HOLWELL’S MONUMENTAL HOAX

IncogRito

John Zephaniah Holwell was a learned but lonely man. A surgeon by training and a magistrate by profession, the 45-year old Irishman had increased the revenue of the British East India Company by rooting out corruption and abuse that the Company’s merchants indulged in. This did not win him too many friends among his compatriots, and he lived in an isolated alcove beside the Burial Ground at the southern edge of Calcutta’s White Town.

A half-century after Job Charnock’s discovery of the city, Calcutta was still going through growing pains. East Indiaman ships brought in droves of young enterprising Englishmen to this fabled land, attracted by promises of wealth and fortune, but their arrival was typically met with disappointment. With enthusiasm sacrificed to dreary book-keeping, energy dissipated by the burning sun, and movements restricted to the one-square mile area around Fort William (for fear of thugs and tigers), most succumbed to tropical diseases or the temptation to return to their homeland. The few who remained would rise by dint of perseverance to a more exalted position within the Company, operate a private business on the side, and be able to afford luxuries like servants on a scale that would be unimaginable in England.

Holwell’s main source of frustration was Roger Drake, the young Acting Governor of Calcutta who was less qualified than himself in all respects. Having been promoted to this position simply because he was the seniormost Company official in the city, Drake’s personality was not suited for any rank of leadership. Vain and irresolute, he would compensate for his shortcomings with a disdain for advice and an obstinate assertion of authority. This often led to catastrophic results, as when he offered political asylum to Nawab Siraj-ud-Daulah’s rival to the throne of Murshidabad. Not surprisingly, this invited the wrath of the Nawab who, already disturbed by the Company’s fortifications, was itching for a reason to rid his land of the “hatmen”.

The 200 kilometre distance between Murshidabad and Calcutta ordinarily took the best part of a month to travel, and progress was considerably slower when accompanied by 30,000 soldiers, 18,000 horses, 2,000 camels, 400 trained elephants and 80 pieces of cannon. Yet despite adequate warnings of the advance and news of a quick capitulation of the Company’s outpost at Cossimbazar, Drake continued to believe that the Nawab would never have the courage to assault Fort William. In reality, the Old Fort was in a state of severe disrepair — the cannons were unused and rusted, the ammunition supply was damp and the Maratha Ditch surrounding Calcutta was shallow and incomplete.

In combination with Drake’s dependence on two civilian cronies for military strategy, this ensured that the siege of Calcutta lasted only a couple of days, and in a shameful show of cowardice, Drake abandoned his men and escaped in a ship meant for the evacuation of European women and children. Holwell had no choice but to step into the shoes of the Governor, an opportunity he had long been thirsting for, but quickly realised that the Fort was indefensible. By the morning of 20th June 1756, the white flag of surrender had been hoisted, and Holwell’s dreams of an honourable career appeared to have come to an ignoble end.

Siraj-ud-Daulah may have been intensely disliked by both his countrymen and his enemies, but he believed in following strict protocols of battle. That included respect for the defeated, and his only interest in the handful of captured Englishmen was to locate the Company’s treasure that he believed was hidden in the Fort. According to

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Holwell, the guards decided to take no chances with the prisoners overnight and locked them in the Black Hole cell, a makeshift military prison within the Fort ramparts. The low-ceilinged room with two barred windows did not provide sufficient ventilation for a roomful of soldiers, and the heat and humidity of a sultry pre-monsoon night conspired against a number of them as they dropped dead from their injuries and exhaustion.

This unfortunate episode wound up earning a position of mythology to generations of English students who learnt to rely on Holwell’s account of the Black Hole tragedy as an act of barbarism that could only be avenged by establishing an Empire in India. However, as research continues to show, Holwell fabricated much of the details related to the incident—including the number of Englishmen he claimed were enclosed (the Black Hole prison cannot physically fit 146 soldiers). Not only was this killing not reported in any other contemporary account, but Holwell’s testimony to the Company completely glossed over this apparent fact. It was only later in 1758, prior to his return to Calcutta as Governor of Bengal, that he chronicled these events as a “Genuine Narrative”, conferring heroic status on himself, and paid for the creation of an obelisk in memory of those killed on the infamous night. Holwell’s Monument listed only 48 names.

A lot of water has flowed down the Hooghly since then and Holwell’s Monument has long since been destroyed by a combination of the elements, lightning and neglect. During his tenure as Viceroy in the early twentieth century, Lord Curzon built a marble replica of the obelisk and also marked the location of the Black Hole (a narrow alley between today’s General Post Office and the Calcutta Collectorate) with a black memorial tablet. Indian nationalist leaders lobbied for the removal of what they called imperialistic propaganda during the country’s freedom movement, and the damaged tablet was transferred to the neighbouring Postal Museum where it lies out of view in the curator’s room since the facts are still in dispute. Holwell’s Monument now stands in the graveyard of St John’s Church, overlooking the very spot where Holwell’s house once stood, ironically ensuring that his name has attained an immortality that he always craved.

AFTERTHOUGHT

The third July, 1940, is going to be observed in Bengal as Sirajuddowla Day—in honour of the last independent King of Bengal. The Holwell Monument is not merely an unwarranted stain on the memory of the Nawab, but has stood in the heart of Calcutta for the last 150 years or more as the symbol of our slavery and humiliation. That monument must now go.

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