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A FORGOTTEN PIONEER OF HIMALAYAN EXPLORATION

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IN 1799 a 16-year-old cadet named Hyder Jung Hearsey joined the forces of the Marathas. His paternal grandfather had fought on the losing side at Culloden and by doing so had forfeited his family estates in Cumberland. His father had taken the course then followed by many younger sons of the manse and joined the East India Company's Madras Army. He had sired two sets of children, one wholly British, the other country-born by a "Jat lady". Hyder Jung's legitimate half-brother joined the Bengal Cavalry and rose to become a fine old Sepoy General, one of the few to act decisively in the first days of the Mutiny. Debarred by his birth from following him into the Company's armies, Hyder Jung Hearsey trained with the forces of the Nawab of Oude for a year before soldiering under the French mercenary Perron and the Marathas. When war with France broke out he transferred his allegiance to Perron's rival, General Thomas, and when "George Bahadur" was crushed Hearsey made off at the head of 5,000 men to set himself up as an independent mercenary. While he was still a teenager he won for himself sufficient *izzaat* to gain a young princess of Cambay, Zuhur-ul-Missa, as wife. She was the adopted daughter of the Mogul Emperor Akbar II and brought him a dowry of estates that included property at Bareilly.

Like his more famous fellow-mercenaries James Skinner and William Linnaeus Gardner (who married Zuhur-ul-Missa's 13-year-old sister), Hearsey thought it politic to put his Irregular Horse at the disposal of General Lake when John Company finally went to war against the Marathas in 1803. He had a good war, led his light cavalry with distinction and survived a severe wound to the head – only to be rewarded by a suspicious Governor-General by having his corps of irregulars called in and disbanded. So it was that in 1807 this seasoned young veteran of nine years of active campaigning found himself without employment.

With the Marathas temporarily subdued the military engineers of the Company's Survey of India department were now in a position to concentrate their efforts on mapping the conquered and ceded provinces of Upper Hindustan. The first Surveyor-General of Bengal, Major James Rennell, had been appointed by Clive in 1756 and it was under his direction that the first detailed maps of India were assembled and printed. Rennell himself had been greatly impressed by his first sight of the Himalayas. In 1788 he

had written, "They are among the highest of the mountains of the old hemisphere. I was not able to determine their height, but it may in some measure be guessed by the circumstance of their rising considerably above the horizon when viewed in the plains of Bengal, at a distance of 150 miles." As to the upper courses of the three great rivers of India that disappeared into this barrier so many hundreds of miles apart, Rennell could only admit to "our ignorance". And as for the source of the Ganges Rennell was prepared to accept Hindu beliefs, which placed its fountainhead beyond the Himalayan range at the sacred lake Manasarovar. Rather more surprisingly, he was also prepared to interpret rather than dismiss the Hindu belief that the Ganges flowed from the mouth of a divine cow:

When meeting the great chain of Mount Himmaleh . . . this great body of water now forces a passage through the ridge of Mount Himmaleh and, sapping its very foundations, rushes through a cavern and precipitates itself into a vast basin which it has worn in the rock. The Ganges thus appears to incurious spectators to derive its original springs from this chain of mountains, and the mind of superstition has given to the mouth of the cavern the form of the head of a cow, an animal held by the Hindus in a degree of veneration almost equal to that in which the Egyptians of old held their god Apis.

Rennell's successor as Surveyor-General, Robert Colebrooke, had "long doubted the account which is given by Major Rennell of the origin of the Ganges at Munsaroar lake". In the spring of 1807 he secured permission to extend his survey work into the upper Gangetic plain. As his survey party entered the less settled areas bordering onto the domains of the Nawab of Oude, Colebrooke increased its strength with an escort of fifty sepoy from Cawnpore. They were placed under the command of Lt William Webb of the 10th Bengal Native Infantry, then 22 years of age and known to Colebrooke to be capable of drawing up basic route surveys – a skill that Webb had picked up while on the line of march with his regiment during the Maratha war. This escort proved to be insufficient. As a "necessary precaution to avoid being attacked and plundered by the Rebels" Colebrooke engaged the services of a local *condottiere*, Captain Hyder Jung Hearsey.

They spent the Cold Weather surveying the notoriously unhealthy *terai* jungle bordering on Nepalese Kumaon, where Colebrooke contracted an intermittent fever that left him so weakened that he was eventually forced to withdraw from the field. However, he was determined that his party should press on towards its ultimate objective, which he set out in his instructions to William Webb as the survey of the Ganges "from Hurdwar to Gungoutri (or the Cow's Mouth), where that river is stated by Major Rennell to force its way through the Hymalaia Mountains by a Subterraneous passage".

In April 1808 Webb and Hearsey set out from Delhi towards the Hills, being joined on the march by Webb's brother-officer from the 10th BNI, Captain Felix Raper. Thirty year-old Felix Raper was the most senior of the three officers but he had no official position or surveying skills so he made it his business to keep the log of the expedition.

By great good fortune the party arrived at Hardwar, where the river breaks out into the plains through a breach in the Siwalik foothills, just as the great gathering of pilgrims known as the *Kumbh Mela* was being celebrated. Among those attending the festival was a party of Gurkhas from Garhwal – which was then still occupied by the Nepalese – including the Governor of the district. After the necessary inducements had been made he gave them permission to enter his territory and proceed to the temple of Gangotri, sited just below the supposed source itself.

On 12 April this first British expedition into the Himalayas entered the Dun valley. It crossed over the site of the future cantonments of Dehra and then climbed up out of the valley slightly to the east of what would in another twenty years become the hill-station of Mussoorie. From the Landour ridge Hearsey and the others got their first good look at the giants of the Garhwal Himalayas. "We had a good and extensive view of the Himalea Mountains," Hearsey noted in his journal. "The most remarkable peaks I delineated and took correct bearings of them, with a theodolite." It was a somewhat prosaic reference in the circumstances; its significance is that it confirms Hearsey's ability as a map-maker, an ability that was to be officially denied him.

After two days of travel through hills and valleys well stocked with forests of deodar, oak and rhododendron they dropped down into the Bhagirathi valley, the western tributary from which the Ganges took its traditional source. For several days they were able to move northwards up its ever-deepening gorge without undue difficulty, finding the inhabitants of the many small villages through which they passed to be most friendly:

The women even, did not show that bashfulness and reserve, which females in Hindostan in general exhibit; but, mixing with the crowd, they made their comments with the greatest freedom. We could not help remarking that the female mountaineers exhibited the general failings of the sex, having their necks, ears and noses ornamented with rings and beads.

On 27 April they reached the village of Batwari, at the southern end of the great 20-mile cleft down which the Bhagirathi river forces its way through the main Himalayan range. Not only were there many sections of the track that had been washed away during the winter rains but now the path also climbed up the steep walls of the gorge to a considerable height above the river. "A tremendous precipice was open on the outer side," Raper noted in his Journal, "For the greater part of the way we found it necessary to avail ourselves of the assistance of the bearers, to conduct us by the hand." On the following day Hearsey was writing along similar lines: "The road during the Day's march was the most difficult we had yet met with. To preserve a footing on the slippery rocks we had to ascend, we were obliged to pull off our shoes; the consequence was that our feet got very sore and we were obliged to halt." The next morning they managed to cover only a few more miles. Webb called a conference and after a few minutes discussion they decided to turn back, less than 40 miles short of their goal.

Webb later provided Colebrooke with a long explanation as to why he

had abandoned his attempt while still being able to despatch “an intelligent native, furnished with a compass, and instructed in the use of it, with directions to visit Gangotri”. Both Webb’s letter and Raper’s published account leave us with the blurred impression of some anonymous but faithful servant struggling on to reach Gangotri. But this was far from the truth, as Hearsey’s journal makes clear. The “intelligent native” was Hearsey’s own Hindu *munshi*, who reached Gangotri without difficulty in the company of six sepoys as well as a number of Hindu pilgrims. Indeed, he even penetrated some miles beyond the temple, to a point where “the current is entirely concealed under heaps of snow, which no traveller ever has or can surmount”.

Although it was still very early in the year for pilgrim traffic the *munshi*’s journey showed that the road to Gangotri itself was open; it was the *sahibs* themselves who were unable to proceed. A passage from Raper’s Journal, published in *Asiatick Researches* in 1812, makes it clear how totally unprepared they were for trekking in the mountains: “Although we provided ourselves with Dandis (open sedan chairs) as substitutes for the Jampuns (large covered litters), we found them equally useless; for we were forced to walk the greatest part of the way. In difficult and dangerous passages, a person is obliged to dismount.” It seems as if these young and intrepid explorers had expected to be carried to the source of the Ganges!

Much chastened by their failure and with a far more realistic understanding of the scale of their undertaking, Webb, Hearsey and Raper proceeded to their next objective – “visiting the source of the Alakananda river at Badrinath before the setting of the periodical rains”. They made their way downstream to Deoprayag, the little town perched above the confluence of the two tributaries that form the Ganges. Here they established that the eastern branch, the Alaknanda, carried a far greater volume of water than the Bhagirathi and was therefore in geographical terms if not by tradition the major source. From Deoprayag they proceeded north, passing through the great Himalayan barrier without being aware of it and eventually coming to the Vaishnava temple of Badrinath. And here, at last, they found a satisfactory source, as Hearsey noted in his account:

Proceed near one mile of snow – the river lost – no vestige remaining of its channels. We halted opposite a cascade of about 200 feet high – two streams fall from the mountain which by the force of the wind is scattered with spray and freezes as it falls. Not a shrub or blade of grass in the vicinity of this place, nothing but snow and shivered black rocks. It is the most solemn appearance of winter I ever beheld.

Hearsey had wanted to go on. He had heard that a fabulous city built by the gods was reputed to be sited at the head of the valley. However, the local guides refused to go any further “saying if we wished to be turned into stones (I suppose alluding to our being frozen) then we might make the attempt by ourselves”. In the event they had to be satisfied with what they had achieved; Hearsey’s *munshi* had given them “convincing testimony . . . that the existence of the Cow’s Mouth is entirely fabulous” and their own explorations had shown that the Alaknanda had no connexion with lake Manasarovar.

As they began to make their way south towards British territory they became aware of an increasingly "unfriendly disposition" on the part of the Nepalese rulers of Garhwal. Messengers appeared with contradictory orders, threats of decapitation or dismemberment by *kukri* were made against those who provided them with assistance, Gurkha sepoy's began shadowing their trail and finally their porters all decamped, forcing them to abandon most of their food and baggage. To add to their discomfort the rains set in; leeches swarmed on every leaf or branch overhanging the trail, working their way into every sensitive portion of the human anatomy. Very soon "every puncture festered and turned to large sores, what with the flies and walking through the water". Hearsey suffered less than the other two officers; he put it down to the fact that "instead of knocking off the leeches when they attacked, I let them have their fill and drop off".

The party was finally brought to a halt when it was within two day's march of the fortress town of Almorah, capital of the district of Kumaon. They had now exhausted both their stock of gifts and their cash and were therefore unable to buy their freedom from the Gurkha governor of Almorah. Only when they had made promises to send him gifts as soon as they had reached the plains were they allowed to proceed on their way.

For some weeks Robert Colebrooke had been waiting in Bareilly for news of the expedition. Finally, at the end of June, a single palanquin was sighted approaching the station. It bore the prostrate form of William Webb, seriously ill with "jungle fever". Some days later Hearsey and Raper and the rest of the party arrived. The fever kept Webb in his bed for another eight weeks, preventing him from working on the calculations and measurements that he had assembled during the eleven-week trek. Long before he was up and about his fellow-officer from the 10th BNI had been recalled to Delhi. Then early in August Colebrooke left. He had lived in India for thirty years and was hoping to take his first home leave. On his passage down-river he died of dysentery, leaving two widows to mourn his passing: an English wife with nine small children, and an Indian *bibi* with a 14-year-old son, to whom he left a pension of 50 rupees a month. He also left behind a nasty scandal over a map.

The map in question now lies in the Map Record and Issue Office of the Survey of India at Hathibarkala, on the outskirts of Dehra Dun – by curious coincidence, an estate that once belonged to the Hearsey family. It was drawn by Hyder Jung Hearsey and it carries two pencilled notes in the margin, written by another of Webb's fellow-officers from the 10th BNI, Captain John Hodgson. The first note reads: "This map was pirated from Captain Webb's documents"; the other: "Webb fell sick at Bareilly." Also to be found among the records of the Survey is a letter written in 1813 by the new Surveyor-General of Bengal, John Garstin. In it he explains why no more "half-castes" are to be employed by the Survey of India:

When Lieutenant Webb was sent to the Gangoutri, or source of the Ganges, he was accompanied, among others, by Mr Hearsey, a pensioner of the Mahratta horse, who, when the survey was over, surreptitiously obtained a copy of the Survey, and had the impudence to send it to the Court of Directors, as if he had been the discoverer of this

Holy Fountain's head. On Lieut. Webb's laying the case before Government, they took the affair up very warmly...with these examples before me I cannot possibly take upon me to recommend De Crux.

Strange indeed to judge a man as unfit for employment on the basis of another man's alleged misdeeds, stranger still that so senior an officer in the Company's service should make such allegations. Yet these charges against Hearsey stuck and to this day they remain the official version of events – that an Anglo-Indian stole a map from a sick man's bedside and called it his own.

The surviving evidence points to a very different interpretation of events. Two accounts of the expedition were written; there was Raper's Journal, which was recovered from among Robert Colebrooke's effects and published in *Asiatick Researches*, and a shorter, far livelier, account written by Hearsey, which fell into the hands of a Director of the East India Company in London and which has been disregarded ever since. We know that the two Company men, Webb and Raper, got on well together; in 1809 Webb was asking that Raper be allowed to join him on a second expedition, "as our long acquaintance and friendship will render me most happy in his company". But nothing in Raper's Journal indicates that they enjoyed the company of their fellow-traveller. This is hardly surprising when we consider that this hardened mercenary of 25 was supposed to take his orders from an inexperienced and over-cautious 23-year-old. In fact, Hearsey's name scarcely appears at all in Raper's account, where he is once referred to as "Captain Hearsay, formerly in the service of the Madhaji Sendiah" – which was not only factually incorrect but implied that Hearsey had fought for the Marathas against the British rather than the other way round.

Hearsey's journal provides a more convincing account of his part in the expedition, for he makes it clear that he saw his role as something more than a mere escort. His references to surveying make it plain that the mapping skills that he used to good effect four years later were already capable of employment. He would certainly have had opportunity to pick up such skills from Colebrooke or even Webb during the many months that they spent together, but it is rather more likely that he acquired them during an earlier period of his life. Among the Hearsey family papers are some neatly executed route surveys by Hyder Jung's father, Colonel Andrew Wilson Hearsey, drawn while campaigning in South India in the 1780s. Could Hyder Jung have learned the rudiments of surveying from his father? Certainly he learned to be a very able draughtsman, noted as such by Emily Eden during her privileged travels *Up the Country*; enough of his watercolours survive to show that he had considerable talent.

Against this it must be said that Hyder Jung Hearsey's manuscript account of his first Himalayan journey conceals – none too skilfully – what would appear to be a deliberate deception. A careful examination of the document (now in the British Museum) shows that in a number of places the word "we" has been erased, as in the following passage (for 29 April):

We proceeded up the mountains a little above Rehaul, from whence

(we) had a view of the Mahadeo's Ling – which (we) took the bearing of, with the Theodolite, from hence (we) perceived that we had entered the snowy range of mountains, many of the Peaks being S. of us.

It is impossible to avoid the conclusion that Hearsey doctored such passages in order to show his role in a more positive light. Yet, if it was a deliberate attempt to deceive, it was an exceedingly clumsy one. The erasures must certainly have been spotted and could only have shown Hearsey in the worst possible light. Just the sort of thing, in fact, that one might expect from a half-caste who stole a sick man's map. But did he steal that map? The only place where he could have done so was at Bareilly.

Bareilly had formerly been the capital of Rohilkhand but had been ceded to the Company by the Nawab of Oude in 1801 to cancel a debt built up following the loan of British troops. Hearsey had considerable property there so it would have been unlikely that the other *sahibs* would have stayed elsewhere. Colebrooke and Raper had gone by the end of August, which would have left the convalescent Webb alone with Hearsey. The latter did not take up any formal employment until the following year, when he was hired by the British Resident in Lucknow to prevent Nepalese settlers from moving down into the Oude *terai*, so he was free to work on his map – which he completed and handed over, together with a letter and a journal, to a Captain Williams in Cawnpore on 13 December 1808.

Captain Williams was to deliver the map to Major James Rennell in London. "By the earliest opportunity that occurred I have the pleasure to transmit the accompanying sketch of a late Tour to the Sources of the River Ganges to you," wrote Hearsey in his accompanying letter. All three officers had suffered financially from the confiscation of their baggage by the Nepalese, but since he was not a Company man Hearsey had little hope of receiving any compensation. "As this Tour was undertaken at our individual expense, may I beg you to present the sketch to the Hon. the Court of Directors, should they deem it worthy a remuneration, whatever their liberality may award, or permit private publication."

As for William Webb, he was apparently unable to resume work until December, by which time Hearsey had completed his own map. Another fourteen months were to pass before Webb's map was ready to be sent down to Garstin in Calcutta. In the meantime Rennell had received Hearsey's "sketch" and had written to the Surveyor-General for more information. Garstin was now desperately keen to see his own department's map completed. "I understand Major Hearsey has sent one Home," he wrote to Webb in January 1810. "I much wished to have been able, by the last despatch, to have sent a General Map...from your Hand, as well as the twelve sheets of the Survey, and still hope to have them in time for the March Fleet." Webb finally sent in his completed map on 8 February 1810:

The plan sent is certainly, in point of execution, a most wretched daub, *for I have lost the Draughtsman who used to assist me*, and although I have always acknowledged my incapacity in this way, I think the necessity I have been under to work when fatigued and at

night, has either increased my natural want of ability, or that I grow worse and worse. (My italics)

Who, then was this “lost” draughtsman? The records of the Survey of India show that no assistant was appointed to his staff during this period; from December 1808 to December 1809 Webb was surveying the eastern frontier of Oude – without qualified assistants. The only man of known ability as a draughtsman working in that same area was Hyder Jung Hearsey. It therefore seems quite possible that, far from pirating another man’s map, Hearsey not only surveyed and reduced his own but was actually helping the incapable Webb to draw up his map – until the latter was transferred in December 1809, just six weeks before he sent his map.

Whatever the justice of the case, Garstin was now able to put it to Rennell that Webb’s map was the *bona fide* one and Hearsey’s merely a copy – and Rennell at once informed the Court of Directors:

A Mr or Major Hearsey thought proper to transmit it to me as *his own Production* (as he left me to understand), setting forth that the Expedition was undertaken by a Party at their own Expense, and requested that I would endeavour to obtain remuneration for him from the Hon. the Court of Directors. Thus informed I readily undertook what I thought a Meritorious Act (for the map is certainly a very curious one and bears the stamp of Truth, as far as Internal evidence goes); but I have since been informed that the Person who sent it to me only copied another Man’s work, with a view to obtaining something for himself.

Once the “father of Indian Geography” had spoken, Hearsey’s reputation was damaged beyond recovery. He had no champions either in Calcutta or in Leadenhall Street, whereas Webb had both loyal friends and a Surveyor-General who himself threw upon him the mantle of the “discoverer of the Holy Fountain’s Head”. In actual fact, it was John Hodgson, together with his assistant, James Herbert, who became the first European to reach the traditional source of the Ganges. In 1817 they made their way up from the temple of Gangotri to Gaumukh, the snout of the Gangotri glacier – to find that there was indeed a Cow’s Mouth – of sorts. “A most wonderful scene,” wrote Hodgson, “The river here is bounded to the left and right by high snow and rocks, but in front the mass of snow is perfectly perpendicular, and from the bed of the stream to the summit we estimate the thickness at little less than 300 feet of solid frozen snow. The Bhagirathi, or Ganges, issues from under a very low arch at the foot of the grand snow bed.”

Hearsey’s troubles were far from over. In January 1812 it was reported that he and his retainers were “conspiring to attack and take possession of the Doon, or Vale lying between the Ganges and the Sutledge, at present in the occupation of the Government of Nepal”. There was some substance to this report, for it seems that after suffering increasingly from Nepalese encroachments on his properties and *jagirs* adjacent to Nepalese territory Hearsey had decided to move onto the offensive. This hardly conformed to Company policy towards Nepal and moves were started to confiscate

Hearsey's holdings. It was at this moment that he decided to evade the government – by undertaking a second “journey into the Hills”. His companion was to be Dr William Moorcroft and their objective the holy lake Manasarovar in Tibet but that, as Kipling would say, is another story.