

NUGGETS

Extracts from travel writing about the Pamirs



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What motivates adventure travellers? Certainly the stimulus of danger and interest in unknown territories and peoples, but in answer to the question "Why?" most would probably give the simple and yet enigmatic answer: "Because it was there."

Accounts of adventure travel contain contradictions: on the one hand it is enjoyed as a solitary occupation, on the other hand contact on a journey with other humans offers great comfort (even if communication is not always easy) and stimulates warmth of feeling for "the brotherhood of man"; attention to simple issues of survival often precludes time for reflexion, yet adventurers often write superb descriptions of natural scenery and develop deep philosophies of life in their writings; ever-present danger ought logically to prohibit light-heartedness, and yet a sense of humour seems to be a most useful quality for maintaining a balanced judgement in times of crisis; scant concern for personal comfort goes hand in hand with strong self-esteem.¹

The extracts that follow are largely taken from my account of the 19th century exploration of the Pamirs in *Tajikistan and the High Pamirs*, published by Odyssey in 2011 (2nd edition). I have labelled the selection "Nuggets" as they represent some of the richest, most entertaining and interesting extracts from the stories of these travellers, to which I have added a minimum of explanatory text of my own.

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"In Ts'ung-ling there is snow both in winter and summer. Moreover there are poison-dragons, who when evil-purposed spit poison, winds, rain, snow, drifting sand, and gravel stones; not one of ten thousand meeting these calamities, escapes. The people of that land are also called Snowy-mountain men."
(Fa-hien, *Fo-kwô-ki*, ca. 400 CE; English translation by Samuel Beal, London 1869)

"Crossing the Pamirs is not a bed of roses – I know this from my own experience."
Sven Hedin, Preface to Filchner Wilhelm, *Ein Ritt über den Pamir*, Berlin 1903.

¹ Witness, for example, the photos of Lord Dunmore and Ralph Cobbold below, staged with great panache long after the event in some London photographer's studio.

The Pamirs were, in the late 19th century, the scene of some epic episodes of the "Great Game" and were, at least in name, familiar to newspaper readers in most European countries:

.... this barren and inaccessible upland, with its scanty handful of wild people, finds a place in Eastern history and geography from an early period, and has now become the subject of serious correspondence between two great European Governments, and its name, for a few weeks at least, a household word in London. Indeed, this is a striking accident of the course of modern history. We see the Slav and the Englishman – representatives of two great branches of the Aryan race, but divided by such vast intervals of space and time from the original common starting-point of their migration – thus brought back to the lap of Pamir to which so many quivering lines point as the centre of their earliest seats, there by common consent to lay down limits to mutual encroachment.²

I have therefore included a longer section illustrating the issues involved, including some diplomatic exchanges that serve to correct the impression that Anglo-Russian rivalry there might have led to war. Despite the derring-do of the best-known Great Game players, there were cooler heads at all times in the Foreign Offices in Moscow and London (if not always in Calcutta and Simla).

It is difficult for us today to appreciate the fascination of Central Asia for educated people of the 19th century. The Oxus, in particular, seems to have been endowed with almost mystical qualities: Captain Henry Trotter, the third European to visit its upper reaches since Marco Polo in the 13th century and the Jesuit Benedict Goës in the 17th, wrote of an "almost sacred interest" attached to it.³ G.E. Wheeler, in the introduction to the 1976 edition of John Wood's account of his famous *Journey to the Source of the Oxus* (see below), comments that

throughout the nineteenth century the pin-pointing of a great river's source was regarded as a matter of much greater importance than it is today, especially when the river was the Oxus, to which a romantic aura had long been attached. The reason for this aura is far from clear.

This aura was well reflected by Matthew Arnold (1822-1888) in his poem *Sohrab and Rustum*:

.... But the majestic river floated on,
Out of the mist and hum of that low land,
Into the frosty starlight, and there moved,
Rejoicing, through the hush'd Chorasmian waste,
Under the solitary moon;—he flow'd
Right for the polar star, past Orgunjè,
Brimming, and bright, and large; then sands begin
To hem his watery march, and dam his streams,
And split his currents; that for many a league
The shorn and parcell'd Oxus strains along
Through beds of sand and matted rushy isles—
Oxus, forgetting the bright speed he had
In his high mountain-cradle in Pamere,
A foil'd circuitous wanderer—till at last
The long'd-for dash of waves is heard, and wide
His luminous home of waters opens, bright
And tranquil, from whose floor the new-bathed stars
Emerge, and shine upon the Aral Sea.

Georg Nathaniel, Lord Curzon was also typical of his generation:

² *Quarterly Review*, London April, 1873, p. 548.

³ *Journal of the Royal Geographical Society*, Vol. 48 (1878), p.198.

Descending from the hidden “Roof of the World”, its waters tell of forgotten peoples and whisper secrets of unknown lands. They are believed to have rocked the cradle of our race. Long the legendary watermark between Iran and Turan, they have worn a channel deep into the fate of humanity. World-wide conquerors, an Alexander and a Tamerlane, slaked their horses’ thirst in the Oxus stream; Eastern poets drank inspiration from its fountains; Arab geographers boasted of it as ‘superior in volume, in depth, and in breadth to all the rivers of the earth’.⁴

Another intrepid traveller, Ralph Cobbold (see below), waxed equally lyrical:

The scenes that have been enacted on the banks of the mighty Oxus are multifarious; indeed, one conjures up visions of mighty conquerors who have founded dynasties, which in turn have been vanquished by mightier men; of Alexander and his conquering Greeks; of the Chinese, the Arabs, the Mongols, and now the Muscovite. What tales of bloody wars and countless battles could not the Oxus unfold had it the gift of speech.⁵

Another source of fascination was the firmly held belief, mentioned by Curzon, that the peoples of Central Asia were the cradle of European ethnicity. The French explorer, J.B. Paquier, wrote in 1876:

C’est sur les contreforts occidentaux du Pamir que commence véritablement pour nous la première histoire des races européennes.⁶

Subsequent explorers and authors (including the present one) were amazed to find fair-skinned (frequently blond-haired and blue-eyed) peoples in the heart of Central Asia, descendants of the Saka Iranian ethnic group driven progressively westward (and upward) by Mongol incursions over the centuries.

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WHY?

Sir Charles MacGregor, *Wanderings in Balochistan*. London 1882, Introduction:

The sight of a map with blank spaces on it produces in me a feeling of mingled shame and restlessness. Of course it is not any particular fault of mine that maps have blank spaces on them, but I always feel the glaring whiteness of the blanks looking reproachfully at me. Judging from my own feelings, I think it would be a good plan if the Geographical Society were to have all unexplored tracts painted on their maps some conspicuous colour, say scarlet, as the sight of these burning spots, thus prominently brought to their notice, would, I feel sure, rouse much of the latent energy of young Britons, and perhaps divert a good deal of it from mooning about the Row to more useful wanderings to unknown regions.



John Wood, *A Journey to the Source of the River Oxus*, London, John Murray, 1872, pp. 150-151.

It was late when we entered the village [Khanabad], and to the hospitality of some of the students in its Madrasa, or colleges, we were indebted for shelter and for firing. Our horses were soon stabled in a corner of the court-yard and, having seen that their provender bags were not empty, we entered as snug a berth as the

⁴ *Russia in Central Asia in 1889 and the Central Asian Question*, London 1889, p. 144.

⁵ Ralph P. Cobbold, *Innermost Asia – Travel and Sport in the Pamirs*, London 1900, p. 193.

⁶ "Pamir et Kashgarie", *Bulletin de la Société de Géographie*, Paris, June 1877, p. 605.

most fastidious traveller could desire. A march of seventeen miles through a thick grass jungle often knee deep in water, performed on a keen winter's evening, had prepared us to welcome rest and shelter wherever found; and as we stretched ourselves on the comfortable warm felts, and sipped our tea, I felt a glow at my heart which cannot be described. A calmness of spirit, a willingness to be satisfied and pleased with everything around me, and a desire that others should be as happy as myself.



Lord Dunmore (Charles Adolphus Murray), *The Pamirs; being a Narrative of a Year's Expedition on Horseback and Foot through Kashmir, Western Tibet, Chinese Tartary and Russian Central Asia*, John Murray, London 1893, pp. 204-205.

Christmas Day [1892] - This day, last year, I left England on this expedition, and spent the day in the train and Channel steamer, en route for Brindisi. To-day I spend it in the Alai mountains of Central Asia. Just before we struck tents, a party of three horsemen rode into our camp, and making straight for our fire dismounted, sat round it, and after warming themselves, began to converse with the men, without any preliminary solicitations on their part, or invitation on ours, always excepting the "peace be with you" salutation; in fact, they acted exactly as if they had been expected.

That is the freemasonry of the road, which obtains all over Central Asia, and to my mind, it is a very sound principle to go upon. It amounts to this: that you look upon every man as your friend, until he proves to be your enemy; whereas, the outcome of our much-vaunted civilisation in Europe is, that you look with suspicion upon every man you meet, until you have proved him to be your friend. There is an almost childlike trust and utter absence of suspicion displayed by these people, which is very refreshing after the stilted conventionalities and etiquette of Western Europe.



Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, London, 1902, p. 4.

Now when I was a little chap I had a passion for maps. I would look for hours at South America, or Africa, or Australia and lose myself in all the glories of exploration. At that time there were many blank spaces on the earth and when I saw one that looked particularly inviting on a map (but they all look that) I would put my finger on it and say: When I grow up I will go there.



Ella Maillart, *Oasis Interdites*, Paris 1937 (Reprint Le Livre du Mois 1971).

Commenting on the fact that on the journey from Beijing to Xinjiang and India she would be accompanied by Peter Fleming:

Cette camaraderie pourtant, que je trouvais si plaisante et qui avait tant allégé pour nous les soucis de l'attente à Lanchow, me privait de ce que la découverte, dans mes voyages antérieurs, m'avait apporté de plus intense. Je perdais la joie aiguë, l'ivresse de faire moi-même ma trace, la fierté d'avoir su me débrouiller seule, auxquelles j'étais si habituée. Mais surtout un morceau d'Europe, matière isolante, nous accompagnait inévitablement par le seul fait de notre communauté; je n'étais plus à des milliers de kilomètres de tout ce que

je connaissais, submergée par une Asie à laquelle je m'intégrais. A deux, on n'apprend pas si vite la langue, on n'est pas adopté par les indigènes, on plonge moins dans l'ambiance. (p. 58)

Leaving Kashgar and climbing towards Mustagh Ata:

Essoufflée, je m'arrête un peu, j'admire les gentianes, les edelweiss aux longues tiges et j'écoute le silence des régions désertes, ce silence qui me manque lorsque je suis parmi les hommes, ce silence profond qui inonde le coeur d'immensité

Une fois de plus, comme au cours des nombreuses heures vides de ce voyage, je me demande ce qui me pousse vers les quatre coins du monde? Oui, je sais, je veux voir toujours du nouveau et je répète avec le poète :

Mais les vrais voyageurs sont ceux-là seuls qui partent
Pour partir; cœurs légers, semblables aux ballons
De leur fatalité jamais ils ne s'écartent
Et sans savoir pourquoi, disent toujours: Allons!⁷

mais ce n'est là qu'un effet; quelle est la cause de cette curiosité qui m'éperonne, de ce besoin de voir, de comprendre? Est-ce que je ne fais que dresser des difficultés devant moi pour avoir le plaisir de les surmonter? D'où viennent les attractions auxquelles je me sou mets aveuglément et qui décident pour moi? Que de choses il me reste à apprendre ... (pp. 258-260)

On the road to Gilgit:

Au cours des trois jours de route qui nous séparent de Gilgit, nous n'avons plus rien à faire: les repas se préparent tout seuls, les tentes et les lits de camp sont dressés quand nous arrivons, des tubs d'eau chaude nous attendent, et après l'étape on fait tourner nos chevaux en rond pour les reposer. Les serviteurs s'appellent des "bearers" ou des "chaprassis", tout est parfait, et je songe avec attendrissement à la vie sauvage que nous avons menée. (p. 281)

And, on return to Paris:

Soudain je comprends quelque chose: je sens maintenant, par toute la force de mes sens et toute celle de mon intellect, que Paris n'est rien, ni la France, ni l'Europe, ni les Blancs ... une seule chose compte, envers et contre tous les particularismes, c'est l'engrenage magnifique qui s'appelle le monde. (p. 288)



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HOW?

Charles Adolphus Murray, eighth Earl of Dunmore, *The Pamirs; being a Narrative of a Year's Expedition on Horseback and Foot through Kashmir, Western Tibet, Chinese Tartary and Russian Central Asia*, London 1893 (Reprint Vintage Books, New Delhi, 1993).

Baggage includes eight tents, thirty beddings, camp-furniture, stores, carpenters' tools, medicine chest; navvies' tools, horse-shoeing tools, 3000 nails and 420 horseshoes, guns, rifles, ammunition, spare saddlery, our own kit and that of thirty men; kitchen utensils, scientific instruments, photographic apparatus, etc. ... fifty-one men and 130 live animals [74 yaks and 56 ponies]. (p. 172)

⁷ Baudelaire, *Les Fleurs du Mal* (1857), le Voyage.



Gabriel Bonvalot, 'Voyage dans l'Asie Centrale et au Pamir,' *Bulletin de la Société de Géographie*, Paris, 4e trimestre 1890, pp. 469-498.



Voici en quoi consistait notre harnachement qui nous faisait ressembler en mal à des mastodontes, à des animaux bizarres, aux membres gonflés, au corps étrangement boursoufflé. C'était en bas, des *valinki* ou bottes en feutre double, garnis de cuir sur les coutures et au pied, là-dedans s'enfilait un bas de feutre souple de Kachgar montant plus haut que le genou ; puis une culotte ouatée, et, par là-dessus, un vaste pantalon de cuir ayant un fond fantastique dans lequel entraient une première pelisse collante en mouton de Kachgar, à pans très longs, appelés *bechmet*. Sur cette pelisse on en mettait une autre nommée *touloup*, très larges à manches très amples et très longues mais très étroites du côté de la main qui s'y abrite du froid et du vent. Sur la tête on avait d'abord un *tépé*, bonnet conique en peau de mouton, s'enfonçant plus bas que les oreilles; puis une sorte de capuchon ajusté à la tête, tombant sur le cou et les épaules et taillé de telle sorte par devant qu'on pouvait le croiser sur la figure de façon à cacher la bouche et le nez auxquels on s'intéresse toujours dans les climats froids. Les yeux étaient garantis par des lunettes bombées et bleues. Le tout était serré par la ceinture où pendait le revolver, et en bandoulière nous avions un fusil. Vous comprenez facilement que nous n'avions pas alors l'allure pittoresque de nos preux chevaliers du temps jadis, et que l'on pouvait surtout nous comparer aux plongeurs costumés du scaphandre élégant que vous avez sans doute vu prenant l'air sur la berge de la Seine. (pp. 480-481)



St. George R. Littledale, 'A Journey Across the Pamir from North to South,' *Proceedings of the Royal Geographical Society, London*, Vol 14, No. 1, pp. 1-35.

In Osh they collected a total of twenty-five horses, baked two thousand biscuits as rations for the men accompanying them and bought clothing appropriate for the expedition on which they were about to embark:

I invested in a coat reaching down to my heels, cloth outside, sheepskin within, and a cap with a kind of curtain all round which made a cape over my shoulders, also of sheepskin. Mrs. Littledale had brought lots of wraps, but we had an extra lining of Khotan lambskin put into a cape of Harris cloth, which had already a thick wadding; it was heavy, but she only wore it riding; it completely covered her and the saddle. She found it delightfully warm. (pp. 4-5)

In Tbilissi they had "bought every dried ox tongue we could lay our hands upon," since they "are very portable and made a delightful change from the inevitable mutton we had to live upon later on." Great attention was also paid to proper personal comfort:

I attribute the good health we have always enjoyed on our expeditions mainly to the fact that no matter how cold or wet the weather may have been, we have always had warm and dry beds at night. Our tent was ten feet square, American drill, with a dark-blue lining, and an outer fly with a porch. It weighed, without poles, 80 lb. Edgington made it to our own design seven years ago. We have used it every year since then,

and it looks good for another seven years. If a tent is properly made in the first instance, and is never kept folded up for any length of time when wet, it will last for years Our camp beds were very strong and serviceable, and most comfortable, weighing about 20 lb. apiece, made after the plan of the Indian charpoi, but lighter; a very thin tarpaulin ground sheet, which is lighter, more durable, and far cheaper than mackintosh, kept everything dry below. We had also a most ingenious folding stove, made in Canada, and recommended to me by a great sportsman, Mr. Otho Shaw. A folding chair, table and stool, and a small light carpet, completed the furniture. With tent, bedding, trunks, rifles, ammunition, tent poles, pegs, chair, and table, we had just three pony-loads between us. (p. 5)



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WHO?

John Wood, *A Journey to the Source of the River Oxus*, London: John Murray, 1872.

1837 was a year of crisis in Britain's relations with Dost Mohammad and Afghanistan. At the beginning of the year, Alexander Burnes – who had distinguished himself already in 1832 on a famous journey to Bukhara in native dress – was despatched on an “extraordinary mission” to negotiate with Dost Mohammad and seek to pre-empt the establishment of friendly relations with the Russians. This mission – the failure of which led directly to the first Afghan war and the subsequent murder of Burnes in Kabul – was passed off as commercial in nature and included a survey of the upper reaches of the Indus to assess its potential as a trading thoroughfare. For the latter purpose, it included a young lieutenant from the Indian Navy, John Wood.

Sent on a detour to the court of Murad Ali Beg of Kunduz, Wood began to wonder

how we could most profitably employ this sojourn in Turkistan. The great object of my thought by day and dreams by night had for some time past been the discovery of the source of the Oxus, and Murad Beg on the 10th of December conceded his permission to me to trace the Jihun, an appellation by which this river is better known among the Usbeks. (p. 145)

Deciding to travel as light as possible, he “adopted the costume of the country, as a measure calculated to smooth our intercourse with a strange people,” and was accompanied only by “natives”: three Indians, a Tajik Mullah in the service of Murad Beg and five Afghans.

More intimate acquaintance with the Eastern countries has considerably modified my unfavourable opinion of their inhabitants, and taught me to dissent from those wholesale terms of abuse which Europeans too often lavish on the native population. It will generally be found that our opinions of a people rise as our acquaintance with them increases. Vice in every community is sufficiently prominent to be seen without being sought after; but the wise and good shun notoriety, and it is only when we probe society deep that they are discovered. (p. 146)

Wood developed a special affection for the Tajiks of Badakhshan and felt strongly for the sufferings inflicted on them by their Uzbek rulers.

The Tajiks make good companions, particularly the Mullahs, who have far more liberality of sentiment than their untravelling disciples. They were always pleased to be visited by us, and used to say that we were no Uzbeks but like themselves in features and complexion. Though their own temperament is grave, they delight in a lively associate. Keep talking to them, and no European, with such an audience, can ever want subjects of conversation – and you are sure of their good-will. ... Nowhere is the difference

between European and Mohamedan society more strongly marked than in the lower walks of life. The broad line that separates the rich and poor in civilised society is as yet but faintly drawn in central Asia. Here unreserved intercourse with their superiors has polished the manners of the lower classes; and instead of this familiarity breeding contempt, it begets self-respect in the dependant. .. Indeed all the inferior classes possess an innate self-respect, and a natural gravity of deportment. (p. 194)

Passing through Jerm, then the capital of Badakhshan, to visit the legendary lapis lazuli mines they spent the night at the shrine of Nasir Khusraw, and, continuing the next day in a blustery storm, Wood thought nostalgically of “Scotland and the social gaieties of winter.”

The Kirghiz had unhesitatingly told us that the object of our search was to be found in a lake upon the ‘Bam-i-duniah,’ or *Roof of the World*, in Pamir, and that the road to it was up the durah [narrow mountain valley] or Sir-i-Kol; but though the northerly direction of that valley and of the countries to which it led was, when compared with the Mastuch [Mastuj], as the Chitral durah is sometimes called, almost sufficient evidence in favour of Sir-i-Kol, I thought it prudent to visit the junction of the respective waters. (p. 217)



Junction of the Pamir and Wakhan rivers

Finding the temperature lower and the velocity greater in the stream coming from the north (the Pamir river), Wood decided to follow it. At this point the officer in Murad Beg’s service announced that he would go no further and Wood could not persuade enough of the local Wakhis to accompany him up the Pamir river. In desperation he turned to the hospitable Kyrgyz with whom he had spent the previous night, and was rewarded by the arrival of a party of men with five horses the next day.

The first night was spent in a howling wind at a temperature lower than could be recorded on Wood’s thermometer (it must have been at least -20°C) and the only respite came from the tea that the Kyrgyz managed to prepare.

... before long the tea cup had gone its rounds, infusing a warmth into our frames, and a glow into our hearts, that made us, I dare say, happier than many a party who were at that moment quaffing their claret, and surrounded with all the luxuries of civilised life. (p. 227)

Three men had suffered so much from the cold in the night that they had to be sent back down the valley. Some of the Kyrgyz defected over the next two days, leaving only five in the party. They had been following an existing track in the snow, but from now on, as Wood remarks ironically, “we had no occasion to remark the absence of snow,” and at one point it took them two hours to cover five hundred yards. They could only make progress on the frozen surface of the river. Finally,

at five o'clock in the afternoon of the 19th of February, 1838, we stood, to use a native expression, upon the *Bam-i-Duniah*, or 'Roof of the World,' while before us stretched a noble but frozen sheet of water, from whose western end emerged the infant river of the Oxus. (p. 232)

Contrary to the legend that persists in some histories, Wood did not actually name the lake 'Victoria'.

As I had the good fortune to be the first European who in later times had succeeded in reaching the source of this river, and as, shortly before setting out on my journey, we had received the news of her gracious Majesty's accession to the throne, I was much tempted to apply the name of Victoria to this, if I may so term it, newly re-discovered lake; but on considering that by thus introducing a new name, however honoured, into our maps, great confusion in geography might arise, I deemed it better to retain the name of Sir-i-kol, the appellation given to it by our guides. (p. 233)



Zorkul from the north-west, the direction from which John Wood probably caught his first glimpse of the lake

His first reflection on his achievement was typical of the man.

How strange and how interesting a group would be formed if an individual from each nation whose rivers have their first source in the Pamir were to meet upon its summit; what varieties would there be in person, language and manners; what contrasts between the rough, untamed, and fierce mountaineer and the more civilized and effeminate dweller upon the plain ... (p. 235)

That Wood's identification of Zorkul as the source of the Oxus was later refuted by Curzon and others and that the Pamirs are not actually the source of the four great rivers of antiquity, does nothing to diminish the extraordinary achievement of his journey: no European followed in his footsteps for another thirty-two years.



Gabriel Bonvalot, 'Voyage dans l'Asie Centrale et au Pamir,' *Bulletin de la Société de Géographie*, Paris, 4e trimestre 1890, pp. 469-498.

Bonvalot and his companions Guillaume Capus and Albert Pépin were the first Europeans to cross the Pamirs from north to south in 1887. In contrast to later British adventurers (see above, Dunmore and Littledale) they were remarkably dilettante about the management of their supplies, a nonchalance that nearly cost them their lives.⁸ Bonvalot's prose is bombastic at times and he is full of his own self-importance (he went on to a successful career in French politics). He was also singularly ungrateful to the British for having effectively saved their mission. Lord Curzon noted that:

⁸ According to Bonvalot's account, towards the end of their journey in the Pamirs they were so desperate for food that they actually robbed itinerant Kyrgyz at gunpoint.

Continuing to Bozai Gumbaz and Sarhad, after an unsuccessful attempt upon the Irshad Pass, they crossed the Baroghil and descended the Yarkand river to Mastuj, whence they were rescued in an almost destitute condition by the kindly offices of Lord Dufferin, at that time Viceroy of India, and safely escorted to Simla. Their books do not err on the side of generosity⁹

From time to time, however, his prose becomes poetic, as in this reflexion on the Alai:

Je regarde, tout est blanc, éblouissant, on a la sensation d'être dans un autre monde, d'être tombé dans une planète désolée. J'aperçois les collines de la vallée de l'Alaï enchevêtrées comme des boucliers blancs de guerriers, faisant la tortue aux pied des cônes immenses et impassibles du Transalaï, ce second rempart du Pamir. De quelque côté que l'oeil se dirige, tout est blanc, un linceul immaculé est développé sur cette nature sans vie, au calme cadavérique; on dirait une terre abandonnée des ses habitants partis pour un monde meilleur. (pp. 484-485)



Alaï and Transalaï



Francis Younghusband and the 1891 'Pamir incident', a high-water mark in the 'Great Game' that led to a paroxysm of anti-Russian feeling in Britain, encouraged by a jingoist press. As is frequently the case in such press campaigns, the reality was somewhat more nuanced.

In 1888, a Russian captain (Bronislav Ludwigovich Grombchevsky) reached Hunza through the Pamirs and spent a month there: his warm reception by the Mir was a source of serious concern to the British, and added to their suspicions of Russian intentions in the Pamirs. Captain Francis Younghusband was sent by the Viceroy to explore the extent of Chinese authority in the region and the chances it might give to hold off the Russians.

In October 1889, Younghusband's path crossed fortuitously with that of Grombchevsky in the Yarkand valley: their meeting passed off cordially and without incident – indeed Grombchevsky seemed even to support the British thesis of Chinese sovereignty over the eastern and southern Pamirs.

Younghusband described their meeting as follows:

⁹ See George Nathaniel Curzon, *The Pamirs and the Source of the Oxus*, Geographical Journal, Royal Geographical Society, 1896, p. 78.

At the camping-ground near the junction of the Ilisu with the Yarkand River, I received a letter from Captain Grombtchevsky, written in Turki, saying that he had halted at Khaian-aksai and was anxious to meet me. I answered, in Persian and English, that I was very glad to have the opportunity of meeting so distinguished a traveller, and would arrange to encamp with him the next day.

On October 23 we marched to Khaian-aksai, leaving the valley of the Yarkand River and ascending a narrow valley whose bottom was almost choked up with the thick growth of willow trees. Rounding a spur, we saw ahead of us the little Russian camp, and on riding up to it a fine-looking man dressed in the Russian uniform came out of one of the tents and introduced himself as Captain Grombtchevsky. He was about thirty-six years of age, tall, and well built, and with a pleasant, genial manner. He greeted me most cordially, and introduced me to a travelling naturalist. We had a short talk, and he then asked me to have dinner with him, and we sat down to a very substantial repast of soup and stews, washed down with a plentiful supply of vodka.

This was the first meeting of Russian and English exploring parties upon the borderlands of India, and there was much in each of us to interest the other. Captain Grombtchevsky had already been to Hunza, having made a venturesome journey across the Pamirs into that country in 1888, that is, the year before we met. It had on the present occasion been his intention, he informed me, to penetrate to the Punjab through Chitral or Kafiristan, but the Amir of Afghanistan had refused him permission to enter Afghan territory on his way there. He had accordingly come across the Pamirs, and was now hoping to enter Ladak and Kashmir, for a permission to do which he was writing to the British Resident in Kashmir.¹⁰

Grombtchevsky nearly met his death on attempting to reach Tibet after their meeting: Younghusband had – probably with malicious intent – recommended a wholly impracticable itinerary across the Karakoram pass to the edge of the high Tibetan plateau in the middle of December that led to the death of twenty-five of his thirty-three horses and to severe frostbite for his cossack escort.¹¹ He was understandably aggrieved at the British refusal to allow him to pass the winter in Kashmir since

.... at the very time when he was thus treated, the Russian government had given permission to (1) Major Cumberland to travel all over the Russian strategical frontier, viz., through Cashgar, Fergana (Fergistan), Samarkand, Bokhara, and to proceed to Europe by way of the Trans-Caspian Railway; and (2) Lieutenant Littledale to travel in a contrary direction to India, viz., through Turkistan, the Pamir region, Tchatra, etc. and to enter Cashmere by the same route of which Colonel Grambtchevsky desired to make use.¹²

Not long afterwards, similar permission (and VIP treatment) was accorded by the Russians to Lord Dunmore. Grombtchevsky commented ironically:

My expedition comprised only 13 persons, the majority of whom were ignorant Asiatics. Surely, British rule in India is not in such a precarious condition that it has cause to fear such a formidable expedition?¹³

Younghusband's later meeting in Boza-i-Gumbez in the Wakhan in August 1891 with Captain Mikhail Ionov, commander of the Pamirs "flying detachment", although also cordial, ended, however, with Younghusband's ignominious departure under threat of arrest by Ionov, who claimed the territory as Russian. At almost the same time, Lieutenant Davison, an officer who had joined Younghusband in Kashgar, was arrested by the Russians in the Alichur valley near Yashil Kul, and escorted to Marghilan where he was released to an official from the British Embassy in St. Petersburg, C.H.E. Eliot, who happened to be travelling in the region as a guest of the Governor-General of Turkestan, Vrevsky.

¹⁰ Francis Younghusband, *The Heart of a Continent*, pp. 234-5.

¹¹ Peter Hopkirk, *The Great Game - On Secret Service in High Asia*, John Murray, London 1990, pp. 457-458.

¹² Article and interview by W. Barnes Stevini in *Asiatic Quarterly Review*, New Series Vol. II, July-October 1891, p. 257-8.

¹³ *Ibid.* pp. 257.

In a letter to his father dated 4 August 1891,¹⁴ Younghusband wrote:

Things are looking a bit serious. I am on one side of a range of mountains and just over the other side in the Little Pamir is a Russian force which have just quietly walked in and annexed the place in total disregard of the heathen Chinese general whom they met on the way and who tried to impress upon them the fact that the Pamirs belonged to China. The Russians have done a good many barefaced things in their time but by Jove this one takes the cake.

This is how Younghusband described the encounter in his published account:

On August 13 the [Russian] reconnoitring party returned [from the Baroghil pass]. As I looked out of the door of my tent, I saw some twenty Cossacks with six officers riding by, and the Russian flag carried in front. I sent out a servant with my card and invitation to the officers to come in and have some refreshments. Some of them came in, and the chief officer was introduced to me as Colonel Yonoff [Ionov]. He and all of them were dressed in loose 'khaki' blouses, with baggy pantaloons and high boots, and they wore the ordinary peaked Russian cap, covered with white cloth. Colonel Yonoff also wore on his breast a white enamel Maltese cross, which I recognised as the Cross of St. George, the most coveted Russian decoration, and I at once congratulated him upon holding so distinguished an order. Colonel Yonoff was a modest, quiet-mannered man, of a totally different stamp from Captain Grombchevsky. He had less of the *bonhomie* of the latter, and talked little; but he was evidently respected by his officers, and they told me he had distinguished himself in the Khivan campaign. I gave the Russian officers some tea and Russian wine, which M. Lutsch, the consul's secretary had very kindly procured for me from Marghilan; and then I told Colonel Yonoff that reports had reached me that he was proclaiming to the Kirghiz that the Pamirs were Russian territory, and asked him if this was the case. He said it was so, and he showed me the map with the boundary claimed by the Russians coloured on it. This boundary included the whole of the Pamirs except the Tag-dum-bash, and extended as far down as the watershed of the Hindu-Kush by the Khora Bhort pass.¹⁵

While, on the basis of an Anglo-Russian agreement of 1873, the Russians were arguably within their rights in arresting Davison, the status of Boza-i-Gumbez was ambiguous. As noted, C.H.E. Eliot, from the St. Petersburg Embassy happened to be in Osh as guest of the Governor-General of Turkestan at the time of the incident: he recounts an amusing exchange on this vexed subject with the Governor of Ferghana and Colonel Galkin, chief of the Governor-General's chancery who had backed up the Russian position, pointing out that:

Boza-i-Gumbez formed part of the Khanate of Kokan, which had been annexed 'ipso facto' by Russia when Kokan itself was captured. That it did form part of the said Khanate was proved by the existence there of a tomb of a Kokan tax-collector Boza by name (whence the name of the place Boza-i-Gumbez, or rather Gumbez-i-Bozas, "the tomb of Boza"), with an inscription saying that he had met his death in the discharge of his official duties ... The next day the Governor-General spoke to me at considerable length on the same subject... The Governor-General said I must see that both the Yashil Kul and Boza-i-Gumbez were in Russian territory. The former was well to the north of the line claimed by Her Majesty's Government in 1873, and that the latter was part of the Khanate of Kokan was proved by the tomb of the tax-collector; I said I did not presume to discuss the question of boundaries with his Excellency, but that the murder of the tax-collector appeared to me to indicate that the local population did not admit the claims of the Khan of Kokan. His Excellency said that tax collectors were always killed in the east and that this proved nothing.¹⁶

Despite heightened public feeling, the 'Pamir incident' was played down at diplomatic level by the British and Russian governments and there was never really a possibility that it would lead to an armed confrontation. The British Ambassador in St. Petersburg wrote to the Foreign Secretary in January 1892:

¹⁴ India Office Library and Records, British Library, London, MSS Eur / F197 / 142.

¹⁵ Younghusband, pp. 289-290.

¹⁶ Postnikov A.V., *Схватка на «Крыше Мира» - Политики, разведчики и географы в борьбе за Памир в XIX веке* (Struggle on the 'Roof of the World': Politicians, spies and geographers in the contest for the Pamirs in the 19th century), Moscow, 2001, p. 239.

I perceive from the correspondence that the Indian government seems desirous to induce the Chinese and Afghans to meet north of Lake Victoria on the Alichur Pamir, and that it would appear that Captain Younghusband actually invited the Afghans to occupy Yashil Kul. Now, it appears to me that this would be a most dangerous policy to follow. It would be acting in flagrant disregard of the engagement of 1872-73; it would give a most legitimate "casus belli" to the Russians against Afghanistan, and we could not honourably encourage the Afghans to carry out such a plan unless we were ready to give them physical support. It seems to me absolutely necessary, if we are to enter upon these negotiations, that we should rigidly adhere to the binding character of the Agreement of 1872-73.¹⁷

In correspondence with the Foreign Secretary a month earlier, the Ambassador recorded official Russian criticism of Ionov's action, while also confirming that the Russians were aware that Younghusband and Davison were fishing in troubled waters:

I ought to say that in the course of conversation M. de Giers [the Russian Foreign Minister] mentioned in explanation of Colonel Yonow's [Ionov's] high-handed treatment of Captain Younghusband, that he had come across, almost everywhere he went, the traces of that officer's handiwork in exciting the Chinese against Russia. A statement made by Mr. Davison to Mr. Eliot at Margilan would seem to a certain extent to corroborate this assertion. Mr. Davison said that Captain Younghusband had in the first instance invited the Afghans to take possession of the Alichur Pamir, but on meeting with no response to his overtures had urged the Chinese to strengthen themselves there in view of a possible invasion by the Afghans.¹⁸

The incident contributed, however, to a recognition by both sides that they had a shared interest in fixing definitive boundaries in the Wakhan. Neither Russia nor Britain (nor Afghanistan) really wanted or was ready for war – despite public sabre rattling and manifestations of popular outrage. The Amir doubted the reliability of British promises of support and feared defeat by the Russians. The British were concerned about their long supply lines to one of the furthest points in Afghanistan from their base and were doubtful about their welcome by the Afghan population en route; Sudan was the main theatre of British military activity at the time and military resources could not be spared for a further adventure in Afghanistan. While the Tsar was unwilling to disavow the actions of his senior officers, neither he nor his cabinet wanted war with Britain: they had other objectives. As Curzon observed at the time:

To keep England quiet in Europe by keeping her employed in Asia, that, briefly put, is sum and substance of Russian policy."¹⁹



¹⁷ Postnikov, p. 251.

¹⁸ Postnikov, p. 248.

¹⁹ *Russia in Central Asia*, p. 321.

**Major-General Montagu Gilbert Gerard, Colonel Thomas Hungerford Holdich *et al.*,
Report on the Proceedings of the Pamir Boundary Commission, Calcutta 1897.**²⁰

By mid-1886, after only nine months' work, a first Anglo-Russian Boundary Commission had reached comprehensive agreement on the north-western frontier of Afghanistan, with the exception of the last few kilometres up to the junction with the Oxus. The latter issue was finally settled in July 1887 by direct negotiations between the two governments.

This was a major achievement²¹ and is proof that there was already a long-standing potential for agreement on essential questions. All that remained was to determine the extent of Afghan dominion over the Pamir region and the tribal areas contiguous with India in the west.

A second Boundary Commission was set up in 1895 and both parties gathered on the banks of Lake Zorkul in June that year. The work of the 1885 Afghan Boundary Commission had been hampered by the absence of comprehensive topographical knowledge of the area and the Russians had bowed to the better survey data possessed by the British; in the case of the Pamir boundary, however, the situation was reversed as the Russians by now possessed more accurate information extending as far north as Osh that was recognised by their British colleagues as “of the first rank.” At their first meeting each side compared the other’s data on the frontier region with its own and one of the senior surveyors commented:

We found ourselves standing on the roof of the world, with practically no differences between us to eliminate and disperse as far as our mapping was concerned.²²

By August the work had been completed and a farewell dinner was organised by the British:

The scene of the dinner was one which will be long remembered in the Pamirs. With considerable difficulty and delay a supply of wood had been collected from valleys south of the Hindu Kush as a provision against a winter sojourn on the Pamirs. All this wood was now stacked into such a bonfire as the Pamirs will never see again, and round about it various dances were performed with much spirit and energy. The night was still, and as cold as 25 degrees of frost could make it, and the moonlight glinted on the freezing surface of marsh and river, adding not a little to the fantastic effect of the scene. Men of Hunza and Nagar, Khataks and Cossacks, Kirghiz and Wakhis, all danced to the inspiring strains produced from two kerosene tins and a reed pipe, with a Cossack concertina accompaniment. The dances were led by a most able master of ceremonies in the person of Lieutenant Miles, who had joined the Commission party for a few days from a political tour in Hunza. The proceedings closed with the old-world chorus of ‘Auld Lang Syne.’ (pp. 25-26)

The frontiers thus delineated are those still in force today.



²⁰ India Office Library and Records, British Library, London, Mss Eur F111/657. See <http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/afghanenglish/159/> - accessed on 2015-01-23.

²¹ The record of the boundary commission’s extraordinarily rapid work can be found in *Northern Afghanistan, or Letters from the Afghan Boundary Commission, with Route Maps*: Bk. 3 C.E. Yate, Rudolf Abraham (Editor), Cambridge 2002, together with all the material and maps from the original 1888 edition, including the plan of Balkh. See https://www.archive.org/stream/northernafghanis00yaterich/northernafghanis00yaterich_djvu.txt - accessed on 2015-01-23.

²² Report by Colonel Thomas Hungerford Holdich, *Geographical Journal*, Vol. 7, No. 1, January 1896, pp. 92.

Charles Adolphus Murray, eighth Earl of Dunmore, *The Pamirs; being a Narrative of a Year's Expedition on Horseback and Foot through Kashmir, Western Tibet, Chinese Tartary and Russian Central Asia*, London 1893 (Reprint Vintage Books, New Delhi, 1993).



On Christmas day 1891, Charles Adolphus Murray, eighth Earl of Dunmore, left England for Karachi, where he disembarked in February 1892 at the start of a journey that was to take him over 2,200 miles through Central Asia, crossing sixty-nine rivers and forty-one mountain passes, some among the highest in the world.

His account of this journey reveals a man of considerable strength, erudition, good humour and courtesy. While the first was a requirement and the second not unusual for all the early explorers of the Pamirs, the latter two qualities were more exceptional. Dunmore was also an accomplished linguist, amateur botanist, poet, painter and musician, with a fine sense for natural beauty.

His qualities stand out even more in comparison with some of the dry accounts published by contemporary travellers to the Pamirs. Major Charles Sperling Cumberland, for example, travelled in almost the same areas as Dunmore three years previously and met Grombchevsky, Dauvergne and a team from Prjevalsky's expedition en route, but his book *Sport on the Pamir and Turkistan Steppes*, published in 1895, contains hardly a single interesting or amusing anecdote: it comprises essentially a series of excruciatingly detailed hunting reports. Where Dunmore frequently expresses concern for the welfare of his native companions, Cumberland is less put out at the death of one of his native guides than at the loss of one of his ponies.

Of course, many of these trips – whatever their real purpose – were indeed described by those participating as “sport”. Dunmore – aged 51 – on the way up the Tagdumbash Pamir, at an altitude of nearly 5,000m, in temperatures of about minus 15°C, spent several days and nights stalking Marco Polo sheep, sleeping out on the snow and, on one occasion, sliding headlong down a glacier into a crevasse. He notes, with imperceptible irony, that “there is no doubt that we have come here at the wrong season of the year.” On meeting a bear, he comments sardonically that he held his fire until the bear was dangerously close because he could only see his head and to aim at it “would have shattered his skull, which was the only part of him I wanted to keep.”

Nothing should surprise today's reader about the explorers of an age in which there were considered to be no limits to knowledge or to human endeavour and improvement.

On 27 October 1892, Dunmore received an official visit from a representative of the government in Urumchi, to check on what he was doing:

He had the same drawling hesitation in his speech that I have already noticed, especially in the case of the Amban of Kargalik, who used to remain on the drawl on one particular note, say B flat, and then jerk his voice up to F natural, and come out with his sentence. This Amban, when hesitating in his speech, lacked the musical (?) drawl of the other one, and simply said ‘jigga, jigga, jigga, jigga’ with the utmost rapidity, which resembled much more the going off of an alarm than the articulation of a human being, and he continued jigga jigga-ing until he got the word he wanted. (p. 132)

On his way out of the Pamirs, Dunmore was well received by the Russian garrison at Murghab. A specially prepared yurt was awaiting him in the Rang Kul fort and the next day, well-rested but cold at -23°C, Dunmore and the Russians “had recourse to various expedients to keep warm.” After Russian peasant and cossack dances, he taught the officers the intricacies of Scottish dancing to the sound of a Russian accordion: “the first Highland reel ever danced on the Pamirs.”²³

He reached Kashgar on 1 December 1892 and was welcomed by the British representative Macartney (N.B. not Consul, only the Russian representative had consular status)²⁴, who had organised a few protocol visits for Dunmore, the only problem being that he had no suitable clothes:

On Tuesday, Mr. Macartney had made arrangements that I should visit the Taotai [local head of civil and military affairs] Li-Tsung-Pin (I make use of the first personal pronoun, because I could never persuade Roche to visit anybody), and as we had already received an ample apology from the Chinese Government for our detention at the Frontier, with an assurance that the culprit, “Ching-Wang,” should be severely punished, there was every reason I should go and visit the chief official of Kashgar. Had the apology not been tendered, I should not of course have visited the Taotai, and the matter would have then been placed on another, and more serious footing, as Mr. Macartney would have referred it to the Government of India. Things, however, having been satisfactorily arranged, I made my preparations to pay the Taotai a visit of ceremony.

No clothes that I could produce, amongst the small stock which constituted my wardrobe, would please Macartney, who said that a Chinaman judged a European by his outward appearance entirely, and he regretted very much, that I had not brought some uniform with me!

Fancy taking a uniform over the Karakoram and into the Pamirs!

At last, to please him, I consented to array my person in an old uniform great-coat of Younghusband’s, with a political officer’s brass buttons and an imposing cape on it.

It being two sizes too small for me, it was therefore very tight and uncomfortable; but I thought of the old lines, Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori, and bore the discomfort with Christian resignation, being told it was for my country’s good; so the whole of this original and grotesque costume being supplemented by a Tartar fur cap, I was pronounced at last as “fit to be seen,” and, mounting our horses, we rode through the bazaars, preceded by Macartney’s chuprassie, Jaffar Ali, clothed in a bright scarlet halat, and followed by an admiring rabble of the youth of Kashgar. Being market day, the streets and bazaars were crowded, and locomotion was difficult, but we eventually arrived in safety at the Taotai’s Yamên [office and residence]

Passing through the inner chamber of a sort of pagoda, reserved only as a passage-way for guests of the highest distinction, we reached a large hall in which stood the Taotai himself got up in his very best, waiting to receive us.

He is an oldish man – in fact, for a Chinaman, a very old man – portly and with a jolly sort of look about him, as if he was in the habit of “doing himself pretty well.” He advanced to meet us and shook hands most cordially, Chinese fashion, and then conducted us to an inner chamber and seated us on a raised dais, covered with red cloth, with a table in the middle of it, on which he placed with his own hands, most reverently, two cups of tea, much in the same way as a priest places a holy vessel on to an altar, and then seating himself on our right, the conversation commenced by his putting to me the usual Chinese query, as an opening to a dialogue, of “How old are you?” After having put him in possession of this piece of valuable information, he

²³ Just over 100 years after Dunmore’s dance in Rang Kul, I had the privilege of dancing the Gay Gordons at the confluence of the Yazgulom river and the Oxus with Barbara Hay, the British Ambassador, in this case not to keep warm but to show the local people, in response to their hospitality, that we too could dance – perhaps the second time Scottish music ever sounded in the Pamirs.

²⁴ After the Chinese overthrow of Yakub Beg in 1877, Russia rapidly recognised Chinese sovereignty over Xinjiang and was rewarded accordingly. The British were “punished” for the official overtures made to Yakub Beg by the trader Robert Shaw and the explorer George Hayward in 1869 and the Chinese did not agree to the opening of a British consulate in Kashgar until 1908. (Lady Catherine Macartney, *An English Lady in Chinese Turkestan*, Oxford 1985, p. 62.)

commenced by making profuse apologies for the manner in which “my excellency” had been treated by a Chinese official at the Frontier, etc., etc.

Undoubtedly, Macartney was right, and Younghusband’s great-coat was working wonders, as I saw the Taotai’s eye wandering with unfeigned admiration up and down the two rows of brass buttons.

After the usual interchange of remarks about the weather, which I find that as a topic of conversation, when every other one fails, holds its own in Central Asia equally with Europe, the Taotai conducted us to another spacious hall, where eight Chinese servants stood round a table laid for three. On seating myself, I found opposite to me a small saucer, two chopsticks, a diminutive soup-ladle, and a small china cigarette ashtray, which turned out to be a wine-glass. (pp.227-229)

After crossing the Chinese frontier, Dunmore camped on Christmas Eve, the coldest night on the journey with temperatures of -40°C , in the snow at the foot of the Terek pass and next day crossed to Sufi-Kurghan, where he was met by an emissary of Colonel Grombchevsky and taken yet again to a specially prepared yurt. The emissary, Hassan Beg, turned out to be from Badakhshan and they conversed in Persian. It being Christmas day, Dunmore, with typical good humour, decided to have a Christmas Pudding for dinner:

... calling in Ramzan, I commenced by explaining to him as best I could in the Urdu tongue that this day was the great festival of the Christian’s year, and one on which all right-minded Franghis were wont to spend the first half of the day at their Mosques, the inside walls of which were decorated with green branches and made as much as possible to resemble a jungle, and the other half of the day and most of the night in over-eating themselves with the most unwholesome food their Khansamas could procure in the *bazaars*, and, therefore, as I did not wish to be behind-hand in following the example of my brother Franghis, but wished – in the absence of my mosque – to keep the day as near as possible in accordance with the articles of my faith, I called upon him as a good Mussulman, to come to my assistance in the manufacture of the most unwholesome edible compound the united ingenuity of our inventive brains could devise.

So after a long discussion and close inspection of our resources, we built up between us, using the Beg’s doster-khan [literally ‘tablecloth’, in this context a gift of food], a Christmas Pudding, which turned out so successful that I cannot refrain from giving a minute description of its architecture.

First of all we took some dark-coloured Kirghiz flour and some baking-powder and the frozen yolks of six Kashgar eggs, which we scraped with a knife into a yellow powder, and after being well kneaded, this compound was rolled out, my telescope making a grand rolling-pin. We then stewed in a small Degchi [cooking utensil] all the Beg’s apricots and raisins with some of my own honey. Another corner of the fire was occupied by a frying-pan, in which I fried the kernels of the pistachio nuts, in the only butter I could get, which I very carefully took out of a fresh tin of Sardines au Beurre. When the paste looked as like the beginning of a roly-poly pudding as we could make it, we poured the apricot, raisin and honey stew into the middle of it, then rolled it up and stuck the outside of it full of the fried kernels of the pistachio nuts, until the result looked like a new-born porcupine. We then proceeded to bake the whole thing as best we could, and I venture to say that no cook in Europe, on the 25th December, 1892, could have been as proud of his Christmas Pudding as I was of mine.

Although its manufacture was not the least interesting part of it, still the eating of it was more pleasurable than most enforced duties are usually, notwithstanding the slight suspicion of a flavour of sardines about it, which at any rate was a new departure in Christmas Puddings, and possessed the one great advantage and charm of novelty. (pp. 267-269)



St. George R. Littledale, 'A Journey Across the Pamir from North to South,' *Proceedings of the Royal Geographical Society, London*, Vol 14, No. 1, pp. 1-35.

On 11 April 1890, two of the most indefatigable and engaging travellers of the nineteenth century left their home at Wick Hill House in Bracknell, England, for Odessa, Batumi and adventure in Central Asia. Mr. and Mrs. St. George Littledale were about to start on the first of their two joint journeys to the Pamirs, with the aim of reaching Kashgar through Badakhshan and Chitral (in the previous year, not accompanied by his wife, Littledale had got as far as Kara Kul and had brought back some hunting trophies). Theirs was only the second expedition by European explorers to cross the Pamirs from north to south (the Frenchmen Bonvalot, Capus and Pépin were the first in 1887). Mrs. Littledale has the additional distinction of being the first non-indigenous woman in the Pamirs²⁵ and, from Littledale's accounts of their travels together, she must be counted one of the most intrepid women explorers of all time.

Apart from the reports submitted by Littledale to the Royal Geographical Society, they did not, unlike several other explorers of the period, publish any more comprehensive account of their travels. Littledale became a friend of President Theodore Roosevelt,²⁶ another big game hunter, and worked with him on the introduction of elk to New Zealand in 1905. He made a gift of one of his trophies to King Edward VII and, on his death in 1921, bequeathed his taxidermic specimens to the Natural History Museum in London²⁷. A sub-species of the Marco Polo sheep, the *Ovis ammon littledalei* from the Tien Shan, is named after him.



Of Mrs. Littledale we only know that she was born Theresa Newcomen Julia Eveleigh Harris on 12 August 1839 at Eldon House, London, Ontario, Canada, that Littledale was her second husband and that she died, childless, in 1928 in Hertfordshire, England.²⁸ From an early photograph, showing a rather conventional young lady with a girlish air about her, only the set of the mouth and head gives any hint of the strength of will that carried her through some of the most difficult mountain terrain then known to man. Although she fell seriously ill on the second of her trips to Central Asia,²⁹ there is, as we shall see, only one record of any complaint on her part about the rigours of travel there.

Armed with official permits from St. Petersburg and letters from the Russian Ambassador in Britain, the Littledales landed in Batumi on the Black Sea on 19 April and began confronting the first of many obstacles put in the way of their pioneering journey with a sense of humour that never deserted them until they finally arrived in Srinagar five months later. Littledale's guns had been carried as freight and the importation of arms was strictly forbidden unless as personal baggage – the Russian Ambassador's letter carried no weight with the Batumi customs officials. Frantic telegrams from the British Consul to St. Petersburg finally freed the

²⁵ Mrs. S.G. Skerskaya, wife of the Russian commander in Murghab, was the second in 1894. A Mrs. Renton (referred to by Ralph Cobbold - see below), Olga Fedchenko (widow of Alexei) and Mrs. Kivekes (wife of the Russian commander in Khorog) are among those who followed her.

²⁶ Theodore Roosevelt, *An Autobiography*, 1913.

²⁷ See http://www.berkshirehistory.com/villages/warfield_ham.html.

²⁸ J.J. Talman Regional Collection, University of Western Ontario, London, ON (Photo). Harris Family Fonds, Box 4182-4186, 5109, P178-190, P620-634. Harris and Magee Law Firm, Box 4060-4062.

²⁹ *Geographical Journal*, Vol. 7, no.2, p. 198.

guns under seal until his next stop, Usun-Ada, on the Eastern Caspian, at the head of the Trans-Caspian railway, where they were to be unsealed and inspected by the officials there before he was allowed to proceed.

The Customs chief at Usun-Ada was away and his deputy was unwilling to take any risks until he received confirmation from Batumi of the instructions in the letter carried by Littledale. The next steamer, however, was not due for two days and, in his reaction to this apparent setback we get a first glimpse of Littledale's ingenuity and resourcefulness as a traveller; indeed, throughout the narrative the reader is struck by how well the Littledales had prepared for all eventualities, including the alternative itineraries on their route, which were scarcely common knowledge at that time:

One learns not only to be patient, but also wily when travelling in the East, so, with the aid of an obliging officer of the Russian Guards, with whom we had made friends in a quiet way, we thoroughly scared the official who refused to take off the seals, and then set to work to interview every likely and unlikely functionary. At last we unearthed one, who, after a brief consultation with our friend, tore off the seals, and we were free. (p.2)

They finally started on the rail journey to Samarkand on 29 April.

The Russians had laid on every comfort for them: a special rail carriage, good food, the hospitality of the Governor of Ferghana in Marghilan, General Korolkoff, and of the commander in Osh, Colonel Deubner, as well as the practical assistance of the latter in putting together their caravan.

The Great Alai Mountains looked grand, appearing like one long wall of snow-clad peaks, running up to 22,000 or 23,000 feet. Seen across the twelve or fourteen miles of plateau, the air was so clear, they looked much nearer, and they stretched east and west as far as the eye could reach. There seemed to be such masses of snow as to preclude all chance of our being able to cross them for a long time to come. In the Kirghiz tongue Alai means paradise, but that is hardly an accurate description of the plain, for from the end of August till the middle of June, or nine months and a half, owing to the severity of its climate it is quite uninhabited, and as we saw it on 3rd of June it looked very desolate; the ground was quite brown, the snow having only just melted, and, except marmots and some great bustard, not a living thing was in sight. (p. 9)



Alai plain, looking south-west to Pik Lenin (then Pik Kaufmann)

In Murghab, the headman of a Kyrgyz encampment came to see them.

I asked if he could read Chinese. He said no; so it was a fine opportunity! I produced my Chinese passport, and enlarged to him the fearful pains and penalties he would incur if he failed to get me a reliable guide. He was apparently much impressed, and he left and returned with the smallest, thinnest, and most woe-begone lamb either of us ever set eyes on, some koumis and cream, and in return we gave him a musical-box, needlebook, and some tea. Finding he was not satisfied, I added an extra fur-cap I had

brought—as, although our presents were two or three times the value of his, we thought it prudent to get a character for liberality, otherwise the guide might not be forthcoming. (p. 12)

The Littledales, having started from Murghab in the direction of Bashgumbez, were discouraged by reports from local Kyrgyz that the pass was blocked by snow and decided to take the Khargush route. On 17 June they forded the Murghab river and went up towards the Alichur valley. Recurring problems with their Kyrgyz horsemen delayed them, but Littledale's resourcefulness and firm response rapidly found a solution:

The head of the Kirghiz told me he could not find us a guide, so I said I was very sorry, but until he got me a man he could not possibly leave us; that put a new complexion on affairs, and a man appeared in a couple of hours. ... The horses were missing again this morning; it turns out that all the horses we have hired belong to two men, with the exception of one solitary animal which belongs to the third, all the wages which he gets being the hire of this horse. This man being poor the others bully him, and expect him to watch the horses all night alone, while they are curled up in their sheepskins. It is of course impossible that one man can walk all day and watch horses all night, consequently he goes to sleep and the beasts wander; being close to the frontier the chances of robbery are much greater, and if our horses were stolen we should be in a most serious condition. The men returned to camp to get some food, having found about fifteen of the thirty odd, and started again on a fresh hunt, when I found that, contrary to my express order, they had left their own horses in camp and had ridden out on our horses to look for the runaways. I was very angry and had all their horses saddled and sent every one of them out with Kirghiz on them to look for the runaways. They were all collected at last; the caravan people were very angry at their horses being used, and said they would return home, and absolutely refused to pack the horses. I stood some distance apart and beckoned the head of the caravan to come; he took no notice of me till I walked straight for him, when he saw I was not going to be trifled with, and he came. At first he was defiant and said they were all going back, so I told him that he was welcome to go but I had engaged their horses for as long as I liked, and I meant to keep them, and if they attempted to take them I would shoot every horse they had. I pointed out that if they returned to Turkistan and broke their contract they would certainly be put in prison; on the other hand, if they did their duty they would not only get their wages but a present as well. The storm died out as quickly as it had arisen, and anybody who had seen them in the evening feasting on a sheep I thought it politic to discover I did not want, would have never imagined they were the same people who were so infuriated in the morning. They were just like children, but firmness at first, and then conciliation, got over all our difficulties. (pp. 13-14)

Reaching the Wakhan, so close to British India, their plans were very nearly frustrated. News of their arrival in what was now legally Afghan territory had reached the local Afghan potentate and they were prevented by his troops from proceeding. Mrs. Littledale, confirming the courage that had brought her this far, joined her husband in an attempt to parley:

We explained that we wanted to cross the Hindu Kush into Chitral and did not want to stay in their territory at all. I produced the passport, and pointed to Lord Salisbury's signature, saying he was the greatest friend the Queen had, and the Persian interpreter enlarged on the dreadful things that might happen if we were kept waiting. (pp. 18-19)

This had no effect whatsoever on the Afghans, who forced them to go back down the Wakhan to Sarhad to seek permission to continue their journey to the Baroghil pass, only some 10km away:

On the fourth day we heard shouting, and a number of men arrived; it was the Governor of Wakhan, Gholam Russul Khan, a good-looking young man; he stated that he had nearly reached Faizabad when he heard we were here, and he had come to see that we were comfortable. He said "Our Queen was their Queen, their country our country." I had to reply, "Yes indeed, we were brothers," but I could not help wishing all the same that our new relatives would cut their hair, and be generally a little cleaner. He wore a smart turban, with the name "I. Greaves and Co., Manchester," stamped conspicuously upon it. (p. 20)

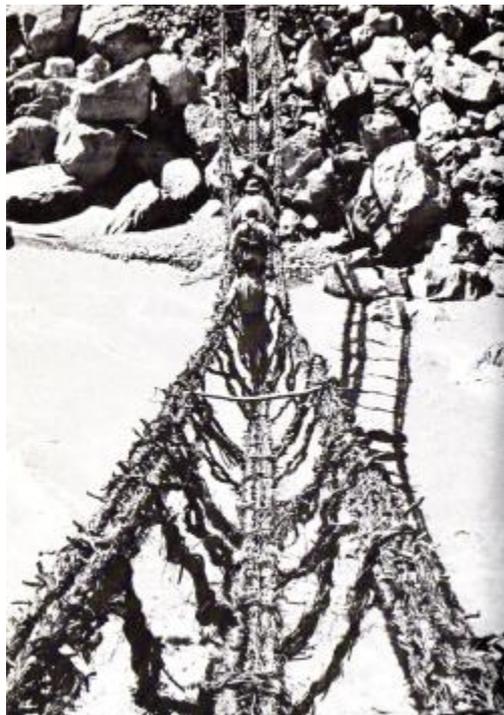
Finally, on the evening of 21 July, a messenger arrived with a letter and they were given permission to leave. The next morning, making presents all round in the hope of securing the Afghans' good will, they reduced the caravan to the strict minimum, said farewell to the

remainder and set off with an Afghan escort to the Baroghil, camping on the other side, already in Chitral but still not secure.

Our fifteen men were reduced to seven. Three of them and a yak started ostensibly to get food and never returned, the others were going off and I forcibly stopped them, and at last made them confess that they had all been told to desert us. I talked to them and promised them high pay; they wanted an advance. One of them, by good luck, happened to have owned a sheep, which the Afghan Governor had presented to us, and which when we had afterwards discovered its owner, we had paid well for, and he said that people who would do that could not be thieves, and they would stay. We took however the precaution of putting them to sleep in the tent and watching them all night. (p. 23)

The journey to Gilgit necessitated numerous river crossings, one of which was by a locally constructed bridge.

These bridges are formed by three ropes made of willow twigs; you walk on one, and the other two you hold on by your hands; it starts high above the water from the rocks, and sags down in the middle. Mrs. Littledale had always announced that she was ready to go anywhere or do anything except cross a rope bridge, and how I was to get her over in the morning I did not know. We selected a strong man, and she got on his back, and they started off across the bridge. ... She had got one-third of the way across ... but she had opened her eyes, and the height, the rushing water underneath, and the swaying of the bridge had frightened her, and she was telling them to take her back. The interpreter unfortunately was not there, but I shouted to them in Hindustani, in Russian, and in Kirghiz, to go on quickly and take no notice, but they did not understand me, and thought I was telling them to return, and back they came. Mrs. Littledale said she was ready to try again if we would tie her on, so that if she fainted she would not fall, but it could not be arranged. We had to think what was to be done. The men said if I would go away out of hearing they would carry her across whether she liked it or not. Women are little thought of in those parts. I suggested a raft; they said at first it was too dangerous, but, since there was no other course, we tied inflated sheep-skins to a camp bed, and sent it on a trial trip with five men swimming alongside, each man having his own skin. It was so buoyant that Mrs. Littledale said she was willing to cross in it. They made her lie down, tied her fast and started. The river flowed over great boulders, and though the raft was often lost sight of in the spray, it got across safely, having been taken by the current a quarter of a mile down stream. We took some dry things over the bridge for Mrs. Littledale, who had been lying half under water when the raft was stationary, and when she arrived on the other side a more draggled specimen of humanity was never seen. Our horses had to swim across and three or four of them were nearly drowned. (pp. 26-27)



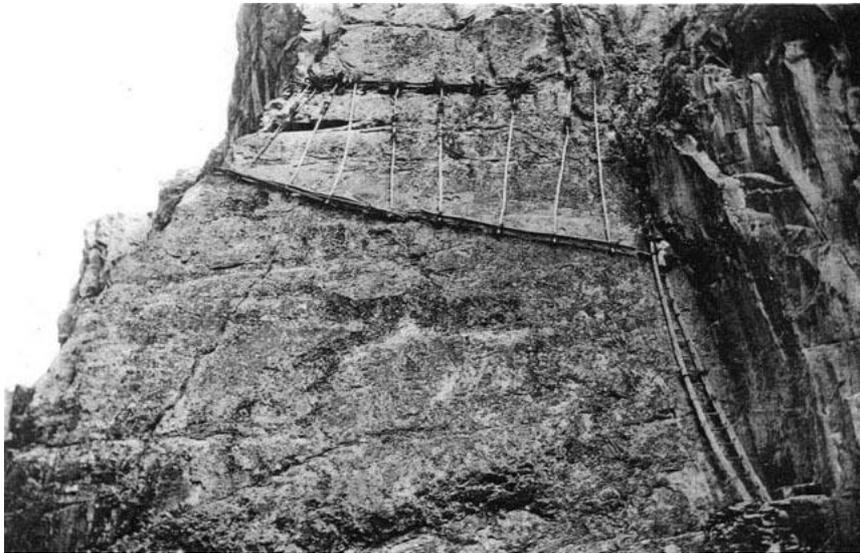
Rope bridge encountered by Ella Maillart in Gilgit

They were then confronted with the ‘hanging passages’ described by the Chinese traveller Yu Huan in Hunza sixteen hundred years previously:

It was a rough scramble over rocks and round corners on logs jammed into crevasses of the rocks, and then down a perpendicular crack in the rock by ladders formed of single poles with notches cut for steps. One man went in front to hold Mrs. Littledale's feet in the notches, while another held on to her dress above. (p. 27)

On 7 August, they reached Gilgit, where they enjoyed the hospitality of the acting British political agent, Manners Smith, and ended their journey in Srinagar on 4 September. En route, Mrs. Littledale, having shown extraordinary courage on the journey so far,³⁰

established a great reputation of another kind; a sick man had come to her to be healed, and she thinking that certain widely advertised pills would please the man, and at the same time could do him no possible harm, gave him a couple; the effect was marvellous, and the fame of the cure spread through the country; our tent was besieged by poor creatures.... (p. 28)



‘Hanging passage’ with ladder on the Panj river (photo D.V. Nalivkin 1916)³¹

Three years later, the Littledales were again in the Pamirs, but only en route to Kashgar, crossing this time by the Terek pass to Irkeshtam. This journey - the declared purpose of which was to collect specimens of wild camels, and ending in Peking, rivals their crossing of the Pamirs in terms of risk and adventure.³² Littledale’s narrative, however, is equally entertaining and contains further illustrations of the couple’s courage and resourcefulness, as well as many examples of Littledale’s irrepressible dry humour.

Just beyond Lop Nor, they found their first camels.

The men said that one of the camels was thirty-five or forty years old; Mrs. Littledale, who tried to eat some of it, saw no reason to doubt that statement. (p. 456)

³⁰ “We were much amused at hearing that one man had stated that he did not leave Kashmir until he had seen the lady who walked from Europe.” (p. 29)

³¹ Nalivkin, Dmitri Vasilievich, "Preliminary report on the travel to the Mountainous Bukhara and Western Pamirs during the summer 1915", *Izvestiya of Russian Geographical Society*, Vol. 52, # 3, 1916, pp. 203-237.

³² *Geographical Journal*, Vol. 3, No. 6, pp. 445-472.

Confronted with threatening tribesmen,

I gave them a practical explanation of the repeating rifle, omitting to inform them, however, that after firing five shots it was necessary to reload, and they left under the impression that it went on shooting indefinitely. ... The repeating rifle was expounded with such marked effect that when Rozahun [their Ladhaki guide] proposed to explain the beauties of the revolver, they begged him to put it by. Whatever their original intentions may have been, they were far too great cowards to face us when they saw we were prepared, and they rode away, looking with their long lances very wild and picturesque. (p. 464)

One of our boatmen complained of his eyes, so we gave him a couple of pills. A Chinaman was overheard asking another why we gave two pills; the reply was: "He has two eyes; do you think he only wants one cured?" (p. 470)

In Kwei-hwa-cheng:

We were most hospitably received by Dr. Stewart, a medical missionary. In describing the difficulties of the Chinese language to beginners, he told me, among other things, that the words for chicken and wife closely resembled each other. Once when prescribing for a sick Chinaman he found he had told him to cut his wife's throat and make broth of her. Another missionary ordered his servant to go to the bazaar and buy a chicken; the man was gone nearly all day, and returned saying that good-looking women were awfully scarce just then ... (p. 470)



Captain Ralph Patteson Cobbold, *Innermost Asia - Travel and Sport in the Pamirs*, London 1900.



In August 1897, somewhat to his surprise, Ralph P. Cobbold, Captain in the 60th Rifles Regiment and scion of a prominent Suffolk banking and brewing family, received permission from the Indian government to travel through Gilgit and Hunza for a sporting expedition to the Pamirs. Although he submitted a private report to the Foreign Office from Srinagar after his return, in October 1898, it would appear to have been unsolicited and we can probably take him at his word when he professes to have had no official mission or status and that his aim was, indeed, adventure. He did, indeed, find it.

His account of his journey, *Innermost Asia – Travel and Sport in the Pamirs*, published in London in 1900, reveals an intrepid and quick-witted traveller, with a gift for precise observation and an ability to get on with almost everybody he met. Like Dunmore, Cobbold tells his tale with humour and intelligence; however, unlike Dunmore, he does not shrink from criticism of his government and compatriots.

When he wrote it, he had just returned alive from a highly dangerous journey in almost uncharted territory. Before him, only two other Europeans had followed the route he took: the Englishman Ney Elias, and the

Russian Captain Vannovsky in 1893, a member of Ionov's Pamir "flying detachment" (see below).³³

In Kashgar he established a warm relationship with the Russian Consul-General Petrovsky, for whose professionalism and competence he had the greatest admiration, and noticed friction between the latter and Younghusband.

I then bade farewell with much regret to the Consul-General, who had been most civil and hospitable to me during my stay. I am at a loss to this day to account for the misunderstanding between Petrovsky and Captain Younghusband which the latter chronicles in his admirable volume [*The Heart of a Continent*, p. 284]. Petrovsky, as I gauge him, is certainly not the man to quarrel with an acquaintance on the score of an unintentional breach of etiquette, and the explanation given by the Consul-General, that the reason he had taken offence was because his visitor had paid a formal call in the afternoon instead of the morning, must be regarded as a pretext for concealing the real cause of the ill-feeling whatever it may have been.

Petrovsky, however, had not been impressed by Younghusband³⁴ and was fully aware of his amateurish efforts to stir up the Chinese against the Russians.

Of Captain Younghusband's mission a few years previously the Consul-General had much to say, and he ridiculed the policy of the Indian Government in sending an explorer 'ignorant of the Chinese language and unacquainted with the duplicity of the Chinese character,' to conduct a political mission as delicate as that involved in a settlement of the Pamirs question. And he told me that all the while that Captain Younghusband was interviewing the Taotai [head of the Chinese administration in Kashgar] and urging him to despatch troops to the Pamirs to complete an effective occupation in anticipation of a Russian advance, the Taotai was keeping Petrovsky daily informed of the purport of Younghusband's proposals, acting on which the Russian agent took steps to render the Russian occupation effective before the Chinese troops were half-way to the Pamirs. Petrovsky related this fact with evident relish, and he expressed himself as being greatly amused at the fact that the Indian Government had decorated the explorer in recognition of his political services.

Perhaps with Younghusband in mind, whose considered view was that "no European can mix with non-Christian races without feeling his moral superiority over them,"³⁵ Petrovsky had shared with Cobbold his criticism of the British attitude to 'the natives':

I was especially interested in his criticisms on our methods of dealing with the natives under our rule, and was struck by the insistent manner in which he refused to believe that they felt any affection for their rulers. He pointed out that we English are too cold and haughty, and hold ourselves too far aloof from our inferiors to gain their good will. He also ridiculed the freedom with which the Indian Government permitted irresponsible globe-trotting M.P.s to spend the cold weather in India haranguing native audiences, and asking them if they were happy under British rule. Such a question, he affirmed, put to a Russian native subject in Turkestan would mean a serious risk of the interrogator being sent to Siberia for life.

A visit to the 'sous-prefect' of the Akbashih district near Kashgar, Sozonstsoff, leads Cobbold to comment favourably on Russian dealings with the local population:

Mr. Sozontoff was shortly going to Kashgar to arrange with the Russian Consul-General there for the construction of a postal road from Akbashih. He told me that the undertaking would not cost his Government anything. The Kirghiz would all subscribe according to their means, as a good road would enable them to get about in the mountains, and take their sheep and beasts to the Kashgar market with greater ease than at

³³ Cobbold notes that Ionov himself had been forced to abandon the attempt to bring a larger group down the Bartang after the loss of all his horses down the sheer cliffs of the valley. Another Russian officer, Captain Bedryag, made a reconnaissance of the upper Bartang in 1893 (*Сборник Географических, Топографических и Статистических Материалов по Азии*. (*Collection of Geographical, Topographical and Statistical Materials throughout Asia*), vol. Ivi, Military Scientific Committee of the Russian General Staff, 1894.

³⁴ Francis Younghusband was - and still is - a darling of certain jingoist circles in Britain. Cobbold's inclusion of Petrovsky's opinion, and his remarks on Russian colonisation policy shed a slightly different light on Younghusband and his supporters.

³⁵ *The Heart of a Continent*, p. 320.

present. One is struck by this example of the use Russians make of the inhabitants of countries that come under their rule, and it seems a pity that the Indian Government does not take a leaf out of their book, and endeavour to open out communication on our frontier in similar conditions. The Russian method of dealing with the native population of their dominions has been arrived at by the Russian dislike of the policy of sending expeditions to burn villages and levy fines and then run away. Where the Russians go they stay, and this is a proper method of dealing with Asiatic tribes. Since Russia has taken over the vast tracts of Turkestan, Ferghana and Bukhara, they have never had any trouble whatever with the people, and consequently they are able to devote their time and attention to the opening of roads and the construction of railways in all directions.³⁶

After resting in Roshorv, situated on a plateau above the river, and engaging bearers, he began the most difficult part of the descent of the Bartang, along the steep and narrow gorges leading to Bassid and further on to Bhagoo. His route combined 'rickety ladders' fixed along the face of the cliff, 'hanging passages' (cf. Littledale extracts above), swaying bridges made of birch twigs and logs placed across precipices. He was forced to divide his baggage into smaller parcels and the ponies had to be held on ropes as they swam around jutting rocks.



"Hanging passage" crossed by Cobbold (with his dog)

His account of this hair-raising experience is prefaced by an apposite quotation from Shelley's *Revolt of Islam*:

I stood upon a point of shattered stone,
And heard loose rocks rushing tumultuously
With splash and shock into the deep--

The path by the right bank being the shorter, the men carrying the baggage crossed the bridge while I kept on to left with the ponies, and found that the path improved, there being few difficult places until we reached a point some miles below the bridge, where the mountain side descends sheer into the river, and a path, composed of birch twigs tied together and suspended by binders from rocks above, afforded the only

³⁶ This was, of course, an exaggeration: from time to time there were uprisings by the local population against Russian rule, such as the one that served as a pretext for Cobbold's subsequent arrest in Vomar, as well as the riots in Tashkent in 1892 during a cholera epidemic and, in 1898, another Muslim uprising in the Ferghana valley (in Andijan). Typically, however, they were put down with extreme force.

means of progression. Shingle and earth had been laid over the twigs, and the path thus provided was good enough in itself. The weight of a dozen ponies traversing it, however, proved too much for some of the binders holding it up, which did not appear as though they had been renewed for years. I had stayed behind to pick some flowers, and seeing that the ponies had crossed in safety had no thought of danger as I hurried on after them. I had gone just halfway across when to my consternation I heard the binder above me snap and instantly felt the path giving way beneath my feet. I clutched desperately at some roots growing in the side of the rock as the path fell into the water below with a sickening thud. The noise of the torrent as it tore along below me was so great that I feared that there was little chance of my being heard, but I shouted for help with all my might. Luckily one of my men and two Tajiks were behind me, and immediately they perceived the danger of my situation they scaled the cliffs above me like cats and taking off their turbans threw the ends down to me. I seized the ends firmly and having wound them well round my wrists I trusted to the men above and swung off into midair. It was a distinctly perilous position, one of the nastiest I remember. We had still twenty yards to go and I feared that it was practically impossible for the men above me to find a firm foothold and support my weight of ten stone. I looked below me and made up my mind to try and gain a footing on a projecting rock some distance down if the worst came and they let me fall; but they didn't. They held on like grim death and occasionally as they worked their way along I eased the tension by thrusting my fingers and toes into crevices in the rock and thus we gradually reached the path again in safety. The whole incident had not occupied more than five minutes, but it seemed to me an age, and when the acute tension was over I felt that all my strength had deserted me and that I was too weak to move. But I soon pulled myself together and we all sat down, the men and I, and I formally thanked them for saving my life at the peril of their own, which the brave fellows acknowledged by seizing my hands and laying them on their foreheads, vowing that I was their lord and master and that their lives were at my disposal.

The ponies had to swim the river several times, and I nearly met with an accident which would have effectually brought my travels to an end. We came to a deep rift in the face of a precipice, over which a single log had been laid, this being held firm in its place between large stones. Several coolies had crossed in safety, and when it came to my turn I straddled the log and had got half way over when the large stone holding it in its place on the further side began to oscillate and finally rolled down the precipice, while the beam with its rounded ends began to turn and roll towards the edge. Fortunately the cries of the men behind me attracted the attention of a coolie, who ran to the log and held it secure till I had crossed. Probably I should in any case have managed to scramble over in time, but the feeling of being seated on a rolling log some hundreds of feet above a raging torrent is not calculated to soothe the nerves of the coolest.³⁷

Ralph Cobbold received no recognition of his extraordinary travels either from the British government or from the Royal Geographical Society. Captain Henry Deasy, however, with whom Cobbold had started his journey, received the Founder's Medal of the RGS in 1900 for the work he did in Yarkand after parting company with him in the Taghdumbash Pamir. Cobbold was not alone in this: Ney Elias had also been snubbed by British officialdom and although he had received the RGS Founder's medal for his surveying of the Yellow River, his exploits in the Pamirs went equally unrewarded. Elias was Jewish, which may be an explanation; Cobbold was perhaps too free in his criticisms of British colonial policy and attitudes.

He writes, however, as well as any of the other explorers of the Pamirs and it is a pity that his book is out of print - cf. his description of his arrival in Kashmir:

Throughout my wanderings I was often conscious of how much I missed; and when from the lonely land of innermost Asia, where it seemed almost in the fitness of things that one *should* be solitary, I came

³⁷ Alexei Pavlovich Fedchenko, the Russian explorer, wrote of an even more hair-raising method of crossing sheer cliffs: "The direct road between Kila Khumb and Shighnan presents many obstacles ; during certain months it is impracticable, and then the only means of communication between the two countries is by means of baskets (corbeilles). I had often heard of this kind of carriage at Samarkand, on my voyage to Khokand, and at first I did not believe the accounts, but I finished with being convinced that there was some truth in it. In impracticable defiles where some large river flows, they can only get along, I was told, by imbedding iron pins in the rocks, and suspending from them baskets attached to cords at intervals of about seven feet. The traveller places himself in the first basket, swings himself along, passes into the second basket, and so on to the end." Quoted by Henry Trotter in *Report of the Trans-Himalayan Explorations - 1873-74-75*, p. 15 footnote.

down into the glorious sunny valley, a world of smiles and freshness, I felt more than ever the want of one kindred spirit, without which happiness is only a broken arc.

It was a beautiful world which I was in now. The flowers, the cool shades, the great trees murmuring with gentle breezes, all rested and delighted my eyes, long accustomed to snow and ice and cold monotony. Certainly the soft influences of this land of fruits and flowers should teach one a more sunshiny creed than belongs to those whose work is in sterner climes or among the tares of fallen humanity. I shall never forget the first evening on the Wular.

'Twas when the hour of evening came
Upon the Lake, serene and cool,
When Day had hid his sultry flame
Behind the palms of Baramoule

[Thomas Moore, *Lalla Rookh*]

that I felt that to the valley of Kashmir nothing needs to be added. It is a “lodge in some vast wilderness” for which one often sighs when in the midst of a bustle at once sordid and trivial. The scenery satisfies the soul: it is magnificent, and the air is life-giving.

From my boat I watched the sunset that evening. Haramuk, the Tragbal, and the mountains towards the east, stood out in a medium of quiet, deep violet against the amber light in the sky, their grey, bleached summits peaked, turreted and snow-slashed, piled above the dark forests, gleamed with glory. The Wular lay “one burnished sheet of living gold,” every ripple made by our boat reflected the deep violet mountains. To the west was a carnival of colour—indescribable. Every instant it changed, deepened, reddened, melted, growing more and more wonderful till at last it faded even off the highest jewelled peaks, and they became wan as the face of death.

A sunset breathes a tonic sadness, always brave, never hysterical. Upon the crowded, noisy life of the world the evening gradually falls, and the lights are extinguished. The inevitable end draws near, and is welcome. To read a sunset well is to anticipate experience, and when the hours of the long shadows fall for us in reality we may hope to face them with a mind as quiet.



The Pundits

The unsung heroes of Central Asian exploration are the pundits.

Travel in Central Asia had always been dangerous and with the exception of Russian merchants, only a few other Europeans had ventured there since Marco Polo. This small and somewhat improbable group included: an Embassy to Tamerlane from the Spanish court in 1403-1406, led by Ruy Gonzalez de Clavijo³⁸; a Turkish Admiral of the Egyptian fleet, Sidi Ali Reis (also known as Katib-i-Rumi), in 1553-56³⁹; an intrepid English trader, Anthony Jenkinson, who got as far as Bukhara in 1558⁴⁰; and several Jesuit missionaries in the 17th

³⁸ See *Embajada a Tamerlan*, Miraguano Ediciones, Madrid 1984.

³⁹ Sidi Ali actually got as far as Talokhan, from where he crossed the Oxus to Kulob. His account of his travels can be accessed on <http://www.columbia.edu/itc/mealac/pritchett/00generallinks/sidialireis> (*Mirat ul-Memalik*, translated by A. Vambéry and published in London in 1899 - accessed on 2015-01-23).

⁴⁰ Jenkinson was the main agent of the Muscovy Company, the first major joint-stock English trading company, formed in 1555 by the navigator and explorer Sebastian Cabot and various London merchants.

and early 18th centuries who travelled to Tibet, including in particular Benedict Goës who crossed the Pamirs.⁴¹

In the 19th century, with the exception of Wood's remarkable journey, there was much to discourage the European adventurer. William Moorcroft, an army veterinary doctor and horse purchaser, had died near Bukhara in 1825 under what were thought at the time to have been suspicious circumstances (the cause was determined later to have been a fever); Adolph Schlagintweit, the German explorer and scientist, had been put to death as a spy in Kashgar in 1857;⁴² and George Hayward had been murdered in Gilgit in 1870 on his attempt to reach the upper Oxus and explore the Pamirs – a crime that generated outrage in the British press and a famous poem by Henry Newbolt (1862-1938).

He Fell Among Thieves

'Ye have robb'd,' said he, 'ye have slaughter'd and made end,
Take your ill-got plunder, and bury the dead:
What will ye more of your guest and sometime friend?'
'Blood for our blood,' they said.

He laugh'd: 'If one may settle the score for five,
I am ready; but let the reckoning stand till day:
I have loved the sunlight as dearly as any alive.'
'You shall die at dawn,' said they.

He flung his empty revolver down the slope,
He climb'd alone to the Eastward edge of the trees;
All night long in a dream untroubled of hope
He brooded, clasping his knees.

He did not hear the monotonous roar that fills
The ravine where the Yassîn river sullenly flows;
He did not see the starlight on the Laspur hills,
Or the far Afghan snows.

He saw the April noon on his books aglow,
The wistaria trailing in at the window wide;
He heard his father's voice from the terrace below
Calling him down to ride.

He saw the gray little church across the park,
The mounds that hid the loved and honour'd dead;
The Norman arch, the chancel softly dark,
The brasses black and red.

He saw the School Close, sunny and green,
The runner beside him, the stand by the parapet wall,
The distant tape, and the crowd roaring between,
His own name over all.

⁴¹ C. Wessels, *Early Jesuit Travellers in Central Asia (1603-1721)*. First published in 1924, The Hague (Reprint: Asian Educational Services AES, New Delhi 1992); and *An Account of Tibet - The Travels of Ippolito Desideri of Pistoia S.J., 1712-1727*, London 1937 (Reprint: AES, 2005).

⁴² Born in 1829, Adolph Schlagintweit was the second son of a family of distinguished scholars and explorers. In 1854, on the recommendation of Alexander von Humboldt, three of the Schlagintweit brothers (Robert, Hermann and Adolph) were chosen by the East India Company to map parts of India and the Himalayas. (See *Results of a Scientific Mission to India and High Asia*, Leipzig, 1860-1866 and <http://www.schlagintweit.de/engl/easien.htm> – the exquisite illustrations by Herrmann Schlagintweit can be found on this site and are also accessible, together with the maps on <http://dsr.nii.ac.jp/toyobunko/XII-4-2>.) Adolph was the first European to visit Kashgar since Marco Polo, but, suspected of being a Chinese spy, was put to death by Vali Khan, ruler of Kashgar. His head was later recovered and brought by a Persian traveller to the British authorities in India, inspiring the closing scene in Rudyard Kipling's story *The Man Who Would Be King*. (Above links accessed on 2015-01-23.)

He saw the dark wainscot and timber'd roof,
The long tables, and the faces merry and keen;
The College Eight and their trainer dining aloof,
The Dons on the daïs serene.

He watch'd the liner's stem ploughing the foam,
He felt her trembling speed and the thrash of her screw;
He heard the passengers' voices talking of home,
He saw the flag she flew.

And now it was dawn. He rose strong on his feet,
And strode to his ruin'd camp below the wood;
He drank the breath of the morning cool and sweet:
His murderers round him stood.

Light on the Laspur hills was broadening fast,
The blood-red snow-peaks chill'd to a dazzling white;
He turn'd, and saw the golden circle at last,
Cut by the Eastern height.

'O glorious Life, Who dwellest in earth and sun,
I have lived, I praise and adore Thee.'
A sword swept.
Over the pass the voices one by one
Faded, and the hill slept.

The self-proclaimed 'civilising mission' of the Europeans was – at least at the outset – not much appreciated by the local population and, in the general absence of law and order, travellers were fair game for bandits. In addition, the British government discouraged travel in frontier areas of India where it was as yet unable to take retaliatory action against the local perpetrators of crimes against its citizens. At the same time, however, the authorities wanted to extend their knowledge of the adjacent territories – and assess the risks of invasion – by undertaking geographical surveys.

The 'Great Trigonometrical Survey' (GTS) of India was begun early in the 19th century and concluded in 1883, when the triangulation of most of the sub-continent had been completed. Already in 1774, a native officer had collected data on the territory between Bengal and the Deccan and, in 1812, the ill-fated Moorcroft was using Indians to measure distance through use of a measured pace.⁴³ By the 1830s – despite some official disapproval of the use of natives for such skilled work – Indians were being employed for surveying. One, Mahommed Ali, travelled with Alexander Burnes to Bukhara in 1832.

As British distrust of Russian intentions grew, so did the need for more accurate information about those same frontier areas that were dangerous for Europeans to enter. In November 1852, Thomas George Montgomerie was appointed to the GTS, and, in 1856, was put in charge of the Kashmir surveys. Under his leadership, there came into being a new class of native Indian surveyors, the "Pundits", immortalised in Rudyard Kipling's *Kim*. The failure of two British expeditions to Tibet in 1861 and 1862 overcame official scepticism and Montgomerie's proposals for training Indian surveyors were approved in 1863.

There are few nuggets in the reports brought back by the pundits; they are, for the most part dry catalogues of what they saw. While they provide interesting local historical and political

⁴³ Derek Waller, *The Pundits - British Exploration of Tibet and Central Asia*, University Press of Kentucky, 1990, p. 22. I am especially grateful to Professor Waller for his generosity in sharing with me some of the source material for his book.

information, they give little feeling for the adventure of travel in uncharted territory and spectacular natural scenery. Moreover, they revealed little about Russian intentions nor about the feasibility of Russian incursions into British India and, within a few years, their work was superseded by the results of scientific explorations by British, Russian and other missions.

Their masters were aware of this and sometimes complained about the lack of imagination of the ‘natives’. In his summary of Mukhtar Shah’s travels, for example, Colonel H.C.B. Tanner of the Indian Staff Corps gave full vent to his (somewhat racist) frustration.

M-S- says that there are lions also, and *babars*, an indefinite animal always played by the Asiatic on the European, and which is intended to represent a kind of condensed epitome of all unknown members of the cat tribe. The pacing of M-S- is not always strictly accurate; his historical facts can often be questioned: but his ignorance of the animal kingdom is beyond belief. To him there are *hiran*, which include all kinds of antelope, deer, stags, and the like; *shers* and *babars*,⁴⁴ by which he means tigers, lions, panthers and wild-cats. The mountain-goat, ‘*buz kohi*’, comprises every other wild animal that exists on the face of the globe which is ‘*halal*’ or eaten by Muhammadans. His ignorance of the vegetable kingdom is equally profound. I can only get out of him: 1. ‘The black tree of Kashmir’; 2. ‘The *safeda*’, or poplar; 3. ‘Thorns’ or *khar*. The latter means ordinary vegetation, of whatever kind or sort, and which is beneath notice altogether.

Most natives ... pass by the mightiest works of nature without lifting up their eyes to regard them, even for a moment. Our explorers have now traversed Upper Chitral, Yasin and the Oxus valley in many directions, and not one of them has ever given a hint of the existence of the immense mountain chains that wall in nearly every valley between Gilgit and Badakhshan. Not one of them has mentioned the lofty Tirach Mir or any of its huge snow-clad companions. The ‘Havildar’ gives a vivid description of his miseries when crossing the Nuksan pass and tells how he fell about amongst the blocks of ice at its base; but there is no mention of the peak of the great mountain between 25 and 26 thousand feet high that rears up its summit almost over head, and which actually gives origin to the ice masses over which he had to scramble and to the crevasses which he had to avoid. The ‘Mullah,’ who surveyed along the Kho and Mastauj valleys, makes no mention of the great expanse of snow which covers the lofty heights of the Tirach Mir, situated only a few miles distant, which, as Major Biddulph writes, ‘fills the entire view’. The Mullah, the Havildar, Abdul Subhan, and lastly M-S-, who one after the other travelled along the valley of the Oxus, made no mention of the immense snow needles which rise up south of Zebak and Ishkashim, and which many centuries previously had attracted the attention of the Chinese explorers when passing down that way. A native cannot give the slightest description of any country, however well he may be acquainted with it. Into trivial particulars he will minutely enter, and while he will tell you how at such and such a camp, which was 267 yards from the stream, there were only three mulberry trees, and one of them was broken off at the top, the great works of nature take no hold on his imagination, or if they do, the recollection of them is quickly effaced from memory.⁴⁵



“Snow needles” in the Hindu Kush as seen from the Wakhan

⁴⁴ ‘*Sher/shir*’ is Farsi (and Urdu) for ‘lion and ‘*babur/babbar*’ for ‘tiger’.

⁴⁵ *Reports of Trans-Himalayan Explorations in Badakhshan*, p. 7 and p. 22.



Ella Maillart, *Oasis Interdites* Paris 1937 (Reprint *Le Livre du Mois* 1971)

Ella Maillart (1903-1997) had travelled in 1932 in Soviet Central Asia, a journey she described in *Turkestan Solo*, published in 1934. In February 1935, accompanied by Peter Fleming, a well-known writer and correspondent of *The Times*, she left Beijing in an attempt to reach British India via Kashgar. The extracts below are from her account of this seven-month journey, *Oasis Interdites*, published in Paris in 1936. In addition to being one of the most intrepid travellers of all time, she also writes vivid prose.

Vie de la caravane

Jour après jour notre existence se déroule selon la règle immuable des siècles. Avant l'aube, sans heurt ni bruits inutiles, deux cent cinquante chameaux, une trentaine de chevaux et environ quatre-vingts êtres humains se disposent au départ.

Les chameaux, qui restent bâtés la nuit, ont dormi accroupis en demi-cercle près des ballots de leurs propriétaires, jonchant le sol de petites crottes rondes et noires comme de grandes olives: avec la cendre des feux, c'est toute la trace que laissera notre passage. Et sans les restes analogues des caravanes précédentes, nous n'aurions pu faire cuire notre soupe.

Torses bruns et nus dégagés de la pelisse de mouton, hommes et femmes s'affairent; ils lancent habilement une corde sous le ventre du chameau au moment où il s'accroupit, ils ficèlent les sacs, et d'un dernier coup de reins arriment les charges à bloc. Et déjà le premier groupe s'ébranle, retournant à la piste quittée la veille.

Le ciel est gris, lourd de froid, et le globe opaque du soleil se lève au-dessus de collines pelées. (p. 95)

* * * *

Les Mongols ne se lavent pas, dit-on, de peur d'être transformés en poissons après leur mort. D'autre part l'eau des puits leur semble chargée de maléfices; issue de l'intérieur de la terre où règne le principe femelle, elle ne sera bonne qu'exposée à l'air et au soleil, qui font partie du monde mâle des régions supérieures. Mais cette saleté inouïe n'est guère incommodante en hiver, où le froid affaiblit même l'odeur du beurre rance dont leurs pelisses sont imbibées. (p. 102)

* * * *

Mais un piquet de tente a été perdu en route, et comme il est irremplaçable dans ce pays sans bois, je pars à sa recherche. Allant d'un pas égal, je me sens très « en forme », pleine d'une joie comparable à celle que j'éprouve lorsque je pars sur mes skis par un matin d'hiver bien sec, et là, sur ce haut plateau d'Asie, je chante:

I'm sitting on top of the world!

Puis je ris sous le grand ciel : quelle bizarre situation que celle qui réunit Peter et moi au centre de ce continent! A vrai dire, elle pourrait sembler romanesque, et si j'écrivais un livre à succès, c'est aujourd'hui ou jamais que les deux héros de mon histoire, émus et reconnaissants, devraient tomber dans les bras l'un de l'autre, après s'être mutuellement sauvés d'une nourriture empoisonnée ou d'un brouillard fatal. Tant pis pour les amateurs de roman!

Peter est le meilleur des camarades, et je me trouve être avec lui d'une franchise absolue. Notre entreprise nous lie l'un à l'autre il est vrai, au point que vivant un peu comme deux naufragés sur une île déserte, il arrive que les remarques prononcées chaque soir au-dessus de la soupe, aient été pensées simultanément par tous les deux au cours de la journée. Mais seuls nos deux égoïsmes sont en présence et s'entraident. Nos divergences m'apparaissent clairement. Nous vouons tous deux nos loisirs au grand air, Peter à la chasse et moi au ski... Mais après? Peter me trouve trop sérieuse et je ne saisis pas bien l'humour britannique (ce qui

est aussi grave aux yeux d'un Anglais que « perdre la face » pour un Chinois). J'ai le mauvais goût de faire la morale; je l'ennuie avec mon besoin de comprendre les milliers de vies diverses qui composent l'humanité, et avec la nécessité que j'éprouve de rattacher ma vie à la vie générale. Enfin, peut-on être assez folle pour scruter si les efforts des hommes améliorent l'âme humaine? Rien de tout cela ne tourmente Peter, qui, dans sa sagesse imperturbable, observe les êtres humains comme les caractères d'une comédie. Quant à son moi profond, sa timidité le cache presque toujours sous une dignité facétieuse. Sauf à de rares intervalles, il semblerait persuadé que ce qui a rapport à lui ne peut intéresser personne.

Mais voici le piquet retrouvé: c'est ce qui importe pour l'instant, et je chante mon succès en revenant vers Peter, qui, debout, attend de me voir poindre dans la plaine qu'il domine. (pp. 151-152)

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Les richesses de la nature.

Il y a onze jours que nous avons quitté Issyk Pakté et chacun de nous est anxieux d'arriver, mais les chameaux ne peuvent guère accélérer leur procession.

Malgré la fatigue, nous sommes de bonne humeur. C'en est fini du triste Tibet dépouillé, épuré à l'extrême... Et Peter parle de sabler bientôt le Champagne à Tchertchen. Cette perspective me sourit, mais à vrai dire, j'aimerais surtout être sûre de boire à Kachgar cette année encore, ne serait-ce qu'un verre d'eau.

Enfin Assa Khan distingue quelque chose du sommet de son chameau, car il profère : "*Adam bar !*" (Il y a des hommes !) Depuis hier nous sommes descendus de 4000 à 3400 mètres, et voici au détour du sentier une immense tache jaune: l'herbe de l'an passé. Je salue une vieille semelle échouée sur le sable, infallible signe d'une proche agglomération. Voici un dos sombre, qui devient un âne, et voici qu'une fillette en haillons court vers un abri de toile annoncer notre arrivée : nous sommes à Bach Malgan.

Devant notre tente, plantée au bord d'un ruisseau limpide, des femmes vêtues de longues et droites robes de lin, viennent nous offrir des plats de bois pleins de lait caillé, et, dans une nappe, de jaunes galettes de maïs tout imprégnées encore de la chaleur du four. Si jamais j'ai vécu un instant de bonheur sans mélange, c'est là, devant ces dons parfumés et savoureux de la nature, entourée de visages bienveillants. Je remarque parfois des cheveux et des yeux clairs qui me donnent l'impression de me trouver parmi des cousins éloignés jusqu'alors inconnus. Et cette idée n'est pas insensée, car au début de notre ère, les oasis du Tarim étaient habitées par des Iraniens de race blanche qui parlaient une langue à eux, le çaka. Ça et là, malgré les invasions turques, une goutte du vieux sang réapparaît.

Ceux qui arrivent saluent en disant: "*Aman keldé!*" » (Bienvenue), puis cérémonieusement étreignent mes deux mains de leurs deux mains, avant de toucher leur front et leur menton en récitant une formule à mi-voix. Peter qui s'efforce toujours de converser pour nous deux, a fait de grands progrès en turki et comprend que nous ne sommes qu'à quatre jours de Tchertchen où règne la paix. L'aksakal de Bach Malgan (l'ancien) vient de se rendre à la ville, car les autorités militaires réquisitionnent les chameaux; les maîtres dounganes ne sont pas aimés, à ce que je comprends, mais les Turakis, ne tenant pas à exprimer leurs opinions, passent rapidement à un autre sujet. Il y a des « Ingliches » à Tchertchen, et ils y ont même un aksakal ; ce n'est bien sûr pas un Anglais (quelle chance cependant s'il savait cette langue...) mais un sujet britannique des Indes qui pourra nous aider le cas échéant. Et voilà bien la meilleure nouvelle que nous puissions apprendre. Il est décidé qu'un guide et quelques ânes nous mèneront jusque chez "notre" aksakal. (pp. 171-172)

