Everest and the Frontiers of Empire

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In May 1921, Charles Howard-Bury, the leader of the 1921 British Mount Everest reconnaissance expedition was in Kalimpong, visiting the home of the local missionary, Dr. J. A. Graham. The expedition was heading to Everest to undertake detailed mapping and reconnaissance prior to any attempts at climbing the mountain. In the mid-nineteenth century the summit of Everest had been surveyed remotely from Darjeeling by the Survey of India and by 1856 had been confirmed as the highest mountain summit in the world. The Surveyor General Andrew Waugh decided to name this remotely surveyed peak Mount Everest to honour his predecessor, Sir George Everest, this despite Everest’s own preference for local names for mountain summits. The British initially maintained that Mount Everest had no standardized and universally accepted local name, although by 1926 the Swedish explorer Sven Hedin had pointed to the use of Chomolongma for the Everest massif in Chinese maps printed in Paris as early as 1733.[[1]](#endnote-1)

The mountain gradually became incorporated into British imperial knowledge and governance practices via remote sensing, cartography and the imposition of new toponyms, a process that frequently obscured older indigenous and regional topographies.[[2]](#endnote-2) As an object of scientific and geostrategic attention, knowledge of Mount Everest formed part of a wider project that rendered Asia legible to, and governable by, the British in India. The British constructed a narrative of discovery around the surveying of Everest that stressed the invisibility of Everest to Western ways of knowing and expressed considerable cartographic anxiety about blanks on the map in this sensitive border region. Even in 1921 Sir Francis Younghusband could still say that ‘we knew nothing of the immediate approaches to the mountain’.[[3]](#endnote-3)

What these Western accounts failed to register was the visibility of Everest and its prominence in other ways of knowing, particularly those of Tibetan Buddhism. When Charles Howard-Bury was in Kalimpong he recorded a conversation with David Macdonald the British Trade Agent in Yatung, Tibet and the acting Political Officer, Sikkim at the time. Macdonald was Anglo-Sikkimese and fluent in the Tibetan language. Howard-Bury recorded that ‘he told me that an old Tibetan lama, who knew Mount Everest well, had described it as “Miti guti cha-phu long-na,” “the mountain visible from all directions, and where a bird becomes blind if it flies so high”.’[[4]](#endnote-4) For Tibetan and Nepalese Buddhists, the visibility of Everest was not merely physical; it was also informed by spiritual geographies, the summit being the abode of the goddess Miyolangsangma, the Goddess of Inexhaustible Giving and one of the Five Long-Life Sisters, a mountain deity still revered by Sherpas in the Solu Khumbu region of Nepal today.

These competing narratives of invisibility and visibility register Mount Everest’s status as a boundary object. The mountain is situated on the international border between Nepal and Tibet, both countries that were closed to Western travellers in the period. Both Nepal and Tibet formed part of British India’s geostrategic thinking, forming part of an arc of ‘buffer states’ the British hoped would exclude any influences from the Russian and Chinese empires, helping to secure the routes to India across the trans-Himalaya passes that might be used by invading armies. But whilst Britain’s relationship with Nepal was governed by treaty and the presence of a British Resident in Kathmandu from the early nineteenth century, ensuring that Nepal was aligned with British foreign policy objectives, the position of Tibet caused the British Government of India considerable anxiety. Formally suzerain to the Chinese empire, Tibet acted with increasing autonomy in the late nineteenth century as the Qing state’s grip weakened on its western provinces. From the 1890s onwards, Britain’s various proposals for climbing Everest, a peak located outside of the British Empire, mirrored Britain’s increasingly aggressive attempts to integrate Tibet more formally into British trade, security and political networks.

Sir Francis Younghusband first discussed the possibility of climbing Mount Everest with Brigadier General Charles Granville Bruce in 1893 when they were both involved on a military mission to relieve the besieged British garrison in Chitral.[[5]](#endnote-5) Both men were to play critical roles in ensuring that Tibet was opened up to British interests and that Everest was made accessible to British mountaineers. With Lord Curzon’s appointment as Viceroy of India in 1899, the Government of India pursued a more aggressive ‘forward’ policy with Tibet. Tibet’s refusal to open diplomatic relations with British India saw Curzon send a punitive military mission to Lhasa in 1903-4 led by Younghusband. The invasion of Tibet led to widespread bloodshed and wholesale looting of Tibetan cultural artefacts by British troops. Tibet’s spiritual leader, the 13th Dalai Lama fled to Mongolia. Britian imposed the 1904 Anglo-Tibetan Convention on Tibet, establishing the presence of British Trade Agencies in Yatung, Gyantse and Gartok and occupying the strategic Chumbi valley after having imposed punitive reparations on Tibet. The Trade Agencies increasingly acted as intelligence gathering centres under the jurisdiction of the British Political Officer in Sikkim. In 1910 the Chinese sent a military force to Tibet to reassert their claim to political rule and the 13th Dalai Lama fled to Darjeeling in British India, where he increasingly came under the influence of Sir Charles Bell, the British Political Officer in Sikkim.

After the collapse of the Qing empire in 1911 and the expulsion of the Chinese from Lhasa the Dalai Lama returned to Tibet. In January 1913 he reached Lhasa, issuing ‘what the Tibetans regard as a declaration for independence’[[6]](#endnote-6) from China. The Simla Convention of 1914 attempted to negotiate a tripartite agreement between Britain, Tibet and China that would fix international borders and define spheres of influence. Britian supported the idea of an ‘Outer Tibet’ and ‘Inner Tibet’, the former with a Tibetan administration in Lhasa, nominally suzerain to China but largely autonomous in its domestic and foreign policy, a position China could not accept. Early republican China, however, was in no position to impose a settlement and withdrew from the convention. Whilst the British and Tibetans proceeded with a bilateral agreement, the borders imposed at Simla became a longstanding cause of contention for successive Chinese administrations.

The British attempt to climb Mount Everest can be understood as a component of this British ‘forward’ policy in Tibet. The Royal Geographical Society and the Alpine Club began lobbying the India Office and the Government of India in 1919 for permission to access Tibet and by 1920 Sir Charles Bell had secured permission from the Dalai Lama for an expedition. In the post-war period, Everest took on an enhanced symbolic significance for the British imperial power. Characterised as the ‘Third Pole’ and the last great challenge of the age of exploration, climbing Everest offered the British the opportunity to assert their fitness to rule over British India by reasserting a form of imperial masculinity that had been shattered by the experiences of the First World War. It was undertaken in a period of extreme geopolitical uncertainty, characterised by numerous threats to the borders of British India. The Anglo-Afghan war of 1919 had spilled over into full scale tribal insurrection on the North-West Frontier Province, a conflict that lasted until 1923. Growing Soviet influence in Xinjiang and instability in Republican China threatened the borders of India just as Indian nationalists increasing agitation for self-rule called into question the very legitimacy of the British Raj.

As the British Mount Everest reconnaissance expedition wound its way up the Chumbi Valley towards Everest in May 1921, Britain’s influence in Tibet was at its zenith. Sir Charles Bell had been invited to Lhasa and was resident there between November 1920 and October 1921. Bell was the first European to arrive in Lhasa with an invitation from the Dalai Lama. Lord Curzon had become Foreign Secretary in 1919 and from 1921 the Foreign Office ‘declared that Britian would deal with Tibet as an effectively if not legally independent state.’[[7]](#endnote-7) British military officers were training the Tibetan military in early 1923, part of a broader strategy to support an autonomous Tibet with its own foreign policy and with the power to resist imposition of rule by China. But this highwater mark of British influence in Tibet was short lived. After the British Mount Everest expedition of 1924 there were a number of issues that led to a worsening of diplomatic relations between Tibet and Britain, some relating to the expedition itself. Conservative clerical opinion in Tibet was incensed by John Noel’s unauthorized employment of seven Buddhist monks as part of his theatrical staging of his 1924 film *The Epic of Everest*.[[8]](#endnote-8) In 1924 the Tibetan government also believed it had evidence to suggest that F. M. Bailey, the British Political Officer, Sikkim may have been involved in a plot to replace the Dalai Lama as head of state with the head of the Tibetan military, Tsarong Dzasa.[[9]](#endnote-9) No British expedition to Everest was allowed back into Tibet until 1933 and no resident British diplomatic presence was allowed in Lhasa until 1936. By 1947 Britain had quit India and any notion of Tibet as an autonomous entity was crushed by its forced reintegration into a resurgent China under the Chinese Communist Party in 1950-51.

1. N. E. Odell, ‘The Supposed Tibetan or Nepalese Name for Mt. Everest’, *The Alpine Journal*, Vol.47, 1935, 127-129. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Lachlan Fleetwood, *Science on the Roof of the World: Empire and the Remaking of the Himalaya* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022) 63. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Sir Fracis Younghusband, ‘Introduction’ p.18, in C. K. Howard-Bury, *Mount Everest: The Reconnaissance, 1921* (London: Edward Arnold, 1922). [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. C. K. Howard-Bury, *Mount Everest: The Reconnaissance, 1921* (London: Edward Arnold, 1922), 31. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Sir Fracis Younghusband, ‘Introduction’ p.1, in C. K. Howard-Bury, *Mount Everest: The Reconnaissance, 1921* (London: Edward Arnold, 1922). [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Alex McKay, *Tibet and the British Raj: The Frontier Cadre 1904-1947*, (Dharmasala, Library of Tibetan Works, 2009), 62. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Peter john Probst, *The Future of the Great Game: Sir Olaf Caroe, India’s Independence, and the Defense of Asia* (Akron, Ohio: University of Akron Press, 2005), 73. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Peter H. Hansen, ‘The Dancing Lamas of Everest: Cinema, Orientalism, and Anglo-Tibetan Relations in the 1920s’, *The American Historical Review*, 101 (3), 1996, 712-747. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. McKay, *Tibet and the British Raj*, 115-132. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)