

The Last Days of David Scott

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David Scott is too well known to those interested in the history of north-east India to require any account of his work in the region. What is not quite familiar is the man's last days. Neither of the two biographies on Scott, Adam White's, *A Memoir of the Late David Scott* and Nirode K. Barooah's, *David Scott in North-East India* have much to say on what this paper attempts to recapture. This paper, therefore is not an attempt to refute or argue on any point but to recall Scott's dedication to work, as a result of which his health failed, his attempts at self medication, the concern at Calcutta of losing Scott and his final hours of agony.

The last years of Scott's life were mainly spent in the Khasi hills. He had an opportunity to reside in these hills when he first traversed through them in 1824 to open negotiations with Ram Singh, the Jaintia Raja and the Khasi *Syiems* of Nongkhlaw and Cherra for the construction of a road through the hills to connect Sylhet and Assam. Delighted with its salubrious climate he not only brought it to the notice of Government as offering very desirable situations for sanatory stations for Europeans but was able to secure permission from Tirot Singh for the construction of a house at Nongkhlaw "to eat the Europe air."¹ After a year's residence there he was affected by a severe sickness that affected other Europeans and Khasis.² Nongkhlaw was therefore ruled out for further development as a health resort for Europeans though Scott continued to be based there. Attention was then directed to start a sanatory station and cantonment for European troops at Cherrapunji.

Scott escaped death many a time. He survived the carnage of Nongkhlaw of 4-5 April 1829 as he had left for Cherrapunji a few days earlier in connection with the construction of the road. Many other attempts were made by the Khasis to take his life. What saved Scott from a more untimely death were the pre-

monitions of danger that made him take precaution in never staying in a place where he would suffer the fate of Bedingfield and Burlton. Scott was always to be seen with his double barrelled guns and swords in those days.³ The suppression of the Khasi insurrection, the problems of administering newly acquired Assam, the Garo Hills with bordering Goalpara and Mymensingh and Sylhet took much of Scott's time. As if this was not enough work he busied himself in encouraging missionaries to set up schools and missions while he himself planned the economic development of the hills and the expansion of the British base at Cherrapunji. Fruit trees and vegetables of various description were written for from Calcutta, cattle to improve the local breed, sheep to be reared at Barduar, roads were planned and bridges were to be constructed. These experiments and plans were made not only to improve the lot of the Khasis but more important from a political point of view was his intention that a large European colony of around ten thousand persons could live in these hills permanently, not very different from what they could be used to in England.⁴

Such a wide variety of responsibility and interests involved much travel. Rough horse rides up and down the hills into Assam and Sylhet to attend to his official duties as Agent to the Governor-General on the north-east frontier of Bengal and as Commissioner of revenue and circuit of Assam, North-East Rangpur, Sherpur and Sylhet were a tiring affair, especially so as Scott was inclined to corpulency.⁵ His bulky figure, however, did not deter him from his duties nor did the sultry climate of the plains. Being a bachelor he had no attachment for home, which for him was where he attended to duty. Consequently he was over working himself.⁶

Scott had a heart disease which required him to sleep in a sitting position and frequently prevented him from sleeping at all. Although he could scarcely walk from the palpitations of his heart, which he seldom attempted, he continued to keep a busy official schedule with long and difficult journeys. He would often begin work at sunrise and would remain in the *kutcherry* until sunset, under the warmth of his blanket for he never used fires.⁷ Sometime in 1830 he wrote from Nongkhlaw to Dr. Lamb in Cherrapunji seeking his advice whether he should proceed to Calcutta for a sea journey or to go to a place of colder climate. But, this incredibly con-

scientific officer answered his own question "that the urgency of my business there is not, however, so great as to induce me to go."⁸

By June 1831, Scott's conditions worsened. In a letter to his friend George Swinton, Chief Secretary of Government, Scott wrote :

*I arrived here (Nongkhlaw) the day before yesterday in hope of obtaining some relief from the distressing symptoms I have been laboring under for the last four or five weeks. During this time a great change has taken place, I fear for the work and something of consequence, must, I apprehend have happened to the structure of the heart itself, the motion being now very different from what it was, and the throbbing consisting rather in a general movement of the whole body than in the direct beating of the heart.... I cannot sleep, I am troubled with frequent sickness at stomach, and am exhausted with the least exertion.*⁹

All these symptoms appeared about 10 May after he had taken too large a dose of hydrocynnic acid which he had hoped would cure the stomach disorder.¹⁰ Two days later he wrote a post script that no change for the better had taken place and that he thought of going over to Cherrapunji although he feared that the doctors there could do little.¹¹ Some weeks later, still at Nongkhaw he wrote to Swinton again that he had a good appetite and was able to sleep but complained of a terrible swelling in his legs.¹² His friends at Calcutta advised him to leave the hills and take a sea voyage but Scott intended to remain at Nongkhlaw and consider the sea voyage until matters were settled in Assam. By then he was unable to hold sessions at Sylhet and Goalpara for he was bedridden.¹³

Swinton, who was in sad alarm that some day Scott would be no more, and Dr. Nicholson at Calcutta were expecting Scott's arrival in the Presidency, but so too was Dr. Rhodes at Cherrapunji. The torrential rains that the hills were then experiencing, it was believed, must have prevented Scott from moving from Nongkhlaw.¹⁴ Nicholson, therefore, proposed that Scott should not leave the hills. Swinton who must have wished to see his old classmate hoped "that his valuable life and services will not be lost to us."¹⁵ We do not know when Scott moved to Cherrapunji but that he did do so is no doubt for Swinton had heard from Cherrapunji that Scott had left

the hills very ill.¹⁶ The journey from his cottage at Nong-khlaw to Cherrapunji must have weakened the man as a result of which he could not descend the hills and had to spend his last days in Cherrapunji.

Two of Scott's last letters were written from Cherrapunji. The first of these informed Government that he was unable to perform his official duties.¹⁷ The other to a near relation residing in Calcutta and dated 14 August 1831 was written in a tone of cheerfulness in every way calculated to allay the apprehensions that his friends feared.¹⁸ His last words so typical of the man were, "I wish you gentleman," he told Colonel Watson, Dr. Rhodes and Lt. Day, "to bear witness to Government that I am no longer able to conduct that affairs of the country."¹⁹

David Scott passed away a few minutes after 6 o'clock in the morning of 20 August 1831 at the age of 45 years. He was buried on the evening of his death on a hillock in the British settlement in Cherrapunji by the side of Ensign Brodie. The funeral was attended by all at the station and with full military honours. Dr Rhodes conducted a post mortem before the burial to find out the exact cause of the death as the case of Scott was a peculiar one that had excited considerable interest. Rhodes recollected that Scott had himself wished such an examination be made. The body was excessively yellow, the legs and scrotum much distended, the cellular membranes of the chest and neck very much discoloured with extravasated blood especially about the neck and the hands particularly the fingers were nearly black. Upon opening the body Rhodes found the heart larger than usual and very pale, weighing 1 pound 7 ounces when freed from all blood. He examined the aorta down to its bifurcation at the loins, but found no enlargement. On removing the heart, found on dissection, the right auricle of the usual size and the tricuspid valve healthy, as were also the right ventricle and semi lunar valves of the pulmonary artery. The left auricle was enlarged, as was the ventricle, and the walls of the latter much thickened.

Rhodes' post-mortem report continues :

I now come to the seat of the disease, and cause of the patient's death. On attempting to pass my fingers along the aorta, I found it obstructed at the semilunar by a bony substance and on examination found all the valves of the

aorta ossified, and the vessel itself almost totally blocked up by a honey-comb like bony substance, leaving a space of about 1/4 of an inch in length, and the width of a probe for the passage of blood.

The diagram to the above account further mentioned that all traces of the semilunar valves were lost. In cutting into the abdomen about two pints of bloody serum was discharged, part of which had escaped from the chest through an opening made in the diaphragm. The liver was enormously enlarged, of a very black colour and when cut into showed itself loaded with dark blood and bile. The head was not examined. These ailments therefore accounted for Scott's death which had been so perceptible for years and the extent of which these concretions had gone rendered it surprising how he could have existed so long.²⁰

Few early British administrators have received as much attention as Scott's death did for him. *The India Gazette* in an official notice of his death said that he was "a most zealous, faithful and intelligent public servant."²¹ One of his close associates from Rangpur wrote in the *Bengal Hurkara* and *Bengal Chronicle* that "to the sharpest and brightest intellect added a winning simplicity of character, combined with a benignity so deep and searching,..... to the great extent of his charity and the singleness of his purpose in everything he undertook."²² His successor as Agent, William Cracroft, who had known Scott since their student days at Fort William College, Calcutta, hoped he would be no unworthy successor of "so bright a character" and "one possessed of talents and judgement."²³ Swinton's one hope was that Government would authorise a simple monument to be erected over his grave in token of its regret of the loss of so fine an officer.²⁴ Close to the Circuit House at Cherrapunji still stands this monument, one of the very few memorials built for Company servants on which is inscribed :

This monument is erected by order of the Supreme Government as a public and lasting record of its consideration of the personal character of the deceased and of its estimation of the eminent services rendered by him in the administration of the extensive territory committed to his charge. By his demise Government has been deprived of a most zealous, able, and intelligent servant, whose loss it

*deeply laments, while his name will long be held in grateful remembrance and veneration by the native population, to whom he was justly endeared, by his impartial dispensation of justice, his kind and conciliatory manners, and his constant endeavours to promote their happiness and welfare.*²⁴

References

1. 'Cherrapunji', *Asiatic Journal*, Vol. XXI, 1836, p. 17 ; A White, *A Memoir of the Late David Scott*, p. 37.
2. R. B. Pemberton, *Report on the Eastern Frontier of British India*, p. 255.
3. A. White, *Op. cit.*, p. 40-49
4. A. White, *op. cit.*, pp. 26, 38 ; Bentinck Papers (Nottingham University), PWJF 2791/1, Scott to Swinton, 21 July 1830 ; PWJF 2820/IV, Scott to Swinton, 6 December 1830 ; PWJF, 2811/XI, Scott to Watson, 2 June 1831 ; National Archives of India, Foreign Political Consultations, 10 February 1826, No. 15, Scott to Swinton, 83 January 1826.
5. *Ibid.* App. 40, p. 133.
6. Scott appears to have had Colonel A. Watson who was with him in Cherrapunji as a 'cousin and friend ; a near relative at Calcutta and a brother in Scotland. He did not appear to have gone home on leave any time during his career in India. *Ibid.*, App. 37 ; N. K. Barooah, *David Scott in North-East India*, p. 8.
7. *Ibid.*, App. 5, Appi 40.
8. *Ibid.*, App. 17.
9. Bentinck Papers, PWJF 2811/XXV, Scott to Swinton, 12 June 1831.
10. *Ibid.*
11. *Ibid.*
12. Bentinck Papers, PWJF, 2811/XIX, Scott to Swinton, 24 July 1831.
13. *Ibid.*
14. Bentinck Papers, PWJF 2811/XXII, Swinton to R. Benson (Military Secretary to William Bentinck), 1 June 1831 ; PWJF 2811/XXVII, Swinton to Benson, 14 July 1831 ; PWJF 2811/XXVI, Swinton to Benson, 9 July 1831.

15. Bentinck Papers, PWJF 2781/XXXV, Swinton to Benson, 26 July 1831.
16. Ibid., XXXVI, Swinton to Benson, 28 July 1831.
17. West Bengal Archives, Judicial Criminal Proceedings, 9 August 1831, No. 2, Scott to James Thomson, 25 July 1831.
18. A. White, *op. coit.*, App. 37, p. 126.
19. Ibid., App. 43.
20. Bentinck Papers, PWJF 2811/XIII, Rhodes to Swnton, 21 August 1831.
21. A. White, *Op. cit.*, App. 38.
22. Ibid., App. 39.
23. Bentinck Papers, PWJF 2811/IX, Cracroft to Swinton, 3 September 1831.
24. Swinton hoped that the Governor-General, Lord Metcalfe would authorise Henry Thoby Princep, Secretary to the Territorial Department to say something handsome to Scott's memory. The inscription on the monument was taken from a letter from Princep to Swinton. Bentinck Papers, PWJF 2811/XVI, Swinton to Benson, 30 August 1831 ; A. White, *op. cit.*, App. 43.