A Village Near the Sky

Greater Tibet, 2002

by Bill Greer

About the Author

Adventure travel expert Bill Greer is the founder of GORP.com, the early Internet era's leading community for outdoor and adventure travel, selected as one of the Top 50 sites on the web in 2000. More recently, he is the author of **The Mevrouw Who Saved Manhattan**, a novel of New Amsterdam that paints a real and bawdy portrait of Dutch life on the Hudson through the eyes of a sharp-tongued bride who comes among the first settlers. Visit Bill at **www.billsbrownstone.com.**

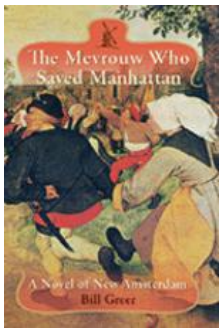
Reviews for The Mevrouw Who Saved Manhattan

From de Halve Maen, Journal of the Holland Society of New York, Summer 2009

"[A] romp through the history of New Netherland that would surely have Petrus Stuyvesant complaining about the riot transpiring between its pages … Readers are guaranteed a genuine adventure that will evoke the full range of human emotions. Once begun, they can expect to experience that rare difficulty in putting down a book before they have finished."

From Historical Novels Review, August 2009

"Bill Greer has deftly blended fact and fiction in his humorous tale The Mevrouw Who Saved Manhattan … The characters are rowdy, raunchy, loveable, and sometimes despicable, but thoroughly believable … This is a thoroughly delightful story that brings the Dutch colonies to life. The Mevrouw Who Saved Manhattan is heartily recommended with or without a tankard of beer, not ale, to accompany it."



Available at:

Amazon in paperback and for the Kindle

For the Nook at BN.com

The Scribd.com store as an Ebook (PDF format)

For a taste of Mevrouw, download the first fifty pages free at BillsBrownstone.com

A Village Near the Sky

Greater Tibet, 2002

By Bill Greer

"TIBETANS DON'T LIKE the earth, they like the sky." Ahqing means no disrespect to the environment around him. He is closely attuned to the many ways that the land sustains his village of Yubeng. But when he seeks escape from the cares of life, he climbs into the mountains. The heights revive his spirit.

Ahqing lives in an ideal place for his sentiment. Meili Snow Mountain towers four miles high, guarding the community of 150 souls split between upper and lower villages. Pilgrims flock here to pray beneath its summit Kawagebo, one of the holiest peaks of Tibetan Buddhism. Ahqing can walk out his door and up a valley leading to its slopes to worship at sacred caves and waterfalls. He truly lives near the sky.

But life is a daily struggle at 10,000 feet. Ahqing plows his fields in the spring, preparing them for wheat or potatoes. While the crops are growing, he and his brother carry axes into the woods to cut timber. The women of the household tend to chickens and ducks. Later in the year, the forest yields mushrooms and medicinal plants, which he can sell for desperately-needed cash. Everyone in the family pitches in at the guest house that he built a couple of years back.

Sitting on the veranda of the guest house, I watch the rhythms of the village that sits in far northwest Yunnan. Tibet, that is the official boundary of the Tibetan Autonomous Republic, begins on the other side of the mountain. I am already far into Greater Tibet, the broader region into which the lamas and the people carried their culture and their Buddhism centuries before. A five-hour walk led me here with my wife Diane and our friend Justin. We are three early tourists who represent the future of the village, or the threat, depending on the perspective.

A woman sits beside me. Her wrinkled skin and toothless mouth show her age. A purple knit cap covers her head. Layers of soiled clothing warm her from the wind blowing off the slopes of Meili on a cold March day. Her right hand grips the handle of

a prayer wheel, kept spinning by the flick of her wrist. The fingers on her left click rosary beads. She wonders if the pictures I show her in a book are of relatives.

A shrine stands outside the courtyard, piled high with slate slabs engraved in ancient script. The path around it is the village's major thoroughfare. Each morning, animals parade by heading for the valley to graze – horses, donkeys, yaks, cows, pigs, ducks. Women and children haul jugs to the river for water. Men drive animals that have lagged behind or carry various implements for squaring or sawing the trees they have felled. The approach of dusk signals the animals and the men to wander back. Even the donkeys and yaks know always to veer left around the stones, coming or going.

A grandfather pauses at the gate with a young girl. He looks like the village radical, with his long hair pulled through a ring and piled under a broad-brimmed felt hat, sunglasses hiding his eyes, a scraggly beard on his chin. He lifts his granddaughter to stare at the visitors. We holler, "*Ni Hou*," the Chinese greeting that literally translates as "You Good?" After several minutes, the pair continues over a bridge spanning a shallow stream that parallels the main river below our sight. They circle the pagoda on the opposite bank, each time around attesting to their faith. We expect three revolutions, then nine, maybe 13. An hour later, the man is still pushing the girl round and round.

"He is 68," a younger man who has stopped into the courtyard tells us. "The old people grow more devout with age. They are closer to death." The girl is surely picking up her grandfather's spirituality, whether by his design or simply because her mother instructed the old man to get her daughter out of the house.

The pagoda is recently reconstructed, along with a monastery in the upper village. The Red Guards destroyed both during the Cultural Revolution as they tried to stamp out the religions they regarded as nothing more than dangerous superstitions. With the changing times, the provincial government has contributed to rebuilding the stupa, a square white base with terraces tiering up to an inverted cone, itself topped with a thin red pyramid 30 feet above the ground. A dozen flags wave white, yellow, red and blue, adding color to the landscape. The poles fit ingeniously into wooden bases, a feature that allows the shafts to be unpegged and lowered to the ground for the changing of the flags.

Each flap in the wind contributes a prayer to build merit for the village. A short wooden shed houses a prayer wheel by the stream. Water spills from a flume to hit the paddles underneath, turning it continually. Each spin offers another prayer.

"I don't want a road or a gondola," says Ana Zhu, in whose home in the upper village we stayed our first evening. He is relating the controversy over how to link Yubeng with the outside world. "A road will make it easy for poachers to steal our resources." As forest manager, he administers programs to protect the environment, and the community's livelihood that stems from it. He enforces the logging restrictions, which limit the harvest to local uses, and manages the applications to cut that must pass up the chain to the township, then the county, for approval. His stewardship extends to policing activities and levying fines on violators.

"A gondola will bring hordes of tourists. They will ride up for a few hours. Each one will pick an orchid or some other plant. One won't matter but together they will devastate the forest. And they will spend no money." The experience with the lift on Jade Dragon Snow Mountain a few hundred kilometers to the south lends credence to his claim. Chinese tourists arrive by the busload, ride to the top and trample the tundra as they snap photos of themselves with the mountain as a backdrop. Then the buses drive an hour to Lijiang for an afternoon of shopping in the city.

Ahqing, the Tibetan who loves the sky, also hopes that the village will not end its relative isolation. He dreams of the day when wildlife revives to the spectacle that populated the valley before 1949, when the communists brought Liberation. In those days, two landlords owned everything. A marker downstream identified the boundary below which they permitted the villagers to hunt. Above was preserved as a sanctuary. The revolution brought division of the land and hunting throughout the area. By 1987, the government recognized how the animal population was collapsing and banned further killing.

"A road threatens the recovery," Ahqing worries. "Poachers already come up from the Mekong to shoot deer, bear and wild cows. People will buy the organs and

intestines of a deer for medicine. The horns, hide, bones and meat of the cows are all sold in the market."

OUR SYMPATHIES LIE WITH Ana Zhu and Ahqing as we climb toward a lake high on the slopes of Meili. Ana Zhu has warned that snow will reach our knees. He has not prepared us to sink hip-deep as we descend the north side of a 13,000-foot ridge, heading for the grazer's huts where we will spend the night. "No one comes here until May," Ana Zhu's brother-in-law informs us. He has been deputed as our guide, complying with a new regulation that someone from the village must accompany campers. The rule is designed to protect ourselves as well as the environment, and perhaps to put a little cash in local pockets. "You are lucky the snow is light this year."

The tongue of a massive glacier lashes down the mountain. The ice spilling from its headwall will keep us from reaching the lake. "Too dangerous," Ana Zhu has indicated, and instructed his brother-in-law to let us climb no higher than the huts. We have reluctantly agreed. Our destination, albeit shortened, does not disappoint us. A dozen shacks dot a snow-packed meadow. The season has warmed enough for a stream to be flowing along its south side. To the west, a cirque extends 180 degrees around, Kawagebo on the left and a coxcomb ridge at center, both almost two miles above our heads. The pale afternoon sun illuminates an explosion of white powder halfway down the peak. All night, we will hear the crack of ice and snow tumbling down the mountains.

We spend the late afternoon shivering around a roaring fire in one of the huts, occasionally venturing out to shoot the shadows playing on the cirque. Although the sun sporadically peers between the clouds, the wind whips a storm through the gaps in the log walls sheltering us. The fine crystals biting into our faces blow from the peaks still a couple of miles away. The vapor steaming off our boots and socks mixes with the smoke to escape through the open eaves. Our guide passes around a bottle of baijo, a liquor fermented from barley. It slithers cold down the throat but lies warm in the belly.

The weather convinces us to head to the lower climes of the village for our remaining days. From our lodging at Ahqing's guest house, we wander through a medieval forest. Towering fir trees darken the floor. The rings of fallen trunks measure an age over a century. Cherries flower in an occasional clearing. Oaks also steal some light. The air wreaks of damp and must. Moss coats trees and rocks alike with a thick sponge. It casts a green aura to the morning air, shifting to brown in the afternoon shadows. Orchids and fungi sprout from the branches, both live and dead.

The valley is empty. In two months, the pilgrims will arrive, perhaps by the hundreds, maybe even thousands. Families will walk through the woods, piling sticks or stones on the makeshift shrines erected by earlier worshipers. Along the rocky flood plain of the stream, they will build miniature stone houses where their souls will live when they die. They will pass a massive rock 30 feet high, colorful strings of prayer flags fluttering around it, offerings of money crammed into its crevasses. Its mythical door hides sacred books and scrolls. The way has opened only once. It awaits another worthy of entrance.

The pilgrims will climb out of the forest and across open pasture. The more adventuresome will scramble up a holy cave to survey the valley from an opening at the top. They will continue upward to where the melt off Kawagebo cascades over a sacred waterfall. Here they will complete their trial, bathing in the icy pool.

But they will bring little money to the village.

"THE MIDDLE TREE DIED about five years ago," explains one of the men sitting in a circle in the courtyard. He refers to one of three firs which stand at the foot of the valley, its denuded branches silhouetted against the snowfields on Meili. "Since then, bad luck has plagued us. This year we don't have enough water. A hundred mu of wheat have already dried up. We will try to replant with potatoes. But we don't know whether we will have enough food."

The village struggles with a mix of private and collective enterprise. The fields are individually-owned, each family benefiting from the produce that grows on its land.

Behind our guest-house, however, several men have hitched three pairs of yaks in a single field. They are cooperatively plowing and planting, working together much better than each animal with its mate. The pairs strain in opposite directions at the turn at each furrow's end. Small businesses are also family-run, like the guest rooms that Ahqing and Ana Zhu have added on their properties. Horses and donkeys are raised privately. But the work rotates among the drivers when pack stock are needed, dispersing the money received. Familial links interwoven throughout the community reinforce the cooperation, which culminates with the forest. The natural resources harvested there are collectively owned and managed.

"We need a road," asserts another member of the circle. "No transportation is why we are so poor." Although Ana Zhu had estimated that the village splits evenly among the alternatives, we are becoming convinced that the desire for a road is predominant. Despite his own objections, Ahqing agrees with that assessment.

"The people in Xidang earn good money working on the road," a third man argues, referring to the town lying at the nearest roadhead. "We would like to get jobs like that, but we have no opportunity."

The men are expressing the concerns of villagers trying to keep their children alive. A better link with the outside world could bring in more food and medicine, perhaps jobs and possibly more people spending money. But to us the risks seem great. Losing its remoteness will probably bring less immediate danger to the village's culture than the destruction by the Red Guards decades ago, but ultimately it may pose a greater threat. Hunting and logging bans may not guarantee preservation of the pristine natural beauty, but isolation limits how outsiders might exploit the land's resources.

As yet, the villagers see little prosperity from tourists who will trek over mountain passes to find their unique culture and magical landscape. Ana Zhu opened his rooms six months earlier. A group of 36 Chinese descended on him one evening, triple what he could accommodate. He lodged the overflow with relatives and friends. But we are the first westerners to arrive. Ahqing also finds most of his rooms vacant, as do the other two guest houses that have recently opened.

At least the investment by these aspiring innkeepers will test the promise before the village faces a decision. The Nature Conservancy is supporting the case for preservation-based tourism as a solution to Yubeng's economic woes. The region's biodiversity makes it a prime candidate for a national park. A related program funded by the Ford Foundation, Photovoice, is building the villager's awareness of their culture and environment by distributing point and click cameras. The program's participants record their life and the nature around them.

One evening, Ana Zhu brings out his Photovoice collection as we finish dinner. A crowd of men and children gather eagerly around us. The landscape of Yubeng and the people who make it their home fascinate the group. A picture of the glacial lake unveils the beauty we could not reach. The kids grab snapshots of women celebrating in bright Tibetan colors. One visitor furtively pockets a few photos that particularly intrigue him. We flip through the album several times with no sign that interest is waning. The reaction to the scenes captured with Ana Zhu's camera reveals a deep understanding of the unique place these people live, raising our hopes.

We leave the village after five days. Donkeys are carrying our packs. Their weight would not pose too much of a burden on our shoulders, but the drivers can use the few bucks that the animals cost us. Maybe this source of tourist dollars will push a few more people toward the side of preserving Yubeng's remoteness. As we climb toward the pass to Xidang, a high-pitched whine fills the valley behind us. Although we saw no sign of mechanized devices during our visit, a chain saw has just cranked to life. We fear what it could mean to life in Yubeng.

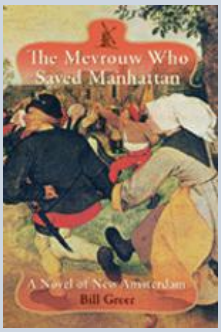
The Mevrouw Who Saved Manhattan

by Bill Greer

"A very authentic ring … like etchings by Van Ostade and Steen."

– Charles Wendell, Ph.D., President of the New Netherland Institute

A Novel of New Amsterdam



When Mevrouw Jackie Lambert opens her New Amsterdam tavern in 1626, she jumps aboard a madcap ride through New York history. With a razor-sharp tongue and the tastiest beer on either side of the Atlantic, Jackie spurs the tiny Manhattan settlement toward a head-on collision with the tyrannical Dutchmen who rule it. Poison, blackmail, murder, all are fair game as she fends off threats to the family she yearned for growing up as an orphan. And when pegleg Peter Stuyvesant would rather destroy the town than surrender his honor, Jackie must take history into her own hands or lose everything she has spent a lifetime building.

A Real Portrait

While a work of fiction, The Mevrouw Who Saved Manhattan paints a real portrait of life in New Amsterdam with all its humor, bawdiness, and conflict. It presents a window into how Dutch culture during the Golden Age of the Netherlands transplanted to the wilderness of the Hudson Valley. The thread of Jackie's life reflects the central theme of the Dutch period, the rebellion of the common people against their rulers, the Dutch West India Company and its Directors, a conflict that historians argue laid the foundation for the pluralistic, freedom-loving society that America became.

About the Author

Bill Greer has spent much of his working life in the heart of New Amsterdam. He is a Trustee and Treasurer of the New Netherland Institute, a membership organization supporting research and education in Dutch-American history. Visit him at www.BillsBrownstone.com for more on Mevrouw's world and old New York and to read an excerpt of fifty pages from The Mevrouw Who Saved Manhattan.

CONTACT: Bill@BillsBrownstone.com / 347-204-1917

Reviews

From de Halve Maen, Journal of the Holland Society of New York

"[A] romp through the history of New Netherland that would surely have Petrus Stuyvesant complaining about the riot transpiring between its pages … Readers are guaranteed a genuine adventure that will evoke the full range of human emotions. Once begun, they can expect to experience that rare difficulty in putting down a book before they have finished."

From Historical Novels Review

"Bill Greer has deftly blended fact and fiction in his humorous tale The Mevrouw Who Saved Manhattan … The characters are rowdy, raunchy, loveable, and sometimes despicable, but thoroughly believable … This is a thoroughly delightful story that brings the Dutch colonies to life. The Mevrouw Who Saved Manhattan is heartily recommended with or without a tankard of beer, not ale, to accompany it."

Manhattan View Press, New York

2009

Available at:

Amazon

For the Nook at BN.com

The New Netherland Institute Shop

The Scribd.com store as an Ebook (PDF format)

For a taste of Mevrouw, download the first fifty pages free at BillsBrownstone.com