

Sherlock Holmes In Tibet

by Keith Suter

A Matter of National Security

This article examines the work of Sherlock Holmes in Tibet during the “great hiatus” 1891-4. In ‘The Adventure of the Empty House’, we learn that, having survived the struggle with Professor Moriarty at the Reichenbach Falls, he had to spend three years undercover to evade the attention of Moriarty’s henchmen.

Holmes travelled for two years in Tibet. Unfortunately, Dr Watson does not seek to obtain more information on this matter. Holmes stated it so glibly (especially to the 21st century ear) that it seemed unremarkable that a person could spend two years there. But, as this article will show, it was a remarkable comment to make for its time.

In fairness to Dr Watson – and in keeping with this article’s overall narrative – Dr Watson would have been warned to leave the remark hanging in the air. Holmes might have said more but none of it could have been printed. This was a matter of national security.

Information on Holmes’ work in Tibet is very sparse. But it is possible to piece together from public sources some rough idea of what Holmes did and the importance of his work.

Mycroft Holmes

In ‘The Empty House’ Holmes says he “had only one confidant – my brother Mycroft”. His brother kept Holmes supplied with money; this was probably British government money. He also maintained the Baker Street lodgings during the “great hiatus” (more government expenditure).

Mycroft was a shadowy figure (as no doubt he liked it). He appears directly in only two stories: ‘The Greek Interpreter’ and ‘The Bruce-Partington Plans’. He gets mentioned in two others: ‘The Final Problem’ and ‘The Empty House’.

He works for the British Government. He is the “central exchange” of information flowing in from the government departments and the armed services and he makes sense of it. Sometimes he has to act as though he *were* the British Government.

Sherlock Holmes was in Tibet on behalf of the British Government. Talking to Watson in ‘The Empty House’, after mentioning Tibet Holmes says he went to Persia (modern day Iran), then Mecca (now in modern day Saudi Arabia) and then on to Khartoum (Sudan): “...the results of which I have communicated to the Foreign Office”. Then – as now – these were three Islamic “hot spots”. Queen Victoria was then governing more Muslims than any other ruler in world history (largely due to the large number of Muslims in British India).

Holmes’ important work in these three Islamic areas will be examined in a later article. For now it is necessary to note that Holmes was killing two birds with one stone – he was avoiding Moriarty’s henchmen and he was acting for the British Government in politically sensitive territories.



The Importance of Tibet

Tibet in the early 1890s was the border land of three competing empires: British India (now India, Pakistan and Bangladesh), Russia, and China's Qing dynasty. Each was suspicious of the other two. Tibet was isolated by the Himalayas, it had a very harsh climate and ordinary life was brutal. It was one of the last secret places on earth.



Unfortunately, Tibet has been made famous for misleading exotic reasons. For example, Helena Blavatsky (1831-91) claimed to have gone to Shigatse city in eastern Tibet and met with the “Masters of the Ancient Wisdom”. She went on to found the Theosophical Society to study religions. In his 1933 novel, *Lost Horizon*, which was made into a popular movie in 1937, Anglo-American writer James Hilton (1900-54) located the Shangri-La monastery in a wondrous Tibetan valley in which everyone lived in harmony and lived for a long time. These give a wrong impression of the tough, brutal lives endured by most Tibetans.

Holmes was not in Tibet for spiritual reasons.¹ He was there for political reasons. Unfortunately, Mycroft Holmes’ papers have still not been revealed to the public. I doubt we will ever see them because of the unique role he had. The British Government became more professional in its intelligence work in the early 20th century; MI6 was formed in 1909 and so took over some of his work.

But we can piece together a rough idea of what his brother was up to. Tibet presented two challenges: no one knew for sure what was there, and it was on the edge of three competing empires. The “great game” referred to the competition between the imperial ambitions of Britain, Russia, and China. The “game” was played out along the northern edge of British India, including Afghanistan in the west and Tibet in the east. A basic task was to map the terrain.² The British mapping began in 1865.

¹ A colourful speculation is by Richard Wincor, *Sherlock Holmes in Tibet* (1968), which is more of a meditation on the classic *Tibetan Book of the Dead*. A variation is by Jamyang Norbu, *Sherlock Holmes: The Missing Years: The Adventures of the Great Detective in India and Tibet* (New York: Bloomsbury 2001), which also mentions Tibet’s special spiritual qualities and treats Holmes as a wise, celibate, compassionate yogi who would feel at home in Tibet.

² Riaz Dean, *Mapping the Great Game: Explorers, Spies and Maps in 19th Century Central Asia, India and Tibet*. (Havertown PA, USA: Casemate, 2019.)

By the 1890s, Tibet had become annoyed with foreign visitors (with their dubious political motives) and so tried to close off the country. Access to the country was difficult at the best of times and the harsh geography deterred any easy exploration.³ There were also robbers on the mountain paths and isolated valleys. It was a very dangerous place to visit.

It was not a tourist destination for the rapidly expanding Victorian tourist industry. This is why Holmes' comment to Watson in 'The Empty House' seems so remarkable: he had gone where very few other Europeans had dared to go. He could have gone to a variety of other destinations (especially the quarter of the world controlled by the British Government) but he went to Tibet – very much off the beaten track. He had to have had a serious purpose for such a risky undertaking.



Holmes in Tibet



The Potala Palace in Lhasa where the Dalai Lama was enthroned

Holmes went to Lhasa to negotiate with the Dali Lama (head religious leader) to make sure Tibet did not side with Russia⁴ or China. Tibet had to make sure it did not become a victim of Russian or Chinese imperial ambitions in the “great game”.

Another threat – that did not materialize – was that the newly united and aggressive Germany would try to get access to Tibet as part of a wider Asian agenda. Therefore Holmes also had to warn the Dali Lama about the risk of German ambitions. Anti-German feelings run through the ‘Bruce-Partington Plans’ study and Holmes had wisely seen how Germany would be a threat to long-term British security (which

resulted in two World Wars). Germany had convened the Berlin Conference of 1884-5 to divide up parts of Africa; Asia could have been next.⁵

³ Even today it is a difficult journey by train from China: Pankaj Mishra, ‘The Train to Tibet’. (*The New Yorker*, April 8, 2007; online at <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2007/04/16/the-train-to-tibet>).

⁴ An example of Russian exploration is Nikita Yakovlevich Bichurin Father Hyacinth (author) Julius Heinrich von Klaproth (editor), *A Nineteenth Century Description of the Lhasa Region of Tibet*. (Amazon Kindle 2015.) Bichurin (1777-1853) entered Tibet via China as a Christian monk.

⁵ Also in 1884 Germany claimed New Guinea to Australia's north and this was an incentive for the colonies to federate in 1901 to be united against potential German aggression in the South Pacific (German New Guinea was amalgamated into the independent state of Papua New Guinea in 1975.)

Holmes would have entered Tibet from the south, via British India. We know that he was a master of disguises (not least from 'The Empty House') and so the two year period spent in Tibet would have included becoming an "Indian" merchant. Traders have encircled the world for millennia. People over the centuries have been suspicious of foreigners with political agendas but traders are usually welcome.

The merchants travelled into Tibet in large caravans, both to benefit from the economics of scale and to deter brigands. Holmes in disguise would have easily fitted in among the ninety men in each caravan.⁶

The Impact of Holmes' Work

Holmes' negotiations worked. Tibet did not become a victim in the "great game". Holmes' report to London would also have included his observations on how to treat Tibetans to win their hearts and minds.

Unfortunately, the Russians maintained their ambitions towards Tibet. The British worried that a Russian presence in Tibet would be a prelude to a Russian invasion of India.⁷ In 1903 UK military leader Sir Francis Younghusband led an expedition into Tibet. Eventually the expedition was successful in gaining public support (Chinese propaganda stated otherwise). He was probably following advice from the Holmes report on how to treat Tibetans (such as respect their holy places, pay for the provisions and do not steal them).



Thubten Gyatso, 13th Dalai Lama from
1879 to 1933

To conclude, Holmes' mission to Tibet was a great success. Tragically, long after his death, China fulfilled its ambition by invading the country in 1950. But Holmes had managed to help safeguard Tibetan independence for a few decades in a turbulent era just over a century ago.

⁶ Ratna Sarkar and Indrajit Ray, 'Two Nineteenth Century Trade Routes in the Eastern Himalayas: the Bhutanese trade with Tibet and Bengal'. (http://himalaya.socanth.cam.ac.uk/collections/journals/jbs/pdf/JBS_15_03.pdf)

⁷ Veteran British journalist Peter Hopkirk (1930-2014) wrote about these times, especially *Trespassers on the Roof of the World: The Secret Exploration of Tibet*. (London: John Murray, 1982.)



Canonical Limericks - *The Canon: Five Lines*

at a Time is an amusing collection of Sherlockian limericks submitted by members of the 'Crew of the Barque Lone Star' society and other noted Sherlockians. It can be downloaded at <https://www.dfw-sherlock.org/barque-society-pastiches.html>

The Barque Lone Star's website is also home to the long running comic strip 'Baker Street Elementary'.



Welcome Holmes - this discussion group for fans of Arthur Conan Doyle and Sherlock Holmes is now hosted at www.groups.io/g/welcomeholmes, following the shutdown of Yahoo Groups.

Classic Specialties - Carolyn Senter, who ran Classic Specialties and the 'Sherlockian E-Times' with her late husband Joel, will be closing down the <http://sherlock-holmes.com/> website and sherlock@sherlockholmes.com email address over the next few months.