The Bogle Mission: travels through Bhutan and Tibet 1774-1777

By James Cooper

In 1774, Warren Hastings, the Governor General of India, dispatched a young Scotsman, George Bogle, as emissary to the Panchen Lama’s court in Tibet’s second largest city, Shigatse. The Panchen Lama, an outgoing and intelligent man, was then the most powerful figure in Tibet outside the capital Lhasa. Despite, or perhaps because of the growing influence of Beijing at Lhasa, the Panchen Lama was prepared to carry out his own foreign policy initiatives.

A trade route to Lhasa
Following the closure of Nepal’s borders after the Gurkha overthrow of the Newars in 1769, Hastings hoped the Bogle mission would lead to the establishment of a trade route between India and China. Although a community of Capuchin missionaries had lived in Lhasa in the early years of the eighteenth century, there had been no diplomatic contacts between modern Europe and Tibet. In retrospect, the Bogle mission brought only limited and short-term benefits to trade and politics. After 1792, the Tibetans closed their doors to Europeans, until they were forced to enter into relations with British India by the Younghusband mission of 1903-04. Only a handful of Europeans were able to visit central Tibet in the nineteenth century.

Bogle, accompanied by surgeon Alexander Hamilton, enjoyed a hospitable reception in Tibet and was apparently fascinated by its culture. He also seems to have formed a warm personal relationship with the Panchen Lama during his stay in Shigatse; the Scotsman enjoyed an ease of access to the Panchen’s court that no European ever enjoyed again. Bogle died soon after returning to India, before he could collate the reports that he compiled for Hastings concerning conditions in Tibet (and Bhutan, through which he travelled to Shigatse).

Significance for Tibetan studies
The writings of Bogle and Hamilton have, until now, remained largely unknown, with only one less than comprehensive and poorly sourced early twentieth century summary of Bogle’s observations available to the general reader. Yet the reports of these eighteenth-century travellers provide a unique resource for the study of Tibet in the pre-modern period. Alastair Lamb has thus rendered great service in providing a properly edited version of Bogle and Hamilton’s writings.

This is not an account of a one-way transmission of knowledge, but a genuine exchange reflecting an era of the European Enlightenment and a Himalayan Buddhist court open to the world.


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