

Bibliography of Academic Writings of Fr. Ludwig F. Stiller

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Fr. Ludwig F. Stiller the Historian: A Personal Introduction

With the passing of Fr. Ludwig F. Stiller on 10 March 2009, we have lost one of the most brilliant historians of modern Nepal. Born in Salem, Ohio in the US on 24 August 1928, Stiller came to Nepal in 1956 to teach at St Xavier's School Godavari. He began his studies of history at Tribhuvan University (TU) in 1966 from where he earned an MA the following year. In 1971 he became the first person to be awarded a PhD in history from TU. Stiller became a naturalized citizen of Nepal in February 1969. He taught at TU for about 10 years but was never made a permanent member of its faculty. He left TU in 1981 and spent the remaining years researching and consulting at the Human Resources Development Research Center in Kathmandu which he had founded in the early 1970s in the company of fellow researcher, Fr. John K. Locke (1933 – 2009).

When I arrived at St. Xavier's Jawalakhel in early 1972 as a second grade student, Stiller had already moved out of the teaching fraternity there and was well into research and teaching of modern Nepali history at TU. During the second half of the 1970s, as I approached my teen years, I began to raid the excellent collection of books in my father's library. It was there, perhaps in 1977, that I first encountered Stiller's premier work on Nepali history, *Prithwinarayan Shah in the Light of Dibya Upadesh* (1968).

At fewer than 80 pages, it is a thin-book. I remember being drawn to its green cover, quite unusual for books then. However I cannot remember reading it from cover to cover. Perhaps I tried but the constituting elements of a professional historian's text – the first avatar of which was an MA thesis Stiller has submitted to TU – were too academic for a very young Nepali then learning to master English.

In 1979, as students of grade nine, we got an opportunity to read Stiller's *Dibya Upadesh* chapter by chapter with his colleague and fellow researcher, Fr. John K. Locke. Although the new SLC curriculum did not require it, the Jesuits who ran St Xavier's then thought it was good for us to read not only Stiller's work (as an adjunct to the government-prescribed history textbook) but also texts such as Dickens' *A Tale of Two Cities* as additional English learning texts.

Some years later, I read Stiller's *The Rise of the House of Gorkha: A Study in the Unification of Nepal, 1768-1816* (1973). Written as his doctoral dissertation at TU, this text was already on its way to becoming a classic by the time I read it. I can't remember how much of it I

understood in my first reading but it was certainly a text whose English did not threaten me. I also remember seeing Stiller's later texts, *The Silent Cry: The People of Nepal, 1816-1839* (1976), *Planning for People: A Study of Nepal's Planning Experience* (1979, co-authored with Ram Prakash Yadav) and *Letters from Kathmandu: The Kot Massacre* (edited, 1981) in my father's collection but don't remember reading them in the early 1980s.

After some educationally confused years I began to study South Asian history in earnest at the University of Pennsylvania during the summer of 1989. To ground my learning in Nepali history, I first returned to the texts of Stiller.

Evaluating Stiller's Books

How could one read Stiller's first book today? Since its narrative is rather terse and its interpretive contribution was eventually superseded in Stiller's later works, I would suggest that one should read Stiller's *Dibya Upadesh* to understand how a historian first constructs a sympathetic reading of his subject based on a close but very critical reading of a key text. In an age where research has become a bad name for semi-literates running around Nepal with ill-designed questionnaires to be filled by "respondents" in the "field," here is an example of what can be produced by doing what good historians have done over several generations: paying good attention to internal evidence of a text, interrogating the text in the light of other available readings and offering an interpretation of it as an argument.

Stiller's second book *The Rise of the House of Gorkha*, provides us with a very readable narrative of how the work of the political conquest of territorial Nepal was achieved between 1740 and 1816. Relying on the more fundamental work done by Mahesh C. Regmi on the economic incentives and impact of the era of conquest, Stiller provided us what is still the best account, 40 years later, of the relationship between land and the military that drove the machine of conquest. In other words, it was not just the ambition of Prithvinarayan Shah to become an overlord of a greater kingdom that made Gorkha successful, it was his management of land grants to ordinary soldiers as *their jagirs* in the initial phase of his campaign that realized his ambition. The *jagir* system was good for the conquest but it put enormous pressure on Nepal's peasants as had been demonstrated by Regmi.

If marrying one's ambition with one's managerial capacity is an indication of genius, Shah appears no doubt as a genius in Stiller's work but the book is no hagiography of the kind one encounters in nationalist accounts. Here is history not just with tons of facts but facts presented in a carefully crafted narrative to provide fundamental insights into an era of history, an understanding of which is essential to our knowledge of just about everything in today's Nepal.

If in *The Rise* Stiller was still working in the shadows of Mahesh C. Regmi's insights, it was in his third and more challenging book, *The Silent Cry* that he gave us his most original and provocative interpretation of the early phase of Nepal's modern history. The question he asked was simple: if the land-military nexus had been fundamental to the successful growth of Gorkha, what happened to that equation after the Treaty of Sagauli with the East India Company in 1816. As every Nepali knows, that Treaty put an end to the expansionist phase of Gorkha's history and it lost a substantial part of its territory. The first implication of this fact would be that the military whose strength had been enhanced for the purpose of conquest had lost its most fundamental reason for existence. The second, as common sense would suggest, would be a reduction in the military's size.

In analyzing why the military's strength *increased* in the aftermath of Sagauli, Stiller provided us with an original perspective on why Bhim Sen Thapa – who dominated Nepali politics for two decades after the treaty of Sagauli – had reasons to do so (put briefly, to save his own position) and what the implications of that decision were for the people of Nepal. When the increased strength of the military could only be supported with the truncated corpus of land owned by the state following Sagauli, this resulted in the fine tuning of mechanisms to extract more and more resources generated from the land to the coffers of the state. The outcome was clear: further impoverishment of Nepal's peasants and their outcry through petitions and voting by feet. It was Stiller's argument that Thapa could not hear this cry that led him to the title of his book *The Silent Cry*.

The conclusion of this book is still relevant today: when self-serving politicians make decisions to enhance their own political positions, the public interest of the ordinary Nepalis at large suffers. The challenge is also with us: are today's leaders better able to hear the public's cry or are we living in a re-mixed era of *The Silent Cry*? This book is also very provocative in the many ways in which it makes us think about aspects of early nineteenth century Nepal that are related to our current concerns: Nepali identity and unity.

Stiller edited *Letters from Kathmandu* to provide access to original documents that inform our understanding of Nepal during the 1840s. He also wrote *Nepal: Growth of a Nation* (1993) to explain modern Nepali history to the non-specialist, and co-wrote *Planning for People*, one of the best works available on the early experience of planning in post-1950 Nepal.

Stiller's works, in particular, *The Rise* and *The Silent Cry* have greatly enhanced the genre of analytic narrative history of modern Nepal, a genre one could say invented by Regmi and cultivated by Stiller. Stiller's books had an advantage over Regmi's in that they read almost novel-like at places. They also taught us how some of the best historical narratives of modern Nepal were constructed as interpretive texts in close dialogue with the work of other historians. That is how it should be.

[This is a slight revised text of an article published in *The Kathmandu Post* on 22 March 2009 under the title “Ludwig F. Stiller the Historian”]

Bibliography of Stiller’s Academic Writings

I have come up with this bibliography after looking for Stiller’s writings (book reviews, articles) in the major academic journals published from Nepal and after consulting his books. Most of the items mentioned in this bibliography are available in the library of Martin Chautari in Kathmandu. I would like to receive information about missing items in this bibliography and suggestions regarding any necessary corrections in the items listed here. Such information should be sent to me at my email address: sinhas@mos.com.np. This bibliography will be updated when new information needs to be added to what is given here.

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