Sketches of Rulers of India ...

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SKETCHES OF
RULERS OF INDIA

VOL. II
THE COMPANY'S GOVERNORS

CLIVE  HASTINGS  MUNRO  MALCOLM
ELPHINSTONE  METCALFE
THOMASON  COLVIN

BY

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INTRODUCTION

In that memorable Apologia for his seven years' administration of India which the late Viceroy of India, Lord Curzon, delivered at a farewell banquet given in his honour at Bombay on the eve of his embarkation for England, occurs this noble utterance: 'A hundred times have I said to myself that to every Englishman in this country as he ends his work might be truthfully applied the phrase: "Thou hast loved righteousness and hated iniquity." No man has, I believe, ever served India faithfully of whom that could not be said. All other triumphs are tinsel and sham. Perhaps there are few of us who make anything but a poor approximation to that ideal. But let it be our ideal all the same, to fight for the right, to abhor the imperfect, the unjust, or the mean, to swerve neither to the right hand nor to the left, to care nothing for flattery, or applause, or odium, or abuse—it is so easy to have any of them in India—never to let your enthusiasm be soured, or your courage grow dim, but to remember that the Almighty has placed your hand on the greatest of His ploughs, in whose furrow the Nations of the future are germinating and taking shape, to drive the blade a little forward in your time, and to feel that somewhere among these millions you have left a little justice, or happiness, or prosperity, a sense of manliness or moral dignity, a spring of patriotism, the dawn of intellectual enlightenment, or a stirring of duty where it did not before exist. That is enough. That is the Englishman's justification in India. It is good enough for his watchword while he is here, for his epitaph when he is gone. I have worked for

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As one who has himself felt the impress of a great personality, and the stimulus of an ardent enthusiasm, I only voice the opinion of those conversant with the work that the author of these words accomplished in India, when I say that, so far as he himself is concerned, they convey the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. And as they are true of him, so will they be found to be equally true of all those servants of the Empire who have possessed the same inspiring energy, the same high ideals, and the same enduring enthusiasm, and of none will they be found to be more true than of those men whose lives and characters are briefly portrayed in the following pages.

The period covered by the careers of these eight early administrators is one of the most remarkable and the most interesting periods of the history of the British connexion with India. It extends over exactly one hundred years, from the laying of the first foundations of British supremacy in one remote corner of the Indian Continent, onwards throughout its gradual expansion, till it spread practically over the whole country, and down to the determined attempt that was made at the end of that period to overthrow it.

The special interest of these biographical studies will be found to be in the fact that the men therein portrayed were some of the principal actors in the great scenes that were enacted during the progress of the great drama. Though they were all in the position of public servants, the two first in the series, Clive and Warren Hastings, being the most faithful servants of the Company, and the others the agents of the Company's representatives, the remarkable feature about them all was that they were no mere puppets controlled by wire-pullers, but were all conspicuous for an independence of character which enabled them, not once or twice only, but on many occasions, to take the initiative, when the great interests
entrusted to them seemed to demand that such initiative should be taken: and they were usually able to command the assent of their chiefs; and even where that assent was not forthcoming, 'Time, the great wonder-worker,' more often than not confirmed the wisdom of their action, so that, when, as not unfrequently happened, orders arrived disallowing particular action, they could often point triumphantly to the accomplished fact. But their thus taking the initiative into their own hands did not by any means imply a spirit of insubordination: they never deliberately set up their own judgement as superior to that of their chiefs. On the contrary, there were occasions when, even though they may not have approved of the particular policy enjoined on them, they loyally co-operated in carrying it out. Thus they proved their possession of the most valuable qualities that public servants can possess, initiative combined with a proper sense of duty and responsibility to their chiefs.

These men represented both the Civil and Military Services, and another remarkable feature about them was that they one and all rose from the lowest grades of those services to the highest office they could command. They all rose to be Governors of Provinces: and two indeed to the rank, in one case substantive, in another provisional and acting, of Governor-General; and this without patronage and without undue favouritism. Sir John Kaye has remarked of those officers whose lives he has recorded in his most interesting and instructive work, Lives of Indian Officers: 'Self-reliance and self-help made them what they were. The nepotism of the Court of Directors did not pass beyond the portico of the India House. In India every man had a fair start and an open course. The son of the Chairman had no better chance than the son of the Scotch farmer or the Irish squire.' These words are especially true of the men who are dealt with in these pages.
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A seventeenth-century poet has thus described his outlook on life:—

Lord of myself, accountable to none,
But to my Conscience, and my God alone.

This was the principle that practically animated the lives of these distinguished men. Among their most marked characteristics was their calm confidence in their own uprightness and righteousness: it was this that carried them through unparalleled difficulties and dangers, aye, and temptations too, that assailed them, or at any rate the great majority of them, in the course of their careers. Chief among the temptations that beset them was the bribery and corruption that formed the very atmosphere of the world they lived in. That they resisted this, and made themselves masters of circumstance rather than its slaves, forms one of their highest claims to distinction. A story, as told by Sir John Kaye, in his Life of Lord Minto, may be given here to illustrate the character of the temptations high officials in India were constantly exposed to at this period of Indian history. A wealthy native had made a certain proposal to Government, and, in order ‘to stimulate it’, he offered the Chief Secretary a sum of 30,000 rupees. The man was indignantly dismissed. For some time after this he was observed to be considerably depressed in spirit, and was continually reproaching himself. ‘Fool that I was,’ he repeated, ‘to offer a gentleman of his rank only 30,000 rupees; I should have offered three lakhs, and then I should have got what I wanted.’ This feeling, that a gift has only to be large enough for it to be accepted, still exists in India, only it has been transferred from the region of bribes to that of fees. An illustration of this may be given. The Government of India has recently ruled that a medical man, when called in by an Indian nobleman, is not to accept more than a certain prescribed amount without obtaining the
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consent of the Government. A medical man had been attending a Feudatory chief; when his services were no longer needed, he was presented with a very handsome fee. This happened to be more than the amount prescribed; it was returned with a polite message that it could not be accepted without the consent of the Government. The chief was a bit puzzled, and he remarked to his Diwan: 'What does the Sahib want? Send him a bigger fee!' It will stand to the eternal credit of Clive that he was the earliest administrator to put a stop to the practice common amongst the Company's servants of taking presents from the people. It is a striking testimony to the character for purity and integrity that British officers in India, under the initiative of such men as Clive and Warren Hastings, gradually built up for themselves, that, finding the higher British officials absolutely incorruptible, the princes and chiefs and noblemen of India, who were anxious to know how matters affecting their interests, which were before Government, were progressing, and who were too impatient to wait for the actual orders passed on them by Government, should have established their own agencies at the headquarters of Government, and should have paid sums amounting to several thousand rupees to their agents for any early information they could buy in the Secretariat. The fortunes of one well-known family in Bengal were entirely built up from such an agency. Nor were these men exceptions in their display of these high qualities of uprightness and integrity. It is recorded of that brave old soldier, Sir David Ochterlony, that when he discovered that a certain native, to whom he had sold a mansion he had himself recently bought from Sir Charles Metcalfe at Delhi, was boasting of having rendered him a service in thus taking it off his hands, he promptly cancelled the bargain and bought it back again. Naturally, some of the more gracious courtesies of Oriental life and manners have been lost to Englishmen by the orders that they are
not to accept presents, and so place themselves under an obligation to the people of the country. It has always been customary with the great houses of India 'to welcome the coming and speed the departing guest' in a peculiarly graceful manner. The would-be host first sends a preliminary invitation to one he wishes to honour by entertaining him as his guest; when he has ascertained that a visit would be acceptable, he takes his Guru, the family spiritual adviser, into consultation, in order to ascertain what day will be auspicious for a visit from his guest. The Guru consults his tablets, and an auspicious day and hour for the guest's arrival is fixed. A special messenger, who is generally the family news-writer, is then dispatched, bearing with him a beautifully engrossed Sanskrit couplet, if it is a Hindu friend who is being thus invited, which announces the auspicious day. The guest duly arrives, and is presented on arrival with articles conducive to his comfort during his stay; on taking his departure, he is presented with a gift of money to recoup him for the expenses of his journey, and sets of handsomely embroidered silks and brocades. At the same time, though such presents are not allowable for Englishmen to accept on the occasions of their visits to their Indian friends, a pleasant exchange of courtesies is still possible between an Indian host and his English guest; and this takes the simple form of an exchange of portraits. A portrait-gallery of some dimensions could possibly be filled from the collections that grace the walls of many an Indian nobleman's halls, of the portraits of distinguished English visitors with whom their hosts have thus exchanged portraits. It is interesting to note in this connexion that after the death of the great Sikh Maharaja, Ranjit Singh, ruler of the Punjab, a portrait of Metcalfe was found among his most treasured possessions in the State treasury, with an inscription on the back marking the esteem of its owner for the original of the portrait.
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Another prominent characteristic of these early administrators was their exceeding versatility. What Sir John Kaye has noted of the versatility of Malcolm especially is almost equally applicable to all: 'I do not know an example out of the regions of Romance in which so many remarkable qualities, generally supposed to be antagonistic, were combined in the same person. It is no small thing to cope with a tiger in the jungles: it is no small thing to draw up an elaborate State paper: it is no small thing to write the history of a nation: it is no small thing to conduct to a successful issue a difficult negotiation at a foreign court: it is no small thing to lead an army to victory: and I think it may with truth be said that he who could do all these things with such brilliant success as Sir John Malcolm, was a very remarkable man in a remarkable age.' In the court, or the camp, or the cottage, they were all equally at home. What the Asiatic and Indian potentates seem to have felt most about them was the dominating power of a superior will. Almost at his first contact with Clive, the will-power of the Nawab Suraj-ud-Daulah seems to have collapsed. Hastings, though he never came into direct personal touch with the great Mahratta chieftain, the Maharaja Madhav Rao Scindia, was recognized by him as a man whose will was not to be thwarted. Of the two envoys who were at the Court of Persia at the same time, 'Baghdad Jones' and Malcolm, it was the towering personality of Malcolm alone that impressed the imagination of the Shah. And, but only after a long trial of strength, the will of the great Sikh Maharaja, Ranjit Singh, eventually succumbed before the more patient but more masterful will of Metcalfe. One of the most amusing dispatches ever recorded in history is that which Ranjit Singh addressed to Metcalfe after receiving an ultimatum in connexion with some demands which Ranjit had been slow to comply with, and upon which hung the issues of peace or war. It reads