Obituary

Hugh Richardson

Resident British Diplomat in Lhasa, Tibet. Scholar and Author.

Hugh Richardson died three weeks short of his 95th birthday. He spent a total of eight years as a diplomat in Tibet between 1936 and 1950, six of them as Head of Mission, Lhasa, first for the British and then for the Indian government. With the exception of two Italian missionaries in the eighteenth century, no westerner has lived longer and none gained a keener appreciation of the history and culture of the Land of Snows. After his retirement, Richardson began a second career as an independent scholar, publishing numerous articles and several books on many aspects of the Tibetan heritage. His standing was such that it is almost impossible to open a book about Tibet published since the mid-1930s without finding numerous references to him. He was a dedicated friend of all Tibetans, a life-long friend of the Dalai Lama, with whom he kept in frequent contact, and a prominent advocate of the cause of Tibetan independence.

Richardson had met Basil (later Sir Basil) Gould when the two were serving in Baluchistan. The junior man impressed Gould, who had been Political Officer Sikkim and who had returned once again to this post. Knowing that Richardson was interested in working in Tibet, Gould assisted him in taking up the post of British Trade Agent Gyantse in July 1936. Gould shortly afterwards invited Richardson to accompany him on the British Political Mission to Lhasa in 1936. The purpose of this visit was ostensibly to mediate between the then Panchen Lama and the Tibetan government, but in reality, it was an elaborate demonstration to show that the Chinese, at that time, had no special status in Tibet. The mission also aimed to straighten out certain Tibetan problems and to lay down a more definite policy towards the country. To this end Richardson was to establish personal contacts with Tibetan governmental officials in order to exchange advice and information. The mission arrived in Lhasa on 25 August 1936 and two days later called on the Regent, the Prime Minister and the Cabinet in the Potala.

The members of the mission much enjoyed their time in Lhasa and were fascinated by its highly developed culture. They temporarily introduced football to the city, including seven-a-side. The game was later to be banned by the Lhasa authorities who felt it to be inauspicious, and, in the event, the goalposts were stolen for firewood anyway. Having obtained the 1938 Everest Expedition permit, the mission departed Lhasa in mid February 1937. In private talks, Gould had agreed with the Kashag, the Tibetan Government's Cabinet, that as some matters were outstanding Richardson (along with army radio operator Lt. Dagg) would stay on to discuss them. The presence of the mission thus became permanent.

The relative peace and stability of those times allowed Richardson to travel widely and cultivate the friendship of Tibetans of all classes, both monks and laymen, who encouraged him in his scholarly interests in the land, its people, religion, culture and wildlife. His main interest was the study of ancient inscribed pillars. His work had to be done at "a slow and ceremonial pace.'" He came to compare much of the mediaeval-like country favourably with Chaucer's Canterbury Tales. He spent much time learning Tibetan. According to the Tibetan Finance Minister, T.W. Shakabpa, he spoke "Impeccable Lhasa Tibetan with a slight Oxford accent". His classical written Tibetan was also excellent.

In his memoirs the 14th Dalai Lama recalls that when he arrived as a young child in Lhasa before his installation, he was greeted outside the city by the Prime Minister, the Cabinet, the leading monasteries, and by Hugh Richardson. However, Richardson was not to remain in Lhasa for the actual installation ceremony because shortly afterwards he was posted to the North-West Frontier of India. On his way there, he met his old friend and mentor Basil Gould coming up from Sikkim for the event in February 1940. Returning to Lhasa a few years later, Richardson was unable, for reasons of protocol, to meet the Dalai Lama privately, but maintained contact with him via the Austrian mountaineers Heinrich Harrer and Peter Aufschneiter. Only after the Dalai Lama had fled from the Chinese in 1959 did they have the opportunity to meet privately.

In August 1947, India gained independence and requested Richardson to stay on as their representative. According to Richardson, "the transition was almost imperceptible." However, Indian independence, along with the end of the Second World War, changed the whole balance of power in Asia and ultimately led to the occupation of Tibet. Richardson had already witnessed great changes in the country during the war as large amounts of trade passed through neutral Tibet from India to China. During his time as the representative for India, Hisao Kimura, a Japanese agent working as a British spy, arrived destitute in Lhasa. He went to find Richard-

son, whom some time previously he had briefly met, to seek assistance and later described his reception as "somewhat less than I had anticipated." He was told "There are two reasons why I cannot help you. One is that I am no longer the British Representative. The other is that even if I was, you have no right to divulge your mission, if true, to anyone, even to me."

Hugh Richardson retired from service at the end of August 1950, so ending a British presence which had been established in Lhasa on and off since 1920. The sense of impending crisis was confirmed when China invaded Tibet the following October. He aided belated Tibetan efforts to establish international relationships and membership of the United Nations. In December 1949 fears of Chinese invasion prompted Richardson to grant Tibetans visas for India when Tibet sent missions to Britain, Nepal, India and the USA in an attempt to secure the support of the UN and to gain membership of that organisation. After the Chinese invaded Tibet in 1950, he was to accompany a delegation to New York to lobby for the Dalai Lama's appeal for help to the UN via a direct letter to the Director-General Dag Hammarskjold. He wrote of the Tibetans' appeal of that year, 'Only El Salvador had the courage to move the condemnation of the unprovoked invasion. It must be recorded with shame that the UK delegate, pleading ignorance of the exact course of events and uncertainty about the legal position of Tibet, proposed that the matter be deferred.' As developments took place, Richardson was horrified by China's destruction of Tibetan civilisation. In 1959, the Tibetan uprising was put down brutally and the military occupation was completed. At the UN, where Richardson was busy lobbying for support for Tibet, a joint resolution was put forward by Malaya and Ireland about the situation and status of Tibet, and although the resolution was carried, Britain abstained without the UK's delegate putting forward any explanation as to why Tibet's status was far from clear under article 2 (7) of the UN Charter. Richardson wrote, "In all practical matters the Tibetans were independent but the British Government sold the Tibetans down the river. I was profoundly ashamed of the government."

Richardson wrote very little of his personal thoughts and feelings. He was, however, a polymath, with a keen interest in ornithology, botany, entomology, topography, and gardening. He was also an enthusiastic photographer, relating late in life, that "I wasted a lot of film on the Potala. I have all these views of it." His writing energies went into the historical and cultural: self revelation would have been totally out of character. He did relate, however, that he had been delighted to be in Tibet, but only later in life had he been aware of what a privilege it had been. He was the perfect gentleman, though a very determined character, elegant, tall and lean. Even late in life, he would spare much time for many people seeking informa-

tion and advice on Tibetan affairs even if they were two generations younger. At the age of 94, he would spell out long Tibetan words faster than one could write them down.

Hugh Richardson was the greatest friend and defender of the Tibetans. Much of his work and research supports Tibetan autonomy and their right to rule themselves. Any future political settlement will have to take into account the many historical arguments he has put forward for this.

Hugh Edward Richardson was born in St. Andrews, Fife, Scotland on 22 December 1905, the second of three children, two boys and a girl, the son of Colonel Hugh Richardson and Elizabeth née McClean. Richardson went to school at Trinity College, Glenalmond, and later read classics at Keble College, Oxford, graduating in 1928. After teaching at his old school for a year, he passed the Indian Civil Service Exam. His first posting, 1932-4, as Sub-Divisional Officer, was to Tamluk in present day Bangladesh from where he found time to trek in Sikkim and make his first journey into Tibet, crossing the Himalayas to Phari. In 1934 he joined the Foreign and Political Service, Government of India, and spent a year as Assistant Political Agent at Loralai, Baluchistan, now in Pakistan, and was much involved in matters following the massive Quetta earthquake. Between 1936 and 1950 he spent long periods in Tibet acting as British Trade Agent Gyantse, or Head of the British Mission, Lhasa. He was Political Officer Sikkim for six months in 1937. During the Second World War he was Assistant Commissioner and then Deputy Commissioner in Charsadda, North-West Frontier Province, India, followed by time spent in Chungking, China, as Assistant to the Agent General for India; finally he served in Delhi as Joint Secretary to the Government of India, External Affairs Department. He returned to Tibet in April 1946 and remained there until August 1950. After a short spell in Malaya, he retired to his birthplace and in 1951 married Huldah née Walker, widow of Major-General T.G. Rennie, killed in action in 1945. She was a lady of great beauty, intelligence and kindness who brought him two stepchildren, David and Elizabeth. She predeceased him in 1995.

As an independent scholar, Richardson taught in educational institutes, including time in Bonn, and was visiting professor at Seattle. Amongst his great many publications, the following are of particular note:

Tibetan Word Book (1943)

Tibetan Language Records (with Basil Gould, 1945)

Ancient Historical Edicts at Lhasa and the Mu Tsung/Khri Gtsug Lde Brtsan Treaty of AD. 821-822 from the Inscription at Lhasa (1952)

Tibet and its History (1962)

A Cultural History of Tibet (with David Snellgrove, 1968)

A Corpus of Early Tibetan Inscriptions (1985)

Ceremonies of the Lhasa Year (1993)

High Peaks, Pure Earth: Collected writings on Tibetan history and culture (1998)

Roger Croston, Chester, 2nd January 2001