

LIGHT ON MONGOLIA

Ivor Montagu

The People's Republic of Mongolia, a General Reference Guide by A. J. K. Saunders. *Oxford University Press*, 232 pp., 45s.

The Modern History of Mongolia by Dr. C. R. Bawden. *Weidenfeld & Nicolson*, 460 pp., 63s.

Mongolia—the region formerly known as ‘Outer Mongolia’—was the second country in the world to follow the path toward socialism opened by the October Revolution. It was the first in Asia to do so. It was the first People's Republic. Since this beginning it has been a loyal associate of the USSR, able to count upon the latter for advice, example, and for more material aid, especially at times of danger from the encroaching group of Russian counter-revolutionaries, of pre-liberation exploiters from China, of Japanese expansionists, of US practitioners of the free ‘dollar’ society.

How has it fared since it took the first step forward by the side of its mighty neighbour?

The answer is of growing importance to quite a large part of the world. It is of interest to every people faced with the problem of overcoming in a short time material poverty while retaining its national identity, of somehow bypassing, or short-cutting, via the socialist path, the centuries-long obstacles that separate non-industrial societies from the modern age.

Yet there are very few in this country who could attempt an answer to this question. Mongolists and would-be Mongolists in Britain are yet but a handful and Mongolia still ‘a far-off country’ of which most of us know nothing. Here the popular contacts even lag behind governmental initiatives, for Mongolia has for some years now been accepted as a UN member over the ruins of Taiwan and US State Department objections, and ambassadors and cultural agreements have been exchanged with the Government of St. James.

The library shelves have not been quite empty. There have been accounts from ignorant tourists (the present reviewer), disgruntled tourists (René MacColl) and extremely well-informed tourists (Professor Owen Lattimore). But the two books under review give us more abundant and more thorough material than has ever been available before.

The first is exactly the guide it says it is and a very full one at that. It gives general information and special, on government, party, army, sciences, press, education, health, religion, museums, universities, literature, television and the arts, sport, finance, industry, agriculture, transport, trade—statistics, names, notes, anniversaries, geography, Mongols outside Mongolia, dialects, scripts, eats, drinks, even phrases.

Do you want to know who is doing what, what is being done where, what wave-length to find which broadcasting station, how much something is likely to cost, what you should try to say—more vital still—what someone may be trying to say to you? It is all here, in a short book of 232 pages.

Such compression makes it of course quite unreadable, but compilation so complete makes it also quite impossible to do without, if you are either visiting or studying the country. As a first fruit of the new cultural relations between Britain and Mongolia it is highly promising.

Dr. Charles Bawden's history is a profound and detailed work, nearly twice as long. It represents a real turn in Mongolian studies outside the Russian and Mongolian languages. Dr. Bawden, on a British Council research exchange, has had opportunity to consult the national libraries in Ulan-Bator, and for the first time in any western language we have an historical account making use of indigenous and original sources.

'Modern', in Dr. Bawden's usage covers from around the 15th and 16th century to the present day, that is from the break-up of the remnants of Genghis Khan's Empire, the end of the Mongol dynasty in China, the decline of Mongolia back into internal civil conflict with the Khanates having become mere empty pretensions, and the conquest of both Mongolia and China by the Manchus, to the autonomy declared in 1911, the revolution, the republic and its secularisation, and the return, however modest, to the world's stage.

Hitherto only very little, and much of that guesswork or at third hand, has been known of the first 400 years of the period covered by Dr. Bawden, and of the more recent period only the broad outlines.

It has been known that in the first few years after the October Revolution, the mad ex-Tsarist officer General Ungern-Sternberg and his rabble together with Chinese occupation troops, at each other's throats, made of the whole of Mongolia a bloodstained slaughterous 'dog's breakfast' ('chien-lit' to use President de Gaulle's translation of the Montgomery phrase), everyone was relieved when literally a handful of revolutionaries succeeded in rousing the countryside and gaining, through Lenin's help, the means of driving them out. That later, on the death of the evil Buddhist incarnation, who was its titular ruler, the Bogdogen, in 1924 the country was declared a republic. That it first went right; then tried collectivisation long before there was either will to decide it or machinery to benefit from it; then wavered between left and right struggling against the lamaism that constituted a crushing burden of unproductivity, ignorance and venereal disease (40 per cent of the adult males were in monasteries) and a perpetually renewing source of tribalism, reaction and conspiracy with foreign imperialists from whom rescue was expected; later together with the Soviet Army defeated the invading Japanese first at Khalkin-Gol, before the Hitler war, then finally in Manchuria just before the Japanese surrender which this defeat accelerated; and lastly since the second world war, and particularly during the honeymoon period of friendship between USSR and People's China, achieved gigantic strides with the encouragement of both.

Now at last, thanks to Dr. Bawden's industry, application and scholarship, we can dot many of the *is*, cross many of the *ts*. Many of them, not all. For what we have is not 'The History' as the title claims, but something less, 'A History'. An invaluable array of hitherto inaccessible facts and records. But, in this form, tilted all over to one side, out of kilter, skew-whiff.

For Dr. Bawden is not one person, but two in one, a classic of schizophrenia. On the one hand there is the scrupulous scholar, whose integrity obliges him to put down everything as he finds it. On the other is the fanatic, so devoured by anti-communist mania, that common-sense flies out of the window and spleen distorts his understanding of everything he describes.

Dr. Bawden has not the slightest difficulty in documenting bloodbaths, tragic injustice committed by revolutionaries against many probably innocent of the charges against them, including each other, and contradictions in speeches

and records, confusion, vacillation, all in the stormy course of the social transformation that he describes and, for the first time, reduces to some kind of probable, no doubt well-founded, orderly pattern. Where he errs is in imagining this the result of some wilful fault of revolutionaries or their folly, worse still, their blind obedience to alien (Soviet, of course) command. He does not see events as the inevitable accompaniment of revolution in such a setting; the result of the working of tradition, circumstance and environment acting in opposition to the patriotic will for betterment of imperfect human beings, and the whole picture as one in which, despite their imperfections, the devotion and hard-bought experience of these erring human beings have brought their country at the last to a tranquillity, a prosperity, a liberation by knowledge, and a national integrity undreamed of even as a possibility by *every* western visitor in pre-revolutionary times.

Dr. Bawden's honesty obliges him to admit that the debts, brutishness and disease of pre-revolution Mongolia were colossal, that its feudal princes and lama-politicals did in fact plot with Chinese and Japanese, that bloodshed, much of it careless, had been characteristic of argument in the whole Mongolian past—and yet the moment this tree bears fruit in shaping the errors and efforts of the revolutionary struggle, he seems to think it a fault of revolution. All the time he is mentally comparing the events that he has painstakingly unearthed with some liberal Utopian model in which, all without tears, it would have been possible to remove injustice, spread education, reform religion, end corruption and invent democracy, avoid leaning upon the USSR and yet escape the wolves of pre-liberation China and Japan. So far does Dr. Bawden's prejudice and dream world extend that all the way through his description of the struggle with the monstrous lamaistic system—corrupt, cruel, ignorant, anti-national, enslaving, diseased, riddled with Shamanism—this history of his refers to it as 'the church'—so that the Bogdodegen, self-indulgent, diseased and syphilitic, treacherous, poisoning his enemies (all this Bawden of course records), with pornographic pictures behind the mirrors in his palace, becomes a sort of Archbishop of Canterbury, a hero-Becket withstanding Edward the II, personified by the impious Reds.

The trouble with such scholars as Dr. Bawden is that they still believe in Father Christmas. They have never outgrown their Foreign Office Eton trousers. In the case of Mongolia the *real* alternative to revolution with all its troubles would have been national, even physical, extinction. 'The establishment of the Bolshevik regime is, I believe, the last act in the tragedy of Mongolia. The doom of the Mongols, as a race, is sealed,' was the verdict of the great American traveller and scientist, Chapman Andrews, as late as 1932. Now Mongolia has the highest standard of living of any country in Asia (in the sense of less poverty) and has opened to its people the doors of the twentieth century. Instead of contrasting past Mongolian suffering and degradation with the Mongolia of today (to which Saunders's book is quite adequate testimony), and making this Himalayan-scale transformation the departure point and touchstone of proper judgement, Dr. Bawden's certainty that revolution can never be successful forces him to conclude that the nowadays Mongols can only be pitied because they don't know they ought to be unhappy.

All the more honour to Dr. Bawden's integrity as a scholar in that his energetic research has produced such an informative work in a field previously so blank. All it needs is a pinch of salt.

EARL MOUNTBATTEN OF BURMA

Commander Edgar P. Young, R.N. Retired

IT was not until late in January of this year (1969) that governmental authority was given for the publication of Section E of *The Report to the Combined Chiefs of Staff by the Supreme Allied Commander South East Asia, 1943-1945*, by Vice-Admiral The Earl Mountbatten of Burma, the previous sections of which were published in 1951. The 18 years delay in the publication of this concluding section, headed 'Post Surrender Tasks', is explained by Mountbatten in a preface, dated 1968, as being due to the fact that many of the problems with which the author had to grapple after Japan's surrender 'involved the interests and policies of allied and other governments and remained unsolved for many years after the completion of his report.' This section was, therefore, he writes, 'subject to political considerations.' When one reads this publication, one can understand well why our Government has delayed its appearance, for it is a terrible indictment of the Governments of France and the Netherlands. It is an even worse indictment of our own (Labour) Government, for, without its approval and active support, the others mentioned could not have done what they did.

For the discerning reader the net effect of this document is to show that the present situation in South-East Asia is in continuation of that which Mountbatten has described and which he himself produced; one of imperialist aggression against the peoples there. Then as now the British Government's primary concern has been to preserve its hold on the dollar income derived from Malaya, which exceeds that earned by the whole of Britain's industry, and it contrives cunningly to use other countries as catspaws to that end, while pretending not to be involved. Mountbatten has been at pains to create the impression that he disapproves of the double-facedness and double-dealing involved, but his attitude is revealed in his 1968 preface, where he writes:

In French Indo-China the decision to divide the country on the 16th parallel, and put the north under Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek, caused great difficulty at the time and sowed the seed for even greater conflicts in the years to come.

In fairness to Mountbatten, it must be admitted that the assignment to his already extensive South-East Asia Command of all the South-West Pacific area south of the Philippines was a tough one: the Combined Chiefs of Staff had 'added half-a-million square