

BEGINNINGS OF THE LHASA EXPEDITION: YOUNGHUSBAND'S OWN WORDS

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For a student of Tibet and its affairs, the expedition led by Colonel Francis Younghusband to Lhasa in 1903-4 is an event of the utmost significance in the recent history of India's relationship with our neighbouring land. Nor has that significance, and import, become less relevant today than it was a half century ago. For the specialist apart, any intelligent student of our foreign policy, more specifically in the context of relations with the People's Republic of China, would find it exceedingly hard to grasp the meaning of much that has lately passed over a country traditionally known only for its Lamas, its mystery and its snow, without a reasonable familiarity with the aims and objectives visualised and the results that flowed from this expedition. One could go a step further and underline the fact that even today the framers of India's policy have not been able fully to assess the varied ramifications that flowed from the entry of an armed force into Lhasa, in the opening years of this century. For the viewpoint that tends to regard this episode as though it marked the end of an old chapter in Britain's imperial history has been completely misplaced; in reality, it is more pertinent to view it as a watershed that opened a new phase whose end is not yet in sight.

In its beginning the story is a simple one—the end, however, was to become extremely complicated and gave rise to controversies that have remained live to-date - and relates to the summer of 1903 when Baron Curzon of Kedleston Hall in Derbyshire, then Viceroy and Governor-General of India, chose Major Younghusband, temporarily promoted to the rank of Colonel, to lead a small number of 'frontier diplomats' to negotiate some trading rights, and settle a few long standing border disputes, with the representatives of Tibet's 'god-king', and of the Imperial Chinese Resident, chosen always from among the Manchus, at Lhasa. Two letters, which are reproduced in full in the pages that follow relate to Younghusband's choice as the leader of what, to start with, was a commercial mission. Being of a private nature, written in strictest confidence to his father* in England, they afford an insight

*Younghusband's father, to whom, all through life, he was very much devoted, was Major General J.W. Younghusband who served under Charles Napier in the Sind Campaign of 1843 and later under John Nicholson on the North-West Frontier. Invalided home in 1856, he married Clara Jane Shaw, sister of Robert Shaw, the well-known Central Asian explorer.

into men and events which Lord Curzon's ponderous despatches, not to talk of State Papers and Blue Books, succeed remarkably well in concealing. Inasmuch as the writer has had access to these in the fullest degree, and has made use of them in the annotations, the end picture that emerges of the launching of the expedition is as nearly complete as one could construct.

I am deeply indebted to Dame Eileen Louise Younghusband, Sir Francis' daughter, through whose courtesy these letters have, for the first time, been made available for re-production.

II

On the way to Simla
May 1903

My dear Father,

The mystery⁽¹⁾ is solved. I am to go to Tibet in charge of a very important mission. Very strictly in confidence Lord Curzon had intended to send me to Lhasa with an armed force capable of putting down all resistance.⁽²⁾ The Home Government would not, however, agree to this. But they have agreed to a mission being sent to Tibet to meet Chinese and Tibetan representatives and I have been nominated British Commissioner⁽³⁾ with a man called White⁽⁴⁾ (who had been for 14 years Political Officer in Sikkim) as Joint Commissioner. This is all I know at present but I have been summoned to Simla to receive instructions and am now on my way there.

That Lord Curzon should have selected me for so important a mission is of course a great compliment and I am to discuss "frontier, trade and general matters" with Tibet. It sounds a pretty comprehensive mission.

Just seen Small Boy⁽⁵⁾ at Umbala. He seems v. flourishing but wants a billet. If I get half a chance I will take him with me.

Poor Kathleen⁽⁶⁾ must have had a bad time. I only heard of the new arrival two days ago.

Must send this off from Kalka to catch this mail. Love to Emmie.⁽⁷⁾
Your affectionate son,
Frank.

III

Confidential

Simla May 21 1903

My dear Father,

This is a really magnificent business that I have dropped in for. Lord Curzon's original idea of sending an imposing mission- like Malcolm's to Persia and Burnes to Kabul in old days⁽⁸⁾-to Lhasa has not been sanc-

tioned: and I am not to go to Lhasa itself as far as is present settled, but only just inside Tibet, still what I have to do is as important. I have to try and induce the Tibetans and Chinese to allow a permanent British Agent in Lhasa if possible or at any rate in some town in Tibet.(9) I have to put our trade relations with Tibet upon a proper footing: and I have to settle the boundary between us. What has brought matters to this head is that the Russians have concluded, or tried to conclude, a secret treaty with Tibet(10)-though their Ambassador in London has sworn to Lord Lansdowne that such a thing is the very last thing in the world that his government would dream of doing.(11) However, from India, Peking, Paris and St. Petersburg identical reports arrive so evidently an attempt at least has been made by the Russians to get hold of Tibet(12) and so I am to be up there to forestal them and to put our relations with Tibet on such a footing that we will be able to prevent any other Power gaining a predominant influence there-that more or less is the official phrasology.

The Chinese and Tibetans are being informed that I am a high and important official- which of course the Resident at Indore is - and they are to treat the matter seriously and send an equally high official. I am to have the rank of Colonel and an escort of 200 men while a battalion of Pioneers is to be kept in reserve in Sikkim-I am to go up from Darjeeling through Sikkim to a place called Khamba Jong, and afterwards perhaps to Gyantse. I am to have as Joint Commss'oner (and what Lord Curzon calls inferior colleagues) a Mr. White, at present Political Officer Sikkim, and who, poor beggar, has been there for fourteen years and always looked upon this job as the object of his life. He is very sore at not getting the charge of the mission but he seems a good chap(13) for what I have seen of him here and of course I will make it as easy for him as I can. Then an officer of the China Consular Servie(14) is to accompany us as an interpreter - and there will remain at Sikkim at my disposal ready to be brought forward when required and opportunity offers-an Intelligence Officer, a Survey Officer and a Doctor.

They are most determined about the thing up here. Even the Madras member of Council is excited about it. The Home Government of course are going a bit slower but even they acknowledge that it is a matter of urgent necessity that our relations with Tibet should be put upon a satisfactory basis.(15)

All this has been breeding up for some months and though I knew nothing of it lots of other men did and numbers have been applying for the billet. I hear that Dane(16) himself would like to have had it and so would Major General Sir Edmund Barrow who was in China and with Lockhart in Chitral in 1885. And of course crowds of fellows would like to have come with me. I should like to have got the Small

Boy in somehow or other but there is a chap in Sikkim now who speaks Tibetan fluently and knows the whole question and I am afraid he will have to come as Intelligence Officer(17)-which is the only billet for a Military Officer.

I had lunch with the Viceroy and met Lord Kitchener. The former very enthusiastic. He first of all told me how much he appreciated my work in Indore. He said when he looked back and thought of all the trouble with Holkar there used to be in the former times he never could have believed it possible that in so short a time things should have become so quiet as they now are. I hear too that an unusually warm appreciation has arrived from the Secretary of State.

Lord Curzon then talked away about the Mission saying he was convinced the Russians were upto some (harm?) and he was determined to forestal them and that there was no man in India he could trust better than me to carry out his plans.(18) In his telegram to the Secretary of State about this mission he wrote, "I propose to appoint as Commissioner Major Younghusband who is at present Resident at Indore. He has great Asiatic experience, and he is an officer on whose judgement and discretion I can confidently rely. He should occupy temporarily the rank of Colonel".

The Viceroy said to me "You will be glad to get back to your old work and away from all the administrative work." So of course I am. Nevertheless I would not have missed those years of internal work for anything and even if I had remained on the frontier I would never have had anything better than this.

Kitchener was very pleasant and agreeable - inclined I think to be a little more cautious than the Viceroy but thoroughly in earnest about this business. What of course is to be feared is not any armed invasion of India by the Russians through Tibet. That is impossible. But an effort by the Russians if they are in Tibet to get hold of the Nepalese. Say Russia was in Tibet we should undoubtedly have to keep a considerable force to watch Nepal. By timely action now we can prevent her gaining any predominant influence in Tibet. I hear from a gossiping little man that it is practically settled that the Viceroy stays on two years but he wants four months leave and the Home people will give him only six weeks, so they are squabbling over that.(19)

The same man also tells me that there was a great flutter in the F.O. over that letter I wrote them from Deoli about Tonk when they would not accept the British Officer whom the Nawab asked for but insisted on sending a Native. The F.O. got in a great stew, though they must have put their foot in it badly and begged the Viceroy to get

them out of the mess. The result as you will remember was that I was informed that the Gov. Gen. in Council highly appreciated my work and Government went back on their former orders and accepted my proposal for a European. The F.O. have apparently had a good whole some respect of me ever since and yet that weak-kneed nonentity Martindale when I wrote that letter suggested to me privately that I should withdraw it and he would send it back to me privately and say no more about it. It was only when on the receipt of his letter I wired to him that I fully intended to maintain my position that he sent it on.

I am staying up here with Dane. He is really not half so bad as I thought. He had lots of go and enterprise in him and good robust commonsense. The Viceroy hops on to him(20) and everybody else too badly though when anything goes wrong.

Mrs. Dane was Edith Norman and is also much better than I expected. She has no side on and is throughly devoted to her children.

I am dining with the Viceroy on 25th - leave here 26th probably. Go for a day to Indore. Then to Darjeeling till June 15th and probably reach Khampa Jong July 1st. Beyond that I am not to go without the Secretary of State's orders.

Helen(21) will I think go to Darjeeling and I shall be able to get back occasionally to see her.

Your affectionate son,
Frank

Notes

1. In the bunch of 53 letters from Youngusband bearing on the Lhasa expedition there is one preceding it. This is date-lined 'Indore Residency May 7 03' and refers to 'a mysterious letter' which he had received from Simla and wherein his correspondent, one Cabriel, had asked 'to take him with me on my journey and saying he supposes he will see me shortly at Simla.' 'Evidently', Youngusband concluded, 'something is up'. But what I do not know. Probably a mission to Nepal or Tibet.' How correctly had he guessed?
2. In his well-known despatch of January 8, 1903, Lord Curzon had suggested, inter alia, that the venue for the conference, which the Chinese Amban had proposed, should be Lhasa; that the meeting be held in the spring of 1903 and that a representative of the Tibetan Government should be associated with the discussions.

For the text see, *East India (Tibet) Papers Relating to Tibet*, Cd.1920, (London, 1904), No. 66. pp. 150-56. There were 23 enclosures and 19 annexures to this despatch. Abbreviated, et., seq., as *Tibet Papers*.

3. The British Government had rejected Curzon's proposals but had given him the go ahead for his negotiations with the Chinese and the Tibetans. *Ibid.*, No. 85, p. 188.
4. This was John Claude White, Political Officer in Sikkim since 1889. His book, *Sikkim and Bhutan; Twenty-one years on the North-east Frontier, 1887-1908*, (London 1909), refers only briefly to the Lhasa expedition.
5. 'Small Boy' was the nick-name always used for Leslie, Young-husband's younger brother. He later rose to be Major General Leslie Napier Younghusband, followed his brothers in active service on the North-west Frontier and, during World War I, commanded the force covering the Persian oilfields.
6. Kathleen was the name of Leslie Younghusband's wife.
7. Emmie was Younghusband's unmarried sister who lived for most part with their father. This would explain why quite a few of the letters from Tibet in this collection are addressed to her. Younghusband was, for long time, very close to his sister.
8. John (later Sir John) Malcolm, who rose to be Governor of the Bombay Presidency (1827-30) was sent by Lord Wellesley in 1799 to Persia. After about a year's stay, and 'by his prodigal use of gold,' Malcolm was able to arrange two treaties with Fath Ali Shah, the then ruler of the country. The first was commercial and provided for the establishment of factories in Persia, it also ceded some islands in the Persian Gulf to the East India Company. The second was political and was directed against the aggression of Afghanistan and the extension of French influence in Persia.

Alexander (later Sir Alexander) Burnes led a mission, ostensibly commercial, to Dost Muhammad, the then Amir of Kabul, in 1837-38. In reality its aim was political namely, to conciliate the rulers of Afghanistan so as to 'secure their friendly cooperation in resisting the tide of Russo-Persian invasion'. Burnes, however, did not get very far, for Dost Muhammad was anxious to recover Peshawar with the aid of the British and this

Lord Auckland, the then Governor-General, would not hear of. In 1841, Burnes, who had accompanied the expeditionary force to Kabul, to restore Shah Shuja was murdered alongwith Macnaghten.

The idea of an 'imposing mission' to Lhasa, and its comparison with Malcolm's and Burnes', is characteristic of Curzon's entire mental make-up and his penchant for the grandiose and the magnificent.

9. In a private letter to Lord George Hamilton, the Secretary of State for India on May 7, 1903, Curzon had written:

'My idea would be to frighten the Chinese and Tibetans into the acceptance of Gyantse by offering them as the only alternative to a representative at Lhasa itself. They will be so ready to bribe us out of the latter proposal that they may concede the former.'

Curzon to Hamilton, *Curzon-Hamilton Correspondence*, in the India Office Library, referred subsequently as *Hamilton papers*.

10. There had been, in the spring of 1902, persistent rumours about a Russo-Chinese deal on Tibet. Rumours apart, there was the Viceroy's own conviction that 'some sort of relations' existed between Russia and Tibet. In his despatch of January 8, 1903, alluded to earlier, Curzon had talked about the degree to which 'we can permit the influence of another great power' to be exercised for the first time in the history of Tibet. For Tibet's relations in the past, he had pointed out, had always been with China, Nepal or the British in India and Tibetan exclusiveness had been tolerated because it had carried with it no element of political or military danger.'

For details, *Supra*, n 2.

11. On April 8, 1903, on instructions from St. Petersburg, Count Benckendorff, the Russian Ambassador in London, informed Lord Landsowne, the then Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, in the most emphatic manner that 'Russia had no agreement, alliance, or treaty of any kind or sort with Tibet; nor does it contemplate any transaction of the kind'. There were no Russian agents, much less a mission in Lhasa, nor was there any intention of sending them there. Russian policy, the Count, explained, could best be summed up in the phrase, 'ne viserait le Thibet en aucun cas.' Hamilton to Curzon, letter, April 8, 1903, *Hamilton Papers*.

12. Despite denials from Peking and St. Petersburg, about the 'apocryphal' text of the agreement, the Viceroy was clearly convinced of its existence. As he wrote to the Secretary of State, 'I am myself a firm believer in the existence of a secret understanding, if not a secret treaty.'
13. Younghusband's opinion of White was to undergo a complete change in the weeks and months ahead when he began to distrust and, later, even ignore him.
14. This was to be Ernest (later Sir Ernest) Wilton.
15. Hamilton had written to Curzon.
'it is self-evident that if negotiations break down and the Tibetans still decline to give assent to the obligations, we must express our disapproval. . . . (and that could only) take the shape . . . of either a blockade or the occupation of the Chumbi Valley'. Hamilton to Curzon letter, May 28, 1903, *Hamilton Papers*.
16. Louis (later Sir Louis) Dane, then Foreign Secretary to the Government of India.
17. This was Captain William (later Sir William) Fredrick O'Connor who accompanied the expedition to Lhasa as Secretary ('Intelligence Officer') to the Mission.
18. Curzon had enjoined Younghusband 'not to look upon him as Viceroy, but as an old friend and fellow-traveller.' He confessed, however,
'The first part of his injunction was difficult to obey. It would have taken a man with a larger imagination than I have not to look upon Curzon as Viceroy.' Cited in George Seaver, *Francis Younghusband*, (London, 1952), p. 198.
19. There was an unseemly quarrel about Curzon going on leave. The king, Edward VII, had entered strong objections and as his Secretary (Lord Knollys) wrote to Arthur Balfour, then Prime Minister, 'His Majesty is still of opinion that the Viceroy should only be allowed to remain six weeks, or at the most two months', to which the Prime Minister had replied by recommending that 'his (Curzon's) plans should in substance be accepted'. And this 'in spite of Curzon's extraordinary behaviour and still more extraordinary'-letter, at whose 'tone and temper' he (Balfour) 'confessed to being much disappointed.' *Balfour Papers*, British Museum, Vol. I.

20. In a subsequent letter Younghusband, remarked that, 'At the interview when Dane was present he (Curzon) always called Dane-Mr. Dane and was exceedingly stiff with him. I think he might with advantage unbend to others as well as me - but I suppose being a youngman when he came out he stiffened himself up to assert himself and so keeps stiffened up.'
21. Helen was Younghusband's wife.
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