

INTO THE HEART OF BENGAL

JOHN DREW

A Journey Up the Country, Bengal 1857, by George Thompson (1804-1878).

"Most men carry weapons of defence with them. I carry none. A revolver was offered me before I started but I declined it. My mind shall not premeditate nor my hands perform by previous intent an act of destruction. I have journeyed oft by land and water, and until now have never been harmed, though always defenceless. I will journey on without an instrument of assault or preservation. I will not provoke violence by the possession of means of violence".

These words were written by a man journeying up country in Bengal during turbulent times. It may come as a surprise to learn that the man was George Thompson, a friend and guest of the Tagore family, and the time was April 1857.

1839 he declared himself to be a "Philo-Hindoo" and was one of the founders of the British India Society, an association inspired by William Adam's contact with Raja Ram Mohan Roy and designed to highlight Indian affairs. So concerned did Thompson become with India that he exasperated many of his peers by trying to tie all radical causes in Britain, including the Anti-Corn Law League, into the cause of Indian Reform.

In 1842 Thompson accompanies Dwarkanath Tagore to Bengal where he stays as his guest, the only European to do so. "Hindoo Thompson Sahib Bahadur", as he is called, tells us that, he spends time "in the native city of Calcutta, labouring 12, 14 and 16 hours a day, instead of at the palace of

when legitimate Indian grievances and aspirations were not addressed.

Thompson returns to Britain to fight his corner as an M.P. and returns also to the United States to continue the struggle to get slavery abolished. An indefatigable traveller, he is once more in Bengal, this time as a guest of Prasanna Kumar Tagore, in 1855 and picks up again with the Young Bengal people, including its leading light, Peary Chand Mitra, the secretary of the association he founded and now the librarian at the public library. He sends letters from India to be published in the radical news-sheets in London, the Empire and the Star but much of his writing has a more personal touch, being addressed to his daughter, Amelia.

of the Hindoos".

Thompson is as much interested in poetry as politics and he sends home the following pretty, if conventional, little piece, presumably to his Amelia Mohan:

From Somebody in India to
Somebody in England.

When stars above are brightly beaming,
And firefly lamps are fitly gleaming,
And all, besides myself, are dreaming -
Then I think of thee, love,
Then I think of thee.

And when the Orient morn is shining,
And every cloud with silver lining,
Instead of at my fate repining,
Then I think of thee, love,
Then I think of thee.

poet H.L.V. [de] Rosario, better known now as Derozio. He reproduces long passages from the Fakir of Janghira and quotes Browning on Cowper's grave: "I can read no more while the impression of these verses rests upon my mind".

Thompson spends most of his time with Hindoo friends. Apart from seeing Mitra at the public library (and his host Prasanna Tagore has a library of 50,000 volumes), he calls on Kristo Das Pal, who as editor of the Hindoo Patriot will later call on him to be a correspondent. He is no doubt in touch with the current editor, Harish Chandra Mukherji and others he knew from before: Ramgopal Ghosh and Tarachand Chakrabarti. He talks with members of the British Establishment, notably Canning (no favourite of Pal's) but he does not mix with the British Community.

He writes a full account of Charak Puja and compiles 50 pages on Hindoo marriages. As a guest of the Tagores, he hobnobs with the aristocracy. Durga Puja he spends with Raja Radhakant Deb, President of the British Indian Association formed as a successor to his original and, somewhat eccentrically, an advocate of both female education and sati, while the year before Thompson had been the guest of Mahtab Chand, the Raja of Burdwan or Bardhaman, a dynasty of Kapoors notable for making the transition from Punjab to Bengal.

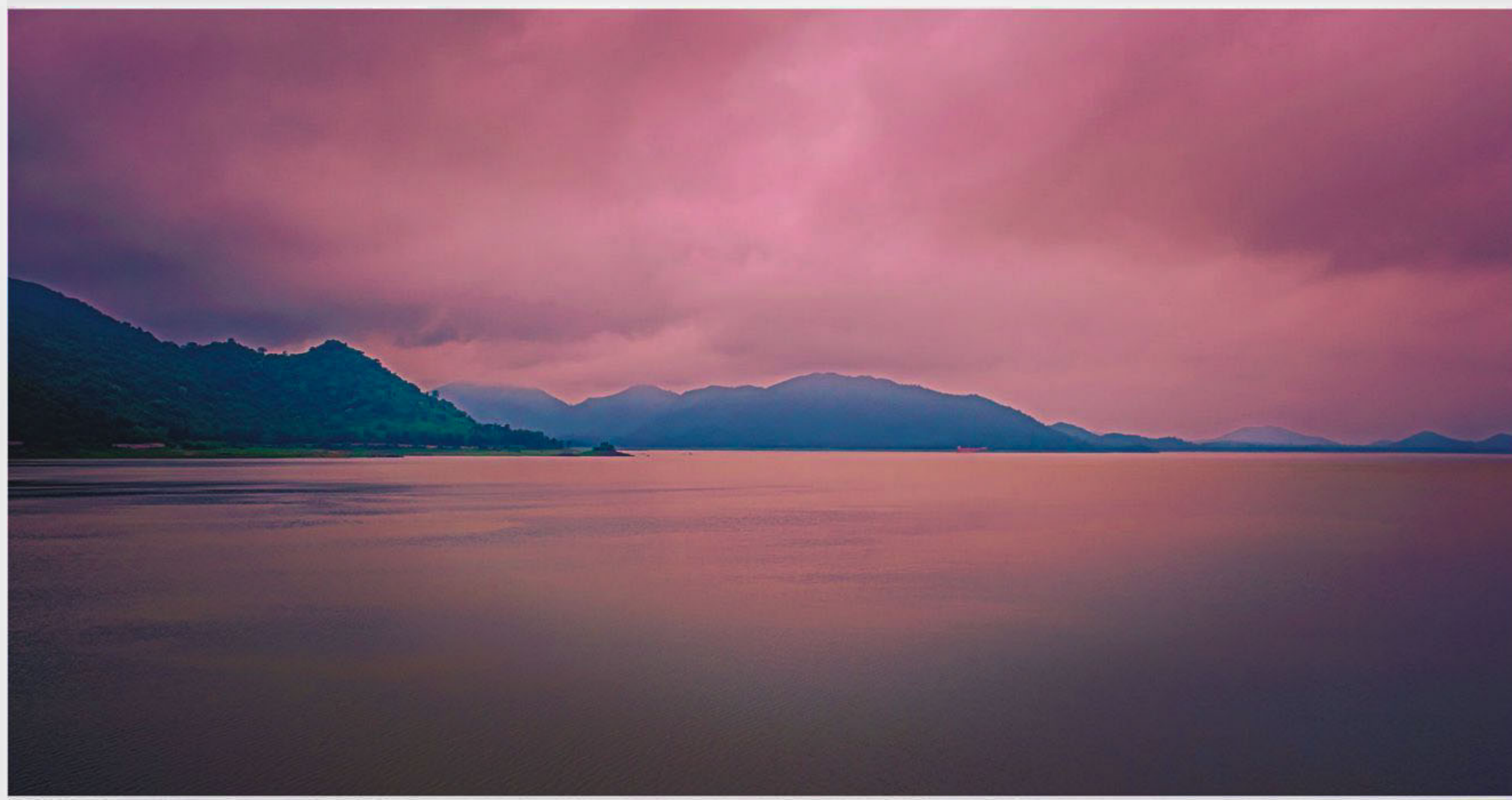
In 1857, Thompson sets out up country just as the Uprising is beginning. "The Astrologers", he writes, "have this year foretold that the British dominion here might, by a vigorous and combined effort, be overthrown, as the stars were propitious to the conquerors for only a century after the battle of Plassey".

We find him having dinner with Feradun Jha, the Nawab of Murshidabad, with his Hindu Dewan, Raja Prasanna Narayan Deb, the band striking up to the tune of *O, the Roast Beef of Old England* and then he meets an indigo planter of whom he says "the only enemies of the British Constitution he faces are the army of good things daily marshalled rank and file before him to attack and utterly destroy from the face of the table". He celebrates the cooking of a Singhalese cook at the Dak Bungalow, Krishnagar, 64 miles from Calcutta.

[Source: Raymond English Anti-Slavery Archive, John Rylands Library, Manchester]

John Drew is a poet, scholar and cricket aficionado who has taught English literature and creative writing at universities in several countries. His books include 'India and the Romantic Imagination' and the poetry collection 'Buddha at Kamakura'.

(To be concluded in the next issue)



Thompson, formerly M.P. for Tower Hamlets, famous for its radical politics, was a self-educated man who made his mark in the 1830's espousing the anti-Slavery cause. After attacking the Emancipation Act of 1833 for its failure to enact immediate emancipation, he campaigned for Abolition in the United States with William Lloyd Garrison to such effect that the Slavers put a price of \$20,000 on his head and so nearly captured him that he was forced to leave the country "to escape the assassin's knife".

Back in Britain, he engaged in other radical causes, in the Peace Movement and in bodies espousing the emancipation and rights of slaves, aborigines, workers and women. In

my host, where I might have enjoyed ease, idleness and luxury". Whatever the nature of his labours, religious, political or social, he is much among the men we associate with Young Bengal and one fruit of his labours is the foundation under his presidency of the Bengal British India Society.

We sometimes think of the story of Indian Independence beginning with the founding of the Indian National Congress in 1885 but we might reasonably trace it further back through the foundation of these several associations with confusingly similar names that kept reconstituting themselves in both India and Britain, each one raising the political temperature that much more, especially

In 1856, he writes to Amelia: "Being myself half a Hindoo - the cherished guest of a Hindoo - the advocate of Hindoo rights and the intimate friend of Woopendur Mohun Tagore, the nephew of my host, let me give you a new name between ourselves and from this bright Bengal Sunday morning be you my Amelia Mohun". Perhaps it doesn't occur to him he has given his daughter a male name but it is equally likely, as an advocate of women's rights he would be happy to do so. When he writes to tell her the long story of Tagore family history, he comments: "Bear in mind, as you look at the pedigree, that female children are not mentioned. They find no place in the genealogies

And wilt thou, when alone thou'st roaming,
Beneath our native skies at gloaming,
Whilst seas between us loud are foaming,
Sometimes think of me, love,
Sometimes think of me.

But when some cherished hope has faded,
When earthly joys by grief are shaded,
And care hath all your heart invaded,
Then, trusting, think of me, love.
Trusting, think of me.
Sunday, April 20, 1856.
You know where, and by whom, and to whom. Bus.

He also tells Amelia the story of the

The Other Handmaid's Tale

JOE TREASURE

I happened to be living in California when the twin towers were destroyed and, although a long way from New York, I observed the range of American responses to that attack at close hand. In a novel I wrote a couple of years later, I contrived a somewhat farcical scene in which a woman of European heritage called Astrid, attempting to gain some insight into Islamic culture, dresses in the burqa she has bought online. Meanwhile, David, a visitor to the house, comes across the gasmask that has been acquired by Astrid's more fearful housemate and, out of curiosity, tries it on. Stumbling into each other in the sitting room, both Astrid and David experience a moment of panic, each confronted, as it seems, by a faceless and alien intruder.

I wish I were an inventive enough writer to have imagined last week's scene on the *Promenade des Anglais* in Nice, when a woman in a burkini was ordered by four armed policemen to expose more of her body in order to conform to secular Western standards of undress. Way beyond farce, this would have been

theatre of the absurd, if there had not been an actual victim. The law these gendarmes were enforcing loads a simple article of clothing with such significance that it comes to symbolise, paradoxically, both female subjugation and homicidal intent.

The Western imagination has not always found the burqa so offensive or so threatening. In Muriel Spark's novel, *The Mandelbaum Gate*, which was published in 1965 and set four years earlier, Barbara, a British woman who is half-Jewish by birth and a convert to Catholicism, is in Israel visiting ancient sites, while her cousin is working on the legal team prosecuting Adolf Eichmann as a Nazi war criminal. Wishing to continue her pilgrimage into East Jerusalem, still then under Jordanian control, Barbara is persuaded by her Palestinian tour guide to disguise herself, for her own safety, as the guide's servant. The servant's old-fashioned, rustic garment allows Barbara to travel anonymously and unnoticed.

There are farcical elements here, too, though the sense of hazard,

both physical and moral, is rarely absent. Setting her novel at this meeting point of three great religions, and at the gateway between East and West that gives the book its title, Spark explores aspects of cultural similarity and difference. Barbara herself is culturally conflicted. The Jewish Catholic invisible under the burqa is marginalised from every direction. The burqa itself, however, remains an exotic prop.

In her futuristic fable, *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985), Margaret Atwood draws on a thoroughly Western history of female subjugation in veiling her female characters. A Christian coup has turned America into a theocracy. The governing ideology divides women strictly according to their roles in relation to men. Furthermore, as a result of environmental pollution, only a minority of women remain fertile. These 'handmaids' are a prized and exploited commodity. Through the tale of one such handmaid, we experience what it is to be both nurtured and imprisoned.

"ব্যঙ্গ-সৃষ্টিতে অসাধারণ প্রতিভার প্রয়োজন। ... বন্ধু আবুল মনসুরের হাত-সাফাই দেখে বিস্মিত হলাম। ভাষার কান মলে রস সৃষ্টির ক্ষমতা আবুল মনসুরের অসাধারণ। এ যেন পাকা গুস্তাদী হাত।"

-কাজী নজরুল ইসলাম

আবুল মনসুর আহমদের শ্রেষ্ঠ গল্প

সম্পাদনায়
ড. নুরুল আমিন

Home Delivery Service
www.rokomari.com
16297

Scan this QR CODE

আজিজ সুপার মার্কেট, শাহবাগ: প্রথমা (৯৬৬৪৮২৫), পাঠক সমাবেশ (০১৭১৩০৩৪৪৪০) কাটাবন: প্রকৃতি (০১৭২৭৩২৮৭২৩), বেইলি রোড: সাগর পাবলিশার্স (৯৩৫৮৯৪৪) বিমান বন্দর: বুক ওয়ার্ম (৯১২০৩৮৭)। নরসিংদী: বই পুস্তক (০১৮১৮৫৩৪৮৯৩) কুষ্টিয়া: বইমেলা (০১৭১১ ৫৭৫৬০৬)।
চট্টগ্রাম: বাতিঘর (০১৭১৩৩০৪০৪৪), প্রথমা (০১৭১১৬৪৯৪২২)