



Flight of the Bon Monks

Book Tells True Story of Bon Monks' Escape from Tibet and Survival of Bon



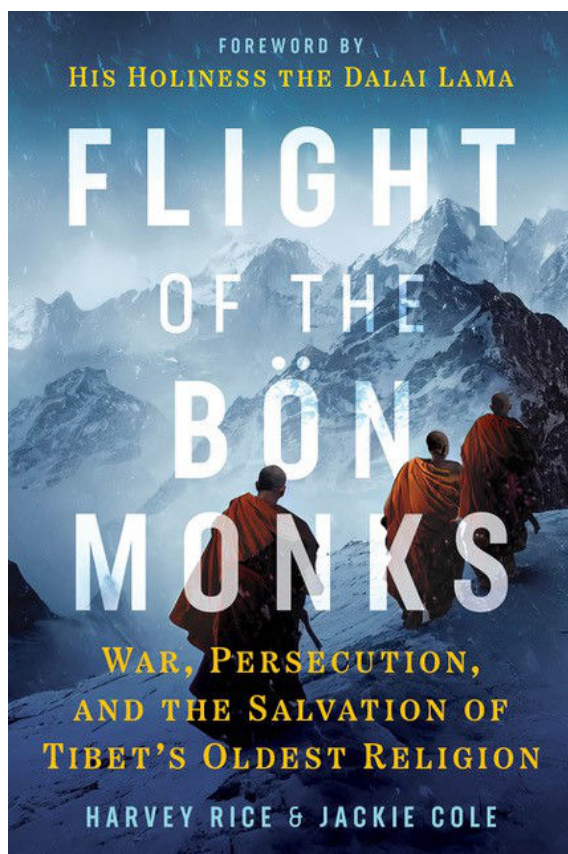
The remote cave where Tenzin Namdak studied for four years with his master Harvey Rice and Jackie Cole, who are husband and wife, have written an amazing book that details the trials and triumphs of Bon's highest teachers during Tibet's most agonizing period and the founding of Menri Monastery in India. The book is titled

Flight of the Bon Monks: War, Persecution, and the Salvation of Tibet's Oldest Religion.

The true story, which reads like a novel, is told through the voices of Bon's beloved teachers and is amplified by others who were likewise caught up in the turbulence of the era. The book focuses primarily on His Eminence Yongdzin Tenzin Namdak Rinpoche (called "Tenzin" in the book), His Holiness Lungtok Tenpai Nyima Rinpoche (called by his original name "Sangye") and Samten Karmey, who became a writer and researcher in the field of Tibetan studies. The story

is amplified by others who were caught up in the turbulence of the times, including Tenpa Woser, a monk from Menri who renounced his vows to protect the Menri Trizin, and David Snellgrove, the British scholar who chose Sangye, Tenzin and Samten to travel to London. The book covers the 1950 Chinese invasion of Tibet and subsequent rebellion and battle of Lhasa; His Holiness's and Samten Karmay's lifelong friendship and adventures before and after their escape together; Yongdzin Rinpoche's ambush and near death, captivity and escape; the founding of Menri Monastery in India; and efforts to secure the Bon religion.

The book includes many details the authors gathered from other books and interviews. Harvey worked for 18 years as a reporter for the Houston Chronicle, and Jackie has been a student of Bon for more than two decades and has many contacts in the worldwide Bon community. You can read an excerpt of the book at flightofthebonmonks.com . Ton Bisscheroux interviewed the authors.



Ton: Reading the book, I get a lot of information and details, and I have the feeling that you witnessed all the events you describe. How did you manage to do that?

Jackie: We used narrative nonfiction as technique. In that way we try to make you feel you are

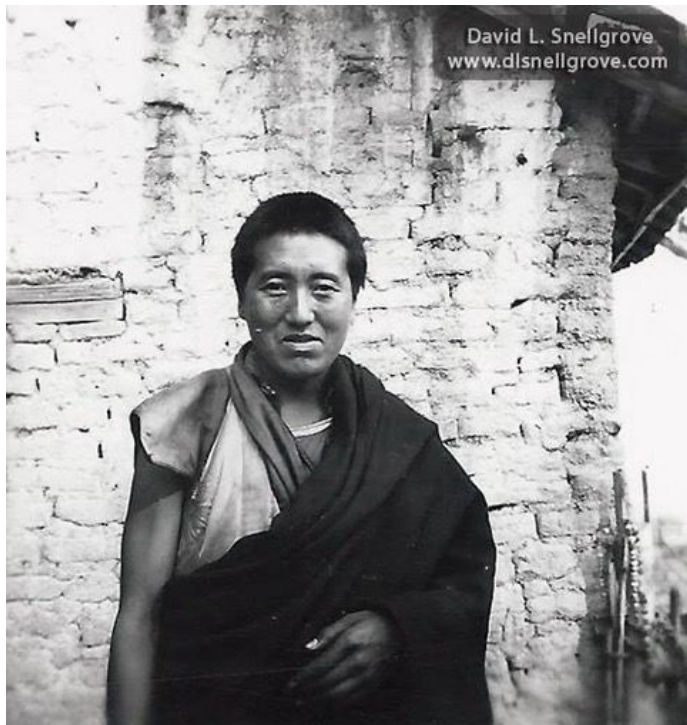
there. In this style you tell a true story, but it reads like a novel.

Harvey: I wrote it in that way because I want to engage people, also those who are not familiar with Bon.

Ton: Can you talk about retrieving the information through interviews and literature study?

Jackie: We did many interviews and a lot of research. We probably have about 60 books on Tibetan history on our bookshelf, so we got details from a lot of authors.

Harvey: We spent many hours with Yongdzin Rinpoche, Khenchen Tenpa Yungdrung Rinpoche (abbot of Triten Norbutse Monastery in Nepal) and Samten Karmay. Over the years we talked with them multiple times, in different countries.



Yongdzin Rinpoche in 1960

Jackie: After sitting and talking with Yongdzin Rinpoche, we would go home and write it down. Then we realized that there were pieces of that story that weren't clear. So we'd go back the next day and talk to him again. It was like the first time he told the story, it was an outline. And then the next we would get a piece here and there. And then the next time we'd get information in between those pieces. While asking him these questions, at some point Khenpo said, "Oh, I never knew that." While we were doing our interviews, they were also writing up the official biography of Yongdzin Rinpoche.

Harvey: We also did an interview with His Holiness the 33rd Menri Trizin before he died. We

had all these questions we wanted to ask him, and the first thing he said was, "No questions. I know what you guys need to know, and I will tell you" Kindly, he was very forthcoming in that long "interview."

Jackie: The other thing that we did after an interview is ask, "Is there somebody else we need to talk to?" That's how we were able to fill in the story with more details, from interviews with Tenpa Wosar and Tsering Wangyal, and some others. Some information came out of books, but there is also information from the people who were there.

Harvey: We traveled to so many countries, Italy, France, Estonia, Great Brittan, Nepal, Tibet and India, to do research and interviews.

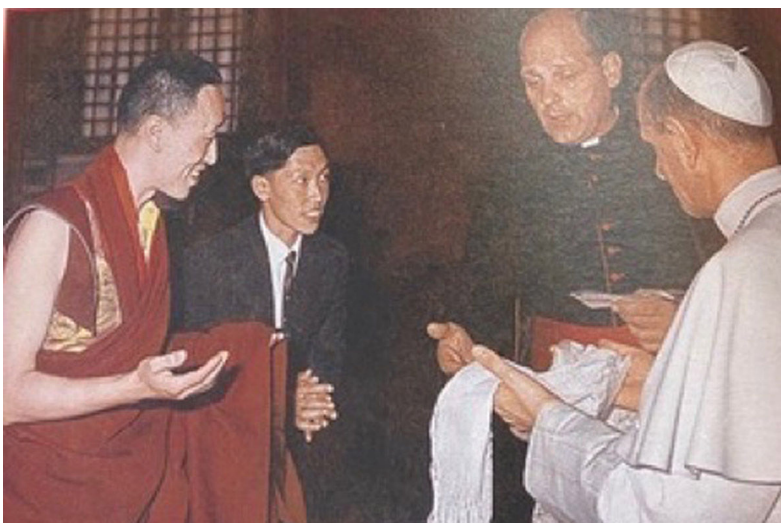
Jackie: We went to Estonia to meet the Norwegian scholar Per Kvaerne, and we met David Snellgrove before he passed away in Italy.

Harvey: We did not expect to get an interview with David Snellgrove. We had our tickets booked on a flight to Paris, because we're going to a retreat at Shenten Darye Ling. And we got this one chance to interview him. So when we got to Paris, we rented a car, and we had to drive straight all the way from Paris to Italy.

Jackie: We spent the night in Italy, interviewed David Snellgrove the next day, then drove back to Shenten. When we told people our story, they looked at us, and said, "Oh, How American. Later, we were in London, we went to the house where David Snellgrove lived, and the people invited us in, and were so gracious to take us to the backyard to see the stupa that Yongdzin Tenzin Namdak, Sangye Tenzin and Samten Karmey had built there. Every time, every corner we turned, we found out something new that send us down another path, and another way.

Ton: That was an amazing journey you made.

Jackie: Yes, it has truly deepened my devotion to this tradition. To hear their experiences and know the courage and commitment, heartbreak and pain they went through to help each other and keep Bon alive is pure inspiration.



From left, Sangye Tenzin, Samten Karmay, Vatican official, Pope Paul VI. The two visited the pope in 1964. **Ton: Please tell us about the research you did to ensure the accuracy of the**

many historical events in the book.

Harvey: We were able to cross-check many events to make sure they were correct. We are indebted in part to these authors, because there are a lot of details about what happened in Lhasa in 1959. Like Melvin Goldstein, a preeminent historian on Tibet, had done a lot of research, and then there were other people who had done research on that as well. It gave a lot of detail.

Ton: What prompted you to want to write this book?

Harvey: I remember the very moment of the inception of the idea. I was working from my office in our house. Jackie came in and said, "Harvey, I got an idea I'd like to run across you. My teachers told me a story, and I think it's a fascinating story about how Yongdzin Rinpoche was ambushed and shot in Tibet. I think we should write that story." I said, "That sounds like a great story. Let's do it." The next year we went to India and Nepal and did our first interviews.

Jackie: I thought, we've got to tell these stories or they're not going to be written down. And fortunately, Yongdzin Rinpoche, His Holiness, Samten Karmay, Khenpo and the whole group of them gave us permission and opened their stories to us.

Ton: What is the most important thing you want to communicate in writing this book?

Jackie: What I want people to know is how extraordinary these people are, and how extraordinary the country of Tibet is. How ancient Bon is woven into people's lives. And how extraordinary these Bonpos are, especially the main characters in the book. We could easily have lost Bon. It is a story of courage and devotion. It's also a story of forced migration, and with conflicts (all over the world) this is kind of a model of how that can happen. And how a person survives disaster, and what characteristics a person needs to have.

Harvey: We also wanted to engage people who never heard of the Bon religion, and give a basic idea of what it is. And then record this important piece of history that people would otherwise never know. There is a beautiful official biography of Yongdzin Rinpoche, but it is not a book that people are going to pick up in the bookstore. It's a very thick and expensive volume with a lot of religious aspects that most non-Bon readers would probably find daunting.

Ton: How long have you been working on the book?

Jackie: Ten years. We started in 2011, asking for permission and blessings, and we sold the book in 2022. When you write a book, you can self-publish it. But if you want to have a publisher, you get an agent who will sell it to a publisher. We submitted 52 agent queries before we got one to say yes. And the reason was not that the book was bad, but it's a niche book. The audience wouldn't be big enough for the publisher. So we want to prove them wrong. Now we want to make sure that it gets out far and wide, as much as we possibly can.

Ton: How did you work together on the book?

Jackie: We did all the interviews together, and we each asked questions. I transcribed them. Harvey did most of the book research, and he did most of the initial outline writing, and then we would work together to massage it into what we ended up with. It's been rewritten probably 25 times.

Harvey: I did the first draft in 2016. I got a four-month leave of absence from work and wrote the draft during that time. The final product is totally unrecognizable from the draft that I wrote.

Ton: Did you ever have the feeling this project would never end?

Jackie: It's been an interesting journey. I'm excited every day, and it feels surreal that we're actually going to have a book. It would not have been okay for me not to finish this. That's the kind of commitment that I had to it, and the responsibility I felt. It felt like an embarrassment for it to take so long, but Samten Karmay kept saying to us, "Take your time. It'll be all right."

Harvey: It was a great adventure, and I never felt that we were not going to get to the end. I always knew we would. We just didn't know where the end was.

Ton: When I came to the last chapter, *Promised Land*, I thought that would be the last chapter. But then you put an epilogue after it, *How It Is Now*. It was really interesting to see how things evolved. It already felt like the end, and then it continued. That was beautiful.

Jackie: My initial idea was that the story would end at the border when they got out. But as we learned more, the book became a little fuller and a little more interesting. It was like these little nuggets would come out.



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