

The Rev. Thomas Augustus Firminger, The Celebrated Indian Botanist and Chaplain of Guwahati and Sylhet 1866-1867

S. K. Austin John

Introduction

The Rev. S.B. Taylor, M.A. Chaplain, All Saints Shillong, in his "Ecclesiastical Report", of Lower Assam written in 1880 mentions that Rev. T.A. Firminger, "The celebrated Indian Botanist", joined appointment as Chaplain of Guwahati and Sylhet in 1866 and was in charge for about 18 months, residing part of the time at the newly opened station of Shillong. Taylor's remark "The celebrated Botanist", roused by curiosity about Mr. Firminger, But I could not find any more information about him in the Church records. A few days ago I was browsing through my collection of old books and I chanced, on a book, presented by Dr. & Mrs. H. J. Taylor, "Firminger's Gardening in India" and to my delight I found it to have been written by Rev. T.A. Firminger. It is quite a voluminous book containing some 650 pages. The book was first published in 1863 and by 1874 it went into third edition and by 1904 it saw the fifth edition and the sixth edition was brought out in 1918. I am not aware of any subsequent editions. The 1918 edition has a few pages on the life of the Author, written by his son the Rev. Walter Kelly Firminger, who was Vicar of Kidderpore, Calcutta in 1904 and in 1909 to 1911 was Chaplain of All Saints' Church, Shillong and later was appointed the Ven. Archdeacon of the Diocese of Assam in 1916. The life of Rev. T.A. Firminger is interesting. He lived in some tense and anxious times in the history of our country. Through it all he found time to indulge in varied interests unconnected with his profession. I wish to share his life story with the readers.

Thomas Augustus Firminger

Thomas Augustus Firminger was born in the Parish of St. Pancras in 1812. He was the eldest of 13 children born to Dr.

Thomas Firminger of Kent and Elizebeth Shepherd. "Dr. Thomas Firminger was a Scientist in London and acted as deputy to the Royal Astronomer, N. Maskalyne, whose sister had married Lord Clive. He lived at Edmonton, which, at that time was a country place in the suburb of London. The family lived in a house named "Warren Lodge". The house had spacious grounds with good garden and Rev. T.A. Firminger looked after the garden with care and tenderness. Moreover in the house there were many scientific implements. Firminger, thus, grew up in this atmosphere. His college at Cambridge was Pembroke, where he took his degree in 1837 and was ordained as Curate of Sittingborne in Kent. In 1846 and this probably is the date when the ship in which he journeyed, reached Diamond Harbour in India. Bishop Wilson, of Calcutta and Metropolitan of India, placed him in Saugor (Sagar) in the Central Province, for six months and then posted him to Forezepur in the Punjab. He was there during the anxious and very tense period of the Second Sikh War (1848-49). He narrated the anxiety and experience and tension of the war in his Sermon preached in St. Andrews Church, Ferozepur, during its inauguration in 1854.

Firminger the Hidden Artist

In 1854 Firminger visited the historical cities of Northern India and took note of the gardens, their layout, fruits, flowers, trees and natural sceneries. He recorded these in oil and water colour pictures and pencil sketches. These drawings were beautiful and worth exhibiting to public. But the artist would not like to show it to people. Perhaps he considered them to be private as they were done for his own pleasure and relaxation. However he was once persuaded to send two small oil paintings of native crafts on the Hugli. His son remarks "Although the pictures were hung in a place "On the line", which would have excited most artists to further achievements, yet he would not consent to exhibit his work again. He would not allow any of his pictures to be hung in the house save in his two studies and dressing room". These paintings remained closed up in a bureau all through his life time and when they were opened for view, they were very much appreciated and were rated high by the viewers.

Firminger the Cook

Firminger was much interested in India cooking and being a practical kind of a person, must have experimented in considerable

amount of cooking, which would have been rather unusual during that period of time. His son writes, "In one of his letters he (Firminger), refers to his art as a cook" and further says "It is perhaps worth mentioning that he left behind him, at his death, a collection of carefully written recipes". Hence one can legitimately suppose that, at one time, he may have had the intention of writing a book on Indian cooking, somewhat similar to the book he wrote on gardening in India. One is left to wonder if those recipes were ever made public.

Firminger and 1857

In 1854 Firminger took his first furlough and went to England. He took temporary charge of Bapchild parish in Kent and here he met his future wife. In May 1856 he married Georgiana second daughter of Rev. John Buchner. He had seven children from this marriage. In October 1856 the newly married couple set sail for India and arrived at Calcutta in early 1857 a year referred to as "Year of Ineffable Disaster and Horror". To his good fortune Firminger was not sent to Ferozapur to his old station, for "In May 1857, the two native regiments at Ferozepur mutinied and in spite of the presence of British regiments destroyed the Cantonment and memorial Church of St. Andrews". Instead he was sent to Howrah where save on "Panic Sunday", when railway men went to Church armed, situation though tense was under control. Firminger remarks "The mutiny inspired indignation rather than fear". His son writes "An old Calcutta resident indeed has told me that in her memory Calcutta was nearer to a panic during the plague riot of 1897-98, than it was even in 1857". On "Panic Sunday" Firminger preached on a text found in Isaiah "In quietness and confidence shall be your strength". May be because of his earlier experience in Ferozepur during the "2nd Sikh War" he was not perturbed by the tension all around.

At Howrah Firminger lived quite close to the famous Botanical Gardens which were in the care of his friend Mr. Errington. Another friend was Mr. Stalker who helped him with his book on gardening. In February 1859 Firminger's health broke down and he and his wife were sent on sick leave to "Nelly Grey" Hills- the Nilghiries.. Here he got the opportunities of visiting and studying the gardens at Cotaoamund under the care of Mr. Mcivor. By now he had become the senior Chaplain and on his return from the south he was placed

at Chinsurah, which during these days was an important Military depot for Bengal. It is nicely situated. Thorton's Gazatteer of India published in 1858 records that the site of Chinsurah "Is said to be better than that of Calcutta and it is considered one of the healthiest in Bengal. However a few years later the Military Depot was removed and "The imposing barracks turned into Kutcherry". Chinsurah in those days had one of the best cared for botanical gardens in India. Firminger's house in Chinsurah had spacious land with lovely garden stocked with Indian and English fruits and flowers.

Sometime at this period Firminger had accompanied a wing of the 35th West Morland Regiment in the Bhutan expeditionary force in Assam and he met Rev. Sydney Endle of Tezpur who writes - "Rev. Firminger was present at the taking of the Fort Dewanpur, a place of importance and did good service there".

Firminger the Indian Botanist

He was not an academic type of botanist. He loved flowers, vegetables, fruits, orchids, ferns etc. and liked to do his own gardening. He was a keen gardener. All the knowledge he gathered on plants was mostly through observation and practical experience. He learnt a lot by visiting Botanical Gardens and other private gardens in India. He had gathered books and periodicals in gardening and adapted their methods to his needs. He also made careful study of the lay out of gardens. He writes "By residence of several years in Ferozepur I had made myself well acquainted with the cultivation of a garden in the North West Provinces, when, on removal to Howrah by the practical knowledge I acquired in my garden as well as by observation of what was done in others I had the means of visiting, I became thoroughly conversent with the practice of gardening as applicable to Bengal. The ready access also that I then had both to the Govt. Botanical Gardens and to those of the Agri - Horticultural Society, served to put within my reach much very important information concerning numerous plants, which I could not otherwise have obtained. The appointment, moreover, I had during six years as one of the judges at the Horticultural shows at Calcutta served to render me familiar with the finest productions of the country in the way of vegetables, fruits, and flowers exhibited there during the colder months". He being a gardener himself wrote "No one should allow himself to

suppose that he can have a well kept, well cultivated garden without being, to a considerable extent, his own head gardener. A garden left entirely in the hands of a Mali will invariably be found in that dirty, neglected state so noticeable in the compounds around most European residence in India. It is useless to give only general orders to a native servant. The owner must, from time to time scrutinize each particular operation of the garden".

In the eighteen fifties, no single, comprehensive book on Indian gardening was available, Firminger writes "It was not till, after every inquiry possible, I had ascertained that there was no prospect whatever of a work of the kind being undertaken by some other hand that I resolved upon commencing one myself, and placing before the public such amount of information as, during my hours of recreation and leasure, I have been able to collect upon the subject". However Firminger was so reticent in this venture that even his wife did not discover that he was writing a book till about 1860.

In 1863, Firminger having seen the book through to press, left India on eighteen months' medical leave on 9th March 1863, with his family. The leave was extended by short periods till January 1866 where, he left his family and returned to complete the short period of service due before retirement and pension. During this time he was appointed Chaplain of Guwahati and Sylhet by Bishop Cotton. The last event in this short period was the tragic demise of Bishop Cotton. "Bishop Cotton, on his return from a visit to Guwahati, in going on board the river steamer at Khustia, lost his footing and met with his tragic death".

On January 9, 1868 Firminger retired from the service and made his home at Warren Cottage, in Edmonton.

Amid his various pursuits, he never let his scholarship to grow rusty. Till the last he continued to read, and made some geological charts. He died on eighteenth January 1884. A few hours before his last sickness, he had been reading a Greek play, and by the side of the play were neatly arranged a file of papers covered with some astronomy problems and charts.

"His days began early; even in winter time, before it was light, he would be out working in his garden. Painting, music and light reading, as well as some serious works in sciences ... In his remain-

ing days he lived very much to himself. His belief was in a God of Truth and Beauty; and everything which bore the stamp of Truth and beauty was honoured by him as God's good creation".

Early in January 1884, he went to London and called on a friend. he spoke very clearly to his friends about his death which he instinctively felt to be close at hand. On January fifteen he was taken ill and on eighteenth he passed peacefully to his rest. He was buried in the grave where the bodies of his father and mother are resting, in the churchyard of All Saints' Edmonton.

References

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