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## Review of *Kathmandu* by Thomas Bell

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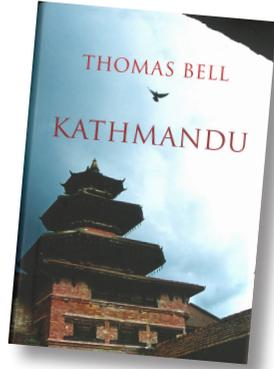
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### ***Kathmandu.***

**Thomas Bell.** Gurgaon: Random House India, 2014. 463 pages. ISBN 9788184005783.

### **Reviewed by Heather Hindman**

A chaotic, complex city of alleys and movie multiplexes calls for a multifaceted book like Thomas Bell's *Kathmandu*. Bell's book takes a distinctive perspective—or, more accurately, perspectives—on Kathmandu, conjuring the capacity of the city to be frenzied and calm in the same block. Bell uses his neighborhood walks and everyday connections to bring life to history and traditions. Reading *Kathmandu* can induce a feeling of vertigo, pulling readers past and present, high and low, following Bell through his intimate daily encounters with local characters and broad claims about Asian values. Bell's meanderings through Nepal's history and culture can be frustrating to those seeking to build a linear chronology. It is more pleasant to merely follow Bell on his peripatetic journey through time and space. The result is an entertaining introduction to life and pasts in Kathmandu.

Bell begins with Western historical accounts of the city and uses his on-the-ground journalistic skills

and adventures to interrogate these stories, tacking back and forth between assumptions and experience. In seeking local memories to confirm foreign tales, “(t)he more complicated you recognize the scene to be, the more numerous and devious the conspiracies become” (p. 191). Following common parlance, Bell often conflates Nepal and Kathmandu, with the city acting as both a synecdoche for the country and a palimpsest of national histories. Bell overlaps his initial experiences in Kathmandu with Nepal's beginnings, drawing from old buildings and Western histories of Nepal to understand the cityscape. Like the authors he cites, Bell finds the foreign accounts to “give remarkable confirmation of these native records...” (p. 32). This is often his method, taking English-language accounts and tracking these stories on the ground in his neighborhood and with contacts.

Thomas Bell may have gone to Nepal to cover the country's decade-long Civil War, but he clearly fell in love with the country and its people, making the nation more than a stopover on his journalistic career. Bell's investment draws him close to characters and into intimate stories, from which he must then telescope out to provide context. Despite Bell's investment in understanding the Maoist conflict that brought him to Nepal, he found any explanation of the struggle “hard to confirm: cruel, and falling apart” (p. 70). He finds it easier to retell eighteenth and nineteenth century accounts by foreigners than to get Maoist leaders to take his phone call. Bell's review of early Nepali history of Licchavi and Malla eras will provide little new information for Nepal scholars, but Bell is able to bring them alive by his contact with everyday keepers of Nepal's history. Locals often find his questions naïve and his interest

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#### Hindman on *Kathmandu*.

suspect, allowing Bell to stand in for the exotic assumptions of many foreigners about Kathmandu. Yet, Bell shows greater sophistication than many of the foreign diplomats who engage in parachute surveillance of Nepal's conflicts and return quickly to the comfort of Kathmandu's five-star hotels. All of the research and interviews he does in his role as an international reporter finds limited journalistic audience, due to Western short attention to conflicts and history in distant lands.

The book's reviews of Brian Hodgson, Jang Bahadur Rana and Prithvi Narayan Shah are fairly pedestrian accounts, but Bell brings life to them by placing these stories in the context of twenty-first-century street life. Caste and consumption guidelines are transformed from rules in books into accounts of the sheep's blood flowing down main streets and young boys slaughtering buffalo, making the innocence or ignorance of Westerners about everyday carnage impossible in Kathmandu (pp. 210-11). It is these intimate stories that make *Kathmandu* an extremely valuable and important book to Nepal studies. Students have little time for litanies of Shahs and Ranas or distinctions between CNP-Masal and CNP-Mashal. Bell sneaks an account of Prithvi Narayan Shah's siege of Kathmandu past readers by embellishing the history with stories of past bloody practices and the pandemonium of drunken celebrations of a contemporary

Indra Jatra. Often Bell finds historical echoes as past conflicts play out in new forms today.

As with many accounts of Kathmandu, 1951 appears as a sea change, when democracy and modernity arrive. With foreign aid and Western ways arriving for good and ill, aid empowered elites and anthropology brought new exoticism. Bell does an artful job of exploring the good intentions and bad effects of art collectors/thieves and of foreign scholars with their exoticizing narratives. It is in the post-1990s that Bell is able to dig into the details of local politics and conflict. He observes the last several decades of turmoil of revolutions and delayed elections through the lens of his neighbors and tear gas irritated eyes. In this more reflective section, Bell discusses his place in elite life in Kathmandu and his struggle to make sense out of the dramatic changes in the city.

In the last few dozen pages of *Kathmandu*, Bell brings his exceptional access to less-known information about Operation Mustang, especially British involvement, somewhat burying what could be a lede. Through his contacts, Bell is able to explore the open secret of foreign participation in Nepal's Civil War and raise concerns about foreign support for the Nepali army despite British and American awareness of human rights violations, including torture and kidnapping. This section of the book should be required reading for aid

workers and diplomats as he divulges the blowing winds of foreign support and the way in which diplomacy and development interventions can, and do, have deleterious effects on Nepal, even with the best of intentions (pp. 380-1). Unprepared foreign officers have come to Nepal with little more than tourist guidebook information, yet then have the capacity to transform the power dynamics of Nepal. While the book opens with Bell's unabashed love for Kathmandu, it concludes with significant skepticism about the city's future. Changes of politics leadership brings little transformation and what lies ahead is gloomy according to Bell's interlocutors, and Bell seems to share their outlook.

Readers of *HIMALAYA* may not learn a great deal of new history from *Kathmandu*, but the book has the potential to transform the field of Himalayan studies. Bell provides an extensive review of Kathmandu's history as well as several snapshots of Nepal's religions and cultures through his very personal viewpoint. Rather than a list of deities, Bell offers living gods (and goddesses) as they are present in the lanes of Kathmandu. Readers learn how Buddha statues are crafted and then sold and their role in Nepali households as Bell sneaks in a Buddhism primer amidst gripping stories of flying witches and neighbor's nightmares. As Kathmandu's cameos in popular video games brought a generation of scholars to study of Nepal, Bell has the potential capacity to draw in many to

learning even more about Nepal, and provide a stronger basis than Tomb Raiders or Indiana Jones.

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