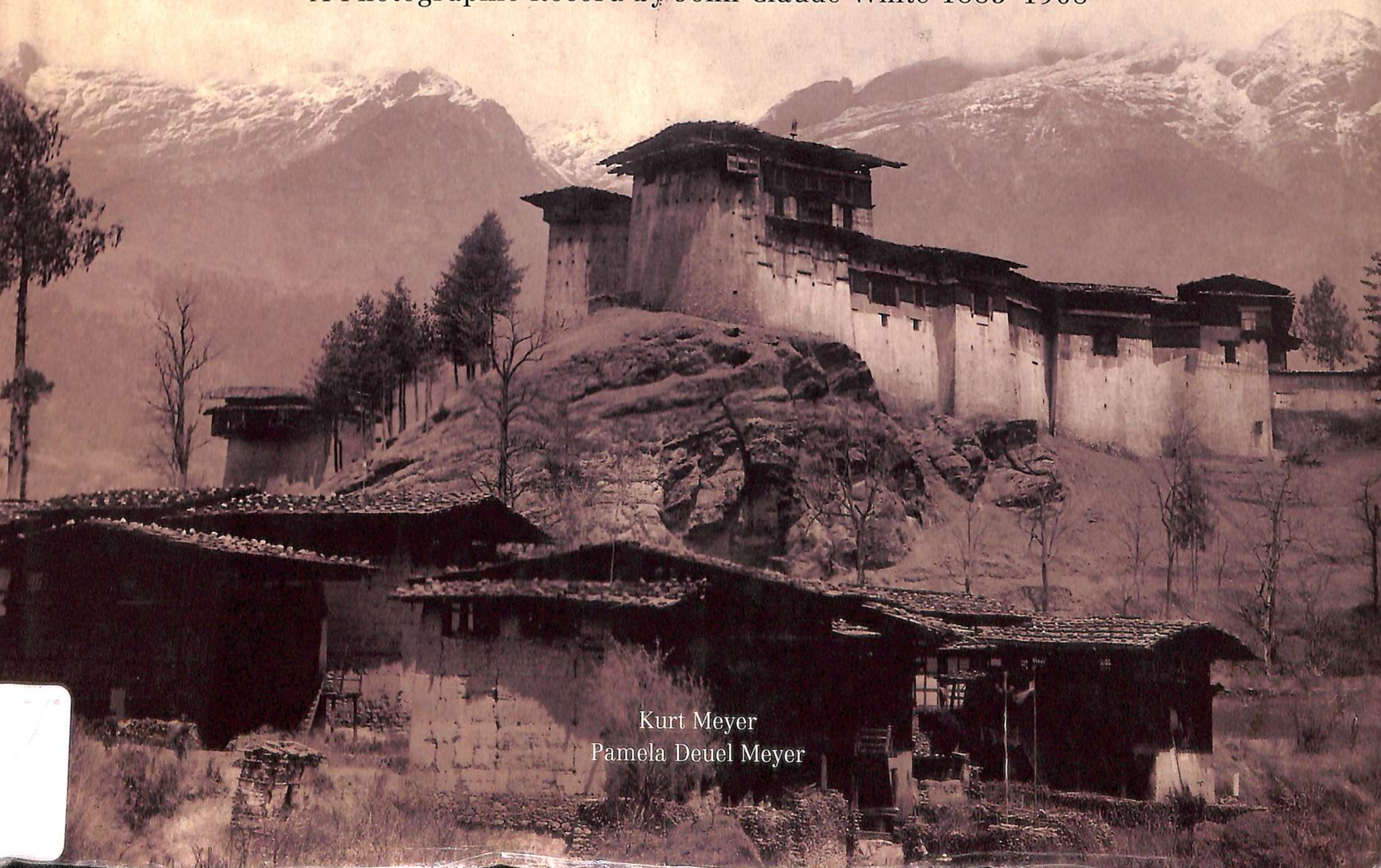


IN THE SHADOW OF THE HIMALAYAS

TIBET • BHUTAN • NEPAL • SIKKIM

A Photographic Record by John Claude White 1883-1908



Kurt Meyer
Pamela Deuel Meyer

IN THE SHADOW OF THE
HIMALAYAS
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*When I first visited
Darjeeling in 1881, I used to look
across the valleys of the Rungeet
and the Teesta rivers and long to
penetrate into those stupendous
mountains and valleys, with their
magnificent forests and rivers, to
explore the everlasting snows and
glaciers, and to come in contact
with their interesting people. An
added fascination for me was the
fact that beyond these mountains
lay the mysterious, unknown land
of Tibet, about which all manner of
things were conjured up in my
imagination, and which I fondly
hoped I might some day reach.*

—John Claude White, *Sikkim and Bhutan*



London, Edward Armitage

John B. White



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Captions

Page 1:

1 Glacier head of Langpo Valley, Sikkim

Page 3:

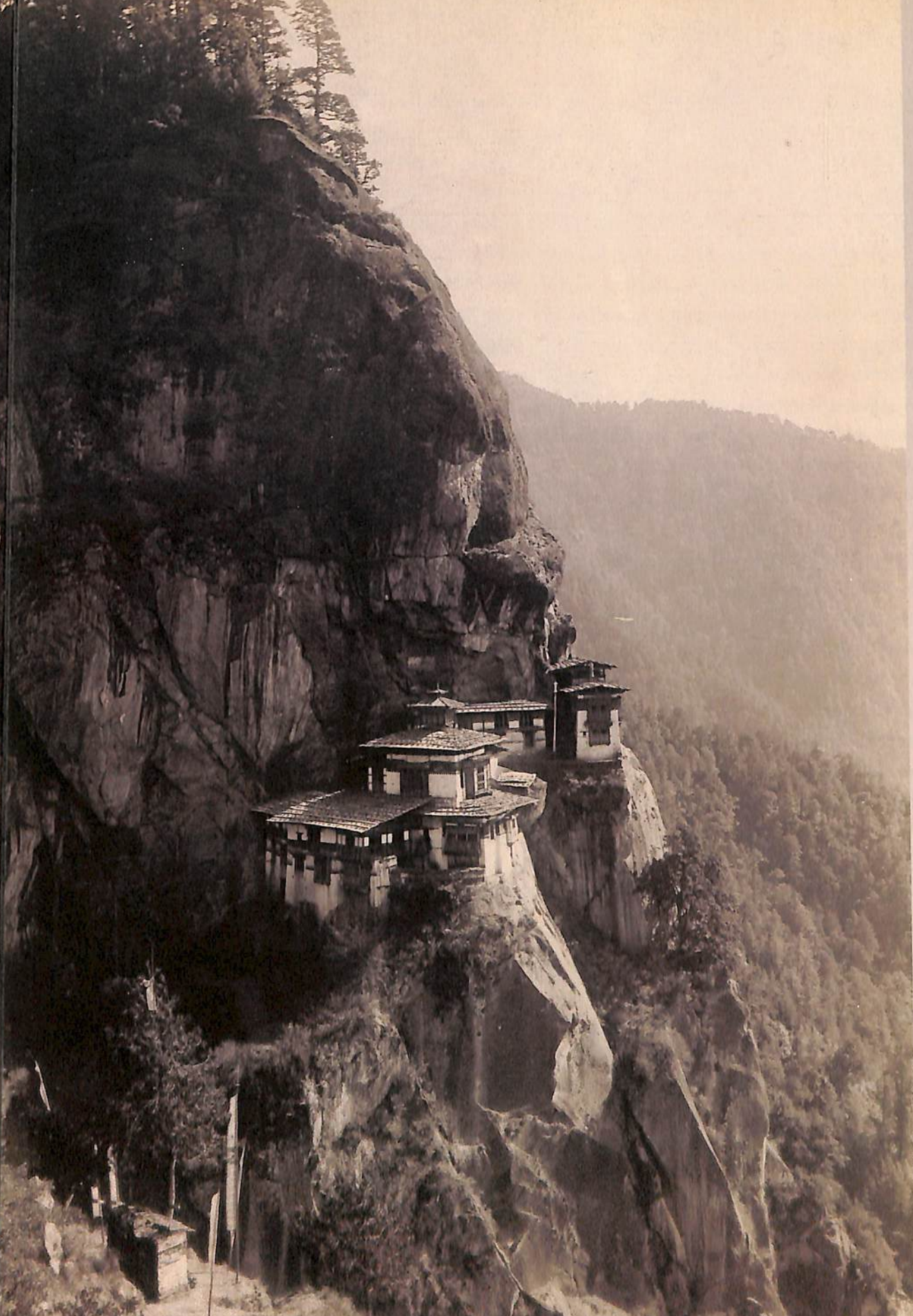
2 John Claude White

Page 4:

3 A group of lamas and novitiates at
Tongsa, Bhutan (also see page 190)

Page 7:

4 Taktsang Monastery, Bhutan
(also see page 190)



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For students of my generation, educated in the classical central European tradition, as I was in Zürich in the 1930s and 1940s, history east of Europe stopped at Persia with Alexander reaching the Indus River. We studied the Roman and Greek cultures in depth but scarcely considered the rich cultures of Central Asia, South Asia and China. The coloured details of my school atlas stopped at the banks of the Indus River.

It was the Swedish explorer Sven Hedin who ignited my curiosity about those unidentified regions, when as a teenager in Switzerland I first read his book *Adventures in Tibet*. My attention was shifted by the demands of war, closed countries, raising a family and developing an architectural career, but as compensation I collected rare books about Central Asia and the Himalayas, particularly the writings of the explorers. I hungrily read each memoir and history from first page to last. Among these was John Claude White's book of memoirs, *Sikkim and Bhutan: Twenty-One Years on the North-East Frontier, 1887-1908*.

John Claude White spent his career as a British government officer, which spanned more than 20 years, in places that 100 years ago were considered far-flung and today remain to a certain extent shrouded in an air of mystery: Nepal, Sikkim, Tibet and Bhutan. A dedicated photographer by avocation, he took his bulky photographic gear with him everywhere, documenting his explorations. Traditionally, mountains had been feared and avoided, but in the 19th century Europe's Alps attracted romantic travellers who were drawn by the spectacular mountain scenery and the climbing challenges. British adventurers explored the Alps in numbers, and as one peak after another was conquered, people's fear of the mountains was replaced by fascination. Mountain tourism flourished and the sport of mountaineering emerged. Englishman Edward Whymper's dramatic first ascent of the Matterhorn in 1865, despite the loss of four team members who fell to their deaths on the descent, ignited the public's imagination and launched the golden age of alpinism.

As a teenager studying in Bonn, Germany in the 1880s, John Claude White was surely exposed to the exploits of mountaineering, which extended to the German and Austrian Alps as well. As his memoirs and the body of his photographic work reveal, both eyes and spirit were captivated by the beauty of the mountains. Valleys, glaciers and rocks, but above all mountains, form the subject of approximately one third of his images. He lived with the peoples who were of the mountains, and his work depicted the mountains he shared with them, in detail and in panorama, in light and in abstract form.

White's work is unique and different from that of other photographers of the 19th century in India. Not better, not worse, but different. White alone lived among the mountain peoples for over two decades. Well-known photographer Samuel Bourne made three trips into the Himalayas during his time in India (1863-1870), producing stunning images from these journeys. Images of 19th-century India captured by other photographers—notably the firms of Baker and Burke, Johnston and Hoffmann, and Bourne and Shepherd—detailed people, architecture and culture in exquisite photographs, but none published more than a handful of mountain photos. White was a pioneer in mountain photography.

White's photographs illustrated the articles that he wrote on Tibet, Bhutan and Nepal, which were published in *National Geographic Magazine*. However, he scarcely mentions his photography in any of his publications. We know that he

worked with the photography firm of Johnston and Hoffmann, based in eastern British India; they printed his images as well as published some of his photography albums. Founded in Calcutta in 1880, they opened a second office in Darjeeling about 10 years later. In the *Royal Geographical Society Journal* Hoffmann describes an exploration trip he and White undertook in Sikkim in July 1891. The beginning of the 20th century was a great era of exploration, when adventurers pushed the boundaries of the known world. These explorers returned to England where the public had a keen appetite for learning about how the rest of the world looked and lived. The Royal Geographical Society was the primary stage where these intrepid travelers told their stories.

According to Hoffman, starting from Darjeeling they proceeded through unexplored regions to the Zemu glacier on the east face of the Himalayan peak Kanchenjunga, the third highest mountain in the world. After he and White had taken many photographs, Hoffmann returned to Darjeeling while White continued his discovery trip north. Without a doubt White must have learned much from Hoffmann on this joint picture-taking trek. It does not, however, explain where and when White acquired his skills, which are already quite apparent in his Nepal pictures, taken in the Kathmandu Valley where White spent a year on engineering duties in 1883, eight years prior to the trip with Hoffmann. Although most of the original photographs of Nepal have been lost, many accompanied his article in *National Geographic Magazine* of October 1920, an in-depth description of the architecture and culture of the country and the arduous trip from India to Kathmandu.

Regarding the firm of Johnston and Hoffmann, John Falconer (1983) writes:

*White had a continuing relationship with the firm. The firm, in fact, not only appears to have printed White's work but also to have purchased the negatives and thereby acquired the copyright. . . . White's financial involvement is unclear. Since his expenditures for certain photographic work had been met from government funds, it is unlikely that he would have been permitted to benefit personally from the sale of the negatives to Johnston and Hoffmann. Possibly they were sold on the government's behalf, since, when the Royal Geographical Society applied in 1906 for a set of the Bhutan and Tibet material, the government reply was that "we have arranged with Messrs. Johnston and Hoffmann, the photographers to whom the work was entrusted" to make prints, certainly an officially sanctioned arrangement. Perceval Landon remarks in *The Opening of Tibet*, p. 285, that "at the wise discretion of the Indian authorities, the transport of the column was burdened to the extent of three mule loads, with the large 13x10 camera and innumerable plates".*

Like so many glass negatives, they are unlikely to have survived intact the rigors of the succeeding 100 years, and although Johnston and Hoffmann stayed in business until the early 1950s, the fate of their negative archive has not been discovered.

If any glass plates survived, they would have been destroyed in 1990 when a fire ravaged the Johnston and Hoffmann studio in Calcutta. We must, therefore, assume that the scarce collections of prints made from White's negatives, now for the most part housed in various institutions—notably the British Library and the Royal Geographical Society in London, the Newark Museum in New Jersey, the Peabody Essex Museum in Salem, Massachusetts and the Philadelphia Museum of Art—are the sole remaining memorial to his photographic achievement.

The time that White spent with Hoffmann, and his collaboration with the Johnston and Hoffmann studio, have contributed ambiguity about some images, as Johnston and Hoffmann stamped all their prints with the company name

regardless of the photographer. Thus, images 25 and 35 are credited by *National Geographic Magazine* to John Claude White while the Royal Geographical Society prints of the same image credit Johnston and Hoffmann. Royal Geographical Society records also identify Hoffmann as the photographer of images 23, 24 and 25, taken on his trip with White. Because these images so well illustrate the conditions of Sikkim, we have included them in this book. Most of the photographs are not dated but have been arranged in chronological order, paralleling White's experiences.

White's photography marks the end of the era of the large format, glass plate camera, as small-scale portable cameras were introduced at this time. Because of their compact size, they were transported and manipulated much more easily than the larger plate cameras and allowed the photographer to capture more spontaneous photographs of people and events, whereas the larger camera was more suitable for scenery and posed pictures. For just this reason, some of the photographs taken by White's son-in-law, Captain Henry Hyslop, with a portable camera at the coronation of the first king of Bhutan in 1907 are included here (see photographs 80, 83, 84, 87, 92, 98 and 103).

When albums of White's photographs came on the market at the California Antiquarian Book Fair in Los Angeles, the urge to have them was irresistible and I bought them. The albums were sold to me by John Randall, a rare book dealer in London. It was John who introduced me to the British organisations, libraries and museums that became a part of our subsequent life in the pursuit of information and materials about White. John Randall helped us make this journey of discovery a pleasure. Thank you, John.

Research in this region cannot be carried out without the work of the Aris brothers: Anthony, with his guidance and constant cheerful encouragement, and Michael, posthumously, with his superbly researched publications.

An early quest was to find living members of White's family. Through Anthony Aris we travelled to Oxford to meet Beryl Hartley, White's great granddaughter and granddaughter of Henry Hyslop. Beryl has carefully preserved important documents and generously gave us access to her grandfather's diary of the trip to Bhutan, the White-Hyslop family tree and the farewell commendation presented in Sikkim to John Claude White upon his retirement and departure for England.

Beryl's documents led us to both Nepal and Sikkim, where we were able to locate and come to know well the current generation of the Pradhan clan during our nine-year stay in Nepal. In Kathmandu and the capital of Sikkim, Gangtok, doors were magically opened to us through the help of Narendra and Om Pradhan and Keshab C. Pradhan. We are particularly indebted to Keshab for his enthusiasm and interest in helping us understand Sikkim's history. Before becoming chief secretary, Keshab had served, like his father before him, as forest manager of Sikkim. His files yielded important primary information about the forest preservation efforts initiated by White and among other documents a rare copy of the 1908 history of Sikkim, compiled under the direction of their highnesses the Maharaja Sir Thuthob Namgyal and the Maharani Yeshe Dolma of Sikkim. It was also through Keshab that we were able to meet with key officials in Sikkim. Transport Commissioner Wangchuck Barphungpa introduced us to White's work as a surveyor by showing us a number of property survey maps, signed "land surveyor, John C. White." When White first came to Sikkim, he constructed the British residency building, which is today the Raj Bhawan, governor's house, occupied by the governor of Sikkim. We are grateful to the governor for inviting us to a cup of tea and for giving us the opportunity to inspect White's house and gardens for ourselves.

In the Kathmandu Valley, many thanks go to Kanak Mani Dixit for making available to us photographs discovered in an old album in his family's private library, the Madan Puraskar Pustakalaya.

One cannot write about any subject, or study old photographs of South Asia, the Himalayan states and Tibet, without the interest and help of scholars and staff of museums and private collectors. We appreciate Lila Bishop's

unhesitating generosity in sharing images from the photograph archives of her husband, Barry Bishop. Special thanks go to John Falconer of the British Library Oriental and India Office, London; Zette Emmons of the Newark Museum, New Jersey; Clark Worswick of the Peabody Essex Museum, Salem, Massachusetts; Martha Chahdroudi of the Philadelphia Museum of Art; Esa Epstein and Sophie Gordon of the Alkazi Collection of Photography, New York and London; Clive Coward of the Royal Geographical Society, London; and the late Yvonne Greear of the University of Texas at El Paso.

Through the British Embassy in Kathmandu we were put in touch with the curator of the Gurkha Museum, C. J. D. Bullock, O.B.E., M.C. Brig. (ret.), who supplied us with the account of the part played by the 8th Gurkha Rifles in the Younghusband invasion of Tibet. Our historical detective work was also helped by Jackie Hiltz, Wendy King, Charles Ramble, Chang Jui and Mary Euyang Shen, Sonam Vasseux and Brian Whyte.

Once we had conducted a great amount of research, and were ready to begin, Omar Khan's publication *From Kashmir to Kabul* set up a fine model for which to strive.

A writer's labour is made a great deal easier by the team of professionals who work diligently to transform a concept into a book. We are grateful to our publisher, Bipin Shah, for his commitment to this project, and to all the staff at Mapin Publishing, with special thanks to Christina Sullivan Sarabhai and Paulomi Shah for their unflagging and talented work in editing and design, respectively. We appreciate the great sensitivity with which John Kiffe brought the 100-year-old prints back to life.

My solitary efforts were enhanced when my wife, Pamela Deuel Meyer, joined me in Nepal. It is no exaggeration to say that this book would never have seen the light of day without her. Thank you again, Pamela; your keen sense for research uncovered many jewels.

K. M., Los Angeles, August 2004

Foreword

A photograph shatters the glass between present and past. When John Claude White took these photographs, the moment was frozen on an embossed glass plate. Packed like precious Belgian lace, the plate made its way hundreds of miles along death-defying mountain ledges, its future in the slip of a yak's hoof. Each image in this book is a minor miracle, a gem snatched from oblivion.

Photography books are to adults what illustrated books are to children. In one case, it is the flight of fancy that nourishes; in another, the apparent anchor in reality. Both are invitations to dream—with very little oxygen, indeed, in the case of these images. Their density comes from White's multiple personalities. Few British Indian photographers simultaneously wielded so much political and economic power. White contributed to, instead of subtracted from, the societies he colonized. He was a visionary whose environmental policies still underpin the economic health of an entire state. Few photographers developed the deep relationship to their subjects that White did. That the Tibetans recognised this, even after the bloody British invasion of 1903, is testimony to White's character and the abundance of wisdom accrued in the Himalayan valleys. White brought the photographic experience back to his subjects through (dangerous) magic lantern shows, involving friends from the mountains in the production of this theatre of images. How many similar examples of multi-layered photographs are there in Raj photography?

There is a gun tucked away behind every colonial image. Subject people are being shot, coerced into the frame; made to affix their thumb prints on peace treaties. An imperial edict governed landscape photography as well. The Himalayas were conquered by a steady stream of photographers from the 1860s onward. White worked in areas inaccessible to other photographers, at the end of one of the earliest, most competitive and spectacular landscape photography traditions. As someone who spent much of his life among the peaks, however, White would also have known how thoroughly they overwhelm the inhabitants who dare to tread around them. Their majestic effect is conducive to the spiritual, as adherents of many religions have discovered. White's photographs inform in the sharpest light and transport us to the most ethereal, yet grounded, realms of human culture.

A photograph is a bullet shot from the past into the future. In the case of John Claude White, an American heiress saw one of his photographs in *National Geographic Magazine*. Entranced by his rendering of Bhutan, she made sure that a building in the university she was supporting be rebuilt in the exact image. Other photographs, like the projectiles from an ancient slingshot, have yet to land far from the places and times from where they were launched. That they will land one day, we have two remarkable authors, Kurt Meyer and Pamela Deuel Meyer, and their splendid work to thank. This is a groundbreaking collection that restores in one stroke an entire life's work. It also asks again whether, despite the proliferation of cameras during the past century, there has been any improvement in the photographic craft.

The authors have turned John Claude White's plates into missives much like the flapping Buddhist prayer flags that dot the mountains overlooking India and China. Every once in a while, an impression floats to the plains below.

Omar Khan, San Francisco, January 2005



5 Group at Hastings House, The Calcutta Durbar, 1906

Back row: Bhutan soldier, Captain Henry Hyslop (John Claude White's son-in-law), Ugyen Dorji (Bhutan's representative to the Raj), Lobzang Chöden, Jerung Dewan, Burmiak Kazi, Bhutanese soldier, Sikkimese soldier.

Front row: D. E. Holland, Sir Ugyen Wangchuk, (future king of Bhutan), John Claude White, Maharaja Thutob Namgyal of Sikkim, Maharani Yeshe Dolma of Sikkim.