THE ASIAN YEARS OF WILLIAM MOORCROFT, 1808–25

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SOME SIXTY years ago, the great historian of the British veterinary profession, General Sir Frederick Smith, commissioned at his own expense a brass memorial plate. On it he recorded his conclusion that William Moorcroft was one of the most important pioneers of modern scientific veterinary medicine. So he was. It was not the sentiment that challenged me when I first saw that brass plate at the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons, almost next door to the new headquarters of our Society in Belgrave Square. It was the fact that Moorcroft's dates are wrong and that the plate is mounted where nobody can see it. That brass plate, in fact, is a potent symbol of the way posterity has dealt with William Moorcroft. Error on the one hand and obscurity on the other are its two most striking hallmarks. The more my researches made this apparent to me, the more important it seemed to me to try and set the record straight. The extent of the obscurity and the scale of Moorcroft's achievements have, I'm afraid, together resulted in a very big book.*

Let me say now what a pleasure it is to talk about Moorcroft to an audience of fellow-Asianists and, I hope, fellow-enthusiasts. I have been a member of this Society long enough to know that lectures nearly always start like that. It is of course a pleasure to talk to Asianists about Moorcroft, but it is a particular pleasure because our predecessors did more to appreciate the man and record his achievements than those in any other of the many fields he entered. We have at least held on to his memory as an outstanding Asian traveller and explorer. And we have done it notwithstanding his quite remarkable incapacity for self-advertisement, his inability to write readable or entertaining prose, the carelessness (or worse) of those who edited his travel-journals for publication, his death on his travels in the back of beyond with no-one to turn his magnificent failure into a legend like that of David Livingstone or Robert Scott. Despite all

* Beyond Bokhara – The Life of William Moorcroft Surgeon, 1767–1825. Century, 1985.

these things (and more), for us he is, as John Keay has well put it recently, "the father of modern exploration . . . in the Western Himalayas and Central Asia".

Yet before we pat ourselves too heartily on the back, let us recall again the symbolism of Sir Frederick Smith's brass plate. I'm afraid that there has been error and obscurity in the recording of Moorcroft's Asian achievements too. The errors are often quite inexplicable; sometimes they are quite funny too. One modern authority, who should know better, has written resoundingly that "one of the great names of early nineteenth-century trans-Himalayan exploration is *Thomas* Moorcroft" (my italics). The same author then goes on to put up seven more factual errors about Moorcroft on the following page. Another much respected Asian writer, a lady for whom I had the highest personal regard, somehow managed, in a well-reviewed book on Himalayan geo-politics, to make eleven errors about Moorcroft on one page. Opposite it she reproduced what purported to be a page from his manuscript journal. It is in fact a transcript copied later by a third party from a journal written by somebody else! So much for error. As for obscurity and neglect – well, my thesis today is that our concentration on Moorcroft the traveller and explorer has obscured very much else of his Asian achievements. So let us then look more closely at what I have called the Asian years of William Moorcroft.

Notice first of all how few years there were. Moorcroft was already 41 when he stepped ashore at Calcutta in November 1808 and, of course, almost totally ignorant of India's languages, customs and personalities. He was only in India for eleven years. And then for the next – and last – $5\frac{1}{2}$ years of his life he was beyond its frontiers on his circuitous trans-Himalayan journey to Bokhara and beyond. This comparative brevity makes his achievements in these years all the more remarkable. Plainly this comparatively brief period could not have been as fruitful as I hope to show it was, had Moorcroft not come to India, as it were, fully-fledged to make the most of the opportunities he found there.

Let me quickly remind you of what for this purpose we might regard as his 41-year apprenticeship to a productive Asian middle-age. He was born in Lancashire into prosperous rural landed society in 1767, at a time when the application of experimental science and steam-power to agriculture was beginning to transform it. You will not find William Moorcroft's name among the list of contemporary pioneers of the so-called Agricultural Revolution but many of them were known to him personally and their work was of absorbing interest to him. A passionate and optimistic faith in the potential of agricultural improvement – indeed of all improvement – was probably the central driving force of his life. This is the missing x factor without which much of the rest is inexplicable. It has, I believe, been largely overlooked because Moorcroft's formal training and professional activities seemed to be urban and lie in other directions. As a young man, he was trained as a surgeon at Liverpool Infirmary. The first solid evidence that he had quite outstanding technical gifts as a surgeon – and remember that surgery was performed without the benefit of anaesthesia

so speed, deftness, strength and even nerve were essential – came in his late 'teens. The story of his dramatic switch to what was then the fashionable and backward field of animal medicine as a result of the outbreak of cattle plague near Liverpool is well-known. The fact that he – an Englishman – got his veterinary training in France during the early turbulent years of the French Revolution and travelled there afterwards is not so well-known. He was Britain's first professionally trained vet – the first of his many "firsts". In 1793 he opened in Oxford Street what soon became London's most prestigious and wealthy horse practice and did there some important pioneering work into various aspects of equine lameness. It was his central role in the horse world of the day which first brought him to the notice of the East India Company and from about 1800, more or less as a sideline, he was the Company's horse-consultant, purchasing agent, shipper – and eventually manager of its Essex farm and breeding stud. He was also in these London years an active – you might say, hyperactive – member of one of London's volunteer cavalry corps. This military experience proved invaluable, not only in his work as a breeder of cavalry horses, but as a leader of an irregular cavalry corps during the Nepal War and in several tight corners on his Asian travels as well. In hindsight one can see that the Moorcroft of the Asian years was fully formed in 1808. The restlessness, the endless urge to escape from routine and the orthodox approach, the 360-degree vision, the enormous curiosity in all that crossed his path, the energy, the gift for languages, and the personal charm and warm humanity of the man, as much at ease with the greatest as he was concerned for the lowest in the land – all these things are plainly visible before his arrival in India. And of course they help to explain why he was in India at all, why he took the opportunity when it came to uproot himself in middle-age from a secure and successful life, to leave wife and friends behind and cross half the world to face the risks and uncertainties of life in Bihar as Superintendent of the Company's Bengal Breeding Stud at Pusa, near Patna.

The nature and scope of his work at the Bengal Stud has hitherto been almost totally unknown and its central importance has most certainly been underestimated. I need hardly remind this audience that the size, climate and terrain of Asia have always put a high premium on the mobility, durability and shock effect of cavalry. For the East India Company at the beginning of the nineteenth century an effective cavalry arm was essential. The Company's boundaries were extending alarmingly, its enemies were both numerous and strong in cavalry, and its reinforcements were half a year away. Wars of attrition it had to avoid at all costs. The Company had always to strive for victory in a single campaign, preferably deep in the heart of enemy territory. And that meant cavalry in quantity and quality. For us, it requires a considerable effort of imagination to comprehend the centrality of the horse in the world of Moorcroft's day. It is easiest, perhaps, if we imagine our own world without those modern work-horses, the petrol and diesel engine. In war, the horse was tank, jeep, armoured personnel vehicle and lorry rolled into one and the demands on

it were correspondingly high. The dragoon horse with a fully equipped European trooper on his back had to carry about 2½ cwt. The artillery horse might have 2 cwt. on his back and 4½ cwt. to pull. In both cases they often had to work over rough country, great distances and for days on end. Horses of the required size and quality were not bred in the Company's territories at all. They had to be obtained increasingly at a distance and from a dwindling supply which could be cut off at a moment's notice. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that in the 1790's the first attempts should be made by the Company to raise an internal supply. Nor is it surprising, given the problems to be overcome, that it should prove so difficult. As the demand for good horses soared, the supply failed to keep pace. Despite a huge investment in money and buildings, the stud was simply not able to make up the deficiency. The year Moorcroft arrived stud horses could meet only 10% of the army's needs. The Bengal Stud was no ivory tower research institute. It was of crucial importance to Indian defence.

At the heart of it all was the 5000 acre estate at Pusa, and later there were others further up the Ganges, but the breeding operation extended over an area about the size of southern England. I have described in the book the whirlwind activity, body-sapping travelling in all weather, the radical innovations and the violent conflicts of personality and policy which marked Moorcroft's superintendence. The eventual achievement is clear. He wrought such a transformation in a decade that his period was looked back to as a sort of golden age by his baffled successors. The quality and quantity of the animals soared, unit costs fell, disease was reduced by 90% and for the first and the only time in the century, the Bengal Stud came close to realising the dreams of its founders and justifying the huge sums invested in it.

That by itself would be achievement enough for most men. It was a Herculean task which wore out Moorcroft's tents as fast as it wore out some of his Assistants. For him, though, it is scarcely the beginning. Let us look for a moment at Moorcroft the experimentalist and investigator – and this of course covers both his years at the stud and those spent on the move inside British territory or beyond. The trouble is that the sheer range of his interests and activities and writings often forces one, even in a big book, to resort to a mere catalogue to do them justice. In a short lecture it is quite unavoidable. His work at Pusa went far beyond horse-breeding. He was running an agricultural enterprise on a very large scale indeed. He was the first to introduce extensive (and intensive) oat cultivation into India. His own agricultural and horticultural experiments were reinforced by the seeds and samples he collected or sent his servants to obtain in remote places, often beyond the frontiers. He was breeding experimental strains of animals other than horses. He was always a tireless dissector – not a pleasant occupation in Indian temperatures in those pre-formalin days – and the copious clinical notes recording his investigations into some of the baffling diseases which afflicted both man and the domestic animal in Asia suggest that he was sometimes years ahead of his

contemporaries. He also pioneered some important surgical techniques, both in the field of animal and in human medicine, for which he has never received the full credit. The importance and success of his cataract surgery on humans has never been properly investigated, although I have been able to give some idea at least of its scale. His researches into the complex mechanisms of the classical Asian horse-trade and into the shawl-wool trade and manufacture – all mostly unpublished – are a uniquely valuable source for modern scholars. Not only that, but the samples and patterns and the detailed information he sent home were the foundation of the British machine-made shawl industry centred on Paisley. Moorcroft provided crucial evidence about one of the glories of Indian art – classical Pahari hill-painting. He was also an important botanical collector. Although the only *genus* Moorcroftia was not upheld, nearly thirty species bore his name and many still do to this day. He also collected Tibetan manuscripts and alphabets and sponsored important research into the language of Tibet; he recorded inscriptions and temples; he restored tombs and erected memorials; he investigated and puzzled over the fossil-record; he explored for minerals; he struggled in vain to introduce vaccination into the lands he visited; he was among the first to provide a record in detail of the wealth of Bactrian coins which so revolutionised our understanding of Asia's history in the years after the death of Alexander the Great; he was the first in modern times to identify on the spot the great statues and cave-paintings at Bamian in Central Afghanistan as Buddhist; he borrowed and commissioned a translation of what turned out to be a uniquely important version of an ancient Kashmiri Sanskrit text, the Rajatarangini of Kalhana. Do I sound breathless? His activity *was* breathless. And breathlessness captures, I think, part of the quality of the man. His energy was prodigious. The words and ideas spilled out on the fading pages are as busy and as crowded as his days must have been. They would, if published, fill a bookcase, never mind a book-shelf.

Moorcroft's constant excuse – perhaps justification is a fairer word – for investigating and reporting everything that came under his eye while on his travels was simple. If he did not do it, who would? Nobody else had had, or was likely to have, his opportunities. It was true, but it was not the whole truth. There was more to it than that. He travelled, as he once put it, "as a kind of commercial tourist". Although those who sent him were largely unaware of it, his journeys were extended pieces of market research and his long-term aim was no less than the opening of the apparently vast markets of inner Asia to British trade, British influence and the new blessings of western civilisation, backed by steam power. Yet the crates and packets of samples, seeds, patterns, drawings, designs, colours, specifications and techniques which came flooding in from the back of beyond to Calcutta or to England were not merely designed to serve a crude and expansive British economic imperialism. Moorcroft was certainly an intense patriot; but he was also an intensely humane and tender-hearted man. His rather naïve and impossibly optimistic dream was to raise the quality of life and standard of living of the poor both at home and in Asia

at the same time by a fruitful exchange of knowledge, goods and raw materials. It was a magnificent dream, never attained.

What of Moorcroft the traveller and explorer? The brilliant dash in 1812 by an unknown route, in disguise and without permission across hostile Gurkha territory and across the Himalayas to the sacred lakes of Tibet, causing an international incident as he did so, has won a secure and deserved place in the annals of Himalayan exploration. It was not only a geographical triumph, but represented a personal triumph of character over illness and imprisonment – and over age too. As for the great six-year odyssey which at last in 1825 brought Moorcroft across 5000 miles of largely unknown desert and mountain to distant Bokhara – well, we have at least had since 1841 Horace Wilson's dreary 2 volume scissors-and-paste job from Moorcroft's journals. It is not easy to make Moorcroft dull, but Wilson has almost managed it. Worse, he has tampered with the record so extensively that he has sometimes seriously and gratuitously changed Moorcroft's sense and meaning. I often think that it is somehow symbolic that Wilson should call his book about a pioneer journey to remote and romantic Bokhara, *Travels in the Himalayan Provinces of Hindustan and the Punjab*. Just so. The book is like its title – dull, misleading and inaccurate. And it obscures the achievement. That Moorcroft should even consider such a journey in his late fifties is remarkable enough. That he should attempt it, across some of the most dangerously anarchic and hostile political landscape in the world with a swollen caravan of valuable merchandise and animals is even more remarkable. It was not easy, and some of the adventures along the way often read more like fiction than fact. But that he should actually succeed against all odds in bringing his 15-year dream to triumphant fulfilment and leading his remarkably unscathed caravan in through the Kabul gate of ancient Bokhara in the spring of 1825. That was a triumph which it is nearly impossible either to summarise or diminish. He was, of course, the first Englishman to visit Bokhara since the Tudors, and the first ever from the south. He was the first in Kashmir for 40 years, the first European in Ladakh for over a century, and virtually the first beyond Peshawar. He was certainly the first to provide a detailed modern eye-witness account of all these areas. Incidentally, those of you lucky enough to be going from Kashmir to Ladakh this September will be travelling in the reverse direction along Moorcroft's trail. And when you marvel at that breath-taking strategic road that crosses the high passes along the shawl-wool trail between Leh and Srinagar, do not forget that it is a vindication of Moorcroft's apparently absurd conviction that Ladakh is of crucial strategic importance to the rulers of India.

These great journeys to Tibet in 1812 and to Bokhara between 1819 and 1825 are deservedly classics. Nobody, however, knew that in 1811 Moorcroft made a 1500 mile trip round some of the hottest parts of India at the hottest time of the year and twice crossed the border into potential enemy territory. Even such a knowledgeable authority and historian of the Pathans as our former member and much-missed Sir Olaf Caroe, was

unaware that Moorcroft had penetrated perhaps the most dangerous part of the north-west frontier in 1824 practically alone and brought back in his papers the first eye-witness evidence of Waziri and Khattak customs. The omission was not Sir Olaf's fault. Wilson scarcely mentioned Moorcroft's journey at all. He said, of course, absolutely nothing of Moorcroft's stay in Bokhara.

All this travel in highly sensitive frontier zones, all this assiduous intelligence-gathering, either direct or through agents travelling incognito, that mysteriously high salary, Moorcroft's key role in Indian defence, his extensive, not to say excessive, attention to highly-charged defensive, strategic and political matters – this and much else prompts the question which has intrigued men in one form or another ever since Moorcroft's own time. Was he a spy. The Russians thought so at the time and their historians still do? When I first encountered Moorcroft in the 1950s, Rachel Gibb who was then at work on his biography had convinced herself that he was. Her views, unpublished but generously shared with all those who consulted her, have had a discernible influence in subsequent western writing too. Moorcroft certainly often behaved as though he was a secret or political agent. And yet it was always a self-appointed role for which he apologised and excused himself endlessly. His political masters in Calcutta largely disowned or ignored his opinions – and his evidence and his initiatives as well. He was not a spy in the ordinary sense of the word at all. And yet, as I have argued at length elsewhere, he was in a quite remarkably prescient way, the first British player of that much abused term, the Great Game. He was almost the first classic British Russophobe, alarmed at Russia's expansive potential in Central Asia. It has always puzzled me how such an essentially generous-hearted man could always believe such unmitigated evil of the Russians. In response, he proposed a coherent set of counter-measures based on detailed defensive planning and on an offensive, pre-emptive expansion of British influence underpinned by trade, steam-powered river navigation, trans-frontier missions, and client kingdoms. In a word, he advocated classic forward policies. He proposed them in the Punjab and Ladakh, the Pamirs and Tibet, Sinkiang and Afghanistan. He was not quite the first of his race to bend his mind to these great problems, but in the completeness of his views and in his travels and on-the-spot investigations he was years ahead of the rest. He was as much the father of the Great Game as he was of modern Central Asian and Himalayan exploration. It is yet another under-rated Asian achievement.

Yet another was his astonishing – sometimes almost uncanny – anticipation of the future. Over and over again he glimpsed and elaborated the possibilities of the future before his contemporaries, or events, were ready for them. Hindsight often allows the historian to be critical or condescending. In Moorcroft's case subsequent events are usually his vindication. I have already mentioned his anticipation of British forward policies in Afghanistan, Central Asia and Tibet; his awareness of the strategic importance of Ladakh; his alarms about Russia. He also predicted the British

annexation of the Punjab, the steam-powered river navigation of the Indus and its tributaries, the Muslim revolutions in Sinkiang and future trouble on the Pamirs. He was right in his belief that shawl-wool goat could produce its fine wool outside Tibet, right in his belief that drainage would make unhealthy Kunduz one of the most fertile and rich parts of Afghanistan, right in his anticipation of the Russian conquest of Central Asia, and right even in his forecast of Chinese encroachment in the northern Himalayas which caused such anguish to India in the 1950s and early 60s. It was no surprise when Moorcroft's writings were produced as evidence in the Sino-Indian war of words which preceded the real thing. So to all Moorcroft's other Asian roles we may add Moorcroft the prophet.

Let me end where I began. It has been a great privilege to be able to remind a learned Society concerned with Asian Affairs of one of its great predecessors. Moorcroft had a love-affair with Asia. So have many of us. Perhaps we should call ourselves the Royal Society for Asian Love Affairs. I ought to add, for fear of being misunderstood by those who may have woken up at this point, that I do not for one moment wish to add any credence to the view that Moorcroft was also a kind of travelling lecher. "His principal occupation was making love" according to that Gallic humbug, Victor Jacquemont. There is not a shred of evidence for such a view. But if it is true, then the prodigious day-time achievements and ceaseless energy of the Asian Years of William Moorcroft are even more remarkable than I thought.

Victor Jacquemont went on in the same sentence to call Moorcroft's travels "unproductive". He must, surely, have been joking.