

TIBET, PAST AND PRESENT

By HUGH RICHARDSON

(Address given to the Royal Central Asian Society on October 22, 1963, by Mr. Hugh Richardson, C.I.E., O.B.E., Sir William Dickson, President of the Society, in the Chair. The Address was followed by the presentation to Mr. Richardson of the Sir Percy Sykes Memorial Medal.)

THE PRESIDENT: I have much pleasure in introducing to you Mr. Hugh Richardson, who is going to give us a lecture on "Tibet, Past and Present".

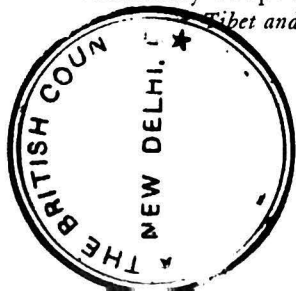
Mr. Richardson is a member of this Society and therefore very well known to us, but may I remind you that he is also very well known as a considerable international authority on Tibet. He served at the capital of Tibet for a number of years, not only for H.M. Government but also for the Government of India. He became devoted to that country and was the friend of all its people, from the Dalai Lama to the humblest Tibetan herdsman. He is the author of a remarkable book,* and it was that book and his impassioned representation of the Tibetan people's agony at the United Nations which pricked the conscience of the world concerning the predicament of the Tibetans after the invasion of their country, and their sufferings under Chinese Communist rule. I know that you will be very interested indeed to hear him.

THE last time I was invited to talk to this Society was in 1959, not long after the rising at Lhasa. Just before the date of the meeting I was asked to go to New York at short notice to help the Tibetans prepare their case before the General Assembly of the United Nations. Sir Olaf Caroe with great generosity made it possible for me to go by taking my place here and giving a far better talk than I would have done. Today I want to take up the story where he left off and try to piece together the scraps of news about Tibet since 1959. I am not going to attempt any summary of bygone history; the past will be drawn on mainly to contrast with the present, and will be represented also by a handful of pictures which you will see later as a nostalgic reminder of a life which has almost vanished.

After the Chinese Communists invaded Tibet and occupied it in 1950 and 1951 they kept up a constant campaign of interference and subversion against all Tibetan customs, religion and every expression of Tibetan nationality. The rising in 1959 was the culmination of Tibetan resentment at that interference. The Chinese say it was the dying kick of the nobility. That is not true. The nobles did not want an open breach, and it was essentially the act of the Tibetan people. But it was desperate. And in the upshot it allowed, or even compelled, the Chinese to do at one violent blow what they had been trying unsuccessfully to do by eight years of insidious subversion. Resistance was fiercely crushed and the Chinese summarily swept away the whole system of administration, society and

Tibet and its History. London, Oxford University Press, 1962.

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religion which had been kept going after a fashion under their own control, and replaced it by a military dictatorship which in effect continues today.

When I was in India in 1960 and 1961 I met Tibetan refugees from that disaster. The Dalai Lama and large numbers of monks and soldiers had escaped to India in 1959, and a steady stream of refugees continued to flow in year by year. I spoke to many of them as they arrived, tired and destitute. There were women and children with them, and babies were dying because the mothers were too exhausted to feed them. Their story was that after the rising the Communists immediately clamped down on all movement in Tibet. They posted troops in strategic places and then gradually extended operations from village to village.

The Chinese make no bones about having abolished the noble class and confiscated their property. The refugees showed that they were also set on the destruction of the whole class of small yeomen farmers. These were smallholders, simple people of humble status, no part of the nobility and without any share in the administration of the country—the backbone of Tibetan agriculture. When the Communist teams arrived in each village the farmers were subjected to the travesty of a trial of which we have heard in China. They were publicly accused, assaulted, robbed, imprisoned or sent to forced labour. Their offence was the possession of private property.

The attack extended also to monastic property and the practice of religion. The chapels and small monasteries in each village were desecrated and emptied of their monks, who were ordered to break their vows, marry, and turn farmer. Some were starved into submission, others were killed or committed suicide.

By 1961 landless labourers too were joining the flow of refugees. They had been given the confiscated land with the promise that they would enjoy the whole crop for the first year. But when harvest came they were compelled to offer two-thirds of it to "the People". So they, too, fled from being regimented, cheated and half starved. Their stories confirmed the even worse lot of their former masters.

It is a commonplace of the professionally detached observer that refugees' stories are always exaggerated. Maybe. But I have had some experience of Tibetan life and I took care to cross-examine those I spoke to very closely. Two characteristic things emerged. These men who had been assaulted and stripped of their possessions were far more deeply concerned about the attack on their religion than they were with their personal losses. And none bore ill will against their labourers who had taken part in the attack on them. They said that if the men had not done so they would themselves have been accused. It was therefore distasteful to hear during a debate in the House of Lords an opposition peer stating with an air of authority but without a shred of personal knowledge that only Tibetans who had exploited their fellow countrymen were refugees. That is the sort of talk the Communists spread in their publications and by other means; and it finds acceptance by some people who do not stop to ask what reliance can be placed on self-justification by a successful land grabber.

It is noticeable, too, that in the midst of the zeal and haste towards independence by peoples of Africa with nothing to compare with Tibet's thirteen centuries of continuous civilization and national identity, the vocal critics of colonialism have nothing to say about China's conversion of independent Tibet into a new and strictly controlled colony.

In fact, Chinese propaganda has had a very easy run for its money. In 1950 it represented the seizure of Tibet as the liberation from Anglo-American domination of what had always been a part of China. Our Government and the Government of India, which had had treaty relations with Tibet and knew that it had enjoyed at least *de facto* independence since 1912, did nothing to rebut this falsehood. Worse still, we prevented any discussion in United Nations of that Chinese aggression and had the matter hushed up and put on the shelf. So the Communists were able to pass quickly to the praises of their benevolent and progressive policy in Tibet. That line suffered a setback in 1956 when they had to admit that Tibetan resistance compelled them to postpone their so-called reforms.

Since the rising in 1959 the new note has been fierce abuse of the old system, which is damned as cruel and oppressive feudalism and religious obscurantism. We may ask why nothing was said or done about this between 1950 and 1959, when the Chinese were in control of Tibet. The charges are supported by evidence which is often ludicrous. A museum of "feudal instruments of torture" displays ritual religious implements, and even kitchen spoons which are described as being used to gouge out the eyes of serfs.

Even without such extravagances it is always easy to attack the past, and Tibetan life was from our point of view rugged and in some ways harsh. But from fourteen years' acquaintance with it I maintain that it was not deliberately cruel or oppressive. It did not need force to maintain itself: there were no police, and there was hardly any army. It had evolved a closely knit society with a balanced economy and higher standard of living with far less distance between rich and poor than obtained, say, in India. There was a regular surplus of grain, and large reserve stocks. No one suffered the degrading conditions of life of which we read in the industrial revolution here or in Ireland. The Tibetans knew that some changes were inevitable and necessary and were prepared to make them themselves. They were no threat to anyone, and there was no need of a foreign conquest to impose change.

It is ironic and tragic that when the Communists did impose those foreign changes the combination of natural calamities and the failure of doctrinaire planning in China had nearly wrecked their own agriculture and had brought about a severe shortage of food. So the immediate result of their reforms in Tibet was to involve Tibetan agriculture and self-sufficiency in the same ruin. In a way this made things easier for the Chinese, because they could use their control of the meagre food supplies to enforce obedience. But it brought administrative difficulties, and those must have been increased by the worsening of relations with India. So by about 1961 or 1962 there was some relaxation; some of the imprisoned men and women were released and attempts were made to show Chinese actions in Tibet in a favourable light.

In this spirit the Chinese allowed a British journalist, Mr. Stuart Gelder, and his wife to visit Lhasa last summer for several weeks. A film they made was shown on ITV, and a book is expected soon. Mr. and Mrs. Gelder disclaim Communist affiliation, but they have been on good terms with the régime since the days of Yen-an and we may wonder whether similar facilities would be given to others without that background. At all events, they relied on the Chinese for transport, accommodation, interpreters, etc.

They say that they had heard charges of genocide, oppression, suppression of religion and so forth—but found none. Instead, they found the development of welfare and progress.

When their book appears, a detailed analysis will be possible. In the meantime it may be noted that the Gelders have no personal knowledge of Tibet before 1959 and no experience of conditions they condemn; certainly none of conditions before 1950. They have therefore no standard of comparison. They do not even mention the aggression by which the Chinese seized Tibet. Much of what is said in praise of the Chinese is lame: the march of progress after twelve years is represented by a small carpet factory and a 200-bed hospital. Much is tendentious. A monastery formerly housing 7,000 monks now has only 700; the rest, we are told, left voluntarily. Anyone who reads statements made to the International Commission of Jurists will know what that means. Then it is false to claim, as they do, that Western medicine was introduced by the Communists. There were successful and popular hospitals in Yatung Gyantse and Lhasa run by British and Indian doctors for many years, and in some forty years of such work smallpox had already been brought under control.

We should remember that the Chinese see themselves as the only exponents of true Communist doctrine—and that the object of Communism is to communize. The idea of genuine national minorities, national culture or traditions in their fold is anathema. And if any appearance of such things is preserved it is as a temporary pragmatic expedient.

No—the truth is, I fear, that after twelve years of Communist pressure and four of direct administration little remains that is recognizable of the old Tibetan way of life, and nothing of any significance has yet taken its place.

It is known that the land has been distributed to farmers at the rate of half an acre per head. These holdings are organized into mutual aid groups which could easily be converted into co-operatives or communes, but misgivings about the results of such arrangements in China have led to the postponement of anything of that sort in Tibet for at least five years. Even so, the land is not producing anything like what is needed, and the Chinese People's Liberation Army still has to work in the fields.

Constitutional reforms too have been postponed. Chinese publications report the survival of the "vice of local nationalism" among the Tibetans and hint at armed resistance also. Nor are things well with the Chinese workers in Tibet. "Incorrect behaviour" continues, including corruption, idleness and "big-Han chauvinism".

From the stories of recent refugees—for they are still coming—and from Chinese sources too it can be seen that religion is preserved only as

a rare museum piece; education is channelled to one end and is more and more in the Chinese language; dancing and music are organized cultural displays without spontaneity; people go in rags; food supplies are insufficient and strictly controlled, there are queues, permits, shortages and substitutes. The ordinary ration per person per month is twenty-five pounds of adulterated barley flour, half a pound of bad butter, a measure of salt and a small amount of adulterated brick tea. No sugar, no meat, rice once a year, cloth costing over £1 per yard. For anything outside the ration the black market is both impossibly expensive and dangerous. There is forced labour for long hours, constant indoctrination, lecturing and surprise inspection. Although the time of general extreme severity seems to have passed, discipline is strict and punishments severe. There is, in short, no freedom in religion, trade, movement and family life, and of course no political freedom.

Why should this have happened? I do not accept the vague theory that there was something in the Tibetan system which made such a fate inevitable. It was the result of the rise of a new power in Asia determined to use violence. In the Chinese seizure of Tibet I do not believe that anxiety about their defences or the aim of advancing Communism came first, but the desire to stand forth as a great nation and Empire on the old Western model. But for that, even if they completely misunderstood the Indian mind, Tibet could have been left as a terrified buffer inevitably falling more and more under the influence of the stronger neighbour; and the Chinese could have consolidated their position behind that vast inert cushion. Once they had seized Tibet, although that increased their power to threaten, it also increased the problems and cost of defence. I am no strategist, but it seems to me that Tibet might be a good base for a devastating surprise blow or for conventional attack against a half-hearted defence; but against resolute counter-action, or in long-drawn-out sparing, it could be a very expensive commitment.

In this situation communications are vital, and the real issue with India is possession of the roads made by the Chinese through the Aksai Chin desert on the Ladakh frontier of India. This is part of a great circular route from Lanchow through Tibet and Chinese Turkestan, and back to Lanchow by the Tsaidam marshes and Kansu oil wells. It may be seen as a lifeline for Tibet in case Chinese communications in the east are threatened, as they were in 1956-57; and as a lifeline for Sinkiang in case communications there should be interrupted. There have lately been many signs of tension between China and Russia in Sinkiang: foreigners are not now allowed to enter Sinkiang; there are allegations by the Chinese of Soviet instigation of disturbances by some of the peoples of Sinkiang, and of border incidents and infringements. So Tibet may seem, at present, more important to the Chinese as a bastion against possible Soviet penetration of Central Asia than as a springboard for adventures towards the south.

The recent Chinese invasion of India was probably intended to scare the Indian Government into accepting a bargain which the Chinese have long been dangling before their eyes: exchange of the Aksai Chin territory, which the Chinese appear to need for their security, for a guarantee

of the Indian position along the rest of the long frontier. The attempt did not produce that result, and the military success which led the Chinese to embarrassing—perhaps dangerous—lengths was counterbalanced by a political and moral failure. Such warlike adventures, of which we have probably not heard the last, must be an obstacle to peaceful development in Tibet. In orderly conditions, with a large injection of capital and labour, Tibet could be an agricultural and pastoral country supporting perhaps four times its present population. As early as 1952 Mao Tse-tung forecast the sending of 50,000 families there. That process would very likely lead to the swamping of the Tibetan population, which is only about two to two and a half million. But in addition to psychological difficulties about Chinese settlement in Tibet it is probable that heavy military demands on capital, labour, food supplies and communications prevent any large-scale Chinese settlement on the land at present.

Chinese hopes for the control and exploitation of Tibet seems to rest largely on the projected railway from Lanchow to Lhasa, some 1,000 miles or more through difficult, often desert, country; and they plan an equally long link between Khotan and Tibet. There is no oil production in Tibet and little fuel of any sort, so there is a problem now of building up supplies for road and air transport. Ideas of developing the supposedly great, but as yet unproved, mineral wealth of the country also depend on cheap communications. But even the completion of the railways would not necessarily solve all the difficulties. Maintenance would be a big task, and so long as China remains in an isolated and aggressive posture the fear of sabotage in the remote desert areas must be very real. The railway, incidentally, seems still a long way from Lhasa in spite of so much use of forced labour.

In fact, unless there are new and striking developments in technology China's position in Tibet looks like proving the truth of Owen Lattimore's dictum that Tibet is a "zone of diminishing returns for imperialism". But while the Chinese are digesting this lesson the position of the Tibetans goes from bad to worse; and with the children usually separated from their parents and being skilfully indoctrinated the next generation is likely to be divorced from past ways of thinking and from the merits of the former Tibetan character. One must fear for the survival in Tibet itself of that remarkable devotion to religious faith, of the pattern of family life, even of the Tibetan language and the idea of being Tibetan. Here and there in Tibet there may be reservoirs of the old way of life, probably for the most part among the nomadic population whom the Chinese have not succeeded in pinning down into settled areas. But these are the roughest and most primitive type of Tibetan and, for all their toughness and endurance, not likely to produce an intellectual national revival.

And so it is among the Tibetan refugees in India that there seems a hope of keeping Tibetan characteristics and values alive. Some of the older monks and laymen perhaps think of returning to Tibet and taking over just where they left off; but that is not the view of the Dalai Lama. He worked out the plan of a new sort of constitutional theocracy for Tibet. The details cannot concern us here, but it is evidence that there is no general idea of trying to keep Tibet as an interesting survival in a glass

case. The young men both monk and lay, and young women too, are avid for learning of a new sort; and they know quite well that they have got to adjust their lives and their thinking to a new world both now and for the future for which they hope.

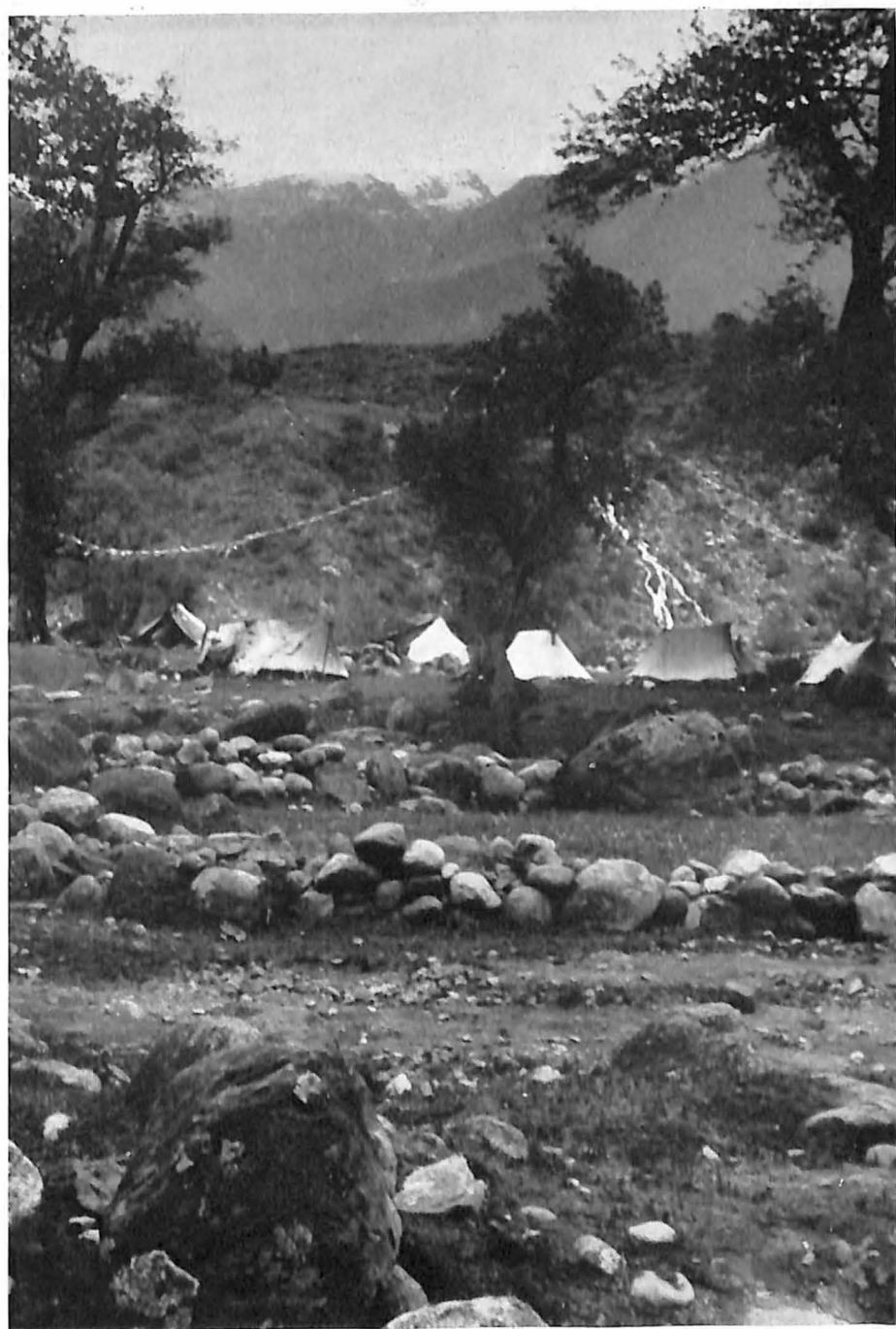
But what chances are they getting, and what is their future? There are perhaps 70,000 refugees in India and the border countries. For the shelter and food of most of them the Indian Government has taken the costly responsibility, and spends about three-quarters of a million pounds a year. Large sums of money and help in kind have been sent and are still being sent from foreign countries. America, as usual, took the lead, but private organizations in this country are all making considerable and well-thought-out contributions now. I wish there were signs that our Government was taking an active and sympathetic interest; but there are none.

There is a good deal of variation in the conditions in which the refugees live, but the great majority live in hardship and discomfort in temporary camps working on roads in remote areas of India's frontiers. When I saw some of them I was moved by the way they had preserved their patience, dignity and helpfulness to one another. But they are living in an unsuitable climate under a new sort of strain and there were signs of something almost unknown in Tibet: nervous breakdowns and neuroses. What they long for is somewhere settled to live where they can earn a living and keep their self-respect. So far, that sort of settlement has been possible only for some 3,000, and they are in South India—too far from their fellow countrymen and the spiritual influence of the Dalai Lama.*

There are about 8,000 children among the refugees. These are the hope of the future. Life in road camps or as wandering beggars is a poor start for them. The Dalai Lama has tried to collect as many as possible into some sort of schools or homes, and so far perhaps 2,000 are getting some sort of care. Even that fraction is too great a strain on the resources available. Two years ago I saw at Dharamsala infants crammed in rows on the floors of one of these homes, without proper beds or bedding, with inadequate water and sanitation and the most rudimentary food. It is hardly credible, but I have heard that even more children have now been packed into that inadequate accommodation: nearly 1,000 children in space which in this country would be considered inadequate for even three hundred. It is hard for the Tibetans to turn them away.

A promising development is the Children's Homes at Mussoorie, where groups of twenty children live in good surroundings in separate houses with Tibetan houseparents to look after them. But this only takes care of less than 500 children at present. Much devoted and strenuous work is being done for the refugees by private persons in India including British volunteer workers, and by many Christian missions. But almost everything that is done is mere patchwork, aimed only at keeping the refugees alive.

* Information received since my talk shows that the Government of India is making considerable progress with the resettlement of Tibetans in new sites in Orissa and Madhya Pradesh. These, with the existing settlement in Mysore, may absorb 10,000 of the refugees in the near future. This is a great step in the right direction.



TIBETAN REFUGEES. *ROADSIDE CAMP. INDIA—1963



(By courtesy of the *Daily Express*)

TIBETAN REFUGEE CHILDREN LAYING SCARVES OF WELCOME BEFORE A PHOTOGRAPH OF THE DALAI LAMA ON THEIR ARRIVAL AT THE PESTALOZZI CHILDREN'S VILLAGE, SEDLESCOMBE, SUSSEX

What is to happen to the children when they leave the homes and schools, and what is to be done about the men and women who have little prospect beyond working on Indian roads, wasting their qualities of adaptability, courage and honesty? It is clear that a long-term plan is needed, and it is important to establish whether the aim of such a plan should be to absorb the refugees piecemeal into Indian life or to settle them in self-supporting Tibetan groups.

The latter seems the only way of preserving anything of the distinctive Tibetan character and living religious faith, but by now, four years after the crisis, it does not appear that such large-scale settlement is feasible in India. It is necessary, therefore, to consider seriously whether India cannot be relieved of the burden and whether the problem ought not to be taken over on an international basis, and a suitable home for the Tibetans sought outside India.

In thinking of the future, those Tibetans who are getting help and training and experience outside India will be important and will be able to help their fellow Tibetans in a new life. Tibetan scholars are being supported at many foreign universities to act as informants for Western students of Tibetan religion, history, language, etc. This was an early and far-seeing plan of the Rockefeller Foundation. There are successful experiments in Denmark and Switzerland where young Tibetans learn Western skills and techniques, farming, dairying, carpentry, simple engineering and so on. Private persons also support young Tibetans in several foreign countries and give them education. There are children in groups of twenty at the Pestalozzi Villages at Trogen in Switzerland, in Germany, in the French Pyrenees, and at Sedlescombe in Sussex. This is no more than an inadequate sketch of what is being done.

In general, the Tibetans adapt themselves easily to life in Western countries. They are friendly, gay and sociable, with no fuss about caste, creed or colour. They are eager to learn and quickly acquire skill in handicrafts. In grasping the intellectual ideas of a world which until now has been closed to them they are less ready: that will be a slow and selective process. As I have said, there is a need for co-ordination and an objective in everything that is being done to help them. But, of course, until some progress is made towards getting them suitably settled, money and help of all sorts will be needed simply to keep them going, to make life tolerable for those in India, to provide decent living conditions and schooling for the children there, and also to help some carefully chosen individuals to get the right sort of training in foreign countries. I am sure I don't need to apologize for begging in this cause, and although I cannot give a list of all the organizations which need support, many of you know of the Pestalozzi Children's Village, the Save the Children Fund, the Ockenden Venture and of course Oxfam. But I suggest that anyone interested might get in touch with the Tibet Society of Great Britain, 58 Eccleston Square, London, S.W.1, which will provide information about what is being done and will gladly accept help and contributions.

Now let us relax a little and look at a short record of the happier past.

(Mr. Richardson then showed a series of coloured slides of life in Tibet before 1950, and of Tibetan refugees today in India and elsewhere.)

PRESENTATION OF THE SIR PERCY SYKES MEMORIAL MEDAL

THE PRESIDENT:

On behalf of everyone present I do thank Mr. Richardson very much for an enthralling lecture. There is no doubt of his being a great authority on Tibet. The story he has told of the Chinese conquest of that country and of the suppression and near-extinction of the way of life of an altogether lovable and harmless people has stirred the emotions of us all, even to anger and deep resentment. It is a story far worse than that of the Soviet repressions in Hungary. We, amongst the many friends of Tibet, which should include the United Nations, must not forget his plea for the helpless refugees from Tibet. I am sure that we will not forget.

Mr. Richardson's lecture was a fitting prelude to the presentation to him of the Sir Percy Sykes Memorial Medal. May I remind you that for this medal we are greatly indebted to the family of that great man, Sir Percy Sykes, and as usual it gives us much pleasure to have with us today three members of his family.

The medal was cast as a perpetual memorial to a man who dedicated most of his life to helping, and increasing the knowledge of us all concerning, the countries of Asia, and of promoting understanding between those countries and the countries of our Commonwealth.

The Council of this Society do not award this medal lightly, but they had no hesitation in recommending Mr. Hugh Richardson to be its recipient this year. Mr. Richardson has spent the best part of his life in the service of that famous body of men, the Indian Civil Service; but, over and above that, his service led him to an understanding and sympathy with the peoples of India and those on its perimeter, and that is something very much in keeping with the aims and interests of this Society.

It is therefore with much pleasure that on your behalf, and on behalf of the Royal Central Asian Society, I now ask Mr. Richardson to accept this medal, engraved with his name, with our best congratulations, our admiration and our warmest good wishes.



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