

BEYOND BOKHARA

*The Life of William Moorcroft
Asian Explorer and Pioneer Veterinary Surgeon
1767–1825*

GARRY ALDER

Low Price Publications

Delhi-110052

Copyright © Garry Alder 1985

All rights reserved

First Published in Great Britain in 1985
by Century Publishing Co. Ltd.
Portland House,
12-13, Greek St., London W1V 5LE

Second Edition Published with New Introduction and Postscript 2012

ISBN 13: 978-81-7536-545-2

ISBN 10: 81-7536-545-5

Published by
Low Price Publications
A-6, Nimri Commercial Centre,
Ashok Vihar Phase-IV, Delhi-110052
Phone: +91-11-27302453 Fax: +91-11-47061936
e-mail: info@Lppindia.com
website: www.Lppindia.com

Printed at
D K Fine Art Press P Ltd., Delhi-110052

No part of this book may be reproduced, stored in or introduced into a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means (electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise), without the prior written permission of the above mentioned publisher of this book.

PRINTED IN INDIA

POSTSCRIPT TO CHAPTER 23

When Fathers Huc and Gabet first stumbled upon evidence in Lhasa in 1846 that an Englishman named Moorcroft had recently lived there in disguise for twelve years, they had never heard his name before. Had they known then that Moorcroft was generally believed to have died in Northern Afghanistan twenty-one years earlier, they might have probed the story more deeply. As it was, they naturally believed what they were told by a number of credible and high-ranking informants. They did not even question the evidence of the Kashmiri servant, Nisan, who had apparently worked for, and travelled with, Moorcroft for at least twelve years without once suspecting his assumed Kashmiri identity was bogus. It was only later and far from Lhasa, when they were able to check the European printed sources, that the puzzling implications of their discovery became apparent. As Father Huc put it,

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?

How indeed? The two versions are clearly incompatible as they stand yet both are plausible enough to be taken seriously. It is a pity that both "deaths" occurred in remote places and without the benefit of reliable eye-witness accounts but the result is a genuine and tantalizing mystery. Until more evidence comes to light, the best that the historian can do is attempt a credible reinterpretation of one of the versions in order to maintain the other. Thirty years ago, puzzling over the superficial plausibility of Huc's account and yet its incompatibility with virtually all of the other contemporary and later evidence, I concluded that the earlier death had really happened and that the later Tibetan "death" was occasioned by mistaken identity. My American friend and correspondent, Dan Jantzen, on the other hand, believes that the Tibetan story is in all essentials true. He accounts for the earlier "death" in Afghanistan as a deliberate fabrication so successful that it fooled his contemporaries and all who followed.

His starting point is the cryptic official letter Moorcroft wrote on the 10th June 1825 just before he set out from Bokhara (above p.356). Jantzen believes, with some justification, that my account does not properly explain it. First, there is the unexplained hint that Moorcroft was planning to separate himself from his party on “one if not two” mysterious individual ventures so secret and dangerous that they could not be committed to paper. The excursion to Andkhoi could perhaps qualify as one of these ventures but it would only take three weeks to complete. It does not begin to explain the hint, which can be read into Moorcroft’s words, that he had something in mind so ambitious that the rest of his party might reach India before he could rejoin them. Jantzen believes that the separation from the main party at Balkh, ostensibly to visit Andkhoi, was actually an essential part of the preparation for this longer trip. Moorcroft, he believes, deliberately removed himself from so many witnesses among his party at Balkh in order to fabricate his own death at or near Andkhoi and then travel light on his dangerous separate mission under an assumed identity. But what could that separate and risky mission have been? It seemed hardly likely, as Jantzen first believed, that it was to travel and make maps in Tibet. Moorcroft had already made a foray into that empty country in 1812 and he now knew that Tibet offered neither quality horses nor significant opportunities for British trade. (The same argument, it could be said, might be used to cast doubt on the idea that Moorcroft would ever want to spend twelve years there before returning to his friends and family).

Jantzen’s eureka moment came while on a journey along the Wakhan corridor in north-eastern Afghanistan in the summer of 2007. It suddenly occurred to him that “when Moorcroft started, he was not going to Tibet at all, but rather was going to Yarkand in disguise to check the last location where there might still be the horses he was searching for” (*e mail of 13 December 2008*). The plan would have been to winter in Chinese Turkestan and then return across the Karakoram to Ladakh when the passes were open, rejoin his party in the plains and then return with them to British territory. This interesting possibility certainly provides a credible motive for a separate high-risk venture. Moorcroft had spent much of his two-year stay in Ladakh trying by every available means to secure permission from the Chinese to travel to Yarkand and he had been bitterly disappointed when Kashmiri intrigues and Chinese opposition finally defeated him. He had wanted to explore the possibilities of purchasing horses there but Yarkand also offered a safer route to Bokhara across the empty Pamirs into the upper Oxus valley, avoiding the hazards of the north-west frontier and the turbulence in Afghanistan. There were also Moorcroft’s very real concerns about Russia’s commercial and strategic interest in the approaches to India from this direction, as personified by the mysterious Agha Mehdi. So, there were certainly reasons enough to tempt him to one last-ditch attempt to make that journey in the reverse direction, unencumbered by his large party and in disguise.

This, Jantzen believes, explains the extraordinary and risky plot to leave his party, fabricate his own death well away from prying eyes, acquire a substitute (perhaps animal) corpse for burial in his place and then travel light in the guise of a Kashmiri trader eastwards across the Pamirs to Yarkand, probably accompanied by the man Nisan whom Huc and Gabet met twenty-one years later in Lhasa.

Jantzen believes that the risks of such a plan were so great that nothing could be committed to paper for fear of disclosure if the correspondence fell into the wrong hands. Hence the cryptic allusions in the letter from Bokhara. Only the trusted Trebeck would have been party to the plot when Moorcroft set out from Balkh two and a half months later. Later still, of course, at least one of the servants who accompanied him must also have been made privy to it. In practice and despite the risks, the plan worked perfectly. When the unrecognisable substitute corpse was brought back to Balkh along with news of Moorcroft's death, Trebeck could assume that his friend was safely on his way. Later on, as his own health deteriorated and the predators closed in on his beleaguered party, he was faced with an acute dilemma. He could either reveal the truth and put his absent friend in serious danger or he could maintain the fiction a little longer. On the 6 September 1825 he committed the lie to paper in a formal letter to Wade. Moorcroft, he said, was dead. Not long afterwards so was he and the truth died with him.

Jantzen imagines what might have happened next:

Word of events like the demise of Moorcroft's caravan travel slowly over the caravan routes, but the news does get through. We can imagine Moorcroft and the few servants travelling with him hearing about the various deaths and misfortunes from other caravans while in Yarkand or beyond. For Moorcroft, unable to do anything to help his friends, it might have seemed the last straw. His children were in England for schooling, his friends and caravan were either dead or lost, his goods ... seized, he was disgraced and had lost his job in India, and he had nothing so show for five years of travel and hardship throughout Central Asia. Might he not at this point have decided to throw in the towel, maintain his disguise and travel on to Tibet with his servant Nisan, and take up a life of semi-retirement, managing a few herds of sheep and goats, and all the while maintaining a diary of his experiences and sketch maps of his travels? Might he then have decided to go to Lhasa, perhaps for just a few months? And then decided to visit some other place for another month or two, and so on and on? Might he also have tired of this after twelve years in Tibet, and decided at the age of 73 [actually 71] to return to India via Western Tibet and Ladakh, with the intention of sharing his vast wealth of

information on Tibet and Central Asia with the Indian government, and again pressing the government to exert itself in developing and governing the Himalayan areas north of the Indian border? And might he have been killed by bandits as he neared the Ladakh border, unable at his advanced age to pull off one last escape from the myriad dangers he had always managed to face down so successfully in the past? Only firm evidence will answer these questions but surely the case can be made for the need to search for the evidence? (*A revised theory on why William Moorcroft might have decided to fake his own death at Andkhoi, (unpublished paper, 19 September 2007).*)

Few would disagree with that at least.

On re-reading the Tibetan account, I have been struck by the flimsiness of the link so confidently made at the time between the events described and Moorcroft himself. It rested only on papers which the two French priests were never shown and it was established long before they reached Lhasa. One wonders how it could have been made at all since, it seems, nobody in Lhasa at the time could speak or read English. Perhaps the inability to read the papers is the only reason why Moorcroft is involved at all. One can easily imagine the Tibetan and Chinese authorities, both very alarmed at British expansion in the plains beyond the Himalayas and staring at incomprehensible documents in an unintelligible foreign script, simply assumed that they must have been the work of the only Englishman they knew who had not only made at least one unauthorised visit to Tibet in disguise but who, more recently, had been prowling about in the border region with Ladakh and trying to gain access to Chinese Turkestan. Whoever it was who first identified the dead map-maker as Moorcroft and on what evidence is unknown, but it would obviously not have been the Kashmiri servant, Nisan. He admitted to Huc and Gabet that he had been so alarmed by the uproar when his former master's suspicious map-making activities and European identity came to light, that he destroyed a testimonial he had been given for fear of being compromised. His fear is understandable. The innocence he asserted rested on the fairly implausible claim that he, a Kashmiri Muslim who had been travelling with and working for his pretended Kashmiri Muslim master for twelve years, had never once suspected that his identity was false and reported those suspicions to the authorities. Jantzen, as has been seen, believes that Nisan was lying and was concealing his complicity in the deception from the beginning. It seems to me at least equally possible that Nisan was telling the truth. He had no reason to suspect the authenticity of his Kashmiri master because he was indeed a Kashmiri and not a disguised Englishman at all.

However, even if Jantzen is right about Nisan, there remain other formidable objections to his belief that the man murdered in Tibet was indeed William Moorcroft. In the last of his letters to survive, written to Wade only the day before he set out for Andkhoi, Moorcroft stated clearly that the venture would

only take about three weeks after which he would rejoin his party and set out for India. Historical explanation becomes very fragile indeed if we are to step off the solid ground of the evidence before us. However, accepting that Moorcroft was prepared to lie quite deliberately in his official correspondence, there still remain the considerable practical difficulties in a remote, fever-ridden and hostile environment like Northern Afghanistan of successfully faking a foreigner's death, finding a credible substitute corpse for burial, and then securing total silence from all those who must inevitably have been party to the deception. But even swallowing all these implausibilities and assuming that he got safely all the way to Tibet disguised as a Kashmiri Muslim, there were all the other people who would have to be deceived during his thirteen years on the road and in and around Lhasa. This would have been particularly difficult in the case of his fellow-countrymen, the numerous Kashmiri traders in Lhasa and their influential local representative. The bulk of their trade was to and from Ladakh and this raises another difficulty. According to the two French priests, the man supposed to be Moorcroft had arrived in disguise from Ladakh with Nisan in 1826. Yet only a year or two earlier, Moorcroft had lived a high-profile life at the capital of Ladakh for two full years, practising his medicine, dabbling in politics and travelling extensively. He had also come into public collision with the commercial interests of the considerable Kashmiri trading community there. If there was one place in all of the borderlands of India where Moorcroft's disguise was most likely to have been penetrated, it was Ladakh. So why he would have chosen to enter Tibet from that direction after leaving Yarkand and Kashgar, when a much safer and less populous route direct to Lhasa was available, is not easy to explain. For these and the reasons already given in Chapter 23, I remain unconvinced by Jantzen's theory. It seems to me much easier to believe that Trebeck was expressing no more than the simple truth - Moorcroft died while absent from his party at Andkhoi in late August 1825.

Although Dan Jantzen and I disagree about the date, place and manner of Moorcroft's death, we are fully agreed that the search for evidence to clarify the events reported by the French priests is well worth some effort. For, if it can be established that a perceptive and reliable observer like Moorcroft had really spent twelve years in closed Tibet, then his journal and maps would constitute an invaluable new source of information. Moreover, towards the end of those years in Tibet, the growing British alarm at Russia's apparent ambitions in Central Asia, which Moorcroft had been almost the first to articulate, was about to precipitate the first of the tragic European interventions in Afghanistan which continue to this day. Perhaps indeed it was those gathering war clouds down in the plains in 1838 which finally persuaded the patriotic Moorcroft to end his self-imposed exile on the Tibetan plateau and hurry to put his unique information and Afghan experience at the disposal of the British authorities.

Jantzen's determination to get to the bottom of the French account deserves every encouragement. He has already committed considerable time and effort to the task - searching for a tell-tale sign of Moorcroft's clandestine visit to Yarkand and, more realistically, checking with the help of local scholars for any confirming Tibetan and Chinese documents in the Lhasa, Beijing and Taipei archives, I wish him well for it will not be easy. Indeed further progress may have to wait until Chinese sensitivities about outside interference, especially in regard to her contentious policies in Tibet, have been overcome. In the meantime, we can enjoy the luxury of two conflicting theories of how and when Moorcroft died. About his remarkable life and its enduring significance, however, there is no significant conflict at all.