

IN the sixteenth century the persecuted Scots preacher/teacher John Knox roused the country against Roman Catholic rule. A little-known chapter in the history of Bocket Hall was its tenancy by a direct descendant of Knox, John Lord Lawrence, hero of the Punjab, friend of Florence Nightingale, and one of the great viceroys of India.

John Lawrence was born in Richmond, Yorkshire, another link between Bocket Hall and the north of England from whence many of its occupants have sprung. His father was a major in the 19th Foot embittered by tough service and lack of promotion, invalidated with a shattered right hand and a scarred face. His mother was a Miss Knox, a frugal woman who bore her tempestuous Irish husband a dozen children of whom Lawrence was the eighth.

FLOGGED

He attended the Grammar School in Londonderry where his uncle the Rev. James Knox was headmaster assisted by his sister. When the family moved to Bristol young John and his three older brothers attended a day-school where they were stigmatised as non-gentlemen. "I was flogged every day of my life except one," he recalled, "and then I was flogged twice."

His elder brothers joined the Indian army and John Lawrence had similar aspirations. "A soldier I was born and a soldier I will be," he insisted. His elder sister Letitia, an invalid who greatly influenced the family, persuaded him to accept the chance to go to Haileybury an Imperial Service College in Hertfordshire and there he went in 1827.

PRIZES

For two years he studied Bengali, won the history prize and a gold medal for history, and his tall, gaunt, uncouth figure was often seen walking about Hoddesdon and Hatfield. Alone, for he was a reticent man and made few friends. At night he would steal out and listen to the nightingales and bathe in the River Lea. Room C54 at the College bore his brass nameplate. The prizes he presented to his sister Letitia: "These are all won by you," he told her.

The Hertfordshire days of a Viceroy of India

BY MARGOT STRICKLAND

In the autumn of 1829 he, his brother Henry and sister Honoria set sail for India. Lawrence was violently seasick and not expected to survive the six-weeks voyage. On taking up his post in Delhi he suffered from acute homesickness and a Scot's mistrust of the English under the Raj in a temperature of 90 degrees in the shade. He plunged into a study of Urdu and Persian and mastered both.

On leave in Ireland the thirty-year-old Lawrence met and married Harriette Hamilton, daughter of a liberal parson who maintained friendly relations with the Catholics in his parish. Together they returned to India.

PROMOTION

Lawrence's single-minded devotion to duty amazed all. For his physical prowess he was compared with Samson. His zeal for the people's welfare was paramount. Promotion came despite his lack of rank, loathing of ceremony, and blunt tongue. When a socially superior replacement was promised a near-mutiny broke out among his staff. Every eventuality was met with fearless justice by the tall man with the penetrating eyes, wild hair and furrowed face. Lawrence was knighted and became Chief Commissioner of the Punjab, a region of extremes ravaged by small-pox, cholera, leprosy, plague, famine and war.

When the entire Bengali army mutinied the hour found the man: Sir John Lawrence. A commander without parallel he was firm, liberal and with a grasp of the minutest detail, a Hercules to his troops decimated by cholera.



Lord Lawrence of the Punjab.

In 1857 Lawrence came to England and Windsor Castle where Lawrence, though no courtier, was greatly impressed with the Prince Consort's grasp of the situation and agreed with Lawrence's controversial views on India and British policy there. Queen Victoria was distressed and indignant by the people's unchristian spirit towards the mutineers: "They should know that there is no hatred to a brown skin, none, but the greatest wish on the Queen's part to see them happy, contented and flourishing."

Lawrence was the first Knight of the new Order of the

Star of India with which the Queen invested him at Windsor Castle in the winter of 1861. The Order bore an onyx cameo of the head of Queen Victoria and the legend: "Heaven's light our guide". This was Lawrence's career crowned.

Sir John Lawrence was at his desk in the India office in Whitehall when he was told he was to return as Viceroy. England's greatest honour was his and after years of separation from home and family he prepared again to sail to India.

His youngest child Bertie was only two years old. Before small children his famous Scots reserve crumbled. He held his son in his arms while his other children in turn spoke a hymn to him and said goodbye to their father who openly wept, fearing he would never see the child again.

The appointment was an unconventional one, greeted with relief for a man of merit had been appointed to a post usually accorded to men of rank. It was said that Lawrence had an imperial mind. *The Times* wrote that Lawrence was "stamped by the hand of

Nature with the true impress of nobility". Florence Nightingale wrote: "There is no greater position for usefulness under heaven than that of governing the vast empire you saved for us. And you are the only man to fill it". The Duchess of Argyll praised the solidity of judgment and simplicity of character.

Lawrence had risen from the ranks but despite his responsibilities had to combat envy from the high-born. He remained the same blunt Scot who worked at his desk in shirt-sleeves, collarless, and with carpet slippers on his feet, on occasion offending the ritualistic Indian dignitaries.

BLINDNESS

The Lawrences left India in 1869 and in the spring of 1871 they leased Bocket Hall, Lemsford, from Earl Cowper.

There they drove about the winding lanes of leafy Hertfordshire in a little carriage. Lawrence loved driving horses and was specially attached to a spirited grey mare called Kate. But the near-blindedness he had suffered as a child of five

returned to plague him and his eyes which penetrated Indian and European alike in a dauntless quest for truth, were failing.

At Bocket he entertained his children, grandchildren and friends, and when Bertie went to Harrow, taught the boy history in the school holidays. There was no entertaining on a grand scale for he retained his hatred of ceremony and formal dress. He regularly visited the village schools at Lemsford and Ayot St. Peter, for he had a Scot's passion for education and in particular, religious education, as inculcated in him by his aunt Miss Knox. "The Bible should be read," he wrote and rejected most ancillary works. He staunchly upheld the work of the Church Missionary Society and welcomed missionaries to Bocket. The time would come, he believed, when the Indian people would turn to Christianity.

SECRETARY

With the family at Bocket was his private secretary, a Miss Gaster, who had stayed

on with the family after being the children's governess. From her childhood she had worshipped the tall, cadaverous hero whom she had first seen speaking at a public meeting. "God never made a purer nobler nature than his", she wrote.

CROQUET

The eminent viceroy taught his devoted secretary to play croquet on the Bocket lawn, a game at which he excelled. He played to win and he expected her to do the same. Undeterred by pouring rain they would wield mallets and tap the coloured wooden balls through the hoops, often joined by "a very muscular parson who lived near Bocket".

Lawrence retained his simple sympathy for all, giving lifts to anyone he met walking by the roadside to and from Hatfield railway station. The lodges at the park gates were occupied by four elderly women, three of whom were pious churchgoers, but Lawrence preferred the company of the fourth, a jolly toper. Expected to turn out in all

weathers to open and shut the park gates, he pressed the long-suffering Miss Gaster to help him drag boughs to the lodges for the old ladies' fires, on one occasion observed with disdain by a foppish young neighbour whom the Lawrences had entertained to luncheon that day.

By the autumn of 1875 Lawrence's sight and health were so poor that he and Lady Lawrence left Bocket. His vigorous criticism of British policy in India continued in the columns of *The Times* and in the House of Lords, protesting at the repeal of the cotton duties which would enrich the English manufacturers at the expense of the Indian workers. When the tired old man rose to speak in the House of Lords in the winter of 1879 his words were tragically inaudible. The great gaunt giant was only sixty-eight but he was blind and dying.

"I am so weary", he murmured at the last.

Lord Lawrence was buried in Westminster Abbey.

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