Book Review

A CULTURAL HISTORY OF TIBET.
By *David Snellgrove* and *Hugh Richardson.*
(Weidenfeld & Nicholson, price—U.K. only—63s.).

Review by Marco Pallis.

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This splendidly laid out and illustrated volume is the joint work of two authors who, between them, combine a remarkable number of qualifications for the work they undertook. Mr. Hugh Richardson has had the rare advantage of spending some eleven years at Lhasa as representative of the Government of India—a historian by temperament, his appraisal of social and political conditions in Tibet prior to the Chinese Communist invasion has been particularly valuable; Dr. David Snellgrove, who is in charge of Tibetan studies at London University, is strong on the side of classical source-material where his knowledge of Sanskrit as well as Tibetan has been an invaluable asset. Moreover, his own researches in the field of the pre-Buddhist culture of the Tibetans have greatly enriched this book—some vivid renderings into English of early poems convey the flavour of this ancient culture as nothing else could have done.

There would be little point in describing the contents of the present work section by section; here all one needs say is that it always makes good reading despite the vast amount of detail presented. Both the man of scholarly disposition and the ordinary reader who simply wants to know something of the Tibetan way of life will find his needs catered for with accuracy as to fact and with an evident sympathy for the people who form the subject of the present study—with a sympathy that is neither indiscriminate on the one hand, nor patronising on the other.

One of the conclusions that stands out from the mass of facts concerning the daily life of the Tibetans as collected in this book is that, contrary to what pro-Communist propaganda would have us believe, the government of Tibet under the old theocratic system was mild, as human societies go, and that the generality of people remained reasonably contented under it. This does not mean that no grievances ever arose—of what human society could this be said?—but those grievances did not add up to anything meriting the label of oppression as we under-stand it. Whether great or small, a grievance will always seem important to the man who feels it: when I was in Tibet 1 met a man who was complaining about certain taxes; but when I told him how much I myself had to pay out annually to the Government he exclaimed "Do you mean to say that in your country people are burdened with such heavy taxation? Why, I had always been led to suppose that in England everyone is very happy, very clever and very rich!"

In regard to the prime material necessities of feeding, housing and clothing Tibetans on average were quite well provided, but without much to spare "and certainly without luxuries—absence of the latter can scarcely be called an indigence, however. Though the

Tibetans have been described as "poor", their condition bore not the slightest resemblance to the grinding poverty common in the cities of Britain when I was young (the authors also make this point); certainly it is highly misleading to use the same word to cover both cases. Moreover, even the poorer members of the Tibetan population shared in many things which well-to-do people in other countries are without; in a very real sense they participated in a common culture through eye, ear and in many other ways. Beauty surrounded them on every side, both the beauty of Nature and the beauty of things fashioned by human hands. Things we would call "works of art" and would promptly house in a museum were often to be seen in quite humble homes—a painting here, a beautifully chased metal teapot there and so on. Life in Tibet was full of variety and colour, with religion running through it as its central thread thus giving it form and meaning, just as it also gave a meaning to death. On any estimate of *real* values the standard of living of the Tibetans was anything but low; on this score, the facts assembled in the present book leave no room for doubt.

On the credit side of things, I would gladly have found in these pages some specific reference to one prominent characteristic of all Tibetans, namely their eminently enlightened attitude towards their non-human neighbours both wild and domestic, wherein they excel even by Buddhist standards. The Tibetan soul would not be what it is but for this feature which, for this reason, deserves particular stress whenever Tibetan "culture" is discussed.

Though Tibetans are in principle opposed to taking life, they do not (as people often rashly assume) abstain from meat-eating: the case of certain contemplative saints apart, to eschew meat altogether is hardly possible in Tibet for climatic reasons, though many people abstain from meat on certain days as a token of intent. In all other respects the relations between men and animals in Tibet have been almost ideal: both public opinion and the law were at one in this matter. No beating, no swearing at mules or other beasts of burden, no harrying of the animals and birds of mountain or field, no wanton cruelty by adults or children—a Tibetan child would never think of crushing an insect—, all this adds up to a marvellous showing that puts most other parts of the world to shame. One can only say that, in this respect, the old Tibet was not far short of paradise: what may have happened to the animals of Tibet since the Occupation does not bear thinking about. The step from paradise to hell is a short one in this world, though we are apt to forget it.

As was to be expected when retracing the cultural history of a people as artistically gifted as the Tibetans, a good many pages are devoted to arts and crafts of all kinds, from architecture and painting down to those crafts catering especially for domestic needs, of which metalwork is one of the chief: the Tibetans, and especially the Khambas, have exhibited such an extraordinary genius for this branch of the arts that it might perhaps have been given somewhat more detailed consideration even in a book where space was necessarily limited.

In a paragraph dealing with another craft, that of carpet-weaving which the Tibetans originally received via the Chinese, there occurs a statement which, I confess, has puzzled me greatly: among the classical motives figuring in Tibetan rugs the authors mention a "dragon and peacock" design of which a photograph is shown on page 256. So far as I know, designs depicting animals or birds were never traditional in Tibet; such designs only came in round about the year 1940 when Tibetan taste in these things was

well on the way to collapse as a result of a partial commercialization of the rug industry coupled with the diffusion of chemical dyes.

One of the reasons why good examples of classical Tibetan rugs are so rare today is because about the date mentioned the richer Tibetans developed a taste for newfangled rug designs of a sensational kind, rendered all the worse by strident aniline colours and by a horrible board-like texture having nothing in common with the beautiful flexibility of the old-time products. These bemused people, whose social position turned them into arbiters of fashion, hastened to banish all their fine traditional rugs to the servants' quarters where they were quickly worn out. Thus did a once flourishing craft become vulgarized beyond recognition in the course of a few years.

As for the design that occasioned these remarks, I very much doubt any remote Persian connection; to my eye it smacks unmistakeably of all-too-recent Chinese inspiration, As the authors rightly say, the bird is a phoenix, not a peacock; Tibetans are apt to use names of plants and animals very loosely, "lotus" and "peacock" being cases in point: it is amazing how many different species have been covered by these particular labels!

The concluding chapter of this most informative book covers developments during the 20th Century when Tibet, as a result of the Younghusband incursion of 1903-4, became drawn into the British orbit: some of the questions raised, just because they refer to such recent happenings, remain more discussible than the facts, of ancient history, or at least they could admit of supplementary comments from various points of view. One such question is the voluntary isolation of Tibet during latter times and another is the question of education, which became even more pressing as contacts with the outer world, through trade and official travel to and fro, were extended in range and duration. The authors have some cogent things to say about the failure of the Tibetan authorities to prepare in time to meet the pressures that were building up on all sides; insofar as this criticism applies to the need for new forms of schooling I think good measure required an explicit reference to the fact that Tibetan fears on the subject were far from baseless: the history of many other Asian countries shows that the kind of education developed in post-Christian Europe, with its built-in rationalist and materialist assumptions, is anything but neutral in its effects on the minds of growing children.

All one can say is that monastic opinion in Tibet, while opposing attempts to organize schools inside the country under British headmasters—the authors mention three such cases—, showed itself singularly blind to the far greater danger of sending young Tibetans away to be boarded in missionary-run schools at Darjeeling and Kalimpong: while living at the latter place I myself had many opportunities of observing the effects of religious and cultural alienation on the behaviour of children so placed; "out of sight, out of mind" seems to have been the attitude of Tibetan officials and parents alike in regard to this vital matter. The fact is that any attempt to solve the educational problem in Tibetan, not foreign, terms called for qualities of initiative coupled with discrimination that no-one at the time possessed—or rather the few who did possess these qualities were in no position to impose their views, with the result that the question was never considered in the light of tradition or of common sense either; the case went by default.

There is one other question which, in my opinion, might well have found a place in

this final chapter: this is the growing evil of "absenteeism" which, during the last years of Tibet, was affecting the great landowning families to the country's serious detriment. Instead of spending much time on their estates in personal contact with their tenants as in the past, more and more members of these families were coming to prefer the low-grade excitements afforded by shopping expeditions down to Calcutta where they could also enjoy the Cinema and other still more doubtful luxuries and whence they would go back to Lhasa with their luggage stuffed with gadgets; though there were still many honourable exceptions, the trend among the great families had set strongly in this direction—a sure sign that the feudal arrangements were about to break down. As the great houses all over the country had hitherto been important centres of a culture in which all the local people shared, this subject merited more mention than it got in a history of the kind here under review: this is said in no officious spirit, since the book's two hundred and seventy pages provide such a complete picture of the Tibetan civilization from its earliest years till now that it might seem almost presumptuous for anyone to suggest that something important might still be added.

The last paragraphs of the book strike an inevitably mournful note—uninformed people are apt to speak optimistically of "preserving" such and such a culture without paying heed to the necessary human conditions. In a sense we all are suffering the same disability: no culture worthy of the name can exist minus a religious tradition to animate it; on this score our own claims to possess a culture have worn very thin. Tibetan culture, though somewhat in decline in recent years, was still alive when the Communist invasion took place; it still could produce some living saints, and of near-saints not a few. A work like the present one is not merely a pointer to past Tibetan glories; indirectly it is a call to self-questioning on the part of all who will read with attention, wherever they may belong.