

# **The Sino-Indian Border in Ladakh** *Alastair Lamb*

## **Asian Publications Series**

1 Julia Ching (trans. and ed.),  
*The Philosophical Letters of  
Wang Yang-ming*, 1971

2 Colin Mackerras (trans. and ed.),  
*The Uighur Empire According to the T'ang  
Dynastic Histories: a study in Sino-  
Uighur relations 744-840*, 1972

AUSTRALIAN NATIONAL UNIVERSITY PRESS CANBERRA 1973

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Catalog Card no. 78-189014. National  
Library of Australia Card no. and  
ISBN 0 7081 0399 5.



## Preface

In 1962, while the Chinese and Indians were adopting postures which could only lead to some kind of armed conflict, I was working on the British archives in the Public Record Office and the India Office Library in London, my main interest at that time being the origins of the McMahon Line, the Indo-Tibetan border along the Assam Himalaya, although I also devoted some attention to the history of the Ladakh border with a view to writing about it at length at some later date. Subsequently, with the publication in 1963 of Dr Alder's admirable *British India's Northern Frontier 1865-95*,<sup>1</sup> I felt that the history of British relations with Ladakh and their interest in the Karakoram mountains up to 1895 had been so well covered as not to require another detailed study. In writing the relevant sections of my *The China-India Border*<sup>2</sup> I found Alder's work, which I first saw in Ph.D thesis form in the library of the University of Bristol, extremely useful. Alder's study, however, comes to an end in 1895, a date which does not coincide with any final solution of boundary problems in Ladakh and the Karakoram, though it does mark the effective end of Anglo-Russian crises arising from disputes over the alignment of the Russo-Afghan border in the Pamirs. I decided, accordingly, to concentrate my research

<sup>1</sup>London 1963.

<sup>2</sup>*The China-India Border: the origins of the disputed boundaries*, Chatham House Essays No. 2, London 1964.



on the period after 1895 while I was working as a Senior Fellow in History in the Research School of Social Sciences of the Australian National University from 1964 to 1966. The result was the two papers in this monograph and the maps which accompany them. Since this work was carried out in Canberra, it gave me great pleasure to accept Professor Wang Gungwu's suggestion that it should now be published in Canberra.

The history of border tracts, particularly those situated in remote areas, cannot be elucidated to any degree of satisfaction without the proper use of maps. A number of the major historical controversies to have emerged from the Sino-Indian border dispute, for example, would perhaps assume a rather different aspect if the disputants involved were more familiar with the terrain about which they have argued. In my study of the Sino-Indian border in Ladakh and along the Karakoram I endeavoured to plot as many significant features as I could on maps and to compare old and new cartographical ideas by this method in order to see whether apparent changes in border alignment might reflect no more than improvements in the accuracy of topographical survey. While in Canberra I drew nearly a hundred maps of one kind or another in this study: twenty-one of them are reproduced here.

I would like to thank Sir Keith Hancock and the Depart-

ment of History of the Research School of Social Sciences in the Australian National University who provided me with drawing board, stencils and a wide variety of special drafting equipment not usually employed by the orthodox historian. I also owe a debt here to Professor O. H. K. Spate who gave me much encouragement in some of my more experimental map drawing. Finally I must express my gratitude for the way in which the photographic section of the John Curtin School of Medical Research of the Australian National University made reductions for purposes of reproduction of my original large-scale drawings. For any defects in the maps themselves, of course, I am alone responsible. The maps, which appear at the end of this monograph, are referred to in the text: some of them, however, require more than a short caption and are accompanied by a commentary.

The first of the two papers which make up this monograph has never before appeared in print though it was presented in a cyclostyled version to delegates to the International Conference of Asian History held at the University of Hong Kong in late 1964. It was designed to meet certain criticisms which had just been raised against one of the maps (not drawn by myself in this instance) in my *The China-India Border*, and which have been raised since in connection with some passages in my *The McMahan Line*,<sup>3</sup> the chief critics

<sup>3</sup>London 1966.



being Drs S. Gopal, M. W. Fisher, and L. E. Rose. These persons, as well as Sir Olaf Caroe, would seem to have been persuaded by the far from disinterested view of Himalayan cartography of the Ministry of External Affairs of the Government of India: and, indeed, so much to official Indian taste were comments of this kind that an extremely hostile review by Sir Olaf Caroe of *The China-India Border* was actually reproduced and circulated by the Indian High Commission in Canberra.<sup>4</sup> The cartographical arguments, however, still stand; and I trust that my explanation as to why old maps are not always entirely reliable may yet be of interest.

At the time when these particular criticisms were made, of course, it was still fashionable to regard the Indians as the heroes and the Chinese as the villains, the men in black hats, in the Sino-Indian melodrama. There is a certain irony in the fact that the combination of the Vietnam War and President Nixon would seem to have produced a new attitude towards this kind of question. In 1964 to see any merit in the

<sup>4</sup>Sir Olaf Caroe's critique appeared in the *Geographical Journal* in 1964. When the author pointed out to him the reasons why he had treated the 1899 boundary discussions as he did, Sir Olaf replied to the effect that it did not really matter what the facts of the case were—the important thing was that the British should support India as the Indian Republic was still very much part of the British heritage. One wonders what Sir Olaf's reaction would be were he now to witness a parade of the Indian armed forces: MIG aircraft can hardly be described as a positive contribution towards British exports.

Chinese case vis-à-vis anything, was to invite the accusation of being, to quote Sir Olaf Caroe, 'brainwashed by Moscow and Peking'. It is probable that today one would no longer run the risk of being charged with such strange mental gymnastics.

The major question raised in the paper, namely how the 1899 British note to the Chinese Government should have been so gravely misquoted by Mr Nehru in a formal communication with the Prime Minister of the Chinese People's Republic, and, incidentally, how the Chinese, who presumably still possessed the original text of the note, never brought themselves to point out the misquotation, still remains unanswered. Here is a matter which perhaps deserves further scholarly attention.

The second part of this monograph was written in Canberra in 1965. It was originally intended to form part of a larger work covering the history of British Indian relations with Sinkiang and the evolution of the Karakoram border over the

Sir Olaf Caroe, it should be noted, was at one time Secretary to the Foreign Department of the Government of India; and, more than any man, he deserves to be regarded as the architect of the Sino-Indian border in the last years of the British Raj. For a most interesting study of Sir Olaf Caroe's own way of handling documentary material relating to the Sino-Indian border, see K. Gupta, 'The McMahon Line 1911-45: the British legacy', *The China Quarterly* XLVII, July/September 1971.



period 1895-1947. The section which was completed, while in a sense a fragment, has yet a certain validity in its own right as an account of the Raskam question and its wider implications for Anglo-Russian and Anglo-Chinese diplomacy.

The problem posed by the Mir of Hunza's claims to certain rights in Raskam and the Taghdumbash Pamir on the northern side of the main Karakoram waterparting resulted in the British boundary proposals to the Chinese Government of 1899. These proposals, the only formal definition of a border in this region that the British ever appear to have offered to China, still have relevance today not only to the understanding of the Sino-Indian boundary dispute in Ladakh but also to the settlement in 1963 of the Sino-Pakistani border along the western end of the Karakoram Range. Both these issues have their bearing on the present Indo-Pakistani confrontation. Without the Aksai Chin problem Sino-Indian

relations might not have deteriorated to the extent they did in the climactic clash of late 1962. Without the settlement of the Sino-Pakistani border, which, as the reader will see, to some extent emerged out of the problem of the status of Hunza of which the Raskam crisis was in great measure a reflection, Pakistan might never have evolved today not only China's major ally on the littoral of the Indian Ocean but also a state in direct land contact with Chinese territory by a motor road through the Karakoram.<sup>5</sup>

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1972

<sup>5</sup>For a general picture of the region discussed in the second paper, with special references to the orientation of mountain ranges and watersheds, see Maps 4, 5, and 6.

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This book contains detailed studies of two aspects of the history of the Sino-Indian border. The first shows how some historical maps, though not necessarily reliable, throw light on problems arising from defects in the original British survey of Kashmir and its dependency Ladakh.

The second deals with the evolution of the extreme western end of the border between British India and Manchu China, a stretch which was of vital concern to Pakistan and the People's Republic of China in the boundary discussions that culminated in the Sino-Pakistani Boundary Agreement of 1963.

Twenty-one beautifully executed maps illustrate this work on remote and little-known regions that are as yet a continuing element in contemporary Asian tensions.

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Professor Lamb is the author of several books and monographs, including *The China-India Border* (1964), *The McMahon Line* (1966) and *Asian Frontiers* (1968).

Cover designed by David Walker,  
ANU Graphic Design Section