

A FLY ON THE WHEEL

OR

HOW I HELPED TO GOVERN INDIA

BY

LIEUT.-COL. THOMAS H. LEWIN

AUTHOR OF "WILD TRIBES OF THE SOUTH-WESTERN FRONTIER,"
"HANDBOOK OF THE TIBETAN LANGUAGE,"
ETC, ETC, ETC.

FOREWORD

BY

JULIAN FRANCIS

FRIENDS OF THE LIBERATION WAR

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Ensign Thomas Herbert Lewin aged 18.
Year 1859

Biography

The following biography is quoted verbatim from the United Kingdom National Archives.⁵

“The Lewin family came from Bexley and Eltham in Kent. In the mid-eighteenth-century Richard Lewin became commander of an East India Company ship, and started a connection with the Company which would continue through several generations of the family. Richard's son Thomas worked for the Company between 1770 and 1800, and was resident in India for about 20 years during that period. It is Thomas Lewin's grandson Thomas Herbert Lewin who later became the District Commissioner of Chittagong Hill Tracts”

"Thomas Herbert Lewin was born in London on 1 April 1839. He was educated at a school in Littlehampton and later became a cadet at the Addiscombe Military College. In September 1857, Lewin travelled to India as a lieutenant and was involved in several campaigns to put down the Indian Mutiny. He became the District

⁵ United Kingdom National Archives. The Lewin Family Papers (1779-1926). Ref. No. MS 811

Superintendent in Police at Rampur Bandleah in April 1861. In January 1864 he moved to the same post for Noacolly in South Bengal and then to Chittagong in October 1864. In March 1866, he was promoted to Captain. His appointment, first as Temporary Superintendent and later permanent Deputy Commissioner and Political Agent for the unregulated Hill Tracts - a post that he held until 1875 - meant that he became in effect the governor of the remote Lushai and Chittagong Hill tracts. His abilities as an administrator led him to be regarded with affection by the local tribes and his work in understanding the language and culture of the region was of lasting significance. From his experiences he wrote *The Hill Tracts of Chittagong and the Dwellers therein* (Calcutta, 1869) and *The Wild Races of South-Eastern India* (England, 1870)."

"In January 1874, Lewin returned to England due to ill health; he was made an honorary Lieutenant Colonel and received a Colonel's pension. He returned to India in 1875 to take up the post of Deputy Commissioner of Cooch Behar. During another period of furlough in England, 1876-7, he married Margaret Elliot, and they returned to India together in October 1877, where Lewin was taken up the post of Deputy Commissioner of Darjeeling. Between 1873 and 1879, Lewin wrote three further books: *Hill Proverbs of the Inhabitants of the Chittagong Hill Tracts* (Calcutta, 1873), a handbook on the *Lushai Dialect* (1874), and a manual of *Tibetan* (1879). He remained at the post until 1879 when he was permitted to retire and returned to England. In 1885, he bought Parkhurst, a house in Abinger, near Dorking, Surrey where he lived until his death in 1916."

"In 1884, Lewin's book, *A Fly on the Wheel* was published giving an account of his time in India between 1857 and 1873, with a second edition being published in 1912. His interest in India continued until

his death and he corresponded with his acquaintances from his days there. After his death, his wife continued this correspondence."

Thomas was born 1 April 1839 in Lewisham, London, the son of George Lewin and Mary Friend. He was baptized 13 June 1839 in London. His father died when Thomas was 16.⁶

He married Margaret McClean 24 July 1876 at Elham, Kent.⁷

He died 11 February 1910 at Dorking, Surrey, England at the age of 70. He was buried at Abinger, Mole Valley District, in Surrey.⁸ His will was probated 25 May 1916 in London.⁹

⁶ "England Births and Christenings, 1538-1975", database, FamilySearch (<https://familysearch.org/ark:/61903/1:1:JW8L-V2N> : 21 September 2020), Thomas Herbert Lewin, 1839.

⁷ Marriages Sep 1876 - Lewin Thomas Herbert Elham 2a 1403 accessed at <https://www.freebmd.org.uk/cgi/information.pl?cite=Kh238WRP5IJPld3%2FNTx6dQ&scan=1> 17 Feb 2021

⁸ Find a Grave, database and images (<https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/58112529/thomas-herbert-lewin> : accessed 24 February 2022), memorial page for Thomas Herbert Lewin (1 Apr 1839–11 Feb 1910), Find a Grave Memorial ID 58112529, citing St James Churchyard, Abinger, Mole Valley District, Surrey, England ; Maintained by buttershap (contributor 46840435) .

⁹ PROBATE - Lewin, Thomas Herbert of Parkhurst Abinger Common Dorking Surrey, died 11 February 1916 Probate London 25 May to Margaret Lewin (Widow). Effects £55094 6s 8d Transcript from <https://probatesearch.service.gov.uk/Calendar#calendar>

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A FLY ON THE WHEEL

CHAPTER I LOOKING BACK

1857-58

I HAVE arrived at the midmost stage of life; and now, before quitting the table-land of maturity and striking down to the lower level of old age, I am minded to look back, while I am still able to gaze at the past, with vision undimmed by age or infirmity.

I come of old Kentish stock, who for three generations had sent sons to India; and therefore it was a natural start in life when one of my Indian uncles obtained for me a cadetship in the East India Company's service, and I was in due course started out with a dozen other youngsters, my college-mates from Addiscombe, bound for Calcutta, on the 9th September, 1857, the year of the Indian Mutiny.

We had heard rumours in England, before starting, of insurrection in Bengal, but the disturbance was thought to be local, and not of general importance; and after the final wrench from home ties, and the quick ensuing superlative wretchedness of sea-sickness, we reached the Mediterranean, our youthful minds much elated with the sense of our own individuality, and troubled only by insatiable appetites; sea and sky, present and future, alike undimmed by any fleck of cloud, any presage of evil omen.

At Malta, however, serious news awaited us, news that struck home to our boyish hearts, and brought us face to face with the stern realities of life and death. The province of Bengal was in a flame of revolt from end to end; the entire Bengal army was in open mutiny; and, what stirred us most, the batch of cadets which had preceded us to Bengal by a few months only, young fellows we had all known, and with whom we had played cricket within the year – they, our schoolfellows, had been surprised and massacred at Allahabad, as they sat at mess. The knowledge and fear of death as a thing possible to ourselves had hitherto been unknown to us; but now it came very near as we realized the dreadful scene. The cheerful mess-table, with its lights, and white cloth sparkling with silver and wine; and then in a flash the windows filled with the black threatening faces and murderous eyes of the mutineers, as they surrounded the mess-house, from which not one of the poor lads escaped alive. The fun of our voyage was gone. The glories and wonders of Alexandria and Cairo; the crossing of the pathless desert sands, strewn with skeletons of animals and shapeless masses of rock, over which we jolted heavily in our mule-drawn vans; the dry burning heat of the Red Sea and the moist clinging warmth of the Indian Ocean and Ceylon; the strange new human creatures that swarmed round the ship, importunate for alms, as we stopped for coaling: all passed before our eyes like a dream, as obstacles and delays in our now tedious journey. The fever had seized us; the desire to fight, the wish for vengeance was in our blood. We wanted one thing only-to reach quickly the land where our comrades and friends had so treacherously been murdered.

It was a relief when at last the low, muddy banks of the Hoogly came in view. The pilot climbed on board, and we slowly steamed up the river and dropped anchor off the City of Palaces. I even now shudder to recall the chill feeling of loneliness and home-sickness with which I sought the bare, cheerless room assigned to me in the cadet's quarters in Fort William. Alone in a strange land; my fellow passengers had scattered and gone their respective ways on landing; my fellow cadets even, had found friends to meet them, while I went

alone to the Fort Adjutant, to report my arrival, and inquire to what regiment of the Bengal army I was likely to be posted.

"Army I-regiment!" was the reply. "There is no Bengal army; it is all in revolt. You will be sent off to the front all once, and perhaps attached to some Queen's regiment. Provide yourself with a camp-bedstead and a chillumchee, and wait for orders."

I saluted and left the presence of my superior officer, deeply pondering as to the possible nature and qualities of a "chillumchee," but not venturing to inquire further. However, I must obey orders; so with some misgivings I entrusted myself to some palanquin-bearers, who jogged off with me to the bazaar, whence I returned triumphant, with my chillumchee, or brass washing-basin, borne helmet-fashion on the head of a dusky porter, who followed in the wake of my novel conveyance. The bedstead I did not purchase, grudging the expense out of my slender purse.

Next morning I learnt that I and four other cadets were to proceed to Chinsurah, to join Her Majesty's 34th Regiment, which was under orders for Cawnpore. We were each allowed 150 lbs. weight of luggage; and I ruefully parted with the rest of my belongings, which I did not see again for a year and a half.

On reaching Chinsurah and reporting myself to the Adjutant of the 34th, I was posted to C company, and the same day we were booked by railway to Raneegunge, and marched to a standing camp. There, two other cadets and myself were allotted an empty tent, and, rolling ourselves up in our cloaks, we lay down on the bare ground and slept profoundly.

From Raneegunge, I set off with a lieutenant and fifteen men of the 34th Regiment, by horse-dak, in wretched jolting vehicles. The order was given for the men to load their rifles, and we pushed on night and day, changing horses every ten miles. At Benares we joined

forces with a detachment of the 82nd Regiment, and, leaving our horse-daks, wo proceeded in bullock-wagons.

I engaged a servant at Benares, who added much to my comfort, and at Allahabad I had the satisfaction of drawing my first pay-my last, too, for many months-and invested promptly the greater part of it in the purchase of a pony.

I had found the slow, dusty progress of the bullock-train most weary and monotonous, and one evening, to beguile the tedium of the way, I rashly displaced the driver of my wagon and determined to try my hand at driving the quiet-looking beasts. There was no driving-seat, the driver having to squat on the pole to which the oxen were yoked. I seated myself accordingly, and sought to apply the simple means I had seen the driver use to increase our speed. It looked so easy, to screw the tail round a bit and give a gentle dig with the goad. I had no difficulty in setting them going; but, alas! It was the old story of the salt-mill over again. I had no power to stop them. Away went the heavy wagon, swaying and groaning in the ruts of the road. The lieutenant from the wagon in front turned in astonishment to see what had happened; but I, luckless charioteer, had enough to do clinging to the pole, where I with difficulty kept my seat. The road lay along a steep embankment, and, checked by the wagon in front, down the slope my bullocks plunged, dragging me and the wagon after them. Shouts filled the air as we left the track, and I, thrown from my uneasy perch, clung on for dear life underneath the pole, with the great wheels thundering on either side of me, while in front lay the deep precipitous chasm of a watercourse, in which we seemed doomed to end our career. To my inexpressible relief, the beasts seemed to object like myself to this conclusion, and wisely stopped short on the brink, while I hastened to recall the driver, and, much crestfallen, lay down meekly inside the wagon, sore with kicks and bruises, and fully convinced that I had no vocation for driving bullocks.