

History

The core of the TMRBM project is the Younghusband Collection, acquired during the 1903–4 British military mission to Tibet. The collection is perhaps the largest single acquisition of Tibetan literature made during British colonial history and is one of the most significant collections of the Edwardian period. It was obtained at the peak of the British Raj and at a time of intense political tension between the greatest military and imperial powers of the day.



Lord Curzon (1859-1925)

over Tibet was both militarily strategic and commercially beneficial as a gateway to China. The suspicion of Russian presence led to an active British campaign to enter Tibet against a strong isolationist policy adopted by



Sir Francis Younghusband (1863-1942)

Younghusband, however, returned from Tibet a different man after experiencing something of an epiphany on the high ridges of Tibet to become an advocate and author of a proto-new age spirituality and the founder of World Congress of Faiths.

The infamous Younghusband Mission, which turned out *de facto* to be a full-scale invasion of Tibet, took place during the viceroyalty of Lord Curzon (1899-1905). The British Government suspected that the Tsarist Russian hegemony was spreading to Tibet at the invitation of the thirteenth Dalai Lama, Thubten Gyatso, through the Buryat monk Dorjjeff. They were convinced, without any evidence, of growing Russian presence in Lhasa, the Forbidden City. With the Great Game or rivalry for supremacy in Central Asia between the British Empire and Tsarist Russia at its height, control



Lhasa toward the outside world in general and the British power in India in particular. It was in such political climate that Lord Curzon appointed Colonel Francis Younghusband, an earnest adventurer and ambitious imperial officer, to head a civil mission to Lhasa escorted by a large army of some 3000 soldiers and 7000 support staff under Brigadier James Macdonald. The British desire to enter Tibet at all costs and the fierce Tibetan resistance to it unfolded into a bloody war on the Roof of the World during which its inhabitants suffered tremendous loss of life and were forced eventually to allow the British troops to march into the Forbidden City, to pay the indemnities of the war and to sign a treaty apologising for the resistance.

One of the persons on the mission was Colonel Lawrence Austine Waddell, a medical doctor. Called 'a miserable old woman' by Younghusband in a letter to his father, he was the archaeologist to the mission and was also the main person responsible for the acquisition of the collection. Charles Allen later called him 'the chief looter' for this role. Beside Captain Frederick O'Connor, the official interpreter for the mission, Waddell was the only person who had some knowledge of Tibetan and things Tibetan. He appears to have had a strong inclination for cultural exploration and some prior knowledge of Buddhism. Although his knowledge of Tibetan culture and religions was vastly inadequate to properly understand its intricacies and underlying concepts, it was for his days a rare and admirable achievement.



L. Austine Waddell (1854-1938)

Like Younghusband and most other colonial colleagues, Waddell approached Tibet with a mixture of curiosity and superciliousness. The mood of the mission was infused with the ethos of Victorian grandeur and the glory of the British Empire. British imperialism was at its apex with strong fervour of British supremacy. Unlike some of the earlier visitors to the Himalayas such as George Bogle, who, inspired by the age of enlightenment and exploration and motivated by commercial benefits, were open and appreciative of the foreign cultures they encountered, the explorers of the late nineteenth century and beginning of twentieth century were arrogant and oppressive, driven by a sense of their own superiority and their zeal to expand British imperial interests. This was compounded with the usual explorer's thirst for conquest of unknown places. Entry into the Forbidden City was in itself seen as a trophy by most of the officers in the mission. Only one English man, Manning, had previously managed to barge into Lhasa.

Waddell, like most other colonial masters of that time, believed in the supremacy of the white race and in their duty to subject and rule other people. Given such beliefs, he had little love or respect for Tibetan civilization. A glimpse through his *Lhasa and its Mysteries* reveals his imperialistic arrogance and contempt for the barbaric and superstitious world of Tibet. In addition, his perceptions of Tibetan culture and religion were often influenced by late Victorian Christian evangelism. Like many other early western scholars, he calls Tibetan Buddhism 'Lamaism'. Padmasambhava he describes as the 'wizard king', the Dalai Lama as 'Pope King / Grand Lama', the private chapel of deities as the 'cret chamber of the devil' and much of Tibetan Buddhist rituals as 'diabolic'. In his description, Tibetan Buddhism was 'a parasitic disease'. He calls it, 'a cloak to the worst forms of oppressive devil-worship, by which the poor Tibetan was placed in constant fear of his life from the attacks of thousands of malignant devils both in this life and in the world to come, and necessitating never-ending payments to the priests of large sums to avert these calamities.' Tibet's socio-political structures are seen as the most repressive and backward.

After the conflict in Guru where some 625 Tibetans were killed, Waddell regrets the bloodshed but justifies it saying ‘enemies as the Tibetans were, not only of ourselves, but in some sense, by reason of their savagery and superstition, of the human race.’

Seen in the light of such condemning prejudice, it is difficult to imagine that Waddell was sincerely interested in collecting Buddhist manuscripts which represent the depth and spirit of Tibetan civilization. Or are these observations merely insincere travesties to feed a British audience hungry for accounts of patriotism, British superiority and expanding imperialism?

Whether or not his disregard for Tibet and its people were genuine, Waddell seems earnest in his interest to collect books and other artefacts. He even claims to have risked his life to collect the books. He writes: “On being told that there were several Tibetan books in the house of the headman, I hurried in through a labyrinth of dark passages, crowded with boxes of gunpowder, and found some books, which I had brought out hastily as the adjoining house was afire, and I had to run the gauntlet of explosions, which were occurring all around, and the house in which I had been blew up a short time afterwards.” The books, he remarks, have also given him protection from explosives thrown at them when the British were under siege in the Changlo manor in Gyantse.



Much of the collection, Waddell claim, was collected by May 1903, thus in and on the way to Gyantse. The books, he says, were collected ‘under exceptionally favourable circumstances of acquiring rare manuscripts and volumes otherwise unobtainable.’ These ‘favourable circumstances’ were the numerous military clashes during which the

invading army besieged and ransacked several monastic and family establishments. Almost all of the texts and artefacts acquired by the mission both officially and individually were the booty of lawless looting. Very little was collected after Gyantse according to Waddell, due to 'unfavourable circumstances'. After the last battle at Kharo La pass, the Tibetans surrendered and gave in to British demands to enter Lhasa. There was no confrontation and this left the mission very little opportunity to loot. Besides, Younghusband had by now lost the unflagging support of the Government of India for the Tibet campaign, which came from his chief ally and patron Lord Curzon, and was instead sternly reprimanded for exercising excessive authority and senseless looting.

When the British mission returned from Tibet, after signing a nominal treaty and finding no Russian presence, Waddell brought back with him '300 mule loads' of about 2000 volumes of religious books. He collected for both the Government of India and for himself - but it is difficult to verify what proportions were intended for each party. The books were sorted, listed, packed and then later shipped to the UK where the collection got distributed between the libraries of Oxford, Cambridge, the British Museum and the India Office. The latter two collections have now been put together in the British Library.