

BOOK REVIEWS

PERCEVAL LANDON : *Lhasa* 2 Vols. London: Hurst and Blackett 1905. Photomechanic Reprint 1978. Delhi Kailash Publishers 1978. Rs. 300/\$60.

Author's subtitle runs thus: An Account of the Country and People of Central Tibet and of the Progress of the Mission sent there by the English Government in the year 1903-4, written with the help of all the principal persons of the Mission. Publishers of the reprint put the subtitle 'The Mysterious City' on the dust cover. This reviewer would have suggested a subtitle thus: Travel Diary cum War Diary cum Political Commentary of the Times Correspondent with the Younghusband Expedition.

The two volumes (pp 414 & 426) may not be classed with specialist works like Waddell's *Lhasa and its Mysteries* reviewed in the previous issue of this *Bulletin*. Yet they have great value both for the specialists and the general readers. The author, Perceval Landon, had travelled widely before he was destined to visit Lhasa and Central Tibet and in reporting his travels he wielded his pen like a man of letters of the late Victorian era. "He took the keenest interest in the mysteries of Tibet and appreciated to the full the wonderful scenery which to my mind was infinitely the most fascinating of all our experiences" as Francis Younghusband wrote in his Introductory Note.

Landon's exquisite accounts of the wonderful landscapes from the rail-head Siliguri to the destination Lhasa are quite many, while limited space for review would not permit extracting more than two.

The foliage of the Tista valley from Sevoke onwards covers several pages.

"The Himalayas' southern front ends with an abruptness which is almost startling, and five or six miles away it would have been difficult to point out a fissure in the great wall of mountains which stands untopped across the wide flat waste of northern Bengal. Through this curtain there is this one narrow channel and India ends at its jaws. The towering cliffs, clothes suddenly with vegetation wherever root-hold can be found, spring sharply upwards, and the first turn in the track by the river hides the plains, with their blue lines of trees fifteen miles away beside the levelled water. Sevoke, planted at the water-side just where the sticks of the fan diverge, is a little street of grubby. Dust hangs heavy in the air, and dryness dulls the leaves. The only wet thing at Sevoke is the water itself, as it slackens way and gently swerves outwards at the foot of its long stair. Even the rough dugout boats, moored to the pebbly bank, are coated with dust, and the lumps of camphor are almost indistinguishable in the boxes in the shops from the inevitable Pedro cigarettes beside them. From Sevoke onwards the beauty of the road begins to grow. The track runs on the westward bank of the Tista, fifteen or twenty feet above the snow-green water. Almost from the first mile post it is a gradually increasing riot of foliage such as Hooker himself admitted to be unparalleled

in the world. There is no colour on God's palette which He has not used along this road. There is no variety of vegetation which He has not permitted to find its own place somewhere beside the slowly chilling path. Sal and gurjun lead on through teak to kapok and bamboo, then on through tree fern and rhododendron to the pine. Beyond these last, birch-trees alone survive among the frozen rocks of the upper snows. At their roots, or from the hill-side above their tops, round their stems, or springing from their wood is almost every flower known to man, here wasting its luxuriance along the loneliest and liveliest two hundred miles on earth. Pepper ferns, with their dark green glossy foliage, vines and bind weeds, begonias and asphodel tangle themselves about the undergrowth of gorgeous shrubs, or stumps gay with scarlet fungus and dripping moss. Overhead the bald scarp of the rock, orange and ochre and cinnamon rarely broke through the trailing glories of smilax and other creepers. Once or twice down on the road itself, where a passage had been blasted years ago, the deep crystalline garnet rang not only with the echoes of the sweeping water below, but with the tiny persistence of the drip-well from its roof. Ferns lurk in every cleft, and, higher up, the majesty of some great osmunda thrusts itself clear of the green confusion round its roots. Of greens, indeed, from the dark moss myrtle of some varnished leaf that ought to have been a magnolia, but probably was not, to the aquamarine of the young and dusted bamboo grass, from the feathery emerald of some patch of giant moss to the rich olive of a crown-vallary of orchid, none is unrepresented.

“Where the valley vegetation lies in the ugliest putrefaction there you will find the living jewels of this long fillet—a flash of emerald and chrome glazed with chocolate; a patch of brown, shot through with sapphire in the sun; a swallow-tail with olivine and black velvet where we may rarely see, beside some Norfolk broad, the dun and cream of his poor English cousin. Strong in the wing, zigzagging unballasted in ten-foot swoops of pure colour, the butterflies lace the sunlight. And underfoot in the deep soft white dust the kidney footmark of the brown ox, or the kukri-like print of the high in-stepped native are the only reminders in that hot world of colour that there are other things as graceless as oneself.”

“The colour of Tibet” in Landon's knowledge “has no parallel in the world. Nowhere, neither in Egypt, nor in South Africa, nor even in places of such local reputation as Sydney, or Calcutta, or Athens, is there such a constancy of beauty, night and morning alike, as there is in these fertile plains inset in the mountain backbone of the world. Here there is a range and a quality in both light and colour which cannot be rendered by the best of coloured plates, but which must always be remembered if the dry bones of figure and fact are to be properly conceived.

“During the mid-hours of a summer day, Tibet is perhaps not unlike the rest of the dry tropical zone. Here, as elsewhere, the fierce Oriental sun scares away the softer tints, and the shrinking and stretching shadows of the white hours are too scanty to relieve the mirage and the monotony. All about Chang-lo the contemptuous shoulders of the shadeless mountains stand blank and unwelcoming. All along the plain as far as the eye can see the stretches of iris or barley and the plantations of willow-thorn are dulled into eucalyptus grey by the dust; the trees lift themselves dispirited, and the faint droop of every blade and every leaf tires the eye with unconscious sympathy. Far off along the Shigatse road a packmule shuffles along, making in sheer

weariness as much dust as the careless hoofs of a bullock, that dustiest of beasts. One does not look at the houses. The sun beats off their coarse and strong grained white-wash, and one can hardly believe that they are the same dainty buildings of pearl-grey or rose-pink that one watched as they faded out of sight with the sunset yesterday evening. Everything shivers behind the crawling skeins of mirage. There is no strength, there are no outlines to anything in the plain, and even the hardthorn trees in the plantation are flaccid. As one passes underneath them a kite or two dives downward from the branches. He will disturb little dust as he moves, for your kite mistrusts a new perch, and the bough he sits on must be leafless both for the traverse of his outlook, and for the clear oarage of his wide wings. Also, you may be sure he has been to and fro fifty times to-day. See him settle a hundred yards away near that ugly significant heap of dirty maroon cloth, and mark the dust thrown forward by the thrashing brake-stroke of his great wings. It hangs in a pretty cloud still when we have come up to him and driven him away in indignation for a little space.

“Under foot the dwarf clematis shuts in from the midday heat its black snake-head flowers, and the young shoots of the jasmine turn the backs of their tender leaflets to the sun, dropping a little as they do so. Veronica is there in stunted little bushes; vetches, rest-harrows, and dwarf indigolike plants swarm along the sides of the long dry water channels; and here and there, where the ditch runs steep, you may find, along towards the southern face, what looks for all the world like a thickly-strewn bank of violets. Violets of course they are not, but the illusion is perfect, in colour, growth, and size alike. Near them tall fresh-looking docks have found a wet stratum deep below the dusty irrigation cut, and away in a sopping water meadow by the river stunted Himalayan primulas make a cloudy carpet of pink.

“Late in the afternoon the change begins. Details of flowers and fields and trees vanish—and surely one is content to lose them in the scene that follows. First, the light pall of pure blue which has all day gauzed over the end of the valley towards Dongtse deepens into ultramarine ash. Then in a few minutes as it seems, the fleeces of white and silver in the west have gathered weight, and a mottled company of argent and silver-grey and cyanine heaps itself across the track of the setting sun. The sky deepens from blue to amber without a transient tint of green, and the red camp-fires whiten as the daylight fades. But the true sunset is not yet. After many minutes comes the sight which is perhaps Tibet’s most exquisite and peculiar gift: the double glory of the east and west alike, and the rainbow confusion among the wide waste of white mountain ranges.

“For ten minutes the sun will fight a path clear of his clouds and a luminous ray sweeps down the valley, lighting up the unsuspected ridges and blackening the lurking hollows of the hills. This is no common light. The Tibetans themselves have given it a name of its own, and indeed the gorse-yellow blaze which paints its shadows myrtle-green underneath the deepened indigo of the sky defies description and deserves a commemorative phrase for itself alone. But the strange thing is still to come. A quick five-fingered aurora of rosy light arches over the sky, leaping from east to west as one gazes overhead. The fingers converge again in the east, where a growing splendour shapes itself to welcome them on the horizon’s edge.

“Then comes the climax of the transformation scene. While the carmine

is still over-arching the sky, on either side the horizon deepens to a still darker shade, and the distant hills stand out against it with uncanny sharpness, iridescent for all the world like a jagged and translucent scale of mother-of-pearl lighted from behind. Above them the ravines and the ridges are alike lost, and in their place mantles a pearly underplay of rosepetal pink and eau-de-nil green, almost moving as one watches. Then the slowly developed tints tire and grow dull; the quick evening gloom comes out from the plain, and a sharp little wind from the south-east is the herald of the stars.

“These sunsets are as unlike the “cinnamon, amber, and dun” of South Africa as the high crimson, gold-flecked curtains of Egypt, or the long contrasting belts of the western sky in mid-ocean. So peculiar are they to this country that they have as much right to rank as one of its characteristic features as Lamaic superstition, or the “bos grunniens” itself; and to leave them unmentioned, however imperfect and crude the suggestion may be, would be to cover up the finest page of the book which is only now after many centuries opened to the world. That alone is my excuse for attempting what every man in this expedition knows in his heart to be impossible.”

Landon was as good an observer of Nature as of War. His admiration of 32 Pioneers (Sikhs) and of the Indian clerk may be quoted in this connection.

“... What the hardship must have been of climbing up to an altitude which could not have been of less than 18,500 feet it is difficult for the ordinary reader to conceive. Hampered alike by his accoutrements and by the urgent anxiety for rapidity, Wassawa Singh still gave his men but scanty opportunities of rest. It was such a climb as many a member of the Alpine Club would, under the best circumstances, have declined to attempt, and the Order of Merit which was afterwards conferred upon Wassawa Singh was certainly one of the most hardly earned distinctions of the campaign.”

“... But, well or ill, every man reached for his rifle and came out to his place. The members of the Mission—Colonel Younghusband, Lieut.-Colonel Waddell, Captain Ryder, and, it should not be forgotten, Mr Mitter, the confidential clerk of the Mission—immediately manned the upper works, and a certain number of the followers displayed considerable martial energy in positions of more or less personal danger.”

The first passage describes the capture of Karo La and the second refers to the siege of Gyantse camp. There are passages appreciating the bravery and skill of the Gurkhas and Pathans. About the Pandit Surveyors Landon wrote “I do not know that there are many feats in the world of adventure, endurance and pluck that will compare favourably with that of the Indian native entrusted with the work of secret exploration in Tibet.” Such secret explorations had made the task of Younghusband Expedition less difficult.

Landon’s observations on the political and diplomatic affairs were profound.

“Chinese supremacy over Tibet nominally dates from the year 1720, and as about that time the policy of isolation was adopted, it is not unreasonable to suppose that the Chinese pressed it upon the Tibetans with the idea of making a “buffer state” of the most impenetrable description between their province and the unknown but growing power of the foreigners in India.

Perhaps it was not the white foreigners alone that they dreaded; Nadir Shah's invasion of India in 1727 must have been the cause of some anxiety to the Middle Kingdom. In any case we may fairly accept the definite statement of many travellers that the isolation of Tibet was in its origin a Chinese device. But they taught willing pupils, and the tables are now so far reversed that the Chinese are unable to secure admittance into the province even for the strangers to whom they have given official permission..."

In the concluding pages we read about the hostile demonstration, and stone throwing, over the Chinese escorting Claude White, F.C. Wilton and Perceval Landon around the Lhasa Cathedral.

"The real significance of this incident must not be mistaken; in itself it was of no very great moment, but as indicating the utter contempt felt by the Tibetans for the suzerain power of Tibet, it is something which we cannot entirely ignore. The more we acquit the actual guardians of the temple from all complicity in it, the more spontaneous and popular does this outburst of indignation against the normal overlords of Tibet become. Even when their suzerainty was supposed to be supported by the presence of our troops, outside, it was possible that this could occur in the heart of Lhasa, and it is in itself a convincing proof that no action of the Chinese with regard to Tibet will, in the future, have any real importance, or be regarded by the Tibetans as binding upon themselves in any way."

Prophetic words indeed; for till the middle of the century Tibet remained independent. Landon, like Waddell, was not objective about the Dalai Lama XIII, the architect of Tibet's independence. Nor could he be fair or pains-taking about Lamaism. Later British scholars like Charles Bell redressed the imbalance to a considerable degree.

About 250 illustrations—photographs, drawings/sketches and colour paintings—and 6 maps add substantially to the pen pictures of Landon. Eleven items in the Appendix detail the composition and personnel of the Young-husband Mission, the history and political background of the events, the governmental system of Tibet, the natural history of Southern Tibet etc. Later researches have amended many of the findings in Landon's book. Even then the book should be of use to specialists. For the general readers the book provides access to the grandeurs and wonders of nature which only sponsored tourists can enjoy today.

The binding and stitching of the two precious volumes should have been stronger and better.

NIRMAL C. SINHA

The following publications will be reviewed in the next number of the *Bulletin*.

ARABINDA DEB : *Bhutan and India* (Calcutta 1976)

JAHAR SEN : *India-Nepal Trade in the Nineteenth Century* (Calcutta 1977)

NIRMAL C. SINHA : *An Introduction to the History and Religion of Tibet* (Calcutta 1975)

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