



Deeper than Indigo: Tracing Thomas Machell, Forgotten Explorer

Jenny Balfour Paul

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The author's quest begins when the word 'indigo' draws her to the illustrated journals, now in the British Library, of Victorian explorer Thomas Machell. She finds her life to have striking echoes of his, not least his travels to and within India, a career in indigo, and a passion for journal writing. She is also intrigued by his aspiration to write 'a novel in the form of an autobiography' and by his quirky watercolor sketches. Machell of Crackenthorpe, born in 1824, first demonstrated his yearning for adventure when only twelve, and at sixteen left the family rectory to follow his dream of traveling to the East. By chance, he witnessed many important historical events, including the infamous 'First Opium War' and the 'Indian Mutiny'. He spent most of his adult life in India; the author follows him to indigo plantations of rural Bengal and Bangladesh, to coffee estates in Kerala's Malabar Hills, to unexplored regions of central India and to the city of Calcutta. Machell also traveled up the Indus River to Kashmir and the North-West Frontier and undertook an intrepid sea voyage with Muslim merchants. When the author voyages aboard the last freighter to take passengers from UK to India, she faces the same threat of pirate attack in the Red Sea as Machell. She also follows in his wake by cargo ship to the most remote Polynesian islands, setting for his passionate love affair, and she seeks his colorful descendants in the New World. This remarkable tale of East-West connections brings to life the untold story of a spirited outsider at the height of the British Raj. Serendipity, intuition and an enchanting relationship, as well as the author's quest to uncover the missing years of Machell's life, give this book its magical extra dimension. Thomas Machell, explorer, writer and artist, was born near York in 1824. As a teenager he sailed around the Cape of Good Hope to India and on to China where he experienced the 'First Opium War'. His next voyage was around Cape Horn to the Polynesian Islands of the Marquesas, on a ship carrying coal and guano. Returning to India, he worked in indigo in Bengal, coffee in Kerala and with bullock transport in central India. He also traveled up the Indus to the North-West Frontier and Kashmir and in the Arab world by land and by sea with Muslim merchants. He died in India in 1864, aged 39.

REVIEWS

'The author's alliance with Thomas is an amazing and magical thing...this book must at all costs be read, because the author's voice – her passion and her mission – is utterly captivating.'

- Gillon Aitken of Aitken Alexander Associates

'A deeply moving, totally enchanting account of a great metaphysical mystery.'

- A N Wilson

'... the story of a forgotten pioneer whose startling diaries shed a surprisingly progressive light on European colonialism.'

- Western Morning News: Hannah Finch

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