

**SITING THE STAGE:  
REPRESENTATIONS OF  
CENTRAL ASIAN ENVIRONMENTS  
IN BRITISH LITERATURE,  
c.1830-1914**

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Between 1830 and 1914, Central Asia, hitherto a peripheral area of little strategic significance to Britain, became subject to extensive investigation and comment in a diverse range of publications. One recurring theme in such accounts was a perception of Central Asia as a region with many inhospitable environments, be it the extensive deserts, the mountain ranges, or the vast expanses of the steppes. Many writers emphasised that these harsh environments posed special difficulties for travellers and for the extension of British commercial, political and missionary influence over the region. Not all accounts of the environment were critical, however, and some writers acclaimed the landscape of Central Asia as a rural arcadia, seeing the extensive open spaces as representative of a society which was much freer than class-conscious Britain. Very rarely, however, were these contradictory assertions noted in the extensive discussion of Central Asia. This article seeks to offer an overview of how Central Asian environments were represented and to analyse the purposes these representations served.

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## The Significance of Environmental Representations

Many scholars have acknowledged what Tony Ballantyne has called ‘the pivotal role of knowledge production in European imperial projects’.<sup>2</sup> It is true that there are divergent approaches to interpreting the ways in which knowledge was obtained and the purposes which it served, but at the very least it has been recognised that to understand the history of imperialism scholars need to extend their studies beyond analyses of political and military interactions.<sup>3</sup>

Recently, one of the main branches of enquiry in this regard has been the connection between imperialism and the environment. Many scholars, such as John MacKenzie, have noted the flourishing interest in natural history in the second half of the nineteenth century, in particular.<sup>4</sup> Natural history neatly fitted the interest in classification characteristic of the Victorian era.<sup>5</sup> Consequently, many accounts of Central Asia by explorers, surveyors, soldiers, sportsmen, missionaries, compilers of encyclopaedia and histories, included descriptions of and allusions to the environment. This enabled writers to construct an apparatus of objectivity in their depictions of their subjects and in so doing enhance their credentials as scholars and disseminators of useful knowledge. In the context of the nineteenth century quest for scientific and verifiable knowledge about the world, assertions about the environment elevated recreational travel and exploration into the acquisition of scientific data. At the same time, the pursuit of science for its own sake was not the prime objective of such ventures, it was rather increasing knowledge about the world for the practical benefit of the British Empire. By the end of the nineteenth century this scientific knowledge of the Central Asian environment would also be invoked to explain the character of its peoples. Such explanations enabled writers to present assessments of Central Asia’s peoples and places in a scientific manner while simultaneously satisfying demand for knowledge about the region.

The connections between gender and empire have been another area of analysis. Tony Ballantyne and Antoinette Burton have argued that analyses of gender, sexuality and embodied subjects afford valuable insights into the everyday encounters characteristic of empire.<sup>6</sup> The difficulties of obtaining knowledge about territories beyond the boundaries of the British Empire in a place which posed serious dangers and stern physical challenges meant that exploration of Central Asia was presented as an affirmation of British

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<sup>2</sup> Tony Ballantyne, ‘Introduction: Knowledge and European Empire-Building in Asia’, *New Zealand Journal of Asian Studies*, 6, 2 (2004), 8-9.

<sup>3</sup> James Ryan, *Picturing Empire: Photography and the Visualization of the British Empire*, Chicago, 1997, 12.

<sup>4</sup> John MacKenzie, *The Empire of Nature: Hunting, Conservation and Imperialism*, Manchester, 1988.

<sup>5</sup> MacKenzie, *Empire of Nature*, 40-42.

<sup>6</sup> Tony Ballantyne and Anne Burton, eds., *Bodies in Contact: Rethinking Colonial Encounters in World History*, Durham, 2006.

prowess. For most of the nineteenth century, exploration in Central Asia was a masculine endeavour, the majority of explorers having a connection with the military. By the turn of the twentieth century, some British women had explored the region.<sup>7</sup> The very fact that women were able to travel in such formerly perilous territories advertised the extension of British influence.

By virtue of its strategic position between the British, Russian and Chinese empires, Central Asia came to assume great geopolitical significance to Britain. The region also attracted explorers, tourists and missionaries because of its isolation and exotic reputation. Consequently, any contribution to knowledge of Central Asia could be appropriated and utilised by a variety of organisations interested in the region. Although the representations of Central Asian environments varied, inconsistencies did not necessarily undermine their credibility. As Ali Behdad has noted, one of the strengths of Orientalist scholarship was its ability to accommodate a wide range of discourses, even some explicitly opposed to each other.<sup>8</sup> Behdad's observations are particularly applicable to Central Asia, because the vastness of the area meant that virtually any image could be projected onto the region.

Two key factors made this possible. First, so little was known about the geography of Central Asia at the beginning of the nineteenth century that any account of the region and its environment could be plausible. Even in the mid nineteenth century, the Royal Geographical Society (RGS) publication, *A Gazetteer of the World*, noted in its entry on Tartary that the 'geography of this tract is only known in a very general way; so obscure is it that it has been justly characterized as being 'chiefly conjectural', and as remaining, to the disgrace of science, 'in a wretched state of imperfection'.<sup>9</sup> The main reason for the paucity of knowledge was that Central Asia only became of any strategic importance to Britain when the Russian empire began its expansion towards India, beginning with the Russo-Persian War between 1826 and 1828.<sup>10</sup> Second, Central Asia was never a nation state or a region with clearly defined boundaries. It was, rather, a territory in which a diverse range of polities, tribal confederations and ethnicities existed. In the nineteenth century, 'Central Asia' became a generic term for the territories

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<sup>7</sup> For example, St George Littledale's wife accompanied him on his journey though Central Asia in 1896. Annette Meakin, a Fellow of the Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland, visited Bokhara in 1896 and 1903. Annette Meakin, *In Russian Turkestan: A Garden of Asia and its People*, London, 1903. Mrs Rickmers accompanied her husband on his travels in Bokhara in 1899 and Russian Turkestan in 1907.

<sup>8</sup> Ali Behdad, *Belated Travelers: Orientalism in the Age of Colonial Dissolution*, Durham, 1994, 17.

<sup>9</sup> Royal Geographical Society, *A Gazetteer of the World, or Dictionary of Geographical knowledge, compiled from the most recent authorities, and forming a complete body of modern geography, physical, political, statistical, and ethnographical*, Edinburgh, 1853, 32.

<sup>10</sup> H. W. C. Davis, 'The Great Game in Asia (1800-44)', The Raleigh Lecture on History, Read November 10 1926, *Proceedings of the British Academy* (1926), 231. See also David Gillard, *The Struggle for Asia 1828-1914: A Study in British and Russian Imperialism*, London, 1977, 3, 25.

between British India and Russia and because of its very fluidity a wide range of characteristics was ascribed to it. Demetrius Charles Boulger, author of several books on the so-called 'Central Asian Question', neatly encapsulated the British definition of the region when he wrote: 'Central Asia is that portion of Asia which intervenes between the English and Russian frontiers wherever they now are, or wherever they in the future may be. It is consequently a variable tract of country in accordance as those frontiers advance or recede'.<sup>11</sup> The existence of such an imperfectly defined space between three significant political entities, the British, Russian and Chinese empires, posed a significant challenge to British prestige. Consequently, the acquisition of information about Central Asia performed an essential role in assuaging imperial insecurities.

### Historical Background of Nineteenth-century Interpretations

The representations of Central Asian environments in the nineteenth and early twentieth century were influenced by previous characterisations. The term Central Asia was an appellation which came into common usage in the second half of the nineteenth century. Previously, the region was known by a variety of names, such as Turkestan (later subdivided into Russian Turkestan or Chinese Turkestan) and, as earlier mentioned, 'Tartary'. This appellation was loosely applied to a large territory between China and the Caspian Sea. The *Encyclopaedia Britannica* of 1771, for example, defined Tartary as a:

Vast country in the northern parts of Asia, bounded by Siberia on the north and weft [sic.]: this is called Great Tartary: The Tartars who lie south of Moscovy and Siberia are those of Astracan, Circassia, and Dagistan, situated north-weft of the Caspian-sea; the Calmuc Tartars, who lie between Siberia and the Caspian-sea; the Usbec Tartars and Moguls, who lie north of Persia and India; and lastly, those of Tibet, who lie northwest of China.<sup>12</sup>

The term 'Tartary' did not disappear completely in the second half of the nineteenth century; rather, it was one of a number of names ascribed to the region.

Although vague in terms of physical location, the term Tartary—inaccurately derived from the name applied to the Mongol warriors of the thirteenth century—was significant in that it evoked a potent imaginative geography of Central Asia which exercised an enduring influence on perceptions of its environment. 'Tartary' evoked an image of Central Asia as an arid, undeveloped domain inhabited by nomadic raiders who it was

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<sup>11</sup> Demetrius Boulger, *England and Russia in Central Asia*, Volume I, London, 1879, 2.

<sup>12</sup> *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, III, Edinburgh, 1771, 887.

believed were the agents of the apocalypse.<sup>13</sup> The peoples who lived there were referred to by the generic name 'Tartar'. In popular mythology, C. W. Connell notes, 'a Tartar was an agent sent from hell, a precursor of Antichrist, a nuntic of Satan, son of Ishmael breaking forth from his bounds in the mysterious East, the land of Gog and Magog, to unleash all his fury upon the Christian world as punishment for its sins'.<sup>14</sup> During the twelfth and thirteenth centuries it was also believed that 'Tartary' was the realm of the fabulous Christian ruler Prester John, but this ruler never materialised, further adding to the negativity associated with Central Asia. Being such a vast and imprecisely defined region meant that accounts of widely disparate environments were described in generic terms as representative of Central Asia.

The environment in which the Tartars lived was held responsible by some thinkers for the condition of its peoples. In *Spirit of the Laws*, Montesquieu contrasted what he perceived as the 'Freedom' of the Arabs with the 'servitude' of the Tartars, something he attributed to environmental factors. According to him, 'they have no towns, they have no forests, they have few marshes; their rivers are always frozen; they live in an immense plain; they have pastures and herds and consequently goods; but they have no place of retreat or defense'.<sup>15</sup> The nomadic lifestyle, practised by many of the peoples of Central Asia as a means of adapting to its environment, was also criticised. Historian Edward Gibbon asserted that 'in every age the immense plains of Scythia and Tartary have been inhabited by vagrant tribes of hunters and shepherds, whose indolence refuses to cultivate the earth, and whose restless spirit disdains the confinement of a solitary wife'.<sup>16</sup> He later noted that 'the thrones of Asia have been repeatedly overturned by these shepherds of the north, and their arms spread terror and destruction over the most fertile and warlike countries of Europe'.<sup>17</sup> The 'four stages' theory of human development, which held that society progressed through four, increasingly sophisticated stages: hunting, pasturage, agriculture and commerce, was also applied critically to Tartary. In contrast to European nations, which were regarded as exemplars of the fourth and most advanced stage, the peoples of Central Asia were often characterised as exemplars of the first and second

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<sup>13</sup> Axel Klopprogge, *Ursprung und Ausprägung des abendländischen Mongolenbildes im 13. Jahrhundert: Ein Versuch zur Ideengeschichte des Mittelalters*, *Asiatische Forschungen*, 122, Wiesbaden, 1993, 168-69.

<sup>14</sup> C. W. Connell, 'Western Views of the Tartars, 1240-1340', Ph.D. thesis, Rutgers University, 1969, 228.

<sup>15</sup> Charles Montesquieu, *The Spirit of the Laws*, translated and edited by Anne M. Cohler, Basia Carolyn Miller and Harold Samuel Stone, Cambridge, 1989, 294-96.

<sup>16</sup> Edward Gibbon, *Gibbon's Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, 1776-78, Volume III, reprint, London; New York, edited by Christopher Dawson, 1966, 3.

<sup>17</sup> Gibbon, *Decline and Fall*, 4.

stage, that is hunting and pastoral peoples.<sup>18</sup> The philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau, for example, cited the Tartars and the ‘savages of America’ as living examples of peoples who did not know how to cultivate land.<sup>19</sup>

### **Geographical Exploration and the “Knowing” of Central Asian Environments**

Geographical exploration of Central Asian environments transformed knowledge of the region from speculative to scientific, informing both the strategic debate on the ‘Central Asian Question’ and extending British knowledge of the world. As indicated above, representations of Central Asia’s environment from the thirteenth to the early nineteenth centuries were influenced by an underlying association of the region with the nomadic raiders who had attacked the settled world. This continued to influence perceptions of Central Asia during the nineteenth century, but they were augmented by a quest for more precise information about the region.

Because of the perceived strategic threat to Britain, many explorers had military experience. Geographical exploration in Central Asia exemplifies the three epochs in the history of exploration alluded to by Joseph Conrad in his essay on ‘Geography and some explorers’. By the first, ‘Geography Fabulous’, Conrad meant ‘the fantastic visions of mediaeval cartography’. The second was ‘Geography Militant’, paraphrased by Driver as ‘a rigorous quest for certainty about the geography of the earth’. The third was ‘Geography Triumphant’, which occurred as the number of unknown spaces in the world diminished until no area was left unexplored.<sup>20</sup> Between 1830 and 1890 the exploration of Central Asia could be characterised in the ‘Geography Militant’ category, being mostly conducted by people with a military background. By nature, military exploration was written in the vocabulary of masculine endeavour. Imperialism in Asia reinforced the dominant self-image of virile British masculinity, in which healthy physical condition was allied to rational thought and action for the betterment of the empire. For example, E.F. Knight, writing about the conflict in Hunza-Nagar in his book *Where Three Empires Meet* asserted ‘it is in Asia, perhaps, that one realises best what Great Britain is, and there one sees the pick of her sons leading the larger and nobler life that men should live’.<sup>21</sup>

From the outset, explorers of Central Asia, were expected to report on a wide range of subjects. In addition to trying to define the precise location

<sup>18</sup> Ronald Meek, *Social Science and the Ignoble Savage*, Cambridge, 1976, 34, 50-51, 53-56, 97-98.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 87.

<sup>20</sup> Joseph Conrad, ‘Geography and some explorers’, in *Last Essays*, ed. R. Curle, London: 1926 cited in Felix Driver, ‘Geography’s Empire: Histories of Geographical Knowledge’, *Environment and Planning D, Society and Space*, 10 (1992), 23.

<sup>21</sup> E. F. Knight, *Where Three Empires Meet: A Narrative of Recent Travel in Kashmir, Western Tibet, Gilgit and the Adjoining Countries*, London, 1893, 495.

of the major towns and cities of Central Asia, they were required to report on the flora, fauna and geology of the region, as well as the character of its peoples. The practical applications of exploration were also explicitly recognised. Sir Henry Rawlinson, himself a noted explorer of Central Asia and author of *England and Russia in the East*, stated that geographical discovery should 'not be looked upon as a mere dilettante amusement, but should always be attended with practical results for the benefit of commerce and the public interest'.<sup>22</sup>

As previously noted, Russian military and political activity in Persia and Turkey prompted concerns about a possible Russian invasion of India. This in turn led to a quest for information on Central Asia on the part of the Government of India. Lord Ellenborough, the Governor General, having unsuccessfully sought maps and information on Central Asia from the Foreign Office, complained to the Governor of Bombay in 1829 that 'what we ought to have is Information. The first, the second and the third thing a government ought always to have is Information'.<sup>23</sup> William Moorcroft had compiled a map of Afghanistan in 1819 but much of it relied on very dated information, notwithstanding the exploratory mission of Mir Izzet Ullah in 1812-13.<sup>24</sup> In the 1830s, two important journeys of exploration took place. Between 1831 and 1833, Lieutenant Alexander Burnes travelled via the Indus River to Afghanistan and the Khanate of Bokhara.<sup>25</sup> In 1836, Lieutenant John Wood of the Royal Navy explored Badakhshan in north-eastern Afghanistan, to investigate the sources of the River Oxus.<sup>26</sup>

Their experiences highlighted the risks and rewards of exploring Central Asia's environment. John Wood was awarded the Gold Medal of the Royal Geographical Society and the *Asiatic Journal* praised his book as signalling that 'the march of geographical science, advancing in the van of commercial enterprise, or following in the rear of war, is rapidly dispersing the agreeable reveries in which fiction and tradition once indulged respecting remote regions of the earth'.<sup>27</sup> In the process of locating the source of the

<sup>22</sup> *The Times*, December 14, 1869, 3.

<sup>23</sup> Ellenborough to Malcolm, private, 27 October 1829, Colchester MSS 30/9/94 pt. 5/2 (Public Record Office London) cited in Edward Ingram 'The Rules of the Game: A Commentary on the Defence of British India, 1798-1829', *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 3 (1974-75), 258.

<sup>24</sup> Davis, 235.

<sup>25</sup> Alexander Burnes, *Travels into Bokhara; Containing the Narrative of a Voyage on the Indus from the sea to Lahore with presents from the King of Great Britain: and an Account of a Journey from India to Cabool, Tartary and Persia, performed by order of the Supreme Government of India in the Years, 1831, 32 and 33*, III, London, 1835.

<sup>26</sup> John Wood, *A Personal Narrative of a Journey to the Source of the River Oxus, by the Route of the Indus, Kabul and Badakhshan, Performed under the Sanction of the Supreme Government of India in the Years 1836, 1837 and 1838*, London, 1841.

<sup>27</sup> *The Asiatic Journal and Monthly Register for British and Foreign India, China and Australia*, 34, 1 (1841), 152.

Oxus, Wood renamed Lake Sarikol, Lake Victoria, imposing a British identity on Central Asian landscape. Complementing the explorations of Burnes and Wood in Central Asia, Lieutenant Arthur Conolly travelled from England via Russia and Persia through Afghanistan to North India and James Abbott and Richmond Shakespear went to Khiva to seek the release of Russian slaves held by the Khan of Khiva. These missions, however, did not explore the Khanates of Bokhara and Khokand nor the territories between British India and Xinjiang. Consequently, in the *Gazetteer of the World*, most of the references on Central Asia were tentative. The observations of the Timurid scholar, Nasir Ud-din, and of Ulugh Beg, ruler of Samarkand from 1409-47, were cited as the most accurate information available on the longitude of Bokhara in 1853.<sup>28</sup> The coordinates for Kashgar were based upon the Jesuit maps of 1760 while on Mongolia it was stated that the maps of Du Halde and D'Anville, produced in the first half of the eighteenth century, 'constitute nearly all that we know about them'.<sup>29</sup>

Not only the topographical challenges of Central Asia made exploration difficult but also the dangers it posed to European explorers. Reviewing the initial phase of British exploration, Rawlinson noted 'it would really seem as if a fatality had attended us, so few—so very few—of the English officers who advanced the cause of geography in Central Asia having lived to wear the laurels they had earned'.<sup>30</sup> Among the fatalities he noted were Conolly and Stoddart, two British envoys executed by order of the Amir of Bokhara in 1842, Eldred Pottinger and Alexander Burnes (killed in the Kabul uprising in 1842). These deaths discouraged British explorers from venturing through Central Asia for the next two decades. Another effect of these fatalities was that the exploration of Central Asia came to be seen as a contest between the advancement of scientific knowledge and imperial power by British explorers, on one hand, and treacherous terrain and peoples, on the other.

Concerns over the safety of travellers and British preoccupation with the Crimean war resulted in a hiatus in Britain's exploration of Central Asia. Between 1860 and 1914, however, the British pursued an extensive programme of surveying and exploration in Central Asia. The primary motivation for this came from the steady expansion of Russian influence in Central Asia, beginning with the Russian invasions of the Central Asian Khanates of Bokhara, Khokand and Khiva in the 1860s and 1870s.

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<sup>28</sup> 'Neither the physical nor the political limits of B. [Bokhara] can be well defined, because it is environed by deserts, and has long fully participated in that incessant political fluctuation to which all states, in themselves disorganised and subsisting mainly by war and robbery are subjected'. *A Gazetteer of the World*, II, 800.

<sup>29</sup> *A Gazetteer of the World*, VIII, 458; IX, 337.

<sup>30</sup> Henry Rawlinson, *England and Russia in the East: A Series of Papers on the Political and Geographical Condition of Central Asia*, London, 1875, 210.



Two modes of exploration were adopted. One involved using Indians trained as surveyors in clandestine surveys. One of these explorers, known as The Pundit, received a gold medal from the RGS but some British geographers, such as Waugh, Surveyor-General of India, believed that Indians did not have the same intellectual capacity for exploration as Europeans.<sup>31</sup> Another mode of exploration involved British explorers visiting Central Asia undisguised on private and commercial business. George Hayward and Robert Shaw visited Yakub Beg in Kashgar in 1869. Hayward, motivated by a desire for adventure conducted covert mapping during his visit and was killed the following year at Darkot. Shaw sought to establish trade connections between Britain and Yakub Beg's state of Kashgharia. Both were awarded the Gold Medal of the Royal Geographical Society for their endeavours.

The chief objective of such missions was to generate more accurate maps of Central Asia. The process of obtaining such information was linked to extending British knowledge and influence over territories outside the British Empire but in which Britain had political interests. Robert Shaw encapsulated the epistemological role of mapping when he wrote 'after all 'we do not know a country in order to map it, but we map it in order to know it'.<sup>32</sup> The environment of Central Asia was one obstacle to acquiring such knowledge, the peoples of Central Asia were presented as another. Hayward while praising the attractiveness of Central Asia's landscape, criticised its inhabitants for obstructing the exploration and mapping of this same territory. 'It is strange', he wrote:

That we have no really correct map of the interior of the oldest continent of the world. The causes of the absence of this desideratum, now appreciated in the science of geography, may be at once traced to the antagonism of race and religion, which has hitherto been the deadly barrier to the acquisition of such knowledge. It is the fanatical tribes and bigoted Mahomedans in Central Asia, which alone offer a bar to its

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<sup>31</sup> Waugh, asserted that: 'They [Indian Surveyors] have not, it is believed, the same coup d'oeil and power of drawing from nature that Europeans have'. Waugh, cited in Derek Waller, *The Pundits: British Exploration of Tibet and Central Asia*, Lexington, 1990, 24. This belief persisted. Delmar Morgan, commenting on Bower's account of his journey across Tibet in 1893, noted that 'these natives, however valuable some of their work may be, and however carefully trained in the use of instruments, cannot bring us that accurate information as to these countries which we require. They seem to lack that spirit of critical inquiry, and that fertility of resource, that distinguish the European traveller, and open to him as if by magic the most jealously guarded regions'. Morgan, in response to 'A Journey Across Tibet', H. Bower, *The Geographical Journal*, 1 (1893), 406.

<sup>32</sup> Robert Shaw, *Visits to High Tartary, Yarkand and Kashghar and Return Journey over the Karakoram Pass*, London, 1871, 18.

successful exploration, for no country possesses a finer climate, grander scenery, or places of more attractive interest.<sup>33</sup>

The RGS played a significant role in supporting, disseminating and rewarding exploration of Central Asia. Between 1832 and 1914 the RGS awarded 26 gold medals to explorers of Central Asia (16% of the total number of Gold Medals awarded in this period). An examination of the Central Asia related content of the *Journal of the Royal Geographical Society* 1860-1880 indicates the significance attached to exploration in the region. In the three decades before 1860, articles on Central Asia constituted 4.75% of content between 1830 and 1839, 2.99% between 1840 and 1849 and 4.28% between 1850 and 1859. In contrast, articles on Africa accounted for 14%, 23.6% and 30.4% of journal content in these periods. In the two decades between 1860 and 1880, articles on Central Asia accounted for 15.15% of content between 1860 and 1869 and 15.29% between 1870 and 1879, a slightly greater percentage than articles on Africa, which accounted for 13.69% and 15.19% of journal content in these periods.<sup>34</sup>

The detailed information obtained as a result of such exploration played an important role in confirming the political settlement reached between Britain and Russia in 1885 when the two countries nearly went to war over Russian activities in Afghanistan. Part of the settlement involved the formation of an Anglo-Russian boundary commission to delimit mutually acceptable boundaries. The work of this commission, and also the endeavours of British geographers in the northwest frontier province of Chitral in 1895, was cited by Sir Thomas Holdich as an example of how dedicated geographers could overcome immense obstacles to acquire an intimate knowledge of a place.<sup>35</sup> He noted that in Afghanistan the area was 'rough, remote and inhospitable (especially in winter)' but was 'well adapted for geographical surveying'.<sup>36</sup> To illustrate his point that triangulation, the most accurate method of surveying, could now be deployed anywhere in the world, he cited the example of the men of the boundary commission working in the 'long narrow ice bound valleys of the Hindu Kush to the Pamirs . . . where the wind whistles down with the force of steam and the temperature of ice' who had successfully attained accurate measurements, despite temporarily being bunkered.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> George Hayward, 'Journey from Leh to Yarkand and Kashgar and Exploration of the Sources of the Yarkand River', *Journal of the Royal Geographical Society*, XXXX (1870), 123-24.

<sup>34</sup> I am grateful for the assistance of Dr. Alan Latham for his suggestions on conceptualizing and quantifying geographical exploration.

<sup>35</sup> Thomas Holdich, 'The Use of Practical Geography Illustrated by Recent Frontier Operations', *The Geographical Journal* (GJ), 13, 5 (1899), 467.

<sup>36</sup> Holdich, 470-71.

<sup>37</sup> Holdich, 474-75.

The exploration of Central Asia was always closely related to strategic concerns. For a long time, the environment of Central Asia had itself defended its nomadic tribes. The vastness of Central Asia and its natural protection from mountains, barren steppes and extensive deserts posed severe challenges to the armies of sedentary empires for many centuries. In 1885 Arminius Vambery, a renowned explorer and prolific writer on Central Asia, noted in his book *The Coming Struggle for India* that Russian expansionism in the region had met ‘with a serious obstacle in nature, through the endless barren steppes varying with hard clay, sand many feet deep, and wide waterless tracts of country’.<sup>38</sup> An attempted Russian punitive expedition against Khiva in 1839 had faltered when it ran short of water. The extent to which the environment of Central Asia could also act as a buffer against a Russian invasion of India was one of the key issues in the debate on whether British India should take a ‘forward policy’ against Russian expansionism by controlling all or part of Afghanistan or whether they should retain the approach of ‘masterly inactivity’ which involved securing its Indian frontier. The core issue here was whether a modern army, possibly assisted by Central Asian tribesmen, could overcome these barriers.<sup>39</sup> Rawlinson, for example, warned of the ‘hordes of barbarians who in thirst of plunder, would accompany the European [Russian] invaders—the descendants of those wild warriors who rode with Nadir Shah to Delhi’ who might accompany a Russian invasion.<sup>40</sup> Some however, saw the environment of Central Asia as an obstacle. An article in *The Times* in 1854 questioned whether:

Notwithstanding the influence Russia is acquiring over the wild tribes and pathless deserts of independent Tartary, a civilized army, with the usual accompaniments of baggage and artillery, could cross the vast waste which intervenes between the Sea of Aral and the Hindoo Koosh, scale the most rugged and difficult mountain barriers on the face of the globe, and arrive in condition to open a campaign on the burning plains of Hindostan.<sup>41</sup>

The increasingly accurate knowledge of the environment of Central Asia did not alter the dominant image of its peoples and polities as backward,

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<sup>38</sup> Arminius Vambery, *The Coming Struggle for India: Being an Account of the Encroachments of Russia in Central Asia and of the Difficulties Sure to Arise Therefrom to England*, London, 1885, 5.

<sup>39</sup> Major General K. N. Wilford suggested that the Russians might enlist the ‘Tartars of Central Asia’ should they decide to invade India. *The Times*, 29 October 1872, 8. Such fears were expressed from the beginning of the Central Asian Question, see for example, *The Times*, 11 January 1839, 6; 28 April 1840, 4.

<sup>40</sup> Rawlinson, 358. See also Boulger, *England and Russia in Central Asia*, II, 57, 98.

<sup>41</sup> *The Times*, 7 January 1854, 6. See also, John Adye, *Indian Frontier Policy: An Historical Sketch*, London, 1897, 19.

unreliable and violent. Indeed, accounts of the landscapes of Central Asia were cited as supporting evidence for such views. The *Chambers' Encyclopaedia* of 1874 passed moral judgements on the physical environment of the Kirghiz: 'Over this vast tract', it asserted, 'reigns a dismal monotony; the country has scarcely any important elevation or depression, no river of consequence runs through it, no great forest breaks the uniformity of the scene; it is a vast steppe, containing 850,000 English square miles, sterile, stony and streamless, and covered with rank herbage of five feet high'.<sup>42</sup> Sir Henry Rawlinson attributed the character of the peoples of Central Asia to environmental influences. In his widely cited book, *England and Russia in the East*, he argued that 'if we look at the character of the physical geography of Central Asia, we observe everywhere a conflict, as it were, of the forces of nature, which may well remind us of the struggles between the principles of good and evil that was the dominant creed of the old inhabitants of the country'. Rawlinson divided Central Asia into three types of peoples. In the mountainous region, with its 'invigorating climate', were a 'hardy peasantry'. At the foot of the mountains, the mass of the population lived in towns and villages and pursued 'the peaceful arts of life'. Then there was the 'pathless desert' peopled by pastoral nomads. Here, he argued, 'rapine and disorder seem to have their natural home, and here, at the present day, to the ordinary excesses of brigandage is superadded the detested occupation of man-stealing'.<sup>43</sup>

With most of the pioneering work in geography seemingly done by the end of the nineteenth century, some geographers called for a change in emphasis. It was argued that rather than defining the locations of places, geographical methodology could define the character of peoples. George Robertson argued in his presidential speech to the RGS in 1900:

Given the minute topography of a country, a complete description of its surface features, its rivers, mountains, plains and boundaries, a full account of its vegetable and mineral resources, a knowledge of its climatic variations, we have at once disclosed to us the scene where we may study with something like clearness man's procession through the ages. Many of the secrets of human action in the past are explained by the land forms of the globe, while existing social conditions and social organizations can often thereby be intelligently explained and understood. Persistent national characteristics are often easy to explain from such considerations.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> *Chambers's Encyclopaedia*, V, London, 1874, 802.

<sup>43</sup> Rawlinson, *England and Russia in the East*, 240-42.

<sup>44</sup> Robertson, 'Political Geography and the Empire', *Geographical Journal*, 16, 4 (1900), 448.

Ellsworth Huntington took up this challenge in his book *The Pulse of Asia* in which he applied his theory of 'physiography' to Central Asia.<sup>45</sup> He attributed the 'hardihood, hospitality, laziness, morality, and family affection' of the Kirghiz to the influence of life in the plateaus and deserts.<sup>46</sup> Indeed, he regarded the Kirghiz as exemplifying his theory of the influence of natural surroundings on human character.<sup>47</sup> Huntington's work was a classic expression of 'Geography Triumphant'. Central Asia, once a spatial void, was now a surveyed site where such theories could be applied.

Central Asia was not always depicted unfavourably. Classical education—a key part of the curriculum of Public Schools which many explorers attended—invested certain places in Central Asia with great significance, as the birthplace of Aryan civilisation or the realm of Alexander the Great. The Oxus River, for example, exercised a considerable fascination for British travellers. In 1895, Curzon set out to find its sources on the 'Hidden Roof of the World'.<sup>48</sup> He referred to the Oxus as the 'parent stream of humanity, which has successfully impressed the imagination of Greek and Arab, Of Chinese and Tartar'.<sup>49</sup>

By the time of Curzon's visit the strategic concerns which had motivated previous exploration were matters for academic debate rather than urgent enquiry. He recognised that there were conflicting accounts of the region's environment, referring to 'those much debated lands of the Pamir or the Pamirs which have been variously represented as grassy plains and horrible wildernesses, as a certain death trap for invading armies, and yet as the vulnerable gates of Hindustan'.<sup>50</sup> For Curzon and other explorers, however, what was important was that Central Asia, once inaccessible and highly dangerous, was now open to travellers. It now provided an exotic 'other', a contrary experience to travel in Britain. Curzon's visit to the Hunza valley in 1895 constituted just such an experience, describing it as:

Undoubtedly one of the most remarkable scenes in the world, Nature seems to exert her supreme energy, and in one chord to exhaust every note in her majestic and vast diapason of sound. She shows herself in the same moment tender and savage, radiant and appealing, the relentless spirit that hovers above the ice-towers, and the gentle

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<sup>45</sup> Ellsworth Huntington, *The Pulse of Asia: A Journey in Central Asia Illustrating the Geographic Basis of History*, New York, 1907.

<sup>46</sup> Huntington, *The Pulse of Asia*, 361.

<sup>47</sup> Huntington, *The Pulse of Asia*, 125.

<sup>48</sup> Curzon, 'The Pamirs and the Source of the Oxus', GJ, 8, 1 (1896), 16.

<sup>49</sup> Curzon, GJ, 15.

<sup>50</sup> Curzon, GJ, 16.

patroness of the field and orchard, the tutelary deity and the haunts of men'.<sup>51</sup>

Willy Rickmers, who visited Turkestan in 1907, also extolled the virtues of Central Asia's landscape. He presented his explorations in the Fan Mountains as a rewarding trek: 'Next day we are impatient to reach the top of the pass, in order to enjoy what we have been longing for: a mountain view in bracing air after tiring marches through the ovens of hell-baked stone'.<sup>52</sup> In another passage, Rickmers compared the scenery to Great Britain describing a 'Moorland Glen near our camp, where nature was allowed to show herself as a landscape gardener of sweeter mood'.<sup>53</sup> Speaking after her husband had presented an account of their travels to the RGS, Mrs Rickmers spoke of the journey as 'a kind of rest cure for the nerve exhaustion induced by western civilisation'.<sup>54</sup> The fact that women were now able to travel through Central Asia further emphasised that the physical challenge formerly posed by its environment and peoples had been overcome. Indeed, some of these women travellers actively contributed to knowledge of Central Asia's environment. Annette Meakin brought a preserved specimen of a guinea worm back to England from Bokhara for display and examination.<sup>55</sup> In 1910, Fanny Bullock Workman climbed the Hispar Glacier, on the Northwest Frontier.<sup>56</sup>

If the expeditions of Curzon and Rickmers represented a conquering of Central Asia's present, then Aurel Stein's archaeological endeavours and subsequent publications *Sand Buried Ruins of Khotan* and *Ruins of Desert Cathay* represented a reclamation of Central Asia's past.<sup>57</sup> Such a systematic process of excavation could not be conducted without Central Asia being, geographically speaking, a known domain and safe for excavation. In a wider sense, Stein's endeavours reflected changing patterns in the function of geography discussed in Derek Gregory's work. Gregory suggests that by the end of the nineteenth century geography had become a part of the world-as-exhibition. By this he means that by this time 'it was a characteristic of

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<sup>51</sup> Curzon, GJ, 20.

<sup>52</sup> Rickmers, 'The Fan Mountains in the Duab of Turkestan', GJ, 30, 5 (1907), 489.

<sup>53</sup> Rickmers, GJ, 493.

<sup>54</sup> Rickmers, GJ, 499.

<sup>55</sup> Meakin, 166.

<sup>56</sup> The president of the Royal Geographical Society applauded her efforts saying 'the feats accomplished by Mrs. Bullock Workman are more remarkable in the way of mountaineering than those which have been performed ever before by any one of her sex. Whether I ought to make that limitation or not, I am rather doubtful, but at all events, with that limitation, it will not be denied'. Fanny Bullock Workman and William Hunter Workman, 'The Hispar Glacier', GJ, 35, 2 (1910), 130.

<sup>57</sup> Aurel Stein, *Sand Buried Ruins of Khotan: Personal Narrative of a Journey of Archaeological and Geographical Exploration in Chinese Turkestan*, London, 1904, xii and *Ruins of Desert Cathay: Personal Narrative of Explorations in Central Asia and Westernmost China*, I, London, 1912, ix-xiii.

European ways of knowing to render things as objects to be viewed' and thus 'set the world up as a picture . . . [and arrange] it before an audience as an object on display to be viewed, investigated, and experienced'.<sup>58</sup> The exhibition of Stein's treasures advertised both the knowledge of Central Asia's past and present environments and by extension, the successes of modern scientific exploration, to the British public.

### **Sporting Ventures and Exhibitions of Central Asian Specimens**

Not least among the exhibits from Central Asia were dead animals. The ability of British to access Central Asia for hunting was a further expression of mastery over the environment of Central Asia. In addition to its physical challenges, hunting in Central Asia also provided an opportunity to display hunter's achievements in publications such as Rowland Ward's *Records of Big Game* and exhibiting specimens of Central Asian animals, especially the sheep known as the *Ovis Poli*, in public spaces such as the Natural History Museum. John MacKenzie has argued that through hunting imperial nations such as Britain 'expressed their virility through their capacity to dominate their environment and they did that largely by a combination of hunting, killing and classification'.<sup>59</sup> 'Hunting', he argues, 'required all the most virile attributes of the imperial male; courage, endurance, individualism, sportsmanship (combining the moral etiquette of the sportsman with both horsemanship and marksmanship), a mastery of environmental signs and a knowledge of natural history'.<sup>60</sup> Although MacKenzie frames his arguments with reference to hunting in India and Africa, they are eminently applicable to Central Asia.<sup>61</sup>

Accounts of Central Asian environments in hunting literature were generally more positive than those expressed in encyclopaedias, newspapers and missionary literature. The aspects of Central Asian environments which attracted unfavourable comment in these publications—inaccessibility, lack of industrial and commercial development and unsophisticated inhabitants—were regarded as advantageous for the purposes of hunting. Hunters such as Percy Etherton and J. H. Miller relished the isolation of Central Asia. In his book *Across the Roof of the World*, Etherton stated that 'to the sportsman Central Asia is known as a great hunting ground . . . but, as is usual with all

<sup>58</sup> Derek Gregory, *Geographical Imaginations*, London, 1994, 34.

<sup>59</sup> John MacKenzie, 'The Imperial Pioneer and the British Masculine Stereotype in late Victorian and Edwardian times', in J. A. Mangan and James Walvin (eds), *Manliness and Morality: Middle Class Masculinity in Britain and America 1800-1940*, Manchester, 1987, 179.

<sup>60</sup> MacKenzie, 'The Imperial Pioneer', 179.

<sup>61</sup> For a more detailed discussion of this issue, see Geoff Watson, 'Central Asia as Hunting Ground: Sporting Images of Central Asia', in David Christian and Craig Benjamin (eds.), *Worlds of the Silk Roads: Ancient and Modern*, Turnhout, 1996, 265-88.

good things, [it] is difficult of access'.<sup>62</sup> In order to access these hunting grounds, British hunters were assisted by indigenous people, although hunting literature consistently played down the role of the 'shikari'.

By the outbreak of World War One, some hunters were expressing concern that the hunting grounds of Central Asia were becoming too popular and that it was harder to find a truly isolated spot.<sup>63</sup> It was feared that the exotic allure of Central Asia was diminishing as a result of unrestricted hunting. By the late nineteenth century, some were calling for access to Central Asia's hunting grounds to be regulated. Writing in 1896, Curzon feared that 'the time cannot be far distant when the finest of these magnificent animals, instead of peering from their native retreats in the Kukuruk nullah, will only be visible behind a glass case in European museums' and called for permits to be issued.<sup>64</sup> Miller echoed his call in 1914, arguing that the increased number of hunters and the presence of visible signifiers of Europeans detracted from the joy of hunting. 'To many travellers', he noted:

The knowledge that several other sportsmen are hunting within a comparatively small radius, and the feeling that they themselves at any time may be poaching in another's 'nullah', does away with that sense of freedom which is half the joy of big-game hunting. The fascination of treading new ground, where there is no likelihood of coming across empty jam-tins and match-boxes, and where the lure of the next skyline is ever calling, is to some an essential adjunct to the actual hunting.<sup>65</sup>

Venues such as the Natural History Museum provided a space where specimens from Central Asian environments could be displayed to the British public, thereby demonstrating the ability of British citizens to hunt anywhere in the world. The display of Central Asian specimens was given a boost in 1891 when the Hume Bequest, which included 223 heads, was displayed in the Natural History Museum. This exhibition proved extremely popular, with some 9,825 people visiting the exhibition on 19 May 1891.<sup>66</sup> The heads of the *Ovis Poli* and St George Littledale's collection of wild sheep from the

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<sup>62</sup> Percy Etherton, *Across the Roof of the World: A Record of Sport and Travel through Kashmir, Gilgit, Hunza, the Pamirs, Chinese Turkistan, Mongolia and Siberia*, London, 1911, 203.

<sup>63</sup> J. H. Miller quoted in Douglas Carruthers, *Unknown Mongolia: A Record of Travel and Exploration in Northwest Mongolia and Dzungaria, with three chapters on sport by J. H. Miller*, II, London, 1914, 580.

<sup>64</sup> Curzon, 'The Pamirs and the Source of the Oxus', 43.

<sup>65</sup> Miller, II, 581.

<sup>66</sup> *The Standard*, 19 May 1891 cited in *Newspaper Cuttings, Natural History Museum*, III, 144.



Pamirs were singled out as highlights of the exhibition.<sup>67</sup> One newspaper included a feature article by Dr Albert Gunther, head of the Natural History Department, praising that ‘almost every specimen is distinguished by its size by the perfect symmetry of its growth, or by some other feature of interest to the naturalist or sportsman’. Gunther wrote that ‘perhaps most highly prized by the collector is the magnificent series of heads of Marco Polo’s sheep’.<sup>68</sup> Several years later, St George Littledale donated to the Natural History Museum the complete skins and skeletons of several wild bactrian camel which he had shot on his travels through Central Asia. Littledale’s generosity evoked high praise from Sir William Flower, the Director of the Natural History Museum, who described him as a traveller who aided the cause of science:

I am in the habit of dividing travellers who go into remote regions of the world into three classes—those who slay the animals of the countries they pass through and leave them where they were killed; those who bring home their trophies and carry them off to distant and perhaps inaccessible parts of the country where they may happen to reside, to hang them up in their halls, where in process of time moth, dust, and decay destroy them; and those who recollect that there is in London, in the Cromwell Road, an institution where such trophies as are of scientific interest will be preserved for the benefit of all who are capable of deriving any advantage from them. I am happy to say Mr Littledale is one of the third class, and that zoological science has very much benefited.<sup>69</sup>

The Central Asian holdings of the Natural History Museum were again boosted in 1912 when it received the second instalment of the Hume bequest. A catalogue noted that the collection contained four heads which appeared to be a record in their particular species, including a Yarkand Gazelle and a Yarkand Stag, which were shot by Adam Dalglish when he was working for the short-lived Central Asian Trading Company.<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> *The Standard*, 29 April 1891, cited in *Newspaper Cuttings*, III, 143. Similar articles appeared in *The Echo*, 29 April 1891; *The Field: The Country Gentlemen’s Newspaper*, 2 May 1891; *The Shooting Times*, 30 May 1891. All cited in *Newspaper Cuttings*, *Natural History Museum*, III, 143.

<sup>68</sup> *Daily Graphic*, 7 May 1891, 13-14, cited in *Newspaper Cuttings*, *Natural History Museum*, III, 143.

<sup>69</sup> St George Littledale, ‘A Journey Across Central Asia’, *GJ*, 3, 6 (1894), 472-73.

<sup>70</sup> R. Lydekker, *Catalogue of the Heads and Horns of Big Game bequeathed by A. O. Hume to the British Museum (Natural History)*, London, 1912, xiv-xv. The Central Asian Trading Company was a short-lived organization established in 1874 the hopes of profiting from a commercial agreement signed with Yakub Beg in February 1874. Although initial sales were promising, the Government of India soon withdrew its support owing to the indiscreet behaviour of its director Thomas Russell. Bir Good Gill, ‘The

Donating trophies to the Natural History Museum placed hunting in an altruistic light. It allowed its practitioners to transcend connotations of leisured indulgence in the name of educational advancement. When Miller shot two wild boar in Mongolia he hoped they would fit into an unnamed classification, since wild boar had yet to be exhibited in the Natural History Museum at Kensington. On this occasion Miller's hopes were dashed as this type of boar had been shot on a previous expedition.<sup>71</sup> Later, however, after considerable expenditure of effort, he managed to shoot a Kulon, a species of wild mule. Explaining why he took so much trouble hunting an animal which was of 'no value as a hunting trophy' and was often regarded as a pest, Miller stated that he was 'anxious to secure a specimen of the wild-ass, so as to be able to prove to which variety it belongs, no specimen having been previously brought to England from this region'.<sup>72</sup> Displaying specimens from such a previously inaccessible and hostile region exhibited, in the literal and figurative sense, the spread of British influence over territory which remained outside the British Empire. Accordingly, appropriation of exotic specimens from Central Asian environments became a matter of considerable prestige for British Orientalists.

### **Missionary Endeavour: Central Asia as Spiritual Wilderness**

The gradual sense of geographical mastery attained over Central Asia by British geographers and hunters was not evident in missionary accounts. The difficult task facing missionaries, who travelled extensively throughout Central Asia but encountered, at best, a politely indifferent audience, was repeatedly expressed in environmental metaphors. The vastness of the area compared to the available number of workers was a recurring theme in missionary literature.<sup>73</sup> Missionaries frequently referred to the region as an 'unoccupied field', the largest non-evangelised area in the world.<sup>74</sup> Whereas the Anglo-Russian boundary commission was deemed to have satisfactorily delimited borders in the Pamirs, Dr Arthur Neve called for the establishment of a spiritual boundary commission 'not as in politics, to mark off the limits of the sphere of action, but to ascertain why these limits exist at all in spite of the marching orders, "Into all the world"'.<sup>75</sup> The scarcity of the workers is underlined by the fact that in the period 1830-1914, only four British missions remained in Central Asia for any length of time. The London

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Venture of the Central Asian Trading Company in Eastern Turkistan 1874-75', *Asian Affairs*, 31, 2 (2000), 181-88.

<sup>71</sup> Miller, II, 567.

<sup>72</sup> Miller, II, 605.

<sup>73</sup> *Dawn in Central Asia*, 7, 4 (1909), 38.

<sup>74</sup> See for example, *China's Millions*, 55, 2 (1929), 20; *Dawn in Central Asia*, 6, 2 (1908), 28.

<sup>75</sup> Eugene Stock, *The History of the Church Missionary Society, Its Environment, Its Men and Its Work*, III, London, 1890, 768.

Missionary Societies' (LMS) evangelisers, Swan and Stallybrass, stayed between 1817 and 1840 while James Gilmour worked in Mongolia between 1870 and 1890. Other missions included the Central Asian Mission located at Hoti-Mardan, 48 kilometres northeast of Peshawar, which was established in 1902 and the LMS-established China Inland Mission (CIM), for whom George Hunter and Percy Mather commenced working in Xinjiang in 1905 and 1914 respectively, both remaining there (with the exception of one brief furlough for Mather) for the rest of their lives. Their isolation was frequently commented upon. An article in *China's Millions*, the magazine of the CIM, noted that:

In this great province [Xinjiang] larger than the whole German Empire, with Spain and France combined, Mr George Hunter is almost the only Protestant missionary. The only other workers are the Swedish missionaries at Kashgar and Yarkand, nearly 1000 miles [1600 kilometres] from Urumchi where Mr Hunter has secured premises.<sup>76</sup>

Whereas geographical knowledge of Central Asia increased incrementally during the nineteenth century, the task of Christian missionaries was perceived as becoming progressively more difficult, with early optimism replaced by increasingly pessimistic assessments of their likely impact. When Joseph Wolff visited Central Asia in 1830 he believed that there was 'not a more hopeful field for a missionary than Toorkestaun' and that the Turkomans and the peoples of Balkh and Bokhara 'like to converse about religion and to hear of it a genuine feeling for religion'.<sup>77</sup> In this period, environmental metaphors were often employed in missionary literature on Central Asia, with the natural environment often presented in a favourable manner, in marked contrast to representations of the spiritual environment.

For example, an account advocating the establishment of a mission in Peshawar in 1860 asserted that a 'gross darkness broods over it, and that all its glorious mountains, and all its lovely fertile valleys are full of the habitations of cruelty'.<sup>78</sup> Arthur Williamson, from the British and Foreign Bible Society, found his visit to Mongolia very enjoyable. He contrasted the nomadic life with urban Britain, presenting the Mongols as living a healthy, uncomplicated lifestyle. In particular, he admired them for being 'free from the restraints of town and the conventionalities of society, living a roving life, having plenty of good food, fresh air', comparing them to 'brewers draymen at home'.<sup>79</sup> By the early decades of the twentieth century, environmental

<sup>76</sup> *China's Millions*, 36, 1 (1910), 13. See also, *China's Millions*, 35, 12 (1909), 190; Marshall Broomhall, *The Jubilee Story of the China Inland Mission*, London 1915, 290.

<sup>77</sup> Joseph Wolff, *Researches and Missionary Labours Among the Jews, Mohammedans, and other sects, by the Reverend Joseph Wolff*, London, 1835, 215.

<sup>78</sup> *The Peshawar Mission and Central Asia*, Calcutta, c.1860, 5.

<sup>79</sup> Arthur Williamson, *Journeys in North China, Manchuria and Eastern Mongolia; with some account of Corea*, II, London, 1870, 12.

allusions reinforced the difficulties of working in Central Asia. Thomas Cochrane, in a report published in 1925, compared the mountaineering endeavours on Mt Everest with evangelism in Central Asia, stating ‘an unconquered Everest is a challenge. How many will hear and respond to the spiritual challenge of the mountains of difficulty in Turkestan, Tibet, Mongolia and the Borderlands’?<sup>80</sup> Ridley, who worked for the China Inland Mission in Xinjiang, suggested that prospective missionaries might be attracted by the romantic dream of working in Central Asia but would be disappointed ‘now the country is grasped by the throes of desert sand that sense of romance will soon pale before the loneliness and desperate uphill work that must be faced’.<sup>81</sup>

*China's Millions* often included reports from missionaries who worked in or had visited Xinjiang and Mongolia, such as George Hunter, Percy Mather, Mildred Cable and Francesca French. Many photographs of Central Asia accompanied the articles.<sup>82</sup> These authenticated the reports of Central Asia, emphasising the primitive nature of everyday life, and were often shot against a background of mountains or steppes to demonstrate the vastness of the region. One of the most striking photos, in this regard, was taken by Percy Mather showing George Hunter and Colonel Schonberg seated at a table half-way between Kuldja and Urumchi (Figure 1).<sup>83</sup> The caption for this photo was ‘a table in the wilderness’ and was based on the biblical passage in Psalm 23, ‘can God build a table in the wilderness’. The article was later published by the China Inland Mission as a separate leaflet.

The photo powerfully illustrates Ryan's argument that ‘photography was a powerful means by which distant spaces were domesticated and reconstructed in an image of home’.<sup>84</sup> In this photograph, the foregrounding of the table heightens the markers of civilised society set upon it—plates, a teapot and a domesticated animal are juxtaposed against the background of the wilderness, demonstrating the potential of rendering Central Asia, at least temporarily, a British space. The article accompanying the photo further reinforced the process of transplanting British civilisation to Central Asia by listing the menu, which included kidney, mutton chops, potatoes, carrots, kidney beans, apricots cucumber and Dutch Cheese followed by coffee and tea.<sup>85</sup>

<sup>80</sup> Thomas Cochrane, *The Challenge of Central Asia*, London, 1925, 3.

<sup>81</sup> *China's Millions*, 56, 2 (1930), 21.

<sup>82</sup> See, for example, *China's Millions*, 55, 10 (1929), 154.

<sup>83</sup> *China's Millions*, 56, 4 (1930), 53-54. Photograph appears courtesy of Overseas Missionary Fellowship (OMF).

<sup>84</sup> Ryan, *Picturing Empire*, 214.

<sup>85</sup> *China's Millions*, 56, 4 (1930), 54.

## Conclusion

By 1914, the environments of Central Asia had been discussed in a wide variety of forums. The flexibility of 'Central Asia' as a geographical denominator resulted in a diversity of representations of its environments. Strategic imperatives prompted a quest for information resulting in extensive surveys of Central Asian environments. The knowledge obtained from this exploration did not, however, change the underlying perceptions of the region or its peoples. Rather, in the works of Rawlinson and Huntington, the information obtained was cited to explain the nomadic inhabitants of Central Asia as inherently hostile and unreliable. The same environment, however, by virtue of its vastness and wildlife, was ideal for the purposes of hunting, and the act of defining the best areas of hunting in Central Asia and obtaining specimens of its wildlife for display, was a powerful assertion of informal empire. For missionaries, however, the vastness of Central Asia obstructed their endeavours. Although, occasionally, some observers such as Curzon noted inconsistencies in the representations, such reservations were never articulated in a sustained manner. Allusions to environmental influences allowed writers to cloak subjective assessments in an apparently objective, scientific and verifiable garb.

In order to explain why the increased knowledge about Central Asian environment did not alter the dominant discourse about its peoples we need to revisit the underlying motives for the 'imperial projects' conducted in Central Asia. If we understand imperial projects as interactions between an imperial power and organisations and individuals affiliated to or sympathetic to that power, then two key objectives can be identified. First, was a desire to prevent, or at the very least neutralise, the impact of Russian expansion in Central Asia in order to protect India. Second, was the extension of, or at the very least the ability to assert, British influence in Central Asia.

These imperial projects were only ever partially realised. In relation to the first objective, the contest for political influence between Britain and Russia was, at best, a tactical draw. Russia successfully expanded its territories toward the Indian borders while Afghanistan was established as a buffer zone. The related project of enhancing British commerce with Central Asia also met with little success. As to the extension of British influence over Central Asia, the results were mixed. Missionary organisations, an essential part of the imperial 'civilising process', found the peoples of Central Asia uniformly uninterested in converting to Christianity. The quest for more precise knowledge of Central Asia's environment was, perhaps, the most successful of the imperial projects, effectively transforming a spatial void into a surveyed site. Moreover, Russian expansion into Central Asia ultimately opened the region to upper-class tourism and recreation by British citizens. These ventures demonstrated the ability of the British Empire to allow its citizens to travel throughout the world, further adding to the inventory of information about such places and enabling British citizens to appropriate items to exhibit at home. Although not incorporated within the

boundaries of the British Empire, these imperial projects ensured that Central Asia could, nevertheless, be explored, explained, exhibited and engaged with, thereby asserting, at least, British moral sovereignty over the area.

Upholding British prestige through such projects was especially important because many people believed that it was prestige which held together the British Empire. This was expressed by Harold Nicolson in 1937, when he argued that the basis of British prestige was 'power based on reputation rather than reputation based on power'.<sup>86</sup> Central Asia posed unique challenges to British prestige because it constituted a hostile, imperfectly known territory adjacent to the jewel in the crown of the British Empire. Historically, Central Asia, the home of the Tartars, had posed a challenge to sedentary civilisations, of which the British Empire by the end of the nineteenth century was, according to its advocates, the pre-eminent representative. A significant, but often overlooked feature of the 'Great Game' was that it signalled the eclipse of nomadic power by sedentary empires. In 1830, much of Central Asia was independent; by 1914 it had been largely conquered by sedentary powers. Its largely unknown, hostile environment had also been conquered. But a conquered enemy remained an enemy nonetheless and its environment was invoked in explaining both its past ascendancy and its present decline.

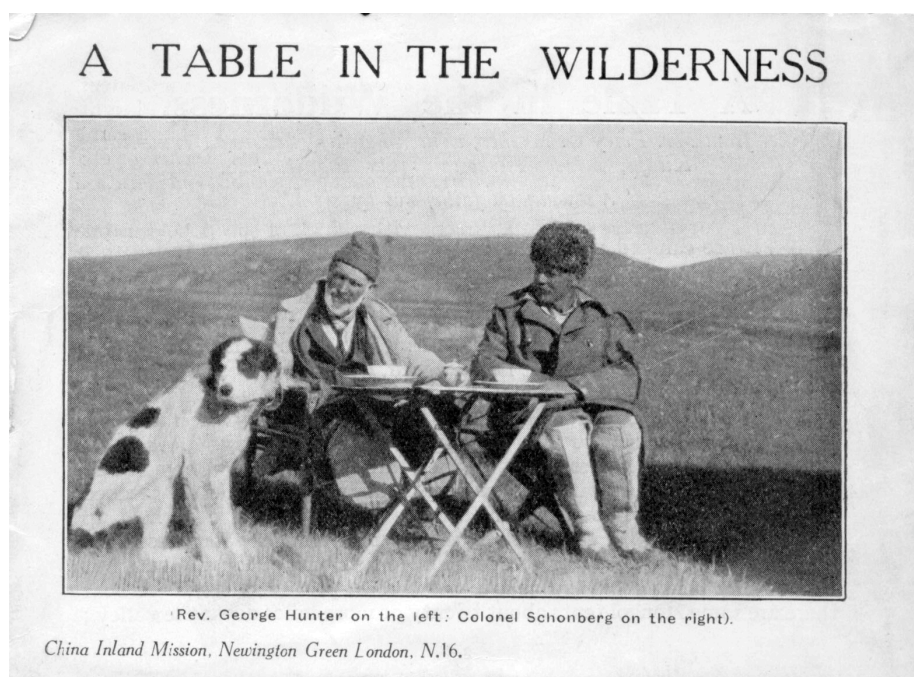


Figure 1. George Hunter and Colonel Schonberg, Central Asia.

<sup>86</sup> Nicolson, *The Meaning of Prestige*, The Rede Lecture Delivered before the University of Cambridge on 23 April 1937, Cambridge, 1937, 9. Nicolson argued that British prestige, understood in this way, was unique to Britain. In France and Germany, he argues, prestige was understood and interpreted in a completely different sense. Nicolson, 9-20.