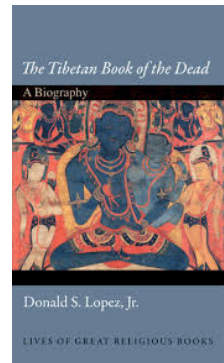


*The Tibetan Book of the Dead: A Biography*, by  
Donald S. Lopez

Lives of Great Religious Books | Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011 | 173 pages | ISBN: 978-0-691-13435-2 (hardback) \$19.95

This volume is being published in truly august company. Its companions in the series (current and forthcoming) include the *Analects*, the *Dead Sea Scrolls*, the *Bhagavad Gita* ... and what does Lopez do? He immediately sets out to demonstrate that the Tibetan Book of the Dead does not belong in this list. One can hardly phrase it better than he does himself:

The Tibetan Book of the Dead is not really Tibetan, it is not really a book, and it is not really about death. It is about rebirth: the rebirth of souls and the rebirth of texts. Evans-Wentz's classic is not so much Tibetan as it is American, a product of Amer-



ican spiritualism. Indeed, it might be counted among its classic texts ... [it is] a remarkable case of what can happen when American Spiritualism goes abroad.

The rest of this brief and highly readable book is dedicated to explaining this apparently outrageous opening statement. The story starts with Joseph Smith, founder of Mormonism, in 1816. It ends in 2005, when the current Dalai Lama subtly indicates in his Introduction to the latest of many English translations that this book was never a best-seller in its native land.

The journey in between takes us to India and Tibet, where Lopez shows how various Buddhist traditions regarding inter-life existence developed and how they were only collated into a single volume somewhere around the late seventeenth century. From there, the British occupation of Tibet in 1903 led directly to Evans-Wentz getting his hands on a copy of this rather obscure compendium of rituals and the rest, as they say, is history. From Carl Gustav Jung, through Lama Govinda, to the Beatles, the Tibetan Book of the Dead would be regarded as the central text of Tibetan Buddhism that it never actually was. Even its name was, shall we say, borrowed, from an Egyptian funerary text. The Tibetan title of the book means something quite different.

And so, the Tibetan Book of the Dead is somewhat like the Holy Roman Empire, neither Holy, nor Roman, nor an Empire. But a sacred scripture, once established, takes on a life of its own regardless of its origins. Could we expect the book's influence to filter back into Tibetan orthodoxy, now that it is increasingly reliant on western supporters for its survival? Lopez hints at it when he writes that the Tibetan text "became a kind of colonial commodity, the raw material exported to the city of the colonizer, where it is manufactured into a product that is then sold back to the colonized at a high price. In this case, that price has included compelling Tibetan teachers, most recently the Dalai Lama himself, to comment on the text yet again" (pp). But it is not only the colonizer that it is being sold back to, then, it is also the colonized.

One presumes that the series editors might have hesitated to contract this book had they known the outcome. Let us be glad they did not, for it has given us this magnificent little piece of literary iconoclasm

Michel Clasquin-Johnson  
*University of South Africa*