

THE BRITISH RESIDENCY
IN THE HIMALAYAN STATE OF SIKKIM:
A HERITAGE BUILDING RESTORED TO ITS FORMER GLORY

ANNA BALIKCI-DENJONGPA
Namgyal Institute of Tibetology

On a hill top above the Himalayan town of Gangtok stands a splendid two-storey Victorian mansion built in the style of a typical British country house. Somewhat out of place, it stands as a reminder of the British Raj and its eventful role on the Tibetan Frontier. The Residency, as it used to be known, was the official residence of the political officers in charge of overseeing the British Empire's interests in the region and its relations with Tibet and the Himalayan kingdoms of Sikkim and Bhutan. In British India, political officers were advisors to the rulers of the princely states though they also served as special envoys or ambassadors in areas beyond the frontier.

Between the year of its construction in 1890 and the departure of its last British incumbent in 1948, the Residency was the home of extraordinary men who all shared a fascination with Tibet or Central Asia. Some of these political officers along with their guests, such as Sir Charles Bell and Sir Francis Younghusband became famous for their diplomatic and military exploits or their writings about Tibet and the Dalai Lama. Over the years, the Residency Gangtok received a large number of visitors as it was the last post on the way to Tibet before officers, scientists, and Everest mountaineers started their arduous journey across the Nathula pass and into the Chumbi Valley of Tibet. It was described by Sir Basil Gould in his memoirs *The Jewel in the Lotus* as "perhaps the most attractive medium-sized home in the whole of India" (1957: 168).

Today, the Residency, now known as Raj Bhavan, is the official residence of the governors of the Indian state of Sikkim. Damaged and rendered too unstable for habitation by an earthquake in 2006, this silent witness of history has recently been restored to its former glory by the present Governor of Sikkim, Shri Balmiki Prasad Singh.

Jean Claude White

The Residency came into existence as a result of a conflict which arose in 1886 between British India and Tibet over the latter's occupation of

a fort located well within Sikkim territory. Following the evacuation of the Tibetan force in 1888 and the restoration of peace on the frontier, it was thought necessary to appoint a resident political officer to overlook the administration of Sikkim and keep Tibetan influence at bay. The responsibility fell upon Jean Claude White (1853-1918), an engineer from the Public Works Department with no political training or diplomatic experience who remained in Sikkim for nearly twenty years. White is well remembered in Sikkim for having established an administration along with a simple form of law and justice. He built roads, bridges and bungalows, as well as the first schools and hospital. He “encouraged industrious immigrants from Nepal to settle in the almost unpopulated southern areas of the State” (Gould 1957: 169), a migration that greatly contributed to the agricultural development of the region.

Shortly after his appointment, White set out to establish an official British residence in Gangtok. After selecting a charming site in the midst of primeval forest with magnificent views on the snow peaks of Mount Kangchenjunga, he went about the construction of his house with great difficulties. As described in his memoirs *Sikkim and Bhutan: Twenty-One Years on the North-East Frontier* (1909), the ground first had to be levelled, trees had to be felled, stones quarried, and masons and Punjabi carpenters imported. Eventually, after eighteen months of labour, White moved into his British country home in the midst of the Himalayas, complete with veranda and furniture from Oxford Street, before Christmas of 1890. For over a century, visitors have not ceased to admire White’s architectural marvel along with its collection of Himalayan artefacts and luxuriant gardens.

Sikkim was then ruled by a Maharaja who was under British control and as Alex McKay points out in *Tibet and the British Raj: The Frontier Cadre, 1904-1947* (1997) “British influence was symbolised by the concrete road which ran from the Maharaja’s palace to the British Residency.” The latter was located on a higher ridge overlooking the Palace, a clear statement of White’s views of the dynasty of Tibetan origin that had established and ruled Sikkim since the 1640s.

The Residency first came to the attention of the world following the 1903-4 British expedition to Lhasa which sought to establish diplomatic and trade relations with Tibet. Perceval Landan, The Times correspondent on the Younghusband Expedition describes his arrival at the Residency in his book *Lhasa* (1905), “The double Residency gates open and shut behind one, and through the tree ferns and dying

bamboos of the drive one emerges into the English roses and clean, short turf of Mrs Claude White's home-made Paradise." On the eve of the British troops advance to Gyantse, the Residency was the scene of the equally publicised wedding of J.C. White's daughter Beryl to Captain HG Hyslop of the 93rd Highlanders on April 19, 1904.

For the Sikkimese however, the Residency had already become a fascination even before its completion, the Maharani herself struggling to comprehend how a building with such thin walls could ever stand up. She was soon proven wrong when the earthquake of 1897 destroyed her palace, built in Tibetan style with walls as thick as 4 feet 6 inches, while the Residency, though badly cracked, remained standing. White adds that "Almost every market day little bands of women dressed in their best clothes would arrive with a few eggs or a pat of butter to make their salaams to my wife and a request that they might be allowed to go over the house, and their progress was marked with exclamations and gurgles of laughter at the strange ways of the Sahib-log" (1909). The semi-circular design of the Residency's bay window was subsequently copied by both the Palace and the local aristocracy's Gangtok residences.

J.C. White recounts that the Residency garden was "a great joy and an everlasting source of amusement and employment" to himself and his wife. He comments on the beautiful green lawns they enjoyed even in winter, the profusion of early spring bloom "seldom seen in England," the delicate mauve of the abundant wisteria on the house and the wealth of roses that "flowered in such profusion, thousands of blooms could be gathered without making the smallest impression." He reports how his office was covered in roses and was an outstanding sight: "Perhaps the most beautiful sight was my office, a building a few hundred yards from the house, which was completely covered, roof and chimney included, with roses, and was a sight worth coming miles to see."¹

Sir Charles Bell

Following J.C. White's retirement in 1908, Sir Charles Bell (1870-1945) was appointed Political Officer Sikkim, Bhutan and Tibet. With the success of the Younghusband expedition, followed by the establishment of diplomatic relations with Tibet and the establishment of British trade agencies in Yatung and Gyantse, the attention of subsequent political officers naturally turned to Lhasa. Bell moved into

¹ kcl.ac.uk/about/history/archives/india/domestic/garden.html

the Residency in October 1908 which he occupied for the better part of a decade. He taught himself Tibetan and as McKay points out “Bell was very much the scholar-administrator of ICS tradition” and eventually came to be regarded as “the architect of Anglo-Tibetan policy and friendship.”

However, Bell’s contributions to Sikkim’s indigenous population were no less significant and farsighted. He protected villagers from the exploitation of merchants and money lenders by limiting their settlement in the interiors of the country. He prevented the settlement of outsiders in the Bhutia and Lepcha regions of North Sikkim, and introduced Revenue Order 1 of 1917, which is still in force today and precludes the sale of Sikkimese Bhutia and Lepcha land to any other ethnic community.

Bell was also a collector of Tibetan and Himalayan art and the Residency was soon overflowing with artefacts including thangkas, bronzes and curios of all kinds complete with two life size effigies of Bhutanese bodyguards in full armour standing on either side of the Residency’s stair case. His contributions to the Residency were a tennis court built in May 1909 by a Darjeeling contractor and the plantation in 1915 of over 1000 oak, magnolia and walnut trees in the residency compound with the view of providing fire wood and timber to his successors.²

As political officer for the region he was responsible for the Dalai Lama during his 1910-12 exile in British India. The two formed a lasting friendship and at the invitation of the Dalai Lama, Bell spend nearly one year in Lhasa on a diplomatic mission in 1920-21. After his retirement, Bell wrote a number of books on Tibetan history, culture and religion, as well as a last volume on his friend the 13th Dalai Lama which, already in the 1920s, revealed much of this obscure yet fascinating culture to the outside world by someone who had not only become intimate with its people but had himself become largely ‘tibetanised.’

Campbell, O’Connor, Macdonald, Bailey and Weir

In 1918, Bell relocated to Darjeeling where he devoted two years to the study of Tibet. Major W.L. Campbell took over as Political Officer Sikkim, Bhutan and Tibet in 1918 but unexpectedly resigned in 1920, allowing Bell to resume for a year on the understanding that he would return to Tibet. After a short stint by Lt-Colonel W.F. O’Connor, the

² Sir Charles Bell diaries (Jonathan Bracken personal collection).

next political officer to occupy the Residency for a number of years was the famous frontiersman Lt-Colonel F.M. Bailey (1882-1967). He relieved David Macdonald in 1921 who, for a few months, had himself relieved Bell while he was in Lhasa. Bailey time's as Political Officer Sikkim, Bhutan and Tibet was not the highlight of his career and coincided with a down-turn in Anglo-Tibetan relations (McKay 1997: 102). Bailey remains better known for his spying exploits in Central Asia at the time of the Great Game. However, with an interest in butterflies and botany, Bailey is remembered for having introduced a large number of interesting plants in the Residency garden. He shared this interest with the famous British botanist Frank Kingdon-Ward for whom he arranged passports to Tibet to search the fifty-mile unexplored gap of the Tsangpo river. In 1928, Bailey was succeeded by Major J.L.R. Weir who, according to McKay (*ibid.*: 121), followed the example of Bell and succeeded in improving Anglo-Tibetan relations through skilful diplomacy.

Frederick Williamson

Frederick Williamson (1891-1935) took over as Political Officer Sikkim, Bhutan and Tibet in 1933. He was accompanied by his wife Margaret who later wrote *Memoirs of Political Officer's Wife in Tibet, Sikkim and Bhutan* (1987). The Williamsons were married at Gangtok, the ceremony conducted at the White Memorial Hall by Dr Graham followed by a garden party for 300 guests at the Residency. From her book it is clear that the Williamsons did a great deal of entertaining since the Residency, along with the dak bungalow, were the only two places where Europeans could stay. Their long list of guests included government officials, army people, foreign ambassadors, botanists, friends from Lhasa, like the Tarings and the Tsarongs, Rani and Raja Dorji of Kalimpong, and even Sir Charles Bell *en-route* for his last visit to Tibet in 1934. She vividly remembers the members of the 1935 Everest Reconnaissance Expedition "all setting off down the garden with ice-axes and umbrellas, with those two great mountaineers, Eric Shipton and H.W. Tilman, carrying between them a wooden strong box full of cash to cover all the expedition's expenses." Margaret complained that there were in fact so many visitors "that sometimes there barely seemed enough time to change the sheets between one set of visitors and the next." She took a special interest in the garden and accompanied her husband on all his tours of Sikkim, Tibet and Bhutan.

Williamson's tenure as political officer remained short as he tragically died of kidney disease while on duty in Lhasa in November

1935. The years the Williamsons spent at the Residency were certainly the happiest of their lives.

Sir Basil Gould

Sir Basil Gould (1883-1956) took over as Political Officer Sikkim, Bhutan and Tibet in 1935 and remained in Gangtok for a decade until the end of the war. Gould is remembered for having established a permanent British Mission in the Tibetan capital and having attended the enthronement of the 14th Dalai Lama in Lhasa in 1940. In Gangtok, Gould was very popular and is still fondly remembered. One of his lasting contributions to the town is a football field which he built in memory of his wife Lorraine and which had to be literally carved out of a mountain side.

As recounted to me by his son Dick who spent his summer holidays of 1939 at the Residency, there was always a constant stream of visitors and a succession of parties, from informal to large garden parties with band, dancers and plentiful food. Gould had a lot of guests who were official or semi-official: the Governor of Bengal and family, visitors from the British communities in Darjeeling and Kalimpong, travellers who passed through Sikkim, and notably the Everest parties of his era. The Maharaja of Sikkim and his family were regular guests at the Residency where Gould tried to gradually widen their horizon and to lessen their shyness of the outside world. The garden was a great delight of his. He was once complimented on being a great gardener and replied that he was not much good at gardening, but he was quite good at employing 40 gardeners!

Arthur Hopkinson

A.J. Hopkinson (1894-1953) succeeded Sir Basil Gould in 1945 as the last British Political Officer Sikkim, Bhutan and Tibet. He remained in Gangtok until after Indian Independence as Indian political officer, handing over to Harishwar Dayal ICS in 1948.

As recounted by Roger Croston in her obituary (2006: 156), when Mrs Hopkinson joined her husband at the Residency, she had to put her foot down to bring the household in order again. Following Gould, the Residency was always full of visitors: "They poured through – things had got out of hand. Even the guidebooks stated that Europeans should travel with dinner jackets, as they would probably dine there. It had

become a habit of people from Calcutta who had few wartime places to visit on leave. They wanted permits for Tibet – as far as Phari – so they could claim to have been there, yet the Tibetans didn't want them all, the country simply could not feed them." She found the Residency servants marvellous, Sikkimese who had been in the service of the political officers for 20-30 years.

On the 1st of September 1948, Arthur Hopkinson handed over his post to his Indian successor. Mrs Hopkinson's entry in her diary for that day reads as an epitaph for the British Raj, "Today we are no longer masters of The Residency." The entry for September 3rd reads: "a difficult departure. It was very hard to say good-bye to all our good, old servants, so kind and willing, and friends like Sonam and Lobzang. We were loaded with garlands. The school children all turned out and nearly the whole bazaar and the Christian community. It was all rather harrowing especially for Arthur. Later we threw our enormous wads of garlands into the Tista" (*ibid.*: 158).

As McKay has pointed out, "With British power in the East rapidly declining, Hopkinson was an appropriately thoughtful, even philosophical figure (1997: 166). He observed a decline in the moral climate of Tibet and a certain aristocratic decadence in the years 1933-1947 following the death of the 13th Dalai Lama, both Chinese and British policies having contributed to the situation (*ibid.*: 176). "Hopkinson was particularly concerned that the encounter with modern culture had brought 'the worst aspects of capitalism' to Tibet" (*ibid.*: 177). Interestingly, "Hopkinson also began to question the accepted ethical values underlying the imperial process. Noting 'the happiness, contentment, self-sufficiency, and liberty' of its people, he concluded that 'the modern world has more to learn from Tibet than to teach [it]'" (*ibid.*: 177).

India House and the Indian Political Officers

Following Indian independence in 1947, a series of Indian political officers were assigned to Gangtok between 1948 and 1975, the year the Kingdom of Sikkim ceased to be a protectorate and joined the Indian Union as its 22nd State. India's responsibilities in Tibet came to an end in 1950 and Bhutan was eventually separated from the political officer's jurisdiction in 1971 (Datta-Ray 1984: 65-66). The Indian political officers were: Harishwar Dayal, Apa B. Pant, Inderjit Bahadur Singh, Avatar Singh, V.H. Coelho, N.B. Menon, Kayatyani Shankar Bajpai and Gurbachan Singh.

The official residence of the Indian political officers continued to be known as the Residency although it was locally referred to as *burra kothi*, the big house. With the view of severing with imperial traditions, Mrs Gandhi agreed to rename the Residency India House in 1968 (Datta-Ray 1984: 64-65).

Sir Basil Gould's son who had spent his summer holidays at the Residency in 1939 visited once again in 1970 and was very cordially greeted by Mrs Bajpai. He observed that the interior atmosphere had radically changed from English country house comfort to something much more austere. Mrs Bajpai herself commented on this with deep regret as she would have loved to have preserved the old atmosphere, but when India inherited the administration of Sikkim the decision was taken deliberately to alter the style. Already by then, Dick Gould noticed that the Tibetan art collections were no longer on display.³ To this, Datta-Ray adds that it was a sadly denuded mansion, stripped of its deep carpets, fine china and gleaming silver that the last Indian political officer left (1984: 321).

Raj Bhavan and the Governors of Sikkim

When Sikkim formally joined the Indian Union, Shri B.B. Lal was made Governor of Sikkim in May 1975. This marked the conversion of India House to Raj Bhavan. Shri B.B. Lal was succeeded as Governor of Sikkim by the following governors: Sarva Shri H.J.H. Taleyar Khan, K. Prabhakar Rao, B.N. Singh, T.V. Rajeshwar, S.K. Bhatnagar, R.H. Thailiani, P. Shiv Shankar, K.V. Ragnath Reddy, Chaudhary Randhir Singh, Kidar Nath Sahani, R.S. Gavai, V. Rama Rao, and Sudarshan Agarwal.

Restoring Raj Bhavan to its Former Glory

Under the guidance of the present Governor of Sikkim, Shri Balmiki Prasad Singh, the heritage building recently underwent a thorough renovation which should fortify it and ensure its stability for another hundred years. Although the erstwhile Residency retained its original appearance, its structure was completely renovated through 'retrofitting,' a technology used to restore a centenary old building's youth and strength. Retrofitting has so far only been used on two other

³ Personal communication Dick Gould.

heritage buildings in the country: the Rashtrpati Bhawan in Delhi and the Taj Hotel in Mumbai.⁴

Over the many decades, the British country house build by J.C. White in 1890 witnessed a great deal of Himalayan and Central Asian history. From the demise of Tibet in 1959 to the establishment of the Kingdom of Bhutan in 1907 and eventually the ascension of the Kingdom of Sikkim to India in 1975, the building was not only the theater of unfolding history but also the home of extraordinary men who helped shape the future and development of the region.



Indian Prime Minister Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru arrives at the Residency in 1958 where Apa Pant, the Indian Political Officer waits to receive him (IPR Collection, Govt of Sikkim).

⁴ *Now!* 19 April 2009, Gangtok, Sikkim.

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