

## **Not Exactly Shangri-la**

Martin Moir

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reviewed by Michael Hutt

Martin Moir is the retired deputy director of the Oriental and India Office Collection of the British Library in London. In this, his first novel, he relates the adventures of one Timothy Curtin, who has recently completed a doctorate in something vaguely Tibetan and is now researching the history of the Himalayan kingdom of 'Kalapur'. In his capacity as the secretary of the 'Royal Himalayan Centre' in London, Curtin organises a lecture by the visiting abbot of Kalapur's main monastery. In the course of his lecture the abbot reveals that a secret document entitled 'The Lives of the Lamas' will shortly be made available to selected foreign researchers, and before he departs he hands Curtin an official invitation to visit Kalapur. As Curtin embarks upon his scholarly adventure, we learn that a violent struggle is going on in Kalapur, in which the construction of the kingdom's recent historical past is a major bone of contention. Curtin's research therefore has major political implications, and he finds himself under pressure to reach a set of prescribed conclusions, particularly with regard to the mysterious death of a senior lama some sixty years earlier.

Moir's novel, which is clearly inspired in part by James Hilton's 1933 novel *Lost Horizon*, is a curious mixture of colonial-style adventure story, pseudo-scholarly travelogue, romance, and modern political allegory. At its best, it is very entertaining. For instance, the question of the existence or non-existence of the yeti is a principal concern for the members of the Royal Himalayan Centre, who are sorely divided over the matter, and Moir's wry account of their argument is great fun. The narrative also displays a close familiarity with Buddhist Himalayan cultures, and Moir describes the religious environment well. However, although it is told with some panache, this reader found parts of Moir's story somewhat unconvincing and winced at some of the Orientalist stereotypes that appear in the course of its telling. When Hilton wrote his novel for an English-speaking readership between the wars, the Himalaya could safely be treated as a mythological setting. But as I read *Not Exactly Shangri-la* I found myself questioning the

wisdom of setting an adventure story in a polity that is fictional but which is located none the less in a real cultural and geopolitical milieu. On the other hand, of course, this is a novel that was not written for a nit-picking Himalayanist academic, and I must end by expressing my appreciation of the way in which the author has deployed his scholarly knowledge and creative imagination.