

Book Reviews

Thomas Bell. 2014. *Kathmandu*. Gurgaon: Random House India.

A foreign journalist's decision to write a sprawling book about Kathmandu (and to authoritatively call that book *Kathmandu*) reveals a boldness bordering on hubris. This makes Thomas Bell's *Kathmandu* all the more remarkable for largely satisfying such a tall order. At over 400 pages, the book is far-reaching in its scope, impressive in its nuance, and fascinating in its narrative structure. *Kathmandu* is not perfect, but it offers an outstanding attempt to characterize a political climate that resists simplistic characterization, to encapsulate a city that defies encapsulation. To the extent that such a project is possible at all, Bell has written a wonderfully accessible book that will appeal to anyone – non-specialists and scholars alike – with an interest in the politics, history, and cultures of Kathmandu and Nepal more broadly.

The (deceptively) unstructured arrangement of *Kathmandu* is difficult to summarize. The author frequently shifts between different historical periods, such that Maoist combatants, mythological origins, Rana autocrats, and post-conflict anecdotes appear side by side. Broadly, the ten chapters of Part I ("The Beginnings") describe the ancient history of the Kathmandu Valley, the Licchavis, the "Transitional Period," and the Mallas. "The Beginnings" concludes with Prithvi Narayan Shah's conquest of the Kathmandu Valley. Part II ("The Revolutions") picks up the meandering history, ultimately leading readers from the Shah kings through the abolition of the monarchy in 2008. In circuitous strokes, the ten chapters of Part II also cover Bhimsen Thapa, Brian Hodgson, the Rana period, the restoration of Shah power in 1951, the Panchayat decades, and the *Jana Āndolans* of 1990 and 2006. The People's War pervades both of these parts, which together comprise the bulk of the book. Bell's target audience appears to be foreign non-specialists, and this group will learn a great deal from the book. Even for the most knowledgeable and well-read scholars, the sheer breadth of its coverage will offer at least some tidbits that were previously unknown. Furthermore, Bell delivers this history with writing that is clear, light, and engaging.

Readers expecting a linear chronology, however, might be disappointed. The narrative jumps around, and Bell frequently interrupts his historical writing with contemporary issues and events. It is sometimes unclear when

an event – whether historical or contemporary – is occurring. Incessantly moving between eras, places, and social perspectives, the book makes no apologies for tackling Malla coin mintage, street violence, tantric sexuality, statuary production, *yārsāgumbā*, and nightclub openings in the span of a few short chapters. This barrage of (seemingly) disjointed topics will likely frustrate readers hoping for straightforward historiography, as it frustrated me when I first read it. It was only upon re-reading the book that this structure wholly redeemed itself to me (see below).

A journalist by profession, Bell writes about the city in a way that compellingly blurs the boundaries between war correspondence, travelogue, personal memoir, and historiography. He has done his due diligence to understand the intricacies of Kathmandu, a city he has called home for over a decade. Perhaps more importantly, he is also candid when he struggles to understand. *Kathmandu* guides readers across Nepal’s socio-political landscape, richly describing Bell’s encounters with government bureaucrats and elderly Newars, spies and foreign aid workers, local police and nostalgic Ranas. The conflict-era anecdotes are alternately humorous and horrific, poignant and revolting. Bell writes all of them with a humanity that rivals Manjushree Thapa’s *Forget Kathmandu* (2005).

The book occasionally digresses into a rollicking tone more reminiscent of renegade travel writing than historiography. While these forays are entertaining and well rendered, Bell’s descriptions of Nepalis occasionally stray uncomfortably close to a subtle Orientalism. At points, portrayals of religious rituals, superstitions, and hygiene practices seem to add little to the overall project except token exoticism. Furthermore, the narrative structure not only *juxtaposes* unique historical contexts, but also draws *parallels* and *continuities* between them (e.g., p. 299). One (Western) colleague expressed to me that, while compelling and thought provoking, such a strategy could easily fall into the Orientalist trap of imagining a timeless, despotic East whose political transformations are largely superficial.

This is *not* to argue that Bell himself ascribes to such thinking. Quite the contrary, there are at least as many passages displaying Bell’s resistance to this sort of exoticizing gaze. Early on, Bell recounts declining to write a story for a foreign newspaper “along the lines of terror comes to Shangri-la” (p. 15). Later, he writes: “My country couldn’t understand the rest of the world in the way the rest of the world could understand it. England seemed denatured and provincial, full of people who’d never know how relative

their judgments were” (p. 219). These moments do not bespeak a closeted Orientalism, and I do not mean to suggest otherwise about Bell or his writing. Rather, my concern is that foreign readers less knowledgeable about Nepal might gloss over *Kathmandu*’s nuance in favor of its descriptions of “strange” cultural practices.

Part III (“Without End”) deals mostly with the ongoing post-conflict period. Readers are oriented to a suite of contemporary challenges facing the city: the threat of imminent earthquakes (all the more affecting after April-May 2015), transportation cartels, labor migration, inadequate education, political corruption, and more. While certainly nothing new, Bell criticizes the unholy alliance between Nepal and foreign development aid, which dovetail to produce a system where “incentives reward the destruction of value” (p. 342). Citing scholars and journalists alike, he describes the “walnut-like structure that binds donors to Nepal in persistent, mutually reinforcing failure...” (p. 344). Perhaps most fascinating – and least known to this reviewer – is his admirable display of investigative journalism in chapter 23. These pages introduce Operation Mustang, a wartime program of Nepal’s National Investigation Department (NID). The program is linked to disappearances and torture during the conflict, and Bell implicates American and British intelligence agencies for complicity, training support, and abetment. It is an indictment worthy of outrage, and it has the added benefit of reading like an espionage thriller.

There are really *two* parallel narratives running through *Kathmandu*. In addition to the historiography, there is also the personal story of the author himself coming to understand the city. This second narrative helps to explain the book’s Byzantine structure. Surely, Bell could have easily organized his notes chronologically, in the order that events actually occurred. The fact that he doesn’t should, therefore, be interpreted as a deliberate choice. It is my opinion that the book is not *only* about Kathmandu itself; it is also (and primarily) about *the process of trying to understand Kathmandu as a foreigner*. Framing the book in this way does not cheapen its real contribution to the literature on Nepal. Rather, it simply adds another layer of depth to the book. From this perspective, the disjointed narrative structure becomes one of the book’s crowning achievements. Even the exoticizing descriptions suddenly seem less like Orientalism and more like an honest account of one foreigner making his way – clumsily at first – through a society about which he admittedly knew very little when he first arrived.

In line with this reading, the book's structure effectively mirrors the experience of being a curious foreigner in Kathmandu. Upon arrival in the city, foreigners are greeted by disjointed architectural styles and staggering cultural complexity. As one spends more time here, fragments of history render the present ever more legible. Yet these fragments rarely come in a linear, rational chronology. One might hear of the Ranas before Prithvinarayan Shah, the Maoists before the Mallas. Different buildings and practices make more sense as history illuminates them. Bell frequently introduces things in early chapters only to return to them later. The historical-cultural context introduced in the intervening pages, however, casts these repetitions in a new light when they reappear. This is no accident. Bell writes in the preface that he wanted "to simulate the connections that run through all [Kathmandu's] parts, and to reproduce the cycles of repetition and reinvention that are the structure of its life..." (p. xxvii). Bell's narrative unfolds as the city itself does: bit by random bit, and always incompletely. The book's real strength, in my opinion, lay in the way its deceptively chaotic structure patiently, imperceptibly demystifies the "mutable heap" (p. 385) of Kathmandu, as though foreign readers were discovering the city just as the author did.

Despite extensive endnotes and a 15-page bibliography, the edition reviewed here does not include an index, making it difficult to use as a reference work. Because a more recent edition from the UK (Haus Publishing, 2016) *does* include an index, one hopes that Random House India will also add this to its future editions. Nevertheless, *Kathmandu* is a fantastic, enjoyable, and informative read for both non-specialists and scholars alike. Quite impressively, the arrangement of histories, biographies, anecdotes, and interviews – which initially seemed so random – somehow blends into a coherent whole by the end. The book not only teaches about Kathmandu; it also simulates the experience of trying to learn about the city in the first place. As a journalist, the author is refreshingly unconstrained by the conventions of academic writing, which too often demand adherence to linear narratives and straightforward cohesion. Scholars might learn a lot from this narrative style. Traditional ethnographies, for example, often begin with a field site history, followed by a theoretical overview and an obligatory discussion of reflexivity and positionality. Alternatively, anthropologists might try structuring their narratives in such a way that mirrors their journey of ethnographic discovery. If executed well, a disjointed style more akin to Bell's could retain the desire to present data and make a theoretical argument, but in an inherently reflexive,

personal, and engaging way. This is certainly not an easy task, but it is at least worth a bit of consideration and experimentation.

Overall, *Kathmandu* is a wonderful book that speaks to a wide audience. Situating the city within its larger political and historical contexts, Thomas Bell has produced a book that comes as close as any to capturing the spirit of the intriguing, dynamic, troubled, and endlessly confounding Kathmandu.

Reference

Thapa, Manjushree. 2005. *Forget Kathmandu: An Elegy for Democracy*. New Delhi: Penguin Books India.

Benjamin Linder
University of Illinois at Chicago