

***The Life of Jamgon Kongtrul the Great*, by Alexander Gardner. 2019,  
Snow Lion, Boulder, Colorado. 506pp. Preface ix-xiii.**

*Reviewed by Rob Mayer*

Alexander Gardner is much to be congratulated for this excellent biography of Jamgon Kongtrul (*Jam mgon kong sprul blo gros mtha' yas* 1813-1899), one of the most important figures in 19<sup>th</sup> century Tibetan Buddhism, whose wideranging influences continue to pervade Tibetan Buddhism in the present day.

Gardner's historical sources are listed on pages x to xi of his Preface. While he makes no claim to have identified previously unheard-of sources that revolutionise our understanding of Kongtrul, he has seamlessly woven together already known sources to construct a minutely chronologised and densely detailed narrative of Kongtrul's life that greatly exceeds anything hitherto published. Gardner's work will very likely remain the go-to resource on Kongtrul's life for many years to come. It is painstakingly researched, but also highly readable. As a disclaimer, I should add that for the purposes of this short review, I have not found the time to compare Gardner's readings with his original Tibetan sources, but my hope and expectation is that he has done them justice.

Gardner has organised the volume into three sections, entitled Training, Collaborations, and Deaths. Part One (pages 3-115) describes Kongtrul's training under different teachers and at different institutions; Part Two (pages 119-320) describes his famous collaborations with other lamas, including Khyentse Wangpo (*mKhyen brtse dbang po*) and Chogyur Lingpa (*mChog gyur gling pa*); while Part Three (pages 323-351) documents the deaths of the important people in Kongtrul's life, followed by his own demise.

The volume also includes a timeline (pages 354-355), some maps (358-363), a full list of Tibetan orthographic equivalents (65-416), notes (417-451), a list of works cited (453-462), and a bibliography (463-474) and index (475-506).

One of the best qualities of this book is the great wealth of detail it contains. We learn a great deal not only about Kongtrul himself, but also about the historical times and the society and culture in which he lived, and of course, about Tibetan Buddhism.

Gardner presents much interesting information about all the important and well-known aspects of Kongtrul's own life, far too numerous to mention here: his birth family and its Bon po affiliations; his relationship with the powerful patron of his early years Khangsar Tsepel (*Khang gsar tshe 'phel*); his happy existence at Zhechen (*Zhe chen*), and his forced removal to Pelpung (*dPal spung*); his favoured ritual practices, such as Jatshon Nyingpo's Konchog Chidu (*'Ja' tshon snying po, dKon mchog spyi 'dus*); his writing of a Gazetteer of Khams; his abiding interests in pilgrimage and in sacred landscape; his great textual endeavours such as the Treasuries; his founding of Tsadra (*rTsa 'dra*) meditation centre; his famous religious collaborations (with Khyentse Wangpo in particular); his involvement in Treasure revelation; his banishment from Pelpung and the events leading up to it; what non-sectarianism (*ris med*) meant to him; and so forth.

In addition, Gardner is able to present a more detailed view than hitherto available into innumerable less prominent events within Kongtrul's life, which are nevertheless highly revealing. To give one example, we learn a lot from Gardner's narratives about the finer nuances of Kongtrul's relationship to his environment and the local deities inhabiting it, through smaller repeated events that would not normally evolve into well-known narratives, such as the routine burial of Treasure Vases, and other propitiations of local deities. Likewise, we learn more about the finer details of Kongtrul's religious life, for example, individual religious dreams are contextualised, as are his Treasure discoveries (which are frequently related to dreams).

The Nyarong War (*Nya rong*) and the decline of Derge (*sDe dge*) in its aftermath make interesting reading, particularly of course in relation to Kongtrul's unavoidable involvement in those events.

In a work of this scale, replete with so many details and so many interpretations, it is inevitable that readers might disagree with occasional statements that were expressed a bit less carefully than they should be. While experienced readers should largely remain unaffected by these, in some cases novice readers might be misled. For example, there is a problem with Gardner's apparent assertion (page 198) that treasure revealers like Chogyur Lingpa would only produce offspring by accident, as a downfall, through their failure to retain semen

during sexual yoga practices. Yet there is in many cases a perceived religious benefit when tantric masters manage to beget suitable progeny to perpetuate their hereditary tantric lineages (*gdung rgyud*). Gardner is inevitably aware of this kind of deliberate production of children by rNying ma lamas, and by this time in his career Chogyur Lingpa might already have been a sufficiently established figure with enough support from senior masters like Khyentse and Kongtrul, to produce his own lineage without fear of scandal. But somehow this was not discussed clearly here, more likely a lapse in authorial mindfulness than any intellectual misunderstanding. Likewise, amongst Gardner's many cited secondary sources, I was surprised not to find Matthew Akester's 2012 translation of Kongtrul's biographies of Khyentse Wangpo (although Akester's 2016 translation of *Jamyang Khyentse's Guide to Central Tibet* is there). Elsewhere, Adam Pearcey has questioned Gardner's assertion (page 275) that Kongtrul never met Dza Patrul (*rDza dpal sprul*) in person. But trivial points like these cannot detract from the great and abiding value of this book. It is a very fine work, rich in detail yet highly readable, a valuable resource that will be widely read for many years to come.