

The Bogle Mission: travels through Bhutan and Tibet 1774-1777

Review >
Bhutan/Tibet

Diplomat George Bogle and surgeon Alexander Hamilton travelled to Bhutan and Tibet in the late eighteenth century. Their unromanticized accounts, edited by Alastair Lamb, provide insight into Himalayan Buddhist court life in the pre-modern period.

By James Cooper

In 1774 Warren Hastings, the Governor General of India, dispatched a young Scotsman, George Bogle, as emissary to the Panchen Lama's court in Tibet's second largest city Shigatse. The Panchen Lama, an outgoing and intelligent man, was then the most powerful figure in Tibet outside the capital Lhasa. Despite, or perhaps because of the growing influence of Beijing at Lhasa, the Panchen Lama was prepared to carry out his own foreign policy initiatives.

A trade route to Lhasa

Following the closure of Nepal's borders after the Gurkha overthrow of the Newars in 1769, Hastings hoped the Bogle mission would lead to the establishment of a trade route between India and China. Although a community of Capuchin missionaries had lived in Lhasa in the early years of the eighteenth century, there had been no diplomatic contacts between modern Europe and Tibet. In retrospect, the Bogle mission brought only limited and short-term benefits to trade and politics. After 1792, the Tibetans closed their doors to Europeans, until they were forced to enter into relations with British India by the Younghusband mission of 1903-04. Only a handful of Europeans were able to visit central Tibet in the nineteenth century.

Bogle, accompanied by surgeon Alexander Hamilton, enjoyed a hospitable reception in Tibet and was apparently fascinated by its culture. He also seems to have formed a warm personal relationship with the Panchen Lama during

his stay in Shigatse; the Scotsman enjoyed an ease of access to the Panchen's court that no European ever enjoyed again. Bogle died soon after returning to India, before he could collate the reports that he compiled for Hastings concerning conditions in Tibet (and Bhutan, through which he travelled to Shigatse).

Significance for Tibetan studies

The writings of Bogle and Hamilton have, until now, remained largely unknown, with only one less than comprehensive and poorly sourced early twentieth century summary of Bogle's observations available to the general reader.

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Yet the reports of these eighteenth-century travellers provide a unique resource for the study of Tibet in the pre-modern period. Alastair Lamb has thus rendered great service in providing a properly edited version of Bogle and Hamilton's writings.

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to the world. In gathering information about Tibet, religion received less attention from Bogle than might be expected. Bogle also instructed the Panchen in the ways of the outside world. He not only wrote an account of Europe that became the main Tibetan source on the subject, but also a play demonstrating British theatrical culture. Unfortunately, this was apparently so dull that Lamb has judged it best excluded from this volume.

Lamb, the leading authority on Indo-Tibetan diplomatic relations in the colonial period, has worked intermittently on the primary sources for the Bogle mission for nearly fifty years, and is uniquely qualified to edit this work, which is enriched by his own notes. This is, however, only the first of two scheduled volumes, with the discussion of the wider context of the mission, as well as the index and maps, reserved for the second volume. This produces certain difficulties for the reader, and it is hoped that the appearance of the second volume will not be overly delayed. Standing alone, however, this volume provides an invaluable and unromanticized picture of contemporary Tibetan society that will be of considerable and enduring interest to scholars and to anyone interested in this Himalayan region. <

- Lamb, A., ed. (2002) *Bhutan and Tibet: The Travels of George Bogle and Alexander Hamilton 1774-1777*; vol.1, Letters, Journals and Memoranda, Hertingfordbury: Roxford Books pp. 479, ISBN 0 907129 13 7

James Cooper is a private scholar based in London. He has published several articles on the Western exploration of Tibet and its encounter with modernity.
mars.hotel@virgin.net