

**WILLIAM WOODVILLE ROCKHILL'S MONGOLIAN TRAVEL
LITERATURE OF THE 1890s**

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The American diplomat William Woodville Rockhill (1854-1914) is known particularly for two accomplishments: 1) in international diplomatic circles, as the United States' Department of State official who authored the famous Open Door Policy for China in 1900; and 2) among academics, as the first American to learn to read, write and speak Tibetan fluently, which is why he is called the founder of Tibetan Studies in the United States. Rockhill's June 1908 visit at Wu T'ai Shan monastery with the exiled 13th Dalai Lama, fleeing the British Younghusband mission to Tibet, also is well remembered. However, his importance as an early writer of travel literature on Mongolia is less understood. Even the new biography of Rockhill by retired American diplomat Kenneth Wimmel¹ does not adequately reflect Rockhill's importance for Mongolian Studies.

Yet Rockhill, while a diplomat in the U.S. Legation in Peking, China from 1884-1895, took leaves of absences from his work to make two unique journeys through Mongolian territories, as well as to the Tibetan plateau, under the sponsorship of the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, DC. Two of his many publications included accounts of his Mongol travels: *Land of the Lamas*, which recounts his trip of 1888 and

¹ Kenneth Wimmel, *William Woodville Rockhill, Scholar-diplomat of the Tibetan Highlands*, Orchid Press, Bangkok, 2003. Rockhill's earlier biographer, Paul Varg, had access to Rockhill's personal papers via his grandson in the 1940s for his 1952 biography of Rockhill. Among Varg's sources was a personal memoir by Rockhill's daughter Dorothy, which was not found by Wimmel. See Paul Varg, *Open Door Diplomat*, University of Illinois Press, Urbana, Illinois, 1952.

1889² and *Diary of a Journey Through Mongolia and Tibet in 1891 and 1892*.³ The latter account is an expansion of his 1893 article, “Explorations in Mongolia and Tibet.”⁴

William Woodville Rockhill was born in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania on April 1, 1854. Shy, seemingly aloof, and sometimes suffering from bouts of severe depression, he was given the name “Big Chief” by his government colleagues, and considered brusque and short-tempered. He was famed for his diligent mental and physical labor and intelligence. Rockhill was one of the first “China Hands,” or professional diplomats intimately familiar with China and its civilization, in the United States. He freely admitted that his greatest passion was Oriental Studies. Fascination with Tibet was the catalyst for his drive to learn about Asia, or the Orient, as it was then called. “He influenced American policy toward China for a decade or more—one of the most important decades for American foreign policy, when the United States emerged from its traditional continental isolation to become a world power.”⁵

Rockhill was never very rich or famous, yet some of the most famous Americans of his day, like Theodore Roosevelt, Henry Adams, and John Hay, were his friends. As a diplomat, he served in many high-ranking posts including U.S. Minister to Greece (1897-1899); Romania (1897); Serbia (1897), China (1905-1909); U.S. Ambassador to Russia (1909-1911); and Ambassador to Turkey (1911-1913). He died in Honolulu, Hawaii on December 3, 1914 from a sudden heart attack, on his way back to Peking to be a foreign adviser to the new Chinese Republican government. He choose to be buried in the small

² WWR, *Land of the Lamas, Notes of a Journey Through China, Mongolia and Tibet*, Sri Satguru Publications, Delhi, India 2004 [The Century Company, New York and London, 1891].

³ WWR, *Diary of a Journey Through Mongolia and Tibet in 1891 and 1892*, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, 1894.

⁴ WWR, “Explorations in Mongolia and Tibet,” *Smithsonian Institution Annual Report, 1892*, Washington, 1893, pp. 659-679.

⁵ Wimmel, 2003, pg. xv.

town of Litchfield, Connecticut, of which he wrote to a friend the year before he died: “I want to go to Litchfield and raise poultry and flowers and live exclusively in an oriental atmosphere of the Southern Sung and Yuan periods.”⁶

Rockhill’s own personal papers are in the Houghton Library at Harvard University,⁷ although many of his writings are among the public papers of John Hay and Theodore Roosevelt in the Manuscript Division of the U.S. Library of Congress. Rockhill’s official dispatches and letters wrote during his diplomatic service are in the Department of State Records in the U.S. National Archives. Rockhill’s personal papers (in English, French, Chinese, Tibetan) at Harvard are numerous—there are 34 boxes, 6 card file boxes, and 18 linear feet of bound volumes, which included materials dating from 1826-1941. His personal diaries begin with 1908, the year he met the 13th Dalai Lama, until his death. He apparently kept private records from about 39 years of age, when he entered diplomatic service, but also retained copies of his official papers. To our knowledge, no researcher has ever done a thorough investigation of the Harvard collection to search for materials on Mongolia. From our preliminary search we found materials on Russian-Mongolian trade; correspondence with Sir Henry Yule and Henri Cordier (translators of Marco Polo’s *Travels*); letters from early well-known Mongolists Sir Henry Hoyle Howorth, John F. Baddeley, and Jeremiah Curtin; description of Mongolian alfalfa and other important Mongolian native plants; letter from Sain Noyan Khan Souroun from 1913; Rockhill’s own political analysis on “The Question of Outer Mongolia” from 1915; and maps of Mongolia. It would be worthwhile for a researcher to study these and other documents.

⁶ WWR to Bland, March 298, 1913, *Bland Papers*, noted in Wimmel, 2003 pg. xv.

⁷“ Rockhill, William Woodville, 1854-1914. Papers: Guide. (bMS Am 2121),” Houghton Library, Harvard College Library, Harvard University, Cambridge, Mass.

This paper's goal is to introduce Rockhill's travel writings on Mongolia in hopes that they will spur interest among a new generation of Mongolists to scrutinize more carefully the entire body of his work. Rockhill began his first trip in the winter of 1888 and 1889, after spending 4 years on his own studying Tibetan. He knew that Lhasa was closed to foreigners, but this only inspired him to try to enter the closed city. He took leave from his post in the American Legation in Peking, and planned to follow the northern route to Lhasa through Xining and Lanzhou to Koko-nor. He went disguised as a Chinese with only 2 mule carts bearing his belongings. He was both inquisitive and observant of the lifestyles of those he met. While admitting that he did not speak Mongolian well, he was careful to always distinguish between Mongols, Chinese and Tibetans in his comments. A small example of his careful commentary can be seen in his story about when he was in Xian, China, where he met traders selling turquoise beads which could be used by travelers as a form of currency. He noted that Tibetans preferred round rather than flat beads, and Mongols preferred greenish beads over blue beads.⁸

When making his way to Kumbum Monastery outside Koko-nor, Rockhill met a variety of people from different Mongol tribes. He wrote that the San-ch'uan had distinctly Mongol facial features and language, although they used many Chinese and Tibetan expressions and wore Chinese-style dress, except on festive occasions when the women dressed in traditional costumes.⁹ He mentioned Mongols who were Muslims: "The only Mohammedan Mongols I heard of were called Tolmuk or Tolmukgun," numbering some 300-400 families, whom he thought were the same as the Chinese Tung-

⁸ *Land of Lamas*, pg. 24, nt. 1.

⁹ *Ibid.*, pg. 43.

kou, Potanin's Amdo Mongols, Prjevalsky's Taldy, Doldy, or Daldy peoples, and Mongol's Zagan or White Mongols.¹⁰

Rockhill criticized the Manchu trade pass system for Chinese wishing to trade among the Mongols and Tibetans, claiming that the system had almost ended legitimate trade between the Kansu Chinese and Mongols, while encouraging contraband trade. He witnessed the annual 'little tribute' ceremony of Mongol princes paying their tribute to the Xining *amban*. Satins, knives, and other goods, all strictly fixed in numbers, were presented by the *amban* to the princes. The princes, in turn, did the *kowtow* in the direction of Peking, and then everyone went to a banquet. He reported that every three years the Mongol princes had to go to Peking to renew their oaths of allegiance to the emperor in the 'great tribute' ceremony.¹¹

In Xining, to escape the Chinese magistrates whom Rockhill suspected wanted to prevent him from going to Tibet, Rockhill donned Mongol *del* and fur cap to cover his clean shaven head and face, and with a group of Khalkha Mongols rode off toward the Koko-nor range. "There were Mongols, mounted on camels or horses, and clothed in sheepskin gowns and big fur caps, or else in yellow or red lama robes—the women hardly distinguishable from the men, save those who, from coquetry, had put on their green satin gowns and silver head and neck ornaments, to produce a sensation on entering Lusak or Kumbum."¹² In the small village of Lusak near Kumbum he attended a dragon festival and saw parties of Mongols amidst the crowds of Kampa Tibetans, Lhasa Tibetans, and Chinese from minority tribes. He noted that the Mongols of the Koko-nor and Tsaidam Mongols dress much like Tibetans, but married women retained Mongolian

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 44-45, nt. 1.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, pg. 54.

¹² *Ibid.*, pg. 56.

hairstyle, with tresses incased in heavy embroidered satin falling on either side of the face.¹³ Rockhill stayed in Lusa a month and a half and said he was kindly treated by the Chinese, all of whom could speak Mongol and Tibetan. Sometimes he even was mistaken for a Mongol or a Turk!

Rockhill wrote extensively of ceremonies at Kumbum and the butter bas-reliefs in the temples. He described prayer flags and Mongol nomadic food, including the custom of picking the bones clean of meat. His account carefully detailed the organization of the Buddhist religious monasteries in the area, their ceremonial objects, and practices. From the Koko-nor Mongols he bought camels to continue his journey. He met a Khalkha Mongol 'Living Buddha' called Cheunjin (Cheojey) Lama on his way to Lhasa, but in the end was not able to travel together with him.

After the long stay at Kumbun, Rockhill headed out towards Tibet. First he passed through the territory of the Tankar Mongols, a section of a large group of 800-1000 *ger* he described as Eastern Koko-nor Mongols led by Mori Wang. This was the last large concentration of Mongols he saw on the first trip. He described them as very poor, herding sheep and goats with not more than 100 head per family, with 5 or 6 horses and an equal number of camels: "They live in constant dread of their Tibetan neighbors, who rob and bully them in the most shameful way. Their flocks are herded by the women, who use slings to "round them up" when scattered, throwing stones or dried dung with wonderful precision to considerable distances."¹⁴ Rockhill never made it to Lhasa on that first journey. Running out of money for new supplies, he called the trip off

¹³ *Ibid.*, pg. 61.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, pg. 120.

600 km. short of his goal. Instead, he returned to Peking via eastern Tibet, passing 36 lamaseries housing 150,000 monks.

Two years later, on the second major journey of William Rockhill through Mongolia to Tibet (a map of which we could not find because it had been removed from the 1894 first edition book we had access to at the Library of Congress), the diplomat went further into Southern Mongolia and Western Kansu. He wrote that to better prepare for his travels he had researched in advance letters of Jesuits in the 17th and 18th centuries, the writings of Abbe Huc (*Souvenirs*), and Prjevalsky's first journey in Central Asia. Rockhill by then could converse in some Kalmyk (Western) Mongolian, so in his travel *Diary* he wrote all Mongol terms using this one dialect he knew.

The American diplomat left Peking and his post as Secretary in the U.S. Legation on November 30, 1891 and did not returned back until October 5, 1892. His route took him through Kalgan, where he saw beautiful camel caravans, but found the camels were too expensive for him to buy. He described an *oboo* in Chahar Mongol territory, and reported that in this region Mongols lived a sedentary life like Chinese. They wore Chinese clothing, smoked opium, liked to drink, and slept on *kang* beds holding 15-20 people, although they did keep their Mongol national hairstyle of long braids.¹⁵ He also witnessed the activities of foreign Roman Catholic Missions among the Chahars.

On the journey he then met Djungarian Ordos Mongols who were very sinified, did not live in *gers*, dressed like Chinese, but still preserved their Mongol hairstyles and ornaments. These people, he claimed, were "much less demoralized than the Chahar." In this region the Mongols ate milk tea and millet, but not Tibetan *tsambe* (as he saw Kokonor Mongols eat on his first journey), cheese and sour milk. Despite their sinification,

¹⁵ *Diary*, pp. 9-10.

these Mongols resented being called ‘Ta-Tzu’ by the Chinese, and called themselves in Chinese ‘Meng-gu’.¹⁶

In his *Diary* account Rockhill described the seven clans making up the Ordos Mongols, who had the special duty to protect the camp or ‘*ordu*’ of Chinggis Khan and were led by a chief called ‘Djungar Ta.’ The clans were Djungar, Talat, Wang, Ottok, Djassak, Wushun, and Hangkin. The Hangkin was the westernmost Ordos clan on the territory of Prince Alashan. This was the home territory of the late Professor John Gombojab Hangin, founder of The Mongolia Society of Bloomington, Indiana USA and one of the most significant scholars in the modern history of Mongolian Studies in the U.S.

Rockhill reported that in the area there were Christians among the Ottok Mongols and some Mongols who were Muslim. He visited the tomb of Monsignor deVoos, the First Catholic Bishop of Ordos, who had died in 1889. Rockhill was interested in botany, so his account included interesting anecdotes on such things as red currant medicine (*kere innuto*) and fruit bearing thornfruit called *karmyk* in Mongolian. His book includes many colorful vignettes, such as passing a group of Mongols warming themselves with lit dry dung on the end of a pointed stick one January day,¹⁷ and coming upon drunken Mongols riding camels!¹⁸

Rockhill visited the village of T’eng-k’ou (Tungor), which was supposed to be Prester John’s capital (which the diplomat doubted). As in his first journey, he stayed at Kumbum lamasery, where he saw many Mongol pilgrims, including some Mongols from Manchuria waiting to go by yearly caravan to Lhasa. In fact, he ran into the same group

¹⁶ ‘Mongols,’ *ibid.*, pg. 19.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, pg. 35.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 37-38.

of Mongols led by Mori Wang in the Koko-nor, whom he had described in his book on the first trip. However, in this second account, he referred to them as Shang Mongols. He did not like these Mongols, calling them vascillating, unreliable, and cowards.

Rockhill's *Diary* contains about 80 pages on his adventures in Mongolian regions. He understood that there were differences among the Mongol tribes, and made an effort to correctly distinguish among them. For example, he reported a meeting with some Eastern Mongol men with several wives. He explained that such a custom was possible for Mongols living around Koko-nor because of the strong Muslim influence there; however, he noted that such practices were not normal for Mongolians.

When he passed through the Korluk Mongol lands, Rockhill reported that the Tibetan chief of the region, the *kanpo*, called the Mongols very ignorant and superstitious.¹⁹ Interspersed with his own travel commentary, he included accounts of much earlier travelers in the region including Plano Carpini, Prjevalsky, and William of Rubruk, as well as his personal engravings of Mongol subjects. He was an excellent and precise artist, who used this skill to explicate the text. For example, he drew a study of six different style boots to explain the unique features distinguishing boots among lay Khalkha Mongols, lay Tibetans, and lamas.

Rockhill recounted his experiences with Eastern Mongolian 'burials'. The dead body was put on a frame and dragged away by a horse. If it fell off, it would be devoured by wolves and vultures. If not, the Mongols burnt it to ashes and molded the ashes into a little human figure which was stored by the family in their home in a small white cotton bag.²⁰

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, pg. 138.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, pg. 152.

Rockhill's second book included much material on the Taichinar Mongols, who were reputed to be witches, and the Tsaidam Mongols, or Eleuts, who lived in the Kokonor mountains. Rockhill claimed the Eleuts had such Europeanized features that they were even barred from Tibet because they were considered Russians.²¹ He took special note of the facial features of the peoples he met. He was struck by the differences between Khalkha Mongols (whom he described as small, light complexioned, with fine, regular features), and the Taichinar Mongols (who were tall, coarse, dark skinned, deep voiced, heavy features, and bearded with hair on body and limbs).²² On this second journey Rockhill again did not reach Lhasa. He was forced to halt 260 km. from the capital by Tibetan troops. After supplying him with food and presents including a saddle pony, he was permitted to return to China via the previously unexplored Chamdo region.

There are several accounts written by Rockhill dealing with his historic meeting with the 13th Dalai Lama in 1908, which will not be covered in this present paper. Among them is Rockhill's famous long letter to President Theodore Roosevelt, which described the meeting--the first official contact between Tibet and the United States. More information about Rockhill's life and adventures can be obtained from a chapter on him in *Tournament of Shadows*,²³ which chronicles the stories of the great western travelers in Central Asia, North India, and Mongolia. This source mentions that Rockhill made a final 1913 trip to China and Mongolia under the auspices of the American Asiatic Association. However, the authors of this paper have not been able to obtain access to any materials on this trip.

²¹ *Ibid.*, pg. 155.

²² *Ibid.*, pg. 180.

²³ Karl E. Meyer and Shareen Blair Brysac, *Tournament of Shadows*, Counterpoint, Washington, 1999.

William Rockhill, scholar, explorer and diplomat pursued many activities related to the field of Mongolian Studies. He translated from Latin the journals of William of Rubruck to the Karakorum Mongol Court.²⁴ The authors also discovered a few interesting references to Rockhill when he was Ambassador from the United States to Czarist Russia in the St. Petersburg archives,²⁵ which should be explored by researchers in the future. While Ambassador to Turkey in 1911, Rockhill, together with the Sinologist Friedrich Hirth, translated the rare account of an 13th century Chinese customs official called *Description of Barbarous Peoples*, which likely contains materials on the Mongols.²⁶ His personal 6000 volume collection of Chinese, Tibetan, and Mongolian books were all donated to the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C.²⁷ Moreover, the Library today displays the lovely Tibetan *thangka* which was presented to Rockhill by the 13th Dalai Lama.²⁸

Curiously, Rockhill in his lifetime never received any official recognition nor honorary degrees, and there is no library or building memorializing the many accomplishments of this great scholar-diplomat. Most of his publications are long out of print. Only his first travel book, *Land of Lamas*, is readily available. He deserves much more recognition as the founder of Mongol Studies in the United States, which is why the authors of this paper are so pleased to bring William Woodville Rockhill to the attention of this important conference on the image of Mongolia in early travel literature.

²⁴ WWR, "The Journey of Friar John of Pian de Carpine to the Court of Kuyuk Khan, 1245-1247," 1900.

²⁵ The Russian State Historic Archive, fund 516, inv. 2, files 252, 253, 264, 266, 268, 269 dated January 24, 1910-February 2, 1911.

²⁶ *Tournament*, pg. 427.

²⁷ Hwa-Wei Lee, "Building a World-Class Asian Collection in the Library of Congress for Area Studies, Culture Preservation, Global Understanding, and Knowledge Creation," Library of Congress, Asian Division.

²⁸ For additional information see Susan Meinheit, "A Gift of the Dalai Lama," *The Library of Congress Information Bulletin*, Washington, June 2000.

However, let us not forget that there have been many other interesting travel accounts by Americans who moved over the Mongol steppes in the early twentieth century. For example, there was Janet Wulsin, a daughter of a rich New York railroad baron, who in the 1920s made a four-year expedition with her cultural anthropologist husband, Frederick, through China, Mongolia and Tibet. Their nine-month Central China Expedition in 1923, sponsored by the National Geographic Society, produced early photos of Inner Mongolia, Gansu and Qinghai.²⁹ Wulsin also had her archives of 1900 photographs deposited at Harvard University. These photographs are particularly interesting because they consist of hand-colored two-inch by two-inch glass positives called ‘lantern slides.’ Her daughter Mabel Cabot has just published a book about the Wulsin expedition called *Vanished Kingdoms*.³⁰

Another fascinating American travel account of Mongolia was written by Harry Franck, a prolific professional travel writer, about his automobile trip from Kalgan, China through Urga to Ude in 1922. This material is found in his book, *Wandering in Northern China*,³¹ and is the subject of a forthcoming separate article by Dr. Campi. Franck was in Mongolia during the early Revolutionary period and provides a little known eye-witness account to conditions in the country, as the writer struggled to gain permission from the highest officials in the Mongolian Government to take pictures on the streets of Urga.

Franck and Wulsin, as well as Rockhill, should be given international recognition like Roy Chapman Andrews and Owen Lattimore, as Americans who have contributed important travel literature on Mongolia.

²⁹ *China's Inner Asian Frontier, Photographs of the Wulsin Expedition to Northwest China in 1923*, Peabody Museum, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass. 1979.

³⁰ Mabel H. Cabot, *Vanished Kingdoms: A Woman Explorer in Tibet, China, and Mongolia 1921-1925*, Aperture Foundation, 2003.

³¹ Harry A. Franck, *Wandering in Northern China*, The Century Co., New York and London, 1923.