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JEREMIAH CURTIN AS A SCHOLAR OF MONGOLIAN FOLKLORE

The name of Jeremiah Curtin deserves a place in the history of Mongolian studies, especially in the English-speaking world, because Curtin was the author of three good-sized volumes about Mongolian subjects. All of these appeared after the author's death († 1906), viz., first, his "The Mongols: A History" (London, 1908, 426 pages) with a literate and courteous 7-page preface by Theodore Roosevelt, U. S. President at that time); second, its sequel, "The Mongols of Russia" (Boston, 1908, 481 pages); and third (the one we are most concerned with here) "A Journey in Southern Siberia: The Mongols, their Religion, and their Myths" (Boston, 1909, 319 pages).

"The Mongols: A History" is a rather closely-written book of nineteen chapters, beginning with a good recapitulation of all the standard legends and stories from Russian, Chinese and Persian sources about the origins and growth of the Mongols, the rise of Temüjin and his dealings with contemporaries; the Khwarezmian campaign; the death of Chinggis Khan (taken from Sagang Sechen, see Curtin, p. 138); Persia in the next decades; the reign of Hulagu; the Chin empire campaign, the death of Ögedei, Khubilai Khan and the Sung, and on through Togon Temür, and the expulsion of the Mongols from China. His second, companion volume should, I feel, be considered a sequel to the first; "The Mongols in Russia" has twenty chapters, beginning with early Slavic history, Kiev, Bogolyubov and the capital Vladimír, the Baltic provinces; and then, Chapter 10 is about the Mongol invasion proper, and Chapter 12 on Russia under Mongol rule; further development of the Golden Horde as rulers of Russia, and concluding with Ivan the III subduing Novgorod. For our needs today, I think this volume lies chiefly in the area of Russian history, and can more or less be put aside. The third and last volume, "A Journey in Southern Siberia", as its subtitle indicates exactly, is concerned with the Mongols, their religion and their myths. It contains lengthy abstracts of several Geser

versions, and his translations of a number of Buriat tales, amounting to more than half the volume, in fact. Hence it has really always been wrong to say that there was no representative Mongolian oral literature available in English in the light of these 200 pages.

All of Curtin's volumes are written in a narrative style; there are no footnotes or indications of any sources used. However, a remark at the front of volume two states: "In gathering material for »The Mongols« and »The Mongols in Russia«, Mr. Curtin used the early chronicles of China, Persia and Russia. To obtain these chronicles he went several times to Russia and once to the Orient." I surmise this justification may have been in response to a criticism.

The life of the author was certainly unique and remarkable. Born in 1835, Curtin was educated at Harvard University, taking his degree in 1863, during the Civil War. He came to the notice of Charles W. Eliot, later to be President of Harvard College. In a prefatory essay to the third volume, Eliot recounts the highlights of Curtin's life, calling attention to his astounding facility with languages. Even if Eliot's statement that Curtin knew more than sixty languages is only half-correct, it would still mean that Curtin had a knowledge of thirty tongues, which is about 20 to 25 more than most scholars can use today. Curtin served as secretary to the U. S. Legation in St. Petersburg, Russia, from 1864 to 1870, and acquired a superior mastery of Russian, extending this later to other Slavic languages, notably Polish. It was his translation of Sienkiewicz's great novel *Quo Vadis* that probably gave Curtin his greatest popular fame. Although Curtin clearly was a remarkable practical linguist, he was best noted as a folklore collector, and among folklorists even today his books on Irish mythology and Gaelic folklore are respected. He also worked on the North American continent for the Bureau of American Ethnology, in the years 1883-1891, recording creation myths and Indian customs. These are major points in a life of much attainment, and the full story is available in his autobiography, "Memoirs of Jeremiah Curtin", edited by Joseph Schafer, and published at Madison, Wisconsin in 1940, by the State Historical Society (925 pages). His wife, Alma Cardell Curtin, his close collaborator and copyist, was in fact responsible for putting his three volumes through the press after Curtin's death. The manuscript of the memoirs came to the Wisconsin historical society in 1938, after the death of Mrs. Curtin.

Curtin was widely acquainted with leading U. S. figures, and also with leading Russian nobles and officials; of rulers, he knew Alexander II, Theodore Roosevelt, Dom Pedro (Brazil); of literary figures, Mark Twain, Tolstoi, Longfellow, James Russell Lowell, Thoreau, Emerson, Sienkiewicz; and in the Central Asian and Oriental field, both Pozdneyev's, Radloff, Vámbéry and Juliet Bredon (author of "Peking"). Fascinating though Curtin's travels, life and writings may be, the topic I should like to take up here is the usefulness, accuracy and validity of his material on Mongolian folklore, specifically his recounting of Buriat epics, myths and tales.

Curtin's third volume begins with an introductory chapter on the history of Siberia (pp. 1-17), and then recounts his trip to Irkutsk and the Buriat country. He left Moscow June 23, 1900, and left Buriatia for Vladivostok on September 21st; hence he spent from about July 23rd to September 13th, let us say eight weeks, in the company of Buriats. From his work we shall cite a few of his statements, and then endeavor to examine them critically. In Irkutsk he met the wife of an editor, Mrs. Popoff, and reports (p. 20) that she was the only person in Siberia with whom he could speak English. By the first of August, he reports (p. 43) that he was studying the Buriat language, but states (p. 52) that his guides "spoke Russian fluently, so I could talk with every Buriat". He met (p. 81) one informant, Mrs. Arkokoff, a "woman about sixty-five years of age ... [who] could speak only Buriat, hence my conversation with her was somewhat limited". Further (p. 83), "my translator was a Russian in the employ of Arkokoff." Three or four days later (p. 84) comes this important statement: "Next morning my translator was wonderfully and fearfully drunk. Fortunately I now understood the language so well I could dispense with his services." As incidental sidelights may be mentioned his encounter with an Italian blacksmith (p. 75) whom he addressed in Italian; and (p. 85) with a Polish Jew, to whom he spoke German (why not Polish, if he had translated Sienkiewicz? Perhaps since Polish is so similar to Russian, he and the Jew wished to conceal their criticisms). These are all the direct statements which Curtin makes in this book about his attainments in Buriat and other languages. Does the internal evidence of his work verify or disclaim his assertion about his mastery of Buriat? On the positive side, Curtin does quote a number of Buriat words with recognizable spelling and correct meaning: (102) *mu udir* 'bad day';

(134, 160) *dolon odun* 'Seven Stars, i.e., the Big Dipper, or Ursa Major'; (45) *tuget* 'complete'; (108) *uǰalge* 'purification' (Mo. *uǰiyalga*); (300) *shagoi* 'knee cap' (Mo. *šagai* 'ankle bone'); (43) *tailgan* 'sacrifice'; (109) *haribo* 'ceremonial stick of a shaman' (Bur. *hor'bo*). A few small spelling or proof-reading errors include (98) Vepholensk for Verholensk, confusing Cyrillic R and Latin R; (39, 124) Ehe Tazar 'Earth Mother', confusing Cyrillic G and Latin T. Others are (134) Segel Sebdik Tengeri for Segeen Sebdeg Tengeri; (119) Irlik Namun Qun for Mo. *erlig nom-un qan*. Fairly recognizable are Baronyé Tabin Tabung Tengeri and Zúm Dishín Dirlún Tengeri, for Bur. *baruunai tabin tabun tengeri* "the Fifty-Five Gods of the West", and Bur. *zuuni dūshe dürben tengeri* "the Forty-Four Gods of the East". One can forgive such anomalies and inconsistencies as (105) Qubun, (100) Xubun, (124) Yubung, and (261) Hubun, all for *xübüün* 'son, lad'; or (119) Mergin and Mëgün for Mo. *mergen*. The alternation *uǰuǰun* and *ubugun* is unmistakably for *übgün* (Mo. *ebügen*) 'old man'. A wrong division has been allowed to stand (p. 120) in Tumúr Shín, for Bur. *tümerše(n)* 'smith'.

If one examines the sentences and context in which the names of some gods and figures appear, and consider the meaning of their names, we obtain the following. Page 100 states:

Ejin, the god of Olkhon, the sacred island of Lake Baikal, had no children; ... Ejin himself is the son of the Fiery Heaven ..., he is counted a brother of Dalai Lama, who is also a son of the Fiery Heaven ...

Since Mo. *ejen* is merely 'lord, master, god' in general, this is certainly phrased in a very peculiar way, and I am not quite certain what it means.

These two quotations are also instructive:

(105 top) From Baronyé Tabin Tabung Tengeri, the first spirit to emerge from the Highest Existence in the Universe, Delquen Sagán Burkan, World White God, often called Esege Malan, came the fifty-five Tengeris.

(118 top) Delquen Sagán Burkan, World White God, is the highest existence in the Universe. He is also called Esege Malan. In him are three spirits: Baronyé Tabin Tabung Tengeri, Zúm Dishín Dirlún Tengeri, and Sagadé Uǰuǰun. From the first spirit came the fifty-five Tengeris, from the second the forty-four Tengeris.

The conclusion certainly seems inescapable, that Curtin could not have clearly understood what these simple and basic phrases, "55 gods of the west" and "44 gods of the east" really meant, because then he would not

have phrased his sentences the way he did. A great deal must have been lost in the translation from Buriat into Russian. It would seem that in learning a foreign language, one of the earliest skills would be good mastery of the numerals. Had Curtin understood the numbers, he would have understood these phrases. Apparently he was relying very heavily on his interpreters.

It is indeed true that Curtin's three books on Mongolia are all posthumous. Consequently, they had to be read from his handwriting or other notes, and then proof-read and corrected by someone who obviously could not have his command of languages. Thus there is room for doubt, and one can maintain that the author himself might have removed these infelicities. Therefore, the evidence is not conclusive, but I am inclined to view his statement about understanding Buriat without his interpreter as a bit of exaggeration, perhaps a bit of boasting aided by his faithful amanuensis-wife.

Disregarding, however, these somewhat unimportant slips, and admiring the two hundred pages of priceless recorded data taken directly from the natives in 1900, we can only cheer and praise the vigor of a man, aged 65, going on an arduous journey to a distant land, spending weeks under uncomfortable conditions, to record the literature of a people. This is a worthy memorial, and Curtin deserves attention as the first folklorist to treat oral Mongolian literature in English. His work is also a source for information on Buriat customs, marriage, shamans and burial practices.

