

## Standing Alone: William Moorcroft Plays the Great Game, 1808–1825

I shall for a time probably stand alone but this point must after a period force itself on the attention of the Government. (William Moorcroft)<sup>1</sup>

On 6 November 1833 a short and slight lieutenant of the Honourable East India Company's Bombay army arrived in London.<sup>2</sup> In the following months he became the most celebrated young man in the city and, for a time, Britain's most widely discussed and celebrated traveller.<sup>3</sup> He met and captivated the great and the famous; spent Christmas Eve closeted with King William IV at Brighton; went on to a house party at Bowood where he met both the future Governor-General of India, Lord Auckland, and the future Queen; lectured widely; and was elected to mem-

The research behind this article has been done at intervals over many years in preparation for a forthcoming biography of William Moorcroft. It has been supported at different times with generous financial help by the British Academy, the British Council, the Imperial Relations Trust, the Wellcome Trust, and the Research Board of the University of Reading. To all of these bodies, and to the staffs of the India Office Library and Records in London and the National Archives of India at New Delhi, I am pleased to acknowledge my great debt. The principal archival source for this article is the voluminous Moorcroft mss. at the I[ndia] O[ffice] L[ibrary], cited throughout as Eur[opean] M[anu]s[cript]s followed by the reference number. Other manuscript sources are cited in full as they occur.

- 1 Moorcroft to Harewood, [17 July 1823], 10L Eur. MSS. D.264, fo. 191.
- 2 Tucker to Bentinck, 7 Nov. 1833, [University of Nottingham], Bentinck mss. PwJf/2131a, reprinted in *The Correspondence of Lord William Bentinck*, ed. C.H. Philips (2 vols., Oxford, 1977), II.1127.
- 3 The most interesting accounts of this heady period are in Burnes's own letters to the Governor-General of 30 Dec. 1833, 3 May 1834, and 14 July 1834, Bentinck mss. 2867/v, 2867/xv, and PwJf/518. See also G. Buist, *Memoir of Sir Alexander Burnes* (Edinburgh, 1851), pp. 17–23; J. Kaye, *Lives of Indian Officers* (2 vols., London, 1904), II.35–43; J. Lunt, *Bokhara Burnes* (London, 1969), pp. 166–72; and W.A. Laurie, *Memoir of James Burnes, KH, FRS* (Edinburgh, 1851), pp. 6–8.

## William Moorcroft Plays the Great Game

bership of learned societies both in England and abroad. Early in 1834 the three-volume account of his travels<sup>4</sup> was virtually sold out on publication day and was subsequently reprinted and translated into French and German. The reception of the work by the great literary and geographical reviews of Europe was one of unanimous and almost unqualified enthusiasm. It was all very similar to the kind of welcome given to returning astronauts in the early days of space travel.<sup>5</sup> But, if distance be measured by the time taken to cross space, this young man had been to places much more inaccessible and remote than the moon and vastly more interesting. He had just returned from an epic thirteen-month journey up the Indus, across Afghanistan to Bokhara, and back to India by way of Persia; almost the first European to visit these fabled lands since the Macedonians of Alexander the Great two thousand years earlier. He, too, was called Alexander – Alexander Burnes.

Launched high by his public success in five short years, the young Bombay subaltern turned into Sir Alexander Burnes, FRS, political adviser and second only to the Foreign Secretary of all India on the mission to Shah Shuja, following that ruler's successful restoration to power at Kabul by an invading British army in 1839. Burnes, until his death at the hands of an Afghan mob in November 1841, was the most celebrated of all the British players of what came to be called the Great Game in Asia. That useful and evocative term has recently been so overstretched that it is in danger of losing its capacity to bear any useful weight at all.<sup>6</sup> It is certainly in need of redefinition. But if it is restricted, as it surely ought to be, to its nineteenth-century usage then it describes the great contest which dominated most of that century: the struggle between Britain and Russia for ascendancy in Central Asia. The first great phase of official activity on the British side in that contest certainly began in 1830, and it can be said that the Great Game as defined above 'began' in that year.<sup>7</sup> But such a statement implies that the earlier manifestations of Britain's concern at Russia's presumed ambitions in Central Asia and her attempts to meet them

4 A. Burnes, *Travels into Bokhara* (3 vols., London, 1834). See *Bombay Times*, 1 Jan. 1842, p. 4.

5 Lunt, *Bokhara Burnes*, p. 166.

6 D. Gillard, *The Struggle for Asia 1828–1941* (London, 1977) applies it to the nineteenth-century Anglo-Russian struggle in the whole of Eurasia and uses it (p. 190) to describe Anglo-American rivalry in North America as well; O. Clubb, *China and Russia: The 'Great Game'* (London, 1971), pp. 520–1 applies it to contemporary conflicts between Russia, China, and the United States in Asia as well as to nineteenth-century Central Asia and the whole period of Sino-Russian conflict in Asia as far back as the Mongols.

7 As stated by E. Ingram, 'The Rules of the Game: A Commentary on the Defence of British India, 1798–1829', *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, III (1974–5), 257 and assumed by this special number of *The International History Review*.

were somehow different in kind as well as in degree, a sort of 'preview'<sup>8</sup> to the Game rather than the Game itself. It is in many ways more logical to date the true beginning of the Great Game in July 1807, when Napoleon met Tsar Alexander at Tilsit and discussed with him a joint Franco-Russian invasion of India.<sup>9</sup> There had, of course, been both French and Russian invasion schemes (or attempts) even earlier than this, but it was the repercussions of Tilsit which in 1808 called forth the first serious British military and diplomatic response.<sup>10</sup> Thereafter, there was no serious or widespread consideration of the problem on the British side until the events of 1829 launched that first classic phase of the Game which brought the young Alexander Burnes to such rapid fame and such a violent death.<sup>11</sup>

It is a curious and ironic fact that, when Burnes reached London at the end of 1833, he had in his luggage some of the documents upon which this article is based, the papers of another East India Company servant who in his late fifties had not only beaten the young Burnes to Bokhara but had anticipated many of his geo-political views as well. To his credit, Burnes never tried to deny or obscure the priority of William Moorcroft's achievements. On the contrary, he spoke and wrote generously about his predecessor whenever he could. It was Burnes who in December 1833 put before the British public the first authenticated account of Moorcroft's lonely death in the tawny wastes of northern Afghanistan, and he urged that an account of Moorcroft's travels, based on the papers he had brought to London, should be published.<sup>12</sup> His own book is scattered with references to 'poor' Moorcroft.<sup>13</sup> Yet the fact remains that while 'Bokhara' Burnes became a legend in his own lifetime, the man who had beaten him there remained a shadowy figure and has been largely forgotten ever since. Despite this neglect, Moorcroft viewed and played the Great Game in the teens and early twenties of the century exactly as Burnes and the other well-known figures viewed and played it later on.

8 As in E. Ingram's four-part article 'A Preview of the Great Game in Asia', *Middle Eastern Studies*, ix (1973), 3-18, 157-74, 296-314, x (1974), 15-35.

9 As does M. Edwardes in *Playing the Great Game: A Victorian Cold War* (London, 1975), pp. viii, 1.

10 These earlier developments are surveyed in G. Alder, 'Britain and the Defence of India: The Origins of the Problem, 1798-1815,' *Journal of Asian History*, vi (1972), 25-40 and E. Ingram, 'The Defence of British India', *Journal of Indian History*, XLVIII (1970), 565-84, XLIX (1971), 57-78.

11 The best modern published account of the 1830s crisis on the British side is (despite its misleadingly restricted title) J. Norris, *The First Afghan War, 1838-42* (Cambridge, 1967). There is also E. Ingram, *The Beginning of the Great Game in Asia, 1828-34* (Oxford, 1979). Still sadly unpublished is the excellent M. Yapp, 'British Policy in Central Asia, 1830-43' (PhD, London, 1959).

12 *Journal of Belles Lettres*, 14 Dec. 1833.

13 Burnes, *Travels*, I. 192, 209-12, 231, 233-4, 236, 243-4, 356.

## William Moorcroft Plays the Great Game

Moorcroft was not an obvious recruit to the Great Game. He was neither soldier, surveyor, nor 'political,' unlike Burnes, who was all three. Born a bastard in 1766 or 1767, he was brought up on the Lancashire estate of his grandfather, Richard Moorcroft, and from him and his wealthy friends William acquired the deep love of scientific farming which he never lost. Indeed, had his mother not later married and had more children, he would probably have spent his life farming the black loam of his grandfather's lands round his native Ormskirk, ending up under a memorial stone in the floor of the church there like so many other Moorcrofts before him. As it was, he was forced to seek his own living. His first choice was surgery, of which he proved to be an outstanding pupil, and then when his apprenticeship at Liverpool Infirmary was finished, he took up what in Britain was the novel study of scientific animal medicine. His grandfather's money financed a year's training at the veterinary college at Lyons in 1790 and two years later helped to established him at the western end of London's Oxford Street as Britain's first trained and qualified veterinary surgeon.<sup>14</sup>

Moorcroft's practice, almost exclusively concerned with the horse, flourished mightily. Many of the great and the famous from the King downwards became his clients and his friends,<sup>15</sup> and he was soon recognized as a particular authority on the various problems of equine lameness.<sup>16</sup> Two eminent British historians have recently expressed surprise at the lack of attention paid by historians to the horse, considering the huge social, economic, and military importance of that animal in the age prior to the internal combustion engine.<sup>17</sup> Certainly in the turbulent period of almost unbroken war at the end of the eighteenth century, the

14 The principal (and very inadequate) published source of information on Moorcroft's life in England is H. Wilson's preface to Vol. 1 of W. Moorcroft and G. Trebeck, *Travels in the Himalayan Provinces of Hindustan and the Panjab* (2 vols., London, 1841). Some valuable additional material is in an unpublished article by J. Barber-Lomax, 'Moorcroft's Life in England', read before the Veterinary History Society in April 1966. My debt to Mr Barber-Lomax for generously sharing the results of his work on Moorcroft over many years is substantial. I have embodied much entirely new matter on Moorcroft's early life in the opening chapters of the forthcoming Moorcroft biography.

15 The list is a long and very impressive one. One contemporary writer even held him up as an example of the way respectable veterinary practice could provide an entrée into high society and a high salary. J. Lawrence, *A Philosophical and Practical Treatise on Horses* (2 vols., London, 1796-8), II. 244.

16 See, for example, S. Freeman, *Observations on the Mechanism of the Horses's Foot* (London, 1796), p. 31n. The best account of Moorcroft's veterinary work is F. Smith, *The Early History of Veterinary Literature and Its British Development* (3 vols., London, 1919-33), III. 3-13.

17 J. Plumb, *The Commercialisation of Leisure in Eighteenth Century England* (Stenton Lecture, Reading, 1973), p. 16n; J. Thirsk, *Horses in Early Modern England: For Service, for Pleasure, for Power* (Stenton Lecture, Reading, 1978), p. 5.

problem of maintaining a supply of suitable cavalry horses was an urgent matter of national defence. Several of Moorcroft's friends and acquaintances were deeply involved in this question and so indeed was the infant London Veterinary College at which, for a brief period in the early months of 1794, Moorcroft was both Professor and Principal.<sup>18</sup> He was, however, never a professional soldier, although the great invasion scare of 1803 persuaded him to don the gorgeous toy soldier uniform of one of London's most prestigious volunteer cavalry regiments.<sup>19</sup> He remained an active and enthusiastic member, attending for training right down to his departure for India, at the age of about forty, in May 1808. As it happened, that great upheaval in his life was also directly associated with military defence.

Asia's size, climate, and terrain have always put a high premium on the mobility, durability, and shock effect of the massed mounted warrior. For the East India Company at the end of the eighteenth century he was coming to be essential. With its lines of communication in India constantly extending, its enemies numerous and strong in cavalry, and with reinforcements half a world and half a year away, the Company in India had now to strive for the quick victory in a single campaign, preferably in the heart of an enemy's territory. And for this, the power and mobility of the mounted cavalry trooper assisted by horse artillery was crucial.<sup>20</sup> The cavalry and artillery horse was the tank, jeep, armoured car, and lorry of its day, and the army which could not count on adequate and reliable supplies of this essential was likely to find itself in serious trouble. In the Mysore War of 1790–2, Colonel John Floyd, later one of Moorcroft's acquaintances in London, was forced to destroy over nine hundred of his cavalry horses after a forty-two day march without proper rest.<sup>21</sup> The quality of horse required was very high indeed. The dragoon horse had to carry over 2¼ cwt (115 kilograms) and the artillery horse might have 2 cwt

18 L.P. Pugh, *From Farriery to Veterinary Medicine, 1785–95* (Cambridge, 1962), p. 39 *et seq.*; F. Smith, *Veterinary Literature*, III, 14–18; and *A History of the Royal Army Veterinary Corps, 1796–1919* (London, 1927), p. 36 *et seq.*

19 This was the Westminster Volunteer Cavalry. Its Treasurer's Accounts, Muster Roll, Minute Book, and Orderly Book for this period have all survived and are now in the care of The Royal Green Jackets Territorial and Volunteer Trust, Davies Street, London. I am very grateful to Col. H. Croom-Johnson for his willingness to put these uncatalogued volumes at my disposal. Notes from earlier (now missing) volumes exist in the Benson Freeman Papers at the Army Museum, Ogilby Trust in Whitehall.

20 For these facts of Indian life, see Lt W. Fraser to Lord Teignmouth, 14 Sept. 1793, N[ational] A[rchives] of I[ndia], India M[ilitary] P[roceedings], 28 May 1794, no. 2 and Minute by Col. J. Murray, 10 May 1794, *ibid.*, 2 June 1794, no. 14.

21 Moorcroft to Board [of Superintendence for Improving the Breed of Cattle], 8 Sept. 1811, NAI India/MP, 8 Oct. 1811, no. 92.

## William Moorcroft Plays the Great Game

(102 kilograms) on his back as well as 4½ cwt (229 kilograms) to pull as his share of the weight of a twelve-pounder gun and limber.<sup>22</sup>

As long as the cavalry and artillery establishments in India were small, the problem of horse supply was not an acute one. In 1793, for example, the Bengal cavalry establishment was no more than 500 horses. But the pressures for growth were irresistible and by 1808, when Moorcroft reached India, the Bengal cavalry had increased twelve times and the *annual* requirement was greater than the *total* establishment fifteen years earlier. And, unfortunately, almost no suitable animals were bred in the Company's territories. They had to be obtained from a dwindling supply far to the north and brought back across disturbed territories which were liable to be closed at a moment's notice in the event of a major war. It is not surprising that the 1790s saw the first attempt to raise an internal supply of suitable animals in both Madras and Bengal. The Bengal stud at Pusa near Patna grew enormously in the years after 1795, both physically and in terms of the capital sunk into it, but unfortunately its production of cavalry horses did not grow at anything like the same rate. In 1805, after the investment of ten years and ten lakhs of rupees, the stud could produce only thirty-four animals suitable for cavalry use.<sup>23</sup> The prime cause, and there were many, was a dearth of suitable breeding stock and this eventually led the Company in London to take Moorcroft on its payroll, first as consultant and purchasing agent and, from 1803, as part-time superintendent in charge of its newly acquired stud farm near Dagenham in Essex. His success there and the continuing disappointments in Bengal made him the obvious choice to take charge of the Pusa stud when its founder and first superintendent retired in 1808. And thus it was that in the first week of November 1808 Moorcroft arrived in Calcutta, paid his respects to the Governor-General and the members of the Board of Superintendence, and soon afterwards set off up-country to take up his duties at Pusa.

For all the deceptively civilian nature of his job running a large horse-breeding stud and extensive agricultural estate, the military importance of Moorcroft's work as part of Indian defence should not be overlooked. His nominal superiors on the Board were practically all serving soldiers and his correspondence was conducted with the Military Department under the personal oversight of the Commander-in-Chief. A few years later, when the whole breeding project was threatened with abolition, one of its defenders put the matter in a nutshell.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>22</sup> NAI India/MP, 15 Oct. 1811, no. 78.

<sup>23</sup> The total for the decade was 314, NAI India/MP, 23 Dec. 1814, no. 122.

<sup>24</sup> Memorandum by J. Salmond, 7 Feb. 1816, I[ndia] O[ffice Records] L/Mil/5/431.

The Court of Directors will perhaps be of opinion that nothing short of an almost physical impossibility of ultimate success could justify the rulers of probably the second Empire in the world, estimated by its population, in abandoning a project upon which the safety of that population may, and probably will, at no distant period, entirely depend. For when India, from the Sutledge to the Sea, shall be entirely under British protection, an event which ... cannot be far distant, that immense Empire will have no protection against the predatory hordes of horse from the Punjab, from Afghanistan, or even from Persia or Tartary, except what it shall derive from cavalry, the produce of India itself.

But it was not, of course, simply a matter of protection against *Asiatic* invaders from the north-west. By a curious coincidence, the year Moorcroft reached India was also the year in which Britain's preoccupation with the defence of the sub-continent against a *European* overland invasion really began. The development of that 1808 invasion crisis reveals the central importance of cavalry and cavalry horses in the plans of both attacker and defender. Towards the end of 1807, Brigadier-General Gardane arrived at Teheran, at the head of an impressive French diplomatic and technical mission, with instructions to prepare the way for a French overland invasion of India. He was required to make particular enquiry into the question of 'whether a sufficient number of horses might be found for remounts for the cavalry and artillery.'<sup>25</sup> At about the same time, the first response to this threat both in London and India was an attempt to increase the Indian cavalry and horse artillery establishments,<sup>26</sup> although later the Indian Commander-in-Chief admitted that:

In respect to Cavalry but little strength can be added to present numbers, the difficulty of procuring suitable horses for Europeans being an unfortunate and insuperable obstacle to any great extension of an arm so necessary and so formidable in a country so generally well adapted to its operations.<sup>27</sup>

This perennial difficulty explains why Mountstuart Elphinstone's diplomatic mission to Peshawar in 1808 was directed to make enquiries regarding the availability of horses suitable for cavalry purposes, a matter

<sup>25</sup> J.C. Hurewitz, *The Middle East and North Africa in World Politics* (New Haven, 1975), 1.187.

<sup>26</sup> Secret Committee to Governor-General, 24 Sept. 1807, 10 L/PS/5/541; Governor-General to Secret Committee, with enclosures, 15 Feb. 1808, 10 L/PS/5/31, fo. 303.

<sup>27</sup> C.-in-C. to Edmonstone, 30 Nov. 1809, [National Library of Scotland, Edinburgh] Minto MSS. M/175.

## William Moorcroft Plays the Great Game

of extreme urgency in view of the possibly imminent invasion by a European army.<sup>28</sup>

The shortage of cavalry horses also explains the key role of Moorcroft's work in Indian defence planning. His own considered opinion on the subject after four years at Pusa was not optimistic.

Taking in consideration the diminished numbers and degraded quality of horses raised within Hindustan; observing the general inferiority of the horses admitted in the Cavalry within the latter years, to those of former times; examining the history of the Government Stud; viewing its present state; calculating its future powers by the employment of means within command; and contemplating the possibility of accidents (i.e. outbreaks of epidemic disease); I cannot but see an imperious necessity for taking speedy and vigorous measures to oppose the further diminution of horse resources before the day of positive scarcity shall arrive.<sup>29</sup>

By 'speedy and vigorous measures' Moorcroft meant the acquisition of suitable breeding stock, and, using that as his justification, he embarked on the series of reconnaissance journeys to the north and north-west which from 1811 onwards took him beyond Bengal, beyond the Company's frontiers, beyond the Himalayas, and eventually beyond the Hindu Kush to Bokhara and the deserts of Central Asia. And, by so doing, he became involved willy-nilly in what came to be called the Great Game in Asia.

Moorcroft's first journey, and the first to put his name in the files of the Political Department, was an official reconnaissance across the Company's own and protected north-west territories to discover how far they could provide the large, bony animals the Pusa breeding operation so badly needed.<sup>30</sup> In January 1811 he crossed the *terai* into Nepal, talking horses with General Amar Singh Thapa<sup>31</sup> at Butwal but taking care to anticipate

28 Govt. of India to Elphinstone, 3 Oct. 1808, [India Office Library,] Elphinstone mss., Eur. MSS. F.88, Box 131.

29 Moorcroft to Board, 16 Jan. 1813, NAI India/MP, 13 Feb. 1813, no. 156.

30 No coherent account of this journey exists because Moorcroft reported much of it to the Board in person in Sept. 1811. Even the route he took can only be reconstructed by painstaking detective work in the official records. The principal clues are in Moorcroft's rambling letter to the Board, 9 Oct. 1811, NAI India/MP, 15 Oct. 1811, no. 80.

31 He was the father of Nepal's prime minister and a key figure in the events which launched the Anglo-Nepalese war in 1814. Butwal was where it all began. See J. Pemble, *The Invasion of Nepal: John Company at War* (Oxford, 1971), *passim*. Moorcroft, like nearly everybody else, seems to have confused him with his brother Qaji Amar Singh Thapa, who had led Nepal's military expansion farther west.



criticism in Calcutta by pointing out that the Gurkhas 'are never likely to use horses offensively in the Company's territories.'<sup>32</sup> In February he was a guest of the Nawab Vizier of Oudh at Lucknow; March saw him in conversation with some of the Rohilla chiefs near Bareilly; in April he was at the great Hardwar *mela* on the very edge of the Ganges plain; then in a great sweeping orbit he visited every single cavalry station (except Ludhiana) in the north-west, saw the Mughal splendours at Delhi and Agra, and made a detour across the border into Bundelkhand and examined the stud of the Maratha chief Daulat Rao Sindhia in his vast tented township on the plain outside Gwalior. He then returned down the Ganges to Pusa, eight months and 1,200 miles after he set out. In that time and distance Moorcroft's views about horse-breeding, and probably about the pattern of his life in India, were transformed. It was now clear to him that the horses he needed were not to be had in sufficient quantity anywhere in the great arc of British-dominated territory between the Sutlej and the Ganges delta. The search would therefore have to be extended north and west beyond the red line into the deserts of Rajasthan and the old breeding districts of the south-western Punjab. And if the Board had reservations about its stud superintendent, in his mid-forties and just back from a punishing journey in the hottest part of the year, going off again on an even longer one and already talking of yet others after that,<sup>33</sup> it did not say so. His curious request for surveying equipment was very sensibly turned down, but for the rest his proposals were accepted in full.<sup>34</sup>

The story of how this next journey, an officially approved horse reconnaissance to Rajasthan and the Punjab, was converted by Moorcroft into a thoroughly unofficial foray into western Nepal and Tibet, carried out without permission, has never been properly told.<sup>35</sup> At the start, it even looked as if distant and legendary Bokhara might become the destination. Back at Gwalior early in March 1812, Moorcroft was deep in discussion with the Resident with Sindhia, Richard Strachey.<sup>36</sup> Dick Strachey was as

32 Moorcroft to Board, 9 Oct. 1811, NAI India/MP, 15 Oct. 1811, no. 80.

33 Moorcroft to Board, 1 Jan. 1812, *ibid.*, 10 Feb. 1812, no. 188.

34 Moorcroft to Board, 4 Oct. 1811, *ibid.*, 15 Oct. 1811, no. 86; Vice-President in Council to Board, 15 Oct. 1811, *ibid.*, no. 80.

35 The only account based on the official records is R.H. Phillimore, *Historical Records of the Survey of India* (4 vols., Dehra Dun, 1945-54), II. 80-1, 430-1, but an unfortunate dating error makes it look as though Moorcroft applied for permission to enter Tibet in 1811 and visited the Punjab in 1812. He did neither. There are several descriptive accounts of Moorcroft's Tibetan journey but they rest mainly on the extracts from Moorcroft's now missing journal published in *Asiatick Researches*, XII (1816), 375-534.

36 Information on Strachey is not easy to come by. Most useful perhaps is C.R. Sanders, *The Strachey Family, 1588-1932* (Durham, NC, 1953), pp. 100-7.

## William Moorcroft Plays the Great Game

compulsive and inquisitive a traveller as Moorcroft and at this time much more experienced. He had already served his own apprenticeship in the Great Game on two trans-frontier political missions against the threat of external invasion, once to Persia in 1800 with John Malcolm and again in 1808 to Peshawar with Mountstuart Elphinstone.<sup>37</sup> The burden of his advice to Moorcroft was clear and authoritative. Reliable supplies of horses for cavalry purposes were no longer available in sufficient quantity on this side of the Khyber, nor probably even on this side of the Hindu Kush. But Strachey confirmed, although admittedly from hearsay information, all that Moorcroft had learned the previous year about the superior animals bred north of the Hindu Kush and along the Oxus.<sup>38</sup>

With a doubt cast over his present plans but a tantalizingly wider perspective opening up, Moorcroft left Strachey and pushed on up-country to taste again the hospitality of Charles Metcalfe and his young assistants at the shabby Residency at Delhi. In later life, Metcalfe became the stern and unyielding opponent of all trans-frontier adventure, the archetypal exponent of 'masterly inactivity' a full generation before John Lawrence turned it into a policy. But in 1812 he seems to have been enlisted as an enthusiastic ally in Moorcroft's hungry search for information about the horse resources of the far north-west and he lent his highly intelligent Persian interpreter and secretary, Saiyyid (or Mir) Izzat-Allah, to organize a search for information in the teeming Delhi bazaars below the walls of the Red Fort. Everything confirmed Strachey's view. The once prolific horse-breeding lands of Rajasthan and the western Punjab could never meet the Company's cavalry needs so long as they remained open to the locust sweep of Afghan, Maratha, Pindari, Sikh, and Pathan raiders. The Oxus valley and Bokhara seemed, or could be made to seem, almost the only hope.<sup>39</sup>

But a journey to that remote and fabled land, where probably no Englishman had penetrated since the Tudors, was something even Moorcroft dared not attempt without permission. It seems to have been Metcalfe who suggested instead the idea of sending an intelligent and trustworthy Muslim emissary to reconnoitre the ground and prepare the way for a subsequent journey to Bokhara by Moorcroft himself. And it was

37 On the latter mission he was secretary and, when it was all over, Elphinstone wanted him to remain behind at Delhi to co-ordinate the gathering of information from an extensive intelligence network of native newswriters extending right across Afghanistan as far as Herat. See Elphinstone to Govt of India, 17 May 1810, Elphinstone MSS., Eur. MSS. F.88, Box 61.

38 Moorcroft to Board, 25 Apr. 1812, NAI India/MP, 6 July 1812, no. 148.

39 *Ibid.* See also Moorcroft to Board, 16 Jan. 1813, NAI India/MP, 13 Feb. 1813, no. 156.

certainly Metcalfe, 'with every manly wish to co-operate,'<sup>40</sup> who made available exactly the right man for the job, Mir Izzat-Allah. The Mir seems to have jumped at the chance of visiting the ancient home of his family on full allowance, plus an extra 100 rupees a month paid 'by way of encouragement' from Moorcroft's own pocket.<sup>41</sup> He needed it, for the dangers were considerable, not only from the more obvious hazards of the road but also because the Mir, like Strachey, had been a member of Elphinstone's trans-frontier mission and on this occasion would be carrying letters from Moorcroft to the mutually hostile rulers and chiefs of the lands through which he passed.<sup>42</sup> Moorcroft was uneasy about this aspect of the plan, and not only on the Mir's account. It is true that the letters were harmless enough in themselves, florid and complimentary effusions introducing the Mir and Moorcroft's wish to follow him in search of horses, but there were good and obvious reasons why Company servants, even those in the Political Department, should not open a private correspondence with foreign rulers without permission. Moorcroft confessed himself guilty of 'many irregularities' in 1812,<sup>43</sup> and this was certainly one of them. He was already going far beyond his brief and, incidentally, employing a technique which later became an important part of the classic Great Game: the sending of intelligent native emissaries on dangerous missions into Central Asia in search of geographical and political information.

The Mir's mission was an outstanding success. Surviving both imprisonment and illness, he journeyed across some of the most forbidding political and geographical terrain in the world by way of Kashmir, Ladakh, the Karakoram, Chinese Turkestan (Sinkiang), the Pamirs, the neighbourhood of Bokhara, and so back to India across Afghanistan, all lands practically unknown to scientific European geography. What was not mentioned in the much-published and -translated accounts of his journey<sup>44</sup> was that his prime task, as Moorcroft put it with almost studied

40 Moorcroft, *Observations on the Breeding of Horses, Fort William, 1814* (Calcutta, 1862; reprinted Simla, 1886); Moorcroft to Metcalfe, 29 Apr. 1812, IOL Eur. MSS. F.38.

41 Moorcroft to Board, 29 Mar. 1813, NAI India/MP, 22 May 1813, no. 116.

42 The letters are enclosed with Moorcroft's letter of 25 Apr. 1812, NAI India/MP, 6 July 1812, no. 148.

43 *Ibid.*

44 H. Wilson translated and edited two different accounts. One was in *The Calcutta Quarterly Oriental Magazine*, III (1825), pp. 103 and 285 and IV (1825), pp. 126 and 185. The other was in the *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, VII (1843), p. 283. The fullest version in English is *Travels in Central Asia by Meer Izzat-Oollah in the years 1812-13*, ed. P.D. Henderson (Calcutta, 1872). References to some of the foreign-language versions are given in G. Dainelli, *La Esplorazione della regione fra l'Himalaja occidentale e il Caracorum* (Bologna, 1934), p. 18n.

## William Moorcroft Plays the Great Game

casualness in a letter to the Board on 25 April 1812, was to obtain at Bokhara 'permission for me to visit the city for the purpose of purchasing a considerable body of animals.'<sup>45</sup> He added that he hoped the members of the Board would not object to the Mir's mission. It would not have made much difference if they had, because five days before Moorcroft's letter was even written and several weeks after the scheme was first hatched at the Delhi Residency, the Mir had set out on his perilous journey. It took him twenty months but Moorcroft, who was still a relative beginner in the problems facing oriental travellers, was hoping that if the Mir could return with a favourable report inside five months, he would be able to set off on his own trip to Bokhara without first returning all the weary hundreds of miles to distant Calcutta.

When Moorcroft's astonishing letter was solemnly considered in Council at the Presidency capital on the 6 July, immediate steps were taken to prevent him from doing any such thing. Only after the most careful consideration of Izzat-Allah's information 'relative to the degree of personal risk attending the journey, the resources of the country in horses fit for the purposes of Government, and the practicability of conveying them from so remote a quarter through barbarous and little known countries would ... the expediency of Mr Moorcroft's proceeding in person to Bokhara be considered.' And in case that was not crystal clear, they added that 'of course ... Mr Moorcroft will not enter on the journey without a previous communication with Government.'<sup>46</sup> They were, it seems, beginning to perceive dimly the extraordinary qualities of the man they were dealing with. But even they could scarcely have conceived that, when these words were written, their stud superintendent had already disappeared on another unauthorized journey in an entirely different direction. Incredible as it must have seemed, he was already in unknown Tibet, having crossed hostile Gurkha territory and the mightiest mountain range in the world by an unexplored route, in disguise and without prior permission of any sort from anyone!

Moorcroft had left Delhi and gone up to Hardwar, where the young Ganges rushes out from the hills which screen the icefields of its mountain birthplace, in time for the April fair as he had the previous year. Disappointed in the results of his visit to the desert horse fairs of Rajasthan, he hoped that the contacts he had made with the dealers in 1811 would at least bring a few good animals to Hardwar. But as usual the good horses were somewhere else. Moorcroft was furious to discover that most of the animals intended for him had apparently been snapped up by itinerant

<sup>45</sup> Moorcroft to Board, 25 Apr. 1812 NAI, India/MP, 6 July 1812, no. 148.

<sup>46</sup> Governor-General in Council to Board, 6 July 1812, NAI India/MP, 6 July 1812, no. 150.

dealers and spirited away into Maratha country across the Company's western borders. So what should he do now? Rajasthan was not worth visiting, the breeding districts round Bhatinda in the western Punjab would be too unhealthy for the next three months and the Punjab itself, although Ranjit Singh had given permission for the visit, Moorcroft hoped to examine on his way to Bokhara at the end of the year. To do nothing for three months never occurred to him. 'I do not see how I can apply this interval to better account for the public service [he told the Board] than by endeavouring to penetrate to the confines of Tartary.'<sup>47</sup> It is hard to know whether this was studied understatement or not. For what he was actually talking about was a crossing of perhaps the greatest natural obstacle in the world outside the polar ice cap, and at this time still largely unexplored.

Perhaps Moorcroft first fell under the spell of the Himalayas when, newly arrived in India, he was carried up-country to Patna in the cold weather of 1808, and glimpsed in the clear dawns that breathtaking thread of silver halfway up the northern sky. The elemental urge to penetrate this fascinating world of snow, mountain, river gorge, and glacier certainly had something to do with his decision in 1812. Moreover, on his way up to Hardwar he had met a young Anglo-Indian soldier of fortune called Hyder Hearsey. This man's twenty-nine years of military adventuring read like pure and very implausible fiction.<sup>48</sup> In 1808, just for the fun of it, he had joined a British surveying party exploring up the thunderous gorge of the Alaknanda and then, it seems, tried to steal all the glory by pirating the official map of the expedition. In 1812 he fell foul of the British authorities again by, allegedly, levying excessive tolls on goods passing through his estates and for raising a private army to drive the Gurkas out of the fertile valley or *dun* of Dehra, part of which he claimed for himself. Hearsey seems to have found the new *pax Britannica* in these frontier lands uncomfortably restricting. So, although in a different sense, did Moorcroft. Both of them had a tough buccaneering streak and Moorcroft seems to have recognized a fellow spirit in this charming rogue. Never mind Hearsey's limited education, Moorcroft admired what he later called his 'courage, spirit of enterprize, acquaintance with the language, manners and habits of the natives of Hindustan and its borders, decisiveness of character and fertility of resource.' Just the man in fact for 'prosecuting difficult geographical enquiries, or others.'<sup>49</sup>

47 Moorcroft to Board, 25 Apr. 1812, NAI India/MP, 6 July 1812, no. 148.

48 Described in H. Pearse, *The Hearseys: Five Generations of an Anglo-Indian Family* (London, 1905). See too the additional information in Phillimore, *Survey of India*, II.77 and 404-5.

49 Moorcroft to Adam (Secretary to the Political Department), 5 Mar. 1813, NAI India/MP, 19 Mar. 1813, no. 62.

## William Moorcroft Plays the Great Game

The 'geographical' and especially the 'other' enquiries which Moorcroft and Hearsey began to plan together in April 1808 were certainly 'difficult' from almost every point of view. In the first place, they had to run the gauntlet of hostile Gurkhas in the Himalayan foothills of Kumaon and Garhwal and then elude the vigilance of the Tibetans once they were across the watershed of the main range. They proposed to do so by making a dash for it, bearded and disguised as Hindu trading pilgrims. Moorcroft knew that this aspect of the scheme would cause dismay at Calcutta and he was right. The Calcutta authorities would have stopped it, if they could.<sup>50</sup> To make quite sure that they could not, Moorcroft repeated the technique he practised with Izzat-Allah's mission and omitted to tell them anything about it until the last possible moment.<sup>51</sup>

The physical difficulties were formidable, too. Hearsey's journey up the Alaknanda feeder of the Ganges in 1808 had proved difficult enough,<sup>52</sup> but this time Moorcroft was coolly proposing to push up the less accessible and more unforgiving Dauli gorge, where no European had been before, and not only up to the river's source but across the watershed on to the high Tibetan plateau. Thereby, and almost as an aside, he hoped to solve the puzzling hydrography of some of the greatest rivers in the world.<sup>53</sup> But there was more to it than that. The shawl-wool goat of Tibet also comes into the account, although it is always difficult to disentangle reason from excuse in Moorcroft's official explanations. The Company, with its sharp nose for a potential profit, had been trying for years, although with little success, to get hold of this elusive creature and its fine under-wool (from which the exquisite and expensive Kashmir shawls were made). Their aim was to divert the profitable trans-Himalayan trade it represented into British territories and perhaps open up vast opportunities for British manufacturers and British farmers as well.<sup>54</sup> Moorcroft caught this dream more avidly and pursued it more zealously than anyone else in

50 Adam to Moorcroft, 18 Dec. 1812, 10 Bengal P[olitical] C[onsultations,] 18 Dec. 1812, no. 31; extract of Political Letter from Bengal, 15 June 1813, 10 F/4/421.

51 This was his letter of 25 Apr. 1812. The decision to go had been made several weeks earlier. See, for example, Moorcroft to Metcalfe, 8 Apr. 1812, 10L Eur. mss. F.38. Hearsey delayed his application for permission to cross the frontier until 3 May (10 Bengal/PC, 25 June 1812, no. 61) and the local officer was later rebuked for granting it (*ibid.*, no. 63).

52 It is described by F.V. Raper in *Asiatick Researches*, x1 (1810). Although the party was travelling with Gurkha permission, it was still subject to harassment. Phillimore, *Survey of India*, II.73-7.

53 This aspect of the journey is given exhaustive treatment by S. Hedin, *Southern Tibet* (9 vols., Stockholm, 1917-23), II.chap. 7.

54 See C.L. Datta, 'Significance of Shawl-Wool Trade in Western Himalayan Politics', *Bengal: Past and Present*, LXXXIX (1970), 16-28; J. Irwin, *The Kashmir Shawl* (London, 1973), pp. 21-2; Pemble, *The Invasion of Nepal*, chap. 3.

the next few years.<sup>55</sup> But the shawl goat provided him with excuse as well as incentive in April 1812.

As it happened, the latest order from London to obtain specimens of the animal had reached the frontier only a short time before Moorcroft himself, and he was quick to avail himself of it.<sup>56</sup> He needed it, for the argument that there might be horses suitable for cavalry on the other side of the Himalayas, although he made a brave effort to deploy it, was as thin as the air they would have breathed. Early in the morning of 7 May, Moorcroft, with Harsey, two Kumaoni guides, and some of the more reliable servants, together with a small caravan of presents and Indian goods, left the scorching plains and moved off across the border by a little-used route into the green and purple hills a few miles west of Ramnagar. And that was the last the Calcutta authorities heard of their highly-paid stud superintendent until smuggled word arrived across the border in October that he and his party were prisoners of the Gurkhas. What happened during those intervening months in the summer and autumn of 1812, while Napoleon's grand army was on its way to destruction on the frozen wastes of Russia, has become part of the history of Himalayan exploration. It was also in a more modest way part of the history of the Great Game. This was a surprising outcome, for whatever the true mix of Moorcroft's motives in 1812 – whether horses, goats, rivers, the call of the high passes, simple curiosity, or sheer zest for a challenge – the one thing he did not expect to find on the other side of the Himalayas was Russians.

He had been surprised enough to discover from his enquiries in the Delhi bazaar that the Russians had already visited and established trade connections with Bokhara, although in truth the novelty at this time was not Russia's interest in Central Asia but Moorcroft's. Russia's regular commercial contacts with Turkestan go back at least to the fifteenth century and perhaps much earlier than that.<sup>57</sup> However, there is evidence of a new and officially inspired Russian drive to establish trade links with Asia at the beginning of the nineteenth century, not only in Western Turkestan but, more distantly, in Chinese Turkestan east of the Pamirs

55 See, for example, Moorcroft to Board, 20 Dec. 1812, NAI India/MP, 15 Jan. 1814, no. 63.

56 Public Despatch to Bengal, 10 Oct. 1810, IO E/4/669, fo. 433; Moorcroft to Metcalfe, 8 Apr. 1812, IO L Eur. MSS. F.38; Moorcroft to Board, 25 Apr. 1812, NAI India/MP, 6 July 1812, no. 148, para. 126 *et seq.* Moorcroft later tried, although without much success, to undo the unfortunate effect which his bubbling enthusiasm for the shawl goat created among his superiors in Calcutta and London.

57 D.N. Druhe, *Russo-Indian Relations, 1466–1917* (New York, 1970), chaps 1, 2; P.M. Kemp, *Bharat-Rus: An Introduction to Indo-Russian Contacts and Travels* (Delhi, 1958), chaps. 1, 5.

and southwards into Kashmir, Ladakh, and Western Tibet.<sup>58</sup> Moorcroft stumbled over this surprising development as soon as he and Hearsey had their first meeting with the Tibetan authorities at the weirdly stacked little frontier town of Daba on 4 July 1812. Like so much in the later Great Game, it had its richly comic side. In that crowded and none too fragrant room, two small European dogs, a pug and a terrier, caught sight of the disguised Moorcroft and, despite his beard and the lampblack on his face, seem to have singled him out for special attention. They

suddenly rushed towards me [he wrote later],<sup>59</sup> fondled, caressed me, frisked, jumped, barked and appeared as much rejoiced at seeing me as if they had recognised in me an old and favoured acquaintance. After their first demonstrations of joy were somewhat subsided they appeared desirous of showing their accomplishments by sitting up on their haunches and pushing forwards their forelegs ... as is sometimes taught to those animals in imitation of presenting firearms ... They were said to have been brought by Ooroos.

Russians! Moorcroft could scarcely believe his ears. So far as he knew, the Russians were still the allies of the malevolent Napoleon and they had already concerted with him a plan for a joint invasion of India across the lower Indus. Now it seemed that they were filtering round on the relatively easy northern side of the Himalayan range, unknown and undetected by the British. To all the other self-imposed tasks of his mission, Moorcroft now added the urgent need to discover as much as possible about this sinister development. A fortnight later, on 17 July, Moorcroft's party reached the huddle of black tents on a broad plain which is Gartok in summer and, for all its makeshift appearance, the main commercial and administrative centre of Western Tibet. Although no Russian caravans had yet arrived, Moorcroft was able, for a time at least, to pick up a lot

<sup>58</sup> Druhe, *Russo-Indian Relations*, pp. 93–5; O.F. Solov'yev, 'K voprosu ob otnoshenii tsarskoy Russii k Indii v xix nachale xx veka', *Voprosy Istorii* (1958, no. 6), pp. 96–109. There is an abridged translation of this article in *Central Asian Review*, vi (1958), 448–64. The presence of Russian traders in Tibet had been noted by earlier British visitors to that land, eg, S. Turner, *An Account of an Embassy to the Court of the Teshoo Lama* (London, 1800), pp. 272–3; C. Markham, *Narratives of the Mission of George Bogle to Tibet* (London, 1876), pp. 125–6.

<sup>59</sup> 'Sketch of an attempt by Russia to form a connection with Ladakh', undated [1821], 101. Eur. mss. D.260, p. 85. In his more contemporary account there is only one dog (Moorcroft to Adam, 7 Sept. 1812, 10 Bengal/PC, 18 Dec. 1812, no. 29) and this is confirmed by the entry in Hearsey's manuscript journal for the 5 July 1812, fo. 44. Its colourful account of this meeting was quoted at length, although not always very accurately, by H. Pearse in *Geographical Journal*, xxvi (1905), 184–5. The dog incident is not mentioned at all. I am most grateful to Mr John Hearsey for the extended loan of Hearsey's journal and for other kindnesses.



more information about the goods they carried and the routes they used. There were darker hints, too, that recent Russian emissaries to Ladakh and Kashmir had a political as well as a commercial significance. Later, and it turned suspicion into certainty, Moorcroft's sources of information about the Russians mysteriously dried up and he felt that he was being deliberately restricted in his movements so as to prevent him discovering any more.<sup>60</sup> But at least the Chinese Governor at Gartok proved co-operative in the matter of shawl goats and allowed Moorcroft to purchase both wool and animals, in defiance both of his instructions and the treaty-based monopoly in the wool enjoyed by the Ladakhi and Kashmiri traders.<sup>61</sup>

As soon as Moorcroft and his party were safely back on the Indian side of the watershed at the beginning of September 1812, and facing a very real danger that he would be arrested (if nothing worse) by the Gurkha authorities whose hill territories still had to be crossed, Moorcroft committed his discoveries to paper while there was still time. He was in no doubt at all that this was the most important and surprising outcome of his wholly surprising mission. The evidence that Russian traders were pushing Russian and French goods into Chinese Turkestan and thence into Kashmir, Ladakh, and Tibet was overwhelming. These activities, he argued, were not only 'highly prejudicial to the Company's commercial interests' but 'if not timely counteracted, will probably lead to events that may disturb the tranquility and safety of the Company's provinces contiguous to the northwestern and northern frontier of British India, provided the warfare now existing in Europe be prolonged under the present alliances.'<sup>62</sup> So far as Moorcroft's sadly out-of-date information went, Russia and France were still allies in the post-Tilsit phase and still threatening the kind of joint attack on India which had caused such alarm in 1807-8.

All British defensive planning at that time had assumed that the main invasion thrust would come by the historic invasion routes from the north-western passes beyond the lower Indus. But the activity Moorcroft had stumbled upon in Tibet suggested that a rather different possibility was being reconnoitred. 'If a Gallo-Russian army were to follow the route of the Russian traders to Yarkand this position [on the lower Indus] would be of no use as the station would be thus turned without a contest and the

60 Moorcroft to Adam, 7 Sept. 1812, 10 Bengal/PC, 18 Dec. 1812, no. 29. The letter is discussed briefly in R.N. Chowdhuri, 'Anglo-Russian Commercial Rivalry in 1812 AD', *Journal of Indian History*, xxix (1951), 18-21.

61 He was later punished by the authorities at Lhasa. See the letters of Webb and Traill in 1818 and 1819 in IOL Eur. MSS. F.36, fos. 57 and 114.

62 Moorcroft to Adam, 7 Sept. 1812, *ibid.*

river be passed in a place little more than knee deep.<sup>63</sup> Any opposition from the incompetent Chinese or the unwarlike Tibetans would be minimal. The main Franco-Russian force would regroup and refit in Kashmir while light columns with mountain artillery would filter along further eastwards on the relatively easy Tibetan plateau, ready to issue through the passes into the plains at times and places of their own choosing and so cause the maximum confusion and dispersal of the overstrained British forces.

Moorcroft, as usual, went on at great length and in enormous detail. It is very hard indeed to relate his own searing experiences on the sheer faces of the Dauli gorge or, grey with altitude sickness, in the cutting wind of the high passes and empty plateaux, with the almost serene progress he anticipated for the invasion forces masterminded by Bonaparte himself. In this, as in so many ways, his long official letter is a classic example of the British alarmist literature which followed in such profusion later in the century. It rolled up time, distance, and difficulty in a few breathtaking assumptions and slid smoothly from possibilities to certainties at the drop of a tense. 'I have little doubt,' he told Metcalfe,<sup>64</sup> 'that Bonaparte has received important information' about these easy and hitherto unknown approaches only thirty-four days' march from the Company's provinces. He was equally convinced, as he told the Political Department,<sup>65</sup> that if this happened the Emperor would 'instantly' abandon all the earlier schemes for invasion across the north-west frontier. It seemed that the problem of defending India was revolutionized at a stroke.

If Moorcroft's military masters in Calcutta were grateful for this strategic bombshell discovered by their wandering civilian stud superintendent in Tibet, there is precious little sign of it in the official record. He was politely thanked for 'much new and interesting information, affording abundant matter for reflection and consideration,' but most of what followed was a recapitulation of the strong objections which the Governor-General entertained towards Moorcroft's hazardous journey.<sup>66</sup> The trouble was, of course, that Moorcroft's alarms were grounded on a premise which no longer held true. Napoleon and the Tsar were not allies any more but enemies, and the French army was on the road to Moscow. But Moorcroft never gave anything up easily. Armed with some corroborative evidence sent back by Izzat-Allah, he returned to the attack in March 1813. 'Although it might seem monstrous to indulge a supposition

63 *Ibid.*

64 Letter of 1 Dec. 1812, IOL Eur. MSS. F.38.

65 Letter of 7 Sept. 1812, IOL Eur. MSS. F.36.

66 Adam to Moorcroft, 18 Dec. 1812, IO Bengal/PC, 18 Dec. 1812, no. 31.

of the present warfare between the French and the Russians being concerted to mask a scheme for invading Hindustan,' yet the outcome may well hasten the projected invasion of India. 'If for instance the usual good fortune of Bonaparte should attend him in Russia the simple fact of having an army so much nearer Hindustan than at any former period might induce him to think it a more favourable opportunity for pushing a part of it in conjunction with the troops of the fallen Emperor than at a later period.'<sup>67</sup>

It was not quite so laughable as it sounded and, as it happened, the possibility was for a time seriously considered in London.<sup>68</sup> Moorcroft's own proposal on how to anticipate the danger was to send his friend Hearsey back on a general military reconnaissance to examine the practicability of the northern routes into Kashmir and what he called 'the road behind Himachal.' Moorcroft himself, of course, still hoped to pursue the search for horses (and Russians) at Bokhara. All this was too much for Calcutta, particularly in the light of the latest news of Napoleon's retreat with a shattered army from Moscow and the recruitment of Russia once again as an ally in the struggle against France. Risky trans-frontier missions to Kashmir or Bokhara were turned down flat,<sup>69</sup> and the Calcutta Board tried very hard in the years that followed to keep Moorcroft's attention firmly on the minutiae of horse-breeding in steamy Bengal rather than entangled with strategy, trade, and geo-politics in the bright, thin air beyond the northern mountains.

It was easier said than done. For one thing, the decision of the new Governor-General to wage war on Nepal less than two years after Moorcroft had returned from that land put a very high premium on his information. The unauthorized journey in 1812 turned out to be a very timely piece of reconnaissance. Little enough was known about the Gurkha possessions and Moorcroft was a man with an insatiable hunger for information about practically everything that came under his eye. Many of those things – trade, natural resources, routes, the attitude of the people, the state of the fortifications, and the location of the troops, to name only a few – speedily became the vital raw material from which important strategic and political decisions were wrought when war came in 1814. Moreover, Moorcroft had made a deliberate effort to cultivate his contacts along the frontier, not only the merchants but some of the more

67 Moorcroft to Adam, 5 Mar. 1813, IO Bengal/PC, 19 Mar. 1813, no. 62; Henderson, *Travels in Central Asia*, p. 59.

68 Moira to Warren Hastings, 11 Nov. 1812, [British Library] Add[itional] M[anu]s[cript]s 39871, fo. 118. I am indebted to Dr R. Bingle for this reference. Cf. Hastings to Young, 19 Oct. 1818, Add. MSS. 38517, fo. 69.

69 Adam to Moorcroft, 19 Mar. 1813, NAI India/MP, 19 Mar. 1813, no. 63.

## William Moorcroft Plays the Great Game

important political figures as well. The Chinese governor in Western Tibet, Amar Singh Thapa at Palpa, Bim Sah at Almora, even the Raja of Nepal at Katmandu, were all among his correspondents in the two tense years before war came.<sup>70</sup>

When it did, Moorcroft was in great demand, bombarding Calcutta with letters advising on possible invasion routes, the best footwear for military use in the hills, and how to secure interpreters and informants. He even raised, with characteristic zest, a force of irregular cavalry and infantry for frontier defence.<sup>71</sup> Moreover, his and Hearsey's emphatic accounts of Gurkha oppression and unpopularity in Kumaon and Garhwal, of the strategic, economic, and commercial desirability of those areas and of European commercial penetration on the high Tibetan plateau beyond all played a significant part in the Marquess of Hastings' decision to annex them when the war was won.<sup>72</sup> Unfortunately, Moorcroft's wider dream of tapping thereby a rich trans-Himalayan trade was not achieved. The shawl wool he obtained at such cost turned out to be well-nigh impossible to clean or process, and the shawl goats that survived the journey to Britain languished and died on the Duke of Atholl's estate in Scotland.<sup>73</sup> Moreover, the alarms that Moorcroft's unannounced visit aroused among the Chinese authorities in Tibet led to an unwonted efficiency in closing the passes to any further British intruders in the years that followed. Western Tibet, as well as the approach routes farther north, remained firmly closed.<sup>74</sup>

And yet, for all the brevity and accidental nature of Moorcroft's journey in 1812, it drew him into the shadowy world of trans-frontier politics, strategy, and trade so deeply that he never really extracted himself from it again, despite the stern efforts of his increasingly dissatisfied colleagues on the Board to keep his attention on the business of breeding horses. These final years at the stud were stormy ones, and Moorcroft probably only obtained a reluctant consent for what became his six-year odyssey to

70 Moorcroft to Persian Secretary, 15 Mar. 1813, with enclosures, 10 Bengal/pc, 2 Apr. 1813, no. 64.

71 Much of this correspondence is in 10 H/645-7, H/649, H/651, H/654, and in East India Company: *Papers Respecting the Administration of the Marquis of Hastings in India - I: Papers respecting the Nepal War* (London, 1824), *passim*.

72 See, for example, *Papers Respecting the Nepal War*, pp. 47-51, 51-9, 65, 76-80, 551, 761; and *The Private Journal of the Marquess of Hastings*, ed. Marchioness of Bute (2 vols., London, 1858), 1.251.

73 Moorcroft to Nisbet, 25 May 1820, 10L Eur. mss. G.28, fo. 74; Irwin, *Kashmir Shawl*, pp. 23-4.

74 Much of the correspondence is in 10 F/4/552, nos. 13, 384; 10 F/4/715, nos. 19, 524; and 10 F/4/730, nos. 19, 778. See too the letters of Webb in 10L Eur. mss. F.36 and Traill to Moorcroft, 28 July 1819, *ibid.*, fo. 114.

Bokhara in 1819 because, by then, they were heartily glad to be rid of him, and because the need for cavalry horses remained as urgent as ever. At least, to that extent, Moorcroft's mission was official this time. He had his salary, transport at public expense up to the British frontier, the faithful Izzat-Allah as Persian Secretary, another Company servant as apothecary, a small escort of Gurkha troops, and official certificates of introduction confirming that he was indeed the Company's stud superintendent on official business in search of horses.<sup>75</sup> Beyond that, he was on his own. As Metcalfe told him when he sought a letter from the Governor-General to the ruler of Bokhara, 'it was never intended to accredit you or vest you with a public character.' Metcalfe added frankly that although such a letter may have smoothed Moorcroft's path, any failure or difficulty would mean that 'the Government would be committed – unpleasantly and contrary to its design.'<sup>76</sup> This, of course, was no more than the policy of limited liability necessarily pursued by all governments when their servants are engaged in dangerous activities beyond the reach of succour or reprisal. But it does not mean that Moorcroft was a secret agent and his mission to Bokhara a deliberate official move in the Great Game against Russia.<sup>77</sup> Moorcroft played and viewed the Great Game very much in the later classic style. But he did so without authority in 1819, much as he had in 1812, simply as a consequence of his adopted roles of explorer, intelligence gatherer, commercial agent, diplomat, and strategist.

On this last great journey Moorcroft was constantly confessing his lack of authority or qualifications to comment on military or political matters.<sup>78</sup> But, he argued as in 1812, if he did not do it, who could? He was the first Company employee in recent times to penetrate into Tibet, Ladakh, Kashmir, Afghanistan, or trans-Oxus Turkestan. An awareness of the uniqueness of his opportunities and information was a compelling reason to report all he found, even if most of it was beyond his brief.<sup>79</sup> So was the ever-present danger of death on the road.<sup>80</sup> So too was his simple duty as 'a son of Britain.'<sup>81</sup> All these factors, Moorcroft believed, left him no choice. And so the enormously long-winded, disordered, and defiant despatches came rolling in to the Political Department in Calcutta from 1819 almost to the very end. Upon them, as well as upon his journals and

75 IO Bengal/PC, 14 May 1819, nos. 97–101; *Asiatic Journal*, xviii (1835), 108.

76 To Moorcroft, 29 Jan. 1820, IOL Eur. MSS. F.38, fo. 16.

77 See below, p. 209.

78 For one example among many, see his letter to Swinton (Secretary, Political Department), 18 Apr. 1822, IOL Eur. MSS. D.263, fo. 35.

79 Moorcroft to Palmer, 15 Mar. 1822, *ibid.*, D.262, fo. 38.

80 Moorcroft to Swinton, 7 Oct. 1823, *ibid.*, D.265, fo. 197.

81 Moorcroft to Swinton, 18 Apr. 1822, *ibid.*, D.263, fo. 35.

private correspondence, it is possible to build a mosaic of Moorcroft's fears, opinions, activities, and assumptions as he examined the political, military, and commercial situation on the outer defensive rim of the Company's Indian possessions in the early 1820s and developed more fully the ideas he had first formed on the road to Tibet in 1812.

His basic assumption then, as earlier, was both alarmist and russo-phobe. He was practically the first of the many who, later in the century, came to believe in the reality of a Russian design on 'the promised plunder of India and the addition of its immense territory to the Russian Empire.' Those words were written in 1812,<sup>82</sup> when he believed that the chief threat came from the combined resources of France and Russia directed by the military genius of Bonaparte. But once Russia stood forth clearly as Britain's major world rival after the defeat of Napoleon in 1815, Moorcroft's fears focussed naturally upon her.<sup>83</sup> He was well briefed on the earlier invasion schemes presented to, or attempted by, the Empress Catherine and Tsar Paul as well as the more recent developments in 1807–8.<sup>84</sup> And he was in no doubt that sooner or later these schemes would be taken up again. So far as his evidence went, it would probably be sooner and certainly so if a new European crisis put Britain and Russia in a state of war.<sup>85</sup> Russia's 'monstrous plan of aggrandizement' revealed 'a grasp of ambition most gigantic.'<sup>86</sup> At the very least it included the conquest and absorption of all Turkestan west of the Pamirs and probably of Chinese Turkestan to the east of them as well.<sup>87</sup> Certainly once Russia gained command of the irregular horse of Central Asia – and Moorcroft's was the first informed British assessment of the cavalry potential of the Khanates, arriving at the alarming total of well over a quarter of a million horsemen<sup>88</sup> – then 'the prospect of a golden harvest may tempt hordes of Tartar cavalry and tribes of mounted Afghans to swell the flood of barbaric inroad upon British India.'<sup>89</sup> The drumming hoofbeats of Gen-

82 To Adam, 7 Sept. 1812, 10 Bengal/PC, 18 Dec. 1812, no. 29.

83 He was not alone, of course. See, for example, Canning to Moira, 30 Aug. 1816, *English Historical Documents, 1783–1832*, eds. A. Aspinall and E. Smith (London, 1969), p. 833.

84 This is clear from several allusions in his official correspondence. One of the books he took on his journey (Keene to Moorcroft, 25 Oct. 1819, 10L Eur. MSS. F.36, fo. 132) was D. Hopkins, *The Dangers of British India from French Invasion* (publ. anonymously in 1808: 2nd edn., London, 1809).

85 Draft letter to Swinton, Oct. 1823, 10L Eur. MSS. D.265, fo. 180. Moorcroft seems to have been uncertain about the extent to which he believed the Russian plans were matured. Cf. his letter to Palmer, 29 Nov. 1821, 10L Eur. MSS. D.261 with that to Swinton, 17 Dec. 1821, *ibid.*, D.245, fo. 113.

86 Moorcroft to W. Fraser, 10 June 1822, *ibid.*, D.263, fo. 91.

87 Moorcroft to Swinton, 17 Dec. 1821, *ibid.*, D.245, fo. 111.

88 Tabular Statement, *ibid.*, D.265, fo. 319. Cf. *ibid.*, C.28, fo. 437.

89 Moorcroft to Swinton, 7 Oct. 1823, *ibid.*, fo. 199.

ghiz Khan and older vestigial memories of utter destruction associated with the Huns became an almost standard element in the stereotyped British fears for India's security later on. But before the onslaught would come sap and mine, the cautious probing of geographical and political possibilities 'masked by the pretext of extension of commerce,' as Moorcroft put it.<sup>90</sup>

All these fears and expectations became personified for Moorcroft in a single Russian agent, the mysterious Agha Mehdi. This man, Mekhti Rafailov as the Russians call him,<sup>91</sup> was the son of a Persian or Turkic Jew and a Christian or Muslim according to the needs of the moment but at all events a Russian subject.<sup>92</sup> In 1808, on instructions from the Russian Foreign Ministry, he was sent as a merchant on a 3-month pioneering journey from Semipalatinsk southwards into Chinese Turkestan and onwards across the Karakoram into Ladakh and Kashmir. Along this new trade route came Russian and European goods which were exchanged mainly for Kashmir shawls. In the years that followed, Agha Mehdi made the journey several times, prospered as a trader, and later he carried official letters to some of the rulers along the route. One of these was from the Tsar to the ruler of Ladakh.<sup>93</sup> Agha Mehdi's geographical and political memoir of the countries along this route was often cited in contemporary Russian literature,<sup>94</sup> and in return for his services to the state he was given civil rank and title.<sup>95</sup> When Moorcroft reached the Ladakhi capital in September 1820 and first discovered the existence of the earlier letter from the Tsar, Agha Mehdi was on his way south again bearing new letters for Ladakh and for Ranjit Singh in the Punjab. He also intrigued very successfully at Yarkand to prevent Moorcroft gaining permission from the Chinese authorities to visit that city.<sup>96</sup> Moorcroft seems to have awaited the arrival of his talented and 'doughty opponent'<sup>97</sup> at Leh with mixed feelings of anxiety and genuine relish.

90 To Palmer, 29 Nov. 1821, *ibid.*, D.261.

91 Druhe, *Russo-Indian Relations*, p. 103 mistakenly believes that these were two different people.

92 Moorcroft's information about him is principally in 10L Eur. MSS. D.245, fos. 84-6; *ibid.*, D.258, fos. 72-3; *ibid.*, D.260, fos. 87-91; Moorcroft and Trebeck, *Travels*, 1.385-91.

There is much information based on cited Russian sources in Solov'yev, 'K voprosu ob otnoshenii Esaroskoy Rossi'. See too C.L. Datta, *Ladakh and Western Himalayan Politics* (New Delhi, 1973), pp. 96-9.

93 Enclosed with Moorcroft to Metcalfe, 1 Jan. 1821, 10 Bengal/PC, 10 Oct. 1823, no. 23.

94 See, for example, the note by J. Senkowski in G. de Meyendorff, *Voyage d'Orenbourg à Boukhara, fait en 1820* (Paris, 1826), pp. 342-3.

95 In 1817 he was given the title of Counsellor of Commerce by the Russian Senate and later the civil rank of *nadvornyy sovetnik*. *Central Asian Review*, VI (1958), p. 462.

96 Moorcroft to Swinton, 29 Dec. 1821, 10L Eur. MSS. D.245, fo. 115.

97 Moorcroft to Parry, 10 May 1821, *ibid.*, D.260, fo. 55.

## William Moorcroft Plays the Great Game

This man's life [he wrote]<sup>98</sup> has been made up of a rapid succession of extraordinary incidents and after the many anecdotes of him recited to me both by his friends and by his enemies I am at a loss how to class him except generally as a man endowed with natural talents of a surprising cast. Had he lived a few years longer he might have produced scenes in Asia that would have astonished some of the Cabinets in Europe ... I have detected traits of an expansion of view seldom indeed entertained by the strongest mind when uncultivated.

But what would have been the first nineteenth-century meeting of British and Russian officials on the borderland between the two great Asiatic empires never did take place. Agha Mehdi's considerable caravan reached Leh in April 1821 but without its leader, who had died earlier on the Karakoram Pass, apparently from the effects of overeating at high altitude. It did not take Moorcroft very long to get a sight of the official letters Agha Mehdi was carrying and he was astonished at the size of the emeralds and rubies and the comprehensiveness of the dye-stuffs and cloth samples in his caravan.<sup>99</sup> It looked as though the Russians were as anxious as Moorcroft himself to gain access to the secrets of the Kashmir shawl weavers and one of Agha Mehdi's aims on this journey, rather like that of Moorcroft in 1812, was to obtain shawl-wool goats for experimental breeding in Siberia. Moorcroft, very much in the later chivalric traditions of the Great Game, tried to save the Russian government's investment from the dishonesty of Agha Mehdi's double-crossing subordinate and did his best to ensure that the official letters, once he had noted their contents of course, reached their destinations.<sup>100</sup> He even attempted, perhaps thinking of his own little son back at Pusa, to ensure that Agha Mehdi's orphaned boy in Kashmir was properly provided for and educated.<sup>101</sup> In Agha Mehdi, Moorcroft clearly recognized a kindred spirit as well as a dangerous rival.

All the same, the more he thought about it, the more sinister it all seemed.<sup>102</sup> Why should the Imperial Russian Cabinet be devoting so much treasure and persistence to the cultivation of trade and diplomatic connections with minor rulers at such an immense distance from the

98 To Traill, 16 Oct. 1821, *ibid.*, D.258, fo. 72, reprinted in *Asiatic Journal*, XXI (1836), 137–8.

99 Moorcroft to Metcalfe, 6 May 1823, 10 Bengal/PC, 10 Oct. 1823, nos. 24–5. The letter to Ranjit Singh is reprinted in Datta, *Western Himalayan Politics*, Appendix A. Moorcroft sent it to Calcutta, for security reasons, in a Latin translation.

100 Moorcroft to Metcalfe, 6 May 1821, 10 Bengal/PC, 10 Oct. 1823, no. 25.

101 Moorcroft to Traill, 16 Oct. 1821, 10L Eur. MSS. D.258, fo. 72.

102 Moorcroft developed the ideas which follow in the next few paragraphs at great length in his letters to Metcalfe, 15 Aug. 1821 and to Swinton, 17 Dec. 1821, 10 Bengal/PC, 20 Sept. 1822, nos. 63, 66. A second long letter to Swinton, also dated 17 Dec. 1821, is in *ibid.*, 26 July 1822, no. 56.



Russian frontier and on the very doorstep of British possessions in the fertile plains below the passes? It was all of a piece with the evidence he had stumbled over at Daba and Gartok in 1812. A colossal flanking movement seemed to be taking place under the guise of trade. The real aim must be to open a new and unexpected approach to Hindustan from the north using the ancient trade routes across (or round) the Karakoram to Leh and onwards from there to Kashmir and the Punjab. Where caravans and pack animals could go, armies could follow. Nor was this mere speculation. Moorcroft was the first to notice that hostile armies as well as friendly caravans had, in the past, penetrated from the north into Ladakh. In one case he believed the attack had been made by a mysterious and much easier route from Khoten farther east, which clipped almost a fortnight off the journey to Leh and offered an easy direct approach to the western Tibetan plateau and the Indian plains opposite Delhi as well. Moorcroft believed he had stumbled upon part of this route by accident in 1812 and in 1821 he explored the Ladakh end of it near the Pangong Lake.<sup>103</sup> But although he did not know exactly where it ran, he was convinced that the omniscient Agha Mehdi and his Russian masters did.

For the edification of his distant masters in Calcutta, Moorcroft in 1821 and 1822 described at enormous length his views on how things might develop. The general military weakness of China on her remote western border was compounded by the simmering hostility of her Muslim subjects there. Moorcroft's intelligence confirmed that they were ready to rise up in support of any invader who would help rid them of the hated Chinese yoke, and it looked as though that invader was going to be Russia. Agha Mehdi, it seemed, had intended to take back to Russia as honoured guests not only representatives of Ranjit Singh in the Punjab and the ruler of Ladakh but also the former Muslim rulers of Chinese Turkestan. This latter 'demonstration of magnanimity may be disinterested,' Moorcroft conceded,

but directions to Agha Mehdee to whisper in confidence to Mussulmen of respectability in Chinese Turkestan the generous intentions of His Imperial Majesty create a surmise of its being designed *en coup de théâtre* to generate an impression favourable to the accomplishment of ulterior projects in which the agency of a numerous Musselmen population is desirable.<sup>104</sup>

Even without Muslim help, a mere 60,000 Russian troops poured into

103 Moorcroft's 'Notice on Khoten', 10L Eur. MSS. C. 28, fo. 130 describes the 1812 discovery, reprinted in *Journal of the Geographical Society*, 1 (1831), 243n. The journal of the 1821 exploration is 10L Eur. MSS. D. 245.

104 *Ibid.*

## William Moorcroft Plays the Great Game

the Tarim basin by the easy routes from Kokand would be sufficient to overwhelm the Chinese garrisons in Kashgar and Yarkand. Thence, there would be nothing to stop them entering Ladakh, either across the Karakoram Pass or by the easier routes to the east. Conversely, the Russians might first attack Ladakh by an uncontested route across the Pamirs direct from Kokand by way of Sarigol (whose Chief was in open rebellion against the Chinese) and then invade Chinese Turkestan from there. It was for a time Moorcroft's intention to examine the suitability of the Pamir line 'for the march of large bodies of troops' on his way back from Bokhara,<sup>105</sup> and also the approaches to Chinese Turkestan from both the Russian and Indian sides on the way there.<sup>106</sup>

Once Chinese Turkestan became a Russian province, any one of several dire consequences might follow. If Russia went east, then Moorcroft did not even rule out the possibility that the whole of China might be conquered.<sup>107</sup> After all, had not Clive boasted that with five good regiments he could conquer China and pay off the national debt? For Russia, it was 'by no means impossible' and the consequences, if China's resources and trade became Russia's or if European technology became China's, would be immeasurable. The annihilation of Britain's tea trade alone would be serious enough, the loss of 'two millions of pounds annually to the Exchequer, the comforts of the whole population of Great Britain to whom tea is now become a necessity of life, the employment of an immense capital and the subsistence of thousands.'<sup>108</sup> Moorcroft was, as always, very sensitive to the criticisms which such novel and extensive views would provoke and, in a passage which bears extended quotation because it is so typical of the torrent of circumlocution which this complex, indomitable man poured out in these years, he set out to anticipate these critics.

It may be argued that a mind actuated or, in more vigorous language, heated by feelings so powerful as to border on enthusiasm in obedience to the illusory impulses of an ardent imagination in picturing new prospects of success has overlooked difficulties and dangers which oppose their realization and which are appreciated only by understandings regulated by cool experience and by wary prudence unwarping by a fondness for novelty, for enterprise and for fame ... Those who are far removed from the scenes presented to my sight may rank my speculations and may reasonably enough impute to me an ambition of arrogating

105 Moorcroft to Swinton, 22 Apr. 1824, 10L Eur. MSS. D.266, fo. 48.

106 Moorcroft to Hodgson, 30 Sept. 1821, *ibid.*, D.258, fo. 51, and to Palmer, 8 May 1821, *ibid.*, D.260, fo. 42.

107 Moorcroft to Swinton, 18 Apr. 1822, 10 Bengal/PC, 20 Sept. 1822, no. 76.

108 *Ibid.*

an extent of view greater than that possessed by the Supercargoes at Canton ... It is very difficult for a person in my situation to defend himself from such an imputation ... the gentlemen at Canton ... are in the situation of spectators beholding a dramatic performance with all its illusions on the stage, whilst I, no matter by what means have contrived to get behind the curtain to witness the tricky preparations of the Green room.<sup>109</sup>

What he saw there convinced him that Russia's designs on China were hostile and imminent. And even if the notion of conquest were rejected, the signs were clear that a bid for the immense inland trade of China was well under way. Communications were being improved along the Sino-Russian border and Russian manufactures were being pushed along them.

But if from Chinese Turkestan Russia moved not east into China but south on Ladakh and acquired the vale of Kashmir, then it would be Britain's turn to tremble. 'With it [Kashmir] Britain might mock any possible movement against her Indian possessions ... but it may be said with truth that from the moment it falls into the possession of any other European power, from that moment the safety of British India is endangered.'<sup>110</sup> Its impregnability, its richness, and its immense military resources made it almost perfect as a place for an exhausted invading army to refit. There was only one grim comfort that Moorcroft could see: noticing the prevalence of venereal disease, he thought that Kashmir might become to the advancing Russians 'another Capua from the temptations it will afford to troops who shall have experienced the hardships and privations of a march from Turkestan.'<sup>111</sup> It was scant comfort. Moreover, below the ramparts of the Pir Panjal was Ranjit Singh's independent Punjab, fertile and rich but thoroughly unreliable in the event of a great invasion crisis. Moorcroft even believed that Ranjit Singh might sell Kashmir to the Russians for cash and that the French adventurers training his army were former Napoleonic agents now in Russian pay!<sup>112</sup>

Grim as his prophecies were, Moorcroft was not the man to content himself, Cassandra-like, merely with their utterance. His response to the danger he perceived was exactly that classic offensive-defensive reflex which earlier, and later, invasion scares created. Defensively, he sought as

109 *Ibid.*

110 Moorcroft to Swinton, 14 Oct. 1823, IOL Eur. MSS. D.265, fo. 176; cf. his letters of 18 Apr. and 17 Dec. 1822 to Swinton and of 15 Aug. 1821 to Metcalfe, 10 Bengal/PC, 20 Sept. 1822, nos. 63, 66.

111 This paragraph was in the original draft of one of his letters to Swinton of 17 Dec. 1822 but omitted in the version sent, IOL Eur. MSS. G.28, fo. 286.

112 Draft of Moorcroft to Swinton, circa July 1824, IOL Eur. MSS. D.266, fo. 75 *et seq.*

## William Moorcroft Plays the Great Game

much information as possible about potential invasion lines and speculated about appropriate defensive tactics and strategies; offensively, he recommended pre-emptive commercial and political forward policies to stifle the dangers before they developed any further. The first thing was to secure the Punjab. Moorcroft believed that it, or the greater part of it, would inevitably fall into British hands in the anarchy which would follow the death of Ranjit Singh. As he told one of the Company's directors, 'This idea may be censured as ambitious, extravagant and improbable, but however it may be scouted at present "to this conclusion you must come at last"'.<sup>113</sup> He was right, and his detailed forecasts of how it might happen proved to be a remarkably accurate anticipation of the developments of the 1840s.<sup>114</sup>

Confident that British annexation of the Punjab was inevitable, Moorcroft noted the best routes and seasons for campaigning, observed the defensive capabilities of Lahore, and accumulated a great deal of general commercial and political intelligence about Ranjit's kingdom.<sup>115</sup> It was not easy, in the web of suspicion and intrigue that surrounded him, nor was it entirely safe. Moreover, since Ranjit was an ally and Moorcroft his guest, it was scarcely ethical either. Moorcroft admitted<sup>116</sup> that his activities were 'altogether more allied to a modification of espionage than is perfectly agreeable to my feelings,' but he did it all the same and with the usual justifications. As far as Moorcroft was concerned, the day when Britain would take the Punjab for herself could not come too soon. He loathed with genuine humanity the poverty, disease, oppression, and misgovernment which he saw on every side but he was not blind to the many strategic and commercial advantages which annexation would bring to Britain. Above all, perhaps, the Punjab would serve a key role in what he called his 'waking dream,' the British commercial conquest of the great markets of inner Asia.

With the Punjab, Moorcroft hoped, would come Kashmir.<sup>117</sup> Moorcroft was the first Englishman known to have visited the Valley in the nineteenth century and the first in a long line of them to covet it as a British possession. For him, its possession was crucial, above all to forestall

113 To Parry, 13 Dec. 1820, IOL Eur. MSS. D.256, fo. 86.

114 *Ibid.*; and Moorcroft to Swinton, 27 June 1823, *ibid.*, c.28, fo. 365 *et seq.*

115 Like so much of the material Moorcroft gathered, its value was not properly appreciated. European officers were rigorously excluded from Ranjit's kingdom during the next twenty years and Wade at Ludhiana struggled to acquire by means of native agents much that was already on file or available in Moorcroft's papers. See C.M. Wade, *A Narrative of the Services, Military and Political, of Lt.-Col. Sir C.M. Wade, 1809-44* (Ryde, 1847), pp. 11-12.

116 To Metcalfe, 21 May 1820, IOL Eur. MSS. F.38, fo. 22.

117 To Parry, 13 Dec. 1820, IOL Eur. MSS. D.256, fo. 86.

the Russians. They would come, he thought, into Kashmir over the Zoji-la from Ladakh, and he sketched with his usual verve and astonishing detail the best way such an attack could be met. His first thought was that the invaders should be tackled in the eroded lunar valleys of Ladakh. There, be believed, a small number of British officers directing parties of Ladakhis could work wonders simply by imitating nature.

The defensive weapons are always at hand, at no cost, in quantity inexhaustible, the approach of the enemy is descried at sufficient distance for timely preparation, there are no trees, no bushes as in the Tyrol mountains to obstruct the fall or to give a deviating direction to the descending mass. The defenders out of the reach of shot are secured from injury by their situation alone, and the invaders by their situation are exposed to overwhelming and inevitable destruction. All attempts to dislodge resolute defenders would be futile. To scale the ascents on which they would be perched would be a work of hours to an unopposed climber not burdened by weapons. Exhausted, breathless with exertion in an atmosphere of great lightness, he must stop every ten minutes to recruit his strength, to diminish the violent beating of his heart, to tranquillize his hurried suffocative breathing, and should he gain the height of four hundred feet the blow of a pebble of a few ounces dislodged from its bed four hundred feet higher would precipitate his body into the valley bruised, torn and mangled by the fall. Should invading cavalry charge through the defended defile at full speed a few only could effect their escape from an extended sweeping torrent which would speedily choke the dale with the bodies of men and horses and bury them in falling ruins.<sup>118</sup>

Later harsh experience of the debilitating effects of the 'scabrous' road between Leh and the Zoji-la, and he travelled over it four times, inclined him to favour the preparation of major defensive works on, and near, the summit of the latter pass on its Kashmir side or at Sonmarg lower down. But the methods, and the enthusiastic details he gives about them, were much the same.<sup>119</sup>

For all the time and space he devoted to military defence, Moorcroft by temperament and conviction was much more interested in commercial offence as the best way to safeguard Britain's position in Asia. His commercial ambitions for his country were every bit as grandiose as those he imputed to the Russians. Indeed, they were very much the same. Moorcroft's conception of his last great journey from 1819 onwards went far beyond the narrow limits of his official instructions and the mere search for cavalry horses at Bokhara. The project, code-named 'the Himalaya

118 Moorcroft to Swinton, 17 Dec. 1821, 10 Bengal/PC, 20 Sept. 1822, no. 66.

119 Moorcroft to Swinton, 17 Dec. 1822, 10L Eur. MSS. G.28, fo. 249; Moorcroft Journal, Oct.-Nov. 1822, *ibid.*, D.248, fo. 56 *et seq.*

## William Moorcroft Plays the Great Game

concern,' and the large private caravan of British goods which was its visible expression, was intended to be the spearhead of a British commercial offensive beyond the British frontiers, which aimed at no less than the capture of the markets of inner Asia. Moorcroft believed that their potential was enormous both as a source of raw materials, tea, and precious metals, and as an outlet for textiles and manufactured goods, always provided that Britain made conscientious efforts to produce the colours, styles, and goods that Asia wanted.<sup>120</sup> In one sense, his journey was an extended exercise in market research and the number of samples and often lovingly detailed descriptions he sent back was substantial.<sup>121</sup> Britain, he believed, not only had greater industrial muscle and entrepreneurial skills than Russia but lower production and transport costs as well. A determined British assault on the Asian market was therefore bound to succeed. It would lift Britain out of post-war recession at home, give Asia 'the blessings of improved civilization,'<sup>122</sup> and provide India with continental security. Even if the flag did not always follow trade, influence would. Moorcroft was born a century and half too early to speak of 'informal empire' and the 'imperialism of free trade,' but that is what he was talking about.

For Moorcroft, the Punjab was central to this dream. Once its trade could be unshackled from arbitrary exactions and its marvellous river network harnessed to the needs of modern commercial traffic, then he believed it could become the great transfer depot on the road to Central Asia. Up the Indus from Bombay would pour a flood of steamborne goods for onward despatch by caravan into the heart of Asia, either north-west or across Afghanistan or north-east by way of Kashmir and Ladakh into China.<sup>123</sup> As a modest start to this grand dream, Moorcroft attempted by a mixture of persuasion and commercial blackmail to win Ranjit Singh's assent to the transport of British goods in either direction across his kingdom with exemption from all but a nominal duty, and he urged the government to back his efforts by pressing for the right to station a British commercial agent at Lahore.<sup>124</sup> The failure of what he

120 Moorcroft and Trebeck, *Travels*, I.xxxii-iv and 358-9; Moorcroft to Parry, 10 May 1821, IOL Eur. MSS. D.260, fo. 54.

121 See, for example, his letter and enclosures to the cutler Thomas Gill, 4 Mar. 1821, *ibid.*, D.259, fo. 6 or his memoranda on British woollens for use in Ladakh, *ibid.*, fo. 78 *et seq.* There are scores of examples in the Moorcroft MSS. and some idea of the detail of his observations can be gathered from Moorcroft and Trebeck, *Travels*, II, chap. 3.

122 Draft of Moorcroft to Swinton, circa July 1824, IOL Eur. MSS. D.266, fo. 73.

123 Moorcroft to Parry, 13 Dec. 1820, *ibid.*, D.256, fo. 86; Moorcroft Journal 1823, *ibid.*, D.249, fo. 116.

124 Moorcroft Journal, Mar.-May 1820, *ibid.*, D.238, fos. 40-2, 96-7; Moorcroft to Ochterlony, 12 and 14 May 1820, *ibid.*, C.28, fo. 58; Moorcroft to Swinton, 4 May 1824, *ibid.*, D.250, fos. 141-2.

realized was a thoroughly improper and unaccredited negotiation, neither surprised nor worried Moorcroft very much. He was in any case investigating the more immediately feasible possibility of opening trade routes through the Western Himalayas without crossing Ranjit Singh's kingdom at all.<sup>125</sup> The object in every case was to gain access to Ladakh.

This, Moorcroft came to believe, was the commercial, military, and political key to the whole situation. In British hands, he argued, it would block or dominate all the vulnerable routes into the Indian sub-continent from the north. Its possession would not only interrupt the sequence of falling dominoes – Kashgar, Yarkand, Khoté, Ladakh, the Punjab – by which Moorcroft visualized the developing Russian threat to Bengal, but would probably save the first three from toppling as well. In that case, it might even be sufficient to save the whole of China from Russian domination, and by the same token give Britain a much more powerful leverage on China than she could ever exert from the sea. Commercially, Ladakh would be both emporium and depot from which British goods would radiate outwards like the ribs of a great fan from north-west to south-east. As a result, Moorcroft believed, there would open 'a field so vast ... that it would be bordering on hyperbole were I to attempt to speak otherwise than very guardedly of its probable extent.'<sup>126</sup> When he was at Leh in 1821, it seemed to Moorcroft that these massive advantages were there virtually for the taking, although not for very much longer. Ranjit Singh had already made one bid for Kashmir and was putting diplomatic pressure on Ladakh; the Russians, as Agha Mehdi's abortive mission revealed, were showing an unhealthy interest in the little kingdom; and there was nothing much to stop even the feeble Chinese from taking it, had they a mind to do so.

Moorcroft convinced himself that the situation required urgent action without being over-scrupulous about niceties of protocol or powers. The story of his astonishing and unauthorized triple riposte to the Agha Mehdi mission has already been told.<sup>127</sup> First, by a judicious mixture of promise and menace he negotiated with the Ladakhi authorities a commercial engagement securing preferential treatment for British caravans. Second, he persuaded the Ladakhis to appeal to Calcutta for formal

125 Either by way of the Niti Pass and Western Tibet or through Lahul or Spiti.

126 To Adam, 12 May 1821, 10L Eur. mss. D.260, fo. 74; cf. his letters to Metcalfe, 4 May and 15 Aug. 1821, 10 Bengal/PC, 20 Sept. 1822, nos. 60, 63.

127 M.L. Ahluwalia, 'Ladakh's Relations with India: An Historical Study', *Proceedings of the Indian Historical Records Commission*, xxxiii (1958), 1–8; Datta, *Western Himalayan Politics*, pp. 99–102 and Appendices B and C; D. Woodman, *Himalayan Frontiers* (London, 1969), pp. 24–6 and Appendix 1; G. Alder, *British India's Northern Frontier, 1865–95* (London, 1963), pp. 16–19.

## William Moorcroft Plays the Great Game

British protection and, third, he warned Ranjit Singh off with a clear hint of British official displeasure if he moved against Ladakh. So convinced was Moorcroft of the benefits he had won that he begged the authorities in faraway Calcutta not to take action against his initiatives without allowing him to defend them in person first. It was all in vain. They cut right through all his extended justifications, disowned the whole package, rebuked him sharply, and told Ranjit Singh that they had so. Moorcroft was plunged into despair, not only at his personal humiliation but at the loss of the immeasurable and unrepeatable national advantages he thought he had won. For a time, this indomitable little man came very near to selfpity.<sup>128</sup>

But only for a time. He persisted in his attempts to push his caravan northwards across the Karakoram to the oasis towns of Chinese Turkestan. That failed too and, by a nice irony, probably because he was too scrupulous about obtaining Chinese permission first. If, instead of sending Izzat-Allah ahead and waiting months at Leh, he had pressed on directly, relying on his considerable charm and the benevolent effects of his medical and surgical practice to 'tranquillize' opposition,<sup>129</sup> he may well have bluffed his way through as he had before. The chief danger of such a course, as he put it with wry understatement,<sup>130</sup> was that the regional Chinese authorities 'out of an excess of zeal, might introduce me to the Sovereign of the Celestial Empire at Peking instead of permitting me to pursue my route and intention towards paying my devoirs to the Commander of the Faithful at Bokhara, a mutation of plan not altogether convenient.' All the same, the failure to reach Chinese Turkestan seemed, quite simply, a 'disaster.'<sup>131</sup> The road to Kashgar, he believed, was the best means to 'lay open the whole of the central and northern parts of Asia to British commerce,'<sup>132</sup> foil the impending Russian commercial and political conquest of that vast heartland, and tap the gigantic inland trade of China much more effectively than could ever be achieved through the treaty ports. But there were a few things even Moorcroft's dogged persistence could not overcome. The suspicion of the Chinese and the mountain ramparts of the Karakoram proved to be two of them. And so, in September 1822, consoling himself that all was not yet lost in his single-handed

128 See, for example, his letters to Prinsep and Ochterlony, 2 and 6 Apr. 1822, 10 Bengal/PC, 20 Sept. 1822, nos. 71 and 72.

129 Moorcroft to Swinton, 29 Dec. 1821, IOL Eur. MSS. D.245, fo. 141.

130 To Palmer, 8 May 1821, *ibid.*, D.260, fo. 44.

131 Moorcroft to Palmer, 14 Sept. 1822, *ibid.*, C.28, fo. 228. Even so he experimented usefully with camel transport across the Karakoram and obtained much valuable information of the lands to the north.

132 Moorcroft to Parry, 13 Dec. 1820, *ibid.*, D.256, fo. 86.



bid 'to beat the Russians to the trade of Central Asia,'<sup>133</sup> he turned his back on Chinese Turkestan (and on his earlier plans to push north across the Pamirs) and set out for Kashmir and the plains to try the Afghan route to Bokhara. It was another forty years before a new generation of Englishmen came to share Moorcroft's belief in the vast trade potential of the lands beyond the Karakoram and, assisted by the Muslim insurrection which Moorcroft had anticipated, did their best to capture it for Britain.<sup>134</sup>

After twelve more months of important but still entirely unauthorized commercial, political, and geographical investigation in Kashmir, Moorcroft re-emerged in the plains at the end of 1823 and set out on the ancient commercial and invasion route from the north-west by way of Attock, Peshawar, the Khyber, Kabul, Bamian, and Bokhara. In the near anarchy which prevailed in those lands at the time, it was a formidable undertaking with such a large caravan, and the amount of time Moorcroft was able to devote to political and commercial reconnaissance was greatly curtailed. In any case, this route was for him something of a military and commercial second-best and moreover one which had already received some British attention at the time of the invasion scare in 1808. Moorcroft was sure from his own observations that the plans of that year to meet an invading enemy coming from the west by relying on fixed fortifications, Martello towers, and armed gunboats on the river itself were all misguided ways of opposing an enemy who could choose the time and place of his river crossing. The invader might well decide to cross the Indus above the Kabul River junction and thereby in effect go round the defences being planned for his reception lower down. Moorcroft believed that highly mobile columns of light artillery, assisted if necessary by forces carried by steam up the Indus from Bombay, would be much more effective. Sitting on the west bank of the historic Indus River crossing under the castellated walls of the Attock fort, Moorcroft speculated on how an enemy might go about reducing the defences and effecting a crossing.<sup>135</sup> Later in the Khyber and at intervals on his long journey across the Hindu Kush, he made careful notes of how and where defence might best be effected.<sup>136</sup>

But neither by training nor temperament was Moorcroft equipped to deal properly with professional problems of military defence. Commercial and political offence had much greater appeal. He was less interested in the Indus as a military defensive line than as a great lateral commercial

133 Moorcroft to Palmer, 14 Sept. 1822, *ibid.*, G.28, fo. 228.

134 Alder, *British India's Northern Frontier*, chap. 2.

135 Moorcroft Journal 1823, IOL Eur. MSS. D.249, fos. 166-70. Much of this material he put in a draft letter to Swinton, *circa* Dec. 1823, *ibid.*, D.250, fos. 1-9, 145-7.

136 See, for example, his letter to Swinton, *circa* July 1824, *ibid.*, D.266, fo. 49.

## William Moorcroft Plays the Great Game

highway. He dreamed of the day when steam power would pump British goods from Bombay to Shikarpur for onward transit into Western Afghanistan, to Attock for the Khyber route to Kabul and Western Turkestan, and to Multan and up the Jhelum, which 'at a future period ... may be a line of communication between Bombay and Kashmir in commercial intercourse with Turkestan and China.'<sup>137</sup> In return, the waters of the great rivers would carry down to the sea the produce of Asia, including a steady supply of good cavalry horses from Bokhara to meet the needs of the Bombay Presidency.<sup>138</sup> Moorcroft was not the first Englishman to see the potential of the Indus and its feeders.<sup>139</sup> But he was the first to examine the upper reaches of the river in detail, and there is an authority about his writings and his urgent pleas for an official investigation of its assumed suitability for steam navigation and the probable political difficulties to be overcome which is entirely new.

Whatever the long-term prospects of Afghanistan's becoming what Moorcroft called 'a large vent for British merchandise,'<sup>140</sup> Moorcroft's earlier view that the best immediate prospects for reaching Central Asia lay in the far north through Kashmir and Ladakh was amply confirmed by his harrowing experiences in the anarchy of Afghanistan. The misery and oppression he saw there and the direct or oblique appeals he received from some of its people<sup>141</sup> awoke in him exactly the same desire to introduce the civilized blessings of the '*pax Britannica*' as he had experienced in Kumaon and Garhwal in 1812, in the Punjab in 1820, and in Kashmir in 1822. There is no justification in Moorcroft's case for dismissing such views as cant, a mere front for naked aggression. He was an intensely humane man, much of whose life was a personal crusade against suffering in men and animals. But he was also a patriot, intensely proud of the record of his countrymen in Asia and convinced that their rule was an immeasurable improvement over anything else available.<sup>142</sup> The two impulses together made him instinctively a forward-policy man in all his reflections about the Russian menace. In the case of the Himalayan hill

<sup>137</sup> Moorcroft Journal, 1823, *ibid.*, D.249, fo. 116.

<sup>138</sup> Moorcroft to Parry, 13 Dec. 1820, *ibid.*, D.256, fo. 86; Moorcroft to Swinton, 28 Dec. 1823, *ibid.*, D.256, fo. 277 *et seq.*

<sup>139</sup> But cf. L.R. Nair, *Sir William Macnaghten's Correspondence Relating to the Tripartite Treaty* (Punjab Govt Record Office Publications, no. 20, Lahore 1942), p. 5. See, for example, Hopkins, *French Invasion*, pp. 142, 147 or the anonymous *Dissertation on the Defence of the British Territorial Possessions in Hindostan* (London, 1821), p. 61.

<sup>140</sup> Journal 1823, IOL Eur. MSS. D.249, fo. 171.

<sup>141</sup> Journal 1824, *ibid.*, D.250, fo. 233.

<sup>142</sup> See, for example, the long postscript to his letter to Parry, 13 Dec. 1820, *ibid.*, D.256, fo. 86. There are many other examples.

states, the Punjab, Kashmir, and even Ladakh, Moorcroft did not hesitate to advocate, or at least envisage, direct British control.

Whatever Moorcroft's personal preferences and even that of the people, he was realist enough to see that in the case of Afghanistan annexation was simply not within the realm of practical politics. But Afghanistan, he argued, must at least be a British client kingdom with 'the direct and practical establishment of British interests at Kabul' and its ruler supported by British military and technical assistance.<sup>143</sup> Moorcroft looked first to Muhammad Azim Khan as a likely candidate<sup>144</sup> and then after his death to the former ruler, Shah Shuja. In an uncanny anticipation of some influential words used by Alexander Burnes just before the disastrous British occupation of Afghanistan in 1838–9, Moorcroft convinced himself that 'a single British regiment would suffice to establish Shuja-ul-Mulk as sovereign' at Kabul.<sup>145</sup> Like Burnes, Moorcroft believed that Russian ambitions left the British no choice but

to interfere even in the concerns of Afghanistan. And it may now be enquired why they should not? Does the objection lie in the distance? ... it may not impertinently be asked if Kabul be more distant from the British frontier than from that of Russia? ... It is presumed that external policy is not bound by other laws than the maxims of state necessity guided by honest and manly feeling. It would border on the ridiculous to argue that the motives which advocate the maintenance of friendly relations with Persia are not equally available when applied to the same object in the contiguous country of Kabul.<sup>146</sup>

There was, after all, Russian activity directly to the north of the Hindu Kush.

Just how much evidence to support his views Moorcroft found in those remote and still largely unknown regions, will never be known. He certainly continued his investigations into routes, compiling useful information that had to be rediscovered by later investigators.<sup>147</sup> He compiled an

143 Moorcroft to Swinton, 4 May 1824, *ibid.*, D.250, fo. 146.

144 Moorcroft to Swinton, 17 Dec. 1821, 10 Bengal/PC, 20 Sept. 1822, no. 66.

145 Journal 1823, 10L Eur. MSS. D.249, fo. 171. Cf. Burnes to Macnaghten, 2 June 1838, 'East India, Copies of the Correspondence of Sir Alexander Burnes with the Governor-General of India', *Accounts and Papers*: 1859, 2nd session, xxv, p. 242.

146 Moorcroft to Swinton, circa July 1824, 10L Eur. MSS. D.266, fos. 73–4.

147 See for example *ibid.*, c.42–3. These are copies made by the brother of Moorcroft's young companion, George Trebeck. A facsimile of c.42, fo. 30 is presented in Woodman, *Himalayan Frontiers*, p. 23 as though it was from 'Moorcroft's Diaries'. Moreover the opposite page alone has eight errors of fact about Moorcroft but the ill health and personal tragedy which accompanied the production of what was her last book must be largely to blame.

## William Moorcroft Plays the Great Game

important assessment of the military resources of the various independent chiefs of Western Turkestan.<sup>148</sup> And, at Bokhara in June 1825, he picked up every scrap of information to be had about a recent Russian official mission to that place, all of which seemed to him to confirm not only the extent of her hostile designs against India but her sustained interest in the northern approaches into the sub-continent by way of Kokand, Chinese Turkestan, and Ladakh.<sup>149</sup> His own plans to investigate that line came to nothing, although he made a foray eastwards to within about thirty miles of Samarkand.<sup>150</sup> On 22 July 1825 he at last turned south for the long and dangerous return journey to India, still scribbling busily into his journal on the usual multitude of topics and still with astonishing energy considering that he was by then almost sixty and had been away from India for the best part of six years. It is somehow characteristic that the last, interrupted entry in his journal was a discussion of the possibility of settling British emigrants along the Upper Oxus.<sup>151</sup> He probably wrote it on 3 August 1825. Less than four weeks later this seemingly indestructible little man was dead and his spirited personal foray into the Great Game was over.

It can be conceded at once that Moorcroft's importance as a player of the Game was certainly not that he had a great influence on the policies and views of the government he tried to serve so faithfully. The contrast with Burnes in this respect is sharp. It is true, as has been seen, that Moorcroft's journey in 1812 had some influence on Hastings' decision to annex Kumaon and Garhwal after the Nepal War. In 1815 there was in London a brief flicker of interest in his evidence of Russian intrigue in Kashmir.<sup>152</sup> Later, in 1824, the influence of his discovery that the Russians had been corresponding with Ranjit Singh can be discerned in the instructions given to Claude Wade, newly appointed political assistant at Ludhiana.<sup>153</sup> Moreover, some of Moorcroft's new geographical information (route surveys were done both in 1812 and from 1819 onwards) was embodied in the official maps.<sup>154</sup> But these things are mere droplets

148 IOL Eur. MSS. D.265, fo. 319. He sent it to Swinton in October 1823, *ibid.*, fo. 196.

149 Draft letter to Swinton, 10 June 1825, *ibid.*, G.28, fo. 407. Whether this information referred to the visit by Meyendorff and his colleagues in 1820 is not clear.

150 Described in IOL Eur. MSS. D.254.

151 *Ibid.*, fo. 392.

152 This was in conjunction with news of Ranjit Singh's growing military strength and of his designs in Kashmir, Draft Political Desp. to Bengal, 6 Jan. 1815, IO E/4/683, fos. 123-5.

153 Wade, *Narrative*, pp. 67-8; E.R. Kapadia, 'The Diplomatic Career of Sir Claude Wade: A Study of British Relations with the Sikhs and Afghans, July 1823 to March 1840' (MA, London, 1938), pp. 42-3.

154 Phillimore, *Survey of India*, III.286; Wilson in Moorcroft and Trebeck, *Travels*, I.xxv.

compared with the torrents of ink Moorcroft poured out and his passionate conviction that the information he provided was vital to the future of his country. The overwhelming impression is one of official neglect, both in Calcutta and, although to a lesser extent, in London.

There are many reasons for it. In the first place, although Moorcroft's breeding operations were an important element in India's military defence, he was employed beyond the frontier only in his capacity as superintendent of the stud and his authority was merely to seek and purchase horses. All the rest, Moorcroft added himself. And, not surprisingly, the government regarded him in these other fields much as he regarded himself, as an amateur; being neither soldier, surveyor, merchant, geographer, nor political agent. Even worse, there were times when he seemed like an irresponsible bungler. In 1812, his clandestine journey into Nepal without permission exacerbated an already tense situation along the border and nine years later his unauthorized initiatives in Ladakh threatened to embroil Britain with her increasingly powerful ally in the Punjab, Ranjit Singh. 'His political views,' remarked London, 'are characterized for the most part by zeal, rather than by sound judgement.'<sup>155</sup> That was putting it mildly. Moorcroft was very well aware of his unfortunate reputation as an unbalanced enthusiast but he unwittingly made it worse by the extraordinarily 'voluminous ... prolix and desultory' despatches with which he bombarded Calcutta.<sup>156</sup> One can almost hear across the years the sigh as yet another fat packet arrived from the back of beyond, and it is little wonder that the bemused Calcutta Secretariat tended to pigeon-hole his letters rather than go to the immense labour of copying them into the record.<sup>157</sup>

The almost unlimited range of Moorcroft's darting interest, which today makes his writings such a mine for those interested in the Kashmir shawl or animal disease or Himalayan art (to take but three from the hundreds of topics which fell under his eye), seems to have incapacitated him from writing the kind of ordered and closely argued memoranda and felicitous prose which Burnes managed so well. Moorcroft was at his worst on paper.<sup>158</sup> He seems to have found compression next to impossible and his writings were often hammered into final form only after endless drafts and even then are liberally sprinkled with very necessary apologies for

155 Draft Political Desp. to Bengal, 6 Apr. 1825, 10 E/4/714, fo. 380.

156 Gov.-Gen. to Court of Directors, 9 Jan. 1824, 10 L/PS/6/34.

157 Ordered 'to lie for consideration' was the phrase used. See, for example, 10 Bengal/PC, 20 Sept. 1822, after no. 76. The Calcutta authorities were later rebuked for not bringing Moorcroft's communications on record, 10 E/4/714, fo. 380.

158 He published very little, a matter which caused him some regret when he reflected on the period of his successful and important veterinary practice in London.

## William Moorcroft Plays the Great Game

their length and disorder. Moreover his death on the road denied him the opportunity, which Burnes seized so successfully when it came, of putting his views face to face at the very highest level. But Burnes was commissioned to do what he did. Moorcroft was not. He wandered into the Great Game by accident. Yet, by making all knowledge his province and travelling where no official Englishman had been before, he was bound to become involved willy-nilly in the wider issues of imperial security.

Some writers have found this view hard, or impossible, to accept. Puzzled by Moorcroft's exceptionally high salary and intrigued by the frequency with which his name and correspondence appear in the political and secret files, at least one of them<sup>159</sup> convinced herself that behind the elaborate smokescreen of horses or shawl goats Moorcroft was in reality a government undercover agent, an official player of the Game. His journey in 1812 was, by this interpretation, a deliberate reconnaissance made with the coming Nepal War in mind and the latter trip an early move against the Russians. Needless to say, this is also a view which commends itself to Russian historians.<sup>160</sup> But unfortunately, or fortunately, there is not a shred of evidence to support it, although much to deny it. Moorcroft's extraordinary political and commercial activities were the consequences not the causes of his journeys and they were conducted from first to last without explicit official authority. His reports in most cases were eventually brought on record and reported to London, but that was because he was a senior Company servant writing officially to the Secretary of the Political Department and there was no other way of dealing with his correspondence. It was certainly not because the Calcutta authorities put a high value on his information.<sup>161</sup>

159 The late Rachel Gibb, who intended to write a biography of Moorcroft. I am indebted to her brother, Richard Gibb, for the gift of some of her papers. They include a 7-page typescript survey of Moorcroft's career in India in which her belief that he was an official intelligence gatherer is made explicit. This is confirmed by some of her letters and a draft chapter sent to Mr J. Barber-Lomax, to whom I am also greatly indebted. Miss Gibb's beliefs on this score were voiced to many fellow researchers in the India Office Library in the late 1950s, including the author, and their influence is detectable in the doubts expressed by Woodman, *Himalayan Frontiers*, p. 26 and by F. Watson, 'A Pioneer in the Himalayas: William Moorcroft', *Geographical Magazine*, xxxii (1959-60), 214. See also Datta, *Western Himalayan Politics*, p. 95. On the contrary, Col. G. Morgan, whose forthcoming *High Stakes in Central Asia* has a chapter on espionage, is convinced that Moorcroft was not a secret agent and that there was no secret service agency in India, then or later.

160 N.A. Khalfin, 'British Expansion in Central Asia in the Thirties and Forties of the Nineteenth Century', *Istoria SSSR* (1958), translated with comments in *Central Asian Review*, vi (1958), 386. See especially p. 390.

161 As is perfectly clear from the tone of their letter to Court of Directors, 9 Jan. 1824, 10 U/PS/6/34.

The principal reason, of course, was that they had much more demanding preoccupations near home. The Marquess of Hastings' administration, which covered all of Moorcroft's two trans-frontier journeys, was dominated by the Nepalese, Maratha, and Pindari wars and then by the immense problems of resettlement and administration which came in the wake of successful war and annexation. The historian of that administration has found no significant preoccupation with external danger from Russia at all.<sup>162</sup> It is not really surprising when one considers that for the whole of this period Russia was Britain's victorious ally in war and with her the principal architect of the peace which followed, the first of any length in Europe for a generation. Statesmen and politicians, as a recent historian of Anglo-Russian rivalry has reminded us,<sup>163</sup> are bound by their assumptions and the working hypotheses which they construct upon them. It was Moorcroft's misfortune always to be offering evidence and opinions which did not fit the current hypothesis. Both literally and metaphorically his was a voice crying in the wilderness. When his first reports of Russian intrigue and a joint Franco-Russian threat arrived at the end of 1812, France and Russia were at war and Napoleon soon in retreat from Moscow. From that time, and partly for that reason, he was regarded as a chaser after shadows, and his unrepentant suspicions of Russia continued to be dismissed as moonshine, irrelevant to the contemporary facts of international life. This put Moorcroft himself on the defensive, as it had earlier. In August 1821, after discussing a possible Russian invasion from the north, he added:

This speculation taken in connection with the late political adjustments in Europe presents an aspect so improbable, so degrading and so monstrous as to make me desert its further prosecution with pleasure. The suspicion forced its way into my mind almost in opposition to my judgement.<sup>164</sup>

The suspicion, however, remained. Two years later, Moorcroft was quick to take advantage of what he called 'the fermentation that prevails in Europe' and the newly increased risk of Anglo-Russian hostility there to point out once again the dangers from Russian 'plans of aggrandizement contemplated in the East.'<sup>165</sup> In fact, as we now know, the russophobe tide in British opinion had already turned and was beginning to run strongly

162 R.J. Bingle, 'The Governor-Generalship of the Marquess of Hastings, 1813-23' (D PHIL Oxford, 1964).

163 Gillard, *Struggle for Asia*, pp. 4-6.

164 Moorcroft to Metcalfe, 15 Aug. 1821, IO Bengal/PC, 20 Sept. 1822, no. 63.

165 Draft letter to Swinton, 7 Oct. 1823, IO L Eur. MSS. D.265, fos. 180, 196.

## William Moorcroft Plays the Great Game

in Moorcroft's direction.<sup>166</sup> He had been dead four years before it first became a discernible influence on Britain's Central Asian policies in 1829. And by the time it dominated those policies in the thirties his views, writings, and experiences had been filed and forgotten and new generations wrestled with the problems which had preoccupied him, almost as though he had never been.

The great exception to the general neglect, as has been seen, was Burnes himself. He admitted that his own journey to Bokhara was inspired by the wish to complete what Moorcroft had begun, and certainly his views about the Russian danger to India were often pure Moorcroft. But Burnes was far too pushing and ambitious to let Moorcroft's achievements stand in the way of his own. Indeed he very skilfully, though probably quite unconsciously, used Moorcroft's death and failure to underline his own courage, survival, and success.<sup>167</sup> Burnes was a born self-publicist, Moorcroft exactly the reverse. He did not even trouble to publish an account of his important pioneering journey into Tibet in 1812 until he was persuaded to make over his rough manuscript journal to young Horace Wilson, then Secretary of the Asiatic Society of Bengal. Wilson did the editing and the President of the Society published a version which cut out much of the material but adhered faithfully to Moorcroft's own words in what was left.<sup>168</sup> The result was not entirely happy, and the unkind criticisms which followed convinced Moorcroft that he should write his own account of his later travels, or, in case he failed to return, make arrangements 'that a plain record may be given ... for the benefit of the public but *that my own language may not scrupulously be preserved*, the circumstances in which I have been placed seldom admitting the leisure sufficient for relating observations in studied phrase or in rounded period.'<sup>169</sup>

Horace Wilson was the man suggested by Moorcroft for the task of producing his posthumous travels but by 1833, when Burnes reached London with most of the raw material, Wilson was already building the reputation which in a few years was to make him an Oxford Professor, one of the world's leading Sanskritists, Librarian of the East India Company, and Examiner at Haileybury. That Wilson was appalled at the state of

166 J.H. Gleason, *The Genesis of Russophobia in Great Britain: A Study of the Interaction of Policy and Opinion* (Cambridge, MA 1950); V.K. Chavda, *India, Britain, Russia: A Study in British Opinion (1838-78)* (Delhi 1967).

167 Burnes, *Travels*, I. xiv, 192, 209-12.

168 Moorcroft Journal, Feb. 1820, IOL Eur. MSS. D.236, fos. 25-6; Moorcroft to Dr C. Abel, 7 Dec. 1824, *ibid.*, D.251, fo. 150.

169 Moorcroft to Swinton, 27 June 1823, *ibid.*, G.28, fo. 361.



Moorcroft's papers is no surprise to anyone who has cast himself adrift in that daunting sea of haphazard and often illegible manuscripts. Nor, in view of Moorcroft's explicit request, is it any surprise that Wilson felt himself compelled 'to re-write almost the whole, and ... to compress unmercifully,'<sup>170</sup> although he must have resented the time involved. Even so, what is surprising is that such an eminent scholar should make such a careless job of it. Wilson's scholarly output in general has come under close scrutiny recently from two American scholars who have raised serious doubts about both his competence and his veracity.<sup>171</sup> His editing of Moorcroft's *Travels* certainly lends some support to their views. His departures from Moorcroft's own wording were often not only quite unnecessary but frequently distort the sense and even on occasions lead to downright error.<sup>172</sup> Perhaps even worse, at least as far as Moorcroft's posthumous reputation is concerned, Wilson rigorously pruned out much of the colourful and not always entirely proper personal comments and experiences which so enlivened Burnes's accounts of his own travels. He made almost no use of Moorcroft's often uninhibited letters, confining himself almost exclusively to the much less lively daily journal. There is scarcely a hint of the material which is the basis of this article.<sup>173</sup> It is not easy to make a man like Moorcroft dull, but Wilson has almost managed it.

Not only that, but it took eight years to bring the work out and this delay finished what chance there was that the book would catch public attention and belatedly establish Moorcroft's reputation. It is not easy to account for the delay. A recent writer has wondered whether there was a conspiracy to hold it back.<sup>174</sup> It is certainly possible, although, on the evidence available, Wilson does not seem to have been the guilty one.<sup>175</sup> What is certain is that by 1841, when the book finally appeared, Moorcroft had been well and

170 Moorcroft and Trebeck, *Travels*, I. iii.

171 G. and N.R. Sirkin, 'Horace Hayman Wilson and Gamesmanship in Indology', *Asian Studies*, III (1965), 301 and 'Of Raising Myths for Fun and Profit', *Columbia Forum*, XI (1968), 33.

172 Some examples are noted by W.G. Archer, *Indian Painting from the Punjab Hills* (2 vols., London, 1973), I. 224, 247, 261, who is justly critical of what he calls Wilson's 'censored paraphrase' of Moorcroft's manuscripts. Irwin, *The Kashmir Shawl*, p. 43 calls Wilson's précis of Moorcroft's words 'arbitrary and incomplete.'

173 The sole important exceptions are the few pages on Agha Mehdi and the importance of Ladakh in vol. 1, chaps. 5 and 6.

174 J. Keay, *When Men and Mountains Meet* (London, 1977), pp. 43-4. William Fraser, whom Keay suspects, offered the papers in his possession to the Asiatic Society of Bengal just before he died in 1835, *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal*, IV (1835), 177. The only public reason given for the delay was the lack of a suitable map.

175 There is some interesting correspondence on the preparation of the work in the Wilson MSS., 10L Eur. MSS. E. 301/2-4 and in the correspondence between Wilson and his publishers, John Murray. I am very grateful to John Keay for copies of the latter.

## William Moorcroft Plays the Great Game

truly scooped, not only by later travellers like Conolly, Burnes, and Masson, but by events themselves. In 1841 Afghanistan was no longer the dangerous *terra incognita* it had been when Moorcroft set out in 1819 but the campaigning ground of a British army and the subject of several works much more lively and entertaining than Wilson's pedestrian and out-of-date edition. Moreover, a few months after it appeared, the riveting horrors which followed the 1841 Kabul insurrection pushed the earlier and less dramatic experiences of William Moorcroft irretrievably into the background.

Barely 700 copies of Moorcroft's two-volume work were sold in all, which is less than the number Burnes's three-volume account sold on the first day.<sup>176</sup> And whereas the family and friends of the martyred Burnes kept his name before the public for another twenty years as part of a deliberate campaign,<sup>177</sup> Moorcroft was quickly forgotten. His papers lay undisturbed for nearly a century until in the 1920s Sir Frederick Smith, the veterinary historian, examined them in substantiating his conviction that Moorcroft was one of the great pioneers of modern veterinary medicine.<sup>178</sup> At about the same time Professor H.W.C. Davis mentioned them as source material for his brilliant Raleigh Lecture of 1926 in which he cast Moorcroft very firmly as one of the early players of the Great Game.<sup>179</sup> The present article has taken up the theme almost where Davis touched and left it fifty years ago.

Although there are thus many good reasons for the neglect of Moorcroft's role as a player of the Great Game both at the time and since, they should not be allowed any longer to obscure his importance. It is simply this: that in a way that is sometimes almost uncanny, Moorcroft anticipated the views, preoccupations, and methods of future players of the Game. To take only the men of the thirties, he shared with them a conviction of the reality of the Russian threat to India and independent Turkestan. Like them, he was a dedicated patriot convinced of the superior virtues of British rule and anxious to extend British influence far beyond its present limits through annexation, protection, agencies, and,

176 Information very kindly supplied by the publishers, John Murray. The Moorcroft volumes were not reprinted until 1971 (Sagar Publications, New Delhi).

177 Described in G. Alder, 'The "Garbled" Blue Books of 1839: Myth or Reality?', *Historical Journal*, xv (1972), 237 ff.

178 There is a running commentary by him as he worked in his unpublished letters to Fred Bullock, Secretary of the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons. I am very grateful to Mr J. Barber-Lomax for his help in locating the relevant letters in this substantial uncatalogued collection, and to Miss B. Horder for allowing me to consult them at the rcvs Library.

179 'The Great Game in Asia (1800-44)', *Proceedings of the British Academy*, xii (1926), esp. 244-7.

above all, trade. Like them, he believed in the central importance of steam navigation along the Indus and the need to cater for the special requirements of the Asian market in order to capture it for Britain. Like them, he accumulated commercial information, sent home samples, and used a trial caravan of British goods to test the market. Like them, he pushed out what a later Viceroy called British 'nervous tissues,'<sup>180</sup> despatching agents or letters far beyond the frontier, probing new routes, taking his British goods and British troops where none had ever been before, and introducing new names, problems, and possibilities into the official files for the first time. Above all his style was that of the young men of the 1830s. Davis summarized it like this:

The men of whom I have been speaking believed that they were helping, each within his allotted sphere, to strengthen the defences and enlarge the influence of the British Empire. They were not born administrators; they had the roving and adventurous instinct; they could not live contentedly in the social hive; and so they obtained leave to work for the hive outside the hive. They were individualists; this is, they belonged to a type which is now suspect or worse. But a great Empire has need of individualists, especially on its frontiers and in its outposts. The British Empire has used such men more freely than most other Empires; and while profiting by their labours it has seldom treated them in their lifetimes with undue respect or generosity.<sup>181</sup>

Every word fits Moorcroft exactly.

But Moorcroft's anticipations of the future extended far beyond the 1830s. He anticipated the renewed interest in trans-Himalayan trade and the problems which Sikh expansion in that direction could cause in the 1840s; he foresaw the Sikh wars and the annexation of the Punjab later in that decade; he anticipated the whole gamut of British political and commercial endeavour in the 1860s and 1870s to penetrate through Kashmir and Ladakh beyond (or round) the Karakoram; he forecast the successful Muslim insurrection in Chinese Turkestan, saw the Chinese weakness which made it possible, and anticipated the likelihood of dangerous Russian expansion in that direction as a result. His interest in the approach routes across the Pamirs anticipated that of the 1890s and his fears of Russian intrigue and penetration into Tibet were those which took Younghusband's force to Lhasa at the beginning of the twentieth century. More recently still, Moorcroft's fears of danger to the sub-continent in the far north across the Himalayas – and he admitted the

180 Dufferin to Cross, 3 June 1877, 10L Dufferin MSS. vol. 20. p. 121.

181 Davis, 'Great Game', p. 256.

## William Moorcroft Plays the Great Game

possibility that it might come from China – have been vindicated by the Sino-Indian Himalayan conflict of the early 1960s. Indeed, in the verbal battle between the two powers which preceded the real thing, Moorcroft's opinions were disinterred from the archives and used as evidence by the Government of India and they have been cited at great length subsequently by historians of the dispute.<sup>182</sup> More striking perhaps even than this are the magnificent military roads which the Government of India has since blasted across the great mountains and empty valleys to Leh, from Kashmir on the one side and Kulu on the other. They are powerful witness to the essential soundness of Moorcroft's judgement about the strategic importance of Ladakh and of the best ways of reaching it. All this and much, much more has developed along lines first laid down by him.

He has been well called 'the father of modern exploration in both the Western Himalayas and Central Asia.'<sup>183</sup> He was also the father of the Great Game in the same area. Indeed he was a pioneer in almost all he touched, whether it was the new scientific veterinary profession in Britain, or the introduction of novel surgical techniques, or new methods of mass-producing horseshoes, or the introduction of oat cultivation to India. So too he was a pioneer player of the Great Game. It was his misfortune, unlike Burnes, whose timing was impeccable, to play alone when his countrymen were scarcely aware that the Game was being played. In July 1823, Moorcroft wrote to a former friend, Lord Harewood, the words which stand at the head of this article. He was talking about the economic importance of the Himalayan hill states and he was right. But the words stand as a text for the whole of his involvement in the Great Game. He *did* stand alone – sometimes for a very long time – but in the end most of his ideas had to be considered afresh by later Indian governments. Ideas born prematurely are often still-born. But that they are conceived at all is the important thing. And as Moorcroft was fond of saying, 'Ce n'est que le premier pas qui coute.'<sup>184</sup> No one knew this better than the young man who took the second step, and who brought Moorcroft's papers back to London in November 1833.

### *University of Reading*

182 Govt of India, *Report of the Officials of the Governments of India and the People's Republic of China, on the Boundary Question* (Ministry of External Affairs, New Delhi, 1961), pp. 288, 299, 313, 314, and CR 199; Woodman, *Himalayan Frontiers*, pp. 22–30; A. Lamb, *The China-India Border: The Origins of the Disputed Boundaries* (Oxford, 1964), pp. 61–2; G.N. Rao, *The India-China Border: A Reappraisal* (Bombay, 1968), pp. 25–6, 36–7.

183 Keay, *Men and Mountains*, p. 18.

184 As, for example, in Moorcroft to Palmer, 8 May 1821, IOL Eur. MSS. D.260, fo. 44.