British and the thirteenth Dalai Lama were so intimately involved. Laden La was not only a keen observer but also an active participant in most of these events.

#### ENDNOTE

1. Parshotam Mehra, *Tibetan Polity, 1904-1937: The Conflict between the 13th Dalai Lama and the 9th Panchen Lama; A Case Study* (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1976). In a recent study, the incumbent fourteenth Dalai Lama told his interlocutor that "on an official level" the relation between the ninth Panchen Lama and the thirteenth Dalai Lama was "difficult and negative, but in private there was a deep, special spiritual connection." See Thomas Laird, *The Story of Tibet: Conversations with the Dalai Lama* (London: Atlantic Books, 2006): 248.

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## GANDHARAN BUDDHISM: ARCHAEOLOGY, ART, AND TEXTS

EDITED BY PIA BRANCACCIO AND KURT  
BEHRENDT

Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2006.  
336 pages, 112 black-and-white illustrations. ISBN  
9780774810807

### REVIEWED BY NANCY C. WILKIE

This volume of essays by some of the leading scholars in the field of Gandharan studies attempts to bridge disciplinary boundaries by bringing together evidence from the fields of art, archaeology, and texts to illuminate cultural and religious developments in the Gandharan region. The kingdom of Gandhara, centered on the Peshawar Valley in northwestern Pakistan, flourished from the first to the fifth centuries CE under its Buddhist rulers. During this time Gandharan culture, and especially Gandharan art, emerged as a unique synthesis of Greco-Roman, Persian and Indian styles.

The first chapter by John M. Rosenfield outlines the necessary precautions that must be observed when using archaeological evidence to date developments in religious doctrine. As he says, "the obstacles to correct interpretation of Kusana Buddhist sculpture are formidable" (p. 17). Most sculptures lack inscriptions, and many sanctuaries were destroyed, their artifacts widely scattered. Moreover, modern forgeries have corrupted the corpus and consequently our understanding of the development of artistic styles. A particular problem is that of using works of art to date developments in religious doctrine, a practice that too often leads to circular argumentation (p. 25).

The late Maurizio Taddei, to whom this volume is dedicated, further warns in Chapter 2 that inscriptions on sculptures are not to be trusted because they often employ an official "code" and thus are not always sincere or reliable (p. 41). In addition, there are instances of counterfeit ancient inscriptions, which can be difficult to recognize (p. 42). As a result, Taddei advocates an integrated approach, combining epigraphy, numismatics and art history—three fields to which archaeology can make significant contributions.

He warns, however, that not all archaeological investigations and publications are of equal value since many are tainted by shoddy work and/or "bombastic conclusions" (p. 52). He does have praise, however, for archaeologists from the Department of Archaeology and Museums of