"Of the whole enormous area which was once the spirited domain of Tibetan culture and religion, stretching from Ladakh in the west to the borders of the Chinese provinces of Szechuan and Yunnan in the east, from the Himalayas in the south to the Mongolian steppes and the vast wastes of northern Tibet, now only Bhutan seems to survive as the one resolute and self-contained representative of a fast disappearing civilization"

*A Cultural History of Tibet* by David Snellgrove and Hugh Richardson.

Michael Aris’s entire career as a Tibetologist and Himalayan specialist was spent recording the history and extant traces of this “fast disappearing civilization”. A few weeks before his death on 27 March this year, his 53rd birthday, he had convened a Steering Committee at St Anthony’s College, University of Oxford, for the purpose of seeking funds to endow posts, studentships and resources for Tibetan and Himalayan Studies at the University of Oxford. His intention was to provide this country for the first time with a firm institutional base for these subjects. Even before Michael Aris’s death, his hopes and efforts were rewarded by benefactions which had been pledged by friends of the family, Hans and Mirri Rausing, and Joseph and Lisbet Koerner. Michael Aris’s family and his academic colleagues have now established an educational and research Trust entitled “The Michael Aris Memorial Trust for Tibetan and Himalayan Studies”. With the magnificent benefactions from the Rausing and Koerner families, the Trustees have decided to endow a post of Lecturer in Tibetan and Himalayan Studies at the Oriental Faculty, University of Oxford. The post will be advertised before the end of the year and an appointee will start teaching in October 2000.

The Trustees are also delighted to announce that His Royal Highness the Prince of Wales has graciously agreed to be Patron of the Appeal.

The First Oxford International Chamber Music Festival will take place 3–8 July next year and a concert will be held at St. Anthony’s College on 5th July in support of The Michael Aris Memorial Trust. Further details on the Festival will be posted in November.

For further information please contact

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*Karma Phuntsho*

The week after Michael died, *Kuensel*, a bilingual weekly and the only newspaper in Bhutan, reported the demise of the doyen of Bhutan Studies. The whole kingdom of Bhutan joined Michael’s family in mourning the untimely death of one of her greatest historians and friends, chanting prayers and lighting thousands of butter lamps in major temples and monasteries. For Bhutanese old and young, Michael personified scholarship on Buddhism and Bhutan.

Michael’s contact with Bhutan—and other Himalayan regions—began when he obtained the exceptional privilege of going to Bhutan in 1967 as a royal tutor arranged through his friend Marco Pallis. Young and adventurous, Michael found himself a stranger in an unknown corner of the world, where there were no vehicle roads, hospitals, or electricity and only few who knew the language he spoke. Soon after his arrival, he was appointed the English tutor to the princes and princesses of King of Bhutan. He loved his royal pupils and they loved him too. During our long walks or afternoon teas, he would often tell me how much he adored the country, the exotic culture, and hospitable people.

The first time I met Michael was in 1997 when I joined Oxford. I vividly remember that cold evening on 29th September 1997 sitting in a small house in Wolvercote having just reached Oxford when Michael rang me to say “Kuzug Zangpola” (sku-gzugs bzang-po-la, Good Health) and welcomed me to Oxford with his benign character and fluent Dzongkha. He was the first and the only foreigner I have met who easily impressed me with his knowledge of Dzongkha, the official language of Bhutan. Since then, Michael and I spent much time together talking about things, places, and people we had in common and a strong bond grew between us, mainly due to our common
interest in Tibet, Buddhism, and especially Bhutan.

He enjoyed narrating the pranks the naughty princesses played on him. He once told me how the princesses instructed him to greet a minister who was coming to their classroom. They taught him how he should bow down and say, O yonpo shang bom dug la. As the minister entered the room, he conveyed his greetings with utmost courtesy while his mischievous pupils burst into laughter behind him. His greeting meant: "O minister, (your) nose is enormous." His pupils also insisted that he find a local girl to marry and during the festivals, they would ask him to choose one from the dancing girls. He always declined, sensing their tricks. However, to his astonishment, they found him a 'maiden', who, when they brought her in, turned out to be an old woman with a huge goitre dangling down her throat. Michael's time in Bhutan was full of adventure and fun, and at the same time productive, something rarely obtained by a foreigner. For some time he lived in a house in Uche, bought for him by the dowager queen. He also stayed in Wangdicholing Palace in Bumthang and in Thimphu, the capital town, working for the government as a translator. In all these places, Michael found himself at home and he enjoyed sharing every facet of Bhutanese village life. It was in those days he learnt his fluent Dzongkha and delved into the history and culture of Bhutan, on which he was later to become the West's foremost authority.

During his time in Bhutan, he also came across the great Tibetan masters such as the Karmapa, Kalu Rinpoche, and Pohu Khenpo from whom he could imbibe Buddhism and knowledge on Tibet. Above all, he had the opportunity to study with Dillo Khyenting, one of the greatest Tibetan Buddhist masters of this century. Khyenting was to leave a great impact on the life of both Michael and Aung San Suu Kyi, and to prove in years to come an outstanding source of inspiration, hope, and wisdom for them. Michael's meeting with Khyenting and other outstanding lamas residing in Bhutan after the fateful invasion of Tibet became his good fortune as it shaped his future as an eminent historian of Tibet.

Michael also worked with the King and the senior officials, giving them a hand in various development projects. He saw Bhutan reluctantly shed its historic isolation and enter modernity with education, roads, and medical facilities reaching even remote parts of Bhutan. He also witnessed the development of Bhutan's national language into a proper written form, the local and village codes of conduct into a formal judiciary system, and the regeneration of traditional scholarship. In all these areas, Michael always gave unrelenting support to the Bhutanese and cherished a deep admiration of the virtue of the rich and unique spiritual and traditional heritage of Bhutan. He left Bhutan in 1977 to visit again only in 1989 but for the rest of his life, Michael lived a Bhutanese life, in the sense that Bhutan occupied much of his thoughts and deeds.

Michael had in a way known Bhutan better than most of the Bhutanese do. With his royal ties, he had privileges which an ordinary visitor can only dream of; he had every access and the support to carry out his research as he wished. He also held a unique position in the Bhutanese world, blending traditional knowledge with modern scholarship. To the older Bhutanese scholars, he was a zealous student of Bhutanese culture and history and a symbol of foreign interest in and respect for their own wisdom. They admired the zest with which he worked and generously dispensed what they knew. For the younger generations, most of whom received a western education and unfortunately lacked interest or skill in their own language and culture, he was like a beacon of modern Bhutanese scholarship. He presented their own history and culture in English, the language in which most of the Bhutanese youth can communicate best even today. Thus, he served as a bridge between the traditional and the modern, learning from the former and passing it to the latter. In the eyes of the Bhutanese, Michael became the only foreigner who knew their culture and history with adequate insight into the religious, historical, and ethnographic dimensions of the country.

Of over forty books, monographs, and articles he wrote, around thirty are on Bhutan, and out of six books, four are entirely on Bhutan, one half on Bhutan and the sixth on something related to Bhutan. Among them, it was his book Hidden Treasures and Secret Lives, a critical presentation of Padma Lingpa, a major Bhutanese saint, and the Sixth Dalai Lama, that provoked controversy and perhaps did the most to earn him a wide, albeit mixed reputation. For some time, it made Michael a little infamous among the traditional rightists in Bhutan. However, for his unsurpassed academic contribution on the country and its history, the Bhutanese always acknowledge him as the foremost western savant on Bhutan.

Michael was a profound historian and capable of presenting his case with lucidity verbally or in writing. He was not a philosopher per se and his knowledge of Buddhism, an indispensable factor in mastering Himalayan history and culture, was adequate but not outstanding. The only serious work he
did on Buddhism is his translation of Jamyang Khyentse’s short text entitled *Brief Discourse on the Essence of All the Ways*. He was, however, one of the very few western Tibetologists who attempted and did well in writing letters and poetry in Tibetan.

Michael was an extraordinary person with friends and connections in all sections of the society. He was very tactful and often ready to pull strings for a good cause. Being good at heart, soft in words, refined in manners, and yet enduring with a stiff upper lip the frustrations of his long and indefinite separation from his wife, the challenges of raising his children by himself, and the insidious ailment terminating his life, he proved, to many of us, the epitome of a true English gentleman.

I did not know Michael Aris 25 years ago, in 1974, when he and his wife came to Nepal. He left his wife here in Kathmandu while he set off hither and thither to remote villages and to Lhasa in order to carry out his research on Mahāyāna Buddhism. At that time his wife, Aung San Suu Kyi, used to come daily to Dharma Kirti Vihāra to teach English to the students of our study circle. Occasionally, I would see him when he came by the convent to meet his wife.

I had known Michael’s mother-in-law, Daw Khin Kyi, from long before. As the Burmese ambassador to Delhi, Nepal was also part of her responsibilities, and so she came on a regular basis, and I would often meet her when she did.

Michael’s wife, Aung San Suu Kyi, presented me with a copy of a book about the Buddha’s 500 births. For six years, I told the stories from this book in public. To celebrate the completion of the recitation of these stories, a five-foot tall statue of Lord Buddha was set up in the Vasundhara temple on the Ring Road. Michael and Suu assisted in this meritorious act.

Moreover, one year before Michael passed away, he promised to look into cost of supporting the education of the novices at Dharma Kirti Vihāra. Alas, he passed away before he was able to fulfill this intention.

As far as I remember, he came to Nepal three times. Once he came with his wife and three-month-old son. The second time, he, Suu, and the two boys all came. On the third occasion, they took the two boys to Burma to perform their temporary ordination, and came afterwards to Nepal. I can’t remember now in which years these events happened.

Later on, Aung San Suu Kyi was put under house arrest for political reasons. Nevertheless, in 1995, when I was in Burma and when I went to Panditarama, she would often come from her house to offer the main meal; whenever she did so, she would come see me as well. Last year, too, when I went with lay supporters to Burma she invited us several times to her house, but out of fear of the political authorities the lay supporter who had invited us to Burma would not allow it. What a pity.

Bhikṣunī Dhammāvatī, Dharmakirti Vihāra, Kathmandu.