



When the nun met a journalist

An unlikely friendship provides a sliver of hope in an otherwise bleak picture of life in 'the roof of the world'.

TRAVEL

Last Seen in Lhasa

By Claire Scobie
Rider, 242 pp, \$35

Reviewed by Sarah MacDonald

THE FIGHT FOR a "free Tibet" has faded from view over the past few years. The campaign's die-hard supporters are as passionate as ever, but China's explosive economic development has ensured the world's media and political leaders prefer to focus on the country's emerging consumer market rather than its human rights violations.

After reading Claire Scobie's *Last Seen in Lhasa*, it is hard not to think the cause is all but finished; that Tibet's environment, culture and way of life are forever altered.

Scobie made seven journeys to the region over nine years - travelling as an explorer searching for a rare lily, a journalist on a secret filming assignment and a pilgrim to sacred Mount Kailash. Her powerful descriptions of prehistoric landscapes, mountains of hypnotic silence, and moonscapes of colour and sparkling light become increasingly contaminated by wretched military towns, sprawling rubbish tips, street prostitutes and kids in red Lycra who offer travellers a bowl of excrement and pelt them with stones.

Tibet's capital has become a city of booze and fags, casinos and sex

shops, blaring martial arts movies and banquet halls where girls are included in the price of a meal.

In Lhasa, Chinese outnumber Tibetans two to one and, within the minority's "moat of sorrow", Scobie senses pools of apathy and anger and icy resilience melted into numbness. She is not a wide-eyed activist - noting the Tibetan spies and bent officials - and comes to question whether, in occupation, the tide of consumerism is now more powerful than brute force.

But *Last Seen in Lhasa* is not just a story about the degradation and disintegration of a land. Rather, it's about the formation and development of a rich and rewarding relationship.

Over the decade she journeys to Tibet, Scobie develops a friendship with a woman she calls "Ani". The Tibetan nun and the English-woman have nothing in common; Ani is a mystic, Scobie intellectual. Ani has innocence and strength; Scobie a journalist's eye and a keen awareness of her own spiritual weakness. Yet their friendship transcends language, culture, distance and difference. It develops into a relationship of the heart - a soul connection.

Scobie gains and conveys a rare insight into the little documented world of a Tibetan nun. Ani's life is that of a wandering hermit. It's a vanishing world inhabited by witches who poison enemies with a concoction of snake venom, rotten egg and herbs, and mystics who live in grottoes while learning a

new language of the soul; a land where a sacred landscape has its mystical vibrations.

This is not the story of a pious, ethereal nun but a bawdy celibate of "earthy womanliness" who pats a man's chest hair and sports dreadlocks and trench foot. Her friendship with Scobie is believable and beautiful. Friends help give us a sense of self; so, when Scobie writes that her journeys smash her internal compass, it becomes clear the friendship helps her develop a new foundation and direction.

Last Seen in Lhasa is a love letter to friendship, an ode to a vanishing world and a pilgrimage to a place and a person. Ani's Tibet is not immune from the pressures of Chinese occupation; through her, however, Scobie finds a place where her spirit can stretch without limit. This ensures the book is not as depressing as you might expect. At the beginning, Scobie quotes Anais Nin who wrote, "Each friend represents a world in us, a world not born until they arrive, and it is only by this meeting that a new world is born."

After reading this book I came to believe that perhaps this is where Tibet will survive; in the world within Ani and her kin, in the hearts of her exiles and in the spirit of friends such as Claire Scobie.

Sarah MacDonald is the author of *Holy Cow!* (Bantam).

 Buy with free delivery,
1300 554 523



Photo: Soinam Norbu