



A NOTE ON SOME FAMOUS ANGLO-INDIAN FAMILIES

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On 17th March 1999 Brig. Michael Alexander Robert Skinner passed away in the UK. He was in direct line of descent from Col. James Skinner, the founder of the Regiment and St. James Church.

Brig. Michael Alexander Robert Skinner was born on the 29th Sept. 1920, and passed away at the age of 78. He was the second eldest of the family of six brothers and three sisters. Brig Skinner was commissioned into Skinners Horse in 1942. He saw action with the Regiment in the PAI Force and Italy during Second World War and was a member of the Regimental contingent at the Victory Parade in the UK in 1946. He also served with the International Control Commission in Vietnam but prematurely retired from service in 1966 to look after the family's lands in Hansi, India, which was granted, to his ancestor Colonel James Skinner.

When the British first started prospecting their colony and moved into India, they firmly incorporated friendship with the Moghul rulers. While the Moghul rulers considered the British as their trusted friends and advisers, the British carefully observed, and waited for an appropriate opportunity to take over the country from the Moghul rulers. This was the time when the intermarriage between the British and the Hindu princess, or Muslim Princess, took place and the Anglo-Indian community began. The intermarriage of the two races at the time started for political purpose. A good example was the founder of the Skinner family in India, Nasir-ud-Dowlah Colonel James Skinner Bahadur Ghalib Jung. Colonel James Skinner, the legendary founder of Skinner's Horse, who died in 1841.

The last Moghul emperor was weak. During his time many new independent small principalities of the Hindu Rajahs, and the Muslim Nawabs began springing up. There was no unity amongst the rulers of the small principalities or kingdoms, they were frequently fighting with each other. These made it easier for the British to move in and take over the Delhi Durbar successfully from the last Moghul Emperor, and make India one of the colonies of the British.

Colonel Skinner's mother was a Hindu Rajput princess, and his father a Scot, the son of the Provost of Montros. Yet, for most of his life, Skinner lived like a Moghul and liked to be addressed by his formal Muslim title. He was brought up a Christian, of sorts, but kept a harem of Hindu and Muslim wives, and showed his open-mindedness by building not only a church, but also a mosque and a temple. Most of his children seem to have been brought up as Christians, but some converted to Islam.

As a reward for his services, the Moghuls and the Marathas both gave him huge estates. At his death in 1841, Sikander Sahib or James Skinner left his five sons 194 villages, several palaces, some Moghul gardens, a network of indigo factories and caravanserais, a grand townhouse, and several bazaars in Delhi. The family squabble indolence and extravagance whittled away the fortune, but by mid 1930s the family had 60,000 acres of land and enjoyed the status of a Maharaja. Despite Skinner's grand Moghul titles, to the people of Delhi he was known simply as Sikander Sahib or the reincarnation of Alexander the Great because his cavalrymen never lost a battle. Skinner commanded his own mercenary force of irregular cavalry, with whom he had fought both for the Marthas and the Moguls, before finally taking service under the Union flag. Skinner's Horse enabled the East India Company to secure great chunks of Northern India for Britain. With their scarlet turbans, silver-edged girdles, black shields, and bright yellow tunics, Skinner's cavalrymen were, "reckoned to be the most useful and trusty, as well as the boldest body of men in India." They never lost a battle.

According to William Dalrymple, "during the Raj, both Indian and British tradition conspired to place people in rigid class, caste and religious compartments; there were few family who managed to break out of these communal entrenchments the

way the Skinners did. But this success placed the family in a particular quandary at Partition: where did they really belong - Pakistan, India, or Britain? In the event, most of the Muslim Skinners fled to Pakistan, while many of the Christian Skinners emigrated to Britain, the USA, and Australia. Only a few remained in India to try and maintain the family estates, while also keeping a lifeline to Britain."

The Skinners spent their entire summer months at Sikander Hall, Skinners' hill palace in Mussoorie, and when the winter came they left the hill estates for Hansi. The whole family went down the road to the plains in great procession, with the boys on the horseback, and all the women in palanquins. The day they arrived in Hansi, Brig Michael Skinner's father would hold a durbar. Urdu was the first language of his father but he was just as fluent in English. Brig Michael Skinner's father preferred to keep friendship with the Indian landowners or princes rather than the British. He often said that 'the more you kick the British, the more you get out of them.' During the durbar he sat cross-legged on a bolster wearing an angurka (Nehru-style frock coat). The headmen of his villages would come and offer a nasr (symbolic tribute) of one rupee, and a basketful of dried fruit. After a lot of speeches, the family would present quilts and ladoos to the poor, and then the bards would recite the genealogy of the Skinner ancestors. The family munshi or teacher would then recite a poem about the deeds of the Skinner ancestors after the genealogy.

During the partition in 1947, there was a terrible communal riot in Hansi. Hindus and Muslims, who lived peacefully upto then, started killing each other. All his friends became enemies of each other. Besides the news that the new Land Act would take away the landowners' estates made Brig Micheal Skinner's father terribly depressed and one evening when he was all alone, he took his twelve-bore and putting it into his mouth, he pressed the trigger and died.

Today Lillian Skinner and her brother Jimmy Skinner still live in India. Jimmy never married. His brother Mike, Brig Michael Alexander Robert Skinner died with no sons to carry on the name Skinner as an Anglo-Indian. That brings to the end of the Skinners in India, although there still are many more of them in Pakistan, USA, England, and in Australia. Their grandmother was Ashgari Begum, a devote Muslim who said her prayers five times a day. She could only speak a limited amount of

English, one of them being, "damned swine." At the time Hansi was like a little colony of Skinners. The house was originally built by Sikhader Sahib as his officers' mess. There were various aunts and cousins living in the house. One of the grandmother's younger sister was Nasira Begum, who called herself Fanny Skinner when she was with the Europeans.

There were armies of servants at the Skinners' palaces in Mussoorie and at Hansi. There were six guards at the gate and a jamedar in charge of them. There were syces to look after the ponies, whole families of sweepers, and bhistis who carried the water. After independence and the land Act of 1947, no one was allowed more than eighteen acres. All their villages were taken away. They were to get compensation of about hundreds of thousands of rupees but nothing came to them, except the Sikander Hall in Mussoorie, and the house in Hansi near Delhi. The Indian judge at the court remarked that the Skinners were relics of the British Raj, and that they were imperialists who had plundered the country.

Brig Michael Alexander Robert Skinner was the Chairman of the Board of Governors, St Thomas' College in Dehra Dun from July 1988 to 17th March 1999, till the day he died.

Many other Anglo-Indians who possessed huge amount of land and properties during the British Raj faced the same plight as the Skinners family members left in India. Average Anglo-Indians at the time remained in the dreamland of the past. They never thought of the future, and what it would mean to them if India became independent. They continued living their stereo type life, content with their job, social life, and entertainment, while the British and the Indians were fighting for independence of India. The Anglo-Indians in India did not anticipate the glorious British Raj to end so soon, and were living with the hope that if it did happen, the British would provide for them, or they would immigrate to England. They were sure that anyway they would remain in the same superior and prestigious status as they did during the British Raj times.

The Gardners of Khasganj, India, are another complicated families. Some Gardners claim to have descended from Lord William Gardner of Coleraine, who commanded a company at the siege of Derry, and whose son also William, was a Lt Col in HM

11th Dragoons. Lord Gardner was a Methodist by religion and his descendants have remained Methodist.

Then there was a soldier Alan Gardner, an Anglican, who raised Gardner's Horse and died in 1828. He is buried at Khasganj. His relative was the Hon. General E. Gardner, a resident at Kumaon, who retrieved and captured Almorah with Colonel Nicolls in April 1815 for the English during the establishment and of British ascendancy in India. Many of Alan Gardner's descendants also seem to have been soldiers.

Alan Gardner was married to a Muslim Begum by the name of Bibi Sahiba Hinga. They had a daughter, Susan, who married a Mirza Anjan Sheko, the son of Mirza Suleman Sheko, and grandson of Alam Shah, one of the later Mogul Emperors. Alam Shah was a descendant of Ghengis Khan. Alan's brother, William James Gardner, also married into the same family, his second wife being Mulka Humani Begum, sister of Mirza Anjan Sheko. Descendants of Alan Gardner and his brother still live in India. Mr Russell V. Gardner, Mr Winston Gardner, their sister Enid can trace back their family tree to Alan Gardner, William James Gardner, and Ghengis Khan. Both Mr Russell Gardner and Winston Gardner are Principals of Anglican schools in India. Mr Russell Gardner being the Principal of St Thomas Collegiate in Dehra Dun. Two of his sisters are married and immigrated to USA and UK, while his son, also Russell J. Gardner, lives with his family in Melbourne, Australia. His daughter, Michelle Gardner married, Reggie Khanna, the son of an Anglo-Indian lady, Mauveen Carbery, from Dehra Dun, and a Hindu Punjabi pilot officer, Mr Ram K. Khanna. Mr Russell V. Gardner also has his own private Junior High School, St Jude, in Dehra Dun. His wife, Violet Lyons/Gardner is the Principal of their private school. Although Mr Russell V. Gardner is an Anglican, his wife is a Catholic, and he has a strong faith in Saint Jude, the patron of hopeless cases, that is why he has named his school by the name.

Mr Winston Gardner, the Principal of St George School in Ketty, in the Nilgiris, is married to an Anglo-Indian, Joan Daniels. They have two sons and a daughter and are living in India. Russell Gardner and Winston Gardner's one brother, Vivian

Gardner was in the Calcutta police, but died early in his thirties leaving behind a son and two daughters.

There are many Gardners in the various Catholic registers also, mostly from Khasganj area, this being complicated by different spellings such as Gardener or Gardiner. The Gardner family tree is very complicated and many-branched. There were tremendous intermarriage between the different lines, and many marriages to muslims. Many of the names are of unrelated families. A missionary by the name of Gardner also lived in Khasganj and converted many Indians giving his surname, 'Gardner' to all those he converted to Christianity.

Dehra Dun, a city close to Mussorie hill station, belonged to three main Anglo-Indian families during the British Raj times, the Skinners, the Hurseys and the Powells. The three families owned many villages and land in and around Dehra Dun area. After the independence of India, most of the land was taken over by the government of India, although each of the families have managed to retain a small portion of what belonged to them till the present time.

Members of the Hursey family eventually sold off their land and property and immigrated overseas, leaving behind no members of theirs to carry on their Anglo-Indian line in India. Jimmy Skinner and his sister, Lillian are still taking care of theirs, just as much as the descendants of the Powell family.

Mrs. Doris Powell left her land and property to her daughter, Mrs. Carbery, who in turn left it to her two daughters, Jennifer and Mauveen Carbery. At present, Jennifer and Mauveen have nineteen acres of land plus a huge farmhouse between them in Dehra Dun. The rest of the land and property were taken over by the Indian Government after the independence of India. The farmhouse belonging to them is built in the Californian style and has antique furniture and crockery belonging to their ancestors. The farmhouse is surrounded by huge expanse of land, which has orchards, wheat, and vegetables growing in abundance. The villagers work on the land for the family.

Jennifer Carbery is married to Mr Mann, and they have their own private school, Carmen Public School in Dehra Dun for many years. Their son, Greg Mann, also has his own private school, while their daughter married an Indian. Mauveen Carbery married an Indian Air-Force Officer, Wing Commander Ram K. Khanna. While Mauveen's children have immigrated to USA and Australia, Jennifer's family still live in Dehra Dun. The villagers around living in the land which once belonged to her ancestors, still look upto her as their chief and the head of the villages. They call her the Pardhani or the chief of the village. She attends all the village functions and gets a great respect from Indian villagers the same as did her ancestors during the British times.

REFERENCES

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- (2) 'Salaam Surrey,' an article on the Skinner Family by William Dalrymple.
- (3) An article about Brig Michael Skinner in the School Magazine of St Thomas Collegiate after his death.
- (4) A personal interview with a family member of the Gardners.
- (5) Robin Volkens research on the Gardeners.
- (6) Indian History book by Mukerjee about General Gardner of Almorah.
- (7) A personal interview with Maureen Cabery.

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