

**INDIA'S  
NORTH-EAST FRONTIER  
in the Nineteenth Century**



INDIA'S  
NORTH-EAST FRONTIER  
in the Nineteenth Century

*Edited with an Introduction by*

VERRIER ELWIN

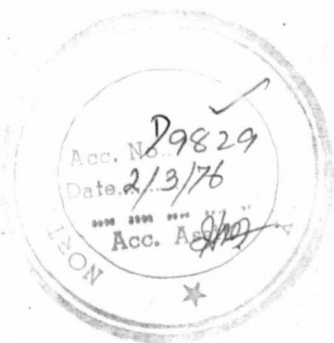
MADRAS  
OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS  
DELHI BOMBAY CALCUTTA

*Oxford University Press, Ely House, London W. 1*  
GLASGOW NEW YORK TORONTO MELBOURNE WELLINGTON  
CAPE TOWN IBADAN NAIROBI DAR ES SALAAM LUSAKA ADDIS ABABA  
DELHI BOMBAY CALCUTTA MADRAS KARACHI LAHORE DACCA  
KUALA LUMPUR SINGAPORE HONG KONG TOKYO  
*Oxford House, Mount Road, Madras 6*

Verrier ELWIN 1902-64

© Oxford University Press 1959

*First published 1959*  
*Third impression 1972*



✓  
954.16  
ELW

*Printed in India*  
*by C. E. Koshy at The Diocesan Press, Madras 7*  
*with blocks made by Sun Process Works, Bombay and published by*  
*John Brown, Oxford University Press, Madras 6*  
*by offset*

F 239  
1304

CONTENTS

10	<i>A Slave for Fifty Years</i> by J. Errol Gray .. ..	416
11	<i>Man's First Disobedience</i> by J. B. Neufville .. ..	417
12	<i>Singpho Traditions of Creation</i> by C. R. Macgregor .. ..	419
13	<i>A Singpho Story-teller</i> by J. Errol Gray .. ..	419
14	<i>Singpho Coffins</i> by W. Griffith .. ..	421
15	<i>A Tour in the Singpho Country</i> by J. Errol Gray .. ..	421
16	<i>Political Presents</i> by J. Errol Gray .. ..	423

XIV THE AKAS OF KAMENG

1	<i>Historical Prelude</i> by A. Mackenzie .. ..	429
2	<i>A Missionary's View of the Akas (1867)</i> by C. H. Hesselmeyer .. ..	435
3	<i>A Soldier's View of the Akas (1884)</i> by C. R. Macgregor .. ..	446

BIBLIOGRAPHY 455

INDEX 469

ILLUSTRATIONS

*Between pp. 112 and 113*

- 1 A Naga *morung* and implements
- 2 A Chief of the eastern or upper Naga group
- 3 A Bor Abor girl, described by Dalton as 'belonging probably to some village near the great Dihong river'
- 4 A group of Digaru Mishmis
- 5 Chulikata or Idu Mishmi Chief in full dress
- 6 Described by Dalton as an 'admirable and thoroughly typical representative of a Tian Mishmi girl'

*Between pp. 144 and 145*

- 7 A young married Khampti woman
- 8 A Gallong, called by Dalton in the manner of his day, 'a Dhoba Abor'
- 9 Akas in 1847
- 10 A Dafla and a Dafla Chief's widow
- 11 An Idu (Chulikata) woman described by Dalton as a 'typical but not favourable specimen'
- 12 An Abor Chief. He is suffering from the very common goitre

Sketch map showing tribes on the North-East Frontier *end-paper*

# INTRODUCTION

## I

VERY little has been written on the tribal peoples of the north-east frontier of India. In J. P. Mills's ethnographic bibliography of Assam only about one in ten of the items listed has anything to say about them. And these items are mostly articles or notes in periodicals now impossible to obtain and difficult to consult, or they are official publications which have been indifferently preserved. The few books of the early period, such as those by Robinson, Butler and Dalton, are today collector's pieces. Yet these elusive records contain much that is of absorbing interest.

In this book, therefore, I present a selection of passages from the older literature, down to 1900, which has a bearing on the history, people and problems of what is now known as the North-East Frontier Agency. These passages are of unusual value, for they give us a picture of the country as it was before it had suffered any external influence, and although the reader may sometimes regret that the writers did not use their opportunities for exact observation more fully, he must be thankful for what he has. He should remember that the administrators, soldiers, missionaries and explorers represented in these pages were not anthropologists. Even Dalton was not an anthropologist in the modern sense. Their information is not always correct; it is sometimes heavily marked by personal bias; some of it is obviously guess-work. But they were fresh to the country and their eyes were open; from them a general idea of what the tribal people were like sixty, eighty, a hundred or even a hundred and twenty years ago, does emerge, and despite all the faults both of fact and of taste their work is of value to scholars and administrators alike.

In contrast to both an earlier and a later age, the European travellers of the nineteenth century were under no illusions about the Noble Savage; in the main their opinion of the tribes was a low one and their attitude was all too often patronizing or scornful. In 1865, declared a leading article in the *Pioneer* of the day, 'the only

idea which most men had, with reference to the hills and forests [of Assam], was that they were the habitat of savage tribes, whose bloody raids and thieving forays threatened serious danger to the cause of tea'.

The people were not even interesting: Lord Dalhousie pronounced the Assam frontier to be a bore, and even as late as 1911 we find the wife of an officer attached to the Abor Expedition of that year expressing herself in a series of puns: 'It is such a bore that my husband has to go off on that silly Abor Expedition to fight those stupid aborigines with their queer arboreal habits.'<sup>1</sup>

Even the serious writers took the same view. Butler declares that the troops of his command 'wish for nothing better than an opportunity of contending with the Singphos, or indeed with any of their treacherous neighbours (whom they hold in the utmost contempt) in a fair battle in the open country'. He speaks of the 'general degeneracy' of the Assamese people who are emaciated by their predilection for the 'pernicious opiate', opium, even though under British rule 'we may yet regard Assam as a rising country'. He calls the Khamptis 'a discontented, restless, intriguing tribe'; the Singphos are 'a rude treacherous people'; the Abors are 'as void of delicacy as they are of cleanliness'; the Nagas are 'a very uncivilized race, with dark complexions, athletic sinewy frames, hideously wild and ugly visages, reckless of human life'. Among such, says Butler in 1847, we might reasonably expect missionary zeal would be most successful. For the last eight years, however, two or three American Baptist missionaries had in vain endeavoured to awake in them a sense of the saving virtue of Christianity.

Rowlatt, who explored the Mishmi hills in 1844, describes the Mishmis as 'disgustingly dirty: with the exception of a few of the Chiefs, they are seldom washed from one year's end to another. . . . They seem to have but a very faint idea of any religion'. M'Cosh, who included a chapter on the hill tribes in his *Topography of Assam* (1837), says of the Miris that their manners and habits are 'wild and barbarous and their persons filthy and squalid'. Robinson, though he speaks well of the Abors, describes the Dafias as having ugly countenances and a 'somewhat ferocious' appearance. The Mishmis are 'in general excessively filthy'. Beresford speaks of the

<sup>1</sup> P. Millington, *On the Track of the Abor* (1912), p. v.

Abors as 'truculent and aggressive . . . like all savages, the only law they know or recognize is that of force and in the ability of awarding prompt and speedy punishments'.

Even J. F. Needham, who was once criticized by authority for allowing himself to be 'cheeked by the men and pulled about by the young women', spoke on occasion in the most uncomplimentary terms of his people. 'Notwithstanding that they [the Abors] are most hospitable,' he writes in 1886, 'their manner is so rough and they are so provokingly impertinent (unmeaningly, I admit, for it is nothing but ignorance, coupled with self-conceitedness, that makes them so) and familiar, as likewise possessed of such monkey-like inquisitiveness, that their society very soon palls upon one, especially after the first novelty of being amongst them has worn off. They are so excessively suspicious too, that one shirks even asking them questions about their manners and customs, except in the most casual manner.' He also calls the Mishmis 'treacherous and cowardly curs'; they are 'blustering' and leniency is as little understood by this tribe 'as by any other similarly uncivilized and savage'.

Dalton's attitude, however, is very different, and he foreshadows the new attitude of respect, interest and affection that in the main governs the relations of literates and pre-literates in the modern world. Not only does he never speak of the tribal people with contempt or scorn, but he never misses an opportunity of recording instances in their favour. Even the Chulikata Mishmis, to whom he gives a bad character (adding, however, that 'I would not venture to have done so on any authority but their own'), have many virtues and are the 'most ingenious of the family'. He is impressed by the 'practical utility' of the Abor dormitory and by 'the ready alacrity and good feeling and discipline' of its member. Of Miri women he says that they make faithful and obedient wives and cheerfully bear the hard burden imposed upon them. The Tanaes (Apa Tanis) make war both effectually and honourably, fighting only men and inflicting no injury whatever on non-combatants. 'If this be true,' adds Dalton, 'the Tanae may claim a hearing as the most humane of belligerents at the next International Congress.'

Unhappily, such an attitude was rare and a lack of sympathy with the people accounts for many mistakes of the earlier writers. In no field are our old records more imperfect than in that of religion. We must remember that it was not easy, at that date, for

the majority of European officers to take seriously any religion other than their own. The outlook of Sir James Johnstone, as expressed in his book *My Experiences in Manipur and the Naga Hills* (1896), is typical: 'I strongly urged the advisability of establishing a regular system of education, including religious instruction, under a competent clergyman of the Church of England. I pointed out that the Nagas had no religion; that they were highly intelligent and capable of receiving civilization; that with it they would want a religion, and that we might as well give them our own, and make them in this way a source of strength, by thus mutually attaching them to us.' Dalton also did his utmost to aid Christian missions among the Kols, when he was Commissioner of Chota Nagpur, his argument being, so Johnstone says, 'that they wanted a religion, and that were they Christians, they would be a valuable counterpoise in time of trouble to the vast non-Christian population of Bihar. In the same way it cannot be doubted that a large population of Christian hillmen between Assam and Burma would be a valuable prop to the State.'

This belief that the tribal people of Assam had 'no religion', or alternatively that what religion they had was (as Butler said of the Singphos) 'a mixture of all the various idolatries and superstitions' ever invented, did not encourage unbiased and scientific inquiry. Thus even Dalton says that 'the religion of the Mishmis is confined to the propitiation of demons', and of the Chulikatas he observes, 'I have met with no people so entirely devoid of religious feeling as are the Chulikatas. I had long conversations on the subject with several of the Chiefs, and they utterly rejected all notions of a future state or of immortality of any kind'. Of the Miris he declares that 'the religious observances of the Miris are confined to the slaughter of animals in the name of the sylvan spirits and vaticination by the examination of the entrails of birds'. Of the Nagas he says, 'they have no temples and no priests, and I never heard of any form of worship amongst them, but I do not doubt that they sacrifice and observe omens like other tribes'.

Yet this was not the last word of the older writers and a fine passage by T. H. Lewin, written in 1869, anticipates the attitude and policy of modern India:

This I say, let us not govern these hills for ourselves, but administer the country for the well-being and happiness of the people

dwelling therein. What is wanted here is not measures, but a man. Place over them an officer gifted with the power of rule, not a mere cog in the great wheel of government, but one tolerant of the failings of his fellow-creatures and yet prompt to see and recognize in them the touch of nature that makes the whole world kin, apt to enter into new trains of thought and to modify and adopt ideas, but cautious in offending national prejudice. Under a guidance like this, let the people by slow degree civilize themselves. With education open to them and yet moving under their own laws and customs, they will turn out not debased and miniature epitomes of Englishmen, but a new and noble type of God's creatures.

## II

ON the whole, very little is known about the men whose writings are reproduced in this book: only two of them find a place in the *Dictionary of National Biography*, and I have had to collect what information there is from chance references in journals and occasional autobiographical passages. The following notes, scanty as they are, will however give some idea of who our authors were and what they did.

*John Butler*

John Butler, author of *A Sketch of Assam* (1847) and *Travels and Adventures in the Province of Assam during a Residence of Fourteen Years* (1855), first visited Assam in 1837, when he spent three months at Goalpara. He was a soldier, belonging to the 55th Regiment of the Bengal Native Infantry, and in November 1840 he was appointed second-in-command of the Assam Light Infantry. His journey from Calcutta to the 'desolate and remote' station of Saikwa took no less than sixty-five days, of which thirty-seven were spent travelling up-stream to Gauhati, 'the metropolis of Assam'. On this second visit, Butler found that Gauhati had been greatly improved; roads had been made, many brick bungalows had been erected, the jungle had been cleared, while 'the view of the river, the islands, temples, and verdant foliage of the trees' made the place 'one of the most picturesque scenes to be met with in India'. From Gauhati he travelled in a canoe (formed of a single tree

hollowed out and propelled by eighteen 'merry paddlers') up the Brahmaputra to Saikwa, 'the north-eastern frontier military post in Upper Assam'. Saikwa had been established in 1839 after the station of Sadiya on the opposite bank had been surprised and burnt in a tribal attack. Here at Saikwa the Light Infantry was posted 'to afford protection to the Tea Gardens from the sudden aggressions of the numerous wild, fierce, border tribes'.

Here Butler settled down in a mat-and-grass cottage plastered with mud 'in comfort and solitariness'. He had many adventures; one night his house was invaded by a great python, and he was constantly in trouble with the Brahmaputra.

His stay did not, however, last very long, for in the following year he was appointed to the civil branch of the service as an Assistant to the Agent to the Governor-General, North-East Frontier; and after a residence of about three years in Lower Assam, in the month of February 1844 he was placed in charge of the hill tribes subject to the Political Agent of Upper Assam. Now again he had to go to Saikwa, this time with his family, and in June of that year his house was washed away by the 'merciless river'. But Butler was never left in one place for long; indeed, as he says, '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', and the 'perpetual motion' in which he lived now took him to Nowgong in charge of the Cachar Levy. In 1846-7 he visited the Naga Hills and received tribute of ivory and hand-woven cloth from the Angamis who took solemn oaths to stop their raids on the villages of the plains, and in 1848 he again visited Khonoma. He founded a small Levy Post and a market at Samaguting and opened cart-tracks to Dimapur. He came to the opinion, however, that Government should abandon any attempt to administer the hills, considering that official intervention in internal disputes had been a failure, and for a time his advice was followed, though a different policy was, of course, adopted after a few years.

Butler, in the fashion of the day, describes Assam as 'a wild, uncivilized, foreign land' and he suggests that 'to those accustomed only to the comforts of civilized life, or to the traveller who is indifferent to the beauties of scenery, the monotony, silence and loneliness of the vast forests of Assam will present few features of attraction'. But Butler clearly was attracted by this wild country,

especially by its people, and he wrote his first book 'to make Assam better known, to remove some prejudices against it, and preserve the memory of many remarkable scenes'.

Butler was evidently what we would now call a 'character'. Wherever he went he carried with him two glass windows, one for a sitting-room and another for a bedroom, which he used to insert in the reed walls of the thatched houses which were usually allotted to him. Once, finding himself being carried down the Brahmaputra in the middle of the night with only one servant to attend him, he was not dismayed but hastily donned his red woollen nightcap and a pea-coat, seized a paddle and rowed most heartily until the skin peeled off his hands. Many other adventures make entertaining reading.

Major Butler retired in 1865. His son, also a John Butler, became Deputy Commissioner of the Naga Hills and was killed in a Lhota Naga ambushade in 1875.

#### T. T. Cooper

Thomas Thornvill Cooper, from whose book, *New Routes for Commerce: The Mishmee Hills*, a number of extracts are given in Chapters XI and XII, has been described as 'one of the most adventurous of modern English travellers'. He was born in 1839, the son of a coalfitter and shipowner, and from his boyhood showed a desire for travel. While still in his teens he was sent on a sea-voyage to Australia for the good of his health, and on the way the crew mutinied; young Thomas, pistol in hand, mounted guard over the captain's cabin. In Australia he made several journeys into the interior and thought of settling down permanently there. But in 1859 he came to India and was employed by the mercantile firm of Arbuthnot and Company in Madras. This, however, was far too tame for his adventurous spirit, and after two years he resigned from his position, visited Sind and Bombay, and finally found himself in Rangoon.

He learnt Burmese, but even now could not settle down and in 1863 went to Shanghai to join a brother who was in business there. He was almost immediately involved in a rebellion and had to help in the protection of the city against the Taiping insurgents. The problem of expanding trade now became an urgent one, and

at the age of only twenty-nine Cooper was invited by the Shanghai Chamber of Commerce to attempt to travel through Tibet to India. At the beginning of 1868, therefore, he left Hankow for Batang, whence he hoped to reach the first point on the Lohit Brahmaputra in eight days. The Chinese authorities, however, refused to let him proceed, and he went instead south to Bhamo, reaching Tse-ku, a splendid achievement for that period. Here he was less than a hundred miles from Manchi on the Upper Irrawaddy, which had been visited by Wilcox in 1826.

He now ran into serious trouble, for on passing Weisi-Fu, he was prevented from going further by a tribal Chief, and had to return to the city, where he was imprisoned for five weeks by the local authorities on suspicion of being involved in a rebellion at that time in progress in Yunnan. For a while he lay under the threat of death, but in August was permitted to depart. He had now been eight months on his journey, but it was not until the middle of November that he finally came back to Hankow. He returned to England and wrote an account of his adventures in his excellent book *A Pioneer of Commerce*.

In 1869, Cooper decided to try again. He had failed to reach India from China; he would now try to reach China from India. In October 1869, accordingly, he set out from Sadiya and worked up the Brahmaputra to a village called Prun, some twenty miles from Rima. But here again he was greeted with determined opposition and was compelled to return. It is this journey which he describes in his *New Routes for Commerce*, which contains a number of shrewd observations on Mishmi and Khampti life.

Later, he went again to Rangoon and was appointed Political Agent at Bhamo. But he was soon compelled by ill health to return to England, where he was attached to the India Office. In 1876 he was sent to India with dispatches for the Viceroy and was soon afterwards re-appointed Political Agent at Bhamo. Captain Gill, who was received here by Cooper after his remarkable expedition through China, describes their meeting in his book *The River of Golden Sand*. Only a year later, while still under forty years of age, Cooper was murdered at Bhamo in August 1878 by a sepoy in revenge for some minor punishment.

Cooper, says the *Dictionary of National Biography*, from which many of the above facts are taken, was a 'man of great physical

powers, and was endowed with the calm courage essential for a successful traveller. Under a somewhat reserved demeanour he possessed a warm and generous nature, and won the regard and affection of all who knew him by his singleness of heart and his unaffected modesty'.

*E. T. Dalton*

Of all the works on the North-East Frontier written during the last century, there can be no doubt that pride of place must be given to the thirty-five pages on the subject in Dalton's great *Descriptive Ethnology of Bengal*, and to the remarkable 'lithograph portraits copied from photographs' with which the book is adorned.

Edward Tuite Dalton was born in 1815 and in due course joined the Bengal Staff Corps, of which he was a colonel in 1872 and a major-general three years before his death on the 30th of December 1880. His name appears but seldom in the histories, but we know that in 1845 he visited the hills in the neighbourhood of the Subansiri River, that he went to Membu in the Abor country in 1855, and that about the same time he was having official dealings with the Singphos. In 1851 he was Political Assistant Commissioner in charge of Kamrup and wrote in that year for the Asiatic Society on the 'Mahapurushyas, a sect of Assamese Vaishnavas', in which he praises the 'general respectability and intelligence of the disciples', and gives an interesting and sympathetic account of Sri Sankardeo. A little later he wrote on the ruined temples of Assam.

In 1855 Dalton was Principal Assistant to the Governor-General's Agent in Assam. Three years later he was transferred to Chota Nagpur as Commissioner of the area and took part in an expedition to put down a rising in Palamau. He also accompanied the Field Force against the Singhbhum rebels in 1858-9. His period of duty in this part of India was as fruitful as his years in Assam, for some of the best passages in his book deal with the Juangs, Hos and Santals.

The *Descriptive Ethnology* was a direct sequel to the Ethnological Congress which was proposed early in 1866 to be held in Calcutta. The Congress, which was to have been an adjunct to a general industrial exhibition, was dropped on account of the practical difficulties of bringing the 'strange shy creatures', the tribesmen

of the hills, to a great city. The Commissioner of Assam stated his conviction that even twenty typical 'specimens of the hill tribes of his province' could not be conveyed to Calcutta and back at any time of the year 'without casualties that the greatest enthusiast for anthropological research would shrink from encountering'. If any of the more independent tribes were to die on the way, 'it might lead to inconvenient political consequences'.

Before the scheme had been dropped, however, the Government of Bengal and the Supreme Government had called on all local authorities to furnish complete lists of the various races to be found within their jurisdictions, and Dalton was asked to edit this information and to draw up a 'descriptive catalogue' which would serve as a guide to the ethnological exhibition. Dalton, however, found that there was insufficient material even for a catalogue and it was then suggested that he should write an account of all the tribal peoples of what was then 'Bengal' and which included Assam and Chota Nagpur, 'the most interesting fields of research in all Bengal'. Many persons assisted Dalton in this project, and in particular he was able to collect a few photographs taken for the London Exhibition of 1862. A Dr B. Simpson, 'one of the most successful of Indian photographers', was deputed to the valley of the Brahmaputra, 'that most prolific of ethnographical fields', to take photographs, while the skill of Dr Brown, Political Agent at Manipur, was also utilized for illustrations of Manipuris and the neighbouring tribes.

For the publication of the work, the Government of Bengal contributed a sum of Rs 10,000—an enormous sum for those days—and the book was printed under the direction of the Council of the Asiatic Society of Bengal, which from the first had done everything possible to encourage the project.

Dalton claims that he was himself responsible for the accuracy of a large proportion of the descriptions given. Unhappily a number of his manuscript tour diaries perished 'during the mutinies', and it is doubly unfortunate that these were the earlier diaries, referring to his travels in Assam, as a result of which his notices of some of the Assam tribes 'were not as full as he should like to have made them'.

Dalton's work did not escape criticism. It is curious, moreover, that it was not reviewed by any of the journals of the day, not even

by the *Indian Antiquary* or the *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal*. Captain John Butler, son of the author of *A Sketch of Assam*, was particularly critical and in a diary of March 1873 he writes:

Amused myself by reading some of Dalton's work on the Ethnology of Bengal and was much surprised to find that the letterpress, at all events as far as the Naga Tribes are concerned, is not in my humble opinion worth very much and yet this is the very portion of the book for the accuracy of which he states in his preface that he himself is alone responsible. It seems strange that he should not apparently ever have considered it worth his while to refer to any of the Frontier Officers in Assam, for I notice that although he concludes his preface with a long list of officers to whom he is indebted for their contributions, there is not a single Assam Officer among the list.

Captain Butler also questioned the identification of some of the illustrations, though these were not those reproduced in this book. It is a pity that Butler did not elaborate his criticisms, for to say that a book is not 'worth very much' does not lead us anywhere. It is true that Dalton borrowed freely from his predecessors; that in some cases, he was writing up material gathered a quarter of a century earlier; and that in his day there were few anthropological precedents to follow and no anthropological training to be had. But his sympathy, his observation, and above all the elegance and purity of his style render his book one of the outstanding achievements of the anthropology of India.

#### *J. Errol Gray*

J. Errol Gray was a tea planter who was interested in extending the trade of Assam beyond the frontier. In 1891 he was invited by the Government of India to explore the Bor Khampti country in a semi-official capacity on their behalf, and on the 24th of November 1892 he left Saikwa in an attempt to cross into western China through the mountains first explored by Wilcox in 1827, and later by Woodthorpe and MacGregor in 1884-5. But Gray went further than any of his predecessors, crossing the Nam-Kiu and entering the valley of the Tisang, an important affluent of the Irrawaddy.

Gray travelled unarmed and with a comparatively small party of thirty-eight Khasi and eight Khampti porters, two military surveyors

and one private servant. His diary is one of the most interesting of the early travel documents, and is enlivened by a controversy between himself and J. F. Needham about the behaviour of a Singpho Chieftain named Ningro who, annoyed at not receiving a political present, seems to have done all he could to hamper Gray's progress. Gray returned to Sadiya on the 23rd of April 1893.

Although part of Gray's journey was beyond the frontier of what is now the North-East Frontier Agency, some of his most interesting observations were made within the Indian border, and his account of the Singphos is of special value.

Gray travelled hard and his relations with the people were friendly, though his journey was overshadowed by the behaviour of Ningro which led him to exclaim: 'There is no getting to the bottom of a Singpho.'

#### *William Griffith*

Dr William Griffith, M.D., F.L.S., was born in 1810 and died at an early age in 1845. He came to India in 1832 as an Assistant Surgeon on the Madras establishment of the East India Company. But he was essentially a botanist and a few years later he went with Dr MacClelland, the geologist, to explore Assam with the special aim of developing the cultivation of tea. This gave him the opportunity to make the expeditions for which his name became rightly famous. In 1836 he went into the Mishmi Hills 'from the debouching of the Lohit to about ten miles east of the Ghalums'. He explored the tracts between Sadiya and Ava and once marched right through from Assam to Ava and Rangoon. He fell ill and was given an opportunity to recuperate as surgeon to the Bhutan Embassy. On his way to Bhutan he visited the Khasi Hills. He also travelled to Khorassan and Afghanistan. In 1842 he took charge of the Botanic Gardens at Calcutta. He was a great collector, a daring traveller, bravely endured many hardships and illnesses, but he had a very bad temper. He has been called 'the acutest botanist who ever visited India'. His diary of the visit to the Mishmi Hills, from which we quote, first appeared in the *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal* for 1837. After his death, there was published in Calcutta a large book of some 550 pages in which his friend MacClelland edited the many journals he had kept of his travels in Assam,

Burma, Bhutan and Afghanistan. Although the interest of this work is largely botanical, it contains references to the Khasis, Singphos, Mishmis and Konyaks.

*Father Krick*

Father Nicholas Michael Krick, who, with his friend Father Bourri, was murdered in October 1854 in the Mishmi Hills, was born in 1819 at Lixheim in France, so that he was only thirty-five at the time of his death. After entering the priesthood and becoming a member of the *Société des Missions Etrangères*, he came to India in 1850 as Superior of the South Tibetan Mission, and proceeded to Gauhati on the banks of the Brahmaputra with the intention of making his way into Tibet through the Mishmi Hills. He was not the first, even at this early date, to think of doing so, though the reports he must have heard at Gauhati can hardly have been encouraging. Thirty years earlier, a soldier, Lieutenant Burton, had reported that the Mishmis 'were very averse to receive strangers'. In 1827, Wilcox made his way into the Miju country, as far as the point 'where the Brahmaputra after flowing nearly due south from Tibet suddenly changes its course and flows in a westerly direction', but the notorious Chief Jingsha forced him to retreat. Ten years later, Griffith succeeded in penetrating as far as the village of Ghalum on the Lohit, but was unable to enter the Miju hills. In 1845 Rowlett went up the Du river as far as Tuppang, where he met a number of Tibetans. Early in 1848, a Hindu ascetic, Parmanand Acharya, whose name may be remembered with the Christian ascetics who suffered after him, was killed by Miju followers of Jingsha.

Father Krick, however, was undismayed, and alone and on foot, with his cross, his flute, sextant and medicine-chest, worked his way up the Brahmaputra and part of the Lohit. At Saikwa he obtained the services of a Khampti Chief as guide and pressed on through the 'rugged, grand but uncultured' mountains of the Mijus. After passing through the friendly villages, so Dalton tells us, he appears to have been guided so as to avoid the hostile clans, but on passing near the home of the formidable Jingsha, a young girl significantly pointed out to him the spot where the pilgrim from India had not long before been massacred, and intimated that a like fate awaited him if he were caught.

However, Father Krick succeeded in reaching the Tibetan settlement of Oualong, and was well received there, and was able to go forward to Sommeu or Samar, in a well-watered and well-cultivated valley not far from Rima, a small Tibetan administrative centre. All went well at first, but presently the Father's resources were exhausted and the people, once the novelty of his arrival was over, were not inclined to support him gratuitously and he was asked to leave the country. On the way back, he stopped at Jingsha's village, where he was roughly treated, but was fortunately able to cure a sick member of the family and was allowed to leave without injury.

After returning to the plains, Father Krick paid a visit to Membu, an important village of the Padam Abors, and then in January 1854 he set out again for Tibet, this time accompanied by Father Bourri, and, escorted by a friendly Mishmi Chief, reached Samar within seven months. The travellers successfully crossed the pass at the head of the valley to Zayul, but had to turn back from Makonglang as the weather was against them and their Mishmi guides refused to go further. They returned down the Du river and went up the Tellu instead.

Unhappily, the Fathers managed to offend a powerful Digaru Mishmi Chief, whose name is spelt variously in the records as Kaisa, Kahesha and Kai-ee-sha. This was not, apparently, their fault. They had invited Kaisa to take them over the Tho Chu Pass and had promised him money and guns as reward. But another Chief double-crossed Kaisa and got the reward instead, at the same time ensuring that the Fathers did not pay the expected friendly visit to Kaisa's house. The angry Chief followed the Fathers into Tibet and killed them as they came up the Tellu path by the mouth of the Tho Chu. He carried off their property and took their Singpho servant as a slave.

The following year, under orders from Lord Dalhousie, a small party of the Assam Light Infantry, with Khampti volunteers and porters, led by Lieutenant F. G. Eden, set out from Sadiya. 'For eight days,' says Mackenzie, 'this little band pressed on by forced marches, swinging across dangerous torrents on bridges of single canes, climbing for hours at a time without water and in bitter cold, till in the grey dawn of a misty morning Kaisa was surprised and captured in his village on the Du, his elder sons slain in open fight,

his people dispersed and the murdered Frenchmen to the full avenged.' Kaisa was tried and hanged at Dibrugarh (Dalton says it was Calcutta, but appears to be mistaken), but not before he had killed two of the guards who were watching him in the jail.

Father Krick's own account of his first Tibetan journey and his visit to the Abor Hills was published in Paris with the title *Relation d'un Voyage au Tibet* in 1854. The parts of it relating to the Abors were translated into English and published in the *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal* for 1913, and selections from this are reproduced later in this book.

In this relation Father Krick reveals himself as a witty, kindly person, a keen observer, a vivid and entertaining writer, and a man of unusual devotion and courage.

Father Krick claims that he was the first person to penetrate into the Abor country, although several agents of the East India Company had tried to do so. For the Padams were not anxious to receive visitors, especially English visitors. If once we allow Englishmen to enter our country, they said, they are sure to have an army at their heels. Father Krick entertains himself over his efforts to prove that he is a perfectly good Frenchman, a priest with no territorial ambitions, who has nothing to do with the English. But in tribal opinion, he observes, 'any white skin, any nose somewhat protruding, is of English make'.

Father Krick was not correct in supposing himself to be the first foreigner to visit the Abor area. Bedford and Wilcox were there in 1825-6, and in 1847 there had been a friendly conference of Padams and British Officers. But he was correct in stressing the tension between the Abors and Government, for from 1850 onwards there were a number of outrages and punitive expeditions. It is curious that in 1855, only two years after Father Krick, Colonel Dalton should have visited Membu in the company of Lieutenant Eden. He has left an account of it which differs in several particulars from that of the priest.

Father Krick was evidently a very human as well as a very courageous person. When we read his summary of the character of his hosts (and his impressions are far more sympathetic than those of many of his contemporaries) we cannot help suspecting that he himself had the same sort of virtues. 'The Padam,' he says, 'is very active, jolly, a lover of freedom and independence, generous,

noble-hearted, plain-spoken, more honest than the average Oriental, not over-moderate in eating and drinking, at least as far as quantity is concerned. . . . He seems to possess much of the child's simplicity, and Membu is undoubtedly less corrupt than Paris.'

*J. F. Needham*

J. F. Needham had the unique distinction of serving for no less than twenty-three years in Sadiya. Belonging originally to the Bengal Police, he was posted to Assam as Assistant Political Officer in Sadiya in 1882 and did not leave the place until the end of 1905. In time he came to be regarded as the earliest of the advisers to Government on tribal affairs. He made many expeditions, though not so many as he desired, for he was considered rather too adventurous—'he had a dash', it was said—and a little too free with the people. In 1885-6 he visited the Mishmi Hills and nearly reached Rima, travelling without escort and following the route of Fathers Krick and Bourri who had been murdered in the Zayul Valley thirty years before. The following year he visited the Hukong Valley. In 1891 he crossed the Patkoi Range to Burma. In 1893 he went as Political Officer with the military expedition into the Abor Hills, and was blamed for a lack of foresight and a spirit of over-confidence which led to the disastrous massacre at Bordak. In 1899, he again accompanied an expedition (the Bebejiya Mishmi Expedition) which came in for severe criticism, this time from Lord Curzon himself, though he himself was praised.

Needham was a voluminous, lively and careless writer. The reports on his various expeditions are always worth reading. He was interested in linguistics and wrote outline grammars of the languages spoken by the Sadiya Miris, the Singphos, the Khamptis of the Sadiya area, and he made brief studies of the Digaru and Moshang Naga vocabularies.

*William Robinson*

William Robinson, an educationalist of the Gauhati Government Seminary, published his first work on Assam in 1841. In the fashion of the day it had a long and sonorous title: *Descriptive Account of Asam: with a sketch of the Local Geography, and a concise*

*History of The Tea-Plant of Asam: to which is added, a Short Account of the Neighbouring Tribes, exhibiting their History, Manners and Customs.* Robnson was very interested in philology, and during the next fifteen years he published, on each occasion in the *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal*, a series of articles on the Abor, Khampti, Konyak, Singpho, Dafla and Mishmi languages.

The *Descriptive Account* is well written and its picture of the frontier tribes is lively and informative, though most of Robnson's contemporaries were probably more interested in his chapter on tea, that 'polyandrous plant of the natural order Ternstiomicae'. Indeed Robnson declares in his preface that the subject is one of acknowledged interest. 'The daily increasing importance of Asam, and the conspicuous position it begins to hold as the scene of great commercial advantages to British India' render an account of the province a 'great desideratum'.

But Robnson's literary objective was not merely to bring 'this highly valuable province into more general notice'. Should his book 'even in the most distant manner lead to an improvement in the moral, as well as the temporal condition of the people, he will consider the labour bestowed on it, more than repaid'. The *Descriptive Account* is, in fact, one of the first of the gazetteers; it devotes chapters to climate and to the effect of climate on man, to geology, botany and zoology, to historical and political geography, to productive industry and to the civil and social state of the Assamese. The hill tribes are discussed in a separate and final section.

Robnson's knowledge was fullest for the Mishmis and Nagas. Except for a brief account of the Khasis and Garos, he confines himself largely to the frontier tribes. He frankly admits his ignorance, however, and indeed the general ignorance, of such tribes as the Akas, and he has likewise little to tell us of the Daflas.

#### R. Wilcox

R. Wilcox carried out a number of surveys in Assam during the four years 1825 to 1828 and gave an account of them in a *Memoir* which was published in the 17th volume of *Asiatic Researches* (1832). This was reprinted in *Selections from the Records of the Bengal Secretariat*, No. 23, in 1855. Wilcox was an intrepid explorer and in his 1826 expedition succeeded in penetrating the Mishmi country

three-quarters of the way to Rima; fifty years later Cooper did not get so far. Sir James Johnstone describes him thus:

Wilcox was one of the giants of old, men who with limited resources did a vast amount of work among wild people and said little about it, being contented with doing their duty. In 1828, accompanied by Lieutenant Burton, and ten men belonging to the Sudya Khamptis (Shans), he penetrated to the Bor Khamptis' country, far beyond our borders, an exploit not repeated till after our annexation of Upper Burmah.

### III.

IN editing these extracts I have preserved as far as possible the original spelling, even though this results in many inconsistencies, and punctuation in order to emphasize the fact that they come from another age, which looked on tribal people with a different eye to ours. Very few of our writers indulged in the luxury of footnotes, and I have not included any of the originals; all footnotes should, therefore, be regarded as my own contribution.

Some confusion may be caused by the indiscriminate use of tribal names by the earlier writers, who used words like 'Abor' or 'Naga' as if they meant 'hillman' or 'tribesman'. This is specially true of the word 'Naga', which they applied to a number of tribes which we do not classify as Naga today.

I must express my obligation to the *Bibliography of Ethnology of Assam*, compiled in 1952 by J. P. Mills, on which I have inevitably drawn in the compilation of the select book-list at the end of this volume. I received every possible assistance from my friend B. S. Kesavan, Librarian of the National Library, and his staff, and from L. N. Chakravarty. I am grateful to the Asiatic Society for permission to reprint the extract from Father Krick's writings, translated into English by Father Gille, which appeared in the *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal* in 1913.

V.E.

Shillong

October 1955