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British policy and the 'development' of Tibet 1912-1933

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Errata Sheet

p.5	representatives
p.5	recognised
p.17	divided
p.46	guaranteed
p.50	one hundred and fifty
p.51	the First World War
p.73	fn 73 Indian National Movement
p.122	line 4 from bottom, 'that'
p.192	provide
p.204	[be] sure
p.207	an important
p.221	Indian National Congress
p.226	produce
p.244	administered
p.252	delete 'the'
p.312	foresaw
p.315	August 1947



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BRITISH POLICY AND THE 'DEVELOPMENT' OF TIBET 1912-1933

**A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the
requirements for the award of the degree**

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

from

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by

HEATHER SPENCE, B.A. (HONS)

DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY AND POLITICS

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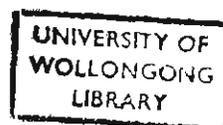


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ABSTRACT

Two conflicting views of Tibet's political status in relation to China have dominated both popular and scholarly literature. The 'pro-Chinese' school views Tibet as a traditional, integral part of China. Tibet, they maintain, was separated from China after the fall of the Manchu dynasty as a consequence of British machinations. Tibet was justifiably reunited with China, the 'motherland', in 1951. The 'pro-Tibetan' school argues that the partnership was between the Dalai Lama and the Manchus: that relationship ended with the collapse of the Manchu dynasty. Accordingly, Tibet is seen as an independent state conquered by the Chinese Communists and illegally incorporated into the Chinese state.¹ This study is not an attempt to enter that debate, but rather to fill a gap in a neglected aspect of Tibetan studies. Nonetheless, the results of this study will, no doubt, become a component in the highly politicized nature of Tibetan history.

Sir Charles Bell's authoritative Tibet, Past and Present (1924) and Portrait of a Dalai Lama (1946) both stand as important primary sources for this study. As secondary sources dealing with British policy, W. D. Shakabpa's pioneering study Tibet: A Political History (1967), P. Mehra's The McMahon Line and After (1974) and A.K.J. Singh's Himalayan Triangle (1988) are indispensable. Alastair Lamb's most recent study, Tibet, China and India 1914-1950 (1989), is the first publication to deal with this period in detail. Lamb expertly evaluates Anglo-Tibetan relations and narrows the gap which this thesis study is also designed to close. However, by locating Anglo-Tibetan relations in the wider context of international politics, this dissertation will augment Lamb's study and contribute to the continuing intellectual debate in the field of Tibetan studies.

Tibet has been significant in the political development of British India, for it was believed to be a key to the safety and security of India's north-eastern frontier. When the British consolidated their power in the sub-continent of India, they were also faced with the problem of securing a stable frontier on India's Himalayan borders. The British government, therefore, had to evolve a definite policy towards the Himalayan kingdoms, especially Tibet. British India's policy during the 19th century was to treat Tibet as a buffer state.

There can be no doubt that the loss of Tibet's independence stems directly from the failure of the British Government's Younghusband Mission of 1904 to achieve what the Viceroy of India, Lord Curzon, hoped would result from it. Curzon believed that the

¹ M. Goldstein, A History of Modern Tibet 1913-1951: The Demise of the Lamaist State (Berkeley, 1989), p. xv.

only way to guarantee the continuance of Tibet as a buffer was to ensure the predominance of British influence at Lhasa. This was to be achieved by bringing Tibet under some measure of British protection or influence. Curzon believed that British influence was essential because unless Britain laid claim to Tibet, Russia would draw Tibet into its sphere of influence. After the First World War Britain again had an opportunity to become Tibet's 'protector' but as was the case after 1904, chose to abandon Tibet to Chinese expansionism.

Tibet, even today, conjures up images of 'Shangri-la', 'the savage and the sublime' and, perhaps, 'paradise lost'. It is, however, far from remote or picayune to world history. Tibet represents the interface between the two most populous nations on earth and marks the site of one of the most complex boundary disputes ever to disturb the peace of nations. The problems on India's northern frontiers have become a tangled mass of diplomatic perplexity to the governments and people of India and China.

The loss of Tibet as a buffer zone between two major world powers has produced major long-term consequences. The Chinese domination of Tibet has presented the current Indian Republic with just those dangers which Curzon feared would confront the British-Indian Empire from the extension into Tibet of the influence of Tsarist Russia. Tibet's role today as a garrison state of China goes far towards explaining its important place in current Western geopolitical thought. Tibet has become a major handicap to China's political stability. The fate of modern Tibet, and the problems of India's northern frontiers, are subjects of recent political debate. Tibet's destiny in a broader sense and in these days of national self-determination is now a concern of world conscience.

It is difficult to comprehend the current situation in Tibet and its place in the policy of both the People's Republic of China and the Republic of India without an understanding of what happened during the period of British colonial domination in India. The British carry some responsibility for the present state of affairs of Tibet. The question at issue is what responsibility should the British accept and what explanations are there for Britain's inability to prevent the loss of Tibetan independence? The answer to these questions lie in an analysis of the wider pattern of Anglo-Chinese political relations and of international relations after the First World War.

Over the years scholars have trodden a well-worn path to the documents dealing with Anglo-Tibetan affairs held in the Public Record Office and the India Office Library. These documents have, more often than not, been used to compose historical surveys which examine chronological events and often result in Anglo-Tibetan relations being analysed in isolation from the broader international context. The primary information on which this study is based provides a level of detail and understanding of the 1920s and

1930s that has not previously been available. Many studies have been made of the 1904 Younghusband Mission, the 1913-14 Simla Conference and the later period of the 1940s and 1950s. The 1920s and 1930s have been overshadowed by the turbulent decades that preceded and succeeded them. These years have usually been given meaning only as a transition period and have assumed the character of a more or less featureless interval: a static period in Anglo-Tibetan relations.

The relationship formed between British India and Tibet by the resolution of the 1914 Simla Conference appeared unaltered and fundamentally unquestioned until the transfer of power to an independent Indian government. This, however, was not the case. During this period two major policy shifts took place. The apparent continuity conceals the intensity of debates over Tibetan policy in the British and Indian governments, especially during the years 1919-1921 and 1932-33, which disclosed Britain's apprehension about the volatile political situation in central and north Asia during and after the First World War. The destiny of Tibet has normally been treated as if it was almost exclusively determined by Anglo-Chinese relations. This approach ignores the fact that after the First World War the Tibetan question became an important component of a much broader controversy on the course of post-war British policy in Asia.

The major reasons given for the Chinese incapacity to conclude a Tibetan agreement with Britain during the 1920s have been civil strife and popular opposition within China. The general consensus on the reason for Britain's inability to persuade the Chinese to resume negotiations is the aspiring mood of nationalism in China itself. Indeed this is part of the answer, but the other part is that China was awakening to the fact that Britain's power and position in the Far East had been substantially decreased because of the First World War. Britain no longer had the diplomatic strength needed to bluff China into concluding a settlement of the Sino-Tibetan dispute.

It is generally felt that China's intransigence and, at the same time, her weakness gave the Foreign Office no alternative but to sanction a policy of close Anglo-Tibetan relations without reference to China. On the surface this appears to be accurate but it overlooks the general context of Britain's economic situation in the Far East. This, in turn, reflected significant changes in the balance of power in Asia. Britain's position in the Far East had diminished and pressure from the British Legation in Peking, the Far Eastern Department of the Foreign Office and the British commercial community in China operated to shift the main emphasis of British policy in Asia from one of reliance on Japan to closer links with the United States and with a renascent China.

With hindsight it can be seen that British policy decisions made during this period were crucial to Tibet's future. This study aims to place this period in the

important position it should hold in any debate of Anglo-Tibetan relations. The 'forgotten years' deserve a more prominent place in Tibetan studies.

The beginning date of 1912, or in Tibetan, the year of Water-Mouse, was the year in which the 13th Dalai Lama returned from two years of exile in British India and declared independence for Tibet. 1933, the year of Water-Bird, was the year in which the 13th Dalai Lama died. The intervening years covered a period of Anglo-Tibetan relations which seem to indicate a movement towards the independence and development of Tibet under the umbrella of British influence. It can be seen in retrospect, however, that British influence in Tibet during the intervening years gradually declined. It was the realisation of this fact which prompted the major question: Why did Britain draw away from relations with Tibet? What were the socio-political and cultural issues that caused Britain to withdraw?

The First World War did irreparable damage to the structure of imperialist diplomacy. This fact sets the stage for a discussion of Anglo-Tibetan relations during the 1920s and 1930s. The undermining of the old order came about in two ways. On the one hand, Japanese expansion on the continent, coupled with the temporary distress of the European powers, destroyed the balance in the Far East which, though always precarious, the imperialists had managed to maintain. On the other hand, there were new forces undermining the very foundation of the old diplomacy - the 'new diplomacy' of the United States and the Soviet Union, and the self-conscious assertion of nationalism in China. It was Tibet's particular misfortune to be caught in the clutch of two powerful neighbours, Britain and China, who used her as a pawn in the compassionless game of political intrigue and diplomacy during the inter-war period.

In attempting to answer the central question it is essential to connect the Anglo-Tibetan relationship to the international situation in which it operated. In tracing the British response to these international determinants, a chronological treatment is used. Each chapter therefore contains an evaluation which places Anglo-Tibetan relations in this wider context, identifying the economic, social and political ideas which set the historical boundaries within which British policy decisions operated.

The central problem of Britain's relations with Tibet has required research based on the archives of the British Foreign Office, housed in the Public Record Office in London, and supplemented by records in the India Office Library. These comprise a massive collection of letters, telegrams, notes, minutes, reports of the British and Indian governments, including many from the Tibetan and Chinese governments. The principal collection used are the Political and Secret Department Subject Files.

The Australian National Library in Canberra has on microfilm the Foreign Office series relating to China which covers political correspondence from 1906 to 1922. In

this series is a vast amount of information relating to Anglo-Tibetan relations. The Library also holds original copies of the Foreign Office Confidential prints (1840-), the only set outside Great Britain. Records and manuscripts held in the Library of Tibetan Works and Archives in Dharamsala, India, have also produced some information.

The private papers of Sir Charles Bell, Colonel Bailey, Colonel Weir, all of whom visited Lhasa during their time as British Political Officers, adds another dimension to the study. The diaries of Bell, Bailey, Frank Ludow, who set up the first British school in Tibet, and Captain R. S. Kennedy, who accompanied Bell to Lhasa as a medical officer, have also been consulted. These private papers are held at the India Office Library and the British Library. Books written by principal figures, such as Charles Bell, Eric Teichman, Henry Hayden, David Macdonald, William McGovern and Hugh Richardson, have also been studied as primary source material. Publications by Tibetan authors, R. D. Taring, R. Lha-Mo, K. Dondup, D. N. Tsarong, D. Norbu and T. J. Norbu have contributed a valuable Tibetan perspective.

Interviews with surviving participants and observers have been especially useful, particularly regarding personal character details. Some interviews were tape-recorded in Tibetan and later translated and transcribed, others were translated into English during the interview. Interviews with English-speaking participants were typed directly into a computer data base.

An application for a research visa for access to the National Archives in New Delhi, India, was successful. However, the application took nearly eighteen months to process and arrived too late for me to make use of the opportunity.

Summary:

With the return of the Dalai Lama to Tibet in 1912 the British government saw an opportunity to consolidate their influence in Tibet and re-establish Tibet as a buffer zone. The declaration of Tibetan independence inspired and facilitated a programme of development by the 13th Dalai Lama. The Dalai Lama intended to initiate changes, political as well as social, which were necessary if his country was to remain independent.

The revived problem of a Russian 'menace' in Central Asia was the primary reason for London to exert pressure on China to attend a conference at Simla in 1914. During the conference the British developed a comprehensive programme to revise the status of Tibet. The Anglo-Tibetan Simla Agreement, in effect, proved to be an unequal bargain. In return for India's frontier security, the Tibetans were promised diplomatic and military support in their struggle with China. From the viewpoint of the Tibetans, the 1914 Anglo-Tibetan agreement identified Britain as 'Tibet's Protector'. Yet, in spite

of all the discussion on the status of Tibet, the notion of concluding some form of protectorate agreement with the Lhasa government was never contemplated. Instead, Britain proclaimed Chinese 'suzerainty' over an 'autonomous' Tibet. The recognition of Chinese suzerainty was to safeguard British commercial interest in China and the support of Tibetan autonomy was to ensure security of India's northern frontier. This provided Britain with informal control of Tibet without involving the granting of responsible government and, at the same time, allowed Britain to continue her stationary economic imperialism in China.

1914 ushered in the Great War, which transformed global politics. During the war years Britain was not prepared to, nor in a position to give, active military assistance to Tibet and the opportunity for building a close relationship with an autonomous Tibet diminished. Taking up arms against China for the sake of Tibetan independence was never a consideration. The Dalai Lama considered that Britain had made a commitment to support and protect Tibet by signing the Anglo-Tibetan Agreement. By 1918 he was very disillusioned. The question at issue by the end of the war was whether Britain was in a position to offer any form of diplomatic assistance or protection to Tibet.

While China was deemed at the commencement of the First World War not to be a threat to Tibet, the war emphasised the increased danger of a China controlled by Japan. It soon became clear that Japan would attempt to take advantage of the war to expand her influence on the mainland of Asia. Despite this ominous situation, it seemed that pre-war circumstances were reviving in which British pressure would eventually overcome obstinate Chinese resistance, and an agreement on Tibet's status would be achieved.

The world, however, was a different place after 1918. During the First World War and the period of post-war settlement British interests in China had radically to be redefined. Altering international economic patterns, changing imperial priorities, rising nationalism in the Far East, and the growth of new ideologies all had repercussions. The predominant theme in Anglo-Tibetan relations during the next few years was Britain's attempt to procure Chinese participation in renewed negotiations over Tibet and Peking's constant refusal, under an assortment of excuses, to oblige. The British government's response to this rejection on the part of the Chinese government was to send a mission to Lhasa.

The sending of a mission to Lhasa and the eventual agreement to supply arms and aid to Tibet were viewed at the time as manifesting a new determination in British policy. Its principal result was supposedly to demonstrate that the British government intended to treat Tibetan autonomy as a reality by strengthening Tibet's ability to defend

itself and by helping to develop the country's resources. Bell's mission to Lhasa, in reality, was a diplomatic bluff to coerce China into resuming negotiations, a bluff which failed. Further indefinite delay, coupled with a continuance of the policy of self-denial, would have involved the risk of the Chinese regaining control over Tibet, as had happened in 1910.

The British feared that the Tibetan government would conclude an independent treaty with China. Policy makers were faced with the choice of continuing to work for a settlement on existing lines, and running that risk, or of taking other measures to protect British interests by adopting a new and more liberal policy towards the Tibetans, which would entail the eventual opening of Tibet and the development of its resources under British auspices. It appeared that Tibet was being drawn more firmly under the umbrella of British influence. With British support, the 1920s seemed to promise a transformation of Tibet: a breaking away from old traditions and a move towards the rudimentary development of technological, economic and military infrastructures which would enable Tibet to become a self-sustaining independent state. Both Charles Bell, Political Officer, Sikkim, and the Government of India wanted a non-interference policy. At the same time they wanted Britain to help develop Tibet in a way that would enable the country to retain its independence but also serve British interests.

The eventual decision to provide military assistance and aid symbolised not a new tenacity of purpose but Britain's inability to intimidate China into accepting an ultimatum. The adoption of the so-called 'new and liberal' policy which followed Charles Bell's mission to Lhasa was little more than an attempt to induce the Chinese government to abandon their obstructive attitude and conclude a settlement of the Tibetan question. The British hoped that the spectacle of Tibet's adoption of a policy of self-development would coerce the Peking government into submission. In retrospect, however, it can be seen that the support given to Tibet was inadequate and the direction which British policy took during the 1920s and 1930s resulted in the eventual loss of Tibet's independence.

The conceptual basis of Britain's new policy was flawed: Britain wanted Tibet as a buffer but was not prepared to give the support necessary for it to remain independent. The source of Britain's impaired policy is manifest. On the one hand, they were committed by a promise to the Lhasa government to support Tibet in upholding her practical autonomy, which was of importance to the security of India, and, on the other hand, Britain's alliance with China made it difficult to give effective material support to Tibet.

What the British wanted was to create a balance. That is to say, give just enough support so that Tibet could protect India's Himalayan border without the British having

to commit themselves to a major defensive initiative, while allowing the Tibetans, meanwhile, to pay for the honour of doing so. The intention was to convince the Chinese that Tibet was becoming self-sufficient. The ultimate objective was to get the Chinese to sign an agreement which would secure, for the British stability in Central Asia. British tactics were impotent and the Foreign Office adopted a 'wait-and-see' approach which dissolved into a 'dormancy' policy.

The 1921 Washington Conference represented the crossroad in Anglo-Tibetan policy. Britain's wider economic and political considerations at this time altered Anglo-Tibetan relations. Britain's Tibetan policy was impaired, as statesmen attempted to cope with the transition between pre-war commitments and post-war attitudes. The British government's post-war position made cooperation with the United States, or at least avoidance of American displeasure, the *sine qua non* of any successful policy. Britain's Tibetan policy during the 1920s and 1930s was to have no policy - to drift: a symbolic act which reflected the decline of British imperialism. The British found themselves on the defensive in the Far East and a desire to retain their trade position in China became dominant. Especially after the 1925 anti-British boycott in China, Britain followed a conciliatory policy and supported Chinese nationalism.

The implementation of Britain's new China policy during the late 1920s coincided with a period of internal political turmoil in Tibet. The critical years for the Tibetan reformation were the 1920s, when the 13th Dalai Lama was attempting to strengthen and develop his nation. British government policy during this period limited the embryonic reforms and ultimately led to a weak and unstable Tibet. The Lhasa government exhibited a 'spirit of independence' but by 1925 the Dalai Lama was moving his allegiance away from Britain towards China. The Chinese Nationalist government took advantage of this tendency and adopted a 'forward' policy.

By 1933 British commercial interests in China made it necessary to subordinate Indian policy towards Tibet to the wider British approach to China. Britain withdrew from relations with Tibet because post-war international political and economic changes hastened the demise of the British Empire and required Britain to support Chinese nationalism. Britain had to choose either to support and protect Tibet or look after her own interests. Britain, not unnaturally, chose to do the latter.

A limitation to this study has been Australia's geographical isolation from areas of Tibetan studies and the scarcity of scholars involved in Tibetan studies in Australia, and especially in the University of Wollongong. My decision to undertake a study of Tibet for my Ph.D dissertation initially met with much scepticism within my History department. However, Dr. Ian McLaine agreed to supervise me provided a thesis could

legitimately be developed from a British point of view. I remain grateful for his confidence in me. The absence of scholarly interaction has made my study a solitary and arduous task. Despite modern communication technology, the scholarly debate still remains a vital element in the process of history writing. To some extent this limitation was reduced by my participation in the Sixth International Conference on Tibetan Studies in Norway in 1992, and I would like to acknowledge my appreciation to the Institute for Comparative Research in Human Culture, Oslo, for the allocation of funds towards my participation.