

# A Preliminary Report on the Macartney Manuscripts

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BY a strange chance, the University of Pennsylvania Library acquired in the autumn of 1954 a lost portion of the private correspondence of George, Lord Macartney (1737–1806), Governor of Madras 1781–85, and first British ambassador to China 1792–94. The full significance of these letters cannot be determined until they are checked against other extant Macartney Manuscripts, but it is already clear that this collection contains many items not duplicated elsewhere. The exact history of this find, which relates mainly to Lord Macartney's connection with India, remains somewhat of a mystery.

There are at present four other collections of Macartney material in public repositories, all (except the official records at the former India Office) stemming from three sales from Macartney's library: one to Sir Thomas Phillipps' collection early in the nineteenth century, one at public auction in 1854, and one by Mr. C. G. Macartney in 1915. The Bodleian Library at Oxford has 68 bound volumes of Macartney papers (MS. Eng. Hist. c.66–117, b.173–186, c.142–143): 52 purchased in 1916, presumably from the private collection of Dr. Hugh Hyndman of Belfast reported on for the Historical Manuscripts Commission (Rept. IX, App. 2, pp. 330–340, 1884); 16 purchased from Sotheby's in 1931. The British Museum has 49 volumes (Add MSS 22, 415–22,464) presumably acquired at the auction of 1854. The record department of the former India Office (now in the Commonwealth Relations Office) possesses all official correspondence relating to Macartney's service in India. These three collections were extensively drawn upon for *The Private Correspondence of Lord Macartney, Governor of Madras, 1781–85*, edited for the Royal Historical Society by C. Collin Davies (Camden Third Series, vol. LXXVII, 1950).<sup>1</sup> The fourth collection, wholly concerned

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with the embassy to China, is the Wason Collection at Cornell University consisting of 21 volumes purchased from the Phillipps Collection in September 1913, supplemented by 10 volumes bought of Mr. C. G. Macartney in 1915.<sup>2</sup>

The several hundred letters and documents under consideration here have clearly passed through at least three hands, those that originally wrapped them at a date somewhat later than 1880, those that rearranged and slightly annotated a few of them presumably about 1920, and those of the Boston dealer from whom the University bought them in 1954. The original wrappers consist of routine correspondence and telegraph forms, all dated in the 1870's, from the files of the Great Falls Manufacturing Company, Great Falls, New Hampshire. Such persons as Augustus Lowell and C. H. Dalton are mentioned in the letters used as wrappers, and occasionally a sample of cloth remains concealed between their pages. A possible supposition is that this concern needed a supply of eighteenth-century excellent quality rag paper and that this lot, having been recognized as something out of the ordinary in a shipment from London, was saved from the pulping machines. It was certainly carefully sorted, wrapped in discarded letters and telegraph forms, and perhaps stored away in a loft or attic until someone found it and went over it again about 1920, for the handwriting and the paper of the second set of wrappers seem to indicate such a date. This person made summaries occasionally on his wrappers, used the stationery of the former Boston City Club, and knew nothing about India. Apparently, the collection was again neglected until it fell into the dealer's hands a year or so ago.

A further reason for supposing that this collection came across the Atlantic not long after the public auction of what must have been the bulk of the Macartney library in 1854, lies in the nature of these letters and documents. They may well have been the leavings of a large sale, odds and ends knocked down to a bidder more interested in old rag paper than in content. Nearly all the few items *not* concerned with Macartney's years in India, 1781-85, are of a sort having little or no value to dealers in rare MSS or autographs. The core of this collection, chiefly letters to Macartney from correspondents in India during his residence

there, 1781–85, presents a different problem. Many of these items should certainly have been regarded as having value for collectors, but it is highly probable London dealers did not realize it. It was quite customary for persons in Macartney's position to have the letters from important personages which they regarded significant copied, often more than once. Furthermore, it was equally customary in the India of the 1780's to send letters in duplicate, triplicate, or even quadruplicate by different routes or messengers to make sure that at least one reached its destination. Hence, when a governor's correspondence was packed for shipment home, there was more than one packet of letters from each important correspondent, and often the neatest and most complete-appearing packet did not contain the originals. When such a collection comes on the auction block, it can happen that, though it is combed as this one undoubtedly was for every scrap in the hand of such prominent figures as Warren Hastings or Edmund Burke, a large number of originals in the hands of persons of secondary importance may escape notice and end up among the odds and ends at such a sale.

This may have been what happened to this group of letters. There is, in the first place, a very large number of private letters to Macartney in the handwriting of persons of distinctly minor importance, such as East India Company officials at many of the lesser posts in the Madras Presidency and the like. There is a smaller number in the handwriting of persons of much greater importance, e.g. Sir John Macpherson, interim governor-general for a year after Hastings' departure in 1785 and John Robinson, Lord North's "political manager." In many of these cases, here at Pennsylvania are the originals; what the Bodleian or the British Museum have are "copies," most of them published in 1950 by Mr. C. C. Davies. There are also a most interesting set of letters from generals and officers in the field during the military campaigns against Hyder Ali and Tippoo Sultan, 1781–83, written in minuscule on both sides of strips of paper half an inch wide, and readable only with the aid of a magnifying glass. These, of course, are not originals in the officers' own hands, but they certainly came through the enemy's country carried concealed by Indian *hircarrahs* (messengers). Again, some of these have been

published from later copies but many, especially those of General Sir Hector Munro, may be new. Further, this collection contains the originals of Macartney's governor's commission, his covenants, his indentures, and many a despatch from the East India Company's Court of Directors with original directors' signatures—all documents of which several copies would be made in the normal course of business.

The importance of this collection lies chiefly in the contribution it may make to the history of southern India in the 1780's. The activities of the East India Company's servants at the lesser "factories" on both coasts are but imperfectly known. There are here at least three sets of private letters from such men including apparently everything they sent to the governor unofficially over a three or four year period, along with many scattered and occasional letters from civil servants and military officers seeking favors for friends or recommendations for themselves. These letters come from a wide variety of places in south and central India: Hyderabad, Masulipatam, Vellore, Ongole, Nagore, Anjengo, Tellicherry, Trichinopoly, Tinnevelly.

Although much has been written on the military history of the Carnatic during Macartney's governorship of Madras, the letters which appear here from officers and agents with the armies in the field throw more light on the story. There are first-hand accounts of the British occupation of the Dutch "factories" at Pulicat, Sadras, and Negapatam, and of the French "factory" at Mahé. Apparently all the letters of Macartney's secretary, Sir George Leonard Staunton, written while he was in the field observing operations and taking part in peace negotiations are here, though there appears to be little or nothing about Staunton's mission to Calcutta in an effort to patch up Macartney's differences with Warren Hastings or about his role in the China embassy on which his fame rests.<sup>3</sup> The most important of the military letters are those of Generals Sir Eyre Coote and Sir Hector Munro for 1781-82 and General Richard Mathews for 1783-84.

It is regrettable that there are not more letters about the affairs of the Nawab of Arcot and the Rajah of Tanjore in this collection. To Macartney, the most important object of his governorship was the retention by his government of the management of the

Nawab's revenues which he had taken over under stress of war. He resigned the governorship of Madras and refused the governor-generalship in 1785 rather than bow to the orders from home to restore the management of the revenues to the Nawab and the unprincipled crew of the Nawab's creditors led by the most notorious "nabob" of the time, Paul Benfield. Though there are no letters of Paul Benfield here, there appears a most informative anonymous "Narrative" of how "B" was set on the road to enormous wealth by the fortunate chance that the Company's military paymaster at Trichinopoly, Mr. Hay, faced with the necessity of returning to England in 1770-71, was willing to part with his "private concerns" worth 140,000 gold "pagodas" (about £56,000) for a fraction of their value.

As an Irishman, Macartney was in fairly close touch, though not intimate, with Edmund Burke. Hence William Burke, Edmund's elusive and far from reputable "cousin," after returning to India in 1781 to serve the interests of the Raja of Tanjore as against those of the Nawab of Arcot, attempted further to ingratiate himself with Macartney. There are in this collection over a dozen original letters of William Burke, several of which are almost certainly new. Photostats of these will be sent to Sheffield where all Burke material is now being gathered to assist in the publication of a definitive edition of Edmund Burke's correspondence under the general editorship of Professor T. W. Copeland of the University of Chicago with the support of the Carnegie Corporation. Macartney's snubs of William Burke, after Edmund's influence had secured William appointment as Paymaster of King's troops at Tanjore, apparently had little effect.<sup>4</sup> These letters end in July 1785 with one of congratulation on the nomination of Macartney as Hastings' successor: "I have a long paragraph and an affectionate one from your friend Edmund on your subject. He says he knows not whether you understand that at all times he has not been idle to serve you."

This collection may well prove of importance for the economic, as well as the military and administrative history of southern India. There are packets of papers on negotiations of the East India Company's tobacco and betel contracts, and on the pearl fisheries at Nagore and in Palk strait between India and Ceylon.

Scattered through the collection copies of many petitions to Macartney from Indians appear. Occasionally, these are accompanied by Persian, Hindi, or Tamil originals, sometimes with seals intact. The familiar subject of “channels of remittance” to Europe, both legal and illegal, is not neglected. Faced with the prospect of managing Macartney’s affairs during his absence, Macartney’s bankers, Thomas Coutts and Co. sought expert advice on this subject. On December 28, 1780, a fortnight after Macartney had been appointed Governor of Madras, Colin Mackenzie wrote Thomas Coutts a long letter describing in detail all methods of remittance except that through the Dutch. Coutts added a postscript in his own hand on remittance via Amsterdam with data on exchange rates and commissions payable before sending the letter to Macartney. Whether Macartney used this information does not appear; as is indicated in the letter, a governor, in control of the legal channels of remittance, did not need to resort to illegal ones.

Unfortunately, this collection yields almost nothing of note with respect to Macartney’s activities outside India. Finding a colored sketch of the “button” or pompon on a high-ranking mandarin’s ceremonial hat aroused hopes that letters concerning China might be included. Nothing has turned up, however, except a letter or two of Sir George Staunton’s written on the voyage home, an inventory of the ambassador’s plate, table and kitchenware dated Peking, August 1793, and other inventories of goods shipped from China to India. The most interesting items relating to China and adjacent regions are not directly concerned with Macartney’s embassy. Henry Botham’s original letter to Macartney of September 9, 1782, from Calcutta announcing that he sails “tomorrow” in the *Elizabeth* at the request of Warren Hastings to “wait upon” the King of Achin in Sumatra to treat for an alliance is here.<sup>5</sup> There are also two copies of English translations of the letter to Warren Hastings and one of the letter to George Bogle from Solpön Chenpo, steward of Chungpa Hutukhtu, regent of Tashilunpo, dated October 28, 1781, which reached Calcutta, February 12, 1782, when the famous Hindu *gosain* (pilgrim) Purungir reported to Hastings about his long journey to Peking.<sup>6</sup> These are accompanied by an original letter from

Francis Baring, undated, apprising Macartney that “the papers received from Bengal by the *Tartar* packet throw further light on the advance of the Chinese army towards Thibet.” Presumably these are part of the material on Tibet prepared for Macartney before his departure for China.

This collection is likewise disappointing with respect to Macartney’s activities at home, whether in Ireland or England. The Irish items are negligible, relating wholly to property and estate matters which are of little significance without supporting material. The English items are numerous, but, apart from the East India Directors’ election of 1780, contain little that is not concerned with patronage of the less consequential sort. The many letters exchanged with the Sulivans—Laurence, Stephen, Richard, and John—may throw new light on East India Company politics, 1777–85, for Laurence was a great power in India affairs until his death in 1785. The items on the 1780 election provide the University of Pennsylvania Library with Macartney’s own copy of a printed list of East India stockholders heavily annotated in the course of his electioneering negotiations for votes for his friends. Such lists are very rare outside the British Museum and the India Office Library.

All in all, this collection, though small, enables the University of Pennsylvania Library to illustrate from contemporary material the nature of the British connection with India in the late eighteenth century. Like others of their type, the “patronage” letters are full of human-interest stories of many kinds, from the obscure civil servant who used his eleven-year-old son’s letter to touch the governor’s heart to the ex-governor’s wife who wrote William Devaynes, Chairman of the East India Company’s Court of Directors, on behalf of her nephew, “I fairly tell you I shall put my worthy friends Mrs. Devaynes and Lady Macartney on your back; and on this occasion to render the God of Friendship more propitious you will allow it fair that I muster all the petticoat interest in my power to accomplish one of the most darling objects I was ever interested to establish.”<sup>7</sup>

#### NOTES

1. On collections of Macartney papers, see especially pp. xvi–xix of this work.

2. Earl H. Pritchard, *The Crucial Years of Early Anglo-Chinese Relations 1750-1800* (Pullman, Washington, 1936), pp. 408-410.
3. Sir George Leonard Staunton was the father of the sinologist, Sir George Thomas Staunton who began study of Chinese in London and accompanied his father on the voyage to China at the age of 13.
4. Macartney was annoyed at William Burke's request "that the whole pay of His Majesty's troops should be issued to me"; see Dixon Wecter, *Edmund Burke and His Kinsmen* (Boulder, Colorado, 1939), p. 86.
5. Botham's expedition against the Dutch at Padang in 1781 is discussed in Vincent T. Harlow, *The Founding of the Second British Empire 1763-93* (London, 1952), p. 136. For the Achin Embassy, see India Office, Home Miscellaneous MSS, vol. 219, pp. 577-612.
6. On the letters brought by Purungir, see Schuyler Cammann, *Trade through the Himalayas* (Princeton, 1951), p. 82.
7. University of Pennsylvania Macartney MSS, Eliza Davidson to William Devaynes, December 2, 1786.