



To a Mountain in Tibet

Colin Thubron

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The mountain path is the road of the dead,? writes Thubron (Shadow of the Silk Road) in this engrossing and affecting travel memoir that transcends the mere physical journey. In the wake of his mother's death, Thubron sets off to Mount Kailas in Tibet, a peak sacred to one-fifth of the world's population and the source of four of India's great rivers. Kailas has never been climbed: the slopes are important to Tibetan Buddhists who say the mountain's guardian is Demchog (a tantric variant of Shiva). Along with two guides, Thubron embarks on a pilgrimage that begins in Nepal and crosses into Tibet, recounting not only his arduous journey but also the political and cultural history of Tibet and the West's continued fascination with its mysticism. Along the way, he observes pilgrims of various religions converging on Kailas and the myriad monasteries, most of which were destroyed during the Cultural Revolution and rebuilt decades later. It is the poignant evocations of his mother and sister (who died at 21), interwoven with his profound respect for the Tibetan culture and landscape that make Thubron's memoir an utterly moving read. - Publisher's Weekly

To a Mountain in Tibet Details

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From Reader Review To a Mountain in Tibet for online ebook

Eveline Chao says

this writer is known for his beautiful writing, and there was no question that he has a formidable command of language, but i actually found all the poetic words distracting. like it was hard to keep focused on what was happening through the ten million ways of beautifully describing a rock or stream or cloud. there were also a lot of things "gently" verbing, and nothing could ever just straightforwardly sit, walk, look, run, but instead everything had to do all these things using some sort of unusual obfuscating word like, i dunno, trammel or glissade. and there's nothing wrong with trammeling or glissading, but when a sentence is 80% composed of words like that stacked against each other, with very little of the breathing room that more everyday words provide, it becomes somewhat unreadable. all of that said, this was my first colin thubron, and i'd definitely be interested to read more just to see if all of his writing is like this.

Heidi Burkhart says

Beautifully written. Some very touching scenes and memories in the book.

Marialyce says

I was looking forward to this book as I love things relating to the Tibetan culture. I did very much enjoy the beginning of this novel. but the middle and end brought out my frustration as I continued to feel the very soul of this novel ebb away. I understood that Mr Thubron is basically a travel writing author, but it was so cold (not only climate wise) as he related the various trials, tribulations, and god/goddesses/monsters and beliefs of these people. It felt it more like a litany of ramblings when there was a chance for more understanding of culture and the people who inhabit this beautiful but severe land. I learned very little other than that there more more gods and demons one could ever imagine.

There was very little personal perspective as I was aware that Mr Thubron embarked on this journey in honor of his dead family, he being the only surviving member. So in essence, this book was not for me, although I did enjoy the description of scenery and the harshness of its life.

Will Byrnes says

To a Mountain in Tibet tells two stories. One is the great travel writer's observations along his trek to a significant physical and religious site. The other is his inner journey of coming to terms with the death of his mother, whose passing prompted this adventure. The sights, smells and sounds of this arduous walk into a remote, mountainous retreat capture his senses. But it is the local culture and sundry religious views of death that capture his imagination as he treks to the holiest mountain in the world. Four great Indian rivers—the Indus, the Ganges, the Sutlej and the Brahmaputra—Have their sources on or near the mountain Kailas. To a fifth of the world's population, this peak is the center of everything, to Buddhists and Hindus, and to believers of other religions before those. In Chinese-controlled Tibet, the mountain has never been scaled, but pilgrims walk around it as an act of devotion, and to seek favor from their gods.

To the pious, the mountain radiates gold or refracts like crystal. It is the source of the universe, created from cosmic waters and the mind of Brahma... The sun and the planets orbit it. The Pole Star hangs immutable above. The continents of the world radiate from its centre like lotus petals on a precious sea (Humans occupy the southern petal) and its slopes are heady with the gardens of paradise.

But the God of Death dwells on the mountain. Nothing is total, nothing permanent—not even he. All is flux.

He catalogs a series of religious beliefs as he encounters monasteries destroyed by the Chinese, and remnant shrines and relics, noting the historic interactions of ancient religions, merging, absorbing each other. It would be a good idea to keep a dictionary handy as there are sundry new words to learn. And while it is not necessary to be familiar with eastern religions, it wouldn't hurt, as Thubron tosses around quite a few names that are unfamiliar to those of us largely innocent of those belief systems.

Colin Thubron - image from Wanderlust Magazine

When he writes about the death of his mother, it is not so much about her physical passing, but how her death affected him. Thubron is trying to cope with her death, and as we learn late in the book, the death at a young age of his sister. But he tells us almost nothing of his relationship with either person. It is their passing that is significant here.

With the death of a last parent, material things—old correspondence, a dilapidated house, a pair of slippers—emerge like orphans to enshrine the dead. My mother threw away nothing. Her drawers spilt out letters, diaries, documents, photos, fifty, seventy, eighty years old, with the stacked correspondence of my father, my dead sister, my nurse, even my nurse's mother. For months the papers lie piled, waiting. They grow huge with delayed sadness. How to decide what is to survive, what is to perish? The value of things no longer belongs to cost or beauty, but only to memory. The chipped and faded teacup is more precious than the silver tray that nobody used. And the letters bring confusion. Sometimes what was written for a day echoes in your head as if forever. Every one discarded sounds a tiny knell of loss. The past drops away into the waste-paper basket and oblivion, and in this monstrous disburdening, grief returns you to a kind of childish dependence. You sift and preserve (for whom?) and cling to trivia. You have become the guardian of their past, even its recreator.

The themes of connectedness to both the sacred and the real permeate his musings.

As they [a group of passing monks] walk on, I wonder at them, their lightness, their lack of need. They have already passed through a painless, premature death. They have shed what others shed in dying. They will leave nothing material behind them to be divided, claimed or loved. Their dispossession strikes me at once as freedom, and a poignant depletion. Their buoyant laughter follows me up the valley, but I do not quite envy them. I only wonder with a muffled pang what it would be in the West to step outside the chain of bequeathal and inheritance, as they do, until human artifacts mean nothing at all.

It is a relatively short book, but it is not a fast read. This is a book you will want to read at the speed of speech. I found myself frequently re-reading passages, paragraphs, pages, only in part to assure that I had gotten what had just crossed my eyes. Mostly it was to savor the writing, the feeling, chewing a morsel very slowly in order to extract all possible deliciousness. Thubron has a great talent for describing not just what he

sees, but the impact of what he sees. His dual career as a travel writer par excellence and a novelist has left us with incomparable writing.

In fact the Times of London publishes a list of the greatest British writers of the post war era, and Thubron continues to be included. It is no shock that he is considered one of the best travel writers ever. Perhaps with ancestors like Dryden and Samuel Morse he has a natural gift for words. Whether for the information imparted here about a very remote place and people or for the more spiritual contemplation of permanence *To a Mountain in Tibet* is a trek worth taking.

PS - about a week after posting this review, I came across the following on PBS. If you want to see the mountain for yourself, it figures prominently in this edition of *Myths and Heroes*
<http://www.pbs.org/mythsandheroes/vid...>

Trish says

"In the beginning Kailas was just rock—rock and stones. Without spirit. Then the gods came down with their entourages and settled there. They may not exactly live there now, but they have left their energy, and the place is full of spirits..." *the myth behind Mt. Kailas*

Now in his seventies, famed travel writer Colin Thubron left his wife and home in England and trekked to a holy mountain in Tibet from Nepal. It was a personal journey. From Nepal, where his father hunted bear and big cats eighty years before, Thubron headed to Kailas, or Gangs Rinpoche, the holy mountain, the "precious jewel of snow."

"Early wanderers to the source of the four great Indian rivers—the Indus, the Ganges, the Sutlej, and the Brahmaputra—found to their wonder that each one rose near a cardinal point of Kailas."

Kailas is a holy mountain for Buddhists and Hindu alike, and thousands of worshippers every year pilgrimage to Kailas to circumnavigate the base.

At 15,000 feet, the base of Kailas is 52 km long, and it sits next to the highest freshwater lake in the world, Manasarovar. Kailas is reflected in its waters: "To the Hindus...the lake is mystically wedded to the mountain, whose phallic dome is answered in the vagina of its dark waters." Kailas has never been climbed. Perhaps it is true that "only a man entirely free from sin could climb Kailas." Thubron's journey to Kailas is spiritual as well. He meditates on his life, his recently deceased mother and long-dead sister as he walks, but he shares with us what he sees along the route, in case we don't get the chance.

The journey begins as if "through a ruined English garden," strewn with viburnum, jasmine and syringa, honeysuckle, dogwood and buddleia. Soon the track becomes "savagely and precipitous," and as he gets closer to Kailas, the road becomes positively alive with pilgrims dressed "in a motley of novelty and tradition," often scattered in groups of two or three, who look "unquenchably happy". And closer yet:

The monks, who have been praying in a seated line for hours, advance in a consecrating procession. Led by the abbot of Gyangdrak monastery from a valley under Kailas, they move in shambling pomp, pumping horns and conch shells, clashing cymbals. Small and benign in his thin-rimmed spectacles, the abbot hold up sticks of smouldering incense, while behind him the

saffron banners fall in tiers of folded silks, like softly collapsed pagodas. Behind these again the ten-foot horns, too heavy to be carried by one monk, move stentorously forward, their bell-flares attached by cords to the man in front. Other monks, shouldering big drums painted furiously with dragons, follow in a jostle of wizardish red hats, while a venerable elder brings up the rear, cradling a silver tray of utensils and a bottle of Pepsi-Cola.”

But finally the destination is reached, and a Buddhist monk shares his philosophy: “Only karma lasts. Merit and demerit. Nothing of the individual survives. From all that he loves, man must part.”

Linh says

Hành trình t?i núi thiêng Kailash, Tây T?ng c?a m?t nhà v?n ng??i Anh, ng??i có l? là m?t trong nh?ng nhà v?n vi?t du ký n?i ti?ng nh?t hi?n nay (và ???c t?p chí Times xem là 1 trong 50 nhà v?n Anh qu?c l?n nh?t t? sau n?m 1945). Xen k? câu chuy?n v? hành trình c?a ông và g?p g? nh?ng ng??i dân Nepal và Tây T?ng là nh?ng h?i ?c c?a ông v? nh?ng ng??i thân ?ã m?t: ng??i cha t?ng là s? quan trong ?? ch? Anh, ng??i m? mà vi?c bà qua ??i d??ng nh? là lý do chính thúc ??y chuy?n ?i này, và ký ?c ph?ng ph?t nh?ng bu?n th??ng v? ng??i ch? gái ch?t tr? do l? núi khi ?i tr??t tuy?t ? trên m?t ng?n núi ? châu Âu có hình dáng g?n gi?ng v?i Kailash. S? xen k? nh?ng h?i ?c v? ng??i thân trong gia ?ình này không kh?i khi?n g?i nh? t?i The Invention of Solitude c?a Paul Áuter cùng v?i nh?ng h?i ?c v? ng??i cha m?i qua ??i.

V?n Colin Thubron ??p nh?ng h?i c?u k?, khó ??c. Nh?ng k? ni?m và tr?i nghi?m c?a ông ph?ng ph?t bu?n nh?ng nh? có gì ?ó m?t m?i và luy?n ti?c. B?n thân Colin Thubron khi th?c hi?n hành trình này ?ã ? tu?i 70, tu?i khó có th? ng?c nhiên và không còn nhi?u câu h?i. Nh?ng riêng chuy?n ông th?c hi?n c? ch?ng ?i kora này hoàn toàn b?ng ?i b? ? tu?i ?ó c?ng là m?t vi?c r?t hi?m ng??i làm ???c.

?o?n k?t h?i ??t ng?t, d?ng l?i sau ngày th? hai trong hành trình Kailash.

Faye says

Read: May-June 2018

Rating: 3.5/5 stars (rounded up to 4/5)

To a Mountain in Tibet is a beautifully written travelogue filled with historical notes and lyrical descriptions of the people and places Thubron encountered on his journey. The reason it is not rated more highly is that I was as interested in his personal journey as I was in the descriptions of his surroundings. There was never any sense that he ever really struggled; there was no mention of why he had chosen to take this trip in the book (though in the synopsis it mentions the deaths of his father, mother and sister being a factor) or how he prepared for it, hardly any mention of the physical toll of the trip, the food they ate, how he recruited the people he travelled with - the sort of details that make you feel like you're along for the journey were mostly missing.

Grady McCallie says

In this relatively short (218 page) book, travel writer and novelist Colin Thubron recounts a trek from Nepal to Tibet, where he ultimately circles Mount Kailas, a holy mountain sought by Buddhist, Hindu, Jain, and Bon pilgrims. His journey is fairly short, and far from epic, but he observes and describes the landscape and people he meets with such care, that the story expands and commands attention. The trip is also as much an internal as an external pilgrimage; Thubron took this trip some months after losing his mother, his last immediate relative. So the story is also the work of a mature author meditating on grief and on the impermanence of all we love, including ourselves. The author's struggle both grounds the information he shares about the historical and cultural meanings of Mt. Kailas -- over and over, stations on the pilgrimage around the mountain are meant to reinforce the pilgrim's awareness of his or her impermanence -- and also creates a tension that drives the book, since Thubron, as a skeptical Westerner, cannot hope for the cosmic salvation experienced by the real pilgrims traveling alongside him. And yet, the journey, at least as he recounts it here, does offer a kind of resolution. Overall, it is a beautiful, respectful, and sober book.

Joanka says

3.5 stars.

Oh, what a private, intimate book it was!

I'm slightly embarrassed to confess it was the first book by Thubron that I've read, although I own a few. My relationship with the author is somewhat turned upside down. Firstly, I took part in a meeting with him a few years ago in Warsaw. He was charming and I enjoyed listening to him a great deal so it made me want to read his books even more. And now that I started my adventure with Thubron's travelling, I started with his last book. But it doesn't matter as it was a literary success for me.

I haven't read such a book in a while. The non-fiction books about travelling that I read in recent years were written in a totally different manner. They read like adventures, even picaresque at times, emotional and "loud" in a way. Which is absolutely not a negative trait, just so different from how Thubron's "To a Mountain in Tibet" is filled with silence. It's the record of the author's journey to Tibet after his mother's death. He followed the route that is a popular pilgrimage path, to the Mount Kailas in Tibet, a mountain believed to be sacred in a few religions, the centre of the world and a house of gods. It's not an easy journey and some people do not manage to complete it, some even die on the way. Yet, this is not an adventurous story of bold explorers or Buddhist enthusiasts. It's a slow journey of an old man, quiet and reflective, with a speck of humour and quite a lot of information about Buddhism and Tibet.

Thubron notices nature around him as well as people but he seems to keep his distance, like a travelling gentleman probably should. He muses about his family, from which he is the only remaining member. His parents, his sister. There is a note of deep sadness beneath his words but true to the nature of the pilgrimage (although Thubron is not a believer and didn't try to become one of the pilgrims really, he keeps his respectful distance), he tries to remain calm in the face of fading of everything in this world, whether we love it or not. Maybe that's why when he opens up writing about his family it makes an enormous effect.

The informative quality of this book was important for me, as I was ignorant about many presented issues but it was Thubron himself that made this book special. It ends abruptly but in a way it suits the topic of the instability of everything in our life. I read reviews in which people complain that nothing much happens here and they are right to some extent. But that's the strength of this book. It's like a quiet walk in the mountains, maybe a bit like a meditation surrounded by nature. I needed such a read and it delivered. I will definitely read more of Thubron's travelling books.

Kim G says

I'm still trying to figure out what I got out of this book. The Tibetan facts/history were not effectively organized, I didn't get to know any interesting characters, and although this book is billed as a sort of elegy for the author's deceased family, other than a few pages on the father's travels and spare paragraphs here and there during the latter half in the book revealing what happened to his sister, they're ultimately non-entities.

I have a feeling a month from now I won't remember much about this book at all.

I was even turned off from the poetic aspects of the writing, some sections were not much more than batches of word soup, and he treads dangerously close to exotification. I'll give the guy a pass on that because it seems that his disconnect with the people around him is a product of his grief, but if he described any of the younger monks as girlish one more time I was going to sprain something from side-eyeing so hard.

There was one paragraph on page 142 that absolutely smashed my heart into pieces. It's just a touch of what this book could have been, but I don't think the author is ready to properly access those places emotionally. If he ever does though, I'll be first in line to read that book.

Bettie? says

Felt at points I was supposed to buy into the family tragedy in much the same way that Dickens gave us poor Nell to boost his readership. Nevertheless, I enjoy travel books and books about journeying, and whilst this is not as good as his Siberian jaunt, I closed my eyes and pictured those timeless still lakes.

Good enough for me 3.5*

blurb - "By trekkers' standards our party is small and swift: a guide, a cook, a horse-man, myself. We move scattered above the river, while loan traders pass us the other way, leading their stocky horse and mule-trains between lonely villages. They look fierce and open, and laughingly meet your eyes. The delicacy of the plains has gone..."

Renowned travel writer Colin Thubron is about to climb Mount Kailis in Tibet, one of the holiest places in the world and hardly visited by westerners. Its slopes are rugged, glacial, and peopled by the toughest types alive. Its slopes are also full of stories: Hindu and Buddhist tales of struggle, devotion and intrigue. But on from these lower reaches, Kailis' s peak rises sacrosanct. Forbiddingly distant. And it is here that Thubron casts his gaze, then walks towards, as listeners can discover in his new account.

Reader Stephen Boxer. Producer Duncan Minshull.

Joshua Buhs says

Brilliant.

It is a short book about three intertwined mysteries: the mysteries of culture, of death, and of human personality. It offers no easy answers--no answers at all, really. It is a pilgrimage finished, but unfulfilled.

Thubron is a famed travel writer, and he left to visit Mt. Kailas shortly after his mother died. He was, at the time, in his late 60s, and the only surviving member of his family, having seen his father, sister, and mother all pass. Kailas is one of the holiest mountains in the world, revered by Hindus, Buddhists, and Bon. It has never been climbed.

Thubron is no climber and he was not traveling to the mountain to climb it, but to walk around it in a clockwise direction, and bathe in the waters nearby, which is the goal of all the pilgrims who visit the mountain. Some, with the deep-lungs of mountain folk, can hike the 32 mile circuit in a day. (They are at about 17,000 feet above sea level.) Others are surprised by the hardship of the trip to the mountain and driven back, even quitting halfway through the circle and forced to return against the grain.

The area around the mountain, and through which Thubron must travel with his guide, porter, translator, and cook--some of these multiple roles are played by a single person--is beautiful, often stark, and Thubron is amazingly gifted in being able to evoke the landscape. The area is also incredibly poor, and Thubron wonders again and again--as does the reader--how the people can survive here, how they can profess to be happy. Thubron notes their happiness without ever offering insights into it.

The book continually refuses to answer the questions, the mysteries at its heart. The people here face hardships unknown to most, admit that these wear them down, and yet say they are happy. Thubron asks himself how he came to be the kind of person who is most happy alone, and how it feels, now, to be alone in a different way--completely without a family.

The poverty of Nepal and Tibet contrast with the West's imaginings of these places as repositories of ancient wisdom, home of compassion's icon, the Dalai Lama, now exiled. Thubron admits that he approached the area with the usual Westerners's sense of Tibet as a mystical place, and the holy mountain as site of redemption--where sins can be cleansed, and merit earned. And he wonders at the divergence between the culture and the life--for even as he talks to some of the people, the monks and pilgrims, they say things--have a perspective on life--that he just cannot understand. What seems mystical to him seems commonsensical to them. At the same time, he interleaves historical anecdotes, which further complicate the culture--earlier Dalai Lama's were much involved in politics, and war, for instance. And the current geopolitical situation, with China having taken Tibet in the middle of the last century, undercuts, he thinks, the last vestiges of Tibet's claim to be a mystical place.

As readers, we sense the change in the very structure of the narrative. Leading up to the Tibetan frontier, Thubron and those in his small party walk, scramble, struggle over scree and old avalanches. Once in Tibet, they are driven, on roads built by the Chinese, past police checkpoints staffed by the Chinese. There is a very real sense in which the material world is paving over the mystical.

This is finely observed, and finely told, but there are issues at the edge of the story which threaten to blow it up, and which Thubron never deals--keeping the book in the realm of old-fashioned travel literature. His father was part of the British army in India, and hunted big game through a nearby region. Thubron himself stands in this colonizing tradition, visiting the region for his own sake--his attempts to help the locals are poor, as he himself acknowledges, though mostly to accentuate the harsh poverty and his own insignificance rather than to question the system which has him, a well-off Brit, visiting this holy land. The politics, too, obscure some of the story, since the Chinese are positioned as the evil invaders--but he too is invading, and is privileged by a huge international system. It is necessary, anymore, if writing travel literature to engage these issues, but he does not. And so the story sticks to the personal, hinting at but avoiding the political.

Nonetheless, the narrative is finely structured, and beautifully written, the language rich, verging on the

pretentious but never crossing the line, There are the recurring references to cuckoos, which seem tossed off until they explode with meaning when we learn the cosmology of the Bon. And there is his artful use of the second-person, here and there, sometimes directed at the reader, sometimes, his mother, his sister, which tends to confuse--in a good way--the reader's sense of self: better put, identity echoes and refracts, in a way that points the reader toward Buddhist understandings of life, and of death.

Understandings that Thubron would like to come to himself, but cannot. Unlike those pilgrims for whom the trip is meaningful but still must fall back, Thubron finishes, and at the end of the book is seen heading back down the mountain, but he never comes to grips with his family's deaths, or his own isolation. The search for meaning is frustrated. Buddhists interpretations of the soul, the sometimes sordid and almost always confusing reality of the temples cannot help Thubron understand his place in the world, or the meaning of death. There is no metaphysical peace, only the relief of having finished an arduous task.

Daren says

It has been a while since I have read any Colin Thubron non-fiction, which I generally find to be 4 star quality, and very enjoyable. Not so much his fiction, but that is another (2 star) story.

This book, I have been looking forward to reading, but it feels a little different to the Thubron I remember. It is possible that this journey is, for Thubron, a more personal journey than his previous work. His mother has passed away, following his father and his sister, who died in a skiing accident in her early twenties. For him, his journey, his kora (circumambulation of pilgrimage) is for his mother, and while he touches on it a few times, he certainly doesn't overshare, or make the book about his mother.

To touch briefly on the location of his journey - a trek from Nepal up to and across the border to Tibet, and on to a pilgrimage circuit around Mt Kailas, the most sacred of the world's mountains (to the Buddhist, Bon and Hindu religions). A mountain that has never been climbed, and the access to which is strictly monitored and controlled, and for many years was closed to almost everyone. The kora takes one through the ever changing scenery of mountainous Tibet, sacred lakes and decaying monasteries.

In my view, it has effected the way he has written. He has written a lot about the Buddhist and Bon religions, and the crossover of Hinduism. He has written a lot about the gods, their stories, and other tales. He has described the ever changing scenery of first Nepal, and then Tibet - and described it incredibly well. But, and there is a but, because this didn't maintain his four star quality, it didn't have the passion, or invoke the colour or excitement that for me his other writing has.

Still an enjoyable read, and as I say the descriptive landscape and even his description of and (albeit brief) interactions with people he meets are great. I have to say I would love to make the trip he has, the kora around Mt Kailas.

3.5 stars, but rounded down as his other four star books are prevail over this one.

Benny says

Colin Thubron is een oude reiziger. Samen met Paul Theroux bracht hij me, toen ik nog jonger was, niet alleen reis- maar ook letterkriebels. *Shadow of the Silk Road, In Siberia, Behind the Wall, Among the*

Russians...het zijn allemaal klassiekers van de reisliteratuur wat mij betreft.

Hoewel *Naar een Berg in Tibet* als zijn meest persoonlijke boek wordt geprezen, ben ik er pas nu toe gekomen het te lezen. Na de dood van zijn moeder is Thubron de oudste van zijn familie. Misschien was het de confrontatie met zijn eigen sterfelijkheid die hem op expeditie zette naar de heiligste berg: de Kailash. Die mythische rotsjoekel in het westen van de Tibetaanse hoogvlakte doet wereldrivers ontstaan en wordt vereerd door hindoes, boeddhisten, jains, bon...als je 't even narekent, kom je al snel uit op een flink deel van de wereldbevolking!

Het is geen evidente bestemming en de reis is moeilijk, maar Thubron is aangenaam gezelschap. De inmiddels zeventigjarige telg uit een excentrieke Britse familie is voldoende cynisch en erudiet om de mythen en fabeltjes te doorprikken, maar tegelijkertijd ook beleefd en nieuwsgierig genoeg om al de mooie verhalen te noteren.

Vliegende bergen, standbeelden die kunnen spreken en zichzelf geschapen hebben...het Tibetaanse geloof lijkt een kralenkrans van visioenen veroorzaakt door ijle hoogtes en al te grote eenzaamheid. Sterk dat Thubron de mythe van Shangrilaland weet te doorprikken, maar ik had niet anders verwacht van hem.

Naarmate Thubron de berg nadert worden de betekenissen en verwijzingen steeds talrijker. Hij wordt geconfronteerd met boerse bedevaartgangers, verdwaasde monniken, de onvermijdelijke westerse toeristen en Chinese agenten, maar ook met zijn eigen geschiedenis. Maar hij blijft discreet en schuwt de grote reflectie. Ook deze reis biedt geen epifanie, geen troost, geen inzicht. De reis is de reis, verdomd zwaar soms, maar ook verblindend mooi.

Ik weet niet of Colin Thubron hierna nog een iets zal publiceren, maar ik vind dit alvast een waardig afscheid. Of zal hij toch nog dat verhaal van zijn familie schrijven?

Don says

(FROM MY BLOG) To the north, beyond the main range of the Himalayas, emerging from the Tibetan plateau, stands an isolated peak called Kailas. Although only 22,028 feet high, quite low by Himalayan standards, no climber has ever stood on its summit (except, apocryphally, a mystic in ancient times). It may never be climbed.

Kailas is a holy mountain to a number of religions, including Hinduism and Buddhism.

To Hindus, Kailas is identified as the earthly manifestation of the mystical mountain Meru. Living on the summit are Lord Shiva, and his consort Parvati.

To Tibetan Buddhists, atop Kailas is the ice palace of Demchog, a demonic deity wearing a crown of skulls - - perhaps a manifestation of Shiva -- who is usually represented with a blue-skinned body, four faces, and twelve arms, and shown embracing his consort Vajravarahi. Demchog and his consort are locked in an erotic embrace, representing the union of "nothingness" and "compassion."

To the remaining adherents of Bön, the pre-Buddhist belief system of Tibet, Kailas represented the seat of all spiritual power.

Colin Thubron is a travel writer in his early 70's. Over his lifetime, he has written a number of well-received books describing his travels in Asia and the Middle East, beginning with publication in 1967 of his book,

Mirror to Damascus. In recent years, he's watched his family die off, one by one. The death of his mother, the last survivor of his family, prompted him to undertake a trek to Kailas, leading to publication this year of his book, *To a Mountain in Tibet*.

If Eric Newby's book, *A Short Walk in the Hindu Kush* (discussed a couple of posts ago) was a young man's light-hearted treatment of a taxing and dangerous climbing and trekking expedition, Thubron writes as a much older man, stricken by the deaths of relatives and facing his own mortality. The trek is not easy, but it follows well known trails; Western trekking companies routinely lead treks to the holy mountain. Thubron's trek is far less a perilous adventure into the unknown than was Newby's.

But Thubron's pilgrimage results is a far darker book.

Thubron begins trekking in the far western region of Nepal. He walks over passes through the Himalayas, crosses into Tibet, and arrives ultimately at the foot of Kailas. He then undertakes the kora, the traditional Buddhist and Hindu circumambulation of the mountain, an exercise that will wipe one's soul free of sin. For those with the tenacity to complete 108 circuits during their lifetime, the cycle of reincarnation comes immediately to an end, and the soul enters nirvana.

Few beliefs are older than the notion that heaven and earth were once conjoined, and that gods and men moved up and down a celestial ladder -- or a rope or vine -- and mingled at ease.

Kailas is such a ladder. The mountain was flown to this remote area, according to Buddhist belief, staked in place before devils could pull it underground, and nailed in place by the Buddha himself, preventing the gods from returning it to its origin.

Thubron speaks with many Nepalis and Tibetans on his trek. They are usually friendly. Their lives are very difficult, and often short. Many have suffered at the hands of the Chinese Maoists. Whatever dreams they may one day have dreamt as children rarely survived their teens. Only their religious beliefs give apparent meaning to the limited number of years and opportunities allotted them.

Thubron describes in detail, throughout his trek, the cosmic views held by Buddhists (and to a lesser degree, Hindus). He looks for that same meaning. He longs also to believe.

But he views the beliefs he lovingly describes as an outsider; he sees them as myths that -- however beautiful and suggestive -- were evolved by a primitive civilization. He marvels at the quiet self-confidence of monks with whom he meets; but he asks himself, are they incredibly wise, or simply credulous? Scholarly, or lazy? Are the desperately poor Nepali and Tibetans whom he meets making their way through just one more incarnation on the road to ultimate enlightenment? Or are they leading short, desperate, meaningless lives, ending in wretched deaths.

Thubron completes the 32-mile circuit of Kailas, crossing over its high point, Dröma pass, at 18,200 feet. He feels a sense of accomplishment, but he attains no spiritual revelation, no peace.

The writhing image of Demchog -- the union of "nothingness" and "compassion" -- leaves him neither at peace with his mother's death, nor at ease contemplating his own. A Buddhist monk, in the Tibetan tradition, explains to him that, in reality, there are no gods. Or rather, that the gods are merely guides, helping to lead him to that enlightenment that is man's highest destiny.

I tried to imagine this, but the wrong words swam into my mind: rejected life, self-hypnosis, the obliteration of loved difference. Premature death.

He tells a monk that his understanding of Buddhism is that, at death, everything is shed.

He smiled, as he tended to do at contradiction. "That is so. Only karma lasts. Merit and demerit."

"So nothing of the individual survives. Nothing that contains memory?"

"No." He sensed the strain in me, and with faint regret: "You know our Buddhist saying?"

Yes, I remember.

From all that he loves, man must part.

Thubron has undertaken a fascinating adventure. He has written yet another excellent book. I doubt, however, that he came down from his mountain having achieved the wisdom, the peace, or the hope that he may have sought on its heights. Demchog, in his amalgam of compassion and nothingness, may appear to Western eyes a cruel god.
