

ELEANOR HOPKINSON (1905-2007)

ROGER CROSTON

Eleanor Hopkinson, who has died at the age of 101, was the widow of Arthur John Hopkinson, Indian Civil Service, the last British Political Officer and Resident in Sikkim. In her old age, she was impressive with the clarity and forcefulness of her recollections as the wife of a servant of the Raj, and a way of life that is now a matter of seemingly ancient history.

Eleanor Hopkinson was born in 1905 into a large extended Quaker family in Newcastle on Tyne. She recalled that, one day in 1926, her future father-in-law had sent his son Arthur (who was on leave from India) to call at her home “as my parents were known to have two eligible daughters! On his next leave two years later we married”. When asked if it had been a kind of arranged marriage because they could hardly have known each other, she laughingly replied “Oh, in a way yes, but he was a wonderful correspondent”.

In 1928, aged 22, she joined her husband in India, first in Kathiawar and later in the North West Frontier Province, which she found “to be part of Kipling’s India”. She recalled life there: “In winter, tribesmen came down from Afghanistan with their womenfolk and camels, going as far as Bengal. They were moneylenders who extracted their interest with ‘the big stick’ – literally. The men were tall, burley and much bigger than the small farmers – if they couldn’t pay, they beat them with a pole 8ft long as thick as my arm, bound with four brass rings. The British Indian Government tried to put a stop to it”.

With the threat of war looming she returned to England, living with her parents in the Lake District and, apart from two short spells of leave, separated from her husband. At the war’s end (a fourth child was born on VE day) she took the first possibility of a passage to India to rejoin her husband, by then Political Officer and Resident in Sikkim. “But I had an 18 month old baby and because I did not know what to expect there, my dear sister took charge of my four children and I went out alone.”

She found India had been badly disrupted by the war; however, the journey from the railhead at Siliguri up the Teesta Valley to Gangtok, surrounded by the Himalayan giants impressed her. "Sikkim was totally alien to my other experiences of India. My husband was supposed to be in charge of the Trade Route to Tibet but that was a bit of a pretence because really it was to control the high border passes and to check that law and order was kept. The British Indian Government regarded Tibet as an autonomous buffer between the great powers of Russia, China and India."

In Gangtok she found 'The Residency' – supposedly a private house – was always full of visitors. "They poured through – things had got out of hand. Both my husband and his predecessor had been posted there alone and wives were not usually allowed and so they liked a crush of people. Even the guidebooks stated that Europeans should travel with dinner jackets, as they would probably dine there. It had become a habit of people from Calcutta who had few wartime places to visit on leave. They wanted permits for Tibet – as far as Phari – so they could claim to have been there, yet the Tibetans didn't want them all, the country simply could not feed them." She put her foot down to bring the household in order again. "Our bedroom window looked out across the whole Kanchenjunga Range. The servants were marvellous unlike many in India where you heeded their demands. There, you were a servant of your servants – they saw to it that you managed according to what suited them!" The Residency garden was particularly beautiful with magnolia trees and rhododendrons. Many interesting plants had been collected and planted there by Lt. Col. Bailey in the 1920s.

As a means of daily transport, the Hopkinsons rode ponies, Mrs Hopkinson having been instructed, when they became engaged, to learn to ride although she never liked it, as she always feared falling off. A daily trek on tours of duty was 12 to 14 miles at a steady pace. At the behest of Whitehall in 1947, Arthur Hopkinson, accompanied by Eleanor, made a month's tour to the main Tibetan administrative centres – other than the capital, Lhasa – of Shigatse, Gyantse and Sakya, which were in contact with British India, to tell them "That the English were gone and thenceforth they were dealing with independent India." They went via north Sikkim where very few, and no Englishwoman, had ever travelled, rather than on the regular route over the Nathu La pass. In Tibet, they reached Khampha Dzong, then still an

intact and magnificent inhabited mediaeval castle, “You looked back at the Himalayas and many of the high snows were below you. The Tibetans reacted to our news with dismay as we were the only outside people they had known. In Tibet, dust got everywhere. It was blown about every afternoon by intense cold blasting winds, yet the houses were always warm because they were built around a sheltered courtyard which caught the intense sun.” They took their own cook with them and carried many stores, especially tinned fruit for luncheons they had to give. “Fortunately all this was in the hands of Rai Bahadur Sonam Topden, my husband’s second in command who knew all the protocol, having dedicated his life to the Raj in Sikkim and Tibet and having previously worked for Lt. Col. Bailey, Sir Basil Gould and Frederick Williamson. All was carried on 24 ponies assisted by three clerks. The Tibetans in return threw big parties. Their barley beer was awfully good – one good drink did you no harm, but you hadn’t to indulge!”

Mrs Hopkinson bought many Tibetan souvenirs. “The Tibetans weren’t stupid – they would sell off damaged things so as to buy new. For example, twice soldered worn out ornate copper teapots and highly decorative painted religious thangka banners, many of which were soot stained or whose original silk backings had turned to dust. Later, in England, some items I’d bought were examined by a museum and found to be incorrect. So what? That is how we bought them.”

On earlier journeys, Mrs Hopkinson had had the then rare privilege of travelling to the Kingdom of Bhutan, east of Sikkim, as well as to Gyantse in Tibet. “From the Sikkim side you got your first glimpse of mount Chomohlari [23,997 feet] standing up in a great peak above the enormous Tibetan plain. It was extremely beautiful. On route to Yatung, there was a wonderful little temple known as the Kargyu Gongpa with some quite exceptionally beautiful images – the first bit of Buddhism you came to when dropping off the high passes. Years later, after the Chinese had annexed the country I saw a photograph of it – the whole place was a ruin. The Tibetans never thought the Chinese would come – who still insist they delivered Tibet from the darkness of medievalism – up to a point they did, but they destroyed so much, it was brutal, they wiped it flat.”

While on tour, they carried with them a ciné projector and showed films to hosts and villagers. On such a tour to Namchi in 1947, they

presented films to an audience of 2000 people with their servants holding the screen to prevent it blowing down. It was a huge success and people did not get away until after eleven.

In 1947, the Hopkinsons travelled to Bhutan on the last official British mission to that country before Indian Independence when the second king of Bhutan, King Jigme Wangchuk, received the insignia of Knight Commander of the Star of India. The investiture took place in the valley of Ha in western Bhutan where the Hopkinsons travelled with Princes Palden Thondup and Jigdal Tsewang Namgyal of Sikkim, Rai Bahadur TD Densapa, Rai Bahadur Sonam Topden, Yap Tempo Namgyal Barfungpa and Rai Sahib Tseten Wangdi of the Political Office.

By the end of their posting, "Sikkim was regarded as an outpost on the fringe of Empire and received no recognition. Our friends in England erroneously thought we had been making a fortune and living really well, which was far from the case. We were simply doing out duty." On the 1st of September 1948, Arthur Hopkinson handed over his post to his Indian successor. Mrs Hopkinson's entry in her diary for that day reads as an epitaph for the British Raj, "Today we are no longer masters of The Residency." The entry for September 3rd reads: "a difficult departure... It was very hard to say good-bye to all our good, old servants, so kind and willing, and friends like Sonam and Lobzang... We were loaded with garlands... the school children all turned out and nearly the whole bazaar and the Christian community. It was all rather harrowing especially for Arthur. Later we threw our enormous wads of garlands into the Tista."

Arthur Hopkinson became an Anglican clergyman in Whitby and died in 1953. Eleanor Hopkinson then moved back to Northumberland, finding that her life with a young family was not easy. She became involved in the lecture circuit of the W.I. and later took to teaching them embroidery and needlework of which she had had a lifelong skill. In her final years, she moved to Welwyn Garden City to be near family. In her very nineties she was still a great raconteur with a phenomenal memory for detail both equally good from yesterday's news – she took a great interest in current affairs – to her time in India and Tibet, though it was sometimes difficult to engage her in the latter which she tended to regard as "All just history from so long ago." She is survived by her four children.

A.J. Hopkinson's Tibetan photos from his visits to Tibet in 1926 and 1945-8 are now kept by the British Museum as the Hopkinson Archive.



Eleanor Hopkinson returning from Bhutan in 1947

CORRIGENDA

In *The Bulletin of Tibetology* Vol. 42 (1 and 2) in the article *Tibetan masters and the formation of the sacred site of Tashiding* some points were overlooked by the authors Mélanie Vandenhelsken and Hissey Wongchuk which were later discovered and discussed by all authors involved. The results of these discussions are the following corrections:

Page 76, fn 60 should begin with: *As Mullard has already mentioned (2005b, p.37, fn 18),*

Page 77, fn 61 should have included reference to Mullard 2005b, p. 39, fn 30, and fn 62 should have included reference to Mullard 2005a, p.76, fn 68.

Page 79, fn 76 should have mentioned that the transliteration given in that footnote and the translation (on the same page) had also been made by Saul Mullard.