

When East Met West and Walking Around Led to Brooklyn

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ABOUT NEW YORK, Michael T. Kaufman

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TO gain a sense of place it really helps to walk around a lot. That is what Hope Cooke did when her world turned bleak and rotten 20 years ago and now, as a result, the 52-year old Brooklyn resident, who is also the last reigning Queen of Sikkim, says she feels more rooted than she has ever been.

"I can honestly say I really know where I am," Ms. Cooke said in the cozy and sweet-smelling ground-floor kitchen of her 1878 house on the periphery of Brooklyn Heights.

Upstairs, her second husband, Michael Wallace, a history professor at John Jay College of Criminal Justice, was working on a manuscript. Her own book of walking tours of New York City has just been issued by Temple University. Now she is hoping to put together a video series describing issues of city life like immigration, racial division and gentrification in their historical contexts. She has lectured on the social history of New York and organized walking tours.

About a month ago she was at a party where there were many local history buffs. "At one point," she recalled, "I was introduced to a young man who, as he shook my hand, blurted out, 'Oh you're Hope Cooke, the Hope Cooke?' Hope Cooke, the walking tour guide?" It made me so happy. It was a real turning point."

Over the last 30 years there had been so many other introductions

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drawing responses, spoken or silent, that were very different. Hope Cooke? Oh, yes, the New York debutante, the Sarah Lawrence student, the one who met and married the heir to the throne of that tiny kingdom tucked between Nepal, Tibet, Bhutan and India. Wasn't she the Grace Kelly of the Himalayas who in 1963 went to live in a palace in Gangtok as the bride of the Chogyal, a man revered by his subjects as the reincarnation of an ancient Buddhist holy man?

And later there must have been many others who tried to fit the name with what they could remember of old newspaper accounts. Yes, she had lived as the Queen of the remote kingdom with its steep paths, silk-clad archers and prayer wheels. She had borne a son and daughter, but then, despite predictions of court astrologers, the marriage turned stormy.

But the little country was running into greater problems as India moved to absorb it. Crowds, organized by

agents from New Delhi, marched on the palace calling for an end to the monarchy. Ms. Cooke fled with her children, coming back to New York, a city she hardly knew. "It was a period of intense and painful dislocation," said Ms. Cooke. "I literally did not know where I was."

She had been born in the city but her experience with it was very limited. Her mother died when she was 2, probably a suicide. Her mother's well-to-do parents kept her father away. She was raised by Scottish governesses whose lilt and burr still mark her speech.

"I don't remember ever going to the zoo or walking anywhere as a child," she said. "We would just take the Chapin school bus down Park Avenue and back. Those of us who lived on the avenue felt sorry for the Chapin children who lived on the side streets. Later there were dreadful dancing classes." After that there was boarding school, Sarah Lawrence and then the palace at Gangtok.

One of the news articles that appeared at the time of her marriage quoted a Sarah Lawrence classmate of Ms. Cooke's as saying, "Hopey was always a little out of place in the West." Ten years in Sikkim could not possibly ease the alienation.

"That's when I started walking and looking," she said. "At first it was a

matter of orientation and diversion. Later it grew into a passion. Now it is what I do."

When she first came back, she says, her major concern was being a single mother, living in an apartment with very little furniture and a constant flow of guests from Sikkim. The king was then under house arrest back in Sikkim, which had been swallowed up by India. For a while she lectured about her experiences and then she wrote about them in a book "Time Change." And all the while she was venturing out into neighborhoods, figuring out where she was and how she and her fellow New Yorkers had gotten here.

Eventually, she lectured on New York City history at Yale and at one time wrote regular columns on city landmarks for The Daily News. Her children finished school, the son becoming a banker, the daughter a public relations representative. Her marriage grew estranged and then ended in divorce two years before the de-throned Chogyal died in 1982. She met Michael Wallace at a meeting of historians and 10 years ago they moved to the house in Brooklyn.

Now, quite clearly, she has grown into the city, taken on a new identity. She really is Hope Cooke, the guide to New York. And though her newest book traces the destinies of immigrants, bankers and writers, it also marks another passage — her own. "I am rooted here," she said. "Life has become sheer fun."