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Secret Lives of Alexandra David-Neel: A Biography of The Explorer of Tibet and Its Forbidden Practices

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This is a substantially revised edition of the well received, but out-of-print Forbidden Journey: The Life of Alexandra David-Neel (Harper & Row, 1987), then indisputably the best biography of its amazing subject. The revised edition reflects its predecessor in presenting a full and engaging account of Alexandra's life of high endeavor, which embraced a quarter-century of pioneer journeying in Asia. In this new edition the authors more fully and freely interpret Alexandra's personal motivations. They work from contemporary political and personal records, conversations with area experts and their earlier reading of Alexandra's hundreds of artful letters to Philip Neel, her ever-patient and financially supportive husband.

In Madurai, South India, she explored esoteric disciplines, including tantric rites that involved participants in ecstatic rather than orgiastic sexual congress. In the Fosters' words, "Tantric sex…is originally a sacred practice. Its aim is to make the sexual life cosmic in scope and intensity."

Alexandra explored Tibetan disciplines that could be described as secret or at least as unknown in the West. She mastered tumo, the art of generating inner heat in sub-zero temperatures and perhaps lung-gom, a speedy, effortless striding on for endless miles, oblivious to cold and fatigue. She was recognized as a seer and sorceress and as having created a threatening phantom double of herself. In her heroic journey to Lhasa, she pierced the veils of political intrigue and secrecy that surrounded Tibet and its Indian, Sikkimese, and Chinese borderlands.

The Fosters tell a story of unrivaled interest. The supporting cast includes the 13th Dalai Lama, Prince Sidkeong of Sikkim, highly placed British political officials and Tibetans of the most varied backgrounds. As researchers the Fosters serve readers well in describing the content of Alexandra's 30 or so books, ranging from expositions of esoteric Buddhist practices to enthusiastic novels. Many of these works merit far wider availability.

The book's attractive physical production, compelling photographs and excellent map reward readers.
PETER SKINNER (September / October 1998)

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