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Theos Bernard, the White Lama: Tibet, Yoga, and American Religious Life

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Theos Bernard, the White Lama: Tibet, Yoga, and American Religious Life. Paul G. Hackett. New York: Columbia University Press, 2012, xxii + 494 pages, ISBN 978-0-231-15886-2 (cloth), \$32.95.

Who was Theos Bernard (1908-1947)? Was he a sincere religious seeker who found answers in the yogic traditions of India and Tibet? Was he a reformer, hoping to bring more enlightened perspectives to an American society that had lost its way? Was he a reincarnation of Padmasambhāva, the Indian tantric master Tibetans believe played a key role in establishing Buddhism in their country? Was he an opportunist, taking advantage of his society's fascination with things foreign and exotic? Was he an imposter, who fabricated a version of his life in pursuit of fame and fortune? *Theos Bernard, the White Lama: Tibet, Yoga, and American Religious Life*, the even-handed biography by Paul Hackett, gives the reader the means to decide for herself. Rather than making specific arguments about Bernard, Hackett tells a detailed and engrossing story about this enigmatic figure's life. Along the way we gain further insight into how Buddhism, Hinduism, yoga and tantra came to the West, and

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how the agents of their transmission actively shaped them in the process. We are also given a new *entrée* into the situation in central Tibet during the time of the “Great Game” in which Britain (from their base in India), China and Russia all vied for influence over Tibet to suit their own strategic interests.

The fourteen chapters of *The White Lama* tell the story of Theos Bernard’s life, from birth to mysterious death. Bernard was raised by his mother in Tombstone, Arizona. After graduating from college in 1931, he reunited with his father, Glen, who had left the family twenty years earlier. Glen had been involved in the “Yogic Sciences” (8) since before Theos was born, thanks to the influence of Glen’s brother Perry, who had been training in *yoga* and Indian philosophy for some time. Reuniting with his father changed the course of Theos’ life dramatically, as he now took great interest in *yoga* and Hindu philosophy.

Bernard moved to Nyack, New York to be near his uncle Perry—refashioned as Pierre—who had become a wealthy businessman and *guru* to a community of well-heeled seekers. (Pierre, who was the subject of much public controversy and was referred to in the tabloids as “the Omnipotent Oom,” is a fascinating figure perhaps deserving of his own biography.) Bernard met and married a young heiress, Viola Wertheim, who had an interest in Indian religion and philosophy. Her financial support enabled Bernard to enroll in graduate courses at Columbia University, in philosophy and then anthropology. Bernard convinced Viola to sponsor his father on a trip to India to further his studies in philosophy, medicine and tantric practices. The young couple followed him a year later. As they toured India, Bernard and his father’s interests started to turn toward Tibet, which they thought a bastion of purer forms of *yoga* and tantra than could be found elsewhere.

After Viola left for home, Bernard put his effort into studying Tibetan language and making connections with Indian, Tibetan and British notables passing through Darjeeling and Kalimpong, in hopes of being able to travel into Tibet. He managed to get permission from the

British Political Officer for Sikkim for a six-week stay in Gyantsé. He was elated.

Traveling for ten days from Gangtok, Bernard arrived with his father in Gyantsé, where he set about photographing and filming the local sites. He also networked with British officials and the local Tibetan nobility, angling for permission from the Tibetan government to visit Lhasa. Bernard hoped that this journey would allow him an understanding of the Tibetan people and their religion more accurate and comprehensive than that achieved by any prior foreign visitor to the capital. A few short weeks after crossing into Tibet, Bernard referred to himself in a letter to his wife as “a real Tibetan Lama,” perhaps partially in jest (174). But as Bernard continued to refer to himself as a *lama* and his wife in her letters took to doing the same, the title became an important element of the new identity he was in process of fashioning for himself.

Bernard was granted permission to spend three weeks in Lhasa, where he met with the highest-ranking members of the Tibetan government. He visited the Potala, the Jokhang, Ramoché and other temples and monasteries. He sponsored offerings and the recitation of scriptures at many of these sites, which earned him a good will he hoped would enable him to extend his stay in Lhasa. After visiting Tashilhunpo and Sakya monasteries—where the hierarch of the Sakya sect gave Bernard a letter encouraging the “king of America” to support him in his task of spreading the Dharma in the West—he departed from Tibet. He had been in Tibet for six months, and intended to return some day accompanied by other adventure-seekers.

After leaving India, Bernard gave his first public lecture, in London, dressed in the full garb of a Tibetan aristocrat. Stories of Bernard’s adventures were published in newspapers, and he was determined to remain in the public eye. Capitalizing on the recent popularity of James Hilton’s book and then movie *Lost Horizon* (1933 and 1937), Bernard went on the lecture circuit as “the White Lama.” He

began rewriting the events of his life, exaggerating the tales of his experiences and at times taking his father's past as his own, in order to create a more remarkable narrative. He even claimed that he had been "accepted" by Tibetans as the reincarnation of Padmasambhāva (293).

Bernard's marriage with Viola came to an end and he partnered with the wealthy and exotic Madame Ganna Walska, an aspiring opera singer who had already been married five times. On Bernard's behalf, she purchased two grand estates in southern California. One was to become Bernard's residence, called, "Penthouse of the Gods." The other, "Tibetland," would be turned into a research center. His ambition was to translate the entire Tibetan Buddhist cannon into English with the help of Gedun Chöpel, whom he had met in India. Gedun Chöpel's American visa was denied, which is unfortunate for all of us: who knows what interesting works he would have gone on to produce had he made it to the US?

Bernard eventually submitted his dissertation and received the first ever Ph.D. in Religious Studies from Columbia. He began an affair with another woman, Helen Park, who saw him as a figure of great spiritual accomplishment. The two set sail for India in 1946, shortly after the end of World War II. Unable to get permission from the British authorities to travel to Tibet, Bernard hoped to travel to Ladakh and Kashmir. It seems he was hoping to earn renewed fame for himself by uncovering a new cache of old Tibetan manuscripts somewhere, or by perhaps finding the text purported to describe Jesus' journeys to India and Tibet during his "lost years." This was a moment of great uncertainty in India, as Britain was on the verge of granting India her independence, and, of more immediate consequence, India would be partitioned to create the Muslim-majority nation of Pakistan. Many places in India would see violence between Hindus, Muslims, and Sikhs. Leaving Helen in the Kulu Valley, Bernard set off with his entourage through the mountains toward Ladakh. Helen soon lost all contact with Bernard's party. After some days the bodies of Bernard's three Muslim

porters were found, seemingly murdered. The “White Lama” was never seen again.

As we follow Theos Bernard through his successes and failures, his travels and stories, his romances and deceptions, we encounter an impressive array of notable figures. Seeing these various figures reflected through Bernard’s story brings genuinely new knowledge about their lives, making this biography a significant historical document. Among the Tibetans who appear in Bernard’s tale are Reting Rinpoché, who ruled as regent of Tibet between the death of the Thirteenth Dalai Lama in 1934 and the enthronement of the Fourteenth; Tharchin, the man behind the important Tibetan-language newspaper *The Mirror*; the rogue intellectual Gedun Chöpel; and various central Tibetan nobles, like Lord Tsarong—the “Hero of Chaksam Ferry”—and others occupying the highest offices of Tibetan government. Among the significant non-Tibetans who appear in Bernard’s life are Charles Lindbergh; Hugh Richardson, the British trade agent in Lhasa, who would produce significant research on Tibetan history and culture; the scholar Giuseppe Tucci; Heinrich Harrer, of *Seven Years in Tibet* fame; W. Somerset Maugham, who would base *The Razor’s Edge* (1944) on Bernard; the adventurer and painter George Roerich; Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru, and many others. Bernard’s life is a testament to the power of effective networking.

The White Lama is written for a general audience; anyone who reads it will be left with vivid images of Bernard’s remarkable life. Among scholars, the book will mainly be of interest to those who study the history of how Buddhism has been brought to and constructed in the West, and to those who study twentieth-century Tibetan history.

Hackett has a good sense for what details a reader will find interesting and is adept at situating Bernard’s story in historical time: this was the time of the Prohibition, the Great Depression, the First and Second World Wars, *King Kong* and the Theosophical Society. Hackett also has a good sense of the importance of the Protestant-inspired

presuppositions that were held by Bernard and many of the Westerners mentioned in the book, which caused them to have rather odd relationships *vis-à-vis* the Asian religions they were encountering, as they prioritized their own idealized conception of these religions over the realities of how they were practiced. Bernard's avowed disdain for ritual surely skewed the presentation of Tibetan Buddhism he would give in his lectures and writings.

Much of the text of the biography is comprised of lengthy quotations, in places more than a page long. Although this would be an excessive amount of quoting for most academic works, it is appropriate and effective for what Hackett is trying to achieve in this biography. Many of these quotations are drawn from Bernard's letters to his wives, his diary entries, his master's thesis, and his published writings, enabling the reader to plumb what Bernard really thought and in the end decide whether or not it seems he was a sincere person. The reader can see firsthand what Bernard said about his impending marriage to his first wife, and try to discern his intentions: was he after her money, and does he even admit as much? Or is the enigmatic letter from Theos to his father to be interpreted in some other way (18)?

One of the most memorable passages in the book is the diary entry in which Bernard describes being escorted through the pitch-black Jokhang temple by a monk carrying a torch. Reeking of and teeming with mice, Bernard could only describe the temple as a "dungeon of worship" (226). This serves as an important reminder that the Jokhang was not always as easily accessible as it has become in recent decades. Another striking passage is Bernard's description of his meeting with a sixty-five year old *yogi* in residence at Drakyerpa, who had spent more than twenty years in meditative retreats, and who Bernard referred to as, "my holy master of this divine line of saints on earth" (258). Bernard's description of this encounter raises many questions, for as Bernard himself admits, his abilities in the Tibetan language were quite limited, and he was communicating with the *yogi* without the aid of a translator.

The reader may wonder how well Bernard understood whatever wisdom was imparted to him at the time. Is Bernard's account purposely embellished, or is this genuinely how he understood what had occurred?

In the course of trimming his dissertation (*Barbarian Lands: Theos Bernard, Tibet, and the American Religious Life*, 2008, Columbia University—just one of the many similarities between Hackett and Bernard) to produce *The White Lama*, Hackett was forced to delete the vast majority of the footnotes, which means that if a reader wants to look further into anything Hackett discusses, he will have to refer to his dissertation. This is not an uncommon situation. But the lack of these footnotes creates a more immediate problem. Hackett has a tendency to quote without giving much description of the source he is drawing from, and there are many places where the reader is uncertain whose words are being quoted. Even when the words are from context clearly Bernard's, it is at times unclear whether a passage is taken from his personal diary or a letter to his wife or a published account. This makes a difference in how the reader thinks about what is being said therein. Clarity with respect to quoted material is especially important in a book that requires such active participation from the reader, piecing together her own understanding of Bernard as she proceeds. This lack of specificity also makes it difficult to follow the trajectory of Bernard's own development over time.

The book includes a few dozen black and white photographs of Bernard and the diverse array of people he met in his remarkable life. There is even a reproduction of the business card Theos' father had printed in India, with a beautiful coiled Kuṇḍalinī serpent logo, on which Glen boldly claims to have achieved the spiritual state of a "Viracharya" (80). Interested readers should look at the electronic version of Hackett's dissertation, which includes many more photographs and reproductions, including a scan of the original telegram Bernard received in Gyantsé from Reting Rinpoché, informing him that he was welcome to visit Lhasa

(520). The images appear much more clearly in the dissertation than they do in the print version of *The White Lama*.

So who was Theos Bernard? Was he delusional or of unparalleled ambition? Was he an innovator or a vessel of traditional Buddhist and Hindu knowledge? Was he a skilled manipulator or a man of remarkable charisma? Did he earn the title “Lama,” even if its meaning must be redefined somewhat? *The White Lama*, written by a scholar who has no incentive to valorize or demonize Theos Bernard, surely constitutes a useful starting point for any future conversation about the man.