

Views of Medieval Bhutan: The Diary and Drawings of Samuel Davis, 1783. Michael Aris. London, Serinda Publications; Washington, Smithsonian Institute, 1982. Pp. 124. Maps. Plates. Illus. Bibliog. Index. £18.00

Michael Aris, who had the good fortune to spend five years in Bhutan, has produced a fascinating book based on the diary and drawings of Samuel Davis who visited that remote Himalayan country in 1783. Davis, an excellent topographical artist in the fashionable style of his time, left abundant evidence of his enthusiasm for the role he was entrusted with by Warren Hastings, who selected him to accompany the diplomatic mission to Tibet and the region which came to be known as Bhutan. In fact Davis was not permitted to enter Tibet, but he was able to spend several months in travelling around and sketching the magnificent countryside and the highly distinctive architecture of the palaces and forts which, almost unchanged, survive until today. As Michael Aris writes in his valuable introduction: "The traditional scene in Bhutan changed little between the time of the Turner missions and the advent of large-scale development and package tours in the 1970s. Even now, the remoter parts of the country remain untouched by the intervening centuries and for those who knew Bhutan before the opening of the motor roads, Davis's drawings are highly evocative." Samuel Turner, leader of the mission to which Davis was attached and a kinsman of Warren Hastings, wrote at the time: "His (Davis's) subjects . . . are not more remarkable for their grandeur and beauty than for the judgment, fidelity and taste with which he has seized on and recorded their features."

Background information on the history, culture and religious practices of the Bhutanese people is provided by Michael Aris in his introduction. He also ranges interestingly among the other painters busy at the time in or about the area. Apart from fifty nine of Davis's drawings reproduced there are many of great interest by other artists, including a lovely painting by Tilly Kettle representing the reception of a British envoy by the Panchen Lama which was wrongly identified in the Queen's collection for many years. There are also some amusing and informative notes on the origins of the famous Stubbs painting of Warren Hastings's yak, in which the great beast dominates a Bhutanese landscape the like of which Stubbs certainly had never set eyes upon. Davis's own main works can now be seen in the India Office Library in London, the Victoria Memorial in Calcutta, and the Paul Mellon Collection at the Yale Centre for British art.

The Davis journal, which forms the centrepiece of this book, is based on extracts read to the Royal Asiatic Society on 20 February 1830 by the author's son, J. F. Davis (later Sir John). Efforts to trace the original manuscript in the Society's Library and elsewhere have so far failed; enough has been preserved, however, to establish the fact that Davis was as acute an observer as he was skilled in drawing. He wrote about many aspects of Bhutanese life with sympathy and perception; he described an economy which functioned largely without money, how the Ruler was accessible to all, and the lack of class distinctions – and therefore envy and jealousy – among the people. He sums up thus:

They are upon the whole an exceeding poor but comparatively happy people, neither in danger of any very outrageous Oppression at home, nor of invasion and slavery from abroad.

It is true, Davis goes on to say, that these advantages are not such as to tempt the more enlightened parts of mankind to change places with the Bhutanese, but he has said enough to convince the reader of his admiration for the human qualities of the simple people of a country cut off from the "benefits" of western civilisation.

The difficulties of colour reproduction in a book of this kind are well illustrated

great understanding and this was particularly apparent when Borodin finally persuaded Sun to accept the important manifesto at the first Kuo Min Tang Congress. The formation of the Whampoa Military Academy, the emergence of Chiang Kai Shek as a figure of real importance and the infighting that went on first in Canton and then in Peking when it became clear that Sun's death from cancer was imminent, all these are dealt with clearly and in considerable detail.

Sun died in March 1925 and, with no heir apparent, Borodin was able so to arrange matters that the two main contenders, Chiang Kai Shek and Wang Ching Wei, came to rely increasingly on his help and advice. And so the story goes with a slightly less clear account of the Northern Expedition which started in mid-1926 (a map here would have been helpful) to the last difficult days in Wuhan where, in spite of all the problems which beset him, Borodin towered over all around him; but, and he knew it, the tide was running against him.

The rest of the story makes sad reading. By July 1927 most of the Soviet Mission was on its way out of China; for Borodin it was a hard and dangerous journey and he did not reach Moscow until October. There, criticized and attacked, he eventually emerged if not unscathed at least free from the charge of Trotskyism, almost certainly due to the intervention of Stalin.

In 1929 he was made Deputy Director of the State Paper and Lumber Trust, but he was not a success and in 1932 he found more congenial work - editorship of a Moscow English newspaper. If this job was never to give him the scope that should have been his at least he survived, survived indeed for another seventeen years, but in 1949 Stalin's protecting hand was withdrawn. Sometime early in that year he was arrested, but it was not until 1953 that it was reported that he had died at Yakutsk two years earlier.

Borodin's story is a fascinating one and Professor Jacobs tells it well, but, and it is a big but, we never get a really clear picture of Borodin as a person. Stories are told of the "magic" of his personality, of his "magnetism" and indeed there does seem to be something magical about the ascendancy that he so rapidly acquired over all who worked with him, but this only adds to the mystery. He was clearly attached to his family, but their accounts seem to have been confined to facts nor have those who worked with him in the 1920's left any adequate record of the personality of this extraordinary man.

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Central Asia

Bhutan: the early history of a Himalayan kingdom. By Michael Aris. Warminster, Aris & Phillips, 1979. Pp. xxxiv + 344. Pref. Guide to pronunciation & key terms. Intro. Illus. Appendix. Bibliogs. Notes. Indexes. £12-50 (hardback).

Bhutan, or Bootan as the British used to call it until the turn of the century, is the only independent Lamaist kingdom to have survived the possessive tendencies of India and China. It is a country about which less is known than any of the states, absorbed or still independent, which lie in the long shadow of the Himalayas.

The books so far written about Bhutan offer prospective visitors and armchair travellers (usually the latter: those who gain admittance to Bhutan are few in number) a useful if romantic picture of a remote mountain kingdom where roads and Post Offices are novelties and the way of life continues much as it did when the earliest European traveller entered Bhutan in 1627. Michael Aris' book, *Bhutan* is the first serious attempt to look behind this romantic facade, and to analyse in depth the cultural and political evolution which gave the country its unity.

REPORT FROM BHUTAN

London

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BHUTAN

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The Land and its People

Bhutan, or the Land of No Chimneys, as my wife calls it (the Bhutanese prefer the more dignified Druk Yul, Land of the Dragons) is a small country of some 18,000 square miles sandwiched in between N.E. India and Tibet. The present boundaries were set in 1865 after the wars with Great Britain. The 250 miles of border with Bengal and Assam are clearly defined but on the north there is no clear demarcation. The Tibetans used to describe the western sector as an "upland tree lowland tree" boundary (i.e., the pine forests belonged to Tibet and the bamboo forests to Bhutan). Colonel McMahon wrote of "the crest of the Himalaya and the watershed of its river systems". Other authorities have spoken of the foot of the Himalaya. Actually in Asia the principle of mountain boundaries tends to take as its point of departure the concept of Lord Curzon's three fold frontier (i.e., administrative boundary, a line more or less definite, a strategic frontier). In the case of Bhutan and Tibet where there are natural passes, there seems to be agreement as to where the troops are to be stationed.

Twenty five years ago, no wheeled vehicle moved across the rugged terrain of Bhutan. Transport was the same as in the days of Sir Charles Bell - on foot, on horseback, by pack animal. Today, by contrast, a good hard surfaced road - constructed between 1958-61 - runs north from Phuntsoling to Confluence Bridge where the road divides, one leading to Paro the other to Thimphu and Punakha. A further extension is planned on to eastern Bhutan.

Bhutan is a mountainous and difficult country to traverse and the road described is a tortuous one. The actual distance from the Indian border to Thimphu, the capital, is 45 miles. The meter reads 108 miles - 5 hours of hard driving. It is, however, better than eight days on mule back.

The country is strangely beautiful. Heavy jungle surrounds Phuntsoling. The growth is lush. Moving north the jungle gives way to forest (70% of Bhutan is forested). Oak is in abundance and is used for firewood. There is walnut and pine for furniture. Poplar abounds. Almost no wild animals are seen. We surprised four large grey apes near Confluence Bridge but for the rest, the animal life we saw was domestic. Dogs are numerous but they are small - not for keeping off wolves. Single hillside dwellings were passed but we saw no clusters of villages. Gradually, as we moved upward - we crossed the summit at 8256 ft. - the Chinese-Tibetan influence became more apparent. The tea changed from Darjeeling to Lapsang Sookhong. A few miles from the Indian border and here was a different country!