







REGINALD HEBER
A LETTER FROM INDIA

Edited by Nicolas Barker

'I do not expect that with fair prospects of eminence at home, you should go to the Ganges for a mitre,' wrote Sir Charles Watkin Williams Wynn, President of the Board of Commissioners for Indian Affairs, in 1819 to Reginald Heber at Hodnet in Shropshire, but in vain. Despite a growing reputation as a scholar, a poet and writer of still popular hymns, an artist and authority on Russia, friend of Byron and Scott, given wit and irresistible charm and goodness, Heber could not resist the evangelical call. In 1823, newly consecrated Bishop of Calcutta, he set off, with wife and family, leaving behind a host of friends.

It was to them, and in particular his cousin Harriet Wrightson, that soon after his arrival the Bishop wrote a very long letter, recording his first impressions of India and illuminating its leaves with his own sketches. As a picture of the country and its peoples, depicted by a keen but sympathetic observer, it makes compelling reading, all but two centuries after it was posted home. The landscape and natural history of Bengal, the human figures, both Hindu and Islamic, as well as newcomers from Europe, are all vividly recorded. Heber, creature of his own time, is full of missionary hopes but equally fascinated by the personalities and characters of those he met. The news that he sent was probably the first to reach not just Harriet but his wider circle after his arrival.

Everything about it suggests that Heber took particular care with the writing, in both senses, of his letter. For that reason, it has been reproduced in complete facsimile, accompanied by a page by page transcript of the text. Surrounding this is a brief summary of Heber's life before he went to India, and of his family, including his half-brother Richard, the great book-collector, and his formidable widow, Amelia,

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are cool, bracing & almost frosty. The sun at noon though still too
powerful to admit of much exercise except in a Carriage, is tempered
by a fine Northern breeze, and not more than comfortable to those
who are screened from its direct rays, and the evenings from half
past three to half past six are precisely those of an English Summer.
The country round Calcutta and indeed the whole of Bengal is the
same dead flat, without any thing like a hill or even the least un-
dermined of surface, - but wherever the Ganges is, there is beauty,
and even there over ~~ridges~~ ^{all} ~~land~~ ^{land} ~~us~~ ^{land}, there are
many attractions in the picturesque simplicity of the villages
and their inhabitants and the magnificent groves which surround
and overhang them. Lady Amherst says she shall never endure
a conservatory again, now that she has seen the plants
which we see with so much difficulty in pots, growing as hedge-
row timber: and even those who are most sensible to the beauties
of English Scenery may allow that while the peepul, the teak, and
the other ^{ever} ~~round~~-topped trees will bear no disadvantageous com-
parison with our oaks, elms & limes, - the mango and tamarind
^{greatly} ~~superior~~ surface is beauty our walnut & cherry trees, and we
have nothing at all answerable to the Banyan, the ^{cactus} ~~Bamboo~~, the
different species of Palms, or the plantain, aloe, and ananas
by which the cottages are ~~surrounded~~ ^{surrounded}. - On the whole my expectations
have been much exceeded, and the more so because the
tawdry coloured prints in Daniel's oriental Scenery give no
idea of the variety, the riches and ^{yet the} ~~calm~~ sober colouring of the
foliage by which we are here ~~surrounded~~ ^{shaded}.

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other larger round-topped trees bear no disadvantageous
comparison with our oaks, elms & limes, the mango
and tamarind greatly surpass in beauty our walnut &
cherry trees, and we have nothing at all answerable to
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sort of idea of the variety, the riches and yet the calm sober
colouring of the foliage by which we are shaded.