

Columbia University Press  
Publishers Since 1893  
New York

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Plan of Lhasa (pp. xxx–xxxii) by L. A. Waddell, Lt Colonel, I.M.S.  
First published in L. Austine Waddell, *Lhasa and Its Mysteries:  
With a Record of the Expedition of 1903–1904* (London: John  
Murray, 1905 and New York: Dutton, 1905).

An abridged version of this book was published in French in Katia Buffetrille and Charles Ramble, eds., *Tibétains: 1959–1999, quarante ans de colonisation* (Paris: Éditions Autrement, 1998). Another version was published in Italian as *La città illeggibile, Storie narrate dalle strade di Lhasa* (Milano: CDA, 1999). Part of “Mestizo” was first published in James O’Reilly and Larry Habegger, eds., *Travelers’ Tales from Tibet* (San Francisco: Travelers’ Tales, 2002). All rights reserved

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Barnett, Robert, 1953–

Lhasa : streets with memories / Robert Barnett.

p. cm. — (Asia perspectives)

Includes index.

ISBN 0-231-13680-3 (cloth) — ISBN 0-231-51011-X (electronic)

1. Lhasa (China). 2. Lhasa (China)—Description and travel. I. Title. II. Series.

DS797.82.L537B37 2006

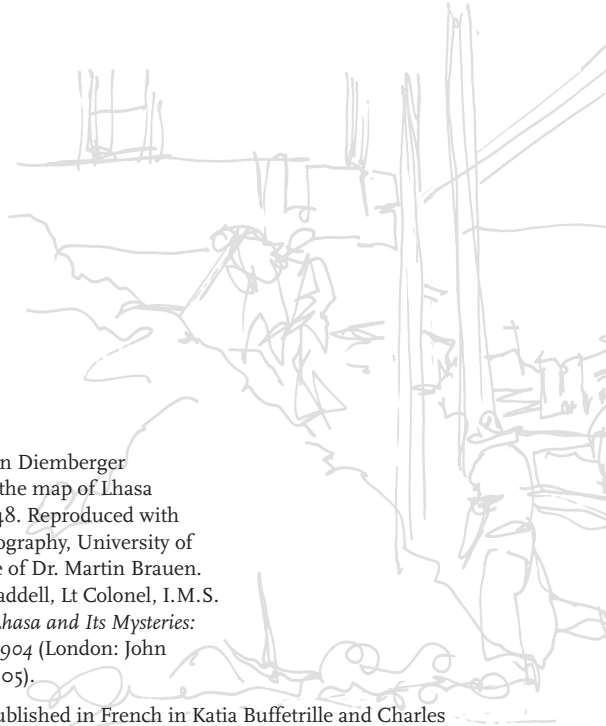
951'.5—dc22

2005048412



Columbia University Press books are printed on permanent and durable acid-free paper.  
Printed in the United States of America

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## PREFACE

Returning to London after some years away, I am struck by the way each street evokes specific memories and sometimes poignant feelings. I sit on the upper deck of the No. 55 bus and look over the iron railings and the walls that shield Gray's Inn Fields. I see the windows of an office once occupied by a leading politician, and the blue plaque that marks the house in Doughty Street where Dickens lived. A thickly varnished door leads to the former rooms of a lawyer friend paralyzed in a car crash two decades ago. I can see the entrance to a dentist's clinic I used to visit. A party that I once attended in the mews behind it just after I finished university comes hazily to my mind.

Later, driving through Southwark, on the south side of the Thames, I pass streets named after the bear gardens and the playhouse where Shakespeare worked. I recognize the site of the tavern where Marlowe is said to have been murdered. I pass a lavish theater thronged with tourists; I worked on that site before the theater was built, setting up stalls for tourists at the time of the Silver Jubilee. On the overground train to Blackheath, I can see where Watt Tyler and the Peasant's Revolt were halted in 1381, and I glimpse the observatory where Newton worked. Near my sister's house in Holloway, not far from the prison, I pass 39 Hill-drop Crescent, where Dr. Crippen disposed of his wife before attempting

to flee on the S.S. *Montrose* to America. Behind the crescent is the house where the famous lyricist Michael Flanders once had me sing a song while he accompanied me on the piano. It was doubly memorable, because I cannot sing.

Some of these associations mark moments that are significant only to me, while others might be relevant to a larger community. Some derive their potency from something I have read or heard, a film I have seen, or scraps of conversation that I cannot quite recall. They are triggered by the sight of memorable buildings and places that I pass.

Such an affective conglomeration is available around every place where we have lived or to which we have nurtured a connection. It is a form of history, and an important one. I do not have access to this kind of knowledge in New York, because I know so little about it, or in Beijing, which I have only visited occasionally for meetings, and of which the little history I know is drawn from guidebooks and the press. In those places, the streets and buildings are largely empty of rich association for me. They inspire feelings, of course, and analogies with other experiences that I might be tempted to apply, but none will be tied to that particular place or be a part of its communal history. Unless I remember to question them, many of these associations are likely to mislead me.

This book is an attempt to scrape a little of the topsoil off the affective history of a city, Lhasa, that is not my own. It seeks to excavate the stories that can be told by the city's buildings and its streets and to distinguish them from the tensions and counternarratives produced by the interventions of outsiders. Such stories, however, cannot be single or coherent, composed as they are of countless, changing elements that I and most outsiders cannot know. At first I think of the task as a kind of archaeology of sentiment, like uncovering the layers of a medieval palimpsest or peeling away layers on a master's painting to reveal what Lillian Hellman called a *pentimento*. But it is neither, because some of the elements that I will find will turn out in time to be my own invention, or to be irrelevant to the web of associations most valued by the inhabitants or even damaging to their interests. Instead of seeking some treasure beneath the surface, my interest is in the convergence of memories, some of which may be unrecorded, that form critical junctures in the historical understanding of a city by its residents and that contribute to the essential illegibility of a city to its foreign visitors.

These recollections are therefore not like Proust's *madeines* or the turtle-walkers whom Walter Benjamin recalled in the Arcades of Paris, which were offered in discussions of the aesthetics of memory and nostalgia and as studies of cultural production. My inquiry is about the effort to know through memories the inner language of a foreign city. This becomes more important and more problematic in a place where certain topics may not be discussed, and where the insertion of foreign notions into the narrative becomes highly probable. A foreigner always has limited access to the associations that hover around the streets and buildings of another people's city, but in Tibet even visitors fluent in the language are left to guess whether their more political conceptions are shared by local people.

So a study of this kind cannot just mine histories and writings by contemporary Tibetans, or wait to have unfettered discussions with the residents. Instead it looks at Tibetan writings from earlier times that might give clues to local ways of thinking about Lhasa, at foreign writings about the city, and at my own interactions with the place. The last two are scarred by histories of misreading that became apparent only afterward, long before issues of restricted speech arose to complicate matters further.

I do not attempt to be complete or scientific in dealing with the question of foreign interpretations of Tibet, since misrepresentation is so familiar a device now in writings about foreign places, thanks in large part to Edward Saïd and the scholars and critical ethnographers who have followed him. In the case of Tibet, much was done by Peter Bishop in a book called *The Myth of Shangri-la*, and later a similar task was performed by Donald Lopez in his *Prisoners of Shangri-la*. Both were following the lesser-known work of an Austrian Buddhistologist, Agehananda Bharati, not to mention a long history of awareness in Western, Indian, and Arabic literatures that many writings about Tibet were literally fantastic. Given this history, it was somewhat ironic that in the late 1990s a series of writers and journalists produced articles claiming to show that earlier Western writers on the subject of Tibet knew little of what they described. CLINTON TO FIND NO SHANGRI-LA ON TIBET, announced a headline on a Reuters article in June 1998; THE SHANGRI-LA THAT NEVER WAS, declared *The New York Times* the following week, as if the press was

about to reveal to the U.S. president and people that the novelist James Hilton had deceived them after all.

This school of writing, which was taken up by several scholars too, rests in part on an interesting but concealed device that is integral to the work of stage magicians: most of the audience already knows what is about to be revealed but cooperates in the pretense anyway, so as to revel in the perception that they are among the elite with prior knowledge. There were likely then, as now, few readers of such pieces who were not already well aware of the fantasticalness of many writings about Tibet, and fewer, apart from devotees themselves—and even that is arguable—who did not view the associated mystical contestations as highly speculative or aspirational. The same was true of earlier generations: when Annie Besant, a prominent socialist leader and labor activist in 1880s London, shifted to being a devotee of Madame Blavatsky in India and of the Great White Lodge supposedly denized in Tibet, her sanity was widely doubted. Conversely, when Roosevelt named his summer residence after Hilton's imaginary Shangri-la, no one thought that he had mistaken the novel *Lost Horizon* for a travel guide. Everyone had seen Ronald Coleman playing the male lead in the cinematic fantasy of that name, and there was no difficulty in distinguishing filmic fiction from documentary, at least in its general features.

My intention therefore is not to add to the works of earlier writers on this subject, or to add to celebrations of the supposed evolving enlightenment of the West in detecting, as if for the first time, its own earlier presumptuousness in describing foreign places. Neither is it to support the implication that there is a significant body of “uneducated” readers who are unable to distinguish fact from fiction. I include accounts of earlier foreign interactions with the city to provide a baseline for critical reflexivity, a benchmark for assessing the contemporary repetition of previous histories, and a lever to open up my own experiences in Tibet.

In looking at Lhasa and at foreign writings about it, I have therefore not attempted to be systematic or complete. Much has been omitted, since I am primarily interested in that kind of elusive and nonlinear history of associations that does not have a place in more conventional accounts. I have not used the word “foreign” to mean Western, and so refer to some writers who are from other areas, as well as exiles who became foreign only by having had to remain abroad for several decades,

so that they were excluded from direct involvement in the history of their city and often found themselves writing in a hegemonic language not their own. I have also included Chinese who traveled to Tibet after 1950 as foreigners in some sense, not always much different from Westerners engaged in similar encounters.

The word “foreign” is therefore not used here as a political or a racial term. Rather, it implies exclusion from the process of making the collectively remembered history of a place, and thus an inability to comprehend that history. It means not to be a partaker in the thick tangle of historical and personal associations with which each place is imbued. Even those who are resident for a lengthy period may not gain access to the previous history or histories that they are changing, and so will be excluded necessarily from comprehending them, even if these residents are the driving force and power that wishes to redesign that history. It may be said of both the British and the Chinese in Tibet that to the extent to which they were involved in seeking to change or even to celebrate its future, they became inevitably involved in fantastical or didactic reconstructions of its past and present, and thus excluded from the ability to read or know its histories. The Tibetan exiles too, although deeply imbricated with the past of that place, suffered exclusion in an inverse and tragically equivalent way by being cut off or by shutting themselves off from its unfolding present.

By contrast, I have often wondered whether the Europeans Aufschnaiter, Harrer, and Ford, and maybe Richardson and Fox, long-term residents of Lhasa in the 1940s, and later perhaps Bass in the 1980s, became conceptually conversant with their host communities in terms of their memories and thoughts about the city. They knew the language, and perhaps more important, they were in the city at times when the imperialist aspirations of their parent states had waned and had lost their moral authority. So perhaps they no longer sought to reconfigure the Tibet in which they found themselves and became to a considerable extent able to share in and to communicate something of its felt history. Certainly this can be said of the Japanese spy Kimura, even though his parent empire only imploded, unbeknown to him, while he was resident *sub rosa* in the Tibetan capital.

In contemporary Tibet there are no published rules forbidding conversations with foreigners. Officials do not intervene at the first sign of

interaction, and local scholars are not automatically forbidden to travel to conferences abroad. Such conditions had existed in Tibet until well beyond the end of the 1970s, but had been modified significantly in the 1980s. Tourism was allowed, scholars invited, and some foreign books translated, so that the possibilities of interaction changed dramatically. But, just as most historical documents in Lhasa are still kept secret from foreign and even local view, there remains a line beyond which Tibetans cannot safely cross in conversation with others. Where that line lies is a matter of contention, and it changes from time to time, according to political conditions, the temperament of certain leaders, individual interpretations, and, most dangerously, erroneous calculation of risk.

There are foreigners in Lhasa who successfully avoid difficulties with the state, and scholars whose knowledge and intellectual discipline enable them to avoid such entanglements. But one of the peculiar problems for visitors to Lhasa (other than those of Chinese or Tibetan descent) is that if they cross that unknown line, the consequences will tend to fall entirely on the local residents, and usually only after the visitors have left. For diplomatic reasons, the old imperialist practice of extra-territoriality remains in place in modern Tibet, so that foreigners, or at least Westerners, will not usually know when they have caused harm. For quite different reasons, earlier generations of outsiders in Tibet also thought they were doing good, only to be judged otherwise by history. Without giving details that might create further problems for the people involved, this book therefore reproduces minute interactions where foreign readings of a situation, like miniature repetitions of earlier history, seemed at one time positive but later were invalidated.

This is thus a book that looks two ways. In the past it looks at some underlying themes in Tibetan myths and histories that might give broad clues to the ways Lhasa's residents think about their city. In the present it looks at buildings and the layout of the city streets, seeing these as a kind of concrete spelling out of the dreams and aspirations of the state or the people who had them built. Scholars of urban studies, geography, and architecture have illuminated the possibilities of studying buildings and the ways in which cities are constructed, teaching us to read them as texts, while archaeologists and historians have in recent times done something similar with much smaller objects of everyday use in the study of material culture. The physical fabric of Lhasa offers clues to a similar kind of history that might be closer

to that experienced by its inhabitants, carrying signs of its past, its changes, failed hopes, and erasures.

Ideally, I would have taken an individual building, like the former aristocratic mansion of Kytöpa where Chinese officials and underground Tibetan communists worked in the 1940s, and excavated all the stages of its history, occupation, associations—the things that it housed and witnessed; the people who lived there or passed by; the events that swirled around it; the changes in its fittings and façades; and the parties, arguments, and revelries within it, to produce a sense of the multilayered associations that Lhasans of a certain age and knowledge might experience when they pass by. I have hinted at the possibilities of such an approach, and have paired it with a set of questions about streets rather than individual buildings.

When a whole street or city area is constructed or revamped and a particular style invoked, its buildings become monuments to the aspirations of the builders or designers and their ideologies. For people living in or near them, they might become beacons of hope for a better future, memorials to something that was demolished to make way for them, or future epitaphs to the eventual failures of those who built them. As the functions of a street or building change over time, they might leave traces in the layered memories older citizens recall when they walk by. Using the buildings and the layout of the city as textual fragments available to be read, but not necessarily understood, by all, this work tries to glean some at least of the stratified associations hovering around the stones and thoroughfares of the Tibetan capital.

When I first saw the streets of Lhasa, after months touring by bus through southern and western China, the issue that struck me as most prominent was nausea. The mountains around me were inspiring and the vivid azure of the sky was impressive, but the effects of altitude were more preoccupying. Still, this trip was my reward after a not entirely successful summer working in Hong Kong, and my reason for traveling rough across China, like most backpackers there, was to show my innate ability to overcome mere externalities such as height and distance. I intended to have inner experiences that would prove that as a traveler I was superior to my compatriots at home, and especially to such low breeds as actors, businessmen, and tourists.