

Gripping trail of cultural intrigue

Review by Linda Jaivin

A high-velocity tale of epic adventure, *Journeys on the Silk Road* transports us back 100 years to central Asia and the company of the eccentric scholar-explorer Aurel Stein as he unearths the oldest printed book on Earth from a bricked-up cave in a desert oasis. Stein, a Hungarian-born Englishman, had become obsessed with tracking down ancient Buddhist and other manuscripts he was convinced lay buried under the sands of Turkestan and China's Taklamakan and Gobi deserts.

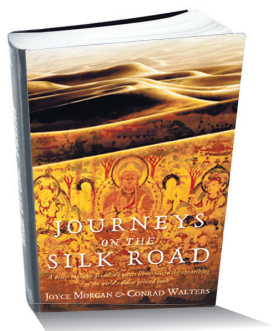
More than 1000 years earlier, traders and Buddhist pilgrims had travelled between China and countries including Persia and India along routes known collectively as the Silk Road. By the 14th century, the Silk Road had fallen into disuse and surrendered to the sands.

In the early 20th century, China's last dynasty was in decline, Western imperialism was in its heyday and central Asia was hotly contested territory. Archaeology was a game of grab-and-go in the name of imperial glory. Stein always managed to be a camel train and oasis or two ahead of his international rivals.

In 1907, he reached his El Dorado, the ancient Chinese oasis of Dunhuang, with its cliff-side Caves of the Thousand Buddhas. It took a sustained diplomatic assault by Stein's Chinese companion and a pile of silver to persuade the caves' guardian abbot, an opportunistic hayseed, to unbrick the entrance of the fabled library cave. Within lay scholarly treasure beyond Stein's wildest imaginings: perfectly preserved paintings, scrolls and letters, on paper and silk, written in languages including Chinese, Tibetan, Uyghur and Sogdian, the middle-Persian lingua franca of the old Silk Road.

These cornucopian riches included a 7th-century star chart, the oldest in the world. There was a guide to correspondence, including a model morning-after letter: "Yesterday, having drunk too much, I was so intoxicated as to pass all bounds; but none of the rude and coarse language I used was uttered in a conscious state."

The supreme prize was a woodblock print on paper of Buddhism's Diamond Sutra. Dated the ninth year of the Xiantong era, AD868, it was, as the authors put it, "created 600 years before Gutenberg got ink



Nonfiction

JOURNEYS ON THE SILK ROAD

Joyce Morgan and Conrad Walters

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on his fingers". Europeans were still writing on mammal skin.

Stein then had to transport his massive hoard of precious, fragile objects across desert, mountains, rivers and sea to the British Museum, in London. He lost some toes in the process but the scrolls arrived safe and sound.

Back in England, he was hailed as a hero but not by sinologist Arthur Waley, who anticipated China's fury with this cultural looting.

Waley asked how his countrymen would feel if some Chinese archaeologist found a cache of mediaeval manuscripts at a monastic ruin in England and, having bribed the custodian, carted them back to China.

The indefatigable Stein's personal journey ended in 1943, a month before his 81st birthday, as he was readying to leave Kabul for Afghanistan's Helmand Valley.

The Diamond Sutra continued on its own odyssey. It weathered experiments in conservation and narrowly missed immolation in the Blitz. It's now permanently on display in the digitised archives of the International Dunhuang Project.

The Diamond Sutra's teachings on the mutability of all things have inspired theosophists (the first New Agers), Jack Kerouac, Aldous Huxley, the Dalai Lama and, one intuit, the authors themselves, who sprinkle quotations from it throughout this well-researched account of its history, discovery and afterlife.