

## Murder of Capt. Williamson and the Mc Mahon Line

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That a stray murder committed in the depths of the Abor Jungle could have such far-reaching effects could not be imagined even by those who committed the murder. The man murdered was Capt. Noel Williamson. An adventurous British youth wedded to British imperialism, Williamson was Assistant Political Officer at Sadiya at the beginning of this century. Within a very short time his exploits covered most of the Mishmi Hills and touched the Chinese territory in Rima. Often invited by his tribal friends to visit their villages, he would often go beyond his jurisdiction being careless of being pursued by his foes. Thus he got killed at about 10 in the morning of March 31, 1911 in a foreign land at Komsing, some eighty kms from Pasighat, by some Abors who now call themselves Adi.

This was all on the surface. Viewed from different angles things appear differently. Williamson's murder may very well be said to be the result of imperial rivalry between China and Britain, with Russia occasionally interfering, over Tibet. His murder draws one's attention to the British policy in the Himalayas, and the British clash of interests with China over Tibet.

To link the murder of Williamson with the establishment of Mc Mahon Line I shall divide my study into three sections ; (a) circumstances leading to the murder, (b) the murder itself and (c) its aftermath.

### Circumstances Leading to the Murder

It was Younghusband's Mission to Lhasa (1903-4) that aroused Chinese concern about the British designs on Tibet. China had exercised suzerainty (Chinese historians say it was sovereignty) over Tibet since 1920. Though the British move into Tibet was bound to invite Chinese displeasure, the British Government had to go ahead with its Tibetan policy because of Russia's interest in Tibet since 1901. Russian interest was secretly backed by China, for China considered Russia a friendly neighbour in comparison to Imperialist Britain. The British Indian Government realised that Russian presence in Tibet might upset the peace in northern India. <sup>1</sup> So it decided to send a Mission later on known as Lhasa Mission to Tibet under Younghusband. China could not take direct action against the Mission but they took action on some other front.

Fearing the "possibility of British protectorate over Tibet they took immediate step so earmark as much territory on the western border of Szechuan as possible for themselves"<sup>2</sup> This marked the beginning of Chinese activities in the Lohit district. The Chinese were also not happy with the resultant Lhasa Convention-1904. For this Convention ignored Chinese authority over Tibet. So it had to be reversed by the Peking Convention of 1906 signed between China and Great Britain. This Convention went against British interests, so far as her Tibetan policy was concerned. For, this provided that preservation of Tibet's integrity should rest with China.<sup>3</sup> Since no restriction was imposed on China in respect of Tibet's internal affairs, China took every opportunity to extend her grip over Tibet and lessen British influence on her. "The Chinese Government were not slow to take advantage of the altered circumstances."<sup>4</sup>

Chang Yin Tang, the Chinese High Commissioner at Lhasa, did whatever he could to bring Tibet into the Chinese grip. The British could not do anything against it; for the St. Petersburg Convention of 1907 signed between Russia and Great Britain bound her hands. According to this Convention both Britain and Russia were "to abstain from interference in the internal administration of Tibet" and 'to enter into negotiations with Tibet only through the intermediary of China'.<sup>5</sup> Thus China's grip over Tibet had to be witnessed by Britain though she did not like it. Charles Bell considered this Convention as an instrument for rendering "possible a Chinese menace not so much of brute force as of insidious penetration, in the north eastern border of India"<sup>6</sup>.

To patch up things, another Trade Regulation was signed between Britain and China in 1908. This Regulation further restricted the entry of the British and Indians into Tibet. Charles Bell commented: "In one way or the another they (the Tibetans) were placed under Chinese domination, and the British Govt. were primarily responsible for putting them there".<sup>7</sup>

The whole situation was not liked by some British political officers who were in actual touch with the issue. Charles Bell, then Adviser on Tibetan affairs, for instance, was further alarmed by Chinese move to influence Bhutan with the ultimate aim of bringing her under her suzerainty. He observed with dismay the Chinese Amban at Lhasa addressing, in 1907, the Bhutanese Chief: "The Bhutanese are the subjects of the Emperor of China, who is the Lord of Heaven".<sup>8</sup> Seeing this, Bell advised the British Government in 1908 "to persuade Bhutan to place her Foreign Relations under

the British Government”<sup>9</sup>. Accordingly, an Anglo-Bhutanese Treaty was signed in January 1910.

All these go to show the British concern about her policy in the Himalayas in general and the north-eastern tract in particular. This is reflected in Charles Bell’s statement : “Bhutan garrisoned by Chinese troops, peopled more and more by Chinese colonists, overhanging the tea gardens of Assam and Jalpaiguri would have been a new and very disturbing factor on the Indian frontiers.”<sup>10</sup> To the east of Bhutan is the present Arunachal Pradesh bordering which were the important tea gardens of Assam where the Britishers had already invested money. The British Government were very anxious to protect the interests of these British planters. The peculiarity of the situation here was that the present Arunachal was then a terra incognita. As time passed, the Chinese made attempts to extend their influence in the region. General Chao Erh-feng, the Chinese Governor at Lhasa, sent his men to the Mishmi Hill. A serious view of his activities was taken by Bell and the British Government warned accordingly : “If the Chinese regain control over Tibet later on they will pay special attention to the development and consolidation of the, at present, thinly populated but warm and fertile districts in the south west of Tibet.....The Tawang district borders directly on Assam.”<sup>11</sup> He also suggested a policy of extending British control over this area. His idea was that such a policy would prevent establishment of Chinese agents or stationing of Chinese troops in this region. It is to be noted that several other British officers also favoured a forward policy in this region. Sir Lancelot Hare, Lt. Governor, for instance, advocated, in November, 1910, a forward policy in this region to Lord Hardinge who turned it down on the plea that in case of Chinese attack on Assam the British could retaliate on the China coast. Hare was not satisfied and tried to convince Harding : “We only now claim suzerainty upto the foot of the hills. We have an inner line and an outer line. Upto the inner line we administer in the ordinary way..... The country between the two lines is very sparsely inhabited and is mostly dense jungle.

“Now should the Chinese establish themselves in strength or obtain control upto our outer line, they could attack us whenever they please and defence would be extremely difficult... .. but we should be bound to defend our valuable tea gardens and unless we had a suitable position this would be extremely difficult.” Then he concluded, “When we have already established ourselves by friendly relations, as in the country on extreme east upto Sati on

the road from Sadiya to Rima we could maintain our present standing and should forbid China stepping in.”<sup>12</sup>

Charles Bell, who also advocated the forward policy, reinforced his argument by quoting from a military resume on the possibility of Chinese attack on Assam through this tribal region ; “That Assam would ever stand the slightest chance of being invaded by a civilized military power has never been contemplated, and consequently, no strategic plan, no defence, no organization whatever exists to repel a serious invasion.”<sup>13</sup>

Hare as well as Bell realized the problem of executing a forward policy in view of non-exploration of this area. So they sought the Viceroy’s approval of sending men who would tour the frontier villages, improve trade-routes and give presents for friendly services and information.

The Viceroy was, however, not convinced. He, rather, wrote to Earle of Crewe, the then Secretary of State for India, to have Hare ‘instruct his frontier officers that they should confine themselves as hitherto, cultivating friendly relations with the tribes beyond the outer line’.<sup>14</sup>

The situation became more explosive after the escape of the Dalai Lama to India. On the advance of the Chinese forces towards Lhasa, the Dalai Lama escaped to India on 25 February 1910. That left the situation in Tibet completely under China.

In his first interview with Bell, the Dalai Lama explained how he was assured by China that no harm would come to the Tibetans, and no curtailment of Dalai Lama’s powers would be made. As the Chinese went back on those assurances in respect of Tibet “later on the Chinese would menace India also”.<sup>15</sup> In subsequent interviews the Dalai Lama and his ministers “asserted that China would not rest contented with her control over Tibet, but would try also to get hold of Nepal, Bhutan and Sikkim.”<sup>16</sup>

Charles Bell’s apprehension was that if China harboured designs of bringing under her control countries like Nepal, Bhutan and Sikkim which had formal and legal rulers, she would definitely try to extend her control over the vast area now Arunachal Pradesh - which was a no-man’s land. In fact Bell was concerned about this region even before Dalai Lama’s escape to India. During the long absence of the Dalai Lama from 1904 to 1909 the Tibetan Government was practically disorganised. Taking advantage of this, General Chao Erh-feng established Chinese administration in eastern Tibet. As a foresighted officer, Bell observed in the Chinese movement a design of bringing this terra incognita

under Chinese control. He wrote, "I feared Chinese intervention and influence - and eventually a measure of control - in these tribal territories. They cover seven hundred miles of Indian frontier.... It seemed to me therefore that although these tribal areas lay outside my own charge - Tibet, Bhutan and Sikkim - I ought to point out the danger. Accordingly in July 1909, I suggested to Indian Foreign office that it should be ascertained how far the country of these tribes was cultivable, how far their hills and valleys could be depended on as a barrier for the plains of India and whether any of the tribes had in any way recognised the suzerainty of Tibet or China".<sup>17</sup>

But the Government of India did not accept Bell's recommendations till August 1910. More and more information about Chinese activities in Lohit causing more anxiety to the British Frontier Officers, was pouring in. In 1910 Capt. F. M. Baily of the Intelligence Department, travelled from Peking to Kahap via Rima and Mishimi country and he reported to his government of whatever he observed on his way. He wrote. "The Chinese have been attempting to enter into relations with the Mishimis, but up to the present have not succeeded."<sup>18</sup>

Such a situation naturally caused anxieties to the ardent British Political Officers who thought seriously of saving Assam from a possible Chinese attack. They demanded British control over this Assam-Himalayan region. The higher authorities, however, turned down the suggestions given by the frontier officers. In spite of this, some enthusiastic officers occasionally exceeded the limits of Government directives but with the best intention of serving the British empire. Yonghusband was one such officer, who went beyond during his Lhasa Mission in 1903-04. Capt. F. M. Baily was another who exceeded the instruction of Sir John Jordan, the then British Minister in China. And the third was Capt. Noel Williamson who made extensive tours beyond the outer line in Mishimi and Abor Hills without the sanction of his superior authorities.

In addition to his being an adventurous youth, Captain Williamson seems to have been guided by Charles Bell, then advisor to the Government of India on Tibet. Bell had kept a constant watch on this region and had observed, from 1909 onwards, Chinese attempts to penetrate into this region. We have seen how Bell had advocated an exploration of this region and study of the attitude of the local tribes. The Government's indecision till 1910 put such officers in an embarrassing situation. It might be that in anticipation of Government sanction, Williamson was verbally asked by

Bell to explore beyond the outer line. It can be presumed that Williamson, with a strong sense of imperialism, and backed by informal goodwill of Bell, "had made a practice of touring a short distance into the hills."<sup>19</sup>

### The Murder

In 1908 Williamson toured the Pasi, Minyong and some Galong villages around Pasihat. In 1907 he made two tours going beyond the outer line - one in the Lohit Valley going as far as Rima, and the other up the course of Dihang, going upto Kebang in the Abor Hills. At Kebang he was prevented from going further north by the Kebang people because of an inter-tribal war between the Pangis and the Minyongs. He, however, made friendship with the tribesmen who invited him to visit their villages. At the beginning of 1911 he penetrated again into the Mishimi Hills upto Walong. "He saw the Chinese flags at Menikrai and reported the Chinese occupation of Rima."<sup>20</sup> This was very important. He seemed to have suspected Chinese hand when he was prevented from going further north of Kebang in 1909. Observing Chinese activities in the Mishimi Hills he became concerned about the Abor Hills. Immediately after his return from Walong, he chalked out a tour programme in the Abor Hills, banking on the invitations of the tribesmen during his earlier tour in 1909. From the Chinese actions he had seen in the Mishimi Hills, "he at once realised the necessity of finding out how far the influence of the Tibetans extended into the tribal country up the Dihang."<sup>21</sup> Dorothy Woodman clearly states, "Noel Williamson made an expedition up the Dihang river in 1911 which was to affect the whole future of Britain's China Policy."<sup>22</sup>

Besides 34 Gunkhali coolies and his personnel interpreters - 10 Miris - 2 orderlies and 3 servants, Williamson was accompanied by Dr. J. D. Gregorson of some Tinsukia tea garden. On 18 March 1911 they reached Rottung and halted for the night there. During that night some provisions and a liquor case were stolen from the camp by some tribal people. Williamson told the villagers that he must be satisfied on his return. Seeing his audacity in someone else's land, the villagers discussed the same night the advisability of murdering the members of the party. This was even reported to Williamson by his intelligence, but he did not pay heed to it. It is probably on the basis of this intelligence that Kotoky, one of Williamson's servants, wrote a letter to his wife : "Have arrived at Pangihat. Here Kebang Abors forbid going further. Sahib

insists on going into the village. My impression is we shall never return' <sup>23</sup> The foreknowledge of Kotoky was not definitely intuitive ; it was based, one may guess, in the smell he got of intense intrigue going on around them. Williamson's indifference to such reports was based on his knowledge of Adi nature that they are stronger in deliberations than in the actual act. Next day they marched upto Pangli and halted there waiting for the arrival of the porters. On 28 March he sent back Manpur, a Mishing servant, with sick coolies and some letters. It is reported by the Secret Department that this Manpur boasted at Rottung that he had carried some orders for sending up Sepoys to punish Rottung and Kebang, which was not true. That instigated the tribesmen who followed these four men, killed them and returned to take action on the main party. On 30 March Williamson marched further leaving Dr. Gregorson and three coolies in the Pangli camp. The tribesmen, gathering strength at Kebang and Babuk, came to the Pangli camp and killed Dr. Gregorson and the coolies. Then they followed Williamson who had reached Komsing in the morning of March 31. The tribesmen arrived there after some time and murdered Williamson and his men. Only a few managed to escape to give the information at Sadiya. According to a statement of the Army Intelligence, "It seems unlikely that the people of Komsing were privy to it, for their women and children were in the village when the murder took place. When an affair of this kind is contemplated the Abors always remove these, and from other evidence it appears that the villagers of Komsing were taken quite by surprise."<sup>24</sup>

The Adi version of story is different. The murder plan was conceived in the mind of Manmur Jamoh, the gam of Yagrung, in 1908 itself, when Capt. Williamson insulted Jamoh in his own village. Jamoh, the gam of Yagrung, which had already been under British jurisdiction, did not like to receive this British Officer who, he suspected, would tighten British grip over them. So he did not allow his men to clear the approach road to his village by which Williamson would come to visit it. But still Williamson went to Yagrung, and the villagers had to improvise a reception as their tradition demanded. Judging from all aspects it may be assumed that Williamson was aware of the apathy of the gam - Manmur - in receiving him. And when Manmur offered, as per their social custom, him a gift, Williamson not only did not accept it but also slapped Manmur telling that he did not like to see a man with ring-worm on his hips and shoulders, which many Adis had during those days. This wounded a tribal mind, and Manmur decided, at that very moment,

to take revenge on Williamson. However during Williamson's second visit to this area in 1909, no attempt of murder was made. In 1911, three years after the insult, sufficient to heal a mental wound, Manmur successfully gathered the people and incited them to commit the murder. And he was successful in murdering not only Williamson but almost the whole party. According to the Adi version, Komsing was not aware of the murder plan.

Some pertinent questions about the incident come to mind :

(i) Why did not Manmur choose 1909 for murdering Williamson when his fever of revenge was at its highest ? (ii) Why did he not choose Pasighat, Renging or even Rottung where he could get the best support ? (iii) Why did he not confide in the villagers of Komsing ?

Answers to these questions may reveal something which history or tradition has not so far reached. We have seen that chao-Erh-feng started sending his agents, and on many occasions even Tibetans, to penetrate into this region from 1909. We have also seen their activities in the Mishimi Hill. It may very well be assumed that Chinese agents came to Riga (Original Minyong village) via Milang and Shinong and Manmur contacted them through his relatives. During these meetings he was encouraged, probably offered help, in the actual act. These agents might have suggested to him to allow the British Sahib to push on into the interior going beyond his jurisdiction. Pasighat, in 1911, was within British jurisdiction and a Chinese agent would not take the risk of being detected there. Hence, Komsing (with necessary intelligence that Williamson would go there), a village some eighty kims beyond the British outer line, was selected. To confide in the villagers of Komsing would mean a fiasco of the plan, for that would lead to some arrangements, which might be too obvious to the intelligent British. All this planning demands high intrigue by so called civilized people; moreover, stealing of rations at Rottung deliberately to make Williamson angry upon the villagers so that these people might be easily turned against him, is again a plan which could be laid by the so-called civilized people. The manner in which Williamson was murdered, followed by the massacre of his men also bears the marks of intrigue. When, at about 10 o'clock Williamson wanted to visit Komsing Gam Lamben's house, four Adis offered to guide him to his house. One of them was Manmar Jamoh and the other three were his accomplices. During this journey, they managed to take Williamson to an isolated spot and killed him. Immediately after the murder, a big fire was lit, and a cry of fire, could be heard.

Williamson's coolies and servants started running in the direction of the fire. At this moment, his coolies and servants, except for those who jumped into the river, were also killed. Actually there was no fire in any house. Who lit this deceitful fire then? It may be suspected that Lomben, who was supposed to come to the Musup, to see the sahib, was engaged by some people for the job. One may even suspect the presence of highly intelligent people, other than the murderers that came from outside, in the village itself to carry on the ghastly massacre.

The incidents that took place in this region immediately after the murder also point to some hand behind this murder other than that of the Adis. According to the Chief of Pangum, a Mishimi village, he and other headmen were summoned, in September, 1911, by the Chinese to go to Rima. Earlier, according to the headman of Tarao, some Chinese had turned up in his area and asked him to open a road down the Delli river for use of the Chinese. The villagers refused to do it. Then they were given a paper with something written in Chinese and were asked to show this to the British officers. The villagers did not accept it. Then the Chinese gave them a flag and asked them to place it in the area. The villages refused again; asking the Chinese to set it themselves if they wanted.<sup>25</sup>

"The Intelligence Branch, Army Headquarters, India reported in April 1911 that the Chinese had appeared in the Aka country close to the administrative frontier of Assam", and that "the Chinese Government had approved the despatch of a force down the Dihang river towards the Abor country, a measure which, if carried out, might have laid claims on tribal territory...."<sup>26</sup>

The portion of the report relating to Abor country must be examined minutely. The past perfect tense of the sentence shows that the Chinese force was to be sent before April. It may very well be that the intelligence Agents had arrived in the area before Williamson's arrival there.

The Chinese, in fact, seemed to have calculated the repercussions of the murder of a British officer earlier. And when repercussion started taking place, in the shape of the Abor expedition of 1911, followed by a series of expeditions covering a vast area from Rima to the east of Bhutan, the Chinese came to the fore. Referring to the Mishimi mission and the murder of Williamson Tien-Min-Pao, a Chinese Paper published a report of alarm. "It seems that in the country of Zayul it was reported that English troops were furtively entering. The British pretend that they are

avenging the murder of Englishmen by the savage, but it may be doubted whether it is not a pretext to pick up a quarrel."<sup>27</sup>

Let us now turn to the British actions following the murder of Williamson.

The British Government immediately sanctioned an expedition—the famous Abor Expedition of 1911-12—to punish the culprits. But a careful reader may observe from what happened during this expedition that other motives gained more importance

Unlike the 1894 Damro expedition of F. Needham which was purely for punishing the murderers of the British sepoy, this expedition aimed, from the very beginning at something else; to fix a boundary between Tibet and Assam to contain the advance of the Chinese. Immediately after stating the punitive purpose of the expedition, the Viceroy instructed Henry Mc Mahon, the Secretary of State for India, "It is of prime importance that we should take advantage of the opportunity afforded by the expedition to carry out surveys and exploration as may be possible, in order that we may obtain knowledge requisite for the determination of a suitable boundary between India and China in this locality."<sup>28</sup> For this purpose different survey parties were sent under the general supervision of Major General Bower, who was also the Chief Political Officer. Accordingly almost simultaneously or immediately after punishing the responsible villages, one party surveyed upto Singging, another upto Damoro, a third Party upto Oarong, and the fourth upto Yingkiang via Shimong, and still another upto Kombong.

What is important is that such survey parties were sent to different areas of present Arunachal Pradesh. The most important of these was the Mishimi Mission. The Chinese advance to Rima necessitated a Mission to this hill. It is the Mishimi country by which the Chinese wanted to penetrate into Assam. They had already established a post at Rima. So the Mishimi Mission was sent "with the double-object of checking any tendency on the part of the Mishimis to help the Abors and of obtaining information for boundary purposes."<sup>29</sup> This Mission, going in two columns surveyed upto Walong and recommended military police posts at Walong and Mintang near the mouth of Delli river.

Simultaneously another Mission, known as the Miri Mission, was sent to the Subansiri area, with the object of exploring the country between the Dihang river and Bhutan."<sup>30</sup> This Mission could not cover the whole area, and to supplement it another expedition, known as Aka Promenade, was sent in 1913. This Mis-

sion faced a serious complication due to Tawang being a Tibetan district. In a note on the North East Frontier, the Chief of the General staff, pointed out in 1912, its strategic position and the necessity of rectification of the demarcation. "The direction of the frontier line about Tawang requires careful consideration. The present boundary (demarcated) is south of Tawang, running westward along the foothills from near Udalgiri to the southern Bhutan border, and thus a dangerous wedge of territory is thrust between the Miri country and Bhutan.... Rectification of the frontier here is therefore imperative"<sup>31</sup> The Aka promenade under Capt. Nevill had therefore to go upto Tawang where he was received warmly, and he suggested inclusion of Tawang in the British territory.

All these go to show how the murder of Williamson aroused the British Government to go for a boundary line between India and China-cum-Tibet. According to Dorothy Woodman, "Ironically, it was not General Chao Eyh-feng who startled Hardinge into an 'active' Policy, but the murder of Noel Williamson, busily probing Chinese activities in the Upper Dehang Valley"<sup>32</sup> When deciding the frontier line Henry Mc Mahon sitting in the Simla Conference-October 1913 to July 1914-had to rely on the reports of these surveys. In fact the boundary line was drawn before the main thrust of the Abor Expedition was made from the last part of October 1911. In September 1911 itself, Hardinge advised securing "as soon as possible a sound strategical boundary between China-cum-Tibet and the tribal territory from Bhutan upto and including the Mishimi country."<sup>33</sup> He, accordingly, proposed that subject to modifications necessitated by the survey reports "We consider this line should be our approximate objective upto which the existing Assam 'Outer line' should be advanced."<sup>34</sup>

A General Staff Memorandum instructed the 1911-12 survey parties : "A suitable military frontier should follow the principal watersheds and include on our side tributaries of the Brahmaputra, the Lohit and Irrawady river. A mountain chain is from every point of view the most advantageous frontier."<sup>35</sup>

Accordingly the survey was made and reports were placed in the Simla Conference, on the basis of which a frontier line was fixed. That became the famous McMahon Line "along the crest of the Himalaya from the north-east corner of Bhutan to the Isu Razi Pass in the north of Burma."<sup>36</sup>

## References

1. H. E., Richardson, *Tibet and Its History*, p. 83
2. Dorothy Woodman Quotes Louis King in her *Himalayan Frontier*, p. 121.
3. Charles Bell, *Tibet-Past and Present*, p. 88
4. *Ibid*, p. 88
5. *Ibid*, p. 90
6. *Ibid.*, p. 90
7. *Ibid.*, p. 91
8. *Ibid.*, p. 100
9. *Ibid.*, p. 101
10. *Ibid.*, p. 100
11. Quoted by Dorothy Woodman in her *Himalayan Frontier*, p. 123.
12. *Ibid.*, pp. 125-126.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 126
14. *Ibid.*,
15. Charles Bell, *Tibet—Past and Present*, p. 111.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 111.
17. *Ibid.*, pp. 107-108
18. Quoted by Woodman, *op. cit.*, p. 127.
19. *Frontier and Overseas Expeditions from India*, Vol. VII, p.1
20. Woodman, *op. cit.* p. 134.
21. *Frontier and Overseas Expedition from India.*, Vol. VII, p. 2.
22. Woodman, *op. cit.*, p. 134.
23. *Ibid.*, p. 134.
24. *Frontier and Overseas Expenditions. from India*, Vol. VII, p. 15.
25. Woodman, *op. cit.*, p. 129.
26. *Frontier and Overseas Expedions from India*, Vol. VII, p. 3.
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29. *Ibid.*,
30. *NAFA Information*, March 1970, p. 6.
31. Woodman, *Himalayan Frontier*, p. 140.
32. *Ibid.*, p. 144.
33. *Ibid.*, p. 146.
34. *Ibid.*, p. 146.
35. *Ibid.*, pp. 146-47.
36. Richardson, *Tibet and its History*, p. 116.