
*Tibet 1924: A Very British Coup Attempt?**

A. C. McKAY

In the course of my research into the character, role and influence of the British officials in Tibet during the 1904–47 period, it became apparent that previous scholarship had failed fully to confront an issue which would explain the clear decline in Anglo-Tibetan relations during the latter half of the 1920s. There is considerable evidence to suggest that the British officer then in immediate charge of Anglo-Tibetan relations attempted to promote a *coup d'état* in Tibet, in order to transfer secular power from the Dalai Lama and his court to Tsarong Shape, the forward-thinking Commander-in-Chief of the Tibetan Army. This possibility has been rejected by the leading European historians of the period, but their conclusions are, I will argue, in need of reassessment.

In the wider context, this is an issue which relates to debate over the nature, extent, and consequences of indigenous “collaboration” with the British imperial presence in South Asia. It is clear that the British cultivation of a network of local “collaborators” – or to use a less pejorative term, “supporters”, was a deliberate strategy by the imperial power. If the British were to understand, influence, and rule South Asia, they needed to attract the support of the indigenous elites. Thus imperial officials actively sought to cultivate supporters amongst rulers and ruling classes of the societies that they encountered.

The Foreign and Political Department (hereafter, the Political Department), of the Government of India was particularly concerned with the cultivation of local supporters. Its officers were specifically instructed that “The first duty of a Political Officer is to cultivate direct, friendly, personal relations with the Ruling Chiefs with whom he works”.¹ The Political Department was, in effect, India’s diplomatic corps. It was responsible for relations with India’s neighbours; in particular, the Indian Princely States, and protectorates and “buffer states” such as Sikkim and Tibet. When relations were established with a neighbouring state, officers selected by the department were posted there to represent the Government of India. These officers tried to influence the state’s rulers to follow policies considered beneficial to British interests. As one Political Officer’s wife

* Research for this paper was carried out as part of a doctoral thesis at the School of Oriental and African Studies, London University, with the assistance of the British Academy, under the supervision of Dr Peter Robb, whose assistance I am pleased to acknowledge. A draft of this paper was presented at the South Asian Studies Seminar, Cambridge University, in March 1995. I am most grateful to Prof. Alastair Lamb for his expert comments on that paper. I also wish to acknowledge the assistance of the Leverhulme Trust in the preparation of this paper.

¹ “Manual of Instructions for Political Officers”, by S. H. Butler, 1909, contained within Oriental and India Collection (henceforth OIC; formerly the India Office Library and Records), L/P&S/7/237–526.

recalled, "it was important that we get to know people, and . . . thereby be able to exert a positive influence in Tibet".²

The realities of British power meant that in the Indian Princely States a Political Officer had a great deal of influence. Few rulers were strong enough to resist his "advice". But in states beyond India's borders, such as Tibet, the international implications of British actions there meant that the Political Officers had less power. In the twentieth century, with the passing of the age of imperial expansion, officers in these states were forced to rely largely on the weapons of diplomacy to persuade local rulers and officials that it was to their advantage to support the British. But what actions were they to take when diplomacy failed and they were faced with an erstwhile supporter who, while not becoming actively hostile or threatening, had ceased to act upon the advice he was given?

An official British presence in Tibet was established by the 1903–4 Mission to Lhasa under the command of the Indian Political Officer, Colonel Francis Younghusband,³ who had been personally appointed to his position by the 1899–1905 Viceroy of India, Lord Curzon. Curzon was concerned by reports which indicated that the Russians were gaining influence in Tibet, and he sought to exclude Russian influence there by establishing a British representative in Lhasa. Although Whitehall, fearing international complications, refused to allow the establishment of a permanent diplomatic mission at Lhasa, it did permit the Government of India to establish three "Trade Agencies" in Tibet, staffed by officers designated "Trade Agents". They were so-called because Whitehall, under pressure from British and Indian trading interests which sought to open Tibet to free trade, accepted the need to station British officers in Tibet to oversee that trade. However, by appointing officers from the Indian Political Department as Trade Agents, the Government of India ensured that it would have diplomatic representatives in Tibet, as Curzon had intended. Thus, although the Trade Agents were nominally charged with the protection of the interests of British Indian traders, as Indian Political officers, their real priority was to exclude Russian (and later Chinese) influence from Tibet in order to ensure the security of India's northern border.⁴

The Trade Agents, and, after the establishment of a permanent British Mission in Lhasa in 1936–7, the Lhasa Mission officials, were under the immediate command of the Political Officer Sikkim, who was stationed in Gangtok (the Sikkimese capital). This officer was responsible for British relations with Tibet, Sikkim and Bhutan. Most of his work concerned Tibet, and he was the Government of India's principal advisor on Tibetan affairs. For want of a recognised collective term embracing Trade Agents, Lhasa Mission officials and the senior post of Political Officer Sikkim, I use the term "Tibet cadre" to describe these officers.

The official British presence in Tibet lasted until Indian independence in 1947, and

² M. D. Williamson, with J. Snelling, *Memoirs of a Political Officer's Wife in Tibet, Sikkim and Bhutan* (London, 1987), p. 104.

³ Lieutenant-Colonel Sir Francis Edward Younghusband, KCSI, KCIE (1863–1942). Born in India, the son of an Indian Police Officer, he was educated at Clifton and Sandhurst, and was later Resident in Kashmir. For a recent, comprehensive biography, including a good account of the mission, see P. French, *Younghusband: The Last Great Imperial Adventurer* (London, 1994).

⁴ Trade Agencies were established at Gyantse and Yatung in Central Tibet, and at Gartok in Western Tibet; British officers were not used at the latter post. See A. C. McKay, "The establishment of the British Trade Agencies in Tibet: a survey", *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, 3rd series, II (1992).

throughout the 1904–47 period, the Tibet cadre maintained a distinct collective identity through a process of selection and training. As a result of this process the British officers, although by no means similar types of personality, developed a broad continuity of approach to Tibetan affairs. In the apparent absence of official instructions as to their role, they saw themselves as diplomats representing the Government of India, but following in the tradition of nineteenth-century imperial frontier officials in other regions (such as the Northwest Frontier Province), they considered their duty was to advance British interests and position. Whitehall had intended them to be overseers of frontier trade, but as members of India's diplomatic corps, they defined their role within the identity and traditions of that service.⁵

As the first Trade Agent in Gyantse, Younghusband appointed his "right-hand man" on the Mission to Lhasa, Captain "Frank" O'Connor,⁶ a keen supporter of Curzon's "forward" policies. O'Connor's successor was a young officer who had made his name on the Younghusband Mission, Lieutenant F. M. Bailey,⁷ who remained in close touch with Younghusband and O'Connor. In Gangtok, Charles Bell⁸ became Political Officer in Sikkim. While Bell, an ex-ICS, rather than Indian Army officer, was a very different type of person to O'Connor and Bailey, he continued, and refined, Curzon's "forward" policies. Thus in the formative years of the British presence in Tibet the officers there all represented the "forward school" of thinking on frontier policy, and, the common theme of the policies the Tibet cadre promoted was that they were designed, or served, to deepen British involvement in Tibet, and increase Tibetan dependence on British structures and "advice". This meant that the cadre resisted the prevailing trend of their Government's policies, which was to refrain from further territorial expansion.

The 13th Dalai Lama had fled to Mongolia as Younghusband approached Lhasa, appointing a Regent in his stead. Although the Regent was a well-respected religious figure, he apparently had neither knowledge of, nor interest in, worldly affairs. Thus the withdrawal of the Younghusband Mission from Tibet left behind a power vacuum which made it difficult for the Tibet cadre to identify suitable "Ruling Chiefs" whom they might cultivate as supporters. China was nominally the suzerain power in Tibet, and recognised as such by the British Government. But the British positions in Tibet posed a threat to Chinese power and prestige in the region, and the Chinese, who considered Tibet part of their empire, sought to regain power there. By 1907 they had established effective control over Central Tibet, and virtually eliminated British influence at Lhasa. But while Whitehall was prepared to sacrifice the Trade Agencies in the interests of wider Anglo-Chinese relations, the cadre officers had come to argue that China's power was a potential threat to

⁵ See A. C. McKay, *Tibet and the British Raj: The Frontier Cadre 1904–1947*, (London, 1997).

⁶ Lieutenant-Colonel Sir William Frederick Travers O'Connor, CSI, CIE, CVO (1870–1943). Born in Ireland and educated at Charterhouse and the Royal Military Academy Woolwich, he served as Trade Agent Gyantse between 1904 and 1907, and was Political Officer Sikkim for three months in 1921.

⁷ Lieutenant-Colonel Frederick Marsham Bailey, CIE (1882–1967). Bailey, a noted explorer and naturalist, was born in India, the son of an Indian Army Officer. He was educated at Wellington, the Edinburgh Academy, and Sandhurst, and was later British Resident in Kashmir and Nepal. He served as Trade Agent in Gyantse and Yatung between 1905 and 1909, and was Political Officer Sikkim from 1921–8.

⁸ Sir Charles Bell, KCIE, CMG, CIE (1870–1945). Born in India, he was educated at Winchester and Oxford. Bell served at Yatung and Gangtok at various times between 1904 and 1908, and was Political Officer Sikkim for most of the period 1908–20.

the security of India, and they sought to ally with the Tibetan leadership against the Chinese.

After Younghusband's departure, the British Government refused to allow its Indian officials to visit Lhasa. With that stricture enforced, the most powerful figure the cadre could contact was the Panchen Lama. He maintained an independent power structure at Shigatse, with his own court and officials, tax-paying territory, and even foreign policy. Significant numbers of Tibetans regarded the Panchen, rather than the Dalai Lama, as their supreme sovereign in both the temporal and secular realms. Soon after the opening of the Gyantse Trade Agency, O'Connor paid a formal visit to the Lama's Shigatse monastery. He, and subsequently Bailey, got on well with the Panchen Lama, a somewhat worldly figure of similar age to the Agents. The Lama was given various gifts, including modern rifles and a motor car, and in 1906 he was invited to India, where he was treated with great ceremony in what was clearly stated as being an attempt to impress him.

In the immediate post-Younghusband period, before the cadre identified the Chinese as their enemy, one of the "leading lights" of the "forward school", the Indian Foreign Secretary, Louis (later Sir Louis) Dane, had seen that the Panchen Lama might be a solution to the Tibetan problem. Dane suggested that if the Panchen Lama took the place of the Dalai Lama in Lhasa, with Chinese approval, the British could then recognise Chinese authority in Tibet and "effectively settle the unruly Tibetans and exclude Russian influence". But although Dane went so far as to seek details of historical precedents concerning the Chinese deposition of the 6th and 7th Dalai Lamas, he also considered the possibility that the Panchen Lama "may yet be an Indian Ruling Chief".⁹

Dane had a very high opinion of O'Connor at Gyantse, and on several occasions prevented the outspoken O'Connor from being censured when he upset his immediate superiors, as he frequently did. Given Dane's close relationship with O'Connor, it was no surprise that it should be O'Connor who subsequently promoted a plan to centre British policy in Tibet around the Panchen Lama. In February 1907, O'Connor proposed that the Government of India should encourage the Panchen Lama to declare his independence from Lhasa and establish a separate state in southern Tibet, centred around the Panchen Lama's Shigatse headquarters. O'Connor argued that if the British then recognised the new state and supported it militarily with arms sales and the stationing of British troops in the new state, the Chinese and Lhasa Tibetan Governments would not be able to prevent the establishment of the new state, and British India would have a friendly and co-operative northern neighbour.¹⁰

O'Connor's proposal aroused great opposition, and was never acted on. But it was consistent with "forward school" thinking. While Tibet was too large for Britain to protect militarily, a southern Tibetan state could have been supported, would have provided a forward position for British interests beyond the Himalayas, and had the potential to be drawn within the frontiers of British India in due course. O'Connor's perspective was

⁹ File notes by Dane, 2 December 1905, & 30 December 1905, FD, 1906 Secret E Marsh 228–245; India to Secretary of State, 23 January 1906, & file note by Dane, 12 January 1906, FD, 1906 Secret E March 154–191, National Archives of India (hereafter NAI).

¹⁰ A. Lamb, *The McMahon Line* (London, 1966), pp. 134–7. [Lamb's reference, PEF 1908/22, No 1226, O'Connor to India, 3 February 1907, is no longer used.]

limited, wider geopolitical implications (such as Russian and Chinese opposition) made the plan impossible for Britain to support, but O'Connor's relations with the Panchen Lama gave him a strongly Shigatse-influenced perspective on Tibetan identity, which was not then firmly defined in the British understanding. Tibet at that time had few of the key indicators of modern statehood; it had neither fixed boundaries, nor an indigenous leadership in administrative control of its territory, citizens and foreign relations.

After O'Connor and Bailey had left Gyantse, and with the Chinese increasing their control over Tibet, the British position there declined to the point where withdrawal was becoming a serious option. But in 1910 the Dalai Lama, who had briefly returned to Lhasa, fled south into India to escape a large body of Chinese troops which had been sent to enforce control in Central Tibet. The Dalai Lama's unexpected arrival in India gave the Tibet cadre the chance to cultivate the friendship of the traditional Lhasa leadership. The Political Officer Sikkim, Charles Bell, was responsible for the Dalai Lama during his exile, and he was able to establish a genuine personal friendship with the Tibetan leader. In 1911, the Chinese revolution meant the collapse of their position in Tibet. The Dalai Lama returned from exile the following year, and issued what the Tibetans regard as a declaration of independence. Bell offered the Dalai Lama such help as his Government would permit, and acted as his principal advisor on secular matters such as the modernisation of Tibet. Bell supported the Dalai Lama's rule, advancing policies based on support for the traditional power structure in Tibet, and the Tibetan leader followed his advice.¹¹ Bell established what was to be the predominant British policy towards Tibet until 1947, that of support for the Dalai Lama and his Government, and it is important to note that what is being examined in this paper is an exception to the predominant policy.

In 1920, Bell's career culminated in his being permitted to visit Lhasa; the first senior British official to travel there since the Younghusband Mission. Bell spent a year in Lhasa, being briefly joined by his long-serving and loyal assistant, Trade Agent David MacDonald,¹² who had been instrumental in enabling the Dalai Lama to escape to India in 1910. In Lhasa, Bell worked closely with the Dalai Lama, and, as Curzon and Younghusband had envisaged, the presence of a Political Officer in Lhasa enabled the British to exert a great deal of influence there. When Bell departed, Anglo-Tibetan relations were at their most cordial.

Bell retired as Political Officer Sikkim while he was in Lhasa, and his replacement was the former Gyantse Trade Agent, Frank O'Connor. O'Connor however, wanted the higher ranking, and soon-to-be-vacant position of British representative in Kathmandhu, and, in a rather complicated manoeuvre, he was able to transfer to the Kathmandhu post after a few months, and arrange for his former successor in Gyantse, F. M. Bailey, to take over as Political Officer in Sikkim.¹³

In the years since he had been in Gyantse, Bailey had made a name for himself. He had explored the eastern extremities of the Brahmaputra, been shipwrecked off the China

¹¹ See, for example, C. Bell, *Tibet Past and Present* (Delhi, 1992; first published, Oxford, 1924), pp. 184–5, 189.

¹² David MacDonald (1870–1962), was half-Sikkimese. After serving on the Younghusband Mission, he became Yatung Trade Agent in 1909, and remained serving there and in Gyantse until 1924. He was Political Officer Sikkim for four months in 1921.

¹³ McKay, *Tibet*, p. 102.

coast, and served at Gallipoli before being withdrawn from war service by the Government of India. In 1918, he was sent on an intelligence mission to Tashkent, to report on the situation there as the Bolsheviks took control. A series of story-book adventures followed. Bailey was soon forced to disguise himself – notably as an Albanian deserter, a disguise so successful that he was hired by Russian Intelligence to find the British agent (Bailey himself) they knew was in the area. Bailey finally made his way back to India, where he took up the post O'Connor had arranged for him.¹⁴

Bailey was now an experienced intelligence agent. In his early years in Tibet he had administered the intelligence network set-up by O'Connor, which made regular payments to a variety of informants; Indians, Sikkimese and Bhutanese, Nepalese, Tibetans, and even Chinese. His explorations also had intelligence implications. Bailey's famous journey from Peking to Sadiya, described as a private one, had earned him a substantial sum from "Secret Service" funds. His activities in Russian Central Asia were only the most visible events of his intelligence career.¹⁵

Bell had reported from Lhasa that "there is no danger of Bolshevism in Tibet" as it was antithetical to their religion and culture.¹⁶ Bailey, however, took a different view. He, like O'Connor and many other senior officers of the Raj, believed in a Russian threat to India, not perhaps by invasion, but by subversion, and considered it a duty to fight that threat. There were attempts by the new Russian regime to gain influence in Tibet in the 1920s, many details of which are only now emerging. Russian agents were dispatched to Lhasa among pilgrim parties from the Russian Buddhist regions, and there was a Russian agent in Lhasa's biggest monastery, Drepung. Although he had his own informants among the Russians, in particular, the Kalmyk Buriat leader Zamba Haldenov, described as "Chief Buddhist priest of the Astrakhan Kalmucks",¹⁷ Bailey's concern at the Russian threat may well have been the primary motive for his subsequent actions.

When he took over as Political Officer Sikkim, Bailey had been out of contact with Tibet for more than a decade. Bell was still in Lhasa, but the two had never been close associates. Unlike the scholarly Bell, Bailey's view of a Political Officer's role was more orientated towards command than advice. As one observer commented "Bailey ... believe[s] it inconsistent with the maintenance of dignity to pander too much to native

¹⁴ See F. M. Bailey, *Mission to Tashkent* (London, 1946).

¹⁵ Re informants, see White to India, 25 July 1906, FD, 1906 External B August 180–181; Secret Service accounts, FD, 1908 Establishment B December 164–195, NAI. Re Bailey's journey to Sadiya, see FD, 1912 Secret E January 65–92, NAI. This file is classified as it contains a map, but the "Index for Foreign Proceedings for the Year 1912", lists this file in two entries, one of which is obviously a misprint, giving the amount involved as 1,000 and 10,000 rupees respectively. Access to the Indian archives has led me to reassess my view that Bailey was not an intelligence officer in 1911; see McKay, *The Establishment*, p. 417. Given that the Government of India curtailed Bailey's Assam exploration in 1911, and considered that he had spent too long in Russian Central Asia, there must be a suspicion that Bailey's intelligence activities were not solely on behalf of the Government of India, whose interests by no means always coincided with those of Whitehall.

¹⁶ Bell to India, 6 February 1921, L/P&S/11/195–1468, OIC.

¹⁷ Re Russian infiltration, see J. Snelling, *Buddhism in Russia* (Shaftsbury, 1993), pp. 212; Re Haldinov [Hodenof/Haldinoff], see Ludlow diary entry, 13 November 1924, MSS Eur D979; Bailey's Lhasa diary, various entries, MSS Eur F157–214, OIC; F&PD Index 1922–23, F.No 619–X, NAI; Bailey to India, 2 September 1924, 371–10291–4178 (1924) Foreign Office. Alex Andreyev of the St Petersburg Cultural Foundation is currently researching Soviet activities in Tibet during this period; see "The Bolshevik intrigue in Tibet", paper delivered at the 7th Seminar of the International Association for Tibetan Studies, Graz, 1994.

ideas".¹⁸ This attitude of Bailey's also alienated David MacDonald (then acting as Trade Agent in Gyantse and in Yatung), who had a great deal of influence on the frontier.

As Bell chose not to invite Bailey to join him in Lhasa, Bailey had no close ties with the Dalai Lama and his court. He had to establish himself with the Tibetans, and indeed his own government, although he did not lack influential support there. His mentor, O'Connor, was now British representative in Kathmandu, and Bailey was also on very good terms with the Political Officer in Assam, Captain G. A. Nevill, as well as with the missionaries in Eastern Tibet who provided the British with valuable intelligence on that sector. In distant Whitehall, Lord Curzon was now British Foreign Minister, and, in addition, Bailey had married into British aristocracy, and had contacts at many levels of the British establishment. Once Bell had retired, MacDonald was isolated, and Bailey could then rely on the support of the other officers concerned with affairs in Central and Eastern Tibet, and from Whitehall.

After Bell's departure a number of problems arose in Anglo-Tibetan relations. The introduction of Bell's plans for the gradual modernisation of Tibet aroused conservative opposition from within Tibetan monastic and aristocratic circles which proved too strong for the Dalai Lama to ignore. Despite some well publicised changes – telegraph and electric installations in the Potala for instance – the Tibetans showed little enthusiasm for modernisation. They opposed changes to their traditional social structures, just as they had done when the Chinese had attempted to introduce similar changes in the 1907–11 period. It became apparent to Bailey that the existing Tibetan Government would not make the changes in Tibet which British interests demanded. Most particularly, the Tibetans were unwilling to strengthen their military forces, to the extent necessary if Tibet was to act as a strong "buffer state" for British India's northern frontier; one capable of excluding Russian influence. There were also a number of minor incidents which placed additional strain on Anglo-Tibetan relations, for example, the illicit journey to Lhasa early in 1923 by the American lecturer at the School of Oriental Studies in London, William McGovern.¹⁹

Bailey was unable to arrange a visit to Lhasa until 1924, and having apparently come to the conclusion that the Dalai Lama was unwilling, or unable to lead Tibet in the direction British Indian interests demanded, Bailey attempted to develop alternative contacts in Tibet's power structure which might support modernisation policies. Given Bailey's military background, he found natural allies in Tibet's military forces, which were being modernised with British assistance. The new military power in Tibet was closely associated with Tsarong Shape, who rose from humble beginnings to become the Commander-in-Chief of the Tibetan Army in 1915.

Tsarong had made his name commanding a small force which held off the Chinese army pursuing the Dalai Lama as he fled to exile in India in 1910. MacDonald had then disguised him as one of the British mail-runners to enable him to join the Dalai Lama in India. Tsarong was clearly an outstanding individual, a powerful figure in Lhasa politics who enjoyed a close relationship with the Dalai Lama. He was also exceptional in having a great

¹⁸ W. McGovern, *To Lhasa in Disguise* (London, 1924), p. 39.

¹⁹ The modernisation of Tibet is a central theme of M. Goldstein, *A History of Modern Tibet, 1913–1951: The Demise of the Lamaist State* (London, 1989).

interest in the world outside Tibet, and while British sources prefer to emphasise his ties with them, he also befriended other foreign visitors to Tibet. Tsarong was the kind of man the British understood; he was considered “the one man who is really wide-awake in Lhasa”; – and one who could “hold his drink well”.²⁰ Bailey naturally identified Tsarong as a potential ally. Tsarong however, lacked either a monastic or aristocratic power base, and his officers, who had been trained by the Gyantse Escort Commander or at Quetta Military College, were suspected by conservative Tibetans of having adopted European values.

With his Government reluctant to allow him to visit Lhasa, it was difficult for Bailey to establish close ties with Tsarong. But in 1922 he personally arranged, apparently without the support of the Government of India, for General George Pereira, a former military attache at the British Legation in Peking whom Bailey had met there in 1910, to visit Lhasa en route from Peking to India. Pereira was officially described as a “private traveller”, but in his memoirs David MacDonald, who was not then in Bailey’s confidence, made the unusual comment on Pereira’s travels that “Whether his . . . journey was inspired by motives other than exploration and the desire to be the first European to reach Lhasa from the Chinese side I do not know, nor did he tell me”.²¹

Pereira gave Bailey detailed reports on the state of Tibetan military forces throughout the country, and, while in Lhasa in October 1922, he held talks with Tsarong. Pereira’s principal recommendation to Bailey was that in order to organise the Tibetan army “it is absolutely necessary to send a military advisor to Tsarong”.²² In Lhasa, Pereira obviously exerted some influence on the Tibetan Government. The day after he left, the Tibetans asked the Government of India to lend them the services of the Darjeeling Police Inspector, Laden La,²³ who had been in charge of the Dalai Lama’s security during his exile in India, to establish and train a police force in Lhasa (an innovation Bell had recommended to the Dalai Lama). This request gave Bailey the chance to develop ties with Tsarong.

Wider international considerations made it obvious that Whitehall would not sanction posting a British military officer to Lhasa. But Laden La was an experienced police and intelligence officer, then highly regarded by the British and trusted by the Tibetans, and he had recently been in Lhasa assisting Charles Bell. Laden La could fill a dual role, while setting up a police force, he would have access to all levels of Tibetan society, and could also advise Tsarong and the military. Bailey persuaded the Government of India that it was of “considerable political importance” to get Laden La to Lhasa, where he would effectively be the Government of India’s representative.²⁴ Arrangements for his mission took time, but Laden La eventually arrived in Lhasa in September 1923 and established a

²⁰ Ludlow diary entry, 22 September 1924, MSS Eur D979, OIC. Re Tsarong, see in particular, H. Spence, “Tsarong 11, the Hero of Chaksam, and the modernisation struggle in Tibet, 1912–1931”, *The Tibet Journal*, XXVI/1 (1991).

²¹ D. MacDonald, *Twenty Years in Tibet* (Delhi, 1991, first published London, 1932) p. 303; draft letter, Bailey to W. M. Hardy [a missionary on the Eastern Tibetan frontier], undated, c. December 1932, Foreign Office 1842–1842–10.

²² Pereira to Bailey, 13 December 1922, MSS Eur F157–238, OIC.

²³ *Kashag* to Bailey, 29 October 1922, L/P&S/11/235–2906, OIC. Rai Bahadur Sonam Wangfel Laden La (1876–1937), was a Sikkimese. He was a nephew of the *pañdit* Urgyen Gyatso, who carried out a number of intelligence-gathering missions in Tibet in the late nineteenth century.

²⁴ File note by E. B. Howell, 9 March 1923, Home Department 1923, file No 42 (v) Part B, NAI; so keen were the Government of India to use him that the ambitious Laden La was able to demand promotion to Superintendent as a condition of acceptance.

200 man police force.²⁵ He also established close ties with Tsarong, although relations between the ordinary Tibetan soldiers, and the far-better paid policemen, quickly deteriorated. Meanwhile, on New Year's Day, 1924, news had reached the Gyantse Trade Agent that Lhasa's long-simmering dispute with the Panchen Lama had culminated in the Shigatse Lama's fleeing into exile in China. Tibet's traditional power structure was clearly threatened.

Bailey began planning his own mission to Lhasa, which the Government of India approved early in March. Political Officers invariably exaggerated evidence supporting the need for their Lhasa missions in order to convince a reluctant Whitehall, but Bailey was clearly worried that the Russians would take advantage of the confused situation in Tibet. He warned his Government shortly before his departure that one "Zyrianin" was undertaking a mission from Urga to Lhasa "with a view to establish Bolshevism in Tibet".²⁶ Bailey set out for the Tibetan capital around the middle of June. He was accompanied, for reasons unknown, by the Assam Political Officer, Captain Nevill, and they arrived in Gyantse on 3 July 1924.²⁷ But events in Lhasa overshadowed his mission.

Early in May 1924, a fight between groups of police and soldiers ended with Tsarong punishing two soldiers by mutilation, as a result of which one died. Mutilation had been forbidden as a punishment by the Dalai Lama, and Tsarong's monastic and aristocratic opponents apparently sought to use this incident to engineer his dismissal. Tsarong's supporters, including Laden La, sought to preserve his position. That much is definitely known. Accounts of the events that followed, and who was involved, are confused. But it appears that this incident brought tensions between the modernising and conservative tendencies in Tibetan society to a head. Tsarong's supporters, including Laden La, began what was apparently a somewhat disorganised effort to take secular power from the Dalai Lama and transfer it to Tsarong Shape.²⁸ The timing of events was such that, had the Dalai Lama been relieved of secular power, Bailey would have arrived in Lhasa to be greeted by a new Tibetan Government headed by Tsarong. Bailey's support for Tsarong would probably have been decisive; but the "plot" was not carried through to that conclusion. What happened remains difficult to ascertain. Bailey did not report fully on the matter, and it was several years before versions of events emerged into public record.

Bailey visited Lhasa between 16 July and 16 August 1924. There he spent much of his time discussing modernisation with Tsarong. Bailey's Lhasa report reveals that he asked Tsarong what would happen if the Dalai Lama died; perhaps a curious question, given that the Tibetan leader was apparently then in the best of health. Tsarong replied that if the Government of India sent troops it would stop any trouble, but Bailey warned him that this was impossible, given the British Government policy of non-interference in Tibet's

²⁵ Gyantse Annual Report, 1923-24, L/P&S/10/218-2418, OIC; India to Government of Bengal, 31 August 1923, Home Department 1923, File No. 42 (V) Part B, NAI.

²⁶ Bailey to India, 28 May 1924, 371-10233-2275 (1924), Foreign Office.

²⁷ Bailey had served as Intelligence Officer in 1912-13 under Nevill on the Dibong Survey mission into hostile Abor country in Assam. Nevill had subsequently turned a blind eye to Bailey's evasion of bureaucratic obstacles to his exploration of the Tsangpo/Brahmaputra; see F. M. Bailey, *No Passport to Tibet* (London, 1957), pp. 31-40. Bailey's Lhasa Mission diary can be read as implying that Nevill accompanied him to Lhasa, although there is no other evidence of this; see diary entry of 18 July 1924, MSS Eur F157-214, OIC.

²⁸ Despite the best efforts of Goldstein to compare accounts of these events, they remain contradictory; and there is little point in repeating them here; see Goldstein, *A History*, pp. 121-37.

internal affairs. Bailey also advised Tsarong to deposit money in India in case he had to flee into exile. When Bailey left Lhasa, he stayed at the Gyantse Trade Agency, where he was joined a few weeks later by Tsarong, who had conveniently chosen to go on a pilgrimage to India, a pilgrimage which included meetings with leading officials in Nepal and India, including the Viceroy. Bailey left Gyantse on 26 September, and Tsarong, who apparently travelled via Shigatse, the now vacant seat of the Panchen Lama, left the following day. They met up again in India, and Bailey accompanied Tsarong on parts of his tour.²⁹

Bailey's departure from Lhasa was the signal for a series of events which greatly reduced British prestige in Tibet. The struggle between the "conservative" and "modernising" tendencies in Tibetan society culminated in defeat for modernisation. Laden La left Lhasa on 9 October 1924³⁰ and the police force lost all power. Tsarong found on his return that he had been removed from his post as Army Commander and that his young military supporters had been dismissed or dispersed. There were a number of other indications that the British were out of favour with the Tibetans, and evidence that in the late 1920s the Dalai Lama was again turning to China or Russia for support. The concluding years of Bailey's term as Political Officer in Sikkim thus saw Anglo-Tibetan relations at a very low ebb.

A number of historians have commented on the causes of this decline in the British position in Tibet. They have concluded that the Dalai Lama turned away from the British because of their failure to obtain Chinese agreement to the 1914 Simla Convention, or their failure to supply further weaponry, or due to the social stresses produced by modernisation, or blamed it on a wider British decline in power in the East.³¹ Although it would go a long way towards explaining the British decline, histories of this period have dismissed any suggestion of British involvement in a plot to depose the Dalai Lama.

Richardson does not refer to the incident at all, although in connection with Chinese accusations of British support for "militaristic lay officials who wanted to substitute some form of civil government for the Lama hierarchy" in the 1930s, he states that "to suggest that the British Government would assist such a group – if it existed – . . . is . . . inept". (This Chinese accusation may reflect their belated knowledge of rumours about the 1923–4 coup attempt.)³² Alastair Lamb (who knew both Bailey and Nevill), while noting rumours of a conspiracy between Laden La and Tsarong Shape, is content to record that there is "not a vestige of evidence" for this in the India Office Library records. Merlyn Goldstein, after a detailed study of the events, writes that "Ladenla [sic] was an Indian official, and it

²⁹ Bailey's Lhasa Mission diary, various entries, MSS Eur F157–214; Ludlow diary, various entries, September 1924, MSS Eur D979, OIC.

³⁰ Copy of press communiqué dated 14 October 1924, L/P&S/10/1088–1417, OIC.

³¹ See, for example, I. Klein, "British imperialism in decline: Tibet, 1914–1921", *Historian*, XXXIV.1 (1971); also see Spence, *Tsarong*, p. 48.

³² I am indebted to Dr Michel Hockx and his wife Yu Hong, who recalled that at school in China she had been taught that the British attempted a coup in Tibet in the 1920s. This led me to examine Wang Furen and Suo Wenqing, *Highlights of Tibetan History* (Beijing, 1984), pp. 159–60. This states briefly that the British "cultivated a clique of pro-British military officers headed by Tsha-rong [sic] . . . to use these troops to stage a coup . . . When the conspiratorial group was ready to strike in October 1924 the scheme leaked out. The Dalai Lama took prompt measures. Tsha-rong and other group members were removed from office or otherwise punished". No sources are given. Aside from the misdating, the account appears consistent except in one key area: if there was such a coup attempt, it was under Bailey's direction, possibly with the assistance of other frontier officers. It did not involve the "British" [Government], and was contrary to the general trend of British policy there at that time.

would have been unreasonable to assume he acted without orders or at least official encouragement"; but he footnotes this statement simply with the contradictory and unsupported remark that, "This is, however, precisely what happened".³³

There was no doubt as to Laden La's involvement, although his role took some time to emerge. The chief Tibetan administrator in Gyantse, the Khenchung, apparently at the Dalai Lama's behest, gave the British a full account of the incident in 1926, when Bailey was on leave. Frank Ludlow, the noted plant-collector and later Head of Mission in Lhasa, who ran an English school in Gyantse in 1923-6, saw "no reason why" the Khenchung's account should not be accepted as true. Even the Government of India eventually accepted that Laden La had been involved, judging from the Indian National Archives file on this matter, which is entitled "Indiscretion of Laden La in associating with Tibetan officers attempting to overthrow the Dalai Lama" – a file which unfortunately remains closed.³⁴

The Government of India's treatment of Laden La is instructive. When he left Lhasa, ostensibly suffering from a nervous breakdown, he took six months leave, and then resumed his post in Darjeeling. Far from being censured, he was promoted to the post of Trade Agent in Yatung, but the Dalai Lama, who now deeply mistrusted him, objected. The Dalai Lama wrote that Laden La, "is not altogether a steady and straight-forward man and it is not known how he would serve to maintain Anglo-Tibetan amity". The posting was cancelled, but Laden La continued to be regarded as a valuable agent, and was employed by subsequent Political Officers on missions to Lhasa.³⁵

Laden La was not, however, universally popular on the frontier. He had annoyed Ludlow, who considered his actions in Lhasa partly to blame for the closure of the Gyantse school, while in McGovern's account of his journey to Lhasa, published in 1924, Laden La was, in passing, accused of using his office for profit. MacDonald later wrote to Bell that "It is amazing to me how Laden La manages to mislead the powers that be! In Darjeeling he is liked openly only by those he can override. When McGovern published his so called libel on Laden La, if he had gone the right way about things, Laden La would not have been in power today".³⁶

After the Khenchung brought out the story of the coup attempt in 1926, Bailey defended Laden La. He originally argued that the Khenchung's account was "inconceivable", and when he finally admitted to Government that Laden La had indeed "certainly committed a serious indiscretion", stated that he hoped no action would be taken against Laden La: none was. Norbu Dhondup, who later headed the British Mission in Lhasa, summed the matter up in a letter to Bailey. He wrote that "through your favour Laden La [was] saved, otherwise he was ruined".³⁷

Has previous scholarship been correct in rejecting Bailey's involvement in the plot?

³³ H. Richardson, *Tibet and its History* (Boston, 1984, first published London, 1962), p. 137; A. Lamb, *Tibet, China and India, 1914-1950* (Hertingfordbury, 1989), pp. 162, 175; Goldstein, *A History*, pp. 133-4.

³⁴ Ludlow diary entry of 19 September 1926, MSS Eur D979, OIC; FD Index 1924-27, File No. 38 (2)-X, NAI. A request to the Indian Department of External Affairs for access to this file was refused in 1994.

³⁵ Dalai Lama to Norbu Dhondup, cited in Norbu to Bailey, 7 October 1924, MSS F157-240; Laden La to Bell, 5 September 1925, MSS Eur F80 5a 97, OIC.

³⁶ Ludlow diary entry, 26 July 1924, MSS Eur D979; Ludlow to Bailey, 3 November 1926, MSS Eur F157-241; MacDonald to Bell, 3 February 1930, MSS Eur F80 5a 92, OIC. McGovern, W., *To Lhasa*, pp. 16-17.

³⁷ Various correspondence, 1927, L/P&S/10/1088; Norbu Dhondup to Bailey, 2 October 1931, MSS Eur F147-240, OIC. It should be noted, however, that Norbu and Laden La were rivals.

Certainly Bailey claimed ignorance of Laden La's activities, but to answer in the negative we must conclude that one of the outstanding intelligence agents of the time was ignorant of the activities of his own key agent at a crucial time and place. The weight of circumstantial evidence certainly points to there having been a coup planned under Bailey's direction; we cannot necessarily expect empirical evidence. An experienced intelligence operator such as Bailey would naturally conceal evidence of a failed coup attempt if he could, and at that time and place it was not unduly difficult for him to do so. The reporting of events in Tibet was largely controlled by the Political Officer in Sikkim, and Bailey apparently took full advantage of his power to restrict Government's knowledge of the matter. It was only when Bailey went on leave some two years after the events, that they were fully reported to the Government of India.³⁸

Viewed from the perspective that is obtained by a study of the Tibet cadre's mentality, the events of this period appear to follow a logical sequence. Bailey had apparently come to the conclusion that the only way to modernise Tibet to the extent where it would provide a secure northern border for India and exclude Russian influence in the region was by establishing a secular government in Tibet under Tsarong Shape's leadership. Pereira's report must have been a significant influence on Bailey; it is clear from the way in which Bailey arranged permission for him to travel freely in areas normally closed to travellers that he had an important role. In sending Laden La to encourage Tsarong, Bailey had an agent whose actions he could disown officially if they failed, while rewarding him later for his efforts.

There is of course a possibility that Laden La acted on his own initiative, in the tradition his "forward" thinking superiors had inculcated in him, but Laden La was not officially attached to the Political Department at this time. Had he, as a Provincial Police Officer, been involved in a foreign conspiracy without significant support from British officers, it is hard to believe he could have escaped dismissal from government service. It is equally unlikely that the British would have continued to use a frontier officer who really had had a nervous breakdown on duty.

Bailey's plans (if such they were) for a Tibetan state under Tsarong's leadership echo O'Connor's earlier plans for the Panchen Lama. O'Connor, then in Kathmandu, may also have been involved in this plan. Bailey was in close touch with him at that time, as he was with Captain Nevill, the Political Officer in Assam who accompanied him on at least part of his mission to Lhasa. Bailey's plan would have been a typical "forward school" move, aimed at linking Tibet more closely to British India, while also serving to place Bailey in the position Bell had obtained, of being a close friend and advisor to a Tibetan ruler. Bailey would have known that he could not expect his Government to approve a plan to overthrow the Tibetan Government, but that if such a plan succeeded, with British involvement concealed, his government would probably accept it, particularly as they would rely largely on the advice Bailey, O'Connor and Nevill would give – that a Tsarong-led Tibet was in Britain's best interests.

³⁸ Norbu Dhondup to Bailey, 1 September 1927, MSS Eur F157–240. John Noel, photographer on the early Everest expeditions, wrote in another context that "the opinions which Major Bailey quotes as coming from the Tibetans are entirely from himself . . . Government refers all matters to him and he practically dictates any answer he wishes"; Noel to RGS. Secretary, Arthur Hinks, 22 May 1925, Royal Geographical Society, Everest Collection, EE 27/6/13.

Under Tsarong, the modernisation of Tibet on the British model could then have proceeded. When the plan failed, the Dalai Lama had no real proof of any British involvement, and may have only gradually come to suspect its full extent. If this was the case, it would then explain why he distanced himself from the British, and withdrew his support for British-sponsored modernisation. Certainly the Dalai Lama adopted a more balanced foreign policy after the events of 1924, exploring alternative avenues of support for his regime along lines less liable to arouse monastic opposition, or create a secular alternative to his rule.

If replacing the Dalai Lama by Tsarong Shape was Bailey's plan, it failed for two reasons, reasons which were also behind the failure of O'Connor's earlier plans for the Panchen Lama. Firstly the policy and financial restrictions imposed by the British and Indian Governments meant Bailey was unable to offer real support to the "modernising" faction in the form of military assistance, which would have been decisive. Secondly Tsarong, like the Panchen Lama, was apparently unwilling to take the decisive step of declaring his claim for power. While the earlier failure by the Panchen Lama to accept secular power in Tibet has been blamed on the weakness of his character,³⁹ no such accusation can be levelled against Tsarong. Rather it appears that his loyalty to the Dalai Lama was too strong for him to turn against his benefactor, and Tsarong knew that even if the Dalai Lama died he lacked sufficient support to take over Tibet without British military assistance. Tsarong consequently chose to go to India on pilgrimage rather than to make a firm challenge for power.

There are a number of loose ends in this matter. A certain Pedma Chandra, a Bhutanese national who had taught Tibetan at Calcutta university, was employed by the British as a translator for the British officers training Tibetan troops in Gyantse at that time. Chandra then turns up in Lhasa, apparently assisting Laden La. Although he may just have been a convenient scapegoat, he was later accused by the Tibetans of being one of the prime movers behind the coup plan, encouraging Tibetan military officers to gather their troops in Shigatse to fight the Tibetan Government.⁴⁰ He eventually attempted to flee Tibet when the Dalai Lama began to dismiss officers suspected of involvement in the plot, and he was killed by a pursuit party. His head was brought back and exhibited in Lhasa, with a notice accusing him of embezzlement and of speaking out against the Dalai Lama. The 13th Dalai Lama had abolished the death penalty in Tibet, and such incidents were extremely rare. But Chandra's exact role remains a mystery, as does that of Captain Nevill.⁴¹

There seems little likelihood of uncovering further evidence of this matter in British records. Bailey would not have confided in MacDonald, with whom he was in dispute, and certainly not with Yatung's other European resident, MacDonald's son-in-law Frank Perry, who, much to Bailey's annoyance, reported events in Tibet to the *Daily Mail*. There were other British officials in Tibet at the time; apart from Ludlow, there was a Captain J. E. Cobbett in command of the Gyantse Trade Agent's Escort, and a Medical Officer,

³⁹ Re the Panchen Lama's character, see Lamb, A., *The McMahan*, pp. 18–19.

⁴⁰ With the Panchen Lama fleeing into exile after tax-demands from Lhasa, there was considerable ill-feeling towards Lhasa there.

⁴¹ Bailey to India, 18 July 1925, & 4–6 October 1925, L/P&S/10/1088–2679, OIC; Goldstein, *A History*, pp. 126–30.

Major J. H. Hislop M.C., who accompanied Bailey to Lhasa. Hislop, a Scot, later served at the Lhasa Mission in the 1940s, where it was said that he had “survived drinking more at high altitude that was previously thought possible”.⁴² But neither officer appears to have left any record of their time in Tibet. The same applies to the Gyantse Head Clerk, Henry Martin (who spent more time in Tibet than any other European in history), and to the telegraph and communication personnel.

British [and perhaps even Tibetan] interests today are best served by maintaining that the British officials who dealt with Tibet worked in conjunction with the Dalai Lama’s Government, with the result that the 13th Dalai Lama has been seen as a supporter of the British. But each power structure, British, Tibetan, and Chinese, sought to promote its own interests. It was not until after the Dalai Lama came under Charles Bell’s influence during his exile in India that the Tibet cadre supported the Dalai Lama as the leader of Tibet, and the Tibet cadre’s view was not accepted by their Government until the Dalai Lama had returned to Tibet and regained power in 1913.

When the Dalai Lama came to be seen as unwilling or unable to follow British “advice”, it appears that Bailey tried to establish an alternative leader who would follow British advice. It was only because the Tibet cadre were prevented by their Government from openly carrying through “forward” policies in Tibet, and because they could not find alternatives to the leadership of the Dalai Lama, that they had to continue to deal with the existing Tibetan ruling structure. The “men on the spot” were prepared to support an alternative ruler to the Dalai Lama, and they were only prepared to support the Dalai Lama as long as he served their interests, or when there was no alternative. Studies of the period which do not recognise this *realpolitik* have tended to take Bailey’s denials at face-value.

But the events of this period gave the Tibet cadre a greater understanding of the Tibetans. They did not make the mistake again of allying with a faction of Tibetan society at the expense of others, and in the 1930s and 40s they greatly expanded their range of contacts in Tibet. As Richardson later wrote “descriptions of this or that official . . . as ‘pro-British’, [or] ‘pro-Chinese’ [are] too facile. The only thing the Tibetans have been ‘pro’ is the preservation of their Religious State”.⁴³ Following the events of 1924, the Tibet cadre had to be content to deal with the Dalai Lama and the traditional Tibetan Government.

⁴² Diary entry of F. P. Mainprice, 15–19 October 1943, Mainprice papers, Cambridge South Asia Library.

⁴³ H. Richardson, *Tibet*, p. 129.