

The lost people of Central Asia

Out of steppe

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DRENCHED with history and exoticism, Central Asia has long attracted outsiders for good reasons and bad. The Bolshevik revolution ended a long tussle between British and Russian geopolitical ambitions, nailing the region down inside the Soviet empire. It also imposed a communist-style modernity that eroded, sometimes savagely, its peculiar ethnicities and ancient religions.

The theme of Daniel Metcalfe's sardonic but sympathetic travelogue is of loss. Having learnt Persian in Tehran (he makes it sound as easy as learning to play snooker) he sets off for Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, two Central Asian despotisms where the collapse of Soviet rule has accelerated depopulation and man-made ecological disaster. Readers may never have heard of the dwindling and maltreated Karakalpak people before, but after a few of Mr Metcalfe's leanly written pages, they will care a lot.

It is the same story with the other lost tribes he tracks down: the Jews of Bukhara, the Germans of Kazakhstan and the Yaghnobi people of Tajikistan. The Yaghnobi are the last fragment of a race of scholar-traders who ran Central Asia in the glory days of the Silk Road. Deported and all but exterminated in the 1960s, they invite Mr Metcalfe to a circumcision feast and tell him stories about magicians who turn people into cats.

Mr Metcalfe is a modest writer who pays due homage to long-forgotten predecessors such as Ella Maillart, a free-spirited Swiss sportswoman who chronicled the savage collectivisation of Karakalpak agriculture in the early 1930s. He makes light of the difficulties, delays and discomforts of voyaging through a part of the world where bureaucrats and bedbugs plague the traveller. Moreover, unlike some travel writers he is refreshingly honest about the tricks he plays, reflecting harshly on the moral weakness that leads him, briefly, to feign a Jewish identity in order to win the trust of the surviving Jews of Bukhara.

His travels end in Pakistan and Afghanistan, where the levelling force is not communism but Islam. One of his many poignant stories is of a Kalasha shaman whose relatives converted him to Islam while he was unconscious in hospital. There is no way back: apostasy would risk murder. So he now practises his craft in secrecy and with difficulty. "My power is not the same," he confides. "I can't fall into a trance so easily. The angels are angry with me."

"Out of Steppe" is enterprising and finely written, if on occasion a shade precious. Mr Metcalfe, a polyglot Oxford classicist, strikes an exotic figure in what used to be called Turkestan. He can justly be compared with British adventurers such as Robert Byron, the interwar traveller who wrote the "Road to Oxiana". But for readers whose talents are less glittering, a gushing dust jacket note that the author "never travels without his mandolin" may be a little much.

Out of Steppe: The Lost Peoples of Central Asia.

By Daniel Metcalfe.

Hutchinson; 352 pages; £18.99

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