

BOOK REVIEW

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In the Shadow of the Himalayas: Tibet, Bhutan, Nepal, Sikkim: A Photographic Record by John Claude White 1883-1908 by Kurt Meyer and Pamela Deuel Meyer. Mapin Publishing, Ahmedabad, India, 2005, 190 pp., Hardcover, 11x10 inches, 113 four colour photographs, 6 maps, ISBN 8188204250.

In this beautifully produced and very affordable book, Kurt Meyer and Pamela Deuel Meyer turn their attention to John Claude White (1853-1918), the first British Political Officer in Sikkim, and his photographic record of the Himalayas that he loved.

The authors of this book have previously worked with the Tharu communities of Nepal, in the course of which they wrote three important books on aspects of this indigenous South Asian cultural complex. In all of these, they combine their strong aesthetic sensibilities with an engaging narrative style, and in *In the Shadow of the Himalayas*, Kurt Meyer and Pamela Deuel Meyer have once again created a meticulous portrait, this time of an interesting man at an important time.

Although not part of the political elite, White's background was firmly colonial: he was born in Calcutta in 1853 to a German mother and English surgeon father. Having attended secondary school in Bonn, White trained as a civil engineer at the Royal Indian Civil Engineering College in Surrey which trained professionals for the Indian Public Works department, into whose service he went. It was fortunate circumstance and a sign of the meritocracy of the times that White should be appointed as the first resident Political Officer of Sikkim less than twelve years after entering government service. White and his wife Nina oversaw the construction of the British Residence in Gangtok, which would later become Raj Bhawan, the official residence of the Governor of Sikkim.

In the Shadow of the Himalayas is comprised of six sections. The first, entitled simply 'The Setting', is an excellent overview of the British colonial enterprise in South Asia and the political alliances and

fears of the time. Pithy and clear, these few pages would be suitable for wider dissemination online or in an introductory publication on Himalayan nations. The second section focuses on Jean Claude White's family background and professional career, and helps contextualise his choices and interests. He emerges as a gentle man, even a gentleman, committed to his work and passionate about his photography. As an obituary written by the great schemer Francis Younghusband in the *Geographical Journal* of 1918 put it, "he [White] was a man of great simplicity of character, kindness of nature, and solidity of purpose: a lover of nature and a lover of simple peoples" (Volume 51, Number 6, June 1918, p. 407).

The remaining four sections are organised chronologically according to White's tours of duty: Nepal (1883-1884), Sikkim (1889-1908), Tibet (1903-1904) and Bhutan (1905-1908). The authors provide a brief introduction to each location as well as detailed captions for each plate. Interestingly, each set is quite distinct. The Nepal collection offers a diverse collection of temples, nature and people; while the Sikkim set, the location of his longest posting, is a little underwhelming. White's photographic focus in Sikkim was almost exclusively on nature: passes, mountains and gorges, and while his photos are technically impressive, for those interested in local history or culture, there is little to feast on. His brief foray into Tibet, in the company of Younghusband, is interesting for what is left out. Although an impressive close up of a Maxim gun detachment (plate 48) gives the reader the sense of a militarised campaign, in none of White's photos does one get the sense of war. The images are respectful and noble, showcasing Tibetan architecture and religious learning in well-lit frames.

The images from Bhutan are the most compelling. Perhaps unsurprisingly, Bhutan is also where White made his closest relationship, namely with Ugyen Wangchuk who would later be crowned king of this Himalayan nation. The photos are varied and intimate, with more close ups and fewer overtly staged scenes. There is also more movement in the images from this time, although perhaps this was unintentional.

The Meyers state that despite being an engineer by 'education' and a colonial administrator by profession, Jean Claude White was a 'photographer by vocation'. I would venture to suggest that White's training as a civil engineer shows through in his photos. The images are well framed, carefully centred, unwasteful, and at times even austere. There is a structural quality to many of his images, an appreciation of

the architectural skeleton that lies behind a *gompa*, a *dzong* or even a mountain. White's photos are neither flashy nor melodramatic, which in part may be put down to the constraints of the medium at the time and the effort it took to compose a photograph, but is also has to do with his pragmatic documentary eye.

In this lovely book, comprised of their insightful text together with White's photographs, Kurt Meyer and Pamela Deuel Meyer have succeeded in rehabilitating the legacy of Jean Claude White. While White's contribution to conservation and forestry planning efforts continues to be acknowledged by many in the region, not all would agree with the authors' suggestion that in "Sikkim and Bhutan he is remembered and respected to this day" (page 27). The colonial presence in Sikkim was neither unchallenged nor unproblematic, and as the first political incumbent, White essentially oversaw the integration of an independent Sikkim into British India. In spite of this political mandate, however, Jean Claude White appears to have been widely liked and trusted by many of those whom he came into contact with. It is thanks to Kurt Meyer and Pamela Deuel Meyer that almost 100 years after the publication of his memoirs (*Sikkim and Bhutan: Twenty-One Years on the North-East Border*, 1909), this magnificent collection of White's photographs is finally in circulation.