

John Cross

Born 1925.

Life story interview by Alan Macfarlane.

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The text of this life story is transcribed, with thanks and acknowledgement, from the collection of Filmed Interviews with Leading Thinkers at the Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology at the University of Cambridge. The interview was carried out by Prof. Alan Macfarlane in Pokhara, Nepal, on 16th April 1991. The video can be accessed from this page:

<http://www.alanmacfarlane.com/ancestors/audiovisual.html>

1. Childhood

When and where were you born?

I was born in London in 1925.

And did you come from a military family?

No. The only military work done by the family was during the First World War, then during the Second World War. No military tradition.

Where were you educated?

Privately at a school ten miles out of Birmingham, then at Shrewsbury School.



Shrewsbury School.

And after school what did you do?

My schooling was truncated, because of the war. I left after four years, and almost immediately joined the army as a private soldier.

2. Joining the Army



John Cross as a young army officer.

I was sent out to India as a cadet. That was in 1944. And for the next 37 years and 324 days I never had a home posting. I was in Asia the whole time. People say why was I there so long. The answer is that I was a slow starter and couldn't make up my mind whether I could tolerate it or not!

What regiment did you join?

I joined the 1st 1st Gurkhas initially, in the Indian Army. Then after partition, when India became independent, I went to the British Army Gurkhas and joined the 1st 7th Gurkhas, who were Easterners. The 1st 1st were from the west of the country.



Refugees fleeing to their home country after the partition of India.

At the end of the war were you involved in Indian independence problems?

Yes. To a considerable degree. But on 15th August 1947, the date of independence, we were in what later became Pakistan. We were in the buffer zone between what became Pakistan and Afghanistan.

When you first joined a Gurkha regiment you knew little about the Gurkhas?

I knew nothing at all about them. I found them a most fascinating people. They were shorter then, I believe, than they are today. And they looked so smart; much smarter than any Indian soldier – if only because the point of balance of the Gurkha was nearer the ground and he looks much smarter in uniform because he is less gangling than many Indian people. I was most attracted by what I felt to be the communal spirit that they had. I was quite terrified by their language. I was a duffer at school, being brought up in the shadow of a brilliant older brother – who incidentally got the finest classical scholarship to New College Oxford for the previous fifty years. I was the kind of person of whom it was said his soldiers would follow him if only out of curiosity.

3. The Gurkhas



Gurkha soldiers being inspected by the Queen.

When I heard the Nepali language spoken I felt I could never learn it. It was takatakatakatakata kirikirikirikirikiri and the hoo! Which left me completely mystified. But I was frightfully attracted to them, if only because I sensed they were such tractable people.

What do you mean by tractable people?

Tractable is the one word that I have found that seems to summarise the innate qualities of a peasant people, a country people, an agrarian people, who have to join together especially when a lot of work in the rice paddies had to be done. Without too much selfishness impeding. They have a community spirit which means that there are times when individualism is sunk by the communal need. They accepted what was said. This was in contra distinction to the British troops with whom I had done my recruit training. There was no fuss, no argy bargy, about what was needed. The conditions were rough, but they settled down to a job and they did what was wanted. They cheerfully accepted that what they had to do needed to be done, and wasn't something they could get out of.

Did you notice anything about their sense of humour?

The nearest I got to their sense of humour was slapstick. The skid on the banana or the cream pie on the face. Once or twice I would see them watching something like the Marx Brothers, and their joy in watching slapstick comedy knows no bounds.

What about the degree of equality or inequality amongst them?

There was great respect for the amount of time served.

Was there competitiveness in any other aspect of their lives, in sport or in war?

Most certainly. In the army if someone does not pull their weight promotion does not come, and decorations cannot be won by the faint hearted. So the amount of competitiveness was considerable. Yes indeed.

What about their physique?

Remember that we have taken the cream of the cream of the country. When I was a recruiting officer in the west of Nepal I could choose 200 youths from about 80,000. So that is 1 in 400. So the physical characteristics of the people I chose must have been above the average. Strong muscly people. Likely to have strong leg muscles. There was a tendency for the arms to be weak, and we had Physical Training instructors who would give them special exercises to toughen up the arm muscles.

Did you notice anything about their relations with their families?

The first time I ever saw any wives or children, having joined at the end of 1944, was in January 1948. In the army we were regimented to a considerable degree, and that coincided with the start of the Malayan emergency. I was out in the jungle most of the time, so had far less opportunity to get to know the families.

When you did meet the families, did you form any impression of the relations between the men and the women and their children?

Yes. I reckoned that the husband was the dominant partner of the two. They seemed to live their children. There was never any suggestion of nastiness or unkindness, and overall I was very impressed.

4. Nepal



Lake Phewa Pokhara, Nepal.

When did you first visit Nepal?

I first visited Nepal in mid-February 1947. The roads were not made up, and we had to walk. I worked out that I and my friend were the 126th and 127th European to visit the valley in the last 150 years.

What are the main changes that have taken place between 1947 and 1991?

Mentally a change of mind, a change of values. And I put that down to the Indian influence that has become much more widespread in Nepal since the opening up of the roads. There has been a subsequent degrading of honesty. When Nepalis ask me what has happened in the last twenty years, I say you guys have become a nation of thieves and liars. You were never like that before. And they say yes, that's the only way we can keep our heads up against the Indians. Also physically they are bigger people. They have become taller, and more hirsute.

Of course the country having recently opened up with roads, and more recently aircraft, and the media that have intruded into their lives – television, videos, radios – have all given them much more chance of knowing what happens outside their villages. This seems to me to have given them a sense of bemusement. They are bemused by the amount of stuff that is chucked at them. And this has in a way blurred the responsibilities. The amount of tourists traipsing around has given them a perhaps false impression of the western world. And this has made it harder to get to know them deeply.

For me, with the passage of time I have got to know them much better. I have a much better linguistic capability than before. I have been told by a number of Nepalis that I can see right into the guts, into their inner selves. They say I am 'not like the others'. They say they can tell lies to others, but not to me. I think this is partly because I have the language, but also because I have the empathy. I love them very much.

You have mentioned honesty. When you first met the Gurkhas, were honesty and directness features that you mentioned?

Correct. But I fear that the influence of Aryan Hindu administrators has undermined this. When to get something done, rather than wait 4 days, you have to give an administrator 50 rupees, that is what, for the sake of a quiet life, the Nepali will do. Hundreds of years of a feudal system has given the Nepali people an ability to bend gracefully rather than break.

What is your experience of aid and development projects?

Aid is a two-edged weapon. And despite the huge foreign aid coming into Nepal over the last twenty years Nepal has sunk from being in the 20 poorest countries, to being in the 10 poorest countries. And Gross National Product has hardly increased at all. So what could have happened has not happened. But the benefit of having fridges rather than no fridges, schools rather than no schools, and irrigation, and potable drinking water, can only have a beneficial effect.

You are one of the very few outsiders who have been given permission to live in Nepal. What made you decide to do so?

A combination of circumstances. I couldn't marry the woman whom I thought I could, and would and should. It was probably the last chance for both of us. So that having resolved itself, I thought I could go and live with a sister, but she went and got herself killed, about the same time that I started losing my eyesight.

There was a lad who was so poor he had to run away from home; his father had died when he was about 13, and he looked after his family as best he could for about five years. And he came down to the camp that I commanded. I allowed him to stay on and I watched Buddhiman Gurung for a year, and took him on as a servant. I said I wouldn't pay him, but I would give him pocket money and food and shelter. And I gave him enough money so that he could buy some land and he and a putative wife and two children would never need to go hungry again. I asked him what we should call each other, and he looked at me pityingly and said 'father and son, what else?'. For eighteen months as I lost my eyesight through cataracts, I relied on him more than I had relied on anyone since I was a baby at my mother's bosom. I decided I would prefer to live in Nepal, with loving personal support, than to enjoy the creature comforts of the United Kingdom.

Is there a depth of closeness in a village in Nepal compared to a town or village in the United Kingdom?

Definitely. No doubt at all. I don't think I've ever been turned away or unloved by any Nepali. I don't think of myself as different in any way. I am completely integrated. I got to England when I have to; I put on my English shoes and I am an Englishman. After six weeks I long to get back to Nepal.

5. Life in a Hill Village

Could you describe your impressions, when you pop into a hill village?

I am always taken by the compactness of the physical dwellings. The immediate warmth and response of people; now more so because they know me. The hospitality given unstintingly. I am never pressed to eat more than I want to eat. I am never pressed to drink – I am a complete teetotal non-drinker and a non-smoker. And the fun and games and the parties that do happen from time to time are put on earlier so that I can take part. There is no animosity at all. Sometimes I am initiated into families with water on the head and yellow ribbons around the neck, and drinking milk the wrong way around from the cup. When that is done the whole family's eyes light up with joy. The removal of the glass curtain between me and them is so obvious. From then on I can go to that house and be accepted as if I was part of the intimate family. Nowhere else have I experienced this.

How much time have you spent in villages?

Not nearly as much as you have, in a concentrated way. But I have walked at least 10,000 miles in Nepal. So I have spent more time walking than I have in any one village.

It is sometimes said that in societies such as Nepal where many children die in infancy people protect themselves by shutting off their emotions towards their children and each other. I don't know if you have every heard this view?

No. And I am very surprised. The protection that a family needs is the family being kept as strong as possible. Everything I have seen is directed towards maintaining the family security and stability. The errant black sheep is not all that popular in this context. None of us are saints. The love and concern between husband and wife, with son-in-law or daughter-in-law, is very strong and embracive.

The obverse of love is hate, or aggression or anger. People who have heard of the martial reputation of the Gurkhas, and have heard that in war they are very fierce, sometimes assume that fierceness is associated with aggressiveness. Having seen them in peace and war and in their villages how would you assess the degree of aggressiveness of their character?

I believe that one opposite of love is apathy. And much of the myth of aggression is myth that the British officer has inculcated. Not all Gurkhas are brave. But the bravery of the few subsumed the not-so-bravery of the many. It is quite wrong to say that the Gurkhas are fearless. But they are probably more fearful of fear than of the enemy's bullets. Time and time again I have heard them say they were afraid until the shooting starts. But once the shooting starts it's rather like an afternoon's fun fair, and they enjoy it!

But the question of being fierce is I believe only manifested when too much drink has been taken, and anger is in control of them. There is a Nepalese proverb, particularly about the hill people, which says 'our anger never happens, but when it does it is unable to be measured'. So there is anger when in battle the Gurkha goes red-eyed and goes into battle and doesn't come back till they have got a head or a

pair of ears or something. But the conditions need to be most unusual, or the person to be slightly unbalanced for that kind of thing to happen. I think the Gurkha's reputation for fierceness is exaggerated, because people can only show fierceness for flashes of time.

Have you ever seen any acts of wanton cruelty during your travels around the villages?

No. I've heard of acts of wanton thoughtlessness, resulting in wanton cruelty. But cruelty for the sake of cruelty, none come to mind.

You have talked about Brahminism, and it is often said that Nepal is a Hindu kingdom. And as you know the British when enlisting Gurkhas wrote on the enlistment papers that they were Hindus. They also assigned each regiment Brahmin priests. How would you describe the religious system of the hill peoples?

Not Brahminism. The figure that I have always been quoted is an 80:20 ratio of Brahminism to Buddhism. But you know that is not so. The Muslim religion is increasing. Christianity is increasing. And Animism is much more apparent in the villages than out of the villages.

Buddhiman will say that he is Hindu because the country is Hindu, but he is also a Buddhist because his family is Buddhist. Many of the apparently religious ceremonies that are undergone are of a cultural rather than religious nature.

The ultimate test of religion is the attitude to death and dealing with death. Have you ever attended any of the hill funerals?

Yes I have. I have been most impressed by them. The sending of the spirit away in the correct method, both for it and for those left behind, is a cultural imperative. And a religious imperative. But whether the culture subsumes the religion or the religion subsumes the culture I would hate to say. They are so intertwined from way way back.

Turning back from religion to development and change, it is one of the popular images of Nepal is of growing ecological crisis. Have you noticed that in the forty years that you have been here?

Oh yes. There is no doubt about it whatsoever. Buddhiman and I talk as we have our morning walks. One thing we both worry about is the vast amount of deforestation. One or two Gurkhas returning here from India have been staggered by the amount of deforestation. Also the land slide and soil erosion. I remember hearing in 1974 of a United Nations committee on desertification who forecast that the next great desert would be the central hill regions of Nepal. There were forecasts ten years ago that within fifteen years, at the current rate of deforestation, there would be no trees at all in Nepal. But if you think about the Indian trade embargo; if stuff does not come in to a landlocked country, trees have to be cut down to cook. On our walks we notice much more use of the axe in what jungle remains. They've brought in rangers, but they seem to have little effect because they are bribed.

What has been the reason for the deforestation? Is firewood the main reason?

A lot will be cut for fodder trees for cattle. A lot will be cut as material for the expansion of house building in the plains. Cooking. Warmth. One of my definitions of hospitality is to burn fuel in the winter when no cooking has to be done.

6. Education and Medicine

You mention building. Twenty years ago the tradition was for Gurkhas when they retired to return to their hill villages. Have there been changes in that?

Oh yes. There's been a great drawing down to towns in the valleys. It's obvious. We give the Gurkhas a taste of running water and electricity, and they then expect that. Today's Gurkhas realise that their parents and grandparents were held back through lack of education, and that today the key to success is education. I think it is sad that the wells of Nepali education have been poisoned by the influence of west Bengal.

In what way?

There was a lot of social disorder in 1946 and 1947 in Calcutta. It became a centre of left wing revolt. And when Nepal's first university was set up, sixteen of the academic staff came from a strongly left wing university in Calcutta. Buddhiman says that if he had not met me he would have thought that the English were all Bible and Sword people, and he would not have been friendly with the English at all. This Indian influence on Nepali education has led some students in Nepal to believe that Marxism Leninism is the answer to all our problems.

When I was in North Vietnam in 1975 they said they wanted Americans to stay in South Korea, because they didn't want the Russians there.

At the level of the middle schools, one is struck by the blue uniformed boys and girls on their way to school. What is your view on the schools?

I have had a lovely experience with these schools. I am a member of two school boards. Education is looked at as an open sesame to future achievement. But the school curricula are very old fashioned, and the quality of the teaching is questionable. The school system does not answer the problems that need to be answered. In the mid seventies a Muslim education minister completely re-vamped the system. The best of British, American and Filipino education was introduced. And extra curricular activities were introduced to encourage people to stay in the villages and not go into the towns. But there was so little imagination in these extra curricular activities. I found in one school in the hill country that instead of having animal husbandry or horticulture or tree culture, the boys were taught book-keeping and the girls were taught to type.

Over the years there has been controversy as to whether the medium should be English or Nepali. English is wanted, and this has led to a whole lot of private schools being set up. Buddhiman went to a Government school and found himself in a class of eighty. How can you teach people in a class of eighty?

A lot of the girls are studying because it means the possibility of a job, and marrying later, rather than marrying young to someone not of their choice.

Another aspect is medicine and health care. Nepal has probably one of the lowest ratios of doctors to patients in the world, and one of the lowest expenditures on medical care in the world. Any comments on that?

We have an increasing number of health posts around the country. But people have no faith in the medicines, which are made in India and are regarded as being of low quality. They would like to have medicines from America, Britain, China or Thailand. Another problem is that the people who work in the health centres pass what medicines they get to the bosses or to their own families rather than to the people who really need them. I am saddened by the paucity of the medical facilities, and I am even more saddened by the uncaring attitude of those who administer these medicines. Where do they throw away their old blood stained bandages? On the ground, for the cows and the crows come to look at it, and for us to walk through it.

One of the lads who came to see me got very ill, and I and another man took him to hospital. I was busy, and the person who helped me had a job to do. And the sister said, which of you is going to stay with him. When we explained that we had to go, it turned out that he was left completely on his own with no attention for two days, when my friend went back to see him. He had fallen out of his bed for two hours, until another patient took pity on him and got him back into the bed. So we took him home and gave him a wash, which he hadn't had for four days. And he had a temperature of about 105. He nearly died. Brahminism can input into this country the attitude that it doesn't matter if people die.

You've noticed this influence in education, and in medicine and in religion. What about in administration and bureaucracy?

The way that offices are over-staffed. The inability to take any decision except at minor level. The fear that the decision taken will not please the person above. The blistering inefficiency. The fact that office activity takes place at a time that the Hindu calendar does not see as auspicious, means that time is a western impediment. All this means that the administration grinds inefficiently and so slowly. This means that it wastes many too many human resources and much too much time.

For instance, you go to the office, but you have something to do; you have to go back to farming. You are told come back tomorrow. Three or four days. Up to a fortnight. And if someone else pays a bit of money their paper goes to the top of the pile, and yours goes back to the bottom. Either you pay a bit of money for the clerk to put your paper in front of the master's eyes, or you lose out in the farming, because the season will soon be over.

Even though the King himself, last year, said a hundred functionaries would go into the villages to issue certificates of citizenship. But sometimes they wrote down the wrong name. Even when this was pointed out to them they said bad luck, we can't change it.

7. Democracy

Nepal seems to many people outside as a relic; a strange feudal world which has remained more or less intact until recently. Now the great cry is for democracy. Do you have views on this switch from a situation in which a small group controlled the whole country to one in which there is party politics?

Immense difficulties. There is no tradition of people making their minds up politically. We in Britain have our difficulties, and we have been playing at this for so long. India has had democracy for decades, but human sacrifice still takes place. Here the whole concept of a free vote is foreign. You've seen the flags outside the houses denoting what the head of the house thinks. It is looked at askance if a son does not think the same as the father does.

The multi party system had to come. It came too late. It came late because when it was tried before people did not take it in the spirit that would generate efficiency. It was looked at more as getting into a position for enrichment and advantages. Rather than as a way of pursuing the good of the country. And this is not the only place this happens; you can see it in America.

But you've got to start somewhere. It takes time, and a lot of time will have to elapse before the Nepalese understand politics. You need many years of traffic in a country before a child learns not to run across the road and treat it as its own. A lot of what we are seeing results from the negative aspects of an absolute monarchy. The toadying to the person at the top. And what you and I might call a bribe is part and parcel of the system.

In Brahminical structure, the Brahmin has four inalienable rights, and one of these is money. That means that ten per cent or one per cent of the budget is the Brahmin's right. And if someone gives the Brahmin money and the civil law says no, it doesn't matter, because it is a religious right. Another of his basic four rights is salvation. No matter what he does when he is finished he gets excused. As long as you have got the dead weight of Brahminism and the thought that the elite are privileged to have position and wealth, then the whole concept of a multi party democracy in which each man and woman's vote gives him or her an intrinsic level, rather than an instrumental level of sameness, it is bound to take time to achieve what you and I think of as multi party democracy – one person one vote – that we have reached in Britain.

The multi party system in Nepal has come in later than it might have done if wiser counsel had been listened to at the top. The fact is that it is here now, and the constitution allows it. The police and the army are taking a back seat, where hitherto they would not have done. But how long does it take to get out of a feudal system, and especially out of an absolute monarchy to parliamentary democracy, where we are bound by a Hindu caste system on which the King's court is based. And strange influences have infiltrated the education system, producing double standards. You are starting two or three paces behind everywhere else. Perhaps twenty or thirty paces behind everywhere else. You've got to get past these last fruitless three decades.

You've talked about bribery and corruption. Another notable feature of third world countries is personal connection, patronage. Is that an important part of the political and administrative system?

It's an important part of everything. I was saying to Buddhiman this morning that I would not be in the position that I am if I hadn't known the people that I do. And it doesn't matter who takes over the administration of this country afterwards, the Nepalese are Nepalese are Nepalese. And you may have read Letters of an Indian Judge to an English Gentlewoman. That will say that to work against the family is the worst thing that an Indian can do, and we are part of the Indian sub-continent. That book also says that to change needs three generations or something traumatic. Well, we have had the trauma, but it takes a long time mentally to catch up. Such a barren period.

Patronage, who you know, I believe means more than anything else in this country, except at times when money is concerned. I have never been asked for a bribe because they know that an English person is not in the habit of giving bribes. And many people do know me. On every bus I take (other than those packed with tourists) I always know at least one person on the bus.



John Cross with Buddhiman Gurung.

8. Reflections

There are three or four things that are difficult in this country. The first is to buy land cleanly, that is without any lawsuit hanging on. The second is to marry someone that you can live for the rest of your life with. The third is known as the right connection. The person who stands at the door. And the fourth, which neither God nor the King can do, is to make someone understand what is needed once that person's feelings have been hurt.

Finally, on an autobiographical note. You mentioned that you are not very good at languages. How many Asian languages have you mastered?

Nine.

Nine. And many of them very difficult indeed. You have also written a number of books, and have had a very distinguished military career. You have recruited many hundreds if not thousands of Gurkha troops.

Two thousand one hundred and forty nine!



A Gurkha soldier in training.

And you have achieved the miracle of being absorbed into a Gurung family, of which the representatives are now on film. If you had to single out one or two things for which you would like to be remembered in the future, when this film is shown in 1000 years time, what would you say?

I think the proudest, in the nicest sense of the word, thing that has ever happened to me, and the most proud-making, is the total acceptance at the highest level in this country. To be really taken as a citizen among some of the world's nicest people. And to me that is almost miraculous, because the citizenship status that I have has never happened before in the history of the country.

And I think the second one is that I am unconventional enough to be eccentric enough to be regarded as different from everyone else, or most other people . And that is taken in Asia, not just in Nepal, as having an inner strength that many others haven't. I am not saying that I am full of inner strength. I am probably as big a coward at the next person. But there is something there, where it came from I cannot say, that has given me a charmed life of almost miraculous proportions. And I am every grateful for that.



Lt.Colonel John Cross.

9. Footnote

The following career outline is extracted, with acknowledgement and thanks, from the www.paradata.org website.

Lieutenant Colonel John Cross served in the Army for just over 39 years of which nearly 38 years were in Asia without a European (including UK) posting. He spent ten years in jungle during his first 30 years.

As a linguist, he passed exams in Urdu, Nepali plus script, Cantonese, Malay, Temiar, Thai plus script, Vietnamese plus script, Lao plus script and had working but untested knowledge of Iban.

He carried out a number of special tasks, one being to make contact with the Communist Terrorist Leader, Chin Peng, at the end of the Malayan Emergency in the 1950s by waiting in a small jungle clearing for several months. Another task was at the beginning of Confrontation with Indonesia where he visited every Iban Longhouse along the Borneo border between Sabah/Sarawak and Kalimantan. This involved hundreds of miles of walking and considerable risk.

As Officer Commanding The Independent Gurkha Parachute Company, he led the Company in Borneo (in the SAS role) in the area where Sarawak, Sabah and Kalimantan Utara meet: there are three mountain ranges on the ground, though only two on the map.

He commanded the Jungle Warfare School in Malaya, and was Defence Adviser in Laos, in the rank of local Colonel. In this role he had the sole use of an Army Beaver Aircraft, and his advice was much sought after by the American and other defence advisers.

He now lives in mid-West Nepal in Pokhara and the nearby mountains, and has adopted a Nepali family.
