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EDITED BY MICHAEL HURST

THE
MCMAHON LINE

A STUDY IN THE RELATIONS
BETWEEN INDIA, CHINA
AND TIBET

1904 TO 1914

Volume I : Morley, Minto and Non-Interference in Tibet

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by
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To the memory of
VICTOR PURCELL
teacher and friend

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A.L.

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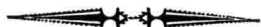
PART ONE
Searching for a New Tibetan Policy
1904 to 1906



1 *Tibet in relation to the rest of Asia*

I

INTRODUCTORY



IN the years between 1904 and 1914 the fate of Tibet was decided. The Younghusband Mission to Lhasa of 1904, perhaps the best-known episode in the history of British relations with Chinese Central Asia, resulted neither in an Indian protectorate to the north of the Himalayas nor in an independent Tibetan state.¹ The British entry into Lhasa, that mysterious city on the 'roof of the world' which had been the unattained goal of so many nineteenth-century explorers, has often been described as if it marked the conclusion of a chapter in British imperial history: in fact, it created more problems than it solved. It shattered the power of the Dalai Lama without deciding the international status of his country. It produced no geographical definitions and it delimited no boundaries. Far from eliminating Tibet as an area of anxiety for the makers of Indian foreign policy, the Younghusband Mission ushered in a decade of Anglo-Chinese and Anglo-Russian discussion over the nature of the Government in Lhasa and the kind of relations which the British might have with the authorities there. These discussions culminated in the Simla Conference of 1913-14 when, on the eve of the First World War, Chinese, Tibetan and British representatives endeavoured to arrive at a common interpretation of the political and geographical meaning of the term Tibet.

Had the Simla Conference achieved what the Indian Government hoped it would, Tibet would have received a

¹ The Younghusband Mission has been described in detail in P. Fleming, *Bayonets to Lhasa*, London, 1961; E. Candler, *The Unveiling of Lhasa*, London, 1905; P. Landon, *Lhasa*, London, 1905; L. A. Waddell, *Lhasa and its Mysteries*, London, 1905.

significant measure of international recognition as a State with autonomy in its internal affairs and a considerable degree of control over its foreign relations. It would have been, it is true, under Chinese 'suzerainty'; but in practice this would have been a limitation of Tibetan independence of very little consequence. In the event, however, the Simla Conference failed. The Chinese refused to sign the text of the agreement which it produced, the Simla Convention. The British, indeed, acquired a neighbour which was for the moment free of Chinese control; but this was the result of circumstances rather than treaty, and there was no guarantee that the Chinese would be permanently excluded from Tibet. The main British gain from the Simla Conference was the delimitation of the McMahon Line, the boundary along the crest of the Assam Himalayas from Bhutan to Burma, by means of an exchange of Anglo-Tibetan notes. The McMahon Line, therefore, can from the British point of view be taken as a symbol of these ten years which followed the British evacuation of the Tibetan capital in September 1904.

The object of this book is to examine how the McMahon Line evolved from the situation created by the Younghusband Mission. It is a story which develops in two stages. First; from 1904 until 1911 the Chinese dominated Tibet, filling the power vacuum which Younghusband had left behind him. Second; in early 1912 the Chinese Revolution brought about a Chinese collapse in Lhasa, creating a new power vacuum which the Indian Government endeavoured as best it could to exploit, in the process obtaining the McMahon Line boundary. The Chinese, however, never regarded their defeat after 1912 as being in any way final. They made it clear that one day they would again be as powerful in Tibet as they had been in 1910-11. In the 1950s they finally attained their goal. A result was the deterioration in Sino-Indian relations which has now become one of the dominant factors in Asian diplomacy. The Himalayan boundary crises of the 1950s and 1960s can in a very real sense be seen as a consequence of the failure of the Indian Government to discover a truly lasting solution of the Tibetan problem between 1904 and 1914. An appreciation of the lessons of that decade can illuminate the dilemma which today faces the Ministry of External Affairs in New Delhi. Had the late Mr. Nehru and

his advisers been in possession of a more accurate picture of what resulted from the Younghusband Mission, they might well have dealt rather differently with the Communist China which became an Indian neighbour in 1950. Perhaps it is still not too late to learn from past British experience.

The Younghusband Mission to Lhasa of 1904 took place because Lord Curzon, the Viceroy of India, was convinced that Tibet had become a field of play for the 'Great Game', the competition between Britain and Russia which so dominated Indian foreign policy during the nineteenth century. Until 1899 Tibet had managed to escape the consequences of that rivalry between the two Powers which had brought such turbulence, for example, to Afghan history. The British were interested in Tibet as a possible market for Indian and British goods, as a potential trade route from British territory to the Chinese interior, and as a source of gold and wool. They understood that Tibetan influence was of appreciable importance in the politics of the Himalayan States, Nepal, Bhutan and Sikkim; and they considered that the maintenance of a tranquil Northern Frontier would certainly be facilitated by the establishment of regular Anglo-Tibetan diplomatic relations. There can be little doubt, however, that in themselves neither the commercial nor the diplomatic advantages of British contact with the Tibetan authorities could possibly have justified anything as drastic as the Younghusband Mission.²

British relations with Tibet in the nineteenth century were much complicated by the belief that the Dalai Lama's Government was subordinate to the Chinese Emperor, and that any British overtures to the Tibetans would require prior Chinese approval. The Indian Government, which was not always impressed by the realities of Chinese rule in Central Asia, from time to time proposed that it should conduct a Tibetan policy which did not involve any measure of Chinese participation; but it was unable to win the approval of the Home Government for this step in the face of opposition from the Foreign Office.

² The history of British relations with Tibet from the eighteenth century to the Younghusband Mission has been related in considerable detail in my *Britain and Chinese Central Asia: the road to Lhasa 1767 to 1905*, which was published in 1960 and to which this present work must to some extent be regarded as a sequel. This book is hereafter referred to as *BCCA*.

British diplomatic representatives in China, while under few illusions concerning Chinese strength, yet appreciated the great importance which the Manchu Dynasty attached to the symbols of Tibetan and Mongol sovereignty; and they felt that to disregard Chinese feelings over Tibet would probably produce greater damage to British interests in China than could ever be compensated for by an increase in the value of the Indo-Tibetan trade.

In 1876, by the Separate Article of the Chefoo Convention, the British Minister in Peking, Sir Thomas Wade, persuaded the Chinese to agree in principle that the British should be allowed to send a commercial mission to Lhasa. The Chinese, in 1876, were in no position to refuse; but their acceptance was so worded as to make the despatch of the mission conditional upon the Tibetan political situation as interpreted by the Chinese Resident, or Amban, at Lhasa. In 1886, when the British mission authorised in 1876 was finally assembled, the Chinese had no difficulty in demonstrating that the Tibetans would not welcome it; indeed, that they would actively oppose its passage through their territory. The mission, which had been placed under the command of Colman Macaulay, was accordingly abandoned. In return for postponing their Tibetan scheme the British were compensated with Chinese recognition of the British annexation of Upper Burma, a region which the Manchus had long considered as falling within the sphere of their tributary states. This transaction was formalised in the Anglo-Chinese Convention of 24 July 1886, in which the British tacitly agreed that in the future they would only establish diplomatic relations with the Tibetans through the mediation of the Chinese.

By 1886, however, the Tibetans had become extremely reluctant to accept the Chinese right to dictate their foreign policy. On learning that the Chinese had approved the despatch of a British mission to Lhasa, the Tibetans resolved to take matters into their own hands and oppose its advance by force of arms. The better to defend their frontier, they had in the early summer of 1886, just before the Macaulay Mission was abandoned, sent a detachment into the British-protected State of Sikkim, a region to which they now reasserted ancient claims. In Sikkim, at the village of Lingtu, on the main road from

Darjeeling to the Tibetan border at the Chumbi Valley, along which Colman Macaulay was expected to travel, the Tibetans set up a military post; and they refused to retreat even after there ceased to be any question of a British mission. The British, through their Legation at Peking, requested the Chinese to make their Tibetan subjects withdraw from British soil. The Chinese showed every inclination to deny that Sikkim was, in fact, British; and, in any case, it had become abundantly clear by 1888 that they had no longer the power to oblige the Tibetans to obey their wishes in matters of this kind. The British discovered that the only way to get the Tibetans out of Sikkim was by force.

The expulsion of the Tibetans from Lingtu, which Lord Dufferin authorised in March 1888, was intended to usher in an era in which, if the British had any dealings with Tibet at all, they would have them direct with the Tibetans and not through the Chinese. China, however, was not prepared to see the symbol of its Tibetan sovereignty, implied in its claimed right to conduct Tibetan foreign relations, disappear. The Chinese, therefore, insisted that they were the proper authorities with whom the British should discuss those problems of the Sikkim-Tibet boundary which had developed from the Tibetan advance into Sikkim and its subsequent repulse by British arms; and, despite protests from India, the British Foreign Office agreed. The result was the Anglo-Chinese Convention of 1890³ and the Tibet Trade Regulations of 1893.⁴ The 1890 Convention confirmed the British position in Sikkim and defined the boundary between Sikkim and Tibet. The 1893 Trade Regulations provided for the opening of a trade mart at Yatung in the Chumbi Valley just inside Tibet, where British and Indian merchants could come freely to trade with Tibetans. Both the Sikkim-Tibet boundary alignment and the Yatung trade mart were accepted by China on behalf of Tibet as a result of negotiations in which the Tibetans were not represented. The Tibetans, under the rule of the thirteenth Dalai Lama, who, by the middle 1890s, was already beginning his schemes for an independent Tibet, not surprisingly refused to be so bound. They adhered to their own ideas as to the boundary; they maintained posts in

³ Appendix I.

⁴ Appendix II.

the extreme north of Sikkim as defined by the 1890 Convention; and when the British attempted to set up a number of boundary markers along the 1890 alignment the Tibetans promptly removed or defaced them. At Yatung, moreover, the Tibetans set out to make sure that the new trade mart would come to nothing; and they ignored British protests to China against failures to comply with the provisions of the 1893 Trade Regulations.

By the opening of Lord Curzon's administration in India in 1899 it was clear to British observers that an improvement in the state of Anglo-Tibetan relations could only be achieved through direct British contact with the Dalai Lama's Government. The problem of the Sikkim-Tibet frontier, however, was very minor ones when compared with other issues facing the British Empire at this period. No one really believed, as they perhaps had in the 1860s and 1870s, that Tibet was going to add much to the total value of British trade. The Tibetan violations of the Sikkim border were carried out on such a small scale that they could have been dealt with by the deployment of a handful of troops; but they took place in regions so remote that even this amount of martial display did not seem to be justified. Other things being equal, there were no good reasons in 1899 why Anglo-Tibetan relations should become a particular object of the attention of the Government of India. Had the Russian spectre not at this juncture been detected on the Tibetan plateau, there would almost certainly have been no Tibetan crisis in 1903-4.

Between 1899 and 1903 a number of reports reached the ears of the Government of India to suggest that Russia was busy securing a foothold in Tibet, a region to which she had easy access through her own Buddhist subjects, the Buriats of Siberia. One Russian Buriat, Dorjiev by name, had by the opening of the twentieth century achieved an important position in the Tibetan monastic hierarchy and had won the confidence of the thirteenth Dalai Lama. In 1900, and again in 1901, Dorjiev visited Russia on what were reported in the Press as embassies from the Dalai Lama to the Tsar. Lord Curzon was at first inclined to doubt that the Dorjiev missions had any political significance; but by 1902 he had changed his mind; information from Peking was suggesting that the Russians were indeed following a Tibetan policy which boded ill for the British. Not

only were they in contact with the Dalai Lama through Dorjiev, but also it seemed probable that they were on the verge of obtaining from at least one clique in Manchu ruling circles an explicit agreement that Tibet should fall within the Russian sphere of influence. All this, of course, did not mean that the actual occupation of Tibet by Russians was particularly likely in the immediate future; it suggested, however, that Russian influence would be soon established in Lhasa to an extent which the British had never allowed it to be established in Kabul. A few Russian agents so close to India's Himalayan border, Lord Curzon thought, could do damage to British interests quite out of proportion to their numbers. The Himalayan States, especially Nepal, kept a close watch on Tibetan politics. An increase of Russian influence in Lhasa might well suggest to the Durbar at Katmandu the advantages of a policy of playing off Russia against Britain to the Nepalese benefit. Nepal's loyalty to the British cause was cherished by the Indian Government because Nepal was the source whence came the recruits for the Gurkha Regiments, units which many British officers believed to be of almost crucial importance to the military strength of British India.

The obvious counter to Russian influence in Lhasa was the establishment there of the influence of the Indian Government. This, however, was not easy to achieve. The Dalai Lama refused to accept any communications from Lord Curzon. The Indian Government had at its disposal no trustworthy agent who could reach Lhasa undetected, let alone gain the ear of the Dalai Lama, a fact which the Viceroy found most humiliating. Curzon's solution to the Tibetan problem, which he proposed formally to the Home Government in January 1903, was the despatch of a British mission to Lhasa, accompanied by an escort sufficient to overcome any Tibetan opposition it might meet with on the way. This mission would oblige the Dalai Lama to acknowledge the existence of the Government of British India and to abandon his flirtation with the Russians. It would ensure that in future an unobstructed channel of communication existed between Calcutta and Lhasa, preferably by way of a British representative permanently stationed at the Tibetan capital. It would demonstrate, once for all, that the British were not prepared to pay lip service to the 'fiction'—

the term is Curzon's—of Chinese sovereignty over a Tibetan régime which the Manchus had shown themselves unable to control.

The Home Government was unhappy about Curzon's plan. Balfour and many of his colleagues were far from convinced of the reality of Russian ambitions towards Tibet. Lansdowne, at the Foreign Office, anticipated that a British forward move in Tibet would complicate the general pattern of Anglo-Chinese and Anglo-Russian relations. Lord George Hamilton, the Secretary of State for India, while sympathetic to his friend Curzon's point of view, felt privately that the Viceroy was being a trifle alarmist. All that Curzon could secure in 1903 was permission to send a British mission just over the Tibetan border from Sikkim to the town of Khambajong, where it would discuss with Tibetan as well as Chinese representatives the outstanding problems of the Sikkim-Tibet border and the proper conduct of the trade mart at Yatung according to the provisions of the Tibet Trade Regulations of 1893. It was clear to Curzon, however, that once this permission had been granted, if the Khambajong talks broke down it would be very difficult for the Cabinet to prevent an advance of the British mission deeper into Tibetan territory.

The Khambajong talks were entrusted to Francis Younghusband, an old hand at the 'Great Game' who enjoyed Curzon's full confidence. When, as Curzon must have anticipated, the proceedings at Khambajong proved fruitless, there was little difficulty in persuading St. John Brodrick, who had replaced Hamilton as Secretary of State for India in September 1903, that Younghusband should move deeper into Tibet, to the town of Gyantse on the road between Lhasa and the Chumbi Valley. The advance to Gyantse took place in the first half of 1904. It gave rise to some armed Tibetan resistance, culminating in May with an attack on the British mission headquarters outside Gyantse which provided the justification for Younghusband's advance to Lhasa itself. In August 1904 Younghusband entered Lhasa, the Dalai Lama meanwhile having fled towards Mongolian territory.

As Curzon's Tibetan policy unfolded itself during the course of 1903 and 1904 the Home Government grew increasingly anxious at the way events were developing. The Russians, from

the moment that the prospect of the Khambajong negotiations was announced, showed an awkward interest in the nature of the ultimate British intentions towards Tibet. Lamsdorff, the Russian Foreign Minister, was now able to meet British enquiries about the implications of the Dorjiev missions and the truth of rumours concerning secret Sino-Russian treaties over Tibet with enquiries of his own. Did the British intend to take Tibet under their protection? To this question, which was repeated throughout 1903, Lord Lansdowne could only reply with a denial of any such intention, and truthfully, so far as the Cabinet was concerned: the last thing Balfour's Government wished at this moment was the extension of British imperial responsibilities north of the Himalayan range. These denials took their final form on 6 November 1903, when Lansdowne informed Benckendorff, the Russian Ambassador in London, that:

owing to the outrageous conduct of the Tibetans, who had broken off negotiations with our Representative, seized British subjects, and carried off the transport animals of a friendly state, it has been decided to send our Commission, with a suitable escort, further into Tibetan territory, but that this step must not be taken as indicating any intention of annexing or even permanently occupying Tibetan territory.⁵

This declaration, the Cabinet felt, also bound the British not to take any steps which might possibly be interpreted by the Russians as indicating the creation of a British protectorate over Tibet. Hence the Younghusband Mission, whatever else it might achieve, should not result in the establishment of a British diplomatic representative at the Tibetan capital.

The Cabinet, therefore, saw in British Tibetan policy little more than a demonstration of British power sufficient to warn the Russians to keep their hands off Tibet and to convince the Tibetans of the wisdom of respecting the Anglo-Chinese agreements of 1890 and 1893 relating to the definition of the Sikkim-Tibet boundary and the conduct of trade at Yatung. Curzon, of course, had rather different ideas. He hoped to end, once for all, the danger of Russian influence on the Tibetan plateau. For this something more than a demonstration was required. There should be some permanent symbol of British power easily visible

⁵ BCCA, p. 293.

to the Lhasa authorities. The ideal would be a British Residency at the Tibetan capital; but many of the desired results could be achieved by the creation of a new trade mart deep within Tibet, perhaps at Gyantse, where could be located a British 'commercial' officer. This mart was the key provision in any terms which Younghusband might secure from the Tibetans.

On 7 September 1904 Younghusband obtained the treaty for which he had come. It was negotiated in the absence of the Dalai Lama, who had fled to Mongolia; and the Chinese Resident (Amban) in Tibet did not affix his signature to it. Its validity was certainly open to question; but it served the British purpose well enough in that it established a precedent for direct Anglo-Tibetan relations and it provided the means for the future prevention of the extension of Russian influence. The full text of this treaty, the Lhasa Convention, is printed as Appendix III. Its main provisions were as follows:

(1) In addition to the trade mart at Yatung in the Chumbi Valley, new trade marts were to be opened at Gartok in Western Tibet and at Gyantse. At each of these marts a British commercial officer would be stationed, to be known as the Trade Agent; and it was clear that Younghusband intended the Gyantse Trade Agent to perform many diplomatic and political duties.

(2) In a separate article to the Convention it was stipulated that the Gyantse Trade Agent could visit Lhasa from time to time, thus, in effect, converting him into a British representative at the Tibetan capital in all but name.

(3) The Tibetans were to pay the British an indemnity of Rs. 75,00,000 in seventy-five annual instalments, and until this sum had been paid the British would occupy the Chumbi Valley, that salient of Tibetan territory south of the main Himalayan watershed which separated Sikkim from Bhutan and through which ran the main road from British India to Lhasa.

(4) The Tibetan authorities would in future accept communications from the Government of India and would enter into relations with the British without Chinese mediation.

(5) The Tibetan authorities would refuse to permit the agents of other Powers to establish themselves in the country or to interfere in its internal affairs. Subjects of such Powers, more-

over, would not be allowed to obtain commercial concessions in Tibet.

The effect of these five main provisions was to declare Tibet closed to the commerce and diplomacy of all Powers (that is say Russia) except Britain, and to permit to the British what amounted to free access to the Tibetan capital. At the same time, as a guarantee of Tibetan good behaviour, the British were to occupy Chumbi, which gave them a vantage-point whence they could again intervene in Tibet should events make it necessary to do so. All this did not of necessity mean that the British had acquired a protectorate over Tibet; but if the Indian Government had been able to exploit to the full the potentialities of the Lhasa Convention the final result would have been very hard to distinguish from a British protectorate. The Lhasa Convention as it stood, therefore, was not easy to reconcile with the implication of the assurances which Lansdowne had given to the Russians, that no British protectorate was contemplated. It was, moreover, particularly vulnerable to Chinese protest, since it left the Chinese role in Tibet ambiguous to say the least, while the Anglo-Chinese Convention of 1890 had by implication afforded British recognition of China's status as Tibetan overlord. Thus the Lhasa Convention could not be accepted by the Home Government as it stood; and it was, accordingly, modified by a declaration by Lord Amphill, acting as Viceroy during Curzon's absence on leave, which cancelled the Separate Article allowing the Gyantse Trade Agent to visit Lhasa, and which reduced the indemnity from Rs. 75,00,000 to Rs. 25,00,000 and the length of the British occupation of Chumbi from seventy-five years to three years.

With this modification of the Lhasa Convention the Cabinet certainly hoped that it had brought the Tibetan question to a halt. Brodrick, the Secretary of State for India, in his despatch to the Indian Government of 2 December 1904, demonstrated that in London there now prevailed a clear idea as to what British Tibetan policy should be. British influence in Tibet was desirable only 'to exclude that of any other Power'; and once this had been achieved—as Brodrick thought it had through Younghusband's show of force—then 'Tibet should remain in that state of isolation from which, till recently, she had shown no intention to depart, and which hitherto caused her presence