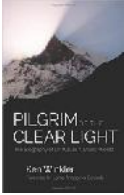


REVIEW: *PILGRIM OF THE CLEAR LIGHT: THE BIOGRAPHY OF DR. WALTER Y. EVANS-WENTZ*

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Ken Winkler. 2013. *Pilgrim of the Clear Light: The Biography of Dr. Walter Y. Evans-Wentz*. Bangkok: BooksMango. 190pp. Nine photos, foreword, acknowledgements, introduction, notes, about the author. ISBN 978-1633231160 (paper 14.99USD; eBook 4.99USD).

As various English-language translations have collectively sold more than half a million copies, much has been written about the collection of texts known as the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*. Little attention, however, has been focused on its creator, Walter Y Evans-Wentz (1878-1965), a man "no one really knew" (15). Originally published in 1982 and reprinted in a second edition in 2013, *Pilgrim of the Clear Light* seeks to shed light on the person of Evans-Wentz. Since its first printing, *Pilgrim of the Clear Light* is the source on which all subsequent scholarship related to Evans-Wentz has relied.

Winkler bases his narrative of Evans-Wentz's life on personal diaries, letters, and interviews that he consulted and conducted over a period of years of travel between California, Oxford, and India. His account provides anecdotes about Evans-Wentz that allow the reader to catch a glimpse, albeit tenuous, into the motivations and psyche of "a driven and compulsive individual" who "lived solely within his own mind" (15). In the account of Evans-Wentz's time at Stanford, for example, we read of his experience of the 1906 San Francisco earthquake. Evans-Wentz was in his fourth-floor dorm room when the earthquake struck early in the morning of 4 April. Deciding that the only safe place to be was on top of the building, Evans-Wentz climbed out his window and clung to the rain gutter in an attempt to pull himself up onto the roof. Luckily for him, before he had been hanging for too long, some friends burst into his room and pulled him back inside. In his diary entry about the event and the earthquake's aftermath, Evans-Wentz recorded, "Measured by man's Prude, M. Alyson. 2016. Review: *Pilgrim of the Clear Light: The Biography of Dr. Walter Y. Evans-Wentz*. *Asian Highlands Perspectives* 40:425-430.

evolution the disaster is a greater good than an evil" (41). This sentiment regarding the miserable state of humanity in the Western world remained a theme throughout Evans-Wentz's life.

After finishing a master's degree at Stanford, completing a study of fairy lore at Oxford, and sitting out two years of WWI in Egypt, Evans-Wentz made his way to Sri Lanka in 1917. He spent the next twenty-four years moving back and forth between Oxford and India with brief visits to the United States. Winkler depicts him as a habitual traveler who rarely stayed in one location for more than a few weeks and who was always on the lookout for religious texts. Based on letters and journal entries written during this time, Winkler argues that Evans-Wentz's aim in interpreting and writing commentaries on the manuscripts he collected was to demonstrate that Asian philosophical and religious ideas (and later Native American ones as well) were neither primitive nor unsophisticated, but superior to those held by his English-speaking audience. Of all the ideas he championed, the doctrine of rebirth, a teaching he first encountered via Theosophy, seems to have been closest to Evans-Wentz's heart. His insistence on the subject led to conflict with Christian groups worldwide, especially in Sri Lanka where Catholics tried twice to have him deported. Evans-Wentz was undeterred, however, and continued writing articles in which he "bombarded the public" with his views on the "thoroughly scientific" theory of rebirth that he was sure scientists were on the verge of proving (93).

Winkler makes clear that Theosophy provided the context for Evans-Wentz's interpretations of Asian practices and philosophies. Much has been made of the fact that Evans-Wentz appears to have never practiced Tibetan teachings or enjoyed a close disciple-teacher relationship with Kazi Dawa Samdup (1868-1923), the Sikkim-born schoolteacher who Evans-Wentz hired to translate the *Tibetan Book of the Dead* (see Lopez (2011) and his forewords to the 2000 printing of Evans-Wentz's tetralogy). This "contemporary carping" (80), as Winkler calls it, about Evans-Wentz's research seems to be the impetus behind the second edition of *Pilgrim of the Clear Light*. In its new version, Winkler has added quotes to the beginning of each chapter, replaced the index with an "About the Author," and incorporated a minor amount of additional information about Evans-Wentz's travels and conversations with other spiritual seekers of his

day. The significant alteration, however, is a sustained rebuttal to demonizations of Evans-Wentz. Winkler reminds the reader that Evans-Wentz was a "meticulous scholar" hampered by a dearth of resources available to students of Tibetan Buddhism in the early twentieth century, resources that could have offered more accurate understandings of the texts that he painstakingly collected and studied.

Readers unfamiliar with the scholarship of Donald Lopez may be surprised by the defensiveness with which Winkler writes. For one, Winkler begins his introduction: "Seldom is another's life as we would like it to be" (15), thus setting the stage for an exposé and establishing a tone for later criticisms of Evans-Wentz. One can surmise, however, that it is statements such as these that put Winkler on the defensive:

Evans-Wentz knew what he would find in the Tibetan text before a single word was translated for him. It almost seems that Evans-Wentz's spiritual vacation could have taken him to any Asian country and that he could have randomly chosen any Asian text, and he would have produced some version of the book published in 1927 (118, in Lopez 2011).

In the same work, Lopez (2011) accuses Evans-Wentz of "[doing] something wrong. His crime was to pretend that his text originated from a time and place, where in fact it did not" (150). Those acquainted with Lopez's writings might conclude that the overblown strength of his remarks is intended for dramatic effect, especially since Lopez's (2011) next paragraph compares Evans-Wentz's "fabrication" to what "Tibetans had done for centuries" in their tradition of revealing *terma* (150). Nevertheless, for someone who admires Evans-Wentz as a "highly principled man, a... pioneer" (15) Lopez's words are sure to rankle.<sup>1</sup>

Lopez (2000b) critiques Evans-Wentz as a translator and scholar of Tibetan Buddhism who engaged in "egregious and willful misreading" of the texts (L). Yet in the context of his life as portrayed in *Pilgrim of the Clear Light*, the source of Lopez's information about

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<sup>1</sup> See also Thurman's 2001 review of *Prisoners of Shangri-La*.

Evans-Wentz, Evans-Wentz appears not as a fraud or criminal but as an overly zealous advocate. Winkler makes clear that Evans-Wentz's goals were not fame and fortune; Evans-Wentz sought to garner interest, among Western audiences, in Asian religious thought. He considered himself an interpreter and translator in the broadest senses of the terms, introducing Asian philosophies and charging succeeding generations with correcting and amending his work. When one keeps in mind, as Winkler continually reminds us to do, that Evans-Wentz's intention was not to dupe but to inspire his readers, his mistakes look much less sinister.

Throughout *Pilgrim of the Clear Light*, Winkler provides historical and geographical context for the events of Evans-Wentz's life mixed with Winkler's own views of Theosophy, the positive and negative aspects of various Indian cities, and the value of Evans-Wentz's efforts. The background information about time and place is helpful, but the quantity of parenthetical notes and digressions interrupt the flow of the story. References to past and future events confuse the chronology and, for this reason, summaries of Evans-Wentz's life by Lopez (2000 and 2011) and Reynolds (2010) are easier reading. In effect, *Pilgrim of the Clear Light* is not so much an academic work (the book lacks a bibliography and all but cursory reference to scholarly sources) as a personal reflection on Evans-Wentz. In this respect, my critique of *Pilgrim of the Clear Light* shares similarities with Lopez's criticisms of Evans-Wentz's works: it is not sufficiently scholarly and it is suffused by the author's personal views. Although Winkler's points are valid, arguments about the genuineness of Evans-Wentz's motivations are out of place in the body of the text and would be more appropriately located in an expanded introduction. A more robust introduction would have the added benefit of allowing Winkler a place to record his travel notes and personal observations. Towards the end of the book, Winkler mentions that his aunt was a librarian at the San Diego library that Evans-Wentz patronized. More information about Winkler's relationship to Evans-Wentz would be both interesting and useful for assessing Winkler's presentation of Evans-Wentz's life.

That being said, the importance of *Pilgrim of the Clear Light* parallels that of Evans-Wentz's books. Even Lopez commends Evans-Wentz for his anthropological bent, specifically, his fieldwork and

efforts to work with native scholars. Winkler can be commended for the same: on-the-ground legwork collecting documents, interviews, and first-hand impressions. Photographs, including one of the stupa in Almora, India, where Evans-Wentz's ashes are interred, add fullness and immediacy to biography. Additional photos, both of and by Evans-Wentz and copies of some of the diary entries and letters that Winkler examined would be welcome, as well as maps of India and California to orient a reader unfamiliar with their geographies. Winkler informs us that later in his life, Evans-Wentz preferred a simple diet, formal but often thread-bare clothes, and became known as a "notorious penny-pincher" despite the fact that his dealings in real estate afforded him a modest degree of wealth. Details such as these, and that Evans-Wentz would sniff out the "psychic currents" and "spiritual structure" of locations (163, see also 40), make *Pilgrim of the Clear Light* a worthwhile read.

Regrettably, in its second edition *Pilgrim of the Clear Light* suffers from a lack of editing. The reader must persevere patiently through typographical errors, dangling modifiers, unclosed quotations, and other mistakes that hinder the flow of the narrative. This significant downfall of the work presents itself to the reader immediately. The second paragraph of the first chapter begins: "Though he never came to call it chance his being there, it was indeed a casual whim of finding a translator that propelled him to this outpost of Buddhism on the edge of Tibet" (18). A few pages later, one reads:

Though Evans-Wentz mentioned his family seemed filled with solid farmers and quiet, pious folk (on his mother's side), it was the black sheep which took the imagination (and the innocent avarice) of he and his brothers and sisters (21).

The first edition published by Dawnfire does not contain these errors. That the new edition is self-published is unfortunate. It would have benefited immensely from professional editing.

Criticisms aside, *Pilgrim of the Clear Light* remains our most comprehensive source of information about Walter Y Evans-Wentz. Contemporary scholars may have dismissed his books for not being true to the traditions they purportedly translate, but succeeding

generations of undergraduate and lay readers continue to turn to the "timeless wisdom" as presented (or, one could argue, created) by the restless and introverted spiritual seeker whose life mission was to bring lost or as yet "undiscovered" spiritual traditions to American and European societies. Whereas Evans-Wentz's study of *bardo* literature has been repeated numerous times and much corrected in the process, Winkler's research has not been repeated. Even thirty-three years since it first appeared in print, we owe our current knowledge of Evans-Wentz to Winkler's presentation in *Pilgrim of the Clear Light*.

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