

Westmacott's "History of Assam"

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That George Edward Westmacott, Junior Assistant of the Agent to the Governor General, North East Frontier for only a few months from 19 November 1833 to 29 March 1835 during which he wrote his three volume "History of Assam" in 1834, is an indication of his interest in history. This young officer, like many of his contemporary military and civil officers made efforts to study the people and the area they governed. Indeed, much of the initial studies in Indian history on more scientific methods of enquiry and presentation were generated by men of his genre. Though one may not agree with their orientation and approach, that they did leave a whole corpus of a variety of history is worthy of mention and reference.

In his short life (1807-1841) Westmacott did much as a soldier, administration and author. He arrived India in August 1823 as an Ensign, was promoted Lieutenant two years later and was Captain by 1833. In this army rank he served in civil employ in Assam and after a well deserved extended furlough (March 1835-March 1839) he rejoined the 37 Native Infantry in Sind, saw action in the First Afghan War where he was killed in action at the retaking of Rikabashi Fort on 10 November 1841.¹ Not much more is known of his military service. Westmacott had a flair for writing. His first attempt at writing history was a paper, "Description of Ancient Temples and Ruins at Chandwar in Assam", which appeared in one of the early issues of the *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal*.² While in Assam he wrote three volumes of his "History of Assam". In all probability Westmacott used the greater part of his furlough to write and publish his more enduring work *The Present and Future Prospects of our Indian Empire*, 8 volumes, London 1838. While on leave he also added four volumes to his "History of Assam", which, for reasons I shall explain, were not published.

The relationship between Westmacott and Dr. James Edward Crombie who bequeathed the manuscripts to Aberdeen University³ is not known, nor, how the seven volumes got into his collection. Crombie (MA of Aberdeen University, 1882) was a prominent figure

in the commercial and industrial activity of this "granite city"- He served the University as Reactor's Assessor from 1900 to 1908 and as the Chancellor's Assessor from 1913 to 1932. He was a member of the University Court and held other positions.⁴

Volume one of the "History" it appears has some pages missing in the beginning which is a pity, as the purpose for writing the history and the division of the writing into seven volumes just might have been explained in these lost pages. The volume begins with long quotations from Tavernier on "Kemmeroo" (Kamrup), Capt. Welsh, M. Martin and F. Buchanan whose reports were available in print for incorporation into Westmacott's "History" without any alterations. Of these reports that of Captain Welsh, covers more than half of the manuscript. The extracts of this report covers letters to Lord Cornwallis, notes on Koch Rajas of Darrang and Kamrup, short notice of Khyrim, Beltola, Ranee, the Singphos, Moamarias, Abors, Mishmis, Khamtis, Miris, the Khasyas of Khyee as some then referred to the tribe. This volume concludes with notes on the Garos. Occasionally Westmacott strays from long quotations to provide useful information, such as "prices current of Gauhati in Lower Assam for May 1832". Salt was Rs. 4,9 annas per maund; fine sugar Rs. 10; coarse sugar Rs. 7 and ghee cost Rs.18. Mustard oil could be purchased for Rs. 6, 12 annas, table rice Rs.1,3 annas while *ruha* dal and *moong* dal at Rs. 3,8 annas and Re. 1 per maund respectively, 3 maunds of paddy fetched Re. 1 in the Gauhati market. Another entry that is of interest is the trade between Assam and Rangpur.

The second volume continues from where volume 1 ends with the Garos. Westmacott refers to John Eliot, Thomas Sisson and David Scott who had made earlier made reports on the tribe. The account, however, is very sketch. So also are the two pages on the Nagas. Page 21 to the end of Volume II again has complete lifting of material from F. Buchanan's account of Assam.

Westmacott's own history begins in volume III. There is no theme or continuity. Rather each chapter or entry is on a specific aspect of those times. It starts with eight pages on the Assam Light Infantry and rambles on to Rangpur, Darrang, and the saltwells at Borkat. A fairly large entry is to be read on Purandhar Singh, Darrang Rajas and Rangpur and Ahom customs. He mentions the beginnings of stamp duties, Naoduar and vocabulary of various dialects. Tula Ram's (Senapati) country is dismissed in two pages. A

second and more detailed account of Purandhar Singh has interesting notices on Ahom royal customs. Another of Assam's unfortunate monarchs Chandrakanta Singh brings up the conclusion with the disturbances of 1830.

Volume 4 begins with 14 pages on officers of State under the Ahoms. Westmacott next makes two interesting references to gold washing in Central Assam and Raha. For my own research the six page on human sacrifice in Jaintia gave details not found elsewhere.⁵ This volume has an interesting one page note on the Census of 1829. Completed in that year the census covered the area from the Bengal frontier to Charduar on both banks. The enumeration showed a population of 4,00,000 souls "but through some mistake it was omitted to count the females of Nowgoan who would probably swell the number to 4,50,000." There are not many illustration in the "History". Volume 4, however, has some drawings of drums used at the Bihu festival and bamboo splits. Other entries in this volume are Bishwanath prices current, 1834; an account of the plains Miris; administration of Assam in 1834 and Gauhati covered between pages 160-173, and therefore useful to historians and geographers.

Volume 5 has extracts from Buchanan's manuscript. Pages 1-114 of Westmacott's "History" are really word for word from Buchanan's study. Then from pages 115-117 is 3 Westmacott's brief narration of Muslim invasion of Assam. This is followed by two entries on currency in Assam (pages 118-121 and 134-136). There being three types of rupees in circulation, Westmacott informs that the "Furrockabad" rupee was ordered to circulate in Assam. Two other currencies used are mentioned, the "Narayunee" 1/2 rupee and "Rajahmuhree" rupee.⁶ Of all the volumes of the "History", this has the second half divided to Assam's economy with references to revenue settlement in Lower Assam, Darrang Settlement, Revenue particulars, Lower Assam and the revenue system in the "Khasia duars". The revenue of entire Assam then under the Company rule in Furrockabad rupees was 400, 893; Lower Assam contributing Rs. 1,60,000; Kamrup Rs. 19,434; Annual Tribute of Raja of Upper Assam Rs. 52,156, Rangpur provided a revenue of Rs. 174, 855.⁷

Revenue system of Lower Assam (pages 22-55) is given prominence in Vol. 6. The Officer also took note of the condition of Assam's roads (Aswa Kranta, Rajwar and Darrang roads); opium in

Assam; short accounts of the Kacharis and Daflas; Darrang Raja, duties, prices in Darrang markets; Darrang Khels and a fairly detailed account of Ahom relations with Bhutias, Bhutia blackmail; the *Posa* legend and descriptions on coins. The last volume relates to a raid on Balipara stockades; Dafla blackmail; Naoduar, Naoduar *khels* and castes; the Pani Koch, the Rabhas, the Ahom government of Lower Assam and one page on the Rajas of Kamrup brings these handwritten volumes to conclusion.

The "History" was not meant for publication in the shape it is in. Westmacott had used much of earlier writer's information on Assam and its people and neighbouring tribes which explains the great and often repitative detail. In this sense Westmacott has not contributed any originality. The importance of these volumes however are the footnotes and references that the author provides - many of which archival and other primary sources do not mention. His notes on revenue, census figures, prices of items in different towns, scattered over these volumes gives first hand information prevailing in the early 1830s. Another use of these volumes are the sources Westmacott refers to, particularly some newspapers and journals that have not been utilised by present researches. Some of these were *The Oriental Observer*, *The Asiatic Register* and *The Oriental Herald*.

The seven volumes of Westmacott's "History of Assam" should be made available to researchers. Located in a library not easily accessible to readers and researchers in the history of Assam and North-East India, it would be appreciated should steps be taken to make this informative manuscript part of the history of Assam, which till now it is not.

Notes and references

1. V.C.P. Hodson (Comp.), *List of the Officers of the Bengal Army 1758-1834*, Part IV, London, 1947, p. 431.
2. *J.A.S.B.*, Vol. IV, 1835, pp. 185-196.
3. The volumes are available for consultation in the Department of Special Collections and Archives, King's College, University of Aberdeen, under catalogue entry AUL MS 2217. The visit to King's College was met from the Special Assistance Programme of the History Department, NEHU and a British Council grant.

4. *The Aberdeen University Review*, Vol, XX, Aberdeen University Press, 1933, pp. 37-38; *Roll of the Graduates of the University of Aberdeen 1901-1925*, Aberdeen University Press, 1935, p. 754.
5. It is intended to edit in an anthology all the early references in the English language on the Khasi-Jaintia Garos. Extracts from these volumes will be incorporated after permission is given for its publication by the University of Aberdeen.
6. The Farrukhabad coin of the East India Company was minted in the name of the last Mughal emperor. The "Narayunee 1/2" rupee was a Koch coin and the "Rajahmohree" rupee an Ahom currency.
7. A calculation of the sum total of the Assam revenue shows a discrepancy of Rs. 1 between collection and total indicated.