

Gaia worship, the 'Great Game,' and a religion of empire

by Mary Burdman

Younghusband: The Last Great Imperial Adventurer

by Patrick French

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This is an excellent biography of the man who led the British imperial invasion of Tibet in 1904; who founded the World Congress of Faiths and the Central Asian Society; who was writing of spiritual union with Mother Earth 60 years before the Gaia cult was popularized; and whose "Fight for Right" society in World War I inspired that hymn of the British Empire, *Jerusalem*. Throughout his life, Sir Francis Younghusband, born in India in 1863, was at the fore of the "forward school" of the British Empire, both politically and spiritually. Although he always remained in the lower orders of the imperial hierarchy, Younghusband's life and work epitomize the essential character of the British Empire.

Patrick French, a very good writer of the Fitzroy Maclean school, actually retraced many of Younghusband's steps in Asia as well as Europe, no small undertaking considering that the highlight of the explorer's youth was a "race" with a fellow British officer across Central Asia, from China to India. The quality of the book reflects the effort.

From the beginning of his career, when he joined the military and then worked for the intelligence service in British India, Younghusband was obsessed with the "threat" of Russian expansionism into India, the bugaboo of the British "forward school" whose leader Lord Curzon became. What becomes clear from this book, is how much Younghusband's work was determined not by British fear of Russia itself, but British fear of those building land routes, especially railroads, in Eurasia!

'Heart of a continent'

Concern on this issue led him to little-known Manchuria already in 1886, which is interesting in view of subsequent

events: Manchuria, then a province of China, was the scene of struggles over Russian and Chinese railroad-building projects, and was seized by the British Empire's Asian ally, Japan, in the British-orchestrated Russo-Japanese War of 1904. In 1887, sponsored by the Tory government of Russophobic Lord Salisbury, Younghusband set out on an overland "race" to India. While Col. Mark Bell of the Indian intelligence service charged through Chinese Turkestan—today's strategic Xinjiang province—Younghusband took a more northerly route through the Gobi, gathering military intelligence on China for New Delhi, and became the first European since Marco Polo to find a new land route to China when he crossed the 19,000-foot Mustagh Pass at the foot of K-2, the second highest mountain in the world and the watershed between India and China. It was from this journey that Younghusband wrote his most famous book, *The Heart of a Continent*.

Younghusband was first turned toward Tibet, his special place in the "Great Game" of rivalry between Britain and Russia, by Sir Mortimer Durand, although this mission took some years to fulfill. First, he was sent into the Pamir Mountains, where he met the famous Russian explorer Colonel Grombchevski, and to the Karakoram, because of British alarm at the railway the Russians had extended through Merv, Bokara, and Samarkand, all ancient Central Asian cities of the Silk Road. Younghusband was deployed into Hunza, high in the Karakoram, where Russia, India, Afghanistan, and Chinese Turkestan meet. While his work was to take political and military control, already the spiritual dimension of his life was emerging, again on imperial lines, as Younghusband, raised an evangelical Christian, approached eastern "spiritualism." As French writes, "like wandering soldiers from Chinese Gordon, to Orde Wingate, and Lawrence of Arabia, his travels in remote places acted as a spur to his religious tendencies." His travels also spurred other tendencies: There was, French reveals, considerable rewriting between Younghusband's journals and his published works, all to the purpose of enhancing his character as a soldier on the outermost fringes of the empire.

Younghusband was so obsessed with expansion, he actually curbed his own career. He was forever urging an aggressive British policy in Asia when London wanted to play more devious games. British policy was to leave the borders of the empire undefined—until it became in their interests to define them. In 1892, Younghusband established relations with the future Viceroy, George Curzon, who was to sponsor the highlight of the former's career, the invasion of Tibet. Younghusband led the charge for the forward school, from the siege of Chitral to the Jameson Raid, sponsored by Cecil Rhodes in South Africa. He eventually made a "society" marriage with the depressive Helen Magniac, whose family fortune was based on selling opium in China.

But at the same time, he began writing that he wanted to find "that form of religion which is best adapted to the men

of the present day, and which would form the religion of the future." In his earlier career, this religion was based on the notion of the "higher moral development" of the British imperial rulers. Younghusband corresponded with John Beattie Crozier, whose "theory" was that the inferior "races" were actually degenerating. "It is our special part in world history to rule and guide these Asiatics and Africans," Younghusband concluded. He put himself forward as the policy guide for Curzon, for the "religious feeling without which no nation is good for anything."

The Tibet revelation

It was at this point, 1903-04, that Younghusband was chosen to lead the expedition into Tibet. The expedition, complete with British officers, Indian troops, and a full contingent of London newspaper correspondents, was launched because of unbased fears that the Russian czar was running secret missions in Tibet through the monk Dorzhiev, to force Tibet to open to "free trade" from India. Strategic issues such as alleged Tibetan rustling of Nepalese yaks was used to turn a "free trade" mission into a full-scale military invasion, which culminated in the battle of Chumi Shengo, where British soldiers machine-gunned primitively armed Tibetan soldiers, most of whom, utterly defeated, were *walking* away from the British. Younghusband led his force into the Tibetan capital of Lhasa, where they found no trace of Russian spies.

But also in Tibet, Younghusband had a "divine" experience which changed the further course of his life; but it was only after suffering a severe accident in Belgium in 1911, that he began to let it all out. The first of his published "spiritual" works was called *Within*, in which he rejects Christianity outright for a "world spirit" within each person. Typically, the example he chose for the manifestation of the World Spirit was the death of Edward VII, which he claimed had caused the Indians to forget their "sedition" and the Germans to bury their differences to join the British in the general mourning. *Within* inspired the author's friendship with Bertrand Russell, who appreciated its "simple sincerity," and its making "a religion of atheism."

Younghusband gets balmier: The next steps are sympathetic aliens from other planets, eugenic fitness, and free love. All this is to culminate in the appearance of a new "God Child" on Earth, better than Jesus, whose "hot glow of Love" would transform the Earth.

But, as Patrick French points out, there is an endearing quality to Younghusband's balminess. His choice of such phrases as "hot glow of Love" is apt. Very soon, Younghusband was having "visions" of beautiful young girls, a "religious" fantasy that was to be lived out when he met Madeline Leas, 34 years his junior, at the end of his life. He often got into trouble with his ever-depressed wife for writing too-ardent letters to women sharing his "religious" fervor. Younghusband's expressive naiveté was again shown in his assessment of the British Commander-in-Chief General

Kitchener's activities: Kitchener "had such affection for his ADCs [aides-de-camp] that when one had to leave he was for days after like a bear with a sore head. One of them, Fitzgerald, he managed to keep with him long after he left India. The two went down together in the *Hampshire*," Younghusband wrote, the last reference being to their ship sinking rather than their activities aboard it.

When World War I broke out, Younghusband rallied to the cause of a "Holy War." This led to him founding a group called "Fight for Right," to rally the population to the cause. One result of the Fight, was the composition of the hymn of British Israel—the belief, grounded in British Protestantism, that Britain and Britons were the new chosen land and people. The words were from William Blake's poem *Milton*:

Jerusalem the Golden

Bring me my bow of burning gold:
Bring me my arrows of desire:
Bring me my spear: O clouds unfold!
Bring me my Chariot of fire!

I will not cease from Mental Fight
Nor shall my Sword sleep in my hand:
Till we have built Jerusalem
In England's green and pleasant land.

While the Fight for Right may have faded from history, *Jerusalem* has not.

Younghusband's work did not end there. He went on to found the Gaia cult, 60 years before James Lovelock. In 1924 he brought out the book, *Mother World*. Younghusband presented the Earth as a "benevolent deity," something very radical in 1924. But while many were shocked, physicist-communist J.B.S. Haldane praised the book. The result of human communion with the Earth, would be the bringing forth of a "god-child," "at one with world-mother." Younghusband apparently attempted to do this himself, though with little success, when he was already 76. He went on to *Life in the Stars* and founding the Religious Drama Society.

Perhaps nothing sums up Younghusband's career better as Great Gamesman and Mother Earth worshipper, than the assault that he, as president of the Royal Geographical Society, organized on Mount Everest. The much-appreciated charms of British climber George Mallory, who died close to the summit of Everest in 1924, are captured in a photograph of him climbing the mountain's lower reaches, stark naked, save his backpack. The culmination of this effort, the successful ascent of Tenzin and Hillary, was, French points out, announced to the world in 1953, on the very day of the coronation of Queen Elizabeth II. But such events are past. Now, at Buckingham Palace, all the "hot glow of Love," "Mother Worlds," and other manifestations of Younghusband-style balminess, are bringing things down from the heights, fast.