

The Snow Leopard

P. Matthiessen

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As already noted¹ I first came across this book as an introductory excerpt in New Yorker in the late 70's. It must have intrigued me as I later bought the book, which I read, or almost read, judging from an old book mark at the very end of the book. (Why did I stop so close to the end, was I not curious as to how it would end?). Some parts stayed in my memory. First the encounter with Schaller and the intensity of the conversation they had had (as related above). Was I envious? Was this the kind of companionship I longed for? I also recall the incident of the crippled little girl in Nepal at the beginning of the trek. The author writes that he felt ashamed of his own strong legs and stride. Why did this stick in my memory? The references to the death of his wife - Deborah Love, referred to throughout the book by the initial D just as Schaller is consistently called GS, except at the very end at an emotional leave taking he becomes for a brief moment 'George'. She died from cancer, and the scene when he presents her with an urn they both had admired in Geneva, she is able to make out the words 'Switzerland'. The pathetic nature of the incident must have startled me enough to commit it to memory. Maybe I thought it was tasteless of him to be on such a journey after her recent death, that it was a kind of abandonment. Apart from that there is little if anything I remember from my first reading, except that he never got to see that Snow Leopard, which I almost thought was on the same level as the mythological being of the yeti², which also is brought up repeatedly, thus later being surprised that there are actually snow leopards in captivity.

Matthiessen born in 1927 was of the generation that peaked in the 60's swept away by the 'Zeitgeist' of drugs, notably cannabis and LSD, and the search for psychedelic experiences, which later matured into a quest for cosmic understanding, often through Buddhism, preferably Zen, the minimal version in which much religious ballast has been jettisoned.

While Schaller has a definite goal, the study of bharals, or blue sheep, to decide whether they are mostly goats or sheep, the quest of the author is more vague. It has to do with Buddhism of course, of which he is not very knowledgeable, and finding himself in strange and exotic surroundings. Explorations in the Himalayas do very much concord with psychedelic experience, and how many people of the sixties did not travel to India and its environs, to seek spiritual enlightenment, and sure enough when opportunity arises he picks some cannabis. While Schaller is very constrained in his book, Matthiessen lies it on purple. What was but one chapter among many in Schaller, is a whole book in the rendering of the former. Thus there is more to be picked up in this book about the texture of the experience than in Schaller's, although the flow tend to numb you after a while.

In Schaller's account there is no hiding of hardship, but the ones that are relayed

¹ In the previous review in this collection

² The possible existence of which, the hard-nosed Schaller does not reject out of hand.

mostly concern the cold and the frustrating intransigency of porters, with Matthiessen on the other hand we learn about dangerous dogs in villages, one of which is fought off by a stave he fortuitously had picked up shortly before the encounter, and above all of vertigo. Vertigo is not something that seems to bother Schaller, but Matthiessen is at forty-six new to mountaineering, and the negotiation of narrow edges along steep slopes, unnerves him more than once. At times he can get into the swing of things, and with great care yet with a rhythmic abandon, no doubt inspired by transcendental meditations, proceed. At other times he is paralyzed by panic, a growing panic as it feeds on itself, and he knows and senses that it is at moment of great terror you are most likely to succumb. At such times he can only proceed ignominiously on all fours, shaking with fear. After one particular bad stretch when Schaller overtakes him remarking in transit that at last there was some interesting hiking, the author is tempted to push him over.

There is a lot of Buddhist nonsense being expounded on, especially when modern physics is concerned. The old Buddhists understood about the equivalence between matter and energy he claims. But so what, in what sense? It is one thing to express it metaphorically quite another one to make it precise and subject to manipulation. Similar with the relativity theory of Einstein and the inseparableness between time and space. To understand those things properly you cannot avoid an understanding of the formalism that underpins it. As was noted a long time ago, there is no Royal road to Geometry, the same goes for modern physics. Without the necessary skills, reflections on the matter do not rise above name-dropping.

More interesting is the evocation of an ancient Buddhist culture practiced by the Tibetans and the Sherpas, recent predominantly Buddhist immigrants from the Tibetan plateau. As such they stand apart from the Hindi population in Nepal and to be found in the north, close to the high mountains. Some tantalizing glimpses of Tibetan history are being offered, but nothing systematic. It does not go that far back, only to about the eighth century. There is also some attempt to delineate the various religions that make up for the Tibetan creed. There being a pre-Buddhist one referred to as B'on. The goal is to enter the inner Dolpo, a distant region in the northwestern part of Nepal, and to which it is hard to get permission to enter. In fact the next year - 1974, it became off limits. But even with paper in perfect order a traveler is at the mercy of local officials who may exercise petty power with impunity. This involves the climbing of tough snow covered passes in late fall, but once there, they can rest and work in a deserted village - Shey, in which only a few women reside in the winter months, as well as a lama, whose existence in a nearby monastery, they only later learn of, and thus seek out and interview. The author is amazed at the inner peace of the lama, and how he in true Buddhist fashion manages to so fully accept his fate (he is crippled with arthrities and unlikely ever to leave) and which is something he also seems to discern in their Sherpa companions. While Schaller is off observing the antics of rutting bharals, the author flounders around, seeking peace and communion, doing his meditations and exercises, occasionally observing the animals as well, eager to contribute to the scientific mission. There is little interaction between the two fellows, their social intercourse at mealtimes reducing to a polite minimum. On the other hand this is what suits both of them best, eager to be alone by themselves, yet at the moment of parting, Schaller does not restrain from expressing his appreciation of

the author's company. And in doing so makes a telling revelation. What excited Schaller most of the expedition was that they were left to their own resources, no contact with the outside world, no air-lifts, no safety nets, success or failure being entirely their own responsibility. This is the early seventies, no satellite phones, no e-mails, no short cuts. An expedition in the classical mould.

When there is mail carried from Jumla to their camp in the Dolpo, the author prefers not to read it, lest it would contain bad news to which he would not be able to respond to anyway just adding misery to an existence he does not want to spoil. When he finally departs back to Kathmandu via a hike to the airfield in Jumla, he gets rather depressed, feeling that the whole experience somehow has been pointless, but of course sooner or later he snaps out of it, contributing it to a too sudden drop in altitude.

He makes friends, or so he sentimentally thinks, with the sherpa Tukten, an old wily character, with a reputation of unreliability and refusal of social adaptation, but backs out in the last minute to invite him for dinner at the hotel in Khatmandu. He certainly would have been out of place there. When he later looks for a rendez-vous, he simply is not there. Out of indifference, or maybe because having been hurt. We will never know.

One learns from Wikipedia that the area is no longer barred to visitors, but provides a popular destination for trekkers, and that the area has been the location for two recent films shot in 1999 and 2009 respectively. One gathers that external influences are far more pronounced now than at the time of Matthiessen and Schaller, who predicted its degeneration within a few decades. The Snow Leopard is endangered and spread over a large Himalayan area, a few thousand are thought to roam in the wild, most of them in China. The Bharal seems to be on the least concern at the so called Red list, which does not provide any population estimates of it.

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