


TRINKETS, TEMPLES, AND TREASURES: TIBETAN MATERIAL CULTURE  
AND THE 1904 BRITISH MISSION TO TIBET

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his paper presents new research examining looting during the 1904 Younghusband Mission to Tibet.<sup>1</sup> It will firstly discuss the “mind of the Mission” by outlining the social and cultural milieu that prevailed, and note the role models for, and influences on, those who took part in the Mission. It will explore the position of L. Austine Waddell (1854–1938), the “archeologist” to the Mission, and the controversial methods he used to acquire both personal and official collections. The aftermath of the Mission is examined, focusing on contemporary newspaper reports from London and Delhi concerning the looting. I note how selected items looted from Tibet are now presented in British museums and collections, before studying the mentality behind the collectors and their desire to construct archives of achievement and “Temples of Empire” that rationalise a perspective of “the other,” and thereby, themselves.

The Younghusband Mission to Tibet was the “end game” of the “Great Game.” The Great Game for political supremacy and influence was played out across the plains of Central Asia between British India and Imperial Russia for almost the entire duration of the nineteenth century. For reasons too complex to explore here (although excellently analysed by Alastair Lamb<sup>2</sup> and others), Lord Curzon (1895–1925), the British Viceroy in Delhi, initially dispatched an escorted delegation of diplomats to Khamba Dzong in southern Tibet to attempt to quash rumours of Russian intrigue in Lhasa. The delegation failed to conduct a satisfactory dialogue, and hawkish elements within the diplomatic and military communities persuaded the Viceroy to sanction a small expeditionary-style force

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<sup>1</sup> Officially termed the “Sikkim Tibet Field Force,” the British presence in Tibet in 1904 has been variously known as the “Younghusband Mission,” the “British Mission to Tibet,” and the “Second British Invasion of Tibet.” Younghusband himself refers to events as the “British Mission,” rather than the “mission.” For simplicity I adopt his convention, but attach no ulterior significance to this choice. The “Mission” strictly refers to the diplomatic corps surrounding Younghusband, however Lord Kitchener issued orders for them to be supported by a Royal Artillery Mountain Battery with two ten-pounder screw guns, a half company of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Sappers and Miners, eight companies of the 23<sup>rd</sup> Sikh Pioneers, six companies of the 8<sup>th</sup> Gurkhas, and two Maxim guns from 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion, the Norfolk Regiment. The vast resources of the Coolie Corps were drawn upon, over 10,000 in all, along with 3,000 ponies, 5,000 yaks and buffaloes, 5,000 bullocks, 7,000 mules and six camels to carry the officers’ cigars.

<sup>2</sup> Lamb 1960.

to push into Tibet in order to force negotiation and assurances. The Mission, commanded by the enigmatic Francis Younghusband (1863–1942), was controversial from its outset, especially after a series of bloody and one-sided encounters with the nascent Tibetan military.

Younghusband was a household name by the time Curzon selected him as his Tibet Commissioner. He was every boy's hero; a world record holder for the 100 yard dash, an explorer who found new passes to China, Gold Medal Holder and later President of the Royal Geographic Society, an Everest mountaineer, and later in life the founder of the World Congress of Faiths. Patrick French describes him "the last great imperial adventurer."<sup>3</sup>

Nearly all those who crossed his trailblazing path lauded Younghusband as a hero; however like his political mentor, he too could be arrogant, obsessive, and argumentative, especially with those that he believed undermined his authority. Among his dissenters was Brigadier-General Macdonald, the man tasked with directing the military and logistical arms of the 1904 Mission. However the view shared by nearly all the British officers that took part in the Tibet Mission is best presented by Captain Frederick O'Connor, his aide and interpreter. For him Younghusband was,

[...] one of the few specimens of the typical "strong silent man" whom I have ever met. Very quiet, very laconic [...] at once a philosopher and a man of action [...]. I never once saw him for a moment even ruffled, far less discomposed or perturbed, by any circumstance or crisis which we had to encounter. An imperturbable exterior covered a strong and steadfast character and a most equable temperament.<sup>4</sup>

After the fortress at Gyantse was taken following a protracted siege, the Mission marched on Lhasa where the Tibetan authorities, in the absence of the exiled Thirteenth Dalai Lama, were required to sign a treaty with the British. The treaty itself was largely renegotiated at the Simla Conference in 1914, however the dramatic clash of cultures and the lasting legacy of the Mission have long provided a fertile field for historians, Tibetologists, and anthropologists, who continuously reappraise this important chapter in Tibet's relationship with the West. Perhaps the most divisive issue in this dialogue concerns looting.

This paper will attempt to answer pertinent questions that remain as to why items were taken, who removed the items, what were their reasons, what was taken, and what they can teach us about the role of contemporary museum and library collections.

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<sup>3</sup> French 1995.

<sup>4</sup> O'Connor 1931: 33.

*Sources*

Accounts of the Mission fall into three general categories: historical British accounts that are generally self-congratulatory and seek to justify or celebrate the actions of the author,<sup>5</sup> modern Western interpretations of the Mission that reappraise its political and historical consequences,<sup>6</sup> and modern Chinese and Tibetan accounts that are often heavily biased by political dogma and propaganda.<sup>7</sup>

Much has been written in all three categories of accounts concerning the issue of looting, but few sources examine the rationale behind events in an attempt to understand the British officers and their men who served in Tibet. Diaries and letters from officers to wives and families at home make many references to both curios and loot, and provide insight into their opinions regarding the “legitimate” collection of objects, despite both direct and General Orders specifically forbidding looting.

It is beyond doubt that extensive looting did occur in Tibet during the Younghusband Mission; however, its full extent, and a comprehensive catalogue of items taken, is almost impossible to discern. Modern Chinese and Tibetan histories of the Mission provide poignant and heated accounts of destruction and pillage, however I am unable to concur with Michael Carrington’s suggestion that “a desire for books, manuscripts and curios, became an important element, even a central plank, of the philosophy of the Tibet Mission.”<sup>8</sup> Equally erroneous are comments found in various Western history texts that ignore or attempt to refute claims of looting, painting a harmonious picture of Anglo-Tibetan relations: comments such as, “Colonel Younghusband, the leader, had been careful to avoid unnecessary bloodshed, and of course had not permitted atrocities, looting, or wanton destruction,”<sup>9</sup> do not provide a full or accurate account of the Mission.

*The “mind” of the Mission*

To understand why looting was such an issue, it is important to note the seismic changes that were taking place in Edwardian society and which influenced those dispatched north from India. An understanding of the morals and codes that permitted officers and men to take items for profit or curiosity must be rooted in an understanding of who they were, and the prevailing social milieu.

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<sup>5</sup> Younghusband 1910; O’Connor 1931; Candler 1905; and Landon 1905.

<sup>6</sup> Fleming 1961; French 1995.

<sup>7</sup> Jaiwai and Gyaincain 1997; Shan 2001. Tibetan and Chinese accounts of the Mission are extensively analysed in Myatt Forthcoming.

<sup>8</sup> Carrington 2003: 107.

<sup>9</sup> Hicks 1988: 55.

Curzon and his Viceregal entourage believed strongly in the philosophy of Empire; that it was Britain's destiny to civilize and harmonise diverse peoples under the rule of law and banner of Empire. While missionaries and preachers brought the souls of "barbarians" and "heathens" into the folds of the "true cloth," Imperial armies pushed the boundaries of Empire, leaving behind them lawful, compliant, and taxpaying servants and subjects of the Emperor King. The British role as natural leaders, displaying military prowess and moral authority, would spread an enlightening and benign influence across a world shaded with cartographer's pink.<sup>10</sup> However, the Younghusband Mission departed at a time when these self-imposed high morals and notions of Victorian benevolence, civilization and culture, were slowly giving way to a world forced to embrace industrialisation and militarisation, and had begun to question the validity of the Curzonian view of the world.<sup>11</sup> As the historian John Boynton Priestly reminds us, "many fairly typical Victorians, some of them very influential, were still to be found in Edwardian England, [...] however, the Edwardian Age was not simply a prolongation of the Victorian. The Victorian Age, which we readily associate with the period 1840–1880, was already losing much of its former character, especially its complacency, during the 1880s and 1890s."<sup>12</sup>

Edwardian Britain (1901–1910) still held a martial spirit; the nation maintained great pride and belief in her armies and Empire. At the time of the Mission the Boer War<sup>13</sup> in South Africa would have been fresh in the minds of the Edwardian thinking classes. Some newspapers went so far as to claim that this war had a redemptive quality for both factions. In an article entitled "The Blessings of War," *The Daily Mail* suggested that the war had a double blessing, "if it makes us re-examine the bases of our national life, ruthlessly dig away all that is decayed or doubtful, and place things on a sound footing [...] out of the present strife and conflict shall emerge an Empire stronger, more fully prepared, amply equipped against the worst our foes can do against us."<sup>14</sup>

The Edwardians were also comfortably elaborating theories and philosophies to suit their purposes and perception of themselves and their Empire. The notion of social Darwinism was gaining favour, justifying the use of force to ensure the progress of societies through competition, just as biological organisms in nature adapted

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<sup>10</sup> Gilmour 2003.

<sup>11</sup> It is a sad afterthought to realise that many of the men who served with the Tibet Mission in 1904 would go on to lose their lives on the fields of Flanders, not defending Victorian values of Empire and imperial munificence, but facing precisely the advanced, indiscriminate weapons they carted over the Himalayas to level against the Tibetans.

<sup>12</sup> Priestly 1970.

<sup>13</sup> The Boer War, 1899–1902.

<sup>14</sup> *The Daily Mail* 1 January 1900.

and evolved through competition for resources and with each other.<sup>15</sup> Likewise Karl von Clausewitz's theory that war was the legitimate means by which states conducted their policies<sup>16</sup> was modified to the Edwardian needs: "his famous dictum that war was merely the continuation of politics by other means, was seen by at least some late Victorians and Edwardians to make war acceptable as a method of settling their differences."<sup>17</sup>

The Mission to Tibet took place at the very edge of this tumultuous mindscape and Imperial landscape; Tibet not only occupied one of the last blank spaces on the map, it also held Edwardian society in thrall to its mysticism, occult spirituality, legendary treasures, and very "otherness."<sup>18</sup> Regardless of the mindset at home, on the frontiers of the Empire Curzon's outlook remained the dominant guide for interaction and self-definition. Just as myth often needs liminal spaces outside the normal constraints of time and space in order to develop, Tibet provided "the setting of a powerful mythology of Empire."<sup>19</sup>

It was with this in the back of their minds that the officers and men of the Mission wrestled with the very real circumstances of both armed resistance and Tibet's formidable landscape. The world may have been changing around them, but high in the Himalayas, soldiers were given ample room to be soldiers, regardless of their schooling, training, and the impossibly high ideals of the period. As frontiersmen they occupied the higher echelons of the Imperial pantheon; "portrayed as strong, self-reliant, courageous and upright, he was a pioneer of European civilization. By gaining the trust of the "unruly" indigenous peoples and imposing the British concept of good order and civilization he acted for the benefit of all."<sup>20</sup> However at the same time, the thinking—and voting<sup>21</sup>—classes in London were becoming less confident of their dominance, legitimacy, and ability to press ever forward this Imperial agenda; those going over the Himalayas were probably out of step with public conscience and opinion at home, still harbouring Victorian values and ideas. These old colonial attitudes can be best surmised from the name of the little Pekingese dog presented to Queen Victoria from the sack of the Peking Summer Palace in 1861; "Looty."<sup>22</sup>

The rules of engagement changed with this shift in public conscience. The Hague Convention of 1899 became the forerunner of

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<sup>15</sup> Wilkinson 1998: 99.

<sup>16</sup> Clausewitz 1976.

<sup>17</sup> Wilkinson 1998: 104.

<sup>18</sup> Bishop 2000.

<sup>19</sup> McKay 1997: 190.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*: 191.

<sup>21</sup> The 1884 Third Reform Act gave men in rural areas the same franchise as those in the urban boroughs, and the electorate now totaled over 5.5 million.

<sup>22</sup> Greenfield 2007: 412.

the Geneva Convention: Article 46 decreed that “private property cannot be confiscated,” and Article 48, “pillage is formally prohibited.”<sup>23</sup> Historically, however, British readiness to plunder and loot following military victories is well documented. In “Officers, Gentlemen and Thieves,”<sup>24</sup> Carrington gives examples ranging from the Napoleonic wars to the relief of the residency at Lucknow during the Indian Mutiny. He also notes how even in the 1880s, after the sacking and destruction of property in the border areas of the Nagalands, there developed a lively debate as to the merits of village burning and displays of Imperial might to dissuade such extremities of the Empire from aggressive or subordinate behaviour in the future.<sup>25</sup>

*The gentleman collector*

The notion of “gentleman collectors” had already been established in the Himalayan region by such eminent figures as Sven Hedin (1865–1952) and Aurel Stein (1862–1943). Hedin was, by 1904, a renowned scholar, explorer, and cartographer; he served his native Sweden in Persia as Vice-Consul, travelled between 1893 and 1897 in the Pamir Mountains visiting the abandoned cities of Dandan Oilik and Kara Dung in Khotan, and Central Asia between 1899 and 1902. On this expedition he travelled through the Tarim Basin, Yarkand, Tibet, and Kashmir. By the time of his death in 1952 he had donated over eight thousand individual items from his numerous expeditions to the Ethnographic Museum and National Archives in Stockholm.<sup>26</sup>

Aurel Stein was a Hungarian explorer and scholar who later became a British citizen, receiving generous funding from the British Museum for his expeditions, and later from Curzon himself after the Viceroy visited the Lahore Museum where he worked. Although he was not to discover the caves at Dunhuang till his 1906–1908 expedition, he had by the time of the Younghusband Mission already carved his name as a Central Asia explorer in his first expedition across the Taklamakan Desert. The British Library’s holdings in early Tibetan, Chinese and Tangut manuscripts were the result of his many expeditions, the finest perhaps being the oldest known dated and printed text; a copy of the Diamond Sutra. Stein famously purchased the majority of the priceless texts from the caves’ guardian for a mere £220.<sup>27</sup> A letter from Stein in Rawalpindi to Waddell dated 1902 gives some indication of his approach to collecting items for museums and libraries. The letter congratulates

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<sup>23</sup> Hudson 1931: 114–117.

<sup>24</sup> Carrington 2003: 108.

<sup>25</sup> See also, Robb 1997.

<sup>26</sup> Kish 1984.

<sup>27</sup> Hopkirk 1984; Baumer 2000.

Waddell on his explorations and work, but laments that he did not have “opportunity to ransack the Chinese Buddhist monasteries before they were looted.”<sup>28</sup> Although it is not known exactly when the sites were looted, it seems that, at least with regard to the monasteries of Central Asia, Stein regretted not that the monasteries were looted, but that they were looted by others first.

In 1904 the collections of Europe were weak in the field of Tibetan art and literature. Even at the heart of the Empire, the London museums had “little more than a few leaves torn from some of the larger texts, and the libraries of Oxford, Cambridge and the Royal Asiatic Society had still less.”<sup>29</sup> The Government of India was well aware that the Mission to Tibet would provide an excellent opportunity to collect the texts and items that scholars and curators craved. It was therefore decided to appoint an official collector for the Government of India, grant him funds to purchase relevant material, and divide the results between major collections held in India and Britain. Austine Waddell was chosen to fill this role. There was an immediate demand to become one of the fortunate museums to receive items from Tibet; many major collectors including the Cambridge University Ethnological Institute, and the Victoria Institute wrote directly to the India Office requesting that any items from Tibet should be passed on to their collections. The India Office replied to most that they had not received instructions as to the distribution of artifacts.<sup>30</sup> Waddell’s papers in the University of Glasgow Library show similar requests directly to him. One dated 29<sup>th</sup> of July 1904 from Professor Cecil Bendall, Professor of Sanskrit at University College London until 1903, asks that the Mission be sure to collect Tibetan literature for Cambridge University Library, and adds a specific request for anything of a Sanskrit origin.<sup>31</sup> Given this level of expectation and demand from the most august institutions in the land, it is unsurprising that items were removed to satisfy the clamour of the collectors, and Waddell was an obvious choice to orchestrate this collecting.

#### *“Archaeologist” to the Mission*

Austine Waddell was a Lieutenant Colonel in the Indian Medical Service, but was also the most renowned Tibetologist in the Empire. In the early part of his career he had been posted to Darjeeling, where he developed a strong interest in all things Tibetan: wildlife,

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<sup>28</sup> GB 0247 MS Gen 1691/3/150. Stein to Waddell, 1902. University of Glasgow Library, Waddell Collection.

<sup>29</sup> Waddell 1912: 80–113.

<sup>30</sup> Foreign (External) B, August 1904, proceedings nos. 241–244. National Archives of India.

<sup>31</sup> Item GB 0247 Waddell Q 203. Glasgow University Library, Waddell Collection Catalogue.

plants, and especially its religion. He befriended many of the "Pundits" of the Great Game, including Sarat Chandra Das (1849–1917), the model for Hurree Chunder Mookerjee of Kipling's *Kim*.<sup>32</sup> In 1892, Kinthup, the Pundit who successfully trekked along the length of the Tsangpo River in order to discover the river's source, joined him and together they set out to trek to Lhasa in disguise.<sup>33</sup> Waddell's blue eyes soon meant that they were discovered; however his stock rose in both academic circles and local monasteries when rumour went about the bazaar of Darjeeling that he was an emanation of Amitabha, the Buddha of Infinite Light, an association he used to gather information for his major work, *The Buddhism of Tibet or Lamaism*.<sup>34</sup> The book established him at the forefront of Tibetology. However his contention that Tibetan Buddhism was a corrupt form of the teachings of the Lord Buddha, and the associations and comparisons he made with Western Catholicism, now appear misplaced.

In 1895 he was attached to the Chitral Relief Force, in the company of Francis Younghusband and his brother, George.<sup>35</sup> This allowed him to indulge his penchant for collecting, amassing a large collection of "several hundreds of beautiful Greco-Buddhist sculptures,"<sup>36</sup> that he presented to the Calcutta and Peshawar Museums on his return. By 1900 he was attached to the twenty thousand strong International Peking Relief Force sent to relieve the besieged delegations during the Boxer Rebellion.<sup>37</sup> It was while serving in Malakand that Waddell first got wind of the proposed Mission to Tibet; he immediately sent a telegram to the Government of India, emphasising "the unique opportunity offered by the Mission for procuring from that closed land those manuscripts and books so greatly required by Western scholars."<sup>38</sup> He secured the support of Younghusband, insisting that David Macdonald, his young Anglo-Sikkimese interpreter, and Kinthup join him in his dual roles of Medical Officer and collector/Tibetologist. He was granted Rs 10,000 from the Government of India to secure such artefacts, texts, and items as he considered to be of best use to scholars.<sup>39</sup> This government funding gave rise to claims in Indian and British newspapers that looting from monasteries and estates

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<sup>32</sup> Kipling 1901; Hopkirk 1996.

<sup>33</sup> Waller 1990.

<sup>34</sup> Waddell 1895.

<sup>35</sup> Younghusband, G 1910.

<sup>36</sup> Waddell 1912: 84.

<sup>37</sup> Fleming 1959.

<sup>38</sup> Allen 2004: 40.

<sup>39</sup> When the Home Department refused to supply the Rs 10,000, it was suggested that twenty-six "Scientific and Minor Departments" be debited the amount. It was also indicated that there would perhaps be an additional grant of Rs 10,000. However Carrington (*Ibid.*) could find no evidence that this additional money was ever allocated. See also, *Home (Books and Publications) A*, July 1904, proceedings number 90–96. National Archive of India.



was in some way sanctioned by the Government of India, a charge Waddell emphatically denied on his return. Lord Kitchener, the Commander in Chief, being an avid collector of such items, even asked him to secure items of Chinese porcelain from Tibet. However the majority of the fragile pieces Waddell did manage to accumulate for his collections were destroyed in transit.

Waddell was a man not averse to taking risks in gathering his collections. Indeed on his arrival in Chumi Shonko (Chu mig shongs ko) and learning of sacred texts in the home of the recently slaughtered chief, he recorded that "I found some books, which I brought out hastily as the adjoining house was afire, and I had to run the gauntlet of explosions, which were occurring all around, and the house in which I had been blew up a short time afterwards."<sup>40</sup> On his return from Lhasa his collection of over two thousand items was divided between the Calcutta Museum, British Museum, the libraries of Oxford and Cambridge universities, and the India Office Library. He noted with some pride in 1912 that the collection "forms by far the largest and richest collection of Tibetan literature which has ever reached Europe."<sup>41</sup> His *magnum opus*, published in 1905, *Lhasa and its Mysteries, with a Record of the British Expedition of 1903–1904*,<sup>42</sup> (on the basis of which he was appointed Professor of Tibetan at London University in 1907) is perhaps the fullest and most readable account of the Mission. It is remarkable not only for his extensive background and insight into Tibetan culture, but also for the exclusion of any mention of his Government funds, items collected by various means, and their eventual resting places.

Waddell's article in *The Asiatic Quarterly* describing the contents of the trove he brought back is interesting in that it was written a clear eight years after the return of the Mission and the deposit of the items in their respective museums and libraries. Why an earlier catalogue or description had not been published is unknown, and it is a sad fact that some of the items he amassed await, even to this day, translation and accurate description. Waddell describes the collection as "one of not the least solid results of the Mission of Sir Francis Younghusband,"<sup>43</sup> but appears to get even the dates of the Mission confused, claiming that it was being formed in 1908, four years after its return. The article remains the only account of the distribution of the books and manuscripts between the libraries; there being no modern full catalogue or index. Although Waddell lamented having to divide his collection between various institutions, there appears to be little rhyme or reason behind his

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<sup>40</sup> Waddell 1912: 85.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*: 80.

<sup>42</sup> Waddell 1905.

<sup>43</sup> Waddell 1912: 83.

methods in the division.<sup>44</sup> Different volumes in the same book were given to diverse libraries, and the allocation appears more random than an attempt to play to the strengths of the institutions; having divided the collection into categories (A: Buddhist texts, B: Bon items, C: Histories, D: Science and Medicine and, E: Lexicons and Grammars,) he then further divided these categories between the libraries. He therefore not only separated his collection along irregular lines, but also failed to augment the existing specialisations and strengths of the libraries involved.

On his return to India, and in the face of strong criticism from the Indian press, Waddell claimed that the greater part of his collection had been assembled before the attack on Changlo Manor in May 1904, and that the majority was purchased with the funds provided by the Government of India. However simple arithmetic shows that the Government of India gave Waddell Rs 10,000 to spend on books, manuscripts and items, and he amassed over two thousand items,<sup>45</sup> something that would only leave an average of Rs 5 per item,<sup>46</sup> a pitifully small amount given the quality of his collection. He later claimed of his personal collection that “all except half a dozen volumes, was lost on the journey back from Tibet.”<sup>47</sup> However, Allen records that in 1905 the Berlin Museum purchased his collection of “Indian antiquities” for a considerable sum.<sup>48</sup>

#### *British attitudes and accounts*

While the opportunistic acquisition of loot never seems to have strayed far from the mind of some officers as recorded in their letters and diaries, some British accounts of looting hint at plain greed. At Nakartse, Kalön (*bka' blon*; “Minister”) Yutok<sup>49</sup> approached

<sup>44</sup> The items that Waddell originally allocated to the India Office have since been moved several times; after the independence of India, Pakistan and Burma in 1947 and 1948 the Indian Records Section (later the India Office Records) and the India Office Library were administered by the Commonwealth Relations Office, later the Commonwealth Office, and (from 1968) by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office. In 1982 the India Office Library and Records were placed on deposit with the British Library Board, and the India Office Records have since been administered, as Public Records, in the British Library Asia Pacific & Africa Collections.

<sup>45</sup> This figure is Waddell’s own: “I am pleased to be able to report that I have secured for the national libraries nearly two thousand volumes of books and manuscripts, comprising several thousand distinct treatises.” Waddell 1912: 86.

<sup>46</sup> Carrington 2003: 206.

<sup>47</sup> Waddell 1912: 88.

<sup>48</sup> Waddell was by no means the only officer to sell items directly to museums; Major Iggulden, Chief Staff Officer to the Mission, sold 169 separate pieces to the British Museum in May 1905.

<sup>49</sup> Kalön Phuntsok Palden Yutok (Phun tshogs dpal ldan G.yu thog), born 1860: a descendant of the Tenth Dalai Lama. Kashag (*bka' shag*) member (Minister) appointed in September 1903, and overall commander at Gyantse and the route

Younghusband's tent under a white flag of truce for discussions relating to their imminent arrival in Lhasa. Younghusband recorded in a letter to his father that he had spent over seven hours listening to the Kalön's requests that the British not advance to the capital when their discussions were cut short by the sound of fighting coming from outside the tent. It transpired that the 2<sup>nd</sup> Mounted Infantry had approached the baggage train of the Kalön while he was in discussion with the Tibet Commissioner; one of the Tibetan train guards had panicked and fired at the cavalry, who returned fire even though the Kalön was under a flag of truce. Lieutenant Carey noted in his diary "they were at once pursued, and after an exciting chase they were captured along with the baggage, twelve of them were killed. They had some first class mules and ponies—and some very good rifles were taken, among them was one Russian, one American, a Winchester repeater and a Mauser."<sup>50</sup> The Kalön only realised what was going on when he emerged from Younghusband's tent to see the Mounted Infantry making off with the entirety of his baggage. His rigorous protests to General Macdonald resulted in a court of enquiry being established. However, it found in favour of the Mounted Infantry; the Tibetan guards having fired the first shot.

Many of the British officers' personal journals and diaries are openly honest about the level of looting that took place. For example, Arthur Hadow of the Maxim Gun Detachment wrote in his diary how he found himself in the monastic complex at Pelkor Chöde (Dpal 'khor chos sde) just prior to the arrival of the main body of British troops. Hadow and a few of his fellow officers had been surveying the fortress or *dzong* (*rdzong*) and on completion of their task the senior officers returned to Changlo. However Hadow and another junior officer walked towards Gyantse and found themselves in the deserted monastery. Unbeknown to Hadow, General Macdonald was advancing towards the monastery, expecting stiff resistance from behind its thick stone walls. Hadow and his fellow officer found the complex all but deserted, and so "broke into three large buildings or temples on the hillside, loading ourselves with loot. Then thinking it desirable to try and capture a Tibetan, to help carry our things, I came outside. I then discovered that the army had moved up in battle array to capture the monastery, but instead of finding the enemy there was only a small party of British officers looting. We were quickly hauled before an angry staff officer, and I had to leave without my loot. Pte Smith

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to Lhasa. He escaped with the Dalai Lama to India in exile, but died soon after arriving.

<sup>50</sup> Carey, Lieutenant Thomas, Expedition to Tibet: Letters being extracts from Diary. Carey, 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion Royal Fusiliers, 1904, Royal Fusiliers Museum, Tower of London. Cited in, Allen 2004: 242.

was even searched, but he managed to slip three brass images down inside his vest, and this was all we managed to bring away."<sup>51</sup>

The letters of Major Beynon give the most aggressive and alarming description of the behaviour of British officers by one of their own number. His letters reveal not only open plundering of the monastery, but also the harsh methods used to gain access to hidden items:

Ross, 2<sup>nd</sup> Gurkhas, was in the big monastery here and was looking for grain with his coolie corps when one of his men was stoned by a Lama. They caught the beggar and tied him up and gave him twenty lashes on the spot and then told him if he didn't show where the grain was hid he would be shot. He showed them two places very cleverly hidden—but when Ross began to get the things out he found that instead of grain the man had shown him where the monastery's plate & robes were kept. Ross reported to the General who told him he might keep what he liked and to send the rest to the man who collects for the British Museum [Waddell]. Ross & Wigram who were working together took something and asked me to help myself, so I selected a very nice hanging silver censer and a gilt one—neither of them very valuable but very quaint design—and I also took two lamas' robes & some silk embroidery, which I am sending home to you.<sup>52</sup>

Beynon's letter is interesting as it mentions that the General "told him he might keep what he liked." These may have been soothing words to calm the conscience of his wife at home, but it also provides an insight into the mind of a middle ranking British officer of the period, as well as that of his superiors.

At Gyantse Dzong, Waddell's own account recalls how at the main building numerous discoveries were made in the labyrinth of rooms; one was a "horrible chamber [...] full of decapitated human heads of men, women, and children. One of the men's heads appeared almost European in countenance. The gory necks of several showed that the heads had been struck off during life."<sup>53</sup> In other rooms he found "a huge stock of grain, about 100 tons, barley, flour, and peas [...] strings of mules and coolies were soon removing it to our camp." The coolies helped themselves in the bonanza, "large stores of dried sheep and yak meat were found which our Nepalese and Tibetan coolies carried off with avidity, being gluttonous flesh eaters."<sup>54</sup> Waddell does not, however, mention the statues nor texts that he collected from the rooms of the *dzong*. It is Beynon's letters again that offer insight into how the officers allocated the loot; in one room a small production facility

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<sup>51</sup> Allen 2004: 224.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*: 226.

<sup>53</sup> Waddell 1905: 223.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*: 222.

was discovered for making statues, these were declared legitimate loot and distributed among the officers. "A selection for the British, and other museums was first made, and then a dozen each for General Macdonald and Colonel Younghusband. After that the remainders were divided amongst the officers of the force, each getting two or three pieces." He writes to his brother that elsewhere in the monastery chests were found containing painted scrolls, and Waddell also collected "a finely inscribed stone reciting the virtues of a chief who restored the fort."<sup>55</sup>

British accounts also record looting from Tsechen (Rtse chen) Monastery, which had offered resistance and therefore deemed fair game once it fell. Lance-Corporal Dunning of the Royal Fusiliers noted in his diary, "we also break open the monastery and kill two Tibetans found therein and secure some loot."<sup>56</sup> Arthur Hadow of the Maxim Gun Detachment wrote home to his mother, "I at once made for the cellars, where we found some things hidden away. We only had time to visit a few of the buildings, so did not get very much, and we then had to divide the things between three of us. I got rather a nice gong which no doubt you will find useful when I am able to get it home."<sup>57</sup> Captain Mainprise wrote to his wife that he had secured, "a few trifles, including a number of very curious painted scrolls." These he later sold at Christie's auction house in London.

Mainprise also recorded how news that curios were selling for high prices in the auction houses of London had filtered through to the officers and men. He told his wife that he had "collected £10 worth of Lhasa curios, including, rings, necklaces, earrings, chate-laines and cup holders," also noting that the news had driven up prices in the bazaar, and that "some of the officers are spending hundreds of rupees on really worthless things, but as they come from Lhasa they are all considered to be of value." He also told his wife that officers were purchasing trinkets from the sepoy, "often at an absurd price, much more than they are worth."<sup>58</sup> His comments add weight to the claim that many of the items were purchased in bazaars and from legitimate sources; however, one wonders where the sepoy purchased or "collected" the items from in the first place. Waddell prefers to claim that he "rescued" a number of books and manuscripts from the burning buildings at Nenyang (Gnas snying), after they had been "set on fire by the retreating Tibetans."<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> Allen 2004: 145.

<sup>56</sup> Diary of Lance Sergeant Alfred Dunning. No. 7245. 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion Royal Fusiliers. Archive: City of London H.Q., H.M. Tower of London.

<sup>57</sup> The letters of Captain Cecil Mainprise are available online at <http://intotibet1903-04.blogspot.com/> Accessed 4<sup>th</sup> August 2008.

<sup>58</sup> <http://intotibet1903-04.blogspot.com/> Accessed 4<sup>th</sup> August 2008.

<sup>59</sup> Waddell 1905: 85.

In some accounts the British officers blame their Indian and Tibetan coolies for the looting that occurred.<sup>60</sup> In one such example Captain Mainprise wrote of his disgust in a letter home to his brother that after the battle at Chumi Shonko, "I found that my Tibetan Doolie bearers had run off and were looting the tents, houses and corpses. It took me about an hour before I could collect my Hospital and proceed along the blood stained road."<sup>61</sup> Official British records for the battle at Chumi Shonko record no fatalities from amongst the British troops, however three Gurkhas were killed in an explosion not mentioned in the official records. Their absence in the General's report to London also hints at his attitude to looting;<sup>62</sup> letters home from Lieutenant Bailey show that rather than being killed in combat these sepoy had found a large metal Tibetan box that they were forcing open in the search for loot, they were, "hitting it with a stone when it struck a spark and it turned out to be powder."<sup>63</sup>

It was not always the British officers who took part in this general looting; the press correspondents were also hot on the heels of the troops, eager to secure items for their own collections. Perceval Landon (1868–1927), *The Times* correspondent, recalls that, after the engagement at the Karo La, they found "the tents still standing, the fires still alight, the water in the cooking vessels still boiling. Furs, blankets, horse furniture, spears, powder-flasks, quick-match, bags of tsampa, skins of butter, tightly stuffed cushions, everything was there as the Tibetans had left it in their haste."<sup>64</sup> At the same camp, Henry Newman, the Reuters Correspondent, spotted his "servant poking about inside a tent from which he suddenly emerged with a heavy scarlet gown in his arms. This garment must certainly have belonged to a very high Tibetan official."<sup>65</sup> Newman appropriated the gown and, despite his castigation of looting, wore it as a dressing gown for the duration of the Mission.

Carrington quotes letters from the Nepalese representative in Lhasa to Younghusband, confirming incidents of Tibetans looting and mistreating their own people. Although such accounts were second or third hand, it is unlikely that there is not a kernel of truth in them. The first records how the Tibetan militia had "killed three or four women who had mixed up with the British troops" at Gyantse.<sup>66</sup> In the second the Nepalese representative writes to the

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<sup>60</sup> Indeed the very word "loot" derives from the Hindi, *lūta*, of the same meaning.

<sup>61</sup> Allen 2004: 121.

<sup>62</sup> See Telegram No. 1060-A. Dated Camp Thuna, the 1st April 1904. From Brigadier General Macdonald to Adjunct General of India. Cited in: Sood 2005.

<sup>63</sup> Allen 2004: 122.

<sup>64</sup> Landon 1905: 140.

<sup>65</sup> Newman 1937: 133.

<sup>66</sup> Letters from the Nepalese Representative at Lhasa Regarding Tibetan Affairs. Foreign (Secret) E, October 1904. Proceedings nos. 646–666. National Archive of India.

Maharaja in Kathmandu that “the Tibetans are plundering villages on their way back to Lhasa,” and how the villagers were “hiding their respective wealth and property wherever they could.”<sup>67</sup>

Not every British officer approved: George Preston grumbled to his wife that he wished he could send her some loot, “but there are strict orders about it and it is only people who haven’t any conscience at all who get it... It is awfully annoying to see fellows sending away loot, whilst you can’t send any away at all.”<sup>68</sup> In a similar letter home, Major Wimberly, an assistant in the field hospital to Waddell, told his wife how he had been left to collect the names and numbers of all the casualties after the storming of Gyantse Dzong, while Waddell “went off on the loot.”<sup>69</sup> In the same letter, however, he did tell his wife how he had collected “two china vases, a china teapot, a pen-case, and a brass cup-stand and cover,” which he intended to pack up and send down when he had the opportunity.

#### *Trinkets and treasures*

Allen concurs on the whole with this position, stating that “the general view among officers seems to have been that, whatever General Orders and the Hague Convention of 1899 had to say on the matter, pillage was acceptable where an army had been opposed or where, in the case of monasteries, there had been incitement to oppose it. As far as Indian troops were concerned, loot was traditionally a soldier’s perk.”<sup>70</sup> This is a claim supported by David Macdonald (1870–1962)<sup>71</sup> who writes, “in January 1905 I was sent to Calcutta to categorise books and treasures, which others and I gathered in Tibet and were brought back using more than 400 mules. They included Buddhist classics, statues of Buddha, religious works, helmets, weapons, books, and ceramics. The bulk of ceramics were sent to specialists for examination. All these treasures were formerly preserved in the India Museum, where I worked, and later in the British Museum, the Indian Museum, the Bodleian Library and the Indian Administrative Library.”<sup>72</sup> He does, however, claim that “so far as I was personally able to observe, there was very little in the way of looting.”<sup>73</sup> From this comment it is clear that

<sup>67</sup> Letter from the Honourable the Four Kasis of Tibet to His Highness the Maharaja of Nepal. *Ibid.* Enclosure no. 3: 59.

<sup>68</sup> Allen 2004: 225.

<sup>69</sup> Narbeth 1996: 16–18.

<sup>70</sup> Allen 2004: 225.

<sup>71</sup> Macdonald was born of a Scottish father and Sikkimese mother and fluent in many Himalayan languages, and Waddell took him to Tibet as his assistant collector. He was later the British Trade Agent in Gyantse between 1905 and 1925.

<sup>72</sup> Macdonald 1932: 42.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*: 26.

Macdonald did not consider his own and Waddell's collecting as looting. Their appointment by the Government of India as official collectors allowed him to justify removing items and manuscripts under the label of scholarship and cultural education. Carrington chooses not to describe the looting as "sanctioned," but as "institutionalized,"<sup>74</sup> suggesting that it was considered customary behaviour for the troops, but perhaps not condoned by their superiors.

The high value general items mentioned in the commentary would have been stored in the monasteries of Tibet, whereas by contrast the British found the *dzongs* they encountered to be rather damp and dingy affairs. Waddell's description of Phari (Phag ri) emphasises the point: "an attempt was made to remove some of the accumulated garbage of ages, but it took many days before a army of several hundred villagers, carrying basketfuls of stuff all day long, made any impression on its dirt."<sup>75</sup> However, Waddell fails to mention that it was here that he made his first "cultural acquisition:" a near-complete hundred-volume edition of the Kanjur. Many of the *dzongs* did however contain military equipment of a historical and cultural value.

Looting did occur on the march towards Lhasa, as British records confirm. While the monastery at Samding (Bsam lding) was found deserted, two sepoy of the Mounted Infantry were caught by Waddell red-handed with their pockets bulging with looted statues. Waddell reported the two to General Macdonald, and ordered that the statues be returned, the monastery having offered no resistance. As their activities had gone against the strict General Orders for the Mission, Macdonald ordered that the men be tried by court martial. Thomas Carey of the Royal Fusiliers records in his diary that one man received two years imprisonment, and the other one year, reduced on account of his bravery at the battle at the Karo La. However he also adds, "they were caught by Dr Waddell, who by the way is also noted for his looting propensities. Everybody rather sympathises although it was rather a flagrant case, as all the staff have taken any amount of loot in their time. Before the sepoy generally got flogged, but General Macdonald wanted to make an example, especially as he had promised the envoys that nothing would be touched."<sup>76</sup> Carey also pens how he bitterly resents the Mounted Infantry who "get the pick of the loot. Some of the MI officers have very valuable loot, we only get the dregs and the same of curios. Of course there are stringent orders against looting monasteries, unless they fire or make resistance."<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> "The sheer scale of the looting of religious objects and the fact that it was institutionalised was unacceptable given the assurances that the monasteries were not to be pillaged." Carrington 2003: 105.

<sup>75</sup> Waddell 1905: 100.

<sup>76</sup> Allen 2004: 241.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*: 241.



*Aftermath*

English and Indian Newspapers carried stories of sanctioned looting on a massive scale that were difficult for the authorities in Delhi to ignore. *The Statesman* of Calcutta claimed that "piles of loot, which it is not possible to transport, had accumulated at Gyantse, and the drawing rooms of Darjeeling begin to tell a tale, which it should be far from pleasant for English eyes to read."<sup>78</sup> Even before the Mission had arrived in Lhasa, *The Englishman* conceded that "there was little glory to be had out of the campaign in Tibet," adding that there was "no reason why the overwhelming weight of loot should not be thrown into the scale."<sup>79</sup>

The Reuters correspondent, Henry Newman, believed that the Mission's arrival in Lhasa was the last time that British troops were "allowed" to loot.<sup>80</sup> Although he wrote this comment some twenty-five years after his return from Tibet, it does show his opinion of looting. Indeed, his own record of gentlemanly conduct is not unimpeachable; on the Mission's arrival in Lhasa he wired his account of the battle at Chumi Shonko before Younghusband had sent his own official record to the government, ignoring the established protocol of giving two hours grace after official reports were filed before wiring newspaper dispatches.<sup>81</sup>

Landon in his dispatches to *The Times* was more in line with the General's orders forbidding any looting. However he does pour fuel on the fire of claims the looting was sanctioned when he wired that "valuables or curios, found in the fort at Gyantse as were not immediately connected with religious worship, will be handed over to the Government of India for distribution among British and Indian museums." However he also told his readers "nearly all the portable valuables have been removed from the monastery [Pelkor Chöde] by the lamas, in spite of the repeated proclamation by Brigadier General Macdonald that there would be no looting."<sup>82</sup> In spite of his claims, records at the British Museum show that he personally donated six items, some of considerable value. It is not recorded where he obtained them.

Younghusband wrote to the Government of India that, after the capture of the *dzong* at Gyantse, he had asked Waddell, William F. O'Connor, and Landon to select "from among the mass of manuscripts and articles lying about such as were likely to be of value specifically." He also claimed that "no articles were removed

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<sup>78</sup> *The Statesman*, Calcutta. 21 July 1904.

<sup>79</sup> *The Englishman*, Calcutta. 28 July 1904.

<sup>80</sup> Newman 1937.

<sup>81</sup> Mitchel and Olson 1997.

<sup>82</sup> *The Times*. London. 21 April 1904.



Figure 1. Gyantse Dzong and Memorial Pillar. Photographed by the author in 2008.

from the chapel in the Jong [*dzong*].”<sup>83</sup> The newspaper claims, bazaar scandal, and Youngusband’s own admission that he had asked officers and correspondents to “select” items soon came to the attention of Ampthill, who had taken over as Viceroy while Curzon returned to Britain on sabbatical leave. Although he remained skeptical of the claims of excessive looting, Kitchener was asked to telegram his Tibet Commissioner and emphasise the strict orders against any such occurrence.

At the same time there was some debate in the London newspapers regarding the appropriate degree of “punishment” to be handed out to the Tibetan people for their willingness to challenge British authority. While this debate does not positively condone looting, it does hint at the public’s attitude for revenge against the Tibetans, their acceptance of both the Imperial role of the army, and the methods it used. *The Times* believed that the British expedition to Tibet acted with “determination and firmness”<sup>84</sup> in its dealings with the Tibetans, and the *Glasgow Herald* reminded its readers that the aim of the operation was to inflict punishment and to inculcate a “wholesome dread of the power of the invader,”<sup>85</sup> and

<sup>83</sup> Youngusband to Russell, ICS, Under Secretary to the Government of India in the Foreign Department. Gyantse, 12 July 1904. In Foreign (External) B, August 1904, proceedings nos. 254–254A. National Archive of India.

<sup>84</sup> *The Times*. London. 2 April 1904: 3.

<sup>85</sup> *Glasgow Herald*. 8 August 1904: 6.

thus initiate a change in Tibetan behaviour.<sup>86</sup> *The Daily Mail* justified the British expedition by comparing the Tibetans to burglars who had been entering Indian territory without permission. The paper explained that “we do not pardon the burglar or criminal because he is of puny stature or weak in health.”<sup>87</sup> Their use of the term “burglar” is extraordinary, given that the Younghusband Mission had not come to Tibet by invitation and had taken the opportunity to fill its baggage train with loot during its short stay. The paper however “justified the invasion of Tibet and explained away the one-sided nature of the war there by showing that the natives were criminals with whom the British forces had to deal.”<sup>88</sup>

We can be sure that at least some of the items in British collections were gifts from monks, aristocrats and officials to the higher-ranking British officers. Such items were often given to win favour—for example, the Mission’s translator was often discovering that small bags of gold dust had appeared on his desk.<sup>89</sup> The Ganden Tripa<sup>90</sup> presented both Younghusband and Macdonald with bronze statues of the Buddha as they were leaving Lhasa. Younghusband was especially attached to his, keeping it with him at all times; it even rested atop of his coffin after he died in 1942.<sup>91</sup>

### *Museums, the Other, and the Self*

The return of looted objects is a highly contentious issue. Indeed, Moira Simpson declares, “one of the most difficult issues seeking resolution by museums in the post colonial era is that of repatriation.”<sup>92</sup> Interestingly there are few calls from Chinese and Tibetan authors (see footnote 5) for looted items to be returned, nor any obvious indication of what the authorities in Tibet would do with such items were they offered. They would certainly make a valuable addition to the Chinese propaganda themed “Memorial Hall of the Anti British” in Gyantse Dzong.<sup>93</sup> Neither do any of the

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<sup>86</sup> Wilkinson 1998: 105.

<sup>87</sup> *Daily Mail*. 7 April 1904: 4.

<sup>88</sup> Wilkinson 1998: 106.

<sup>89</sup> O’Connor 1931: 165.

<sup>90</sup> Lobsang Gyaltsen Lamoshar (Blo bzang gyal tsen lamo shar) Ganden Tri (pa) Rimpoche. Appointed Regent by the Thirteenth Dalai Lama on his exile.

<sup>91</sup> After his death the statue was donated first to the Liverpool Museum, and then into the hands of a private collector, R.A. Wheeler. Wheeler refused to part with the icon, and only with the threat of legal action did he restore it to Younghusband’s daughter. She then gave it to the Royal Geographical Society in London, where it remains in the basement, “nestled in a Peak Frean’s biscuit tin.” French 1995: 401.

<sup>92</sup> Simpson 1996: 171.

<sup>93</sup> For more on this propaganda museum in Gyantse see Myatt and D’Sena 2008: 107–116. This paper also examines new media sources relating to the Mission, and the Chinese presentation of a propaganda narrative for Tibetan audiences.

British museums<sup>94</sup> I have visited, nor the websites for those that I was unable to get to, give any indication of willingness to consider the return of objects, even on loan or temporary basis.<sup>95</sup>



Figure 2. A British officer opens fire at Chumi Shonko. Detail from an oil painting in the Memorial Hall of Anti-British, Gyantse. Photographed by the author in 2008.

In the debate over ownership, much hinges on where the objects in question came from and how they were obtained. Of the vast catalogues of museum collections none states that an object was “looted,” preferring instead to record that items were “acquired,” “collected,” or “purchased.” As is recalled in letters and accounts of serving officers and men, bazaars spontaneously emerged selling curios and trinkets along the advance to Lhasa, and the Barkor area of Lhasa was then, as it is now, a source of many items of Tibetan memorabilia and touristic collectibles. It would be difficult to argue that items that were purchased, often for overly inflated prices, should be considered for return, however items of cultural importance, high monetary value, and historical significance, could have their ownership by Western museums and collections questioned.

<sup>94</sup> Here I include libraries as a form of a museum. While some libraries are places of great scholarship housing reference books that cannot fall under a definition of “collection,” others hold items of such value that they can be considered “collections” of books in a museum sense. “Books are, it is true, sometimes regarded as objects, collected for their beautiful bindings or illustrations... just as it is when a library acts as an archive or contains books intended solely for entertainment.” Pomian 1994.

<sup>95</sup> For more on Tibetan items looted during the Mission now on display in British museums and collections, see Chapter six, Myatt Forthcoming.

Museums facing such difficult questions have a robust and vigorous defence, especially when the object has political and historical significance, as has been shown, for example, in the ongoing debate over the ownership of the Elgin marbles<sup>96</sup> or the Kohinoor diamond. Museums often claim the “universality” of such important objects; that they belong to no individual, organisation or state. This pan-national heritage sounds very grand, and museums point to the fact that their collections are open for all to see, often free of charge. However this claim can be refuted when one considers how many Tibetans have the opportunity to examine objects in a museum in, for example, London or Edinburgh, as opposed to a collection in Gyantse or Lhasa.

Likewise the current argument from museums for the retention of major objects on the grounds of scholarship is no longer tenable. In many instances the tasks of scholars have been satisfied, as for example with the Rosetta Stone whose hieroglyphics have already been deciphered. Modern technology offers solutions to scholars still working on items of importance, be that international co-operation, digital imaging or duplication, or sharing analysis from original samples.<sup>97</sup> Jeanette Greenfield rightly notes that “scholasticism can be a high-sounding motive for a selfish and unrelated purpose.”<sup>98</sup>

Such claims of a custodial role of museums can be interpreted both ways; either calling for the return of objects once they no longer are in need of custody, or their retention on grounds of the richness and source of identity they offer the museum going public:

How fortunate we are that the British Museum and the National Gallery are full of objects which are neither British nor national. It has been argued that these institutions are profoundly imperialist, and some people probably do vaguely perceive the objects they contain as trophies or tribute. On the whole, however, these institutions are far better designed than truly national collections could be to perform the vital civilizing job of reminding us of what is not our “heritage,” encouraging us to love things without having to pretend that they were

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<sup>96</sup> Fitz Gibbon 2005.

<sup>97</sup> Stein, frequently described as an “imperialist looter” in Chinese accounts, is an unlikely source of support for the “custodian role” argument; Whitfield, the Director of the International Dunhuang Project at the British Library, records, “at some sites the finds were too delicate or too large to be transported, and he reburied them in the sands for a time when, as he commented in his diary, the region would have its own museum. Unfortunately, treasure seekers reached many of them first, and Stein’s photographs are often the only record left of these treasures.” Indeed the IDP is a role model for international co-operational projects working with the Xinjiang Institute of Archaeology in China to retrace Stein’s footsteps, and digitising and freely distributing high-resolution images of the manuscripts collected from the caves at Dunhuang. Whitfield 2009: 224–43.

<sup>98</sup> Greenfield 2007: 412.

made for us, to take an interest in other peoples' ancestors, to be curious about the past because our "identity" (which generally means self-esteem) is challenged rather than reinforced by contact with it. Even if we are not clear as to whether or not art objects should be returned to their country of origin, we should be clear as to the purpose of museums.<sup>99</sup>

Western museums may however have a stronger argument from a custodial perspective with regard to Tibetan items in light of Tibet's tumultuous recent past. Quite how many of the items currently in foreign museums would have been lost in the destruction of the Cultural Revolution is of course conjecture, but it is safe to say that the majority would almost certainly have been lost to both scholarship and their original owners. Of the monasteries looted by the British only Pelkor Chöde was to escape the full fury of the Red Guards, and little of historical importance remains in Tsechen and Nenyng for example.



*Figure 3. The Ruins of Nenyng Monastery. Photographed by the author in 2009.*

It is important to note too that museums are becoming more aware and active with respect to dialogue and interaction with cultures from which their collections originated, and Cristina Kreps describes a new paradigm for cultural heritage preservation and a rethinking of cultural interaction and exchange.<sup>100</sup> The Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford is one such museum to attempt such "cultural

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<sup>99</sup> Penny 1983.

<sup>100</sup> Kreps 2003.

hybridisation” when it invited the prominent Tibetan artist Gonkar Gyatso to hold the position of “Artist in Residence” in 2005. His work explores the shifting role of identity in a migratory population, and the traditional identities of Tibetans in a changing global society. In this way, his art pieces and installations augmented perfectly the museum’s impressive collection of Tibetan art and objects, many of which were acquired as a result of the Younghusband Mission.

The Pitt River Museum’s attempts at cultural hybridisation projects highlights the changing role of the museum; from a purely scholarly and presentational storehouse, to an educational and community tool. It has been argued that the modern museum shares many of the classic characteristics of the mass media, and that they operate through the process of mass communication.<sup>101</sup> The educational role of the museum shifts emphasis from the specialist and scholastic to a more general educational approach suitable for all audiences and backgrounds. Gyatso’s work helps to bring a certain interactivity to the old-fashioned linear narrative exhibition format, helping to attain the “active audience” that museum curators seek.<sup>102</sup> His work is particularly important in a museum where the objects in the Tibetan collections are of historic and material value, and therefore visitor interaction and participation is a limited possibility.



Figure 4. Armour from Phagri Dzong in the Pitt Rivers Collection, Oxford, UK, donated by Major Beynon.

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<sup>101</sup> Hodge and D’Souza 1979: 251–256.

<sup>102</sup> Hooper-Greenhill 1994: 4.

Greenfield draws attention to the fact that most major Western collections have such an abundance of objects in their catalogues that it is impossible for them all to be permanently and properly displayed for the public to view. In most cases the surpluses are simply stored, awaiting special exhibitions or the eyes of curious scholars and historians. She gives the example of the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, which holds the largest collection of Indian art treasures outside of the subcontinent, consisting of over 40,000 items, the vast majority not on display. In this instance however there is some prospect that the items will be seen and studied,<sup>103</sup> and the V&A is one of a growing number of museums that has many of its treasures catalogued and photographed online. Their searchable databases, exhibitions and galleries can be viewed online and images of particular items can be requested over the Internet making the collection accessible to a growing number of Internet users.<sup>104</sup>

So why do we collect objects, even to the point of such excess? Answers to this hotly debated topic often resort to primitive psychology; however, this route often provides tautology, “conjuring up any postulation it needs.”<sup>105</sup> Items in collections sometimes give a certain aesthetic pleasure, others relate to and shed light on historical or scientific knowledge. Finally, Krysztof Pomian shows how with some objects, “possession confers a certain prestige on their owners, since they serve as proof of their good taste, of their considerable intellectual curiosity, or even of their wealth and generosity, if not all these qualities at the same time.”<sup>106</sup>

Any attempt to reason why there was such clarion call for Tibetan items must explore the process by which we construct identities, both of others, and of ourselves. “By the later half of the nineteenth century, collection of plunder had also become the collection of curios, and artifacts for both personal and institutional reasons. This material had become increasingly important in the process of ‘Othering’ Oriental and African societies, and was exemplified in the professionalism of exploration and the growth of ethnographic departments in museums, the new ‘Temples of Empire’.”<sup>107</sup> The notion of an “Imperial Archive” had developed in the mind of colonial administrators, their collecting agents in the field, and the museum staff of the London collections who sought to address the declining popular confidence in the very concept and need for Empire, a notion that had taken an exceptionally public mauling in the wake of the Boer War and Britain’s disgraceful burning, looting and introduction of the concentration camp. Thomas Richards presents the “Imperial Archive” as neither “a

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<sup>103</sup> See, for example, Ames 1985: 25–31.

<sup>104</sup> [www.collections.vam.ac.uk](http://www.collections.vam.ac.uk)

<sup>105</sup> Pomian 1994: 162.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*: 163.

<sup>107</sup> Carrington 2003: 81.



library nor a museum, but as a fantasy of knowledge collected and united in the service of state and Empire."<sup>108</sup> These temples became the touch-stones of Edwardian society, and continue to this day to assist us with our understanding of unfamiliar cultures and our own societies. Clare Harris, Curator of the Asian Collections at the Pitt Rivers, describes the wonder of the Lama in Kipling's *Kim* when he visits the Museum, and how at the same time "the Tibetan is initiated into the miraculous powers of Western science and the technologies of Empire, whose purview is demonstrated to extend far beyond the confines of British India and into Tibet. The Imperial techniques for knowing and controlling subject nations—including accurate mapping and census taking, have been augmented by other scholarly pursuits that allow the curator to regale the monk with accounts of the successes of Orientalism."<sup>109</sup>

In terms of this "Oriental Other," Edward Said has noted that "from the end of the eighteenth century there emerged a complex Orient suitable for study in the academy, for display in the museum, for reconstruction in the colonial office, for theoretical illustration in anthropological, biological, linguistic, racial, and historical theses about mankind and the universe for instances of economic and sociological theories of development, revolution, cultural personality, national or religious character."<sup>110</sup> By collecting objects from Tibet the Edwardian officers and men consciously and subconsciously sought to emphasise the differences between the ordered, civilized, rational self, exemplified by themselves and the state they represented, and Tibet's backward, religious, oppressed and flawed, "Other." This could be achieved best by collecting and presenting items to museums that stereotypically encompassed Tibet; items made from human bone, monastic paraphernalia, medieval military equipment and peasants' possessions.

Their magpie tendencies were enhanced when they collected Tibetan items as part trophy and part referent; in Tibet, as in Europe until the protestant revolutions, art and its productions and forms were inseparable from religious belief and ritual. Owing to this fact British officers could collect items from monasteries and temples for their "artistic" merit, as opposed for their exclusively religious otherness. This dual reasoning was especially helpful when appropriating statues and depictions of tantric union. No Imperial officer could be seen to be accused of peddling pornography, but erotically themed *art* pieces (themselves surely the most powerful and seductive depiction of the "Other,") that held religious importance, were a quite different matter, and British museums are consequently crammed with such examples.

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<sup>108</sup> Richards 1993.

<sup>109</sup> Harris and Shakya 2003: 2.

<sup>110</sup> Said 1978: 8.



*Figure 5. Gilt statue of Avalokiteśvara in the Victoria and Albert Museum, London, acquired by Brigadier-General Rawlings.*

The British officers and collectors likewise assured their place in a common historical conscience; collections seek to anchor us in space and time. Collecting items from a far-off location not only points towards the collector's presence there, but also demonstrates their influence over its history. The object becomes a continual reminder of that history, and the larger or more important the object, the more historical significance we can assume the actions of the collector had. As Susan Crane explains, "being collected means being valued and remembered institutionally; being displayed means being incorporated into the extra-institutional memory of the museum visitors."<sup>111</sup> This concept would most certainly be true in the case of Waddell, who held a strong belief in the importance and derivable benefit of the collection he was amassing in Tibet. Susan Pearce concurs that "the guiding principle which animated many collectors over the last five centuries or so has been primarily to create a relationship with the past which is seen as real, reasonable, and helpful."<sup>112</sup> By presenting objects from different civilisations we seek to construct a mind-frame that enables us to compare and contrast historical development between other societies and our own. "Otherness becomes the place of the alien, the primitive and the

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<sup>111</sup> Crane 2000: 2.

<sup>112</sup> Pearce 1995: 310.

unconscious, sharing common properties in their unpredictability, irrationality or uncontrollable nature in contrast to stable self identity."<sup>113</sup>

These collections not only assist the unconscious boundaries we make as individuals, but also the broader academic explanations of cultural difference and division: "It has become obvious that the so called "scientific" collections of Pitt Rivers in his generation, or Boas or Younghusband in theirs, have served to create a superstructure of Western intellectual ideas as a cultural explanation of perceived differences."<sup>114</sup> By enabling those at home to consider the Tibetans as inferior, backward or primitive, those who formed the Mission may have consciously or subconsciously sought to justify their presence and actions in Tibet. Furthermore, the multitude of religious and military items may have influenced popular opinion by instilling the belief that the Tibetans were not to be reasoned with, owing to their devotion to a "backward" religion, and that their military strength was in such a deplorable state that any martial engagement would inevitably result in high numbers of Tibetan casualties.

Museums and collections therefore help us create an identity on both an individual and academic basis, but they also play a role in the construction of a "national identity."<sup>115</sup> By looking at objects in museums we can find ourselves looking into an imaginary evolutionary mirror presenting a universal human heritage and development. In this way museums can unconsciously freeze the cultures displayed in their display cases, shaping the perspectives of the visitor to one that keeps the place of origin in question in the past. This is certainly true of Tibet, where the items displayed being of some antiquity reinforce the commonly held view of Tibet as a theocratic, mystical land transfixed by its Buddhist religious heritage. It is worth noting that none of the museums I have visited, with the exception of the Pitt Rivers described above, holds any displayed collections of contemporary Tibetan art, sculpture, or handicraft. Tibet remains sealed in history, just as the items in museums remain preserved in their display cases.

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<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*: 312.

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