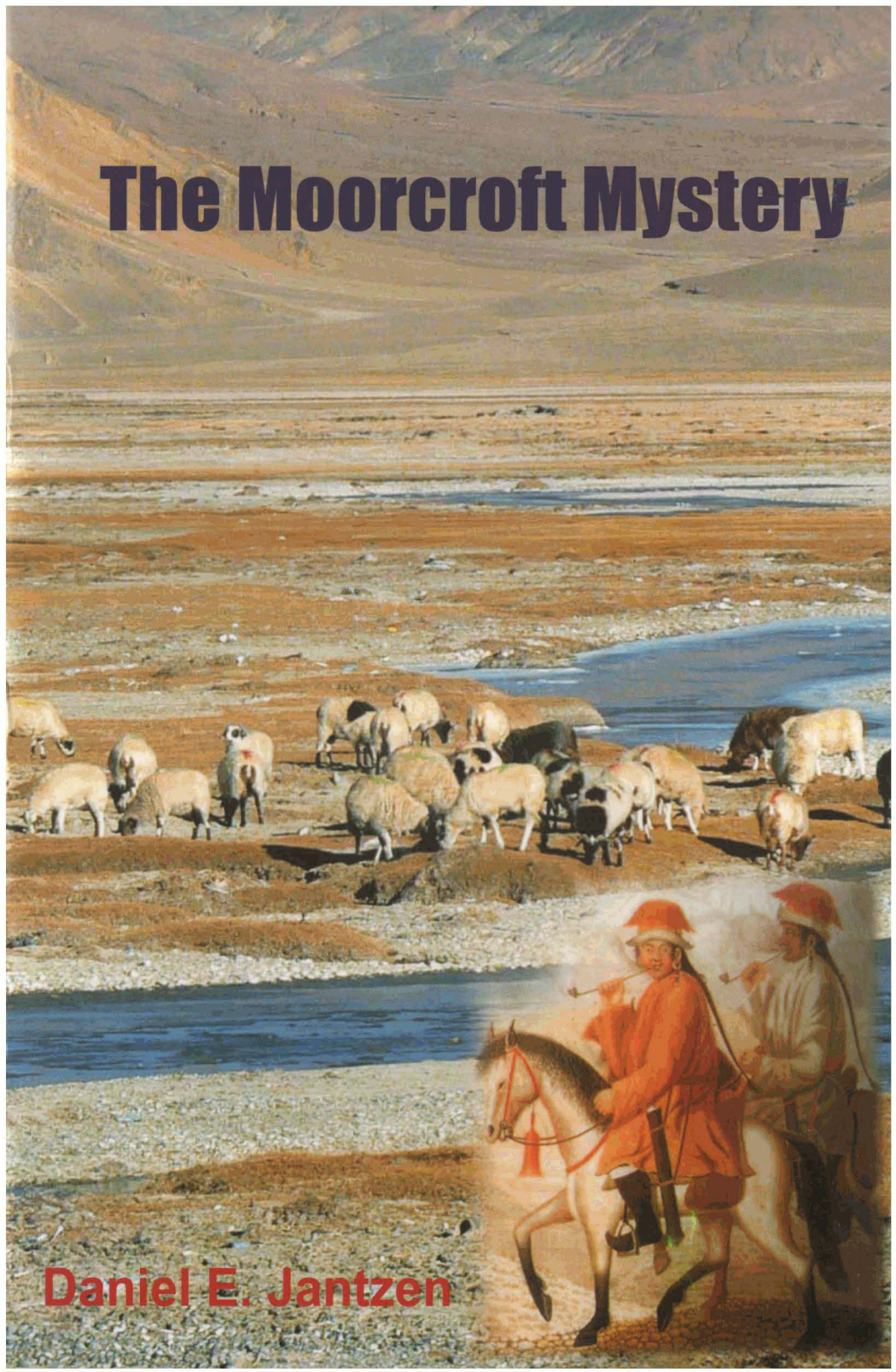


The Moorcroft Mystery

Daniel E. Jantzen



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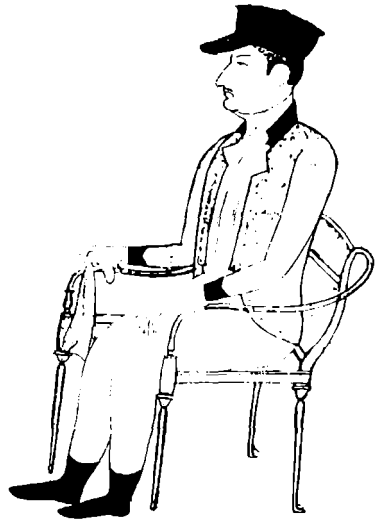
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The Moorcroft Mystery

Introduction

William Moorcroft, the pioneer veterinarian, horse-breeder and Asian explorer (1767-????), is widely reported to have died of a fever in Andkhoi, Afghanistan on Aug. 27, 1825. His death was reported by his companion, George Trebeck, who did not witness the death but did help bury the body without actually viewing it. This first "death" forms the basis for all the Moorcroft biographical accounts. Although some later British observers were suspicious, it was never widely disputed.

However, William Moorcroft is also reported to have lived peacefully in Lhasa for the following twelve years, 1826 to 1838, and to have been killed by bandits in Western Tibet while returning from Lhasa to Leh. This later report is from two French Lazarist priests who arrived in Lhasa on Jan. 29, 1846 after an arduous journey across Northern China and Mongolia. These priests, Regis-Evariste Huc and Joseph Gabet, engaged in missionary activity in Lhasa for six weeks until they were expelled by the Chinese *Amban* [resident or ambassador] and escorted out to Chengdu and eventually Macao. Huc remained in Macao for approximately two years and wrote a book of their



travels¹. While in Lhasa, Huc and Gabet, who had never heard of Moorcroft, were told about his activities and eventual death in Tibet by the Regent of the Dalai Lama and by the 'governor' of the Kashmiris resident in Lhasa. They also met and spoke with Moorcroft's Ladakhi servant, Nisan, who remained in Lhasa after Moorcroft departed in 1838.

These two opposing accounts of the death of William Moorcroft have created some comment but have never been satisfactorily reconciled. The second death, and the tale of twelve years in Lhasa, is generally discounted and thought to be untrue. But might Moorcroft have faked his own death at Andkhoi in order to travel to Yarkand (and later Lhasa) in disguise? He had every incentive to do so. By imagining him attempting a visit in disguise to Yarkand, his well-known objective throughout the six-year journey to Bokhara, one can create a story that unites the essential truth of both accounts. It is a tale of adventurous exploration that rings true to the character and determination of William Moorcroft.

The possibility that Moorcroft's maps and diaries might yet be discovered in Lhasa, Beijing or Taipei is motivating a search, not only for the documents, but for any evidence that Moorcroft's final twelve years were spent researching and reporting the agricultural, economic, political and social life of Tibet. William Moorcroft was certainly a perceptive, accurate and comprehensive reporter of the countries through which he travelled. If found, his reports, diaries and maps, based on twelve years unrestricted travel in Tibet, would constitute a window through which we might gain a unique view of Tibetan life in the early 19th century. Whether these papers ever existed and, more importantly still exist, is unknown, but a thorough search certainly seems justified.

1. *Souvenirs d'un voyage dans la Tartarie, le Thibet et la Chine, Pendant Les Annees 1844, 1845 et 1846*; by Huc and Gabet; 1850. The English translation by William Hazlitt is *Travels in Tartary, Thibet and China*; 1852. Office of the National Illustrated Library, London.

The Moorcroft Mystery

The mystery Huc and Gabet stumbled onto in Lhasa is best told in their own words, taken from *Travels in Tartary, Thibet and China*; Vol 2, Chapter VII.

We have already referred to the travels of Moorcroft in Thibet, in noticing the excessive fear with which the designers and makers of geographical charts inspire the Thibetian government. One day, the governor of the Cashmerians brought to us one of his fellow countrymen, named Nisan, who had been for a long time the servant of Moorcroft at Lha-Ssa. He talked to us at some length about his old master, and the details he gave us confirmed all that had already been related to us. The adventures of this English traveller appearing to us too singular to be passed over wholly in silence, we have thought proper to give a short review of them.

According to the statements collected in the capital of Thibet itself, Moorcroft arrived from Ladak at Lha-Ssa in the year 1826; he wore the Mussulman dress, and spoke the Farsie [Persian] language expressing himself in that idiom with so much facility that the Cashmerians of Lha-Ssa took him for one of their countrymen. He hired a house in the town, where he lived for twelve years with his servant Nisan, whom he had brought from Ladak, and who himself thought that his master was a Cashmerian. Moorcroft had purchased a few herds of goats and oxen, which he had confided to the care of some Thibetian shepherds, who dwelt in the gorges of the mountains about Lha-Ssa. Under the pretext of inspecting his herds, the feigned Mussulman went freely about the country, making drawings and preparing his geographical charts. It is said that never having learnt the Thibetian language, he abstained from holding direct communication with the people of the country. At last, having dwelt for twelve years at Lha-Ssa, Moorcroft took his way back to Ladak, but whilst he was in the province of Ngari, he was attacked by a troop of brigands who assassinated him. The perpetrators of this murder were

pursued and arrested by the Thibetian government, who recovered a portion of the property of the English traveller, among which was a collection of geographical designs and charts. It was only then, and upon sight of these objects, that the authorities of Lha-Ssa found out that Moorcroft was an Englishman.

Before separating from his servant, Moorcroft had given him a note, telling him to show it to the inhabitants of Calkutta if he ever went to that city, and that it would suffice to make his fortune. It was doubtless a letter of recommendation. The seizure of the effects of Moorcroft created such a disturbance in Thibet, that Nisan, afraid of being compromised, destroyed his letter of recommendation. He told us himself that this note was written in characters exactly similar to ours.

The facts we have here related, we derive from the Regent, from the Cashmerian governor, from Nisan, and from several other inhabitants of Lha-Ssa. Before reaching this town, we had never heard of Moorcroft; it was there we first learned the name of this English traveller. From what we have stated, it may be considered established that Moorcroft really went to Lha-Ssa in 1826, that he resided there for twelve years, and that he was afterwards assassinated on the road to Ladak from Lha-Ssa.

Let us turn now, however, to other information, extremely discrepant from that which was given us in the capital of Thibet. According to the *Universal Geography* of Charles Ritter,² Moorcroft made first a journey in 1812, which lasted two months; he was afterwards directed by the Company to procure horses from Turkestan, wherewith to improve the breed of horses in India. For this purpose he undertook a second journey in November, 1819; he got as far as Ladak, where he remained two years. In the month of October, 1822, he left that town for Cashmere, and on the 25th of August, 1825, died at Andkou [Andkhoi], on the way from Herat to Balk [Balkh]. The death of Moorcroft, at the date and place stated by Charles Ritter, was announced by

2. Asia, vol. v. p. 800. German edition, 1833-1837.

his fellow-traveller, M. Tribeck, in a letter dated Balk, 6th September, 1825, and addressed to Captain Wade, the resident at Loudiana [Ludhiana].

We confess that we cannot possibly reconcile such opposite statements. If Moorcroft was really not at Lha-Ssa, how is it that he was so well known there, and that the people there speak of his residence among them in terms so precise? What interest could the Thibetians have in forging such a tale? On the other hand, if Moorcroft was at Lha-Ssa, how can we explain that letter of M. Tribeck, which announces that his fellow-traveller died in 1825, exactly at the time, when, according to the other hypothesis, he was on his way to the capital of Thibet?

The discrepancy that Huc and Gabet found impossible to reconcile in 1848 was less troubling to Moorcroft's British biographer, Prof. Garry Alder. Alder in 1985 published the definitive life of Moorcroft: Beyond Bokhara—the life of William Moorcroft—Asian Explorer and Pioneer Veterinary Surgeon—1767-1825.

Alder was, of course, well acquainted with the Huc and Gabet story from Lhasa. The final chapter of Alder's Beyond Bokhara deals with the Moorcroft mystery as follows:

The last few days are shrouded in mystery. He [Moorcroft] seems to have reached Andkhoi safely. It was a notoriously unattractive place in summer - a local Persian proverb called it 'a real hell' on account of its 'bitter salt water, scorching sand, venomous flies and scorpions'. 'There,' according to one circumstantial account, 'he felt the symptoms of a fever gaining on him, but he wrote to one of his Indian friends, full of hope that the medicines he had taken to remove them, would be effectual.' The source is dubious but it sounds like Moorcroft's optimism. This time the little *hakimbashi* [caravan leader] was wrong. His already weakened body no longer responded even to his iron will, and the fever gained on him remorselessly.

Three days later, apparently on 27 August 1825, even his stout heart could take no more and the tortured, feverish body at last lay still. William Moorcroft was dead.

At least that is what everybody thought.

Twenty years later, and 2000 miles (3200 kilometres) away across the ranges to the south-east, two Lazarist priests from the French mission at Pekin reached Lhasa. Their somewhat optimistic hope was to convert the Dalai Lama and his people to Roman Catholicism. As soon as they arrived, Fathers Huc and Gabet faced close and suspicious questioning from the Tibetan authorities on the subject of maps. Why maps they asked? Their interrogator explained.

"Maps are feared in this country—extremely feared indeed; especially since the affair of a certain Englishman named Moorcroft who introduced himself into Lha-Ssa, under the pretence of being a Cashmerian. After a sojourn there of twelve years, he departed; but he was murdered on his way to Ladak. Amongst his effects they found a numerous collection of maps and plans which he had drawn during his stay at Lha-Ssa."

Huc and Gabet had never heard of Moorcroft. Shortly afterwards they met and quizzed a Kashmiri called Nisan who said that he had arrived at Lhasa with Moorcroft in 1826 and was his servant during his twelve-year stay at the Tibetan capital. Nisan said he never doubted that his master, who spoke fluent Persian and dressed and behaved as a Muslim, was anything but the Kashmiri he claimed to be. He:

"had purchased a few herds of goats and oxen, which he had confided to the care of some Thibetian shepherds, who dwelt in the gorges of the mountains, about Lha-Ssa. Under the pretext of inspecting his herds, the feigned Mussulman went freely about the country, making drawings and preparing his geographical

charts. It is said that never having learnt the Thibetian language, he abstained from holding direct communication with the people of the country."

It was only after his murder that the Tibetan authorities discovered from his maps, charts and papers that the *soi-distant* Kashmiri was an Englishman named Moorcroft. Many other witnesses, some of them of high rank, confirmed the essentials of this story but Nisan added one tantalizing extra piece of information. Before Moorcroft set out on his long journey to Ladakh, he:

"had given him a note, telling him to show it to the inhabitants of Calcutta, if he ever went to that city, and that it would suffice to make his fortune. It was doubtless a letter of recommendation. The seizure of the effects of Moorcroft created such a disturbance in Thibet, that Nisan, afraid of being compromised, destroyed his letter of recommendation. He told us himself that this note was written in characters exactly similar to ours."

There is nothing inherently impossible in this curious story. Indeed there is much superficially to endorse it. The chronology is right, the pasture farming fits Moorcroft's plans for his retirement, he had long been interested in opening a trade link with Lhasa, he was certainly a frequent writer of letters of recommendation and testimonials, and he had friends in Calcutta. Besides, none of Moorcroft's deliberately small entourage at Andkhoi is recorded as having witnessed his death, and the body which was carried in the summer-heat back to Balkh after some delay would have been quite unrecognizable. In any case, Trebeck by then was too ill himself to face the unpleasant task of examining it. It could have been anybody. Moreover if Moorcroft were planning to fake his own death and slip away into oblivion, then this might explain the cryptic reference to the individual duties he had to perform and the puzzling insistence on only a handful of

servants to accompany him into the desert on what he admitted to be a dangerous journey.

Why then would he plan such a thing? He was certainly a sensitive man. Perhaps the ultimate realization at Andkhoi that there were no fine horses to be had, and that his great journey had failed to open either the markets of Central Asia or the eyes of his masters at Calcutta, persuaded him that he simply could not face the I-told-you-so's of his many carping critics in Calcutta and the near certainty of professional disgrace. It is even possible that he was so unnerved by the dangers facing his party at the hands of Murad Beg, or the other robbers along the way, that he decided to cut and run for it, in disguise and alone. After such a gross betrayal there would indeed be little choice but a self-imposed exile in some remote spot beyond the reach of his compatriots. Where better to hide than on the far side of the Himalayas in a country closed to Europeans?

So far, so good, but the doubts are already beginning to clamour for attention. The notion that Moorcroft, dogged and courageous to a fault, would run away from anything is preposterous. He had already come to terms with the possibility of the ostensible failure of his mission and, in any case, his sense of obligation to his employers, not to speak of that to his friends, servants and young family, was far too sharp to consider abandoning them all and stealing away like a thief in the night. Besides, as he had often stated, the mission had not failed. He had acquired some good horses and was still hopeful of getting more. Even without any horses at all, Moorcroft believed he had gained priceless and unique information which he intended to make available to his government and his countrymen, before resigning his post at the stud and embarking on his great rural improvement project in the Himalayas. For that too he needed resources and approvals only available in Calcutta. Only temporary insanity, perhaps under the influence of high fever, could account

for actions so utterly inconsistent with Moorcroft's character, his record, and everything he stood for.

It is unlikely, but even if one allows for a moment the possibility, some formidable difficulties still remain. A faked death and a substitute body would require the collusion of others; secrets like that, in a small desert community in northern Afghanistan, would have been almost impossible to keep. There was never any doubt among those who were close to events, either then or later, that Moorcroft had become ill of fever and died. The confident allegations of murder or violence came later and from more distant and unreliable sources. Even if, against all probability, Moorcroft had succeeded in faking his own death and buying total silence from those who helped him to do it, he still had to cross nearly 2000 miles (3200 kilometres) of difficult terrain, in much of which he was well known, without detection. It would not have been easy. In any case, the man believed to be Moorcroft at Lhasa is not so much like Moorcroft as appears at first sight. There is clear evidence that Moorcroft did not speak Persian fluently as this man did, and he certainly did not speak it well enough to persuade other Kashmiris that he was one of them. Any Kashmiri would be familiar with one of the other local languages besides Persian. Moorcroft was not. Nor did he have any cartographical or artistic skill, always leaving that work to others like Hearsey or Trebeck. Finally, all the evidence of his long life suggests that he would have been constitutionally incapable of keeping aloof from the Tibetans at Lhasa and of not acquiring some knowledge of their language, as the mysterious figure is said to have done for twelve years. Whoever it was, it can hardly have been William Moorcroft.

Why then were the Tibetans so convinced that it was? Not presumably because of the paper evidence since, as Huc and Gabet make clear, nobody in Lhasa could read English or even distinguish between a printed and a manu-

script map. The evidence was never shown to the two missionaries. As for the alleged letter of recommendation which Nisan destroyed but could not read, the only positive assertion about it was that it seemed to be in Roman script. The Tibetans, in other words, could only assume the identity of the mysterious owner of the indecipherable maps and papers. Moorcroft was the most likely candidate simply because he was well known by reputation, both to the Tibetan authorities and to the Kashmiri traders at Lhasa. He had entered Tibet illegally in 1812 and threatened or tried to do so in 1819, 1820, 1821 and 1822. If the maps and papers were indisputably his, as the Tibetans believed and as is certainly possible, then the most likely explanation is that the mysterious stranger was one of Moorcroft's Kashmiri servants (and he had several), who survived the death of his master and escaped with some of his papers and maps and even perhaps with a letter of recommendation. After all, the extraordinary traveller and freebooter Alexander Gardiner met just such a man in 1830, somewhere north of Kunduz.

The haunting possibility that Moorcroft himself may, somehow have cheated the fate which befell the rest of his party in northern Afghanistan, and lived out a lonely old age in the forbidden city of Lhasa until, a septuagenarian and presumably homeward bound at last, he was robbed and murdered somewhere near the empty sacred lake of Manasarowar, must be abandoned. The great weight of evidence and of probability is against it.

On 6 September 1825 Trebeck wrote on a scrap of paper, 'Mr. M died August 27'. Trebeck was a very sick man himself by then but he saw no reason to doubt the truth of what he wrote. Nor need we.³

Thus we have the Moorcroft Mystery, and two apparently diametrically opposed views on whether he did, or did not, spend

3. *Beyond Bokhara*, pp. 357-360.

his final twelve years in Tibet. One view is based on a thorough search of the available record in the British archives; the other on first-person discussions with officials and people in Lhasa, including a man who claimed to be Moorcroft's servant. Both are convincing, both cite the available record, but the conclusions are opposite.

Before presenting a theory I believe adequately explains Moorcroft's first death, and his subsequent travel to Lhasa and residence there for twelve years, it is necessary to go back and review briefly who Moorcroft was, what motivated him, and why in 1819 he set out on a journey into wild and unknown areas that lasted almost six years. Readers interested in a full presentation of who Moorcroft was and what he was attempting to do would best read *Beyond Bokhara*, Alder's 1985 biography. Alder is magnificent in drawing out the details of Moorcroft's life and placing him in the proper historical context of his day.

Horse breeding—the motivation for exploration

Moorcroft first trained as a surgeon in his native England, but then changed his mind and trained in France as the very first professional British veterinarian. In 1791 he returned to Britain as a young man and eventually established a highly successful veterinary practice in London, treating the horses of the rich and famous. As the leading veterinarian he was soon sought out by the East India Company to help select the best breeding stock to be shipped to India for breeding of cavalry horses. Then in 1808, at the age of 40, he was invited to come to India to head the horse breeding operations of the Honorable East India Company. The Company was desperate, so to entice him to make the move from London he was offered an unusually high salary.

In 1814, six years after his arrival in India to take up duties as Superintendent of the Company's Stud Farm at Pusa, Bihar, Moorcroft outlined his plans in a treatise on horse breeding and submitted it to his supervisory board. Observations on the Breeding of Horses within the Provinces under the Bengal Es-

tablishment, submitted to the consideration of the President and Members of the Board of Superintendence by William Moorcroft, Superintendent of the Honorable Company's Stud is the overweight title of a thin 56 page volume detailing present problems with the stud farm and breeding arrangements, and Moorcroft's recommendations for reform. The issue he faced was how to produce or obtain at least 600 quality horses per year for the military. Moorcroft estimated it would require 3,000 breeding mares to produce this many quality horses. When the requisite stallions, growing young colts and fillies are included it obviously became a sizeable operation.

After analyzing the various breeding and purchase systems adopted by his predecessors over the past 19 years, Moorcroft pointed to the lack of quality breeding stock as the key cause of past disappointments. To remedy this deficit he proposed to obtain new breeding stock, from three areas where he was informed the best breeding stock could be obtained. He went on to say that his assistants could maintain the existing breeding operations at Pusa, while he selected for himself the primary task of obtaining, by purchase or trade, improved breeding stock from the best horse-breeding areas, all of which lay outside the northern and western borders of British India.

"I resolved therefore to explore three lines of route to Horse countries, viz., one through the Lukhee Jungul to the left bank of the Indus [the area West of Delhi to the Indus, now Indian and Pakistani Punjab and at that time not under East India Company control]; a second through Kabool [Kabul] to the banks of the Oxus, and a third across the snowy mountains to the reported Horse districts of Chinese Tartary [Yarkand].

The two former were allotted to trusty persons, the last, supposed fraught with more difficulty was reserved for myself.

Embarrassments of various shapes enveloped the second and third of these projects.”⁴

Here, in a nutshell is the crystal-clear statement of what Moorcroft proposed to do—obtain quality horse breeding stock from three areas—(1) the “Lukhee Jungul” now the Punjab, (2) Afghanistan north of Kabul, and (3) the “Horse districts of Chinese Tartary”. He recognized the first two areas were relatively accessible and these tasks could be “allotted to trusty persons” while the third, Yarkand, was “fraught with more difficulty and reserved for myself.” So he has decided to go himself to Yarkand, in spite of all difficulties.

The ‘embarrassments’ Moorcroft refers to include the fact that although in the summer of 1812 Moorcroft and Hyder Jung Harsey were the first British to cross the Himalayan range at the Niti pass, and explore the area then called Hundes (including Gartok and Lake Manasarovar), they were prevented from travelling on towards Yarkand, and returned without obtaining any quality horses. But this 1812 trip to Hundes whetted his appetite and partially accounts for the intelligence that the best horses were to be obtained in Yarkand.

Moorcroft’s journal of his trip to Hundes includes the following entry. “The *Wakil* [agent of Ladakh] said that the horses of *Latak* [Ladakh] were much larger than those of *U’ndes* [Hundes], but that the best were bred in *Yarkund*, thirty days’ journey from *Latak*, and that *Bokhara* was fifteen days’ journey from *Yarkund*: *Latak* is ten or twelve days’ journey from *Ghertope* [Gartok], and the same distance from *Cashmir* [Kashmir], and twenty-five from *Amiritsir* [Amritsar]. Thus the road to the N. W. of the *Himalaya* from *Dehli* [Delhi], would stand thus. From *Amiritsir* to *Latak*

4. Observations on the Breeding of Horses, within the Provinces under the Bengal Establishment, submitted to the consideration of the President and Members of the Board of Superintendence. By William Moorcroft, Superintendent of the Honorable Company’s Stud. Presented in 1814 and reprinted in Calcutta in 1862 and Simla in 1886. P. 12.

twenty-five days, *Yarkund* thirty, *Bokhara* fifteen; making a total of seventy days; a much shorter distance than that by *Cabul*. --- in this route there are two days' journey, in which no water is to be met with ; and for thirty days there is a track without inhabitants ; but the road is safe."⁵ Even in 1812 Moorcroft was working out the details of the route to Yarkand, and how he would get there.

For someone who had been in India for only six short years, Moorcroft's Observations on the Breeding of Horses exhibits remarkable understanding of north Indian horse breeding and trade. He analyses the horse breeding success of various Muslim rulers over the past centuries, and draws lessons from both their and the British experiences.

All this then leads to Moorcroft's repeated plea to his supervisors that he be allowed to travel to the horse-breeding areas to purchase breeding stock in spite of the risks and dangers involved. As Alder writes,

"On or about 14 May, 1819, Moorcroft received in Calcutta an official letter signed by his old friend, Charles Metcalf. It began:

Sir:

His Excellency the Governor-General in Council is pleased to grant you leave to proceed towards the North Western parts of Asia, for the purpose of there procuring, by commercial intercourse, horses to improve the breed within the British Provinces or for military use.⁶

There was no need to read any further. That one sentence gave him the permission he had been seeking through the board, year in and year out, since 1812"

5. Entry from Moorcroft's journal, as published in the 1818 Asiatic Researches Vol. 12, p.453

6. Beyond Bokhara, p. 209.

It took seven long years for Moorcroft's persistence to pay off, but finally he was able to pursue his plan and travel to Yarkand and Bokhara in search of breeding stock. It would be at his own expense and without any official endorsement by the government, but he would be paid his salary en-route. Moorcroft was off like a shot.

His assembled caravan, including trade goods ("English cottons, woolen broadcloths, chintz, cutlery, hardware and ironmongery"), plus all the camp and travel supplies (his reference library alone consisted of over 100 books) weighed some 8 tonnes, and required some 300 porters to move. The entourage consisted of a motley assortment of friends and experts familiar with the area, plus 'personal servants, grass-cutters, grooms, a baker, a draughtsman and two botanical collectors'. Altogether, Moorcroft had some 50 souls on his payroll⁷.

His journey took him first from the stud farm in Bihar to Joshimath, near the Niti pass and the Himalayan ridgeline. When they arrived too late in the season to cross the snowed-in pass they doubled back through the hills and then sent Moorcroft down to Lahore to seek permission from Maharaja Ranjit Singh. With the Maharaja's permission in hand they climbed through the Kulu passes and on to Ladakh. Moorcroft was the first Britisher to visit then independent Ladakh, where he spent two years seeking permission from the Chinese authorities to cross the Karakoram pass with his caravan and visit Yarkand as a trader. When Moorcroft was finally refused permission to enter Yarkand, he left Ladakh for Kashmir, eventually heading into Afghanistan via Peshawar. After a period of residence in Kabul he crossed the Hindu Kush range north of Bamian, crossed the plains of northern Afghanistan, and reached the Oxus river. Continuing on, he became the first British explorer to reach Bokhara, all the while travelling with his 300 porter-loads of trade goods that he hoped to exchange for horses. Most certainly, here was an indomitable man with determination, charisma, sound orga-

7. Beyond Bokhara, p. 212.

nization and preparation, unusual luck, the necessary funds, and a 'never quit' fearless attitude.

At this point, having established the areas Moorcroft wished to visit and his motivation for doing so, we jump far ahead to the decisions he faced in Bokhara in 1825.

The story of Moorcroft's intervening years are best told in the comprehensive and highly readable Moorcroft biography *Beyond Bokhara* by Garry Alder. Alder, professor at Reading University, spent 25 plus years sifting through Moorcroft materials in London and Delhi (there are some 10,000 pages of Moorcroft manuscripts in the India Office Library—now shifted to the British Library) and retraced Moorcroft's footsteps throughout India, Afghanistan and beyond. Alder's minutely detailed biography for the first time documents Moorcroft's early years in Lancashire and Liverpool, traces his training first as a surgeon and then in France as the first professional British veterinarian, the development of his highly successful practice in London treating the horses of the rich and famous, then his move to India, and finally the adventurous life he led breeding horses and exploring for better breeding stock throughout North India, Western Tibet, Ranjit Singh's Punjab, Afghanistan and finally Central Asia beyond the Oxus. The book was well received, and in time the original 1000-copy print-run sold out. It was only in 2011 that Low Price Publications in Delhi produced a reprint edition.

While Moorcroft's travels and exploits clearly place him in the first rank of British explorers in Asia, it was not until the publication of *Beyond Bokhara* in 1985 that we had a complete picture of the man and his accomplishments. Previous biographers, such as H.H. Wilson⁸, made a hash of their reports on Moorcroft,

8. *Travels in the Himalayan Provinces of Hindustan and the Punjab in Ladakh and Kashmir, in Peshawar, Kabul, Kunduz and Bokhara from 1819 to 1825*; in two volumes, edited by H.H. Wilson. Essentially a paraphrase of parts of Moorcroft's journal, but often leaving out the most interesting parts, such as their entire experience in Bokhara.

and considerable erroneous information entered the literature.⁹

Decisions in Bokhara

Moorcroft and his party arrived in Bokhara on Feb. 25, 1825. After five months in the city, and finding that the best horses were away with the king and his army, fighting against the Kitay-Kipchaks, Moorcroft and his small party made a clear decision to return to India. In June he sent off a long hand-written letter of some 60 pages to George Swinton, Esq., Secretary to the Government, Political Department, Fort William, Cakutta. After describing his arrival at Bokhara, as well as highlights of his activities in Kabul and along the route, he deals with his plans for the future as follows:

“At Bokhara I have picked up from thirty to forty horses of different hands and quality, and shall remain at this city until the return of the King.... I purpose then to depart and having crossed the Ammoo [Amu Darya] will leave my party with two or three attendants and at all risks make an effort by some means to accomplish less imperfectly than at present the object of my mission....I have the strongest hopes that my party will reach Hindoostan and that I shall accompany them, but I have one if not two separate duties to perform individually and in their execution I may almost be said to tread upon gunpowder.”¹⁰

What were these ‘separate duties’ that he was to perform ‘individually’; which ‘in their execution I may almost be said to tread on gunpowder’?? Moorcroft quite purposefully speaks indirectly and is not explicit, and the available record in the British archives does not clear up the mystery. He clearly had some-

9. Beyond Bokhara, p. 369. “...the real nature of Wilson’s failure became horrifyingly apparent. His text was revealed as a slipshod and inaccurate paraphrase, often introducing entirely unnecessary alterations to the sense of the originals, and with serious and misleading omissions.”

10. Swinton letter, in British Library as IOL P/124/29, 27 of 14.10.1825.

thing important in mind, but what it was is left deliberately unstated.

A new theory to reconcile the two versions of Moorcroft's death:

I would now like to present a theory that attempts to reconcile all that we know of Moorcroft's plans and activities as related in the British archives with the story related by Huc and Gabet from Lhasa. I will attempt to answer the question---how is it possible that Moorcroft died of a fever in Andkhoi, Afghanistan in 1825, and was then found in Lhasa from 1826 to 1838? In doing so I will offer an alternative to the Beyond Bokhara interpretation of events surrounding Moorcroft's "death" in Afghanistan, such that both the reports in the British archives, as well as the story related by Huc and Gabet, can both be true and correct.

The solution to reconciling these two stories is to posit that Moorcroft conspired to fake his own death at Andkhoi. If so, he managed to convince the members of his own party, the local residents of the area, the other travellers and explorers who followed him into Central Asia, and even his British biographer.

It seems reasonable to assume that while in Bokhara Moorcroft made the fateful decision that he would attempt to reach Yarkand in disguise. By this time he had thoroughly explored for horses in two of the three areas spelled out in his *Observations on the Breeding of Horses* document eleven years earlier, but he had totally failed in his efforts to reach and explore the third—Yarkand. The authorities in Yarkand had blocked his every effort to go there openly. The only alternative, if he was to reach Yarkand at all, was to go there secretly, in disguise. This was the only way to complete the mission he had spelled out for himself already in 1814 and to which he had now devoted almost six years of travel.

Moorcroft was no stranger to travelling in disguise. His entire trip to *Hundes* with Hyder Jung Harsey in 1812 was made

with both men disguised as Hindu *gosains* or *mahants*, and his escape from Murad Beg's clutches to appeal to the *Pirzada* in Taliqan was made disguised as a local Uzbek.¹¹ But in the present case his greatest problem with entering a disguise was how to "disappear". He was now very well known, not only to common folk but also to all the leading men of power and influence between Peshawar and Bokhara. His sudden disappearance would have been immediately noticed and would have aroused widespread suspicion unless there was a sufficiently good explanation.

At the same time it was widely assumed, on reliable grounds, that to be caught in Turkistan as a spy would mean immediate death. The fates in later years of men like Adolphe Schlagentweit, Stoddard, Connolly and Hayward, all of whom were killed while trying to gain information on Turkistan, confirm that European travellers caught as spies would receive no mercy and could expect a quick and unpleasant death.

Thus, it seems reasonable that Moorcroft could have reached the following set of decisions before leaving Bokhara:

1. That he would attempt to visit Yarkand in disguise, in spite of the high risks involved.
2. That in order to successfully disappear as William Moorcroft and to enter his disguise, he would need to fake his own death, and convince everyone in the area that he was now dead.
3. That to keep his secret from leaking out and reaching Yarkand while he was there, he would tell no one except George Trebeck of his plans, and would swear Trebeck to secrecy. Everyone in his entourage, except Trebeck, would be kept in the dark and come to believe that he was dead.

11. See Beyond Bokhara pp. 107-119 and pp. 339-343 for the details of these events.

4. Further, that to prevent word of his plan possibly leaking out prematurely from India, he would not let any of his British superiors or friends know of his plan.
5. That the best location in which to fake his death would be the sparsely populated desert areas of northern Afghanistan. From here he could assume his disguise, travel east through Badakhshan and up the Wakhan valley, and cross the low passes into Turkistan—the same well-known route that would be taken 50 years later by the British explorers of the Forsyth Mission to Yarkand in 1872. He would winter in Turkistan collecting information, and then in the spring cross the Karakoram Pass back into Ladakh and travel down to Peshawar or Ludhiana on the Indian frontier, where he would meet up again with the remainder of his caravan.
6. That Trebeck, as the caravan leader once Moorcroft was “dead” and gone to Yarkand, would waste some time in Afghanistan and travel slowly in order to arrive in Peshawar or Ludhiana by July or August the following year, in time to meet Moorcroft as he came out of Ladakh. Only when Moorcroft was safely out of Turkistan and back in India would his fake death be revealed, and the public, the Indian government and the remainder of his caravan come to know the true story of what Moorcroft had done.
7. That a single servant would be used to assist Moorcroft in faking his own death, and the same servant would ride with him to Yarkand. By not revealing the plot to this servant until the last minute, and then by removing him from the scene of the ‘death’, this servant would not have opportunity to leak the secret. Finally, by taking this servant with him to Yarkand, the servant would become complicit in the death plot and disguise, and could be trusted to preserve the secret since his own life would be equally at risk if the Moorcroft plot were ever discovered.

If this was his plan, notice how carefully Moorcroft crafted his letter to Swinton; telling him that "I have the strongest hopes that my party will reach Hindoostan and that I shall accompany them" without confessing that his return to Hindoostan would actually take a bit longer than Swinton would normally expect. In the same sentence he also alludes to his plan without being specific by going on to say, "but, I have one if not two separate duties to perform individually, and in their execution I may almost be said to tread upon gunpowder." It is very clear he is going 'individually' to accomplish something dangerous; and whatever it is, he seeks to "accomplish less imperfectly than at present the object of my mission." So when he wrote the letter to Swinton he hadn't completed his 'mission' yet, and he was going to do something dangerous to complete it. What else could he be referring to, other than reaching Yarkand.

Given the great risks he knew he would be taking and in view of the possibility that he might not return, in the next paragraph of the same letter he goes on to discuss his papers and to request their safe keeping. He says, "My papers generally will I trust be safe....I feel a wish that such facts, observations or suggestions as have been noticed may not be so wholly lost should circumstances prove adverse to my return...." Thus he acknowledges the possibility he may not return, and requests the safe keeping of his papers, without explaining what highly risky action he is about to undertake. It seems evident he had something more in mind than just returning to India via the same route he had travelled previously.

I believe his plan was to fake his death in Afghanistan, proceed in disguise to Yarkand accompanied by a single servant, spend the winter there observing all that was of interest, and then return to India via the Karakoram Pass once it opened around June and reunite with his caravan. See the blue line on the map for this probable route.

But as so often happens, circumstances intrude and not everything goes according to even the best-laid plans.

The faking of his death from fever and the burial of the fake body (perhaps nothing more than a few goats tied together to look like a body when wrapped up in canvas) went off like clockwork. When Moorcroft and his servant rode off toward Badakhshan and Yarkand in disguise, the men of his caravan and people of the area all believed he was dead and there was not the slightest suspicion anything else was afoot¹². But then, as Moorcroft and his servant were riding east toward Yarkand, things back at the caravan they had left behind began to fall apart.

Soon after Moorcroft was gone Trebeck, now in charge of the caravan, fell sick and in his weakened state was unable to prevent the break-up of the caravan. Alder describes the events after the burial of what was presumed to be Moorcroft's body:

"While Moorcroft rested at last in his lonely grave at Balkh, his death set in motion 'a strange succession of casualties', betrayals and disappointments which overwhelmed the remainder of his party and did much to obscure his own achievements as well. The speed with which the rest of his caravan fell into demoralized disarray speaks volumes for Moorcroft's qualities as a leader. His body, the servants, his nine horses and the other goods with him when he died were all immediately impounded at Andkhoi. It was only with considerable difficulty that Mir Wazir Ahmad was able to negotiate for their release and return, with the now almost unrecognizable corpse of Moorcroft on a camel, to Balkh. The Jews there refused him burial in their sepulchre, the Muslims denied him

12. Sir Alexander Burnes in his *Travels into Bokhara*, 1834, p.243 describes visiting the Moorcroft grave site outside the city of Balkh. "The caravan assembled outside the city, and near to another melancholy spot, the grave of poor Moorcroft, which we were conducted to see.... The corpse of Moorcroft was brought from Ankhooee, where he perished at a distance from his party. He was attended by a few followers, all of whom were plundered by the people. If he died a natural death, I do not think he sunk without exciting suspicions; he was unaccompanied by any of his European associates or confidential servants, and brought back lifeless on a camel, after a short absence of eight days; the health of Mr. Trebeck did not admit of his examining the body."

a marked grave anywhere else. In the end he was buried unceremoniously beneath a dilapidated wall, beside a watercourse, somewhere outside the crumbling walls of the ancient city.

By then both Trebeck and Guthrie were already seriously ill--either from fever, slow poison, or both. On 6 September, however, Trebeck managed to write a letter to Captain Wade, the nearest British representative, 700 miles (1120 kilometres) away at Ludhiana, announcing Moorcroft's death. On the same day he noted on a scrap of paper the date of that death. Guthrie was the next to go and was buried beside his master. In the meantime Askar Ali, having failed to get anything at Kunduz except the sternest warnings from Atma Ram of what would happen to them if they dared to re-enter Murad Beg's territories, himself fell ill at Mazar and lay there helpless for nearly a fortnight. When Trebeck heard this, he sent a man to bring Askar Ali back to Balkh on horseback. There the two sick men wept together over the loss of their companions and debated what they should do next. Trebeck was determined to remove the whole party from Balkh, before its notorious summer fevers destroyed them all. Against the advice of a number of people, including Askar Ali himself, they moved a few miles across the desert to Mazar, under a promise of good treatment from its chief. That was accomplished without mishap but they got no further. Trebeck's declining health and the inability of Wazir Ahmad, Askar Ali and Ghulam Hyder Khan to agree on a feasible course of action, kept them helplessly pinned at that desolate spot for the next three or four months.

...Trebeck seems to have become completely demoralized. Apparently he even virtually gave away the precious pearls which alone might have purchased their freedom. Then, just before his death, he assigned the remaining property under oath to Wazir Ahmad, for onward transmission to Calcutta.

No sooner was Trebeck dead, probably in early December, than the chief of Mazar reneged on his promise of safe conduct. He seized not only all the goods and the 100 or so horses, but some of the men too. Ghulam Hyder Khan was one of those imprisoned for a time at Mazar. Just how and when they all finally made their escape is not clear, but their troubles had scarcely begun. Ghulam Hyder Khan, and those with him at the back of the caravan, were robbed by Hazaras and taken back to Maimana to be sold into slavery. Only renewed efforts by Askar Ali secured their release and they eventually reached Kabul by the roundabout road through Herat and Kandahar. It was not until 1827, after an absence of nearly eight years, that grizzled old Ghulam returned, destitute and alone, to his family at Bareilly and told his remarkable story to his old master, [Hyder Jung] Hearsey. Wazir Ahmad was luckier. He reached Kabul in safety with a portion of the money and some of the horses in mid-December 1825. Then he was robbed twice before reaching Peshawar.

The first rumours of these multiple disasters to reach India were inspired by the earlier death of Izzat-Allah and soon denied. Then, in late October, more circumstantial reports of Moorcroft's death reached his friend Metcalfe at Delhi and hard on their heels came confirmatory stories by way of Amritsar. However, it was not until Trebeck's letter reached Wade at Ludhiana on about 11 December, that the story was confirmed beyond all doubt. Later news of the deaths of Guthrie and Trebeck and the fate of the rest of the party reached Wade in a letter written on 19 December, just after Wazir Ahmad's safe arrival at Kabul. The writer was Guru Das Singh, a Punjabi banker who was doing his anxious best to round up the scattered party and prevent further robbery by the authorities at Kabul. Please, he pleaded, send somebody to help at once."¹³

13. Beyond Bokhara, pp. 361-62.

Eventually, when Trebeck realized his own death was imminent, he was faced with a difficult choice. He could write the truth about Moorcroft in a letter to the British authorities in Ludhiana, and thus expose Moorcroft to possible discovery and extreme danger. Or he could rather lie and maintain the secret by writing that Moorcroft died August 27, 1825 in Andkhoi—leaving Moorcroft to set the story straight if he survived the winter in Yarkand and arrived safely back in India. As we would expect, Trebeck lied for his friend, and wrote, “Mr. M died August 27, 1825.”¹⁴ And thus the date of Moorcroft’s fake death entered the literature.



The caravan trail Moorcroft must have followed up the Wakhan corridor

If Moorcroft’s plan was to winter in Yarkand and return over the Karakoram Pass to India the next spring, some explanation is required for why he changed his plan and ended up in Lhasa for twelve years. Two possibilities suggest themselves.

Perhaps Moorcroft’s disguise began to slip while he was in Yarkand, making it necessary that he get out of town fast and

14. Beyond Bokhara, p. 360.

find a safe refuge somewhere—as happened later to Pundit Nain Singh in Lhasa, another explorer travelling Tibet in disguise for the British. The sparsely inhabited Tibetan Chang Thang, easily accessible and south-east of Yarkand, would offer the seclusion he required. And once in the Chang Thang it would make sense to proceed on to Lhasa; and once in Lhasa with a disguise that was working..., well, he must have decided to stay a while.

Or, perhaps before the Karakoram Pass opened in the Spring and he was still in Yarkand, word reached Moorcroft of the demise of his friends Trebeck and Guthrie, the break up of his caravan, and the theft of his horses. Perhaps this supreme disappointment then led him to conclude that a return to India was now of little importance, setting him free to change his plans and proceed into Tibet and on to Lhasa instead.

As it developed, Trebeck was not the only one to tell a white-lie to cover up the truth in this entire episode. In Lhasa, after Moorcroft was killed by bandits and his disguise discovered through the recovery of his documents, Nisan claimed he had



Camel caravan along the Wakhan route leading to Yarkand

always thought Moorcroft was Kashmiri, and had no idea he was anything else. Of course he would say that, because to admit his role in the entire affair would have put his life in danger as well. But some eight years later, when the crisis had blown over, Nisan had no objections to speaking openly with Huc and Gabet, and laying out the details of the story.

It was probably also this conversation with Nisan, the servant, which gave Huc and Gabet the correct pronunciation and spelling of Moorcroft's name. Anyone who has travelled in Tibet and China will realize the difficulty in getting the correct spelling and pronunciation of any English name from a native Tibetan or Chinese speaker not familiar with English. But we know Huc and Gabet had the correct name and spelling, because they were able to look up the details of Moorcroft's known life in the *Universal Geography* of Charles Ritter when they reached Macao.

Only the re-discovery of the maps and diaries Moorcroft was carrying when he was killed in Western Tibet are likely to ever clear up the questions surrounding what actually happened in Yarkand and Tibet.

Solving the Moorcroft Mystery:

Where might we look for evidence?

If we assume that the theory outlined above is largely true (remember, it is only a theory!), an interesting question arises as to what evidence might still be found to finally confirm what really happened to William Moorcroft. The most direct evidence would, of course, be to recover the maps and diaries discovered in Moorcroft's luggage in 1838. Once recovered from the bandits by the authorities in western Tibet these documents would, presumably, have been sent to Lhasa for a detailed examination—the Huc and Gabet report implies as much. But once carefully examined by both the Tibetan and Chinese officials, it is unclear what might have happened to them. It is unlikely they would



The Wakhan valley route Moorcroft would have followed to Yarkand.
The hills at the end of the valley are in Chinese Turkistan.

have been intentionally destroyed, as they would have value if the Tibetans and/or Chinese ever wanted to accuse the British of spying on Tibet. So perhaps they would have been stuffed away in some corner of the Potala for safekeeping, and soon forgotten about. Or it might be they were sent to Peking by the *Amban* in Lhasa, to satisfy the curiosity of the Emperor. And, if they got as far as Peking, it is even possible they were taken to Taipei in 1949 when the Chiang Kai-shek regime was about to fall, and everything of artistic, historical and financial value in Peking was hauled off to Taiwan to prevent it falling into the hands of the communists.

But, in addition to the original Moorcroft documents themselves, might there be other evidence that would also confirm the truth of the theory? I can think of two additional forms of evidence that might prove useful.

If, as Huc and Gabet relate, the Chinese *Amban* posted in

Lhasa came to know that a foreign traveller had been killed in Western Tibet, and his disguised identity revealed by the maps and English documents found in his luggage, would the *Amban* not have had to report these circumstances to the Chinese Emperor in Peking? Surely he would have felt the need to make such a report, and this 1838 report, if it could be located, might include more information regarding Moorcroft and his documents than was reported to Huc and Gabet. From historical records we know the names of the various *Ambans* during those years, and it should be possible to review their letters and reports to Peking to see if they contain any useful clues. Even if the *Amban* correspondence did not provide additional new information, it could at least confirm the story published by Huc and Gabet.

A second possibility follows from Moorcroft's practice of writing his name in obscure places after a visit. For instance, Moorcroft's journal reports that his partner, Hyder Jung Harsey, carved their names in a rock on the banks of Lake Manasarovar in 1812¹⁵. And when Moorcroft, Trebeck and Guthrie visited the Buddhist statues and caves at Bamian in 1824, on their way to Bokhara, they wrote their names in charcoal on the roof of one of the caves. Prof. Garry Alder relates the emotional moment when he found these names in a Bamian cave some 150 years after they were written there¹⁶. If Moorcroft was in the habit of writing or carving his name in notable places such as these, might

15. Entry from Moorcroft's journal, as published in the 1818 *Asiatic Researches* Vol. 12, p. 475. "August 8th.---Begin to return towards *Hindustan*. Thermometer 45o. ---Mr. H. cut his and my name on a stone, and left it in a secure place. At eleven A. M. march."

16 Beyond Bokhara, p. 327 and xi, "I recall, for example, searching alone all one long golden day among the cool, purple caves high on the tawny cliffs, above the huge figure of Buddha at Bamian in the Afghan Hindu Kush. Late in the afternoon, with patience and torch battery almost exhausted, suddenly there it was! Above a recess at the end of a large cave Moorcroft's unmistakable signature in charcoal, as sharp and as fresh as the moment when he had reached up and scratched it there, 150 years before to the very day. A magical moment." GA.

his name even now still be carved or written in some difficult to reach spot in Yarkand, Lhasa or some other town enroute? If such a name could be found, it would at least establish that Moorcroft had gotten that far, and was alive and well after his 'death' at Andkhoi.

* * *

Thus we leave the Moorcroft Mystery as we found it— an unsolved mystery. There are theories and tantalizing possibilities, but so far no direct evidence except the report by Huc and Gabet, that William Moorcroft spent twelve years making maps and recording his observations in Tibet, and was killed by bandits when returning to Ladakh.

Moorcroft's route to Leh, Bokhara and Andkho[i] shown in red; his presumed route to Yarkhand and Leh is shown in blue 1875 Central Asia Map by Arrowsmith

Further Research:

Anyone intrigued by the Moorcroft Mystery and interested to consider how it might be solved is encouraged to contact the author, Dan Jantzen at DanJantzen@gmail.com

Further Reading:

1. Beyond Bokhara by Garry Alder, Century Publishing, London, 1985 is the definitive life of Moorcroft. This book is now out of print and the few used copies available are rather expensive. A second edition reprint in 2011 by Low Price Publications, Delhi includes the original book plus a new Introduction to the Second Edition and a Postscript to Chapter 23 that deals with issues surrounding Moorcroft's death.
2. Travels in Tartary, Thibet and China by Regis-Evariste Huc and Joseph Gabet was published first in French under the title Souvenirs d'un voyage dans la Tartarie, le Thibet et la Chine, Pendant Les Annees 1844, 1845 et 1846. The English translation by William Hazlitt was published in 1852 and there have been several subsequent reprints. Asian Educational Services, New Delhi publishes reprints of both the English and French versions. There is also a Chinese translation that is widely known among Chinese historians.

Digital copies of the English translation are available on the internet at

<http://books.google.com/>

books?id=IS4PAAAAYAAJ&printsec=frontcover&dq=editions:YKwKuRf9XhYC&hl=en&sa=X&ei=4esmT7fcMuX9sQKX7OCMAg&ved=0CDAQ6AEwAA#v=onepage&q=editions%3AYKwKuRf9XhYC&f=false

Or:

<http://books.google.com>

books?id=eIYOAAAQAQAJ&printsec=frontcover&dq=editions:YKwKuRf9XhYC&hl=en&sa=X&ei=luwmT9DPJ8uGsgKo8t2MAg&ved=0CDYQ6AEwAQ#v=onepage&q=editions%3AYKwKuRf9XhYC&f=false

3. Travels in the Himalayan Provinces of Hindustan and the Punjab; in Ladakh and Kashmir; in Peshawar, Kabul, Kunduz

and Bokhara from 1819 to 1825 is the paraphrase of the diaries of William Moorcroft and George Trebeck edited posthumously by H.H. Wilson. This two-volume set is available from Low Price Publications, Delhi or from Asian Educational Enterprises, New Delhi.

4. Lamas of the Western Heavens by Regis-Evariste Huc is another, less commonly read, translation of 'Souvenirs....' by Charles de Salis and published by The Folio Society, 1982.

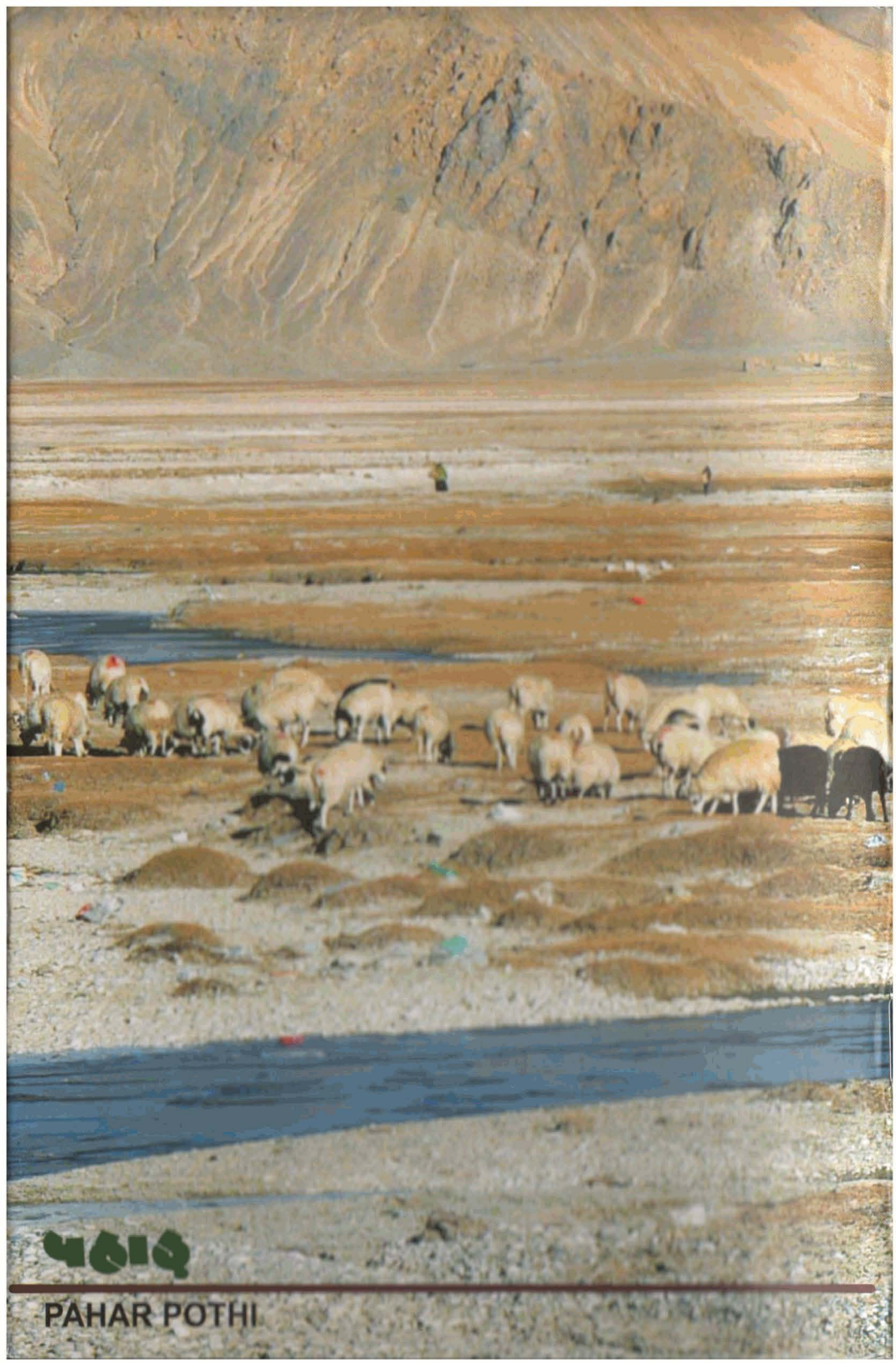


Moorcroft's route to Leh, Bokhara and Andkho[i] shown in red; his presumed route to Yarkhand and Leh is shown in blue
 1875 Central Asia Map by Arrowsmith



Daniel E. (Dan) Jantzen is an American engineer and unusual traveller, who has spent most of his life in Indian subcontinent, as a student, energy engineer, NGO coordinator and Himalayan- Tibetan- Central Asian studies source material collector. This interesting booklet is his second non-engineering feat. The first one was developing an e-library- a library without wait and walls.





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