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Obituary: Willem (“Wim”) van Spengen (1949-2013)

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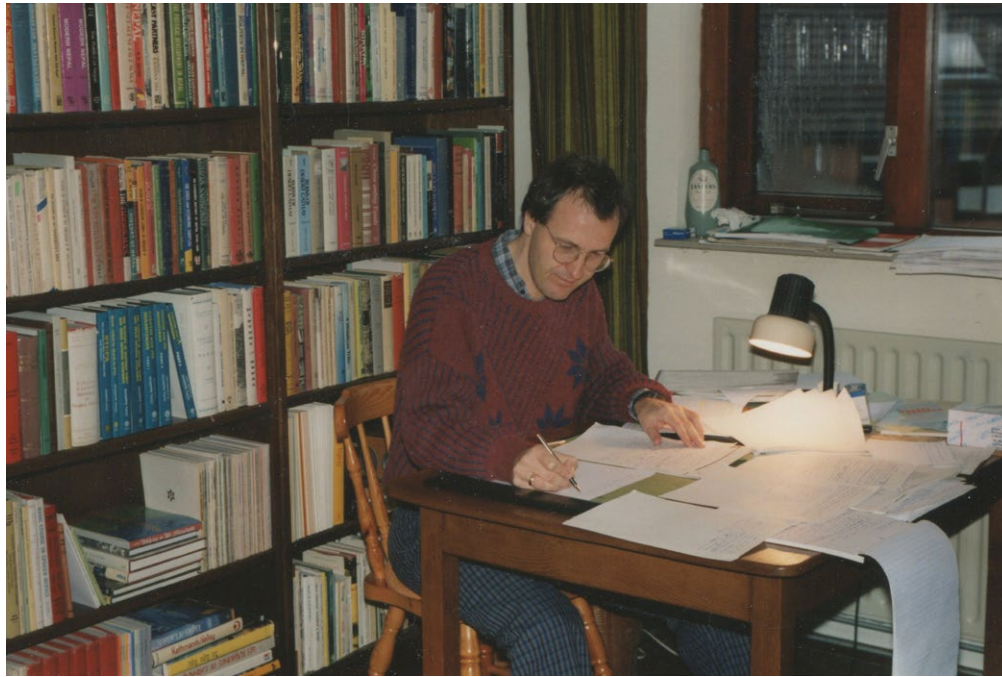


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Obituary | Willem (“Wim”) van Spengen (1949-2013)



Wim in his study working on his PhD thesis.

(Tiny van Spengen-van Hal 1991)

In Memoriam

The Dutch geographer, Willem “Wim” van Spengen, was the author of a seminal geo-historical study of trans-Himalayan trade, *Tibetan Border Worlds: A Geohistorical Analysis of Trade and Traders* (Kegan Paul International: London & New York; 2000). This work, which focussed on the Nyishangba trading community (from western central Nepal, close to the Tibetan border), was also a broader enquiry into the economic world of the Tibetan cultural region and wider questions around the long-term formation of geo-historical structures. These, he concluded, ‘only acquire meaning through the particular geo-historical experience of social groups.’ In this regard, his findings reflected a deep immersion in the broad interdisciplinary approaches of the Annaliste school of French social science and in particular the insights of Fernand Braudel.

Wim was born and died in the pleasant village world of Weesp, near Amsterdam. He completed a B.A. in Human

Geography at the Free University of Amsterdam in 1970 and an M.A. in development geography in 1973, with minors in the sociology and economics of the non-Western world. This course included three months’ fieldwork in Tunisia and, after graduating, he and his wife Tiny spent three years with the Ministry of Education in Zambia, where Wim was Head of Geography at Chama Boys’ and Kasama Girls’ Secondary School. Between 1976 and 1984, Wim served as a Lecturer in the Department of Geography at the Free University in Amsterdam, and it was during this period that his interests began to center on the Himalayas.

In 1981, Wim conducted fieldwork among the Nyishangba in their home district of Manang in the Nyishang valley of Nepal, forming the basis for his later publications in this area. Wim subsequently worked in Paris with the pioneering Himalayan anthropologist A.W. “Sandy” Macdonald (Director of Research at the CNRS), whose work – along with that of Christoph von Fürer-Haimendorf – had alerted Wim to the research potential of the Nyishang valley. Macdonald would later be one of van Spengen’s

examiners when he was awarded a Ph.D *cum laude* by the University of Amsterdam in 1992, where Wim served as a Lecturer in the Social-Geographical Institute between 1985 and 2003.



Wim at home in Weesp. (Tiny van Spengen-van Hal 2010)

Wim read widely and studied deeply, and his research interests subsequently expanded to include the multi-ethnic Tibetan borderlands of Kham in the period from 1890-1940. In this field, his mastery of a vast range of first-hand accounts by European and Russian missionaries and travellers came to the fore. His detailed knowledge of these sources was unparalleled, and represented a rich mine of information and perspectives on eastern Tibet. Wim's own collection of books and articles in the field was extraordinarily comprehensive, and it was his unreserved willingness to share his knowledge of this material that left so many scholars in his debt. In 2003, he concluded that his Lectureship was no longer a necessary part of his life, and chose to take early retirement to devote himself more fully to his interests in the human geography of the wider Himalayan region. Sadly, he was not able to fully enjoy his retirement on account of the cancer that would later take his life. While he continued to research and to build up his library, and to maintain a characteristically stoic good humour, his travel plans had to be abandoned.

Wim was a modest, unpretentious, and well-balanced individual. He treated his students and junior scholars with patience and grace, and was tolerant to a fault in understanding the complexities of human nature. To his colleagues, he was a warm, quiet and friendly man who in time became an encyclopedic resource, able to promptly supply every known detail concerning obscure Tibetan

travellers and their writings in French, German, Russian, and other European languages. While book collecting was his greatest passion outside of his family, he enjoyed chess, which he mastered to a good standard, playing the organ, and cycling in the Dutch countryside.

Wim died on 17 May 2013. He is survived by his wife Tiny and his sons Merlijn and Roeland, as well as two grandchildren. A forthcoming special edition of *The Tibet Journal* will be dedicated to his memory.

By Alex McKay

Wim and Books

The discerning reader will notice the careful and wide-ranging literary references in Wim's writing, for example in his 2004 article for *Himalaya* on "Ways of Knowing Tibetan Peoples and Landscapes." However, to gain a full appreciation of Wim's relationship with the printed word, one had to visit the house that he shared with his wife Tiny van Hal in Weesp, near Amsterdam. Wim did not just consult, cite or cherish books; his whole life was suffused with them.

At first sight, their house is an ordinary brick building on a modest Dutch housing estate. On the open-plan ground floor, there is a harpsichord—evidence of Wim's musical tastes and skills. However, the real treasures are on the second and third floors: shelves of books, thousands, of them, floor to ceiling, in every room. Wim usually kept the curtains closed, not to hide from prying neighbours, but to protect the bindings from the sunlight. It would be misleading to say that Wim possessed a library. Rather, he and Tiny inhabited a library, with living quarters attached.

One of Wim's particular pleasures was to scour online booksellers' catalogues, searching for the next bibliographic rarity, and exchanging details with his friends. In the course of one such exchange, I drew his attention to a new book from Switzerland, adding that—even if he never actually read it—the book might nonetheless have a certain therapeutic quality. The book's presence on his shelves might itself be a source of strength. Wim replied promptly, "How well you know me!"

A few months later, I came across a blog entry by another friend, Stephen Cherry, on "The mysterious power of the unread book." Stephen concluded:

The unread book is a symbol of hope. That's why the shelves are never long enough and why



Wim during his fieldwork in Manang.

(Harka Bahadur Thapa 1981)

libraries and bookshops can give such a spiritual high. It's the oxygen of possibility.

I shared this with Wim, who responded:

“As to your delicious little book story: yes, unread books as a symbol of hope. Our house is abounding with hope.”

By this time Wim was going through chemotherapy, which he knew full well to be palliative rather than curative. But what he said was true. Fortified by his books, and by Tiny's loyal support, Wim never lost hope.

By John Bray

Cherry, Stephen. 2012. The Mysterious Power of the Unread Book, Another Angle (blog) <http://stephencherry.wordpress.com/2012/08/>.

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