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Requiem for a Himalayan Kingdom

Written by Andy Duff

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SIKKIM



REQUIEM FOR A HIMALAYAN KINGDOM

A Tale of Love, Intrigue and the Cold War in Asia

Andy Duff



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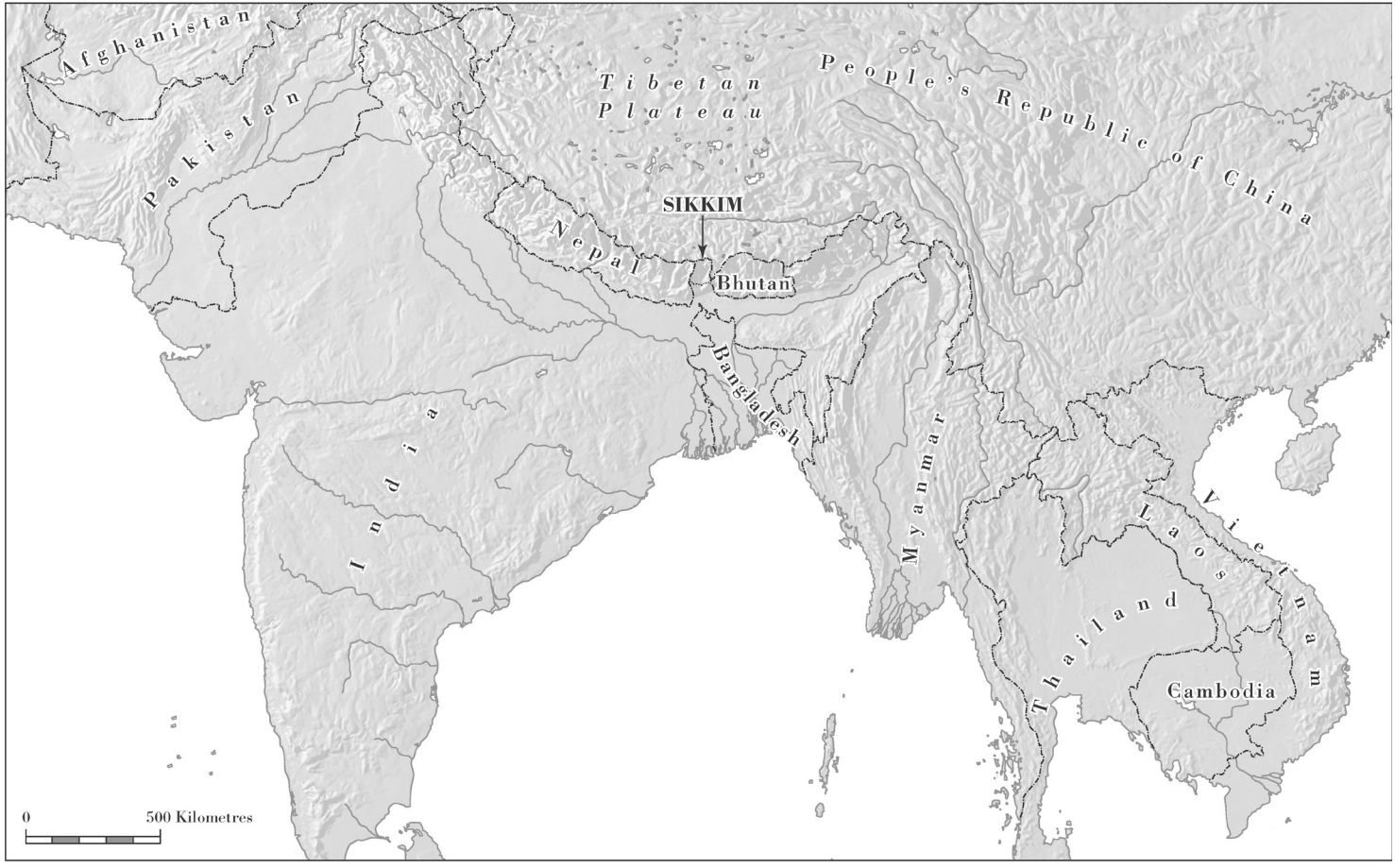
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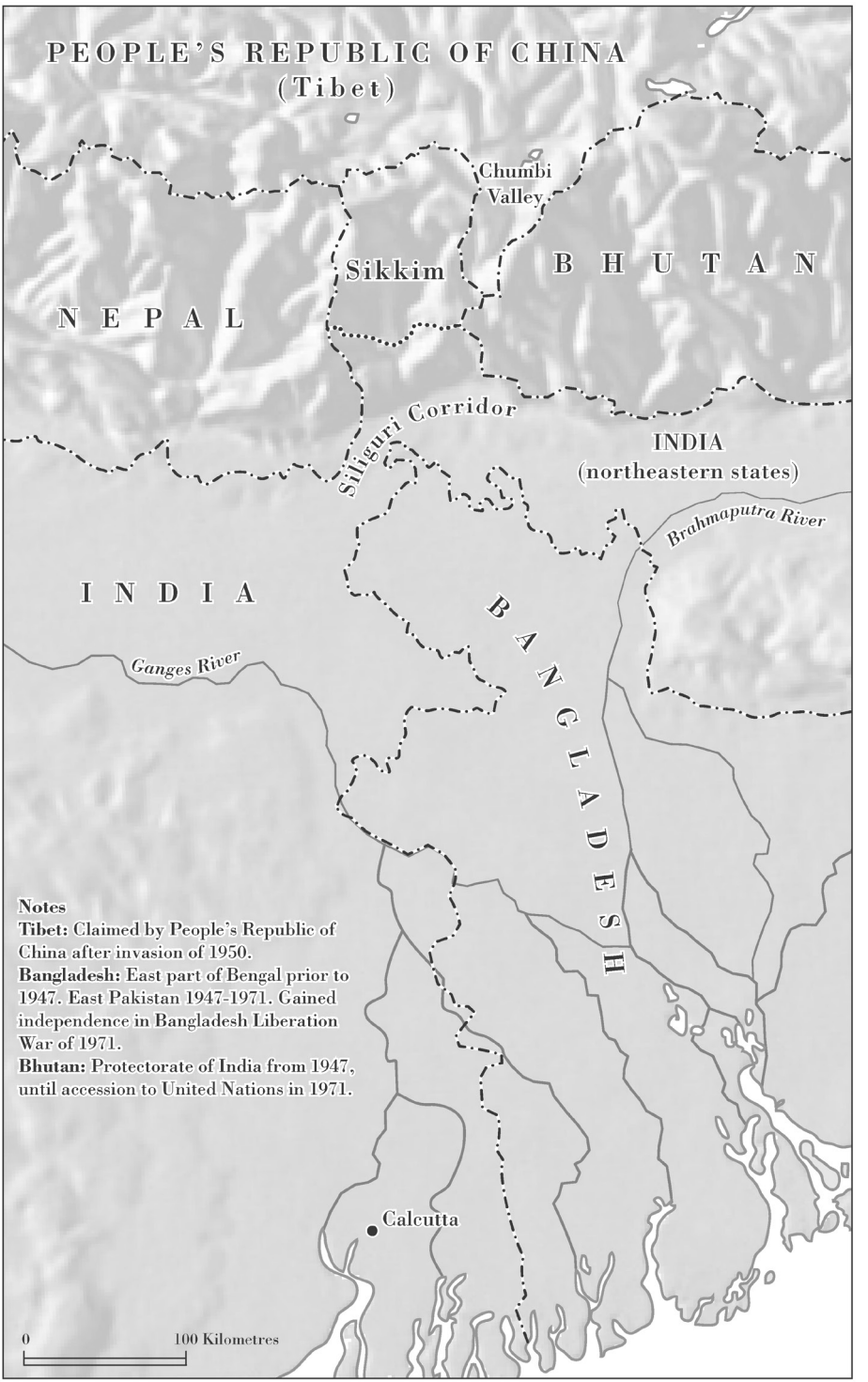
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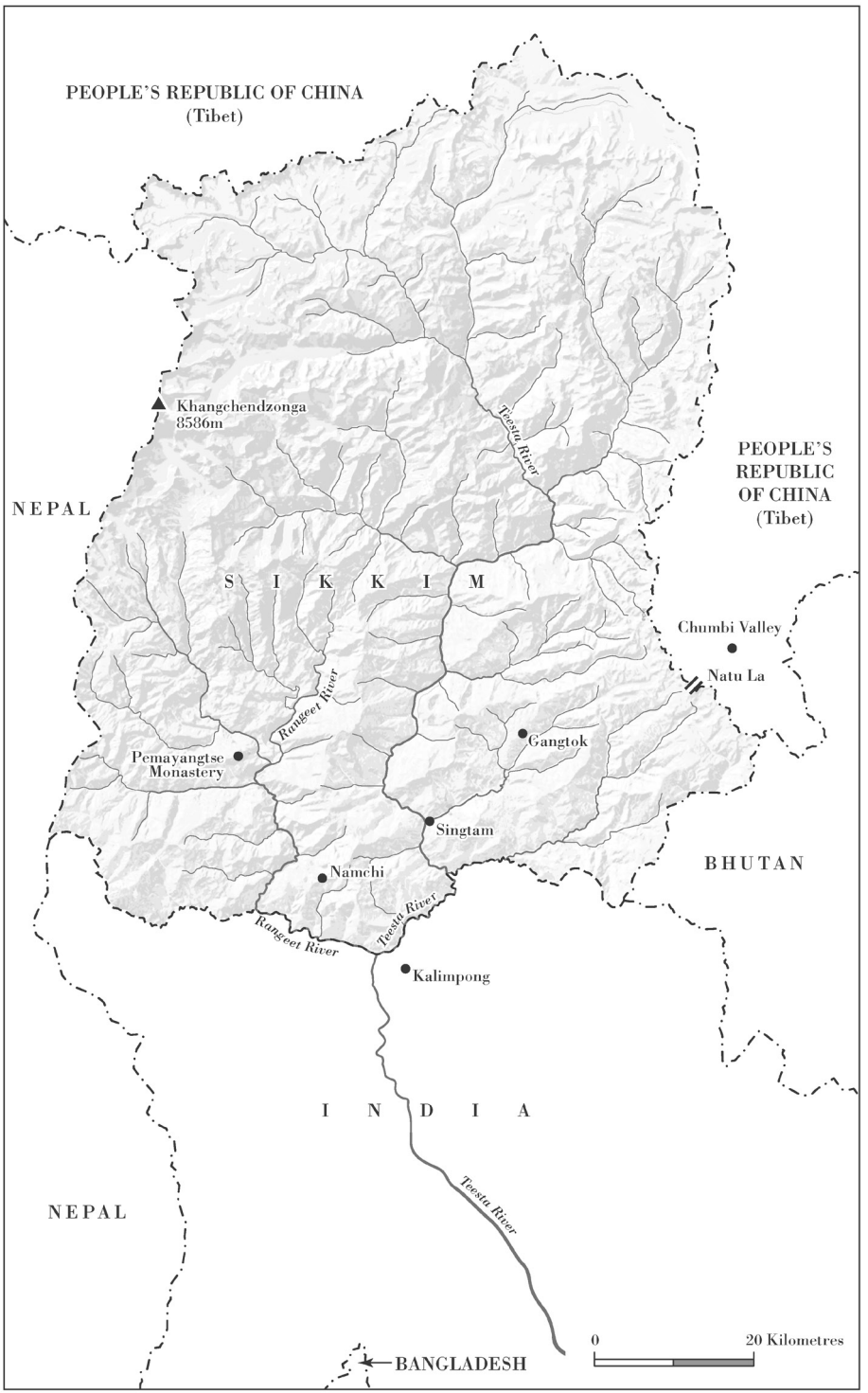
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A Note on Romanisation

For non-English words in the main text, I have used what I consider to be the most usual up-to-date romanised forms and focused on consistency rather than following one particular system. Where different spellings are included in quoted text, I have left these as they stand.


Afghanistan
Pakistan
Tibetan Plateau
People's Republic of China
SIKKIM
Nepal
Bhutan
Bangladesh
India
Myanmar
Laos
Vietnam
Thailand
Cambodia
0
500 Kilometres


PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF CHINA
(Tibet)
Chumbi
Valley
Sikkim
B H U T A N
N E P A L
Siliguri Corridor
INDIA
(northeastern states)
Brahmaputra River
I N D I A
B A N G L A D E S H
Ganges River
Notes
Tibet: Claimed by People's Republic of China after invasion of 1950.
Bangladesh: East part of Bengal prior to 1947. East Pakistan 1947-1971. Gained independence in Bangladesh Liberation War of 1971.
Bhutan: Protectorate of India from 1947, until accession to United Nations in 1971.
Calcutta
0
100 Kilometres


PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF CHINA
(Tibet)
Khangchendzonga
8586m
Teesta River
PEOPLE'S
REPUBLIC
OF CHINA
(Tibet)
NEPAL
S I K K I M
Chumbi Valley
Natu La
Rangeet River
Gangtok
Pemayangtse
Monastery
Singtam
BHUTAN
Namchi
Teesta River
Rangeet River
Kalimpong
I N D I A
NEPAL
Teesta River
0
20 Kilometres
BANGLADESH

Introduction

April 2009, Pemayangtse Monastery, Sikkim

'How much do you know about Sikkim?'

The monk looked at me through the fading light, across the low table in his home on the grounds of Pemayangtse Monastery. A single bulb flickered as the electricity struggled up from the valley thousands of feet below. His maroon robes, trimmed with blue and gold brocade around the cuffs and buttoned front, contrasted with the peeling paint on the window behind him. He left the question hanging in the air as he picked up his soup bowl and slurped its contents. Through the window I could hear the sound of Buddhist chants floating out over the sounds of cymbals, horns and drums.

The words, spoken in an accented English unlike any I'd heard elsewhere in India, were the first he had spoken for some minutes. I shifted uncomfortably in my bench-seat as I thought of my sparse knowledge. On the table between us I had placed a blue plastic folder from which spilled my grandfather's notes and photographs of the trek he made through Sikkim to this monastery in 1922. I supposed, wrongly, that my inheritance gave me permission to discuss Sikkim with the monk. Now it was clear I had miscalculated.

'Not much,' I admitted. 'But I would like to learn . . .'

His hooded eyes rested on me impassively. The chanting had stopped and I could hear the steady sound of his breathing above the hum of electric current trying to feed the bulb. He picked up a book from beside him. I could just see its title: *Smash and Grab: The Annexation of Sikkim*.

He tossed the book to me. 'Read this. It is banned in India. We speak tomorrow.'*

Looking back now, it seems a bit odd that I didn't know more about Sikkim. By the time I met the monk, the place had been in my consciousness for over two decades.

My journey to the beautiful hilltop monastery of Pemayangtse started in the 1980s. I was a teenager, living in Edinburgh. As my paternal grandparents' minds began to fade, my parents moved them from St Andrews to live five doors down the road from us. I was happy: as their youngest grandchild, I had become close to them. Besides, they had around them the glow of something other, something different: they had spent most of their lives in India.

The move prompted a house clearance in St Andrews. Among the belongings that found their way into our house were a number of albums of photographs from India. I was captivated by all of them, but there was one album in particular that I would spend hours poring over. There was something immensely physically pleasing about the weight and feel of this album. It was large and sturdy, about 18 inches wide by 12 inches tall. Inside the stout mid-brown leather cover, marked with over half a century of scratches, were two and a half inches of bound grey linen pages. It was, as my grandfather explained in a short note inside the front cover, 'strong rather than artistic' on account of its provenance: it had been made in Gourepore, the jute mill outside Calcutta where he worked in the 1930s.

The photographs inside were absorbing: most were from my grandfather's early bachelor years in Calcutta. Others showed by grandparents newly married in the 1930s. My father and aunt also featured, as small children soon to be sent home to Scotland as the prospect of war loomed.

I wanted to talk to my grandparents about the stories behind the photographs. I felt there was something deeply unfair about the way they were declining just as I became a curious teenager. It was clear that my grandfather cared deeply for India, in his own way. Every image on every page had been carefully outlined in ink with hand-drawn geometric designs. But it was the carefully inscribed titles for each photograph that

* In fact, the book was never banned, although, as the author Sunanda Datta-Ray explains in a new 2014 edition of the book, it was cleverly sidelined by the Indian authorities.

fired my imagination. I wanted to know what it felt like to jump from the back of a canoe and swim in the river at Falta, to watch the monsoon break at Parasnath, to mess around burying his best friend J. E. Osmond in sand to look like Tutankhamun at Gopalpur. I wanted him to tell me about the elephants on the tea estate in Bhooteachang, about bathing naked and picnicking on fish in the Sunderbans. I wanted to ask him about the Garhwal Himalayas, the Pindari Glacier, about places with strange names like Shillong, Kalimpong, Darjeeling, Ranchi, Phalut.

But there was one word I wanted to ask him about more than anything else: Sikkim.

Each time I opened the album, it was the first word that confronted me. On the right-hand page, encased in elaborate stencils was a single black-and-white photograph of a river rushing under a flimsy-looking bridge. On one side of the photo in large letters was written 'Sikkim'; on the other, 'Pujahs 1922'. On the facing page six type-written sheets of yellowing notepaper had been carefully glued by their edges so that they overlapped. At the top of the first sheet: 'Notes on a Tour in Sikkim Oct. 1922'. The notes contained an account of a journey – a holiday – walking a circular route into the Sikkim Himalaya. The first eight pages were photographs of that journey, made when my grandfather was only 22 and had been in India for less than two years, but there had been other journeys through Sikkim, too, after my grandparents had married in 1929. There was a trip in 1932, again in 1934, and – perhaps most remarkably – one in 1938, when they trekked together over a 14,000-foot pass into Tibet.

But it was the 1922 journey that captured my imagination most. I must have read the matter-of-fact opening a hundred times: 'Our party consisted of four: Sinclair, who made most of the arrangements, Ewan, Ryrie and myself. We left Darjeeling after tiffin on October 15th, and arrived back there on the 25th.' As I read the notes and built an impression from the photographs, I felt as if I was venturing with them deep into the Himalayas. Soon I knew the route description by heart. Place names such as Chakung, Rinchenpong and Dentam became embedded in my memory. I loved reading about what was clearly a physically challenging landscape: there were constant reminders of 'steady tiring climbing', 'steep descents', more 'stiff climbs', descents of 5,000 feet that were described

as 'likely to be very tiring to the walker'. But the rewards were spelled out, too: rows and rows of tea plantations ('very pleasing after Bengal'), roaring rivers with 'the jade green water rushing amid massive boulders between the mountainous banks on either side', 'the snows peeping over the hills to the north' and finally, as they progressed deeper into the Himalayas, 'a magnificent view of the sun peeping over the whole range'.

It was the description and the photographs of the hilltop monastery that was their final destination – Pamionchi – that took the firmest hold on my mind. After five days of arduous trekking, the final approach at dusk– 'through dark and eerie woods, wind and silent', with monkeys 'the only animal life of any kind' – had clearly spooked my grandfather and his companions. That night they had been able to see 'the twinkling of the lights in Darjeeling . . . a pretty sight'. But it had not been till the following morning that they had fully appreciated the spectacular location of the monastery. They could see for miles in every direction. Most spectacularly, to the north, not more than a dozen miles, lay the peaks of the third-highest mountain of the world, Khangchendzonga, sacred to the lamas of Sikkim. The monastery, too, had made an impression – of a slightly different kind. They had found the temple a 'weird place' and the wall paintings 'extremely crude and pagan'. Nevertheless, it was clear from the black-and-white pictures that the imposing building, the monks and their houses had sparked the young men's curiosity – although there were limits: the monks' failed in their effort to entice them into the upper floors of the monastery to see the 'treasures' for a fee of ten rupees: 'Remembering we were Scotch, and had a reputation to keep up, we contented ourselves with seeing downstairs only.'

The four men spent two days at the monastery before returning together to Darjeeling, staying in the Government of India-owned dak bungalows that the British had built across the Himalayas to allow a sufficient level of control. It had taken less than a fortnight. But the notes and photographs survived to fire my imagination more than half a century later. When my grandparents died within three months of each other in 1988, a seed was planted in my mind.

It took two decades for that seed to germinate.

In late 2008, I decided it was time. The first thing I needed to do was to look for Sikkim once again in the atlas. I almost missed it.

Nestled in between Nepal and Bhutan, Sikkim is tiny, about a third of the size of Wales. In most atlases, the space is not even big enough to hold the six letters of Sikkim's name. It lies about two-thirds of the way along the Himalayas, the great white crescent of mountains that stretches for more than 1,800 miles from the steppes of central Asia to the tropical forests of Myanmar and South-east Asia. As I peered at the atlas I could see one very good reason why it had appealed to my grandfather: Sikkim lies almost due north of Calcutta.

In early 2009, I packed photocopies of the notes and photographs into my rucksack and set off for northern India. From Calcutta I travelled up to Siliguri, the junction town from where the Darjeeling Himalayan Railway snakes up into the hills, chugging gently into the mountains, covering no more than 50 miles in six hours. By the time we reached Darjeeling, the heat of the plains had been exchanged for a persistent drizzle and penetrating chill in the air, part of the attraction for the inhabitants of steamy Calcutta. Today the hill station still retains a few signs of its colonial past, managing somehow to stay just the right side of faded grandeur.

It took me a few days to establish that I would be able to follow my grandfather's route into Sikkim. Numerous guides tempted me with offers of trekking along the Nepali border to see Mount Everest, but slowly I started to piece things together. There was one thing that still puzzled me, though. I could not find any reference to the monastery that had been the apex of their journey: Pamionchi.

The turning point came when I found a 1917 book that mentioned it. I cross-referenced the book's map with a 1981 military one I had acquired in Calcutta. Everything fell into place: Pamionchi, I realised, was an early twentieth-century effort to anglicise the word Pemayangtse – this was the modern name for the monastery that was now my destination. The following day I met a guide willing to help me find accommodation along the way. I knew there was little chance of staying in the government-owned dak bungalows that my grandfather and his friends had used.

The landscape turned out to be even more spectacular than I'd expected. The first day and a half consisted of a steep knee-crunching descent of over 5,000 feet to reach the river Rangeet, which separates modern West Bengal from Sikkim. Crossing the river, the footbridge that I had looked at so many times in my grandfather's album was still there, spanning

the glacial water. I used the photocopied notes and photographs that I carried with me to help navigate my way into the Himalayan foothills. After following the river upstream for a few miles, I finally entered Sikkim on 4 April 2009.

Over the next three days I covered more than 50 miles on foot, ascending and descending a few thousand feet each day to cross the concertina of ridges that define the southern area of Sikkim. As I passed through every hill pass, I could see, less than 30 miles away, the magnificent massif of Mount Khangchendzonga and the other snow-capped ranges than separate India from the Tibetan plateau.

I was hard not to feel a sense of destiny as I retraced my grandfather's footsteps from 87 years before. At times the challenging terrain almost defeated me. His party had numbered more than 20 (including all the porters). They had even taken a pony – my grandfather had made an aside that 'it is a help in climbing to hang on to the pony's tail if someone else is riding'. As I zigzagged up steep slopes by myself, I could understand what he meant.

Finally, as dusk fell on the fifth day, I walked high along the side of the Kulhait Valley, climbing up the steep road to the hilltop monastery of Pemayangtse, and my meeting with the monk.

For the first four days of the trek, my guide had managed to procure rooms in the most unlikely of places: among others, a concrete cell-like room above a village bank, and a bed in the house of a local postmaster. In the village below the monastery, I struck gold. I was told that a former monk, who now ran a school offering a Buddhist-based curriculum, was willing to let me stay in his house, right by the monastery. It was on the first evening in his house that he tossed me the book, telling me we would speak the following day.

That night, in a small wood-panelled room at the top of his house, I opened the book and began reading. At first I found the story hard to follow – it seemed to be an account of the funeral of the ruler, or 'Chogyal', of Sikkim – although one thing was clear: the author was convinced that a great wrong had taken place against the king in the 1970s. Tiredness began to get the better of me. With the freezing air making the skin on my face feel numb, my eyes drooped and I struggled to focus on the page.

Then I suddenly became alert. A few pages in, amid an account of the funeral procession, I read the following: 'Finally [came] Sonam Yongda, the Sikkim Guards captain who had paid dearly for his patriotism, and returned to the monastery whence he began. . . clad in the lama's maroon.'

At first I told myself it was a coincidence. I had learnt in Pelling, the small village below the monastery, that my host's name was Yongda. Surely there must be more than one Yongda with connections to a monastery in Sikkim. But curiosity took me to the index. There were multiple references under 'Yongda, Captain Sonam'. I turned to the first:

> Captain Sonam Yongda . . . had passed out with distinction from the Indian Military Academy and had trained for more than a year with an Indian Gurkha regiment. The son of a senior lama at Pemayangtse Monastery, where he himself had also been ordained, Yongda came of sturdy Bhutiya stock.

The odds were narrowing: this Yongda had been at Pemayangtse too. Another passage hinted at a man of some courage: 'With Yongda behind bars, the Sikkim Guards were deprived of the only officer who could have forged commitment and fervour into resistance.'

Curious, I returned to the main story and read on. It was obvious that the author held the king in high regard and was convinced that he had been badly mistreated, abandoned by all but a few loyal supporters, including this 'Captain Yongda'. It was a compelling story of tragedy and intrigue. Now even the piercing cold could not stop me reading till the early hours of the morning.

As I dressed quickly, donning fleece layer after fleece layer, I again told myself it must simply be a coincidence: the military man in the book *must* be a different Sonam Yongda, a brother or a cousin of the monk who was my host at Pemayangtse, nothing more.

I made my way downstairs and into the kitchen area, past the wooden bed frames, towards the low tables and benched seating. Three girls were bustling around the kitchen, filling bowls and pouring tea. The monk was at the table, hunched over a bowl of porridge. He was dressed in an extraordinary outfit – it was hard to reconcile him with the maroon-clad monk of the previous evening. His monastic robe was gone, replaced by a turquoise shellsuit over which he wore a thick, dark-blue down

bodywarmer. He had a bulky woollen hat pulled down over his brow. He glanced up from the bowl of porridge and nodded a greeting to me. I took a seat beside him. One of the girls brought over a mug of steaming tea and a bowl of porridge sprinkled with chilli flakes. The three girls also took seats at one end of the low table with their own bowls. I tucked in to the delicious porridge and, with no idea what to say, I waited for the monk to open the conversation.

'So. How you sleep?'

'Yes, well, thank you.'

'Did you like the book?'

I looked over at him but couldn't read his face in the morning gloom.

'Yes, I did.' I decided to chance it. 'I came across references to someone called Yongda from this monastery. I wondered if he might be a relative of yours.'

I noticed that the girls were all suppressing giggles. I glimpsed the slightest of smirks as Yongda looked over at them.

'You?' is all I could think to say.

He nodded, the hint of a shy smile on his lips, which quickly disappeared. It seemed barely believable that this was the man in the book. I could not hide my curiosity. I blurted out, 'So you were the King of Sikkim's personal bodyguard?'

He nodded again, then looked up at me. 'You must read the whole book. It is a very important story. A terrible story, terrible what they did to the Chogyal.'

His face turned impassive again. 'But that was a long time ago. And I am now late,' he said, standing up. He gathered his things and left.

When I set out on the journey, my intention had been to write about my reconnection with my grandfather's years living in India and his love for the Himalaya, particularly Sikkim. But the book that the monk gave me contained such an extraordinary story of political intrigue and wonderful characters in the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s that my horizons soon broadened. Over the next three days I devoured the tale of the final days of the Himalayan Kingdom of Sikkim. I read how this tiny part of the world, once a vital part of the sprawling British Empire, had survived as an independent entity after India gained its own independence; how

King Thondup, the last Chogyal, had married an American woman, Hope Cooke, once talked of in the same breath as Grace Kelly, and how together they had believed they could revive the ancient kingdom; how (the author of *Smash and Grab* alleged) Indira Gandhi had used her intelligence services to bring that dream to a close, surrounding the palace with troops as she annexed the kingdom in 1975. And as if the drama of the story were not enough, the cast of supporting characters had names worthy of a James Bond novel: the Kazini, a shadowy Scottish woman who orchestrated events on behalf of her husband, the leading politician in Sikkim who harboured a lifelong grudge against the king; the improbably named Princess Coocoola, the king's sister, who Heinrich Harrer (of *Seven Years in Tibet* fame) believed to be the most beautiful woman in the world. The most astonishing revelation was that Sonam Yongda, the monk who had given me the book, had played an important part in the climax of the story as a captain in the Sikkim Guards, the small body of military men who protected the king. In hour-long sessions, he slowly revealed the details of his role in this remarkable tale.

It took me four days to trek back to the Sikkimese border. At one point I found myself walking along old moss-covered cobbled bridleways through ancient forests of deodar. Finally, I reached the river and climbed 5,000 feet back up to the ridge that Darjeeling straddles, returning to where I had started a fortnight before. I spent a week trying to process what I had read, looking for other accounts of Sikkim's story in the best bookshop in the hill town, the Oxford Stores. I discovered that Sikkim's name stemmed from a word meaning 'happy home'. But in the few slim volumes that mentioned the events of 1975 most referred to it as a 'merger' between Sikkim and India, a triumph for 'democratic forces', the culmination of a popular rising by the Sikkimese people themselves – against a feudal monarch. Some even referred to Hope Cooke as a CIA agent. And of the few people I found willing to talk about their recollections of the time, none gave me the same account. The story seemed slippery, full of nuance and complication. Versions seemed to proliferate like subdividing cells.

From Sikkim, I travelled through Nepal and into Tibet, where I began to understand the delicate political and religious connections and tensions between the countries across the Himalayan region. But it was Sikkim's tale that now obsessed me. When I eventually returned to my home in

Scotland, I immersed myself in finding out what I could about the place. I discovered that there was a small group of academics researching its early history. I learnt that Sikkim's ties to Tibet and its position alongside the biggest chink in the Himalayan massif had made it geopolitically valuable for centuries.

Most importantly, I understood that the history of Sikkim's demise could not be seen in isolation. The British involvement in Sikkim and Tibet in the early twentieth century had set up many of Sikkim's problems. After the British left in 1947, the Himalayan region had been at the centre of a period of international intrigue across Asia, a second front for the Cold War. I began to realise that Sikkim never stood a chance.

But I still felt I was some distance from getting under the skin of what happened in Sikkim. *Smash and Grab* was a valuable first-hand account, but the author was open about his close friendship with the Chogyal. I wondered if that had coloured his narrative. I longed for another perspective. My first break came when I was introduced to Martha Steedman (née Hamilton) by a friend of my parents. Martha, a bright, energetic Scottish woman in her late seventies with a distinguished teaching career behind her, had been headmistress of the main girls school in the Sikkimese capital, Gangtok, between 1959 and 1966. Sikkim was a small place, and she had direct access to the Palace. She showed me extraordinary photographs of the royal couple, of their wedding and coronation. The turning point came when she asked if I'd like to see the weekly letters she had written to her parents from Sikkim. Far from being 'of little interest', as she had suggested, the pale blue aerogrammes provided a unique perspective on the world of Sikkim. Life in the palace burst into full Technicolor. I began to discover references to Sikkim in travel memoirs and articles in magazines such as *Time, Newsweek, National Geographic* and *Paris Match* that illuminated matters further.

With the help of Martha Hamilton's letters, I started to piece together the story. But she also gave me my second break. Perhaps, she suggested, I might like to speak to her successor as headmistress at the school, Ishbel Ritchie, another Scot, who had served in Sikkim between 1966 and 1991. A fortnight later I was walking out of Ritchie's home in Dunfermline laden with another box of weekly letters home. As I put them into order, I realised I had stumbled across another treasure trove. Ritchie's letters

(which she had to hide from the Indian censors operating in Sikkim) were just as insightful as Hamilton's. I now had first-hand, contemporaneous accounts of the years from 1959 to 1975, during which Thondup and his queen, Hope Cooke, had tried to reinvigorate the Kingdom of Sikkim.

A project that I thought would take a year had already taken 18 months. But there was one big problem. I was now so immersed in the local story of Sikkim in the 1960s and 1970s that I had missed the other vital part of the story – the geopolitical context within which Sikkim had existed, located on the frontier between India, which had emerged from British rule in 1947, and Tibet, occupied by China since 1950. I began to delve into the motivations of the Indian and Chinese governments in this period, understanding that they were deeply influenced by the Cold War politics swirling around Asia at the time. I realised that understanding the motivations of one woman in particular – Indira Gandhi, the Indian Prime Minister from 1966 to 1977 and then again from 1980 to 1984 – was critical in telling the story of Sikkim.

Suspecting that official records of the UK government might also shed light on the story, I turned to the Foreign Office records in the National Archives. Every year, under what is called the '30-year-rule', the UK government releases secret files from three decades previously. I realised that files from the 1970s would be available. I discovered a remarkable set of documents demonstrating that the UK government had shown a keen interest in the events in Sikkim, a place that was clearly dear to many Foreign Office mandarins, some of whom had been intimately connected to Sikkim's royal family. Secret reports and memos added to the sense of intrigue in the story.

Meanwhile I returned to Sikkim on a number of occasions, tracking down some of those who had been involved in the events I was writing about. As they entered their seventies and eighties, some welcomed the opportunity to unburden themselves, talking openly of their role in the events of the time, often admitting to a sense of embarrassed guilt.

Finally, in early 2013, just as I thought I had completed the final draft of the book, Wikileaks released a tranche of US government cables from the early to mid-1970s. With some trepidation (I had by now had enough of 'revelations') I decided to do a word search within the documents for 'Sikkim'. The computer revealed 500 secret cables that brought to life the

extraordinary Cold War background to Sikkim's demise. It was the last piece of a complex puzzle, putting the events of Sikkim into their proper global context.

At last, I felt I had a complete story to write.

The story of Sikkim is a cautionary tale of what can happen when a small kingdom tugs at the tailcoats of the Great Powers. But it is also an intensely human story – about King Thondup and his wife Hope Cooke. He was the scion of a Buddhist ruling family; she, 17 years his junior and a teenager when they first met, the orphaned granddaughter of a New York shipping company president. That they met at all was remarkable enough; the way their relationship developed – often in the public eye – I found fascinating. As I researched their story in Sikkim, no one I spoke to was shy about giving an opinion. Navigating through those opinions was never easy.

Thondup died in 1982, but Hope Cooke still lives in New York today. I contacted her in 2010. At first she offered to talk about the 'cultural context' to Sikkim, but then decided (after consulting with her children) that she should leave her 1981 biography to stand as her record of the period. Although this was initially disappointing, as time passed I understood that decision.

This tiny piece of land no more than 70 miles by 40 miles has dominated my life for five years. The pursuit of the story has taken me back to Sikkim and India many times, drawing me into fascinating corners and cul-de-sacs I never dreamed of visiting. I have researched in Gangtok's Institute of Tibetology, the Tibetan Government-in-Exile's archive in Dharamsala in northern India, the Bodleian Library, the British Library and the London Library. I have interviewed former Indian diplomats in Delhi, and former (and current) Sikkimese politicians in Gangtok. But the keys to unlocking this story were the letters of Martha Hamilton and Ishbel Ritchie. Both have been unfailingly generous.

On my desk as I write this, there is a small cardboard head-and-shoulders cut-out picture of my grandfather taken in India. He is wearing a shirt and pullover, a pipe hanging out of his mouth. It may even have been taken in Sikkim. It is strange for me to think that without him none of this would have been written.

To him, and to my parents, enormous thanks.

Prologue

On 15 May 1975 a curious letter appeared in the pages of *The Times*. The title was 'Chogyal of Sikkim' and it was signed by a 'JOHN CLARKE, GK8A, Tanyard, Frittenden, Kent'. Clarke's letter was in response to a flurry of correspondence about Sikkim that had appeared in *The Times* over the past month, which had caused him to recall a bizarre conversation he had overhead a month earlier in April.

Clarke was a 56-year-old local solicitor and county coroner, looking forward to an early retirement. It was common knowledge that he would slip away for odd afternoons in the local garden centre to catalogue the rhododendrons,[1] but his other hobby, amateur radio communications, was less well known to his colleagues and friends. The G8KA in his signature on the letter was his callsign.

At 15:18 hrs GMT on 11 April he had just finished chatting with a fellow enthusiast in Australia, callsign VK2DA, when another station broke in saying there was an 'AC3' station on 14151 kilocycles making a distress call. Clarke could not resist returning to his radio set.

As he honed in on the right frequency he could hear a conversation fading in and out. He could only just make out the callsign of one side of the conversation: AC3PT. He immediately looked it up in his amateur radio callbook. Establishing that AC3 was the country code for Sikkim, he saw that only one name was listed, PT Namgyal. The address: 'The Palace, Gangtok, Sikkim'.

Intrigued, Clarke refocused on the signal. Through the static, he strained to hear the high-pitched voice speaking accented but very good

English at considerable speed. It was a weak signal, but the message was unmistakeable.

AC3PT was saying that his country was being invaded and urgently requested that someone tell the 'International League for the Rights of Man'.

Then suddenly the signal faded to nothing. Wondering if AC3PT had moved to another frequency, Clarke called his Australian friend VK2DA back on the line. Both tried to re-establish contact with the signal, but to no avail.

It was very strange. At 15:54 GMT it was just as if callsign AC3PT had vanished into thin air.

Four and a half months later on 26 August, Oliver Forster, Acting British High Commissioner in New Delhi, put the finishing touches to a report on the events in Sikkim. The report had been urgently requested by the Foreign Secretary Jim Callaghan in London. With a state of Emergency still in place across India, it wasn't exactly priority number one, but it did present an opportunity for Forster to demonstrate his ability to see through the confusing mire of politics on the subcontinent. He titled it 'The Indian Takeover of Sikkim'.

His closing paragraph read:

> All in all, the world may be a little worse off for the loss of a Shangrila, ruled benignly but in the interests of a small minority by a Buddhist prince with an American wife and a liking for alcohol. The Indian action may seem a little crude and Indian self-justification somewhat nauseating, but no British interests were involved, no deep moral issues were at stake and only one life was lost, probably accidentally. In the days of British India we would have done just the same, and frequently did with recalcitrant Maharajahs, though one may hope a little earlier and with fewer exclamations at our own virtues. In the event, we successfully kept out of the whole business and such support as the Chogyal has received in the correspondence columns of *The Times* has not been sufficient to offend Indian sensitivities.[2]

Sikkim, he reflected, was history.