

T r a v e l s
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John Butler



Travels In Assam

During a Residence of Fourteen Years



Maj. John Butler



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PREFACE.

THE present volume, which is a continuation of the author's former work "A Sketch of Assam," is intended to describe the habits, customs and manners of the remaining wild tribes of the hills, viz., Angahmee Nagahs, Kookies, Meekirs, and Rengma Nagahs, with whom a lengthened residence rendered him intimately acquainted.

The adventures and travels will also illustrate the life of an officer in the civil employ in Assam. The work concludes with a statistical account of the amount and mode of realizing the revenue, and the physical and moral condition of the people of the district of Now-Gong. As the Indian Government has been pleased to allow the author to derive his information from official correspondence, its authenticity may be relied on, and he entertains a hope that his labours will not be deemed uninteresting or valueless.

1854.

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PART I.

AN EXPEDITION IN THE HIGHLANDS OF
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AN EXPEDITION IN THE HIGHLANDS OF ASSAM.

CHAPTER I.

Introduction—Passage up the Burrompooter—Duties of a Civil officer in Assam—A night in the jungle—A novel raft—Dangerous situation—A pleasant surprise—Removal to Now-Gong—Preparation for an expedition into the Angahmee Nagah country.

IN the year 1841, it was my good fortune to be appointed to the Civil branch of the service as an Assistant to the Agent to the Governor-General, North-East Frontier, Assam ; and after a residence of about three years in Lower Assam, in the month of February, 1844, I was placed in charge of the Hill tribes subject to the Political Agent of Upper Assam. Here, again, it fell to my lot to take up my residence with my family at the desolate

and remote station of Saikwah, on the banks of the Burrompooter.

A dreary trip of six weeks' tracking up against a rapid stream, with heavy west-country boats, brought us to our destination in the month of April. On our arrival we were fortunate in meeting with a small bungalow, made of bamboos, grass, and reed walls; but it was void of the luxury of a door or glass window. Having frequently before felt the discomfort of being without windows, I had learned experience, and took the precaution of carrying with me, wherever I went, two windows, one for a sitting and one for a bed-room. The rainy season being close at hand, we made ourselves as comfortable as circumstances would admit, by laying down bamboo mats to protect us from the damp earth floor; and having plastered the outside reed walls with mud, we vainly imagined we were securely sheltered for some time to come. But we know not what a day may bring forth.

In June, the Burrompooter river began to undermine the bank on which our house was built; and though we were one hundred and fifty yards distant from the brink or edge of the bank, the current was so strong that in a few days it rapidly advanced upon us, sweeping away ten

paces of the bank three or four times in the course of the day, and as a stupendous mass of earth fell with a crash into the bosom of the stream, sounding on our ears like the report of cannon, we received a timely warning to effect our retreat. The river at last came within thirty paces of our door, and being doubtful whether the house would remain on dry land another night, we hastily decamped with all our baggage to the residence of the Commandant of the post further in the rear to the south, nearer to the jungle, and thankful were we for the shelter thus afforded us, till we prepared a room as a temporary arrangement at one end of the Kutchee, or court for public business. A week after we left our abode, the site of our old house was in the middle of the river; and we had not been many days in our new dwelling, when we were again destined to be summarily ousted. The river continued to advance and cut away the bank; we, therefore, had no alternative but to retreat further inland close to a dense forest, and erect a small hut or house in the best way we could, six paces from Colonel White's grave, which was the only cleared high ground available for a dwelling.

It was in the midst of the rainy season (July);

torrents of rain fell daily, and the country being inundated, reeds could with difficulty be procured for the walls of our new abode, and we were in the utmost apparent discomfort. We had erected a two-sided grass roof, and put the kanats, or sides of our tent, round the posts, to answer the purpose of walls; but we were so happy in escaping to the jungles beyond the reach of the merciless river, that we thought nothing of discomfort; on the contrary, we diligently employed our time in improving our position, and in a few days we felt as settled and comfortable as we should have been in the best brick house in Assam.

As past experience had taught us never to repine at what cannot be helped, we only enjoyed the more the comforts Providence had placed within our reach. That a soldier should be exposed and suffer privation is a matter of course, and always expected; but when I saw a lady and child put to these shifts, without a house, exposed to the wind and rain day and night, in the midst of the rainy season, and in what has been truly termed a howling, desolate wilderness, I could not help thinking how many English wives too little know what they enjoy at home; and that in order to be grateful, and to duly appreciate the comforts of life, it is

necessary to be deprived of them for a time, when we become sensible of the happiness already enjoyed, but hitherto not sufficiently valued.

The onerous and responsible duties of a Military officer in Civil employ in Assam can scarcely be imagined; he is expected to do everything. The Principal Assistant of a District is Judge, Magistrate, and Collector. For six months in the year he is constantly travelling about the country, inspecting roads, causing them to be repaired, opening new ones, instituting local fiscal inquiries from village to village, enduring great fatigue, exposed to many perils from climate, wild beasts, and demi-savages in the hills. In one tour well do I recollect an incident that befel me after a long day's march, on reaching my encampment close to a Thannah or Police outpost. I had made myself comfortable for the night in a snug little travelling tent by about ten P. M. A violent storm, attended with heavy rain, hail, lightning, and thunder, came on. It was a dismally cold and wet night, and I was congratulating myself on my good fortune in having brought a capital tent, when, suddenly, a shrill shriek from the riding and baggage elephants made me aware that they had become alarmed, and had fled to the jungle.

The roar of the elements, however, was so great that no orders could be given for their capture; for every servant had taken refuge from the storm in the huts in the market or village. At this moment a sudden gust of wind blew down my tent upon my bed; I was compelled to crawl out and make the best of my way, through torrents of rain, to the Police outpost or Thannah, which was close by.

On entering the building I was astonished to see the whole establishment of Ticklahs, or Policemen, unconcernedly sitting round a log wood fire on the ground. I had scarcely joined this snug party, and exchanged my wet clothes for a dry sheet to wrap round me, when the building was, by a sudden gust of wind, blown to the ground, and we all escaped uninjured under the platform or changs erected round the room as seats. Luckily the roof did not fall flat, or we should have been crushed to death. Our peril, however, was very great; we could not extricate ourselves, and there was every prospect of the roof catching fire, and of our being burnt to death. We succeeded in partly smothering the flames by scraping up the earth floor with our hands, and throwing it on the fire; still the horror of our position was dreadful;

every flash of lightning showed us too vividly the danger we were in, and the darkness succeeding the lightning rendered all efforts to escape unavailing. In this interval of despair we at last discovered a small hole in the roof, by which we all effected our escape, deeply grateful for our miraculous preservation in not being crushed by the falling building, or reduced to cinders by a roaring log wood fire. The next morning the elephants were found and captured on the other side of the Boree Dulung river, having fled in the hailstorm and swum across the river, though their legs were bound with heavy chains.

Shortly after this adventure I was called on to return to Central Assam, to assume temporary charge of the Tezpore Division, and, as west-country boats are seldom met with in Upper Assam, I had no alternative but to convey my baggage down the Burrompooter by some other expedient. I accordingly procured two canoes, tied them together, and, constructing a tolerable sized raft, put the whole of my traps on it, and set out without a day's delay. For my own accommodation the common Khel-nao, or pleasure-boat of the country, was all I desired, which being about fifty feet long and three and a half feet

wide, with a grass roof over a portion forming a sleeping berth, and only permitting a reclining or sitting posture, sufficed for a rapid journey of 200 miles.

All went well for the first day, excepting that I parted company with the baggage raft. The next night the boatmen and servants slept on the open sand which formed the bed of the river in the rains, and the boat being apparently securely fastened to a stake driven in on the edge of the river, I retired to rest at an early hour. In the middle of the night I was awakened by the bubbling noise of water and the rolling motion of my boat, and, on getting up to see what was the matter, I found I was drifting down the middle of the Burrompootee, rapidly passing prostrate trees and stumps, and that I had only one servant asleep in the front part of the boat, and he, like myself, knew not how to swim.

In this dilemma there was no time to be lost; I accordingly put on my red woollen nightcap and pea-coat, seized a paddle, and set to work and rowed most heartily, placing the servant in the stern of the boat to steer with an oar. In an hour, however, the skin peeled off my hands, and, for a while, I was obliged to bide my fate with patience, and

watch the progress of the boat as she drifted past prostrate trees, and whirled round and round in the numerous eddies, or whirlpools, which render the Burrompooter so dangerous. As our safety, however, depended on my exertions to reach the shore, in a few minutes I again set to work with my paddle or oar, and, after the night was nearly gone, I at last had the satisfaction of seeing that I was near the high bank of Dikhoo Mookh. Another quarter of an hour's struggle enabled me to bring the boat under the bank, but the current was so rapid that I could not bring to, or stop the boat, and for some time I was in imminent danger of being crushed to death under the bank, which frequently fell in with an awful report or crash. Nevertheless, the danger of the open river was equally bad; so, as a last resource, I ran the head of the boat on the first projecting point of the bank we met with, and, instantly jumping on shore, fastened a rope round a root of a tree and brought my boat to for the night.

The next morning I fired a gun, and my servants and boatmen, who were left behind on the sand bank, having procured a canoe, joined me through the fog, wondering how I had escaped so perilous a night's journey caused by their carelessness in

not fastening my boat securely. My baggage raft was still less fortunate, for it was wrecked in a storm on the sand bank at Beshnauth. Some of my baggage was lost, and all that was saved was much damaged. My little stock of books had now been drenched in both the Ganges and Burrompooter, in following me in my travels through India. In these wild, remote lands, where books are our greatest friends, for once I felt my comforts had been abridged on this occasion, and, on first hearing of the incident, my equanimity was somewhat tried; but, having reached the end of my journey, Tezpore, the discomforts of the trip were soon forgotten.

After a few months' residence at Tezpore, on the north bank of the Burrompooter, it was again my fortune to be removed to the permanent charge of the Now-Gong District in Southern Central Assam. I received the order in the month of August, in the midst of the rainy season; and the centre of the valley, about thirty miles wide, having to be crossed, and being under water, there was no way of joining my new station except by boats, and these were not procurable. In this dilemma, we, as usual, had recourse to our khel-nao, or pleasure-boat, which we roofed in for eighteen

feet, and thus formed two rooms—three and a half feet wide by nine feet long, and three feet high. As I was accompanied by my wife and a child of three years old, there was little room to spare; however, as we were not accustomed to make mountains of molehills, we set out, after two days' preparation, and were actually four days, by a circuitous route, in reaching the station of Now-Gong.

Never shall we forget what we endured from the heat and musquitos; the thermometer had risen to ninety-six degrees, and the famed Kullung river swarmed with musquitos; and, as we were not able once to put foot on shore, we were well nigh devoured by the voracious and venomous insects. We were literally scarred from head to foot with sores; but out of evil good is produced; we enjoyed only the more the comfort of a mud plastered house without doors or windows, and conceived we had good reason to be grateful that the trial of patience had been but of short duration, and that a store of contentment was laid in likely to endure for some time to come.

During a period of twenty-seven years' service it has seldom been my lot to enjoy, at one place, an undisturbed residence of more than a few months;

some service or other has always kept me, I may say, nearly in perpetual motion. The permanent charge of a division, however, seemed to present a fair chance of becoming stationary at last. I had scarcely assumed charge of the division, when the vision vanished; orders suddenly came enjoining me to be prepared to conduct a military expedition into the Angahmee Nagah country, bordering on the territory of Muneepoor and Burmah. The object of the expedition was to meet the Angahmee Nagah chiefs, and, by a conciliatory intercourse, to prepare them to co-operate with me in repressing their annual murderous and marauding incursions against our more peaceable subjects; to survey and map the tract of country in question, and to open a regular communication with Muneepoor and Now-Gong, through the Angahmee country *viâ* Dheemahpoor, Sumokhoo-Ting, Poplongmaee, and Yang, which would facilitate trade, improve the condition of the hill tribes, and eventually lead to the abandonment of savage habits, and the peaceable and prosperous settlement of this barbarous tribe.

Although naturally fond of excitement and adventures, I cannot say I felt much joy in being nominated to conduct such a mission, for I was aware there would be great fatigue in marching on

foot through a mountainous, wooded country, and that I should suffer considerable exposure both by night and day, through the extremes of temperature from heat to cold, coupled with some personal danger, and, worse than all, with the best intentions and the utmost zeal, I might still fail to carry out the views of Government. However, as the life of a soldier consists in prompt obedience, I set to work cheerfully to make such arrangements as the nature of my journey required. I immediately made up a small tent seven feet by nine; laid in a supply of provisions, consisting of rice, dal, salt, &c., and other necessaries for the detachment and coolies, and sent off the whole stock from Golaghaut up the river Dhunseeree to Dhemahpoor, from which post I determined on entering the hills.

A company of a hundred men of the 2nd Assam Light Infantry formed my escort under the command of a lieutenant; an apothecary to attend the sick, as well as an uncovenanted sub-assistant surveyor, completed our party. On the 20th November, 1845, we marched from Now-Gong, and the daily incidents that befel us till we returned home will now be extracted from the daily journal of the tour.

Travels in Assam

By John Butler

This deep-rooted account of a military and administrative career who spent fourteen years among the tribal people of Assam during the first half of 19th Century, describes his long and successful tours and sojourns of Nowgong via Kachamari, Dimapur, Dhansari river; thence to Razapoma, Mozoma and Khonoma east-ward and then to the south-west by Chama, Berama, Sankur, Hajoi to Northern Cachar, debouching by the Deyang Mukh on the plains of Assam to Nowgong. In all, ten military explorative expeditions were done by the author and had the privilege to see the civil officials, village chiefs, hunters, criminals etc. in order to collect maximum information.

All the information gathered here, are from official correspondence, public reports, and inquiries carried on personally among the chiefs of the tribes and people themselves. The details mainly concern the population, criminal code, hunting and war, religion and its peculiar customs, ceremonies, rites, sports, human sacrifices, occupation, revenue, dress, villages, etc of Kukis, Angami, Rengma and Khonoma Nagas, Mikirs and other wild tribes living in the Nowgong district of Assam and the neighbouring surroundings.

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