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BOOKS

Quest for the Sacred Gorge

By *William McGowan*

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As war looms, the kind of outdoor adventure books that were so popular in the late 1990s seem a bit beside the point right now -- even silly. What is climbing a mountain into thin air compared with zooming an F-16 right through it?

But it would be a mistake to regard Michael McRae's "**The Siege of Shangri-La**" (Broadway Books, 240 pages, \$25) in a dismissive way. The book is a compelling account of the attempts to reach Tibet's inner Tsangpo Gorge in a region called Pemako, a place that until recently was, as Mr. McRae writes, the last "blank spot on the map of world exploration." There is more to the story than adventure.

Set in the long shadows of 24,000-foot peaks, the inner Tsangpo Gorge was long coveted by Victorian-era explorers looking for the headwaters of India's Brahmaputra River and, no less important, for the fabled waterfall rumored to thunder somewhere along its path. Well before the Victorians, the gorge was considered a mythical "hidden land" where Tibetan Buddhist pilgrims of requisite karmic purity might reach a supernatural world beyond. The myth of the hidden land provided the basis for the fantasy of Shangri-La, popularized in the West by James Hilton's novel "Lost Horizon."

Thirst for Glory

Draining a 1,000-mile stretch of the Himalayas and the Tibetan plateau, the Tsangpo (the Brahmaputra before it reaches India) is regarded as the Mount Everest of rivers. It carves a gorge three times the depth of the Grand Canyon. But its most distinctive feature is its rapid descent: 9,000 feet in just nine miles. British explorers believed a huge cataract must exist at some point along the river's course, and they set out to find it with the same thirst for glory that their counterparts in Africa had shown questing for the headwaters of the Nile.

Those who beheld the river wrote eloquently of its fearsomeness. According to Francis Kingdon-Ward, a British botanist and explorer, the river was "all

foam and fury... plunging down, down, boring deeply into the bowels of the earth." What trails there were barely clung to the sides of cliffs pitched at near-vertical angles. Huge mountain spurs were arranged "like the pleats of a giant accordion." Often as rainy as an equatorial jungle, this "green hell" abounded with leeches, venomous snakes and stinging nettles. As for the natives, most tribes were suspicious and unfriendly; one practiced a "poisoning cult" against outsiders.

Kingdon-Ward came the closest to solving what he called "the riddle of the Tsangpo Gorges" in 1924. Ultimately, though, he was forced to declare that the river did not contain any great falls, only a series of smaller ones. Ironically, he gave up his quest a quarter-mile from the giant falls that are actually there, hidden by the convoluted topography.

Mr. McRae's description of the gorge's landscape is vividly real, but he is even better at seeing the place through a cross-cultural lens. As he explains, for centuries Tibetan Buddhists regarded Pemako as "sacred geography." Traversed properly, its landscape could bring about spiritual enlightenment. Pemako's legends included fantastic accounts of "wind runners" who hovered along mountain trails in hypnotic trances and near-naked yogis who meditated into states of "mystic fire." Some lamas spoke of a "door to paradise" cut into the rock cliffs.

Manse in Katmandu

Pemako was officially closed to outsiders when the Chinese communists took over Tibet in the late 1950s. When the region opened to Westerners again, in the early 1990s, it became an obsession for adventurers, especially kayakers who sought out its unrun rapids. It also became an obsession for Tibetophiles interested in "discovery" less in the explorational sense than in the spiritual one.

The main characters in Mr. McRae's story are a pair of "renegade scholars" - based in the roguish expatriate community of Katmandu -- who journeyed through Pemako eight times between 1993 and 1998 hoping to make the official discovery of the elusive falls. One is Ian Baker, a failed American graduate student now in his mid-40s. The other, slightly younger, is Harvard doctoral candidate Hamid Sardar, raised in the Shah's Iran and France. Mr. McRae insists that, despite their privileged backgrounds, they are not "faux Buddhists." Both spent more than a decade cultivating "pure vision" through ascetic Buddhist practice before their journeys, often meditating for stretches of time in cold Himalayan caves.

These two spiritual adventurers offer provocative insights into Buddhist states of mind. But at points in Mr. McRae's story they sound sophomoric. From his well-appointed manse in Katmandu, Mr. Baker makes casual remarks about the "air-conditioned nightmare" of life in the U.S. Both men engage in a dharma-speak that has the insular ring of boarding-school code.

Their expeditions turned out to be a combination of thrill and frustration. Each time they traveled into the gorge, they got closer to its uncharted

center, only to be deterred by terrain or logistics. Their only maps were a set of ancient sacred guidebooks that required additional oral commentary from local lamas. The texts told them where to perform ritual prayers and chants and which "protector deities" to propitiate. Both men wanted to find out whether the fabled falls existed but more for the sake of mysticism than geography.

Portal to Paradise

The pivotal moment came in May 1998, when local hunters told them that the inner gorge had secret hunting trails, which took them to a promontory right over the falls. But they lacked the proper equipment to document the falls' height, a measurement critical to making a claim of discovery. After receiving a grant from National Geographic, the men returned in 1998, along with a film crew. Rappelling to the base of the falls, Mr. Baker and another member of the team established that it reached 108 feet, matching the falls of legend.

For Mr. Baker it was a moment of profound cultural convergence, the Western and Eastern vision of the falls coming together in the spray and roar of the cataract. He says he could see, on the far side of the turbulent water, an oval cut in the cliff -- perhaps the portal to paradise.

The premiere issue of National Geographic Adventure trumpeted Mr. Baker's achievement, saying he had "the creative vision and audacious curiosity to ignore that the Age of Exploration is over." Random House offered him a big book contract. He was soon famous.

A Faustian Bargain

In Mr. McRae's view, however, Mr. Baker made a "Faustian bargain" in becoming a "celebrity explorer." Whatever karmic gains he made were profaned by his sizeable ego and a self-aggrandizing sense of the truth. In Mr. McRae's telling, Mr. Baker elbowed aside others on the team who had contributed to the discovery. Mr. Sardar was particularly upset, feeling "that Baker had not given him due credit and had appropriated parts of his persona in constructing the story of the falls' discovery." It was Mr. Sardar, not Mr. Baker, who could read the ancient texts. And it was Mr. Sardar who had ingratiated himself with the hunter who told them that the inner gorge was his tribe's secret hunting ground, a breakthrough. Mr. Baker's narrative, Mr. Sardar alleged, was "a masquerade of half-truths and baseless lies."

Mr. McRae does not get Mr. Baker to answer these charges, other than to mutter complaints about National Geographic's overeager publicity machine and obtuse media. "The Western model cannot seem to appreciate a landscape without seeing it through the lens of the individual ego," Mr. Baker sniffs.

Mr. McRae closes with an account of his own attempts to journey with Mr. Sardar into an even more recessive part of the Tsangpo area, a trip that was

aborted when a titanic landslide made travel impossible. But it is an impending man-made catastrophe that worries Mr. McRae most. Seeing tourist value in the gorge, the Chinese are readying plans for a network of roads, railways and hotels. "Barbarians are poised at the gates of Shangri-La," McRae writes. Even Pemako's "protector deities" seem unable to do anything about it.

Mr. McGowan is the author of "Only Man Is Vile: The Tragedy of Sri Lanka."

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