

Memoirs of James Howard Thornton : Content Analysis of a Non-Official view of the Jaintia Rebellion

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The Edmundian 1971, the students' magazine of St. Edmund's College, Shillong, had as its first article 'Shillong More Than A Century Ago : A fascinating account of Shillong in 1867 from the pen of one of its earliest settlers.' The account was an extract from James Howard Thornton's, *Memories of Seven Campaigns*,¹ and had been sent to the College by the author's grandson, J. P. Thornton, a well-wisher and benefactor of the college who lives in Victoria, Canada. Intrigued that no one in academic circles or otherwise had heard of the book I was determined to search and locate it, not so much to read of what Shillong was in the 1860's (for the magazine had two pages from the original book), but hoping that my assumption that one of Thornton's seven campaigns was that of Jaintia. Recently I had the fortune of reading the book, only to find to my astonishment that indeed the writer had recorded his memoirs of the Khasi and Jaintia Hills, much of which was devoted to his involvement in the Jaintia campaign.

James Howard Thornton was born to Major John Thornton in 1834. He entered King's College, London in the spring of 1851 and matriculated at the University of London that same year. Two years later he passed the first M. B. examination, a year later he passed the B. A. examination. In 1855, he passed the examination for membership of the Royal College of Surgeons of England and applied for the Bengal Medical Establishment but could not take up the post offered to him as he had not reached 22 years of age. He took advantage of the remaining months to reach that age to pass the second and final examinations for the degree of M. B. in November 1855. The following spring he left for India, and a career that took him to the seven campaigns he describes. He had only passed a few months in the change of duties assigned to him at Benares when the 'Mutiny' occurred. The two years which followed were years of severe apprenticeship and an exercise which proved in many respects profitable to him. In May 1860, he accompanied the 15th Regiment of Punjab Infantry in the Franco-British Expedition to Peking, following which he joined the 28th Regiment Native Infantry which was sent to the Khasi and Jaintia Hills. For some months he witnessed the Anglo-Bhutan war, after which he returned with his force to Cherrapunji, and in 1867 moved to Shil-

ong. In 1882 he joined the Egyptian Expedition, followed three years later by the Suakin Expedition. The last of the seven campaigns was the Hazara Expedition in 1888. Dr. Thornton retired in 1891, after 35 years' service. He returned home to serve for many years as Magistrate at Howe, during which time he wrote and published his *Memories of Seven Campaigns*. In 1904 he was knighted (K.C.B.).²

Thornton must have kept a daily record of his experiences and observations for throughout the book he gives dates and details of happenings. It could only have come from his diaries and private papers that he recalled his experiences, for nowhere does he refer to other sources, though he makes mention of a few, as for instance Joseph Hooker's *Himalayan Journals*, though only to explain the geography, geology, flora and fauna of the places he lived in and passed through. The book is made more attractive with the many drawings it has. These were done very ably by his son Edward and daughter Katherine.

Of interest to this Association is what the author had to say of the Khasi and Jaintia Hills, its people and of course his account of the Jaintia campaign. Any researcher on the Jaintia Rebellion is conscious of the handicap one has in that the sources for writing a history of that resistance movement have largely been official accounts both published and unpublished. Of late new and varied sources have been located and used to give a fuller account of the origins, cause and aftermath or perhaps one of the most serious challenges to British rule by a tribe inhabiting India's North-East.³ Thornton's *Memories* is one such source. The additional insights he provides acquire a special value from the freedom from prejudice with which he has recorded his views and his observations. This work assumes significance since there does not appear to have been any other person involved in the Jaintia campaign other than Thornton who has left an account of it.

Shortly after his return from leave and accompanied by his wife Mary (nee Astor) whom he had married in June 1861⁴ he was attached as Medical Officer to the left wing of the 28th Regiment Native Infantry and ordered to proceed to Sylhet, to assist in suppressing the Jaintias. He gives a fine account of the travel from Calcutta to Nongtalang in the Jaintia Hills via the Sunderbans, Burrisal, Dacca and Sylhet, and the hardships the troops faced in the journey with heavy guns and elephants through swamps, swollen rivers from early rains and the heat of early spring. Jaintiapur "was in a very decayed and ruinous condition... ..and con-

tained hardly anything worthy of notice except some enormous stories.”⁵ On 7 March 1862 after a “very steep ascent for about 1500 feet through the forest covering the hillside..... brought us to the plateau on which was perched the village of Nongtalang , says Thornton, where Major Rowlett the civil officer of the Khasi and Jaintia Hills, and Colonel Richardson of the 44th Regiment Native Infantry met the newcomers.⁶

It is a debatable point whether the second phase of the Jaintia Rebellion had its origins in the reaction to the imposition of an income tax. Thornton had this to say : “The rising of these hill tribes was mainly due to the ill-advised action of the Bengal Government in imposing the income tax..... upon the simple inhabitants of the hills, who had no incomes in the proper sense of the term and could not understand the meaning of such a tax.”⁷ When the income tax was to be imposed the Assam Commissioner wrote to government at Calcutta to know whether the new impost was to be levied in the Jaintia Hills together with the house tax introduced the year before. The district administration was informed to collect the income tax along with the house tax “the incident of the two being different.” It appeared to have been the belief at Calcutta that the new tax would practically be inoperative in the hills.⁸ However, when the tax became operative out of a total assessment of 360 persons, 323 were Jaintias and of these no less than 68 belonged to Jowai.⁹ Thornton was also of the opinion that the rebellion had occurred because :

It so happened that, at this very time, the Sylhet Light Infantry Battalion stationed at Cherra Poonjee in the Khasia Hills was being reduced in strength with a view to its conversion from an irregular local corps into a regular regiment of the Bengal Native Army. The hillmen in their ignorance and simplicity believed this regiment to be the only force at the disposal of Government and seeing it considerably reduced in number, imagined that the ruling power was growing weak and might be successfully resisted.¹⁰

Bengali traders called ‘box wallahs’ by Thornton attributed the uprising to the system of taxing the Jaintias and the weight of the taxes in a region where trade was to a great extent conducted by barter.¹¹

One of the reasons why the British forces could suppress the rebellion was their use of artillery, musketry and rifle. Though the Jaintias were also in possession of some muskets they had a rather ingenuous manner of tackling the offensive. Thornton gives an

excellent account of these tactics. The Jaintias raised stockades throughout their hills and a long narrative is given in the capture of these. The author first describes how the stockade at Ooksai was taken (pp. 100-103), and continues with an account of the capture of Shampung, Ralliang and Mynsoo (p. 106), Umwai, Padoo, Oomkai and Nongbrai (p. 117), Oomkong (pp. 119-121), and on to Nartiang 'which was as dirty and as full of pigs as most Khasia villages.'¹² Another Jaintia village that was stockaded was that of Surtiang, and when the author reached it he was dis-appointed "that it had been attacked and taken on the previous day."¹³ The capture of many of these stockades came after much resistance from its defenders. These stockades were invariably built of stout palisades about 9 feet high, "bristling everywhere with sharp bamboo spikes and the ground in front. was every where stuck full of 'panjees - lancet-shaped bamboo spikes several inches long, which would penetrate the upper leathers of our stout walking boots."¹⁴ The insurgents had the advantage of knowing the terrain and when in retreat could disappear over cliffs and precipices. When they were in an advantageous position in chasing the British forces into retreat they would send showers of rocks, stones and arrows amidst yells of triumph. The author was caught in one such situation at Ooksai where he was struck down senseless by a large fragment of rock. He said that on regaining consciousness he realized that what had saved his life was probably the felt helmet he wore. ¹⁵ Another tactic is described by Thornton in the capture of Surtiang :

I went to see the place and found that the hill was a mass of limestone rocks, covered with forest and pierced with numerous caves and hollow ways. The village was on the summit and could only be approached by very narrow and intricate passages through the limestone. These roads had been barricaded, and trunks of trees had been suspended above them to let fall, at the proper moment, upon the crowd of embarrassed assailants.¹⁶

There appeared to have been a fear that the rebellion had gone beyond the bounds of the Jaintia Hills. Even while Thornton approached Sylhet in February 1862, reports were heard that rebels had come down from the hills and burned a police outpost, killing several police and villagers.¹⁷ In July that year when the Doctor was in Cherrapunji, and while the offensive was halted because of the rains, the residents of the station were alarmed that a body of rebels had reached the village of Mawphlang, about 18

miles distant and intended to attack the station during the night. Luckily for Thornton and others the alarm was uncalled for because no attack was made.¹⁸ The Jaintias once eluded the troops, made their way as far as Theriaghat at the foot of the Khasi Hills, surprized and burned the place, killing some of the inhabitants, several police and two or three unfortunate Bengali traders (box wallahs). Once again the Cherrapunji people were scared as Theriaghat was only ten miles south, and the Station had insufficient troops and police for its protection. 'Fortunately the rebels d'd not make the attempt' says Thornton, whose wife and perhaps one child were living in the station.¹⁹

In October the offensive was renewed. Many of the sepoy who had remained stationing stockades "were in very bad state, nearly all the men having been attacked with malarious fever and so debilitated that they were quite unfit for military duty." The troops were weakened and demoralised.²⁰ By December a considerable force (Thornton estimated that between 5000 to 6000 troops and police were employed in the campaign, p. 95) was assembled at Jowai, which comprised the 21st Regiment Native Infantry, under Major Thelwall, the Eurasian Battery of Artillery, under Captain Corder, with the 44th and 28th Regiments Native Infantry. In the beginning of January, 1863 the whole force, under the command of Colonel Dunsford began the final assault. By March 1863 "the tedious operations against the insurgent hill tribes were at last brought to a close, after having continued, off and on, for fifteen months."²¹ The losses in the suppression of the rebellion were very heavy. The author's own regiment (the 44th Native Infantry) which took part in the operations first to last had four officers wounded and about 200 men killed and wounded in its various engagements, besides a large number of men whose health broke down from exposure and privations. With a note of regret he says : "Nevertheless no medal or reward of any kind, was granted to the troops in recognition of their services in this trying campaign."²²

The *Memories* in all had 33 pages devoted to the campaign. In other pages he tells of how the field force brok up, his happiness to find himself home again, his bulding a home at Cherrapunji and of tigers roaming around the station. Of the Khasis he gives a short account (marvellously illustrated) of their physique, customs, trade and commerce, of the use of *pan* "which reddens their saliva and leaves unmistakable traces and on the paths they follow," the use of weaker baskets to carry loads, which included carrying

wounded soldiers ; Khasi sports and comments that "Khasia women are almost as ugly as the men." ²³ Then following his experience of the Anglo-Bhutan War (pp. 132-149) he returns to Cherrapunji only to be moved with his regiment to the new station of Shillong in 1867. Of Shillong he speaks of how he set up home, the speed with which the station grew with private houses, courts, barracks, hospitals ; of flowers, earthquakes and cricket and football that Gurkha soldiers excelled in. In 1868 after completing twelve years' service, and in poor health he left for two years' furlough. ²⁴

How such a book has escaped the attention of researchers can only be explained in that no second book has made reference to it in any detail. By sheer coincidence it should have been my college that first made reference to it, the use of which is now open to any interested in the Khasi and Jaintia Hills. What disappointed me in reading the *Memories* is that nowhere in the narrative is there any reference to any particular Jaintia not even a reference to Kiang Nongbah whose trial and hanging Thornton must have witnessed. But, we must remember that the book was not written to be a reference but a story of one man's experiences in service. It however, will now prove invaluable for research.

Notes & References

1. J. H. Thornton, *Memories of Seven Campaigns*, Archibald Constable and Co., Westminster, 1895.
2. *Ibid.*, pp. xxiii; A short biography is also in C.E. Buckland, *Dictionary of National Biography*, Indological Book House, Varanasi, 1971, p. 424.
3. The present author has incorporated in his Ph. D. thesis 'British Administration in Meghalaya : Policy and Pattern' (NEHU, 1985) sources on the Jaintia Rebellion that have not been used earlier. Some of these sources which includes Thornton's work are, Letter Books I and II of J. C. Haughton, MSS Eur D 529 ; The letters of J. C. Thornton, MSS Eur D 530 in India Office Library and Records, London ; *Abstracts of Letters received from India*, 1861, 1863, (Parliamentary Papers) ; *The Friend of India*, 1862.
4. The Thorntons appear to have had three children - a daughter, Katherine and two sons Edward was to become a well known architect with Martin and Co. Calcutta and Jack who worked for the Dibrugarh Railways and the Assam Oil Company, Digboi.

5. Thornton, *op. cit.*, pp. 95-100.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 100.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 94.
8. A. Mackenzie, *History of the Relations of the Governmen with the Hill Tribes of the North Eastern Frontier of Bengal*, Calcutta, 1884, p. 242.
9. Home Political Consultations 28 March 1862 No. 65.
10. Thornton, *op. cit.*, p. 94.
11. *Abstracts of Letters from India*, 1862 Military No. 48, p. 150' No. 143, p. 365 ; Thornton, *op. cit.*, 116.
12. Thornton, *op. cit.*, p. 122.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 124.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 102, p. 124. This device was used by many of the hill tribes in hunting and in war. The British lost several men in this manner during the campaign.
15. *Ibid.*, pp. 102 103.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 124.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 97.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 109.
19. *Ibid.*, pp. 115-116.
20. *Ibid.*, p. 115.
21. *Ibid.*, pp. 117-126
22. *Ibid.*, p. 126.
23. *Ibid.*, pp. 126-131.
24. *Ibid.*, pp. 149 153.