

Charles Allen. 2015. *The Prisoner of Kathmandu: Brian Hodgson in Nepal, 1820–43*. London: Haus Publishing Ltd.

Given that it is the first biography of Brian H. Hodgson (1801–1894) in over a century, Charles Allen's *The Prisoner of Kathmandu* is a welcome addition to the historiography of Himalayan Studies and Nepal's relations with colonial India. But for students of Nepali history (and other likely readers of this journal) the book is somewhat frustrating. More than a study of Hodgson's work as Resident in Kathmandu in the decades before the Rana era, this book reads like another installment in the now substantial series of books by Charles Allen documenting his fascination with (and romanticization of) British colonial gentleman-scholars, or Orientalists. Those hoping to learn more about Hodgson's work with the early 19th century court in Kathmandu and how Britain's relations with Nepal were shaped by larger colonial and global contexts will be disappointed. Some of this material appears in the book but it takes a distant backseat to Allen's attention to Hodgson the zoologist, Hodgson the Buddhologist, and so on. Allen's Hodgson is the heroic founder of Himalayan Studies, his exploits presented without even

a whiff of critical consciousness as to the colonial sociology of knowledge to which Hodgson contributed.

As the book's subtitle suggests, Allen focuses mainly on Hodgson's time in Kathmandu. But there are also interesting preliminary chapters outlining Hodgson's early life, his East India Company (EIC) training at Haileybury and Fort William, and his initial assignment in Kumaon, India. The final chapters follow Hodgson's life after his tumultuous departure from Kathmandu in 1843 focusing mainly on Hodgson's continuing work in Himalayan Studies from his new base in Darjeeling until finally returning to Britain for good in 1857.

In between we learn of Hodgson's everyday life in Kathmandu, first as Assistant to the Resident, and eventually as Resident, or official representative of the EIC at the Nepal court. Allen outlines Hodgson's ties with the Newar Buddhist priest and scholar Amritananda. The two seem to have established a close intellectual relationship and it was Amritananda's truly extraordinary openness and generosity that allowed Hodgson to grasp Buddhism in a way no other European had before. It was on the basis of his conversations with Amritananda, and the many rare manuscripts that Amritananda provided, that Hodgson published a number of works that remain foundational to Buddhist Studies.

Allen also details Hodgson's work as an amateur naturalist. Working in collaboration with Nepali and Tibetan hunters, Hodgson collected and documented thousands of Himalayan birds and mammals, published vast numbers of articles, and donated specimens to museums in Calcutta and London. Here we learn of Hodgson's collaboration with the Newar *citrakār* Raj Man Singh who (along with several other Nepali artists) prepared hundreds of marvelously detailed natural history and architectural drawings that accompanied Hodgson's publications and/or still reside in British archives. Although Allen's descriptions of Hodgson-as-Orientalist-scholar are interesting and eminently readable, they cover much the same ground as the volume edited by David Waterhouse (2004). There a range of scholars – from linguists to ornithologists to specialists in Religious Studies – survey and assess Hodgson's accomplishments in a manner much more thorough, critical, and scholarly than Allen provides.

Woven into Allen's main project of telling the story of Hodgson the Orientalist are occasional discussions of Hodgson the Resident. We learn bits and pieces of Hodgson's stormy relations with Bhimsen Thapa, infighting

between various Darbar factions, and Hodgson's efforts to dissuade Nepali leaders from invading EIC territory. But, ironically, in Allen's book we probably learn more about Hodgson's place within EIC politics than within Nepali politics. To be sure people like Hodgson were susceptible to the whims of frequently revolving EIC Governors General (a spat with one of whom – Lord Ellenborough – cost Hodgson his job in 1843). But Allen spends numerous pages detailing EIC policy toward language and education, or describing the catastrophic First Afghan War – none of which have much to do with the book's subtitle: "Brian Hodgson in Nepal." In short, what we learn about Hodgson the Resident has more to do with his relations with Calcutta than with the Kathmandu Darbar. It is true that both William W. Hunter's original biography of Hodgson (1896) and K.L. Pradhan's more focused study¹ of Hodgson as Kathmandu Resident (2001) pay much more attention to Hodgson's work within the Kathmandu court and therefore Allen may have felt it unnecessary to revisit. Either way, a reevaluation of Hodgson's role in early 19th century Nepal based on now-available archival and critical secondary sources remains to be done.

Beyond its much greater emphasis on Hodgson the Orientalist, Allen's book has other interesting differences with Hunter's original 1896 Hodgson biography. Hunter had the advantage of actually working with Hodgson's British widow, a younger woman whom Hodgson married late in life. This gave Hunter access to extensive personal and family correspondence that is now, apparently, lost. Allen frequently cites letters quoted by Hunter with the comment, "present location unknown." (No doubt Allen tried to find this material but he provides no description of his efforts.) While working with Hodgson's widow gave Hunter certain advantages, it also limited the story he could tell. Most notably absent from Hunter's account were (then scandalous) details of Hodgson's private life in Kathmandu including his earlier marriage to a Muslim woman, Mehr-un-Nissa and the family of two children (Henry and Sarah) they raised together in Kathmandu. Allen's efforts to bring to light this fascinating aspect of Hodgson's life are much appreciated.

¹ Pradhan's well-researched and meticulously documented book is the best available source on Hodgson's years at the Kathmandu Residency. Pradhan draws mainly on colonial records in the National Archives of India but also archives in Kathmandu and Calcutta along with 19th century published primary materials in English and Nepali, and secondary sources in English and Nepali.

For better or worse, Charles Allen is not an academic historian and this is not an academic book. On the plus side, Allen is a great writer. Like his many other books, most of which I have read and enjoyed, this book is an informative and fun read. But while the book is rooted in primary source material, there is little engagement with scholarly literature on Nepali history or British colonial history. And when Allen does engage with scholarly debates, it often suggests that he's out of his depth – as with his gratuitous pot-shots at Edward Said's *Orientalism* in which Allen mistakes Said's broad critique of imperialist knowledge production for personal attacks on his beloved Orientalists. Further detracting from the book's value to scholars are things like no in-text citation and minimal footnoting: much of the information presented, including *many* quoted passages, are completely unattributed and even when material is footnoted, the entries are often incomplete, usually lacking page numbers. Allen also frequently mentions vague sources, as in this passage: "According to a Nepalese source, Hodgson wept on being told of Bhimsen Thapa's death" (p. 205). Is this a Nepali textual source? Oral history? How did Allen come across this information? We are left with no way of evaluating the quality of the source. Also frustrating are references to archival sources that name the archive but not the file numbers or other information that would allow someone to efficiently find the material referenced. Finally, the book has no bibliography and, most annoyingly, no index. If you'd like to use the book as a reference to look for information on, say, Bhimsen Thapa, you're out of luck. To be fair to Allen, the book's publisher is probably to blame for many of these shortcomings. Many publishers now seem convinced that citations, footnotes, and apparently even indexes, will scare timid readers away.

Perhaps making up for these deficiencies are the dozens of black and white illustrations and 34 color plates that Allen has managed to include in the volume. Among these are reproductions of many zoological and ethnographic paintings done by Nepali *citrakārs* working with Hodgson (including one depicting Hodgson and his South Asian wife and family outside the Kathmandu Residency). Charles Allen's biography is certainly a fine introduction to Brian Hodgson's life though, from a Nepal Studies perspective, it leaves plenty of room for further reappraisal of Hodgson's work in Kathmandu.

References

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