



Andrew Duff, *Sikkim: Requiem for a Himalayan Kingdom*

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ANDREW DUFF'S *Sikkim: Requiem for a Himalayan Kingdom* tells the story of political turmoil and personal intrigues that led to the erstwhile Himalayan Kingdom of Sikkim's contested merger with the Indian Union in 1975. Spanning ten chapters, preceded by a prologue and ended by an epilogue, Duff traces the politics, plots, and wider regional and political factors that culminated in the end of the Chogyal kingship, a 333-year-long period of continuous rule. The author's motivation for writing the book under review is in part personal. Duff's grandfather left behind a diary and photographs of a trek he had made across Sikkim in 1922, and so the book is based on Duff's desire to trace his grandfather's footsteps. A central and hitherto unused source are the private letters (written to their parents) of Martha Hamilton and Ishbel Ritchie, both of whom were Scottish teachers and principals at the Paljor Namgyal Girls School located in Gangtok, Sikkim's capital, at the time of Sikkim's merger.

Duff begins with a historical discussion. Sikkim's gradual loss of sovereignty, he recounts, commenced with the arrival of the British, whose authoritative presence was poised towards their "desire to open trade relations and gain political influence in Tibet" (17), which bordered Sikkim. The British never formally conquered Sikkim. Their presence, however, altered political hierarchies in the region, and the Chogyal (king), while officially in charge of his subjects, was "supervised" by a British political officer. In 1935, Sikkim was admitted to India's so-called Chamber of Princes, after which it was recognized as a "special case" (25) because of its strategic geopolitical location couched, as it was, between Nepal, Bhutan, Tibet, and British India.

When the British departed in 1947, Sikkim officially returned from being a protectorate to its prior status as an independent kingdom. Its recovered independence, however, did not last long. Soon, newly independent India started making political inroads, since it saw Sikkim as a strategic territory, given its close proximity to China. As the author writes, "the history of Sikkim's demise could not be seen in isolation" (10) from such factors. In discussing Sikkim's merger, Duff links it both to such wider political developments, as well as to rivalries and intrigues within Sikkim. Some of the external developments include the following: the Chinese intervention in Tibet and, later on, in Arunachal Pradesh; the Dalai Lama's flight to India; the Panchsheel Treaty signed by Nehru and Zhou Enlai; Nehru's demise; the ascension to power of

his daughter Indira Gandhi; and the declaration of the Emergency by Indira Gandhi in 1975. According to Duff, all of these events were part of the wider political context in which the merger of Sikkim unfolded.

Duff goes on to discuss the internal affairs of Sikkim after the British withdrawal. What his book showcases, in a way, is the emergence of an identity crisis. While the Chogyal was trying to maintain Sikkim's unique identity as a Buddhist kingdom that is religiously and culturally close to Tibet, during the British era Sikkim's population changed. More and more Nepalese settled in Sikkim, whose language and culture was closely affiliated not with Tibet, but with India. The Chogyal's attempt to safeguard Sikkim as belonging to the Bhutia and Lepcha communities started to create dissatisfaction among the now numerous Nepalese tenants who had been "brought in as part of a mass programme" during the late nineteenth century' (33) by the British from Nepal. Duff calls it the failure of the Chogyal "to fully accept that the ethnic makeup of his country had changed" (119), culminating in the Nepalese settlers resorting to demonstrations, and then insisting on the replacement of monarchy with democracy.

Much more was happening in Sikkim, though, than a demographic transition and an associated demand for political change. There was, for instance, the Chogyal's glamorous but controversial marriage with Hope Cooke, an American citizen, which placed Sikkim in the global spotlight. While some saw their marriage as a "fairy tale," others feared the new foreign Queen, and rumors soon spread that she was a CIA agent (9). Duff too begins to suspect her intentions. He considers her "[o]bsessed with the desire to be a real queen—of an independent nation" (205). He further portrays Cooke as naïve in her actions, "jealous" in her relationship, "insecure" within the family, "unhappy," "emotionally isolated," and "depressed" at times (150).

In describing Cooke's marriage, personality, and her role in Sikkim's politics at the time, Duff mostly relies on her autobiography, *Time Change* (COOKE 1981), as well as the personal letters of Martha Hamilton and Ishbel Ritchie—letters whose contents he subsequently seems to have delinked from their context to match the plot of his book. Duff's focus is on Cooke's relationship with the Chogyal and her role as a controversial political personality. While this is of interest, and much discussed in other treatises on Sikkim, it overshadows many other aspects of Cooke's life in Sikkim, including the various contributions she made to the region. With Sikkim's merger looming, Duff describes Cooke as a "disturbed wife," seeing her role as queen of a Himalayan kingdom evaporate, and as seeking consolation in the barbiturate valium (104). This does not seem entirely fair, as Cooke actively engaged in projects concerning education, cultural preservation, and material history, in addition to being an involved mother (COOKE n.d. [b]).

Cooke's most significant contribution, entirely omitted by Duff, was as the Chairman of the Text Book and Curriculum Committee, in which capacity she oversaw the design, publication, and use of innovative and culturally appropriate textbooks for all of Sikkim's schools (COOKE n.d. [a]). On the whole, Duff paints an overly political and unfavorable image of Cooke. She herself laments Duff's selective usage of materials, saying that, "Duff copied a great chunk from previously published books," and drew heavily on the testimonials of Martha Hamilton. As Cooke writes in her unpublished personal papers archived in Gangtok, "Martha (who never lived to see Duff's book) was his original patron in Sikkim. She would have died twice over if she had read his representation of me...." (COOKE n.d. [b]). Duff, however, cannot be fully blamed for

not bringing out new data on Cooke, as he wrote, “I contacted her [Hope Cooke] in 2010. At first, she offered to talk about the ‘cultural context’ to Sikkim, but then decided (after consultation with her children) that she should leave her 1981 biography (*Time Change*) as her record of the political period” (III).

For the Chogyal himself, Duff also writes about his inability to overcome his ego and the expectations from people around him. “Chogyal often felt insecure and acted indecisively, both as a ruler and a family man” (65). At this point, Duff’s book takes on the shape of a *Bildungsroman*, as it concentrates on the “Hamartian flaw,” the perplexed individual characters, their psychology, circumstances, fast changing situations—all related to the eventual fall of Sikkim.

Another crucial player in Sikkim’s political field at the time was Kazi Lhendup Dorji (later Sikkim’s first chief minister), who led the political movement advocating Sikkim’s transition to democracy. Like the Chogyal, Kazi Lhendup Dorji, too, was married to a foreign national, his Belgian wife Elisa Maria Langford, who seemed to have envisaged a life at the side of a democratically elected chief minister. This movement for democracy, as Duff explains, was primarily supported by the Nepalese settlers in Sikkim, who had by then multiplied into the majority population. After all, democracy, being a game of numbers, gave them prospects of power sharing in ways that Bhutia kingship did not.

Duff’s book is an enjoyable read. However, there are a number of inaccuracies, particularly in historical details, some of which are too important to ignore. For instance, Palden Thondup Namgyal is not the second son of the Ninth Chogyal of Sikkim, as Duff writes, but of the Eleventh. Duff also states certain episodes as being “historical facts” without adequate evidence or references (particularly concerning the marriage of the Chogyal with Hope Cooke). Duff’s book, admittedly, does not claim to be an academic treatise, but this does not justify the lack of references in a number of places. His book should thus not be elevated to the status of a core historical source for future researchers.

While most of Duff’s chapters seem to be dramatized—and much better written—accounts of what has previously been written about Sikkim’s merger, the strength of the book is the lucidity with which Duff tells the story, as well as his stress on the minutiae of the often purely personal jealousies, rivalries, and disputes among the characters, all of which often tend to be overlooked in more formal reconstructions of Sikkim’s merger. Duff certainly does not shy away from washing the dirty linen of historical characters in public. What can be taken from Duff’s book is that the merger of Sikkim should not be portrayed as a simple or even singular story, but as a myriad of tales and events that jointly culminated in the fall of the Chogyal Kingship.

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