Charles Bell’s collection of ‘curios’

Acquisitions and encounters during a Himalayan journey

Emma Martin

Introduction

Many men built formidable reputations in colonial India. The narratives, which often took on mythical proportions, created ‘emblematic heroes and villains’ (Cohn 1996: 6). The British man inevitably took on the role of hero, while the local population was often cast as villainous. The retelling or recasting of key historical events, and the individuals involved, was shaped by the creation of memorials, the writing of historical accounts and the building of collections that later went on to find homes in British museums. These monuments to imperial knowledge, displayed both in South Asia and back home in England, told of an all-powerful colonial dominance. The museum collections created during this period unsurprisingly bring with them connotations of imperial rule, repression and plunder and an expectation that, collectively, these objects will add to the meta-narratives of colonialism. However, when viewed individually and when the process of acquisition is revealed, a very different narrative emerges.

In recent years, a shift from myth to reality has begun within the museological and anthropological context, with research focusing on what ethnographic collections can tell us about the encounters Europeans had with the cultures and peoples they sought to collect from and, by extension, colonize. This is particularly evident in the work of Thomas (1991, 1994), who has argued against Marx’s statement that indigenous communities ‘cannot represent themselves; they must be represented’ (quoted in Thomas 1994: 26), thus opening up a discourse that assesses the ‘culture of colonialism’ and which reflects on the mechanisms of colonialism. To some extent he begins to establish an ethnography of colonialism, highlighting the fractured nature of imperial rule when viewed in a microcosm, with individual actors manipulating, reconstructing and fashioning the colonial experience to suit the grander narrative (Thomas 1994: 60). In his earlier work Entangled Objects, Thomas focuses in on the trading, selling and gifting of objects to colonial representatives and the reliance of colonial officers on ‘informants’ to furnish them with knowledge relating to the cultural practices of the colonized community. Additionally, he reflects on the active agency of those traded objects and their ability to define a collector. By reconstructing the acquisition of specific objects, he tracks the deliberate
decisions made by collectors to acquire and subsequently represent themselves through the narratives embedded in particular objects (Thomas 1991: 141), attesting to journeys to far-off places, encounters experienced and crucially the return to home endowed with new knowledge and previously unknown experiences, all made real through the objects.

Harris, in her work on the ‘Frontier Cadre’ and the representation of Tibetan material culture in the West, has taken that reimagining forward, specifically within the context of colonial collections found in Western museums. Harris draws our attention to the absence of scholarship concerning the ‘visual products of encounters between Tibetans and the foreigners who visited them’ (Harris and Shakyā 2003: 5) and by using visual materials and, specifically, photography and film, Harris reconstructs the networks between British colonial officers and Tibetans, reassociating public and private narratives with visual and literary sources.

With this in mind, the narrative that follows will provide an introduction to just one collector active in the Himalaya during the colonial era. It will consider not just the collector and his collection, but the role and importance of the network of Tibetan and Sikkimese men who helped him acquire, understand and collect his collection of ‘curios’.

Figure 12.1 Charles Bell relaxing in camp. He is probably on an annual inspection tour of the south Tibetan trade agencies, c. 1915 (image credit: Private Collection, used with owner’s permission).

The collector

The hero of this narrative is Sir Charles Bell KCIE, CMG (1870–1945), an early twentieth-century diplomat, Tibetologist and collector (see Figure 12.1). Described as ‘probably the most influential British officer to serve in Tibet’ (Harris and Shakyā 2003: 142), he played a significant role during the Anglo-Tibetan encounter. Palace goes so far as to state that it is ‘impossible to discuss events inside Tibet in this period without reference to Charles Bell’ (Palace 2004: 47) and, indeed, recent research has gone some way to reassess and confirm his status as an astute political administrator (McKay 1997, 2001; Palace 2004). He was a civil service man, a hero of a different kind, what Edward Said called an, ‘inaugural hero’: someone who ‘carved ... out a field of study and a family of ideas which in turn could form a community of scholars whose lineage, traditions, and ambitions were at once internal to the field and external enough for general prestige’ (Said 1995 [1978]: 122). Bell worked in the Himalaya for over twenty years, for the most part as ‘Political Officer Sikkim’, the senior post responsible for relations with British India’s Himalayan neighbours Sikkim, Bhutan and, most importantly, Tibet. He perfected the classic British India role of scholar-administrator by learning the Tibetan language, collecting and cataloguing a collection of ‘curios’ and writing extensively on Tibetan culture and religion. This work sat alongside his day job, which included, amongst other things, developing a sympathetic, modernizing agenda for Tibetan governance by advising the thirteenth Dalai Lama, the temporal and spiritual leader of Tibet. His influence spanned almost half a century of Anglo-Tibetan diplomacy: his style of governance stretching to the last British Indian official out of Lhasa, Hugh Richardson, who reluctantly left Tibet in 1950. This deep understanding of a place and a people does not, however, come to one by chance. Being ‘the man on the spot’, Bell understood that he was British India’s ‘Tibet Expert’ but, in order to maintain this position, he needed an extensive Tibetan network. These networks, or intermediaries, formed a crucial link in Bell’s understanding of Tibet and Tibetan culture; they not only interpreted political and cultural protocols, but they also sourced, gifted and interpreted Bell’s collection, which, in the museum context, has come to represent Bell’s successful tenure in the Himalaya.

It could be said that Bell was not particularly looking for a life of adventure out on the edge of Empire. His early record in the Indian Civil Service (hereafter ICS) shows he was posted as a new recruit to Orissa in 1891, where he followed the customary path of promotion, taking exams that gave him the increasingly responsible posts of District Magistrate, Settlement Officer and, finally, District Judge (Bell Archive, PRM). His peers did not consider him to be a natural frontiersman. What he was looking for when he moved to the Himalaya, in fact, was a position that would help improve his poor health, ravaged by malaria after a decade of working for the ICS on the Indian plains. Bell felt that ‘To me the fates were kind’ (Bell 1987: 23) when he was posted by the government to Darjeeling in 1900. This serendipitous act, this decision in which he played no part, was to be a defining moment in Bell’s career and, by extension, his life. The Himalaya was to be the place where Bell really came into his own, and Tibet, and the
understanding of Tibet, was to become Bell’s quest. His Tibetan journey would be both a physical and an intellectual one.

When discussing the Anglo-Tibetan encounter it is worth noting that, in a sense, this was a new colonial undertaking. There was a need to relearn or reconfigure colonial administration and the accompanying tools, the culture of colonialism. Tibet was a relatively new frontier: there were few expectations, on the part of the British government, that British India’s sizeable neighbour would become a colony, even if individual officers hoped privately for that outcome (McKay 1997: 48). But the same need to understand, to know, to classify and to control Tibet was felt just as keenly by the first wave of Political Officers stationed in the Himalaya, as it was amongst those who began to control and classify Indian history and culture in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. As with their eighteenth-century counterparts, the Political Officers employed a policy that ensured they learned the language and took great pains to understand Tibetan society. Bell, who also learned the language, came to understand the culture and, importantly, became acutely aware of the social mores of the aristocratic families who were highly influential in the administration of the country. To provide him with a more rounded understanding of Tibetan culture, he began to build a collection of Tibetan objects bought locally from traders and markets in the Kalimpong area (Bell c. 1927: no. 36).

Understanding Tibet – gifts in exile

All this preparation came into its own in 1910, when the thirteenth Dalai Lama fled Tibet following an invasion by the Chinese Army (see McKay 1997, 2001; Macdonald 2005; Lamb 1989; Bell 1987 [1946] and Tsharong 2000 for a full account). He made his way over the Himalaya to British India, and to the Himalayan borders that came under Bell’s control. The Dalai Lama’s extended stay of close to two years gave Bell the opportunity to develop a previously unthought-of relationship with the Dalai Lama, through lengthy discussions on politics, religion and world affairs. During this time, a large number of gifts were exchanged between the two men, and between Bell and the Dalai Lama’s entourage. Many of these gifts came to symbolize Bell’s relationship with the Dalai Lama and to represent Bell’s privileged status within Tibetan society. The first group of objects was given to Bell in May 1910, just over two months after the Dalai Lama’s arrival in Darjeeling. Although Bell tells us that ‘Various were the presents received when the party returned to Tibet, but here in Darjeeling, ousted from their own domain and cut off from their own property, they had not very much to give’ (Bell 1987 [1946]: 123), a range of gifts were given at this time. Bell kept many of them for his private collection, including a pair of gyaling, or flageolets, given to Bell on 5 September 1910 (see Figure 12.2).

The silver gilt gyaling came from namgyel [trims] lungta, the monk’s college within the Potala, home to the Dalai Lama’s personal monastic staff. They do not have the distinctive red wax seal denoting an object taken from the Dalai Lama’s personal treasury known as the namse bangdo, and as they show very little wear, there is the possibility that if the gyaling did not travel with the exiled Tibetans, a request may have been hurriedly sent to Lhasa (even though communications would have been difficult) in the very early days of the Dalai Lama’s exile for the gyaling to specifically be made by the Tibetan government’s metalsmiths for Bell. The gifts exchanged at this time were the first of many such exchanges, played out within both the personal and state context. Often through these gifts we are able to see the extent of Bell’s networks and the closeness of the friendships developed. Whilst Bell had already travelled through southern Tibet, making regular trips to the British India trading posts in Gyantse and Yatung, the opportunity to visit Lhasa had never arisen. With the unexpected visit of the Dalai Lama, Bell commented that ‘If I could not go to Lhasa, one might almost say that Lhasa had come to me’ (Bell 1987 [1946]: 118). With such friendly relations between the two men, and by extension British India and Tibet, a visit to Lhasa now seemed possible, if somewhat remote, and it would become a matter of prestige for Bell that he make that journey to Lhasa. Lhasa became the place which, if the chance to visit was presented, would offer him the opportunity to complete his Tibetan knowledge. ‘Lhasa’, was for Bell, ‘the heart of it all’ (Bell 1987 [1946]: 263). Bell did finally make the journey to Lhasa in 1920–1: it was to be his first and only visit to the capital. The events surrounding the mission have been well documented (Bell 1987 [1946]; Lamb 1989; McKay 1997) and will not be covered again here. Suffice it to say that the mission was not only the pinnacle of Bell’s career, but has been described as the pinnacle of Anglo-Tibetan relations, a determining factor being Bell’s integration into Tibetan society and his adept interpretation of Tibetan culture and protocol, the foundations of which were laid during the 1910–12 exile of the Dalai Lama.
The intermediaries

Bell’s friendship with the Dalai Lama and his successful mission to Lhasa were no doubt expedited by Bell’s fastidious attention to all aspects of Tibetan protocol. His choice of auspicious dates and times to make visits (McKay 1997: 73), the gifts he gave and the language he used in addressing his Tibetan visitors were decided on using the ever-ready advice and interpretation offered by Bell’s intermediaries. Bell was known for being socially a rather distant and self-contained man, but without a doubt he had a gift for surrounding himself with knowledgeable and well-networked locals, who not only enabled him to build a considerable understanding of Tibetan culture, but also acted as informants providing Bell with information on influential Lhasa families who would play a critical role in his acceptance into Tibetan society. These same men were also instrumental in acquiring and cataloguing Bell’s collection. They became his knowledge network.

Kusho Palhese – acquiring the collections of curios

Dewan Bahadur Palhese Sonam Wangyal, or Kusho Palhese (c. 1873–c. 1936), as he was more commonly known, was Bell’s most trusted and consulted adviser (see Figure 12.3).

We see glimpses of Palhese in Bell’s writings, both in the acknowledgements in his books and more explicitly in Bell’s description of his relationship with Palhese in his Portrait of a Dalai Lama:

My friend’s circle of acquaintances was enormous among high-born and low-born, monks and laypeople. He was a shrewd judge of character ... Again and again I was congratulated by Tibetans on the possession of this incomparable friend.

(Bell 1987 [1946]: 25)

Of all the intermediaries who worked for the British India government, Palhese held a unique position as a member of the Palha family. The Palhas were one of the great aristocratic families of Tibet. They owned estates around the southern Tibetan city of Gyantse, had large properties in Lhasa and extended family members held critical monastic and lay positions across southern and central Tibet. Palhese is first noted in British Indian sources by Sarat Chandra Das, the pandit, who undertook undercover surveillance work in Tibet, visiting Lhasa in 1882. Palhese’s mother, not realizing he was a spy, allowed Das to travel with her party (which included the 9-year-old Palhese) to Lhasa and she later arranged an audience for Das with the young thirteenth Dalai Lama (Das 1904: 219). Although Das left Lhasa undetected, the subsequent publicity surrounding his secret visit, back in British India, angered the Tibetan government, particularly as there was a blanket ban on all foreign visitors to Tibet at that time. This left the Palha family in a very vulnerable position, and many family members were severely punished by the Tibetan government with long, hard prison sentences and, in some cases, execution (Macdonald 2005: 137; McKay 2002). Some of the Palha family did temporarily leave Tibet, moving into British India, one of these migrants being Palhese.

In 1903, Bell, who was still relatively new to the Tibetan frontier, knew that if he was to succeed as a political agent in the Himalaya, he needed to find an intermediary. He put the word out amongst his Tibetan contacts that he was looking for a Tibetan of aristocratic birth who could help him with protocol and furthering his language skills. Fortunately for Bell he did not have to wait long; two months after his initial request, Palhese arrived in Kalimpong. Bell described Palhese as ‘a veritable encyclopedia of things Tibetan, high and low, especially on the secular side’ (Bell 1987 [1946]: 25). In Bell’s Portrait of a Dalai Lama, we find Palhese, amongst other matters, advising Bell on the size of an offering scarf, or khatag, to send to the Dalai Lama; making offerings at Lhasa’s Jokhang on behalf of Bell; providing advice on Mount Everest; and explaining the concept of reincarnation to Bell. Privately, Bell’s unpublished notebooks and diaries contain Palhese’s daily words of wisdom (not always entirely understood by Bell), alongside his guidance and explanations relating to every aspect of Tibetan culture, from the grading of tea to the preferred type of guard dog (see Bell, Notebook, vol. 1, for example).

Not only was Palhese an excellent cultural interpreter, he was also, from around 1912–13, a dealer in Tibetan material culture, exclusively supplying Bell with
new objects for his collection. Palhese's sources were the aristocratic networks that he belonged to, with the majority of items coming from the extended Palha family. As yet, it is unclear as to how this arrangement began and if Palhese was given any guidance by Bell as to what should be acquired, but over the course of a decade, Palhese sourced objects from Lhalu House, Lhasa, Namseling Mansion, the Phala Mansion near Gyanste and, finally, from Banggyshekar, Palhese's family home in Lhasa that had been visited by Das in 1882. Das described the house's lavish drawing-room as having:

two Chinese chests of drawers, on top of which were a lot of porcelain cups; Chinese pictures – picnics and dancing most of them represented – covered the greater part of the walls; the ceiling was of Chinese satin, and thick rugs of Yarkand and Tibetan make covered the floor. [There were also] well-polished little tables, wooden bowls for tsamba [roasted barley flour], and some satin-covered cushions. (Das 1904: 214)

Much of the wealth of the Palha family was confiscated and several of their homes sealed by the Tibetan government following the Das affair. They suffered further losses during the Younghusband expedition of 1903–4 and also during the fighting in Lhasa between the Chinese and Tibetan armies in 1910–12, when Banggyshekar was destroyed. Before Bell's arrival into Lhasa in 1920, however, Banggyshekar had been rebuilt and many items and documents returned to the house.12 Palhese sold to Bell a range of objects from the house including Chinese vases, Tibetan teapots, incense holders and jades. While many exchanges were quite businesslike and objects were exchanged for cash, Palhese also sourced objects that he gave to Bell as gifts: a pair of Kangxi dynasty (AD 1662–1722) jyeyen vases were given to Bell in August 1920, just before Bell made his journey to Lhasa (Bell c. 1927: no. A48). They had been in the Palha family for four generations and had come to Lhasa via a well-respected servant of the Palhas' named Choktar. As was the practice of aristocratic families at the time, he had been sent overland to Peking (Beijing) to buy good-quality, and often old, pearls, silks, porcelains and jades. Once deposited in the family house, these prestige items were entered into the family's catalogue or inventory. Palhese, having read through his family catalogue, had spotted the listed vases and decided upon them as a gift for his closest friend.

Alex McKay describes Palhese as a disenfranchised aristocratic who was unpopular in Lhasa on account of his British India loyalties, and there is a suggestion that he had a score to settle with the Tibetan government and the Dalai Lama over the fate of his family during the Das affair (McKay 1997: 124). However, Bell tells us that Palhese had the greatest respect for the Dalai Lama’s father, who had tried to mediate more lenient punishments for his parents (Bell 1987 [1946]: 56) and there is no doubt that Palhese also developed a strong personal relationship with the Dalai Lama, privately corresponding with him on many occasions, in addition to enjoying a series of private interviews with him.13 Palhese's actions could, therefore, be interpreted as going some way to re-establish the prestige of the Palha family. His work with Bell, and Bell's consideration of Tibetan protocol at every turn, was deeply appreciated by the Dalai Lama and the Tibetan government, as it was by the British India government. It was widely acknowledged that Palhese was the architect of Bell’s behaviour, and this was rewarded by both sides. Importantly for Palhese, he received an extended lease on the Serchok estate, the family home near Gyanste, and additionally he was awarded the title ‘Dewan Bahadur’ by the British India government. Bar the title of Raja, this was the highest Indian honour, and Bell's thoughts on the subject sum up his feelings for the man: 'Palhese told me that he did not want to be made a Raja, as nearly all Rajas are wealthy, and he was not. He was worthy of either title' (Bell 1987 [1946]: 304). Palhese was not just an intermediary of cultural protocols, but also an intermediary between Bell and the material wealth, the symbols of status, that were used by the Tibetan aristocracy. Palhese's connections gave Bell unique access to objects of high status, enabling him to build a collection that reflected his own perceived status within Tibetan society.

'Barmiak Lama' – cataloguing the collections of curios

While Palhese is relatively well documented as Bell's major secular source, his adviser on religious matters was, until recently, just a name found within the pages of his 'List of Curios', the comprehensive catalogue of Bell's Tibetan collection of objects.14 Barmiak (Burmio, Bermio) Kedrung Karma Palden Chogyal (1871–1942),15 or 'Barmiak Lama', had been an unknown entity in relation to Bell's collection for well over fifty years (see Figure 12.4).16 But as the man responsible for the description, identification and cataloguing of Bell's collection, the Barmiak Lama was an obscure, but crucial member of Bell's network and it was paramount that research should be carried out on this man during research into Bell's collection.17 Having found that Barmiak was a hamlet in Sikkim, I turned to the Namgyal Institute of Tibetology in Sikkim for assistance. It quickly became clear that the Barmiak Lama's reincarnation was now the Director of the Namgyal Institute, and colleagues there have assisted me in identifying the Lama. Born in 1871, he would have been almost the same age as Bell and Palhese when they sat down to catalogue Bell's collection of objects during the winter of 1912–13 (it is probably no coincidence that during this period Palhese began acquiring objects for Bell), Alexandra David-Néel, the famous French explorer, paints a vivid picture of the Lama sitting in the Maharaaja of Sikkim's drawing-room discussing theology with her. It is possible to imagine the three men at Bell's home, the Gangtok Residency, engaged in focused conversation, studying the assembled collection intently.18 The language of the 'List of Curios' is not necessarily that of an inventory or catalogue. Instead, it reads very much like a dialogue between the men, with the Barmiak Lama providing much of the recorded information. Characteristic of all Bell's writings is his need to verify information. Even when he is provided with details by his most reliable sources, he will endeavour to seek out others' opinions before reaching his own conclusions.
A typical example can be found in the entry for no. 68, a figure of the historical Buddha given to Bell by the Dalai Lama on 10 May 1910 (see Figure 12.5). Bell initially describes the object to the reader:

The Dalai Lama and all his Ministers, and Palhese and Laden-La say that the image was brought to Tibet when Buddhism was introduced to Tibet in the seventh century. The Dalai Lama says it has been kept in his own private apartments since the time of the first Dalai Lama. Palhese thinks it was kept in his private chapel called shen don kang.

(Bell c. 1927: no. 68)

Then, on 13 January 1913, he shows the figure to the Barmiok Lama. Bell notes:

The Barmiok Lama is very enthusiastic over this image also. He considers it and No 70 [another historical Buddha figure] to be both excellent. I did not tell him that the Dalai Lama had given them to me, until he had finished describing them.

(Bell c. 1927: no. 68)

While we, the readers, are party to Bell's withheld information, Bell never expresses his personal views on his testing process, nor does he record his feelings on receiving corroborating information from a trusted confidant. Unfortunately, neither do we discover the Barmiok Lama's reaction upon hearing the provenance of the statue placed in front of him.

As a Rechen, the Barmiok Lama was one of only four Head Lamas in the state of Sikkim. Having studied at Tsirphu monastery he then spent several years training in Derge, in eastern Tibet. He returned home to Sikkim and became the Head Lama of the state, where one of his main duties was to act as the Buddhist adviser to the Maharaja. The Barmiok Lama was, therefore, more than qualified to fill the role of religious adviser to Bell, and it is clear from the account given by David-Néel that the Barmiok Lama was a great source of knowledge for foreigners wishing to understand Tibetan Buddhism better. His travels to and studies in eastern Tibet would also have provided Bell with a wider geographical understanding of Tibet, as Bell's primary networks were Lhasa-focused. The Barmiok Lama is the missing link in understanding Bell's knowledge networks. Bell's sphere of influence was not necessarily restricted to the aristocratic families of central Tibet, but also appears to have been strong in Sikkim, where he was resident. This geographical area has often been overlooked as a site of influence, with previous research tending to focus more closely on Bell's well-known and, dare it be said, more glamorous relationship with the thirteenth Dalai Lama. Considering Bell's willingness to cite the role of intermediaries whenever possible it is surprising that the Barmiok Lama went unrecorded in almost all of Bell's documents and publications and further research into the relationship between these two men is needed.
Bell and the collecting process

Although described by his peers as 'not much of a collector', Bell's collection of over 300 objects and 3,000 photographs is visual evidence of the personal encounters and private narratives often described in his writings. Within the museum context these objects have come to represent the knowledge and expertise he acquired during his journey into Tibetan culture.

The private collection of nearly 180 objects that remained with Bell until his death, much of which came to Liverpool Museum (now World Museum) in 1950, relates to the personal events and narratives which became synonymous with Bell's time in the Himalaya. As shown above, this personal collection is striking in that it is made up of a large number of gifts. While the concept of gift-giving might suggest that Bell was a passive collector, this is not necessarily true. Bell rarely writes about collecting in his published works, but on one occasion he does give an insight into his collecting practices:

The Dalai Lama and his Ministers and other Tibetans from time to time gave me presents. These I sent usually to the Government of India, but by an arrangement with the latter I was permitted to retain any that I wished, on condition of course, that I gave in return presents of at least equal value.

(Bell 1987 [1946]: 123)

Gift-giving was an important part of Tibetan culture and was also an important tool for the British India government when it came to maintaining and enhancing prestige. In a bid to control the movement of gifted and looted goods, the British India government adopted an Indian system called the toshakhana, or gift house, that is still used in India today. Into every district's toshakhana the local representative would deposit any gifts, no matter how big or small. Once deposited in the toshakhana the gifts would be valued and then sold at auction, or redistributed at other times when gifting was necessary. Therefore, in order for Bell to keep his gifts, he needed to buy back the objects he was most interested in. Although large parts of Bell's collection have the passive association of gift attached to them, Bell was, in fact, actively acquiring his objects and making clear choices as to what should be collected and what should be deposited for recycling. The role of the toshakhana is mentioned only in passing by Macdonald (2005: 120) and Cohn (1996: 119) and these authors give no references to source materials that can be studied further. However, this is obviously an important process and one that may lead to other objects, given to Bell but later sold by the British India government, being identified, providing a clearer picture of what kind of objects and which gift exchanges had most value placed upon them by Bell.

Bell often lamented the fact that he was too busy to keep a detailed daily diary during the frenetic activity of the Dalai Lama's visit to Darjeeling in 1910–12 (Bell 1987 [1946]: 119). It is interesting to note, therefore, that a number of the gifts Bell chose to reclaim came from this period. In a sense, his points of reference shift slightly, and rather than relying purely on his meticulous notebooks and diaries, Bell appears to have used his collection of objects as mnemonic devices, enabling him to recall personal encounters and events that could otherwise have been lost.

The return: a journey's conclusion

Bell's return to Britain in 1921 was marked with a lecture tour and various awards from geographical societies. Almost immediately he set about ordering his meticulous notes into book form and published four volumes over a twenty-five-year period. Again, Bell turned to Palhese for help, and in the spring of 1927, Palhese came to England to stay with Bell and assist him in the final push to publish (see Macdonald 2005: 135, and Bell, Diary, vol. 14). While his writings were well received, Tibetology, as an academic subject, was in its infancy, and his work, although still quoted today, was superseded by that of later scholars. He died on Vancouver Island, Canada in 1945, shortly after completing his biography of the Dalai Lama and, sadly, just before it was published in 1946. Living several time zones away from London and India, his death went almost unrecorded in the Indian and British press. His diplomatic skills, his deep understanding of Tibetan culture and his love for the Himalaya were, however, not forgotten. These practices were followed by his successors, with Bell's ideology visible in the work of Leslie Weir, Frederick Williamson, Basil Gould, Arthur Hopkinson and finally Hugh Richardson, the renowned Tibetologist, whom Alistair Lamb described as 'represent[ing] the end of an apostolic succession dating back to the time of Sir Charles Bell' (Lamb 1989: vi). While his diplomatic aplomb is what Bell is so keenly remembered for, his collection of objects and photographs have become tangible symbols of his Tibetan life. Bell never completely crossed over; he did not, for example, become a Buddhist. However, his use of his collection, particularly in the display techniques he devised for the Gangtok Residency, demonstrates the quasi-spiritual hold the objects had over him (see Figure 12.6). The drawing-room fireplace, for example, while not a Tibetan altar (he did in fact have one to display his jade figures) does strike the viewer as a cluttered visual map of Bell's cultural knowledge and encounters. Manuscript covers form the basis of the fireplace surround, with many of the gifts he retained arranged with Tibetan altar protocols in mind.

Brought from the edge of Empire, taken with him to Canada and then, finally, sent to the Home Counties of England, his connection to these objects tells of a personal colonial encounter that is very different from the grand narrative of Indian colonialism. These objects represent not only a hero's epic journey, but the part played by a wide group of Himalayan men who enabled Bell to complete his quest of becoming 'in a large measure Tibetised' (Bell 1987 [1946]: 29).
Dalai Lama by the Chinese emperors and pious pilgrims from all over Lamaist Asia' (Macdonald 2005: 240). While cataloguing the dispersed Bell collection it has come to the author's attention that many older objects given as gifts to Bell have a treasury seal still in place. Occasionally, treasury inventory tags are also attached, an example of which can be seen in Donald LaRocca's 2006 catalogue Warriors of the Himalaya (50).

Shakabpa tells us in his Tibet: a political history that the Chinese intercepted the Tibetan government's mail during this time (Shakabpa 1967: 232), but Bell also tells us that during this period of exile he received a consignment of over a hundred new-issue coins from the Lhasa mint, showing that the Lhasa workshops could still meet orders despite the Chinese occupation (Bell 1987: 1946: 124).

While Bell was often praised in public by both British and Tibetan colleagues for his diplomacy and abilities, anecdotally it appears his insistence on maintaining his elevated position within the hierarchy of officers based in the area jarred with many, particularly the wives of the officers. Margaret Williamson (wife of Frederick Williamson, Political Officer for Sikkim, 1932–5) referred to him as the 'great I am' (P. Denwood, pers. comm., 17 November 2008), while the Hon. Mrs Irma Bailey (wife of F. M. 'Eric' Bailey, Political Officer for Sikkim, 1921–6) had this to say about him: 'he thought he was such a great man. In fact he came up from, I suppose the high road, up to our garden [Gangtok Residency] and sort of hung about looking round as much as to say he ought to be treated like royalty and we should have gone out to meet him. I thought that was extraordinary' (Bailey, NML archive, c. 1982).

While this chapter considers only two of Bell's key advisers there were several other major influences on Bell, including Trade Agent David Macdonald, Private Secretary Achuk Tsering, who tragically died during the Bell mission to Lhasa in 1920–1, and Police Officer Laden La. Discussing all of these individuals is beyond the scope of this chapter.

Although we have no date of death, we can ascertain that Palhese (the name used by Bell literally translated as 'Son of Palha') had died by September 1936, as Bell received a letter from Dr Graham (of Dr Graham Homes, in Kalimpong), with sympathies for 'the loss of such an admired and loyal friend' (India Office Collection, British Library, MSS E 8/20 / 225), and in October 1937, Bell corresponds with Hugh Richardson to organize a bi-annual payment of Rs 100 for Palhese's very young son (Bell to Richardson, Private Collection, 1937).

When Bell was preparing for his trip to Lhasa he sent word to Palhese, 'To my request that he would come from Lhasa to my headquarters in Sikkim, I received this reply, 'Though the Emperor of India may desire a good name, the Emperor of China cannot afford to bear a bad one'. "What on earth does he mean?" I asked a mutual friend. "Ah, well; one of his tenants has brought a suit against him. He must stay in Lhasa till it is decided; otherwise he will lose both his case and his good name." Two months later he arrived' (Bell 1987 [1946]: 245).

We know this from Bell's diary entry dated 21 March 1921: 'Visited Bang-gye-shar house, in the eastern quarter of Lhasa with Palhese ... The Treasurers (Chamdro) have an office to themselves with two assistants, and the stewards have also an office to themselves. The ordinary records are fastened to pillars and walls, among these in the Steward's office is one detailing the butter lamps to be offered at the entrance of a Dalai Lama's death. The important records are locked away in strong chests.'

For example, Palhese had a private interview with the Dalai Lama in August 1933 to prepare the way for Bell to visit Lhasa for a second time. However, with the death of the Dalai Lama in December 1933, Bell was subsequently refused entry to Lhasa in spring 1934 and his visit to Lhasa in 1921–2 was to remain his only visit to the Tibetan capital.

This is an unpublished object catalogue compiled over the winter months of 1912–13, with additional entries added in the 1920s.

I am very grateful to Tashi Tsering, Director of Amnye Machen Institute, Dharamsala, India for providing me with the Barmiok Lama's full title and correct dates.
16 ‘Barmiok’ can also be spelled ‘Barmiok’ or ‘Banyak’. The pronunciation, however, is closest to ‘Banyak’, but with a silent ‘k’.
17 My heartfelt thanks go to Dr Anna Balkici from the Namgyal Institute, Sikkim. Following a chance conversation, she provided me with much of the biographical information relating to Barmiok Lama.
18 ‘Nearly every afternoon he crossed the gardens and went to the villa where the crown-prince lived. There, in the sitting-room furnished according to English taste, we had long conversations on topics quite foreign to Westerners … I like to recall these talks which gradually enabled me to lift the veil that hides the real Tibet and its religious world … While the learned and fluent orator, Barmiok Koshog talked, we were lavishly supplied with Tibetan tea’ (David-Néel 1989: 29).
19 Rechen ‘the great one with knotted hair’ is another term for a naljopa or tantric practitioner (Balkici 2008).
20 Comment made by Hugh Richardson to Louise Tythacott and Jane Moore during a visit to Richardson’s home, St Andrew’s in 1997 (NM2: Richardson 1997).
21 Bell donated and subsequently bequeathed over a hundred objects to the British Museum and gave several significant pieces to the Victoria and Albert Museum. I have classified these as Bell’s public collections.

Primary sources

**India Office Collection, British Library**

L/PS/10 Political and Secret Subject Files
L/PS/11 Political and Secret Annual Files
MSS Eur F157 Bailey Collection
MSS Eur F80 Bell Collection
L/Mil/17/14/92 ‘Military report on Tibet’, Calcutta 1910

**British Museum (BM)**

Bell Collection

**National Museums Liverpool (NML)**

Bell Collection
Bailey Collection
Richardson Collection

**Pitt Rivers Museum (PRM), Oxford**

Bell Collection

**The Royal Society for Asian Affairs Library**

Bell Collection

---

**Private papers**

The Bell family (UK)
The Macdonald family (UK)

**References**