

The President then called upon Sir Francis Younghusband, Lord Lugard, Sir Martin Conway, Sir Halford Mackinder, and Mr. Wordie in this order.

THE MUZTAGH PASS IN 1887

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THE Muztagh Pass is a pass across the main watershed between India and Central Asia. On the one side the glaciers at its base flow down towards India, and the water from them eventually reaches the Indus and flows into the Arabian Sea; and on the other they flow into the Yarkand River and eventually lose themselves in the sands of the Gobi Desert. It also stands in a position almost on the direct line between Yarkand (the starting-point of the caravans which make for India from Central Asia) and Srinagar in Kashmir, the point of their arrival. But the caravans instead of using the Muztagh Pass have for centuries—perhaps thousands of years—made use of the more circuitous route by the Karakoram Pass to the east.

Why have they done this? Why have they not used the more direct pass? For long it had been known that some people used the Muztagh Pass. It was marked on old maps, and old travellers mentioned it. Was it still used, and of what value was it for trading purposes—and therefore for military purposes? These were the questions I was asked to answer in 1887. I had then just arrived in Yarkand on a journey from Peking to India. I had been preceded a month before by Colonel Mark Bell, the then head of the Intelligence Department in India. He had to travel by the usual caravan route over the Karakoram Pass, as he had heard there was too much water at that season—August—in the rivers on the way to the Muztagh Pass. But he asked me to try the Muztagh Pass.

This was an enterprise well after my own heart. But I had had no experience of mountaineering, and had no Alpine equipment—not even a pair of nailed boots, still less an ice-axe. And I had no money. I had already travelled nearly 3000 miles across the Desert of Gobi and the plains of Turkistan. And now I was asked to cross the Himalaya by an unknown pass. It was just the kind of call I liked. Inexperienced though I was I had the advantage of youth, and Asiatics love to follow a young man. They like to take charge of him, yet feel that he is there to lead them when the crisis comes. Colonel Bell had sent back to help me an ideal caravan leader—Muhammad Isa—who, seventeen years later, accompanied me to Lhasa and afterwards died with Sven Hedin in Tibet. Indian merchants in Yarkand confidently lent me money on the security of a note from me to a banker in Kashmir. They and Muhammad Isa got together a number of ponies and the necessary supplies and, most important of all, got a man named Wali, who had crossed the pass twenty-five years before, to act as a guide. Since then the pass had fallen into disuse, but Wali was confident he could find the way.

So on 8 September 1887 with eight men and thirteen ponies I left Yarkand. Except the Chinese servant, Liusan, who had come the whole way from Peking with me, all the men were from the Indian side of the Himalaya and three had

been captured by those Hunza raiders who then used to infest the trade route and against whom we had to be on our guard. After crossing the Aghil range and the Shaksgam river, both of which were hitherto unknown, we came to the glacier which descends from the Muztagh Pass. I had never seen a glacier before and was amazed at the sight of this great river of solid ice a couple of hundred feet thick filling the valley-bottom. How we ascended this glacier and eventually crossed the pass I will now describe by quoting from the letter I wrote to my father on my arrival at Skardu on the Kashmir side. I wrote:

“Since my guide had crossed, an immense glacier had descended completely blocking up the valley with ice and immense boulders. Over this for three days I dragged my horses. Twice I gave it up and ordered the horses to go round by Ladakh while I went on with a few men; and twice I renewed the struggle till I got them on to the smooth snow on the high part of the mountain. It was terribly hard work. All day long from daybreak till after dark I was on my legs, first exploring ahead, then returning and bringing on the party; and at the great elevation I was, as one gets, very exhausted—and at night I lay on the ground in the open very warmly wrapped up in sheepskin, as the Kanjuti (Hunza) robbers are said to have a nasty habit of letting the tent down on top of you when you are asleep at night inside.

“On the third day of the ascent proper I sent two men on ahead to report on the pass. They returned at night to say that the pass which used to be practical for horses was now quite impassable through ice having collected, and that the only thing now was to go by the other pass (there are two separate passes—the real Muztagh Pass, and another, 10 miles distant, which is the one that had been practicable for horses) and bring back a number of men from the upper valleys of the district to make a road for the horses.

“So on the next day, September 28, I set out to explore the pass, leaving three men with the horses and baggage. This pass is over the main axis of the Himalaya . . . so we might expect something of a pass, and it is one of the highest and most difficult in the Himalaya. The ascent was easy enough over smooth snow, but we went very slowly on account of the difficulty of breathing. On reaching the summit we looked about for a way down, but there was nothing but a sheer precipice and great blocks of ice broken and tumbled about in such a way as to be quite impracticable. I freely confess that I myself could never have attempted the descent, and that I—an Englishman—was afraid to go first. Luckily my guides were better plucked than myself, and, tying a rope round the leading man’s waist, the rest of us hung on to the end while he hewed steps across the ice slope which led down to the precipice.

“Step by step we advanced across it, all the time facing the precipice and knowing that if we slipped—and the ice was very slippery—we should roll down the icy slope and over the precipice into eternity. Halfway across my Ladakhi servant (Muhammad Isa), whom Colonel Bell had sent to me as a man thoroughly acquainted with Himalaya travel, turned back, saying he was trembling all over and could not face the precipice. It rather upset me, seeing a born hill-man, who had travelled in nearly every part of the Himalayas, so affected, but I pretended not to care a bit and laughed it off *pour encourager les autres*, as the thing had to be done. After a time—and a very nasty time it

was—we reached *terra firma* in the shape of a large projecting ledge of rock, and from there began the descent of the precipice.

“The icy slope was a perfect joke to this. We let ourselves down very gradually from any little ledge and projecting piece of rock. On getting some way down I heard my Ladakhi servant appealing to me from above. He had mustered up courage to cross the icy slope and descended the precipice for a few steps, and was now squatting on a rock salaaming profusely to me with both hands and saying he dare not move another step and that he would go back and take my horses round by the Ladakh road. So I sent him back.

“For six hours we descended the precipice, partly rock and partly icy slope, and when I reached the bottom and looked back it seemed utterly impossible that any man could have come down such a place. For several hours after we trudged on in the moonlight over snow with crevasses every 50 yards or so. Often we fell in, but had no accident. At last, late at night, we reached a dry spot, and I spread my rugs behind a rock while one of the men made a small fire of some dry grass and a couple of alpenstocks to cook some tea. After taking some biscuits with the tea I rolled myself up in the sheepskin and slept as soundly as I ever did.”

Such is the account I wrote at the time of the crossing of the Muztagh Pass. I should note that we had no ice-axes but only sticks with a metal point at the end, and that I, like all the men, wore only the native boots, which were really leather stockings—good on rocks but most dangerous on ice. Three days after crossing the pass we reached Askole, the first village on the Indian side, and from there sent back supplies to the party left behind. And the latter, including my Chinese servant, eventually reached India by the Karakoram Pass. That these Askole men should have been able to cross and recross the pass was indeed a remarkable performance.

Fifteen years later the Muztagh Pass was climbed by the German, Ferber; and last year the Duke of Spoleto's party crossed it on their way to the Shaksgam Valley. From the photograph which first Ferber and then the Duke of Spoleto brought back it is evident that the ice has been much advancing of recent years. When I crossed it forty-three years ago there was much more ice on it than when it was in use thirty or forty years before. In Ferber's time there was more ice than in mine. And last year there was more ice than in Ferber's time. In old days there was probably quite a feasible way up the ravine to the col. Then ice came down on to the col and flowed over more and more into the ravine.

I had no hesitation in reporting to my chief that it was impracticable for military purposes, which was all I was concerned about. But it obviously is quite a feasible way for properly equipped mountaineering expeditions.