

The Correspondence of G. G. Ducarel in the Service of the East India Company 1764 - 1784. (G.R.O., D.2091/C)

The private correspondence of Gustave Gerard Ducarel extends from the year 1764 when he was preparing to set sail for India as a writer with the East India Company and ends soon after his appointment as Collector for the district of Purnoa to the north east of Calcutta. The letters illustrate several interesting facets of 18th century life. Since most of the letters are to Ducarel's mother, we are naturally told a good deal of the young man's routine occupations and activities, in the unusual circumstances of departure for and arrival in India, while the fact that the Ducarel family were intimates of Lord Clive and his family and that Gustave was in Bengal at a time of much administrative upheaval, adds some political interest to the letters.

In 1764 Gustave Ducarel was a young man of about 20 and he was to sail to India with his younger brother, an army captain, where Gustave hoped to make his fortune as "nabobs" like "Diamond" Pitt and his own patron, Robert Clive, had done before him, while brother James had hopes of speedy promotion.

There are some twenty letters describing the preparations the brothers made in London for their voyage and their slow departure along the south coast until favourable winds should allow them to strike out into the Atlantic. The brothers reserved a passage on the ship "Pacific" which cost Gustave £50, then James proceeded to make their cabin more habitable by converting, amongst other things, trunks into a table with a hole in it "for a timing device or a bowl of water". The Captain of the "Pacific" regretted that they would have to share the Great cabin with 24 others - 22 gentlemen and "2 ladies out for a venture and their maid, viz, a virgin by name Miss Dixon and a widow of 40". Next they had to see to the assembling of their luggage. This all had to be listed (including Mama's gingerbread), and sent to India House whence it would be taken in a cart to the ship. Then followed a visit to the dentist by Gustave to have his teeth scraped and to buy a pot of dentifrice, and another essential purchase - some Tincture of Bark to mitigate the possible ill effects of the hot climate.

However, these preparations did not absorb all their time in London, since they first arrived there in January 1764 and until they finally put out from Portsmouth on 10th April. Much of the intervening time was spent in making visits, some purely social, others to transact financial business, here drawing a bill, there selling stocks,

trying to negotiate the restitution of family estates through the Parliament of Paris, for the Ducarel family had earlier in the 18th century left their native Normandy and settled in London, though Mrs. Ducarel, in her widowhood, had gone with her unmarried daughter to live in Bath.

Some of the letters are addressed to Maria, their sister, and a good many of them are concerned with her conduct and possible marriage, for which Gustave, as her nearest male relative, was responsible. It is soon apparent that she has become attached to some unsuitable gentleman and both Gustave and James write her stern letters, recalling her to the path of duty and bidding her to obey her family's wishes in this matter. Gustave then goes on as to his own marriage - "I believe you are pretty safe with regard to any of the transported ladies, who I am told are so haughty and high-minded in India, that they will not condescend to look down on a man of 5 feet and a $\frac{1}{2}$ inch". Maria also gave cause for alarm in her attitude towards Lady Clive. The two brothers had been careful to call on Lady Clive as soon as they had reached London and had honoured her by writing her letters in Italian since she was learning that language. Then a month or so before they sailed, the East India Company were to vote for new members on the Board of Directors and since Mrs. Ducarel was a shareholder, she could show by her vote her attachment to Clive's party. However, Mrs. Ducarel had been ill and Maria argued that to ask Mama to make the journey at such a time was foolish, and at the same time she expressed a low opinion of Lady Clive. Gustave immediately wrote back on 16th March in great alarm explaining the extent of Clive's power in Bengal and how much "it is in his power to make our fortunes or ruin us in Bengal. He is there more absolute than his Majesty here. Even his Council is formed of Officers entirely his own people..... My brother can get no Company nor any employment till he pleases to give it, nor can I have any Place or even the Liberty of trading but from the Governor and Council". On April 3rd he wrote again on this topic enquiring whether his mother had voted and James added a P.S. urging her to make the journey to London. Thus it is with some relief that we learn in a letter of the 6th that Mrs. Ducarel had, in fact, made the journey. During this crisis the "Pacific" was lying at Portsmouth and on the 10th the wind at last changed and the long and hazardous voyage began.

There seems to have been no opportunity to send letters en route from Lisbon or the Cape and the next letter is from Madras on October 6th, 6 months after their departure from Portsmouth and 3 days

after their arrival in Madras. This letter gives some indication of how some of that 6 months was spent. They both enjoyed good health and during the voyage James studied the art of fortification, while Gustave read works on Indian trade and made some attempt to learn Persian, the court language of Bengal and they both studied Indian history from the earliest times, unlike many other young clerks sailing at this time, who tended to use the time perfecting their game of whist, which was a dominant and often profitable part of social life in Calcutta.

Gustave described Madras as "a small well-built town, and the Governor and the gentlemen live in splendid town houses and have country houses with the gardens laid out in the English fashion. There is no extravagance but order, economy and great politeness..... The Ladies here are really Queens as there are very few in this settlement. Even Harridans are made much of Ladies do not appear much before 8 on their verandahs and then the whole settlement parades before them".

The voyage from Madras to Calcutta took about a month because of delays caused by the monsoon and the Great cabin was mostly in 6 inches of water. However, by 30 December Gustave was sufficiently recovered and established to write a letter about his new country, which was to absorb his energies for the next twenty years. On arrival he dined with Clive "en famille" and they talked of old Bath friends. Then he had to find accommodation. He followed the usual practice of setting up house with other newly-disembarked gentlemen. On this occasion four of them rented an unfurnished 3-bedroomed house at £300 p.a. and he then goes on to describe the staff which they acquired. "A very considerable grievance, there are vile customs here established that no man can do anything but the particular business he professes. One man will undertake the care of your linen cloths, etc..... for your Palanquin you have 8 bearers, a boy to carry your umbrella and a boy or running Footman to run before you and clear the way with a large Scimitar. But the most extraordinary person of any that serves you is the Banyan, these are a sect of brokers, who profess it from father to son..... it is through these people that all trade is carried on". He then goes on to say "We have found the language extremely useful and have the satisfaction to see we speak it better than many people who have been here 10 or 12 years and the Black people are exceedingly surprised."

At first Gustave worked in the secretary's office just copying, but this must have been for a very short period since by

30 December 1764, Clive had already appointed him Deputy Paymaster to the army, which had good pay and prospects, while his brother was promised a command of sepoy. Meanwhile James was stationed at Patna and Gustave went to the military headquarters at Monghyr. He then concluded this first Bengal letter with a description of the great entertainment given by Clive to celebrate the signing of the Peace treaties at the end of the Seven Years War, with its great receptions, theatricals, and gladiatorial combats between various unlikely animals. All this must have seemed very remote and exotic to the household in Bath and Mrs. Ducarel and Maria probably felt more sense of contact with Gustave's new world when the muslin chintz and keg of mangoes arrived as he had promised.

Between 1766 and 1769, the brothers seem to have travelled much in Bengal, though they rarely met. During this time James saw several minor military actions and lost his right arm in one encounter, so that from 1767 onwards he had to learn to write with his left hand. In 1767 Clive left Bengal and although he recommended his proteges to his successor, Mr. Verelst, James received no great promotion and his scanty letters take on an embittered tone and in his last in the collection dated 14 March 1769, he said that if he did not get promotion soon "I must contract my views and think of retirement, whilst I have an arm remaining". It was probably soon after this that his health failed more rapidly and he died in India.

Gustave's fortunes on the other hand seem to have been unaffected by Clive's departure. In 1767 he was made Cash Keeper and lived in the Governor's house. This period is always regarded as a particularly discreditable one in the East India Company's conduct of Bengal affairs. In Indian history it is known as "the Shaking of the Pagoda tree", when the English traders made immense fortunes in a very short time, using methods which were to bring the Company and the country on the edge of bankruptcy in the next decade. Mrs. Ducarel had obviously heard with concern of the corrupt practices of the Company's servants and her son wrote in April 1767, assuring his mother that he himself used only honourable methods in business and that James paid strict attention to his military duties. Even so the condition of the East India Company is ideal: "If only a young man writes a good hand he may be useful though he were as stupid as a block..... The spirit of party resentment here and the opposition of interests at home are now the only things to be dreaded." By September Gustave had reaped the fruits of his language studies on the voyage out

and was made Persian translator at Moorshedabad, under the Company's Resident at the Durbar, the Nawab's Court, a post which he believed held great promise. It certainly enabled him to travel about Bengal a good deal, particularly by water and he described such a journey by large boats called 'Budgerones' which had a large room in each. It was usual to cover 50 miles in 2 days and it took 2,000 servants to transport 7 or 8 people 100 miles.

The penultimate letter in this collection was written on 1 December 1769 after his appointment as Supervisor of the district of Purnea, for which position he was chosen because of his knowledge of Persian and of the Bengal fiscal system. He then expounded his conception of the task ahead in an 18th century rhetorical style but expressing a 19th century concern for the inhabitants of his district. He wrote as follows to his uncle, Dr. A.C.Ducarel, "An immense task is allotted to us. We are to investigate the state of our respective provinces under the different heads of History, Trade, Revenues and Administration of Justice - I am Historians and Legislators most probably - but certainly it is that We have in our Power to perform the noblest Task that can be allotted to Men of Honour and Humanity, that of changing the condition of the People from a state of Oppression to Happiness and the Country from Desolation to Prosperity, and that the Scheme will in general have this effect is undoubted by the Advantage English Gentlemen have over Natives of the Country in Education, Principles and Disposition." However, this attitude was frowned upon in the days of Dual Control and in a letter to his mother on 15 December 1769 he refers jokingly to "his government, but the Court of Directors would not be well pleased to hear of their Writers setting themselves up for Governors".

From Purnea, Ducarel went on as Collector in the district of Burdwan, where he became to be regarded as an authority on revenue matters. This expertise was largely put at the disposal of Philip Francis in his struggle against Warren Hastings. Ducarel finally returned to England in 1784, a man of property and family, since at some time in the 70s he had married a Native Indian lady, who bore him several children and they all went to live in comparative seclusion at Exmouth. One son, Philip, came to live at Newland in the Forest of Dean, where his descendants have lived until recently.

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