

*Mapping Charles  
Howard-Bury in  
Central Asia*

**Morgan Hite**

One of the things I love about old hardcover books is that the publisher might have glued a folded map inside the back cover. Even books about imaginary landscapes had these, such as my father's 1954 hardcover edition of Tolkein's *Lord of the Rings*. Sixteen by eighteen inches, it was always there as a reference, ready to be opened up and consulted. This was the kind of map, I got to thinking, that Charles Howard-Bury's account of visiting the Tian Shan needed. A map that would tell the reader where the Yulduz Plains were, where Sergiopol was in relation to Jarkent, where the Agias river flowed.

Famous as the leader of Great Britain's Everest reconnaissance expedition of 1921, Charles Howard-Bury made this less-known and possibly more intriguing journey some eight years earlier, in 1913, into the heart of Central Asia. He went to go hunting in the Tian Shan Mountains of what are today the Ili Kazakh, and Bayingolin Mongol, autonomous prefectures of China's Xinjiang province. In six months of travel he created a diary of 171 pages that Marian Keaney edited into a book published in 1990: *Mountains of Heaven: Travel in the Tian Shan Mountains, 1913*.

He mentions every valley, every pass, and what kinds of wildflowers carpet them. He names specific streams and towns, and tells us about the people living in them. He tells us about weather and politics and the types of ferries on the rivers. The only thing missing is a detailed map, and the reader of his book will soon find him- or herself surrounded by open atlases and country maps, bewildered and unable to figure out where Semiretchinsk is. Names have changed. Official languages have changed. Google Maps turns out to be of very little use.

And Howard-Bury writes as if you *do* have a map in front of you. “*The ram,*” he concludes, “*finally disappeared in the direction of Mustamas*” – without having previously explained what Mustamas is. Is it a town? A peak? “*This place is called the valley of the Sixty Fireplaces,*” he describes at one point, “*because years ago a party of*

Mapping Charles Howard-Bury in Central Asia  
Morgan Hite

*soldiers went through it on their way to Kuchar and in one place built sixty little fireplaces to cook their evening meal.” Kuchar?*

Howard Bury began his journey by rail, leaving Europe by way of Moscow, and finally reaching the end of the tracks at Omsk. From there he took a steamer up the Irtysh River to Semipalatinsk – today's Semey, Kazakhstan, but at that time an outpost of Imperial Russia. From here (it was now June) he and his servant John Pereira journeyed overland and crossed into China, reaching the town of Kuldja, which was to be their base for the next few months. In November, with snow already falling, they re-entered what is today Kazakhstan but was then Russia, and made it to the railhead at a small stop called Kabul-Sai, north of Tashkent. From there they were able to take a series of trains and steamships back to Europe.

I envisioned a 1:1 million map detailing the central portion of the journey, the area in China where they spent the most time and where Howard-Bury mentions the most local details. Secondly, there would be a 1:3 million map showing how they got from Semipalatinsk to Kuldja, a ten-day journey along Russian post roads for whose specific route he gives intriguingly few clues. Last, there would be a map at 1:7 million showing their exit route from Central Asia, from Kuldja to Jarkent to Tashkent, and then on by rail to the Caspian Sea.

Then things happened which illustrate some general hazards about mapping for old books. As I pinpointed more and more places that Howard-Bury had described, it nagged at me that the paper I was designing for was so small. I needed more: it should be 23” wide by 20” high. Soon, the idea that all the mapping could fit into that space went out the window. The first map would need the whole sheet! The other two maps were discarded.

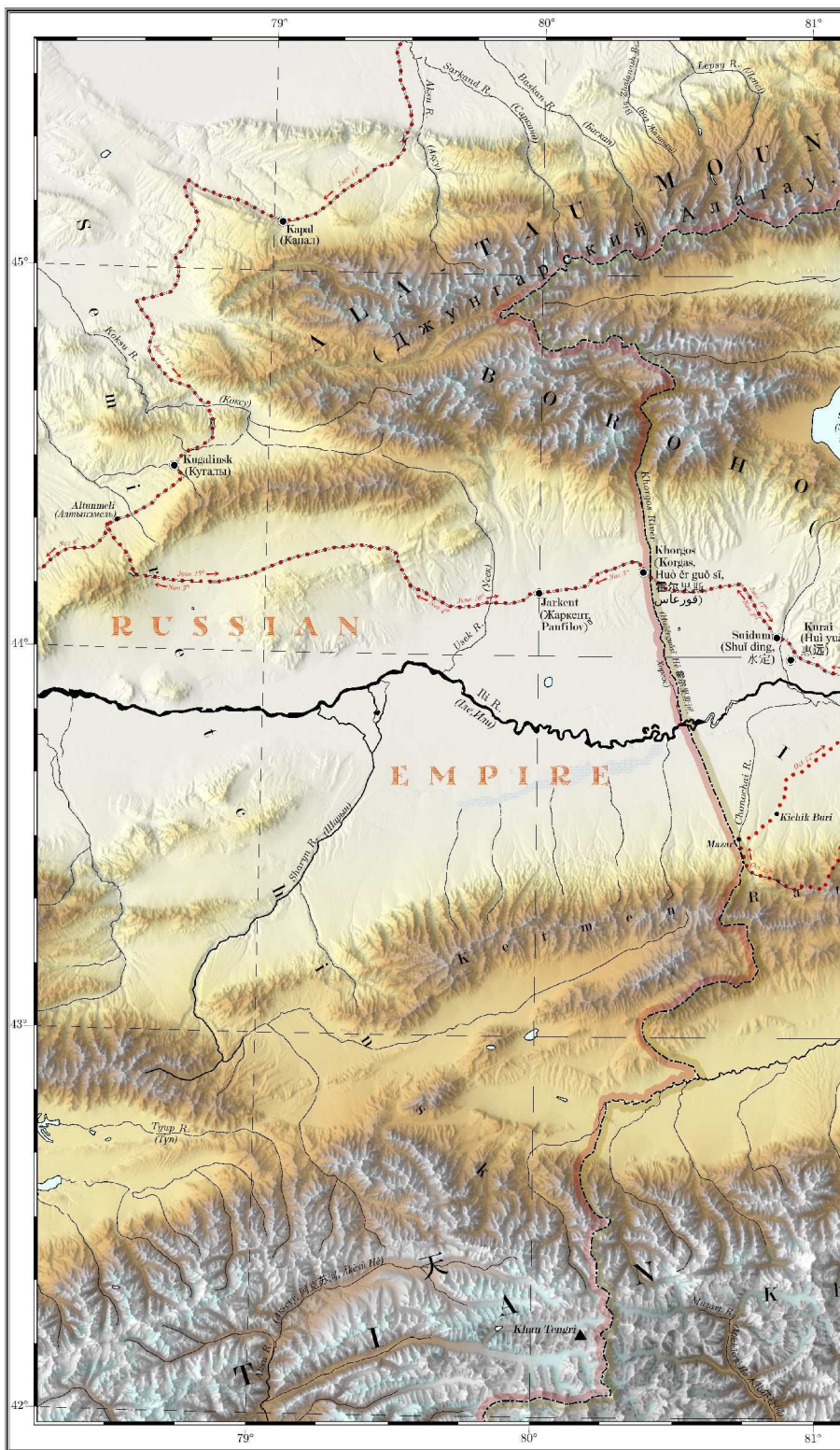
But more importantly, just where *had* Howard-Bury gone? I found myself buried in old maps, Wikipedia articles, and all sorts of other

documents such as you get when you search on obscure terms like “Chalyk Tau.” I was reading maps in Russian and putting German websites through Google Translate. I was converting the old Russian unit of *versts*, which Howard-Bury used to describe all his daily travels, into kilometres (1.067 km to the verst!) so I could match his account to the map.

Ordinarily, the trick to locating a place an author mentions is simply to find a sufficiently detailed map of the area, but Central Asia adds an additional spin to this problem: most places there have had multiple names in the last hundred years. This has happened as a result of political and cultural struggles involving the Turkic peoples (Kazakhs, Kyrgyz, Uyghurs), the Chinese, and the Russians. In China, a river that Howard-Bury in 1913 called by its Kazakh name of Kok-su (“Blue water”) is today labelled (e.g., on Google Maps) with its Chinese name, the Kekesu. Searching the web for Kok-su will yield many other rivers in Central Asia, but not this one. On their side of the border, the Russians renamed many towns after the Russian revolution, and these towns may have *again* been renamed after the break-up of the Soviet Union. Sometimes, as was the case for Mirzoyan (today's Taraz, Kazakhstan), the town's new name lasted only the two years until its namesake fell from favour.

Another level of complexity is introduced by the multiple alphabets, or, more properly, writing systems. Places in Xinjiang typically have both a Uyghur (a Turkic language) and a Mandarin name: the Uyghur can be rendered in the Latin alphabet or the older, Arabic-based Uyghur script; the Mandarin can be rendered in Chinese characters, or two variants of the Latin transcription: the older Wade-Giles transliteration, and the newer pinyin. So for Kuldja you might see 伊宁, Yining, غۇلجا, Ghulja, Gulja, Kulja, or Ili. Most places in modern Kazakhstan have an old Russian and a new Kazakh name, both of which can be rendered in either Latin or Cyrillic. Hence we have a city which the Kazakhs label Алматы and we write as Almaty; but the Russians called it Alma-ata and





Charles Howard-Bury





Mapping Charles Howard-Bury in Central Asia  
Morgan Hite

wrote it Алма-Ата.

Old maps were invaluable in figuring out the details of Howard-Bury's route. I made extensive use of International Map of the World sheets produced by the Americans in the 1950s and 60s, and topographic maps at 1:500,000 and 1:100,000 produced by the Soviets in the 1980s. All of these are available for free on the web. The Soviet maps in particular provide superb detail. When Howard-Bury describes a small feature, say the “Little Kustai river,” and he says, “*We pitched our camp near the rushing Kustai torrent, at a height of 6,000’*,” a topographic map that labels the river in Russian as М. Куштай (the Малый, or Little, Kushtai) and offers a contour line every hundred metres of elevation, is worth its weight in gold. You can pinpoint that camp.

*Kurai* is a nice example of how the Internet and different types of old maps can be woven together, with sometimes only intuition as your guide, to locate a place. Howard-Bury talks about Kurai at length: Kurai is where the Has-a-chu, the head of the Kazakhs, lives; Kurai is 20 miles away from Kuldja and is the seat of government of the province. At one point he reports that there has been a revolution in Kurai and a number of people have been killed! In Kuldja he can hear the sound of cannon coming from Kurai.

The town is clearly within earshot of Kuldja, but I could find no sign of it except a village on one of the Soviet maps, labelled Êóďý (“Kure”). How could this have been a provincial capital? But I did notice that Êóďý was more or less located where the present-day town of Huiyuan is. A quick check of Wikipedia's page on Huiyuan revealed that (my italics added for emphasis) “*between 1762 and 1866 the Huiyuan Fortress, or Huiyuan City, the center of the Chinese authority in Xinjiang, was located within the area of the modern Huiyuan town.*” Aha! Making a historical map is never better than when you solve a puzzle like that.

Another example was locating “Manass.” Howard-Bury wrote, “*There were superb views of distant snowy chains, stretching from far beyond Kuldja, past the headwaters of the Kash river and on in a great semicircle towards Manass.*” It shouldn't have been too hard to locate Manass: Howard-Bury was quite clear in the lead-up to this passage about where he was standing as he took in this view. He was about 130 km southeast of Kuldja, in mountains, at just over 10,000 feet, looking north. I had located the Kash River, about 100 km north of him. And north of both Kuldja and the Kash River were the Borohoro Mountains, running east-west “in a great semicircle.” Manass, logically, was going to be near their eastern end.

But I didn't see anything named Manass. A web search was useless: typing “Manass” into Google yields hilarious results that have nothing whatsoever to do with a town or peak or feature of any kind in Central Asia. The city of Urumqi was over in that direction: could Manass be an old name for it? A quick read of the history of Urumqi at Wikipedia suggested not. Grasping at straws, I actually resorted to panning around in Google maps and letting my eye wander. This had no chance of working, but I did spot it, flickering out of sight at the edge of my vision as I zoomed out, a small town northwest of Urumqi labelled *Manas*.

It was next to a larger town of Shihezi, and Wikipedia's page on Shihezi referred to “*the city's eastern neighbour, the much older historically Hui town of Manas.*” Ah! And Manas had its own page, which didn't tell me much, except that Owen Lattimore in his 1930 *High Tartary* said it was “*the biggest city (after Urumchi) in the biggest oasis on the biggest river of the North Road, and the chief centre of the T'ung-kan (Dungan) population.*” (*Dungan* and *Hui* are alternate names for Chinese Muslims.)

Because readers of the book were my main audience, I labelled places primarily with the names Howard-Bury used, spelled the way he spelled them. But it was also a goal to pass along the useful

Mapping Charles Howard-Bury in Central Asia  
Morgan Hite

things I was learning, things that might aid other people researching the Central Asia of a hundred years ago. Hence I also included alternate names, in whatever script they came in, as well as their Latin alphabet transcriptions. A very nice source for these variants is OpenStreetMap data, as well as the website at [geonames.org](http://geonames.org).

With each *Aha!* answer to a question, I discovered that I was accumulating obscure knowledge and specialist vocabulary that themselves would be useful to other would-be geographers of the area. *Tash* in Turkic meant rocks, and *bulak* meant spring. I learned what a Zimstvo was and who the Kalmucks were. I learned how to navigate the system of Soviet maps, to determine which 1:100,000 maps were contained within a specific 1:500,000 sheet. So at this point I had the idea that the map should perhaps be a *poster*, the bottom half of which could contain notes about all this handy background knowledge. I added an additional 20 inches at the bottom to accommodate all this. It was no longer a book-map.

Howard-Bury named perhaps 75 places, of which I found the great majority, but there are still those I never found. I never found Tsarnakai or the Karasir pass. I never figured out if the Yulding Plains were merely a variant on the Yulduz Plains, or whether they were a different place. I was never sure of the Big Kustai River, or where the Kustai Pass was. I'm sure I know which pass was the Chacha Pass, but I never found it labelled that way on any map.

Of course Howard-Bury was himself carrying a map. He mentions how it misled him: "The Russian map marked the Kurdai pass as only 6,700 feet in height, but as we were already over 8,000 feet, I knew this to be a mistake, but imagined that the six was probably a misprint for nine, and that the height of the pass would be about 9,700 feet and so did not trouble to put on warmer clothes. Little did I guess that the height of the pass was nearly 13,000 feet. What scale was Howard-Bury's Russian map? A Soviet 1:1,000,000 scale map from 1974 was sufficiently detailed to have the Kurdai pass on

it; in Howard-Bury's day however he was likely carrying the one of the Russian 1:1,680,000 scale or “*40-verst*” maps (40 versts to an inch), which were produced for Russia and adjacent lands.

One reason I would love to see Howard-Bury's maps is to determine which *Lepzinsk* he went through. Although it falls for the most part off the map shown here, Howard-Bury's initial route on the Russian post roads from Sergiopol (Ayagoz) to Kapal is bit of a mystery, since he mentions only a few landmarks over the course of three long days of steady travel. In this large space east of Lake Balkhash many routes are possible. The key to the puzzle is a town he calls Lepzinsk, a town he passed through on the second day out of Sergiopol.

He gives us some wonderful clues: daily distances covered (in versts of course), the necessity of crossing the arms of a sandy desert coming in from the west, the proximity of Lake Balkhash, verdant Lepzinsk in the midst of sandy dunes and first seen on the far side of a “*fair sized river*,” a pass at 4,000 feet in a range of rocky hills “*that formed a kind of buttress to the snowy Ala-tau mountains*,” and a plateau over 4,000 feet that leads on to Kapal.

Many of these landmarks are readily identifiable, and “*Lepzinsk*” is sure to be on the Lepsi River, a major river that cuts right across his route. But not only are there *two* towns named Lepsinsk on this river, there's also a third town named Lepsy! Through a combination of measuring out the daily distances over a number of possible alternative routes, and looking at features visible on satellite photographs, I reasoned that his route took him virtually straight south from Sergiopol, crossing the Lepsi at a town that was shown as Lepzinsk on several old maps but is today called Kokterek. Seeing the maps Howard-Bury carried would be a nice test of this deduction.

There have been some really interesting puzzles to solve here, but it seems fitting to end with one of Charles Howard-Bury's

Mapping Charles Howard-Bury in Central Asia  
Morgan Hite

descriptions of the landscape. It is these which make you want to know where he went, to go there yourself, and which made me want to map his journey. You may find that he acts as a kind of hypnotic travel advertisement writer.

*“We climbed up steadily through glorious forests to the grassy meadows at the edge of the tree line which is here a little over 10,000 feet. The grass now became shorter, but was full of iris and primulas and some quite new varieties of flowers appeared. The most astonishing flowers of all were the pansies, white, yellow, blue and every shade of colour up to deep purple and quite as large as any that are found in gardens at home. For miles the hillsides were a variegated carpet of these pansies, and so close did they grow that every step we took crushed some of them: it was impossible to avoid doing so. Never anywhere else have I seen such a luxuriant flora. The flowers in Kashmir were very wonderful, but these here were still more so.”*

~