



• DORNOCH •
HERITAGE • SOCIETY



*'Life and times of J.E.D. Bethune of
Calcutta'*

talk by

Manish Basu

20th November 2008

Thank you very much for that kind introduction. However, I did say to George that I'd like to say a few words about the Lunar Society. A lot of you probably know about the Lunar Society already, but it is interesting. I think it's important for the history of Britain to know a little bit about the Lunar Society. The development of Britain owes quite a lot to the Lunar Society. It was established by Erasmus Darwin, the grandfather of Charles Darwin, in Birmingham. This was after the very early stages of the Industrial Revolution. There were things happening in Britain as a consequence of that, but there were things happening in all of Europe and in other parts of the world. We now recognise that a lot of those developments have taken place in China as well. There

were the missionary people who went to China and they brought back a lot of the knowledge. Marco Polo brought quite a lot of knowledge back as well. So all these things were coming, and in Europe, Renaissance had occurred. It was a time of great development in Europe and Germany. Kepler and a huge number of people were doing all sorts of sciences. In France there were Descartes and Courvoisier and others in Italy. Here in Britain we had Newton and Bayer doing a great deal.

Around Birmingham, the early Industrial Revolution occurred near Ironbridge and Coalport, where coal, coke was discovered, and iron ore was discovered as well. And that's where the first cast iron was made in converters. I can't remember the name of the converter. I'm not sure whether it was a Bessemer Converter or some other converter. The first iron bridge in the world was made there

And you then get a number of people with brains, starting to think about developing, innovating, discovering more and more things in machinery and various other things. Birmingham attracted a lot of people from other parts of Britain, again, because of the innovative basis that developed in Birmingham; James Watt, Adam Clear and Thomas Telford. He was in Shropshire, of course.

Erasmus Darwin thought that it would be a good idea to start a dining club of such people with brains. People from different disciplines would come together, have dinner, on full moon day, hence the name Lunar Society. It was a time, of course, when street lighting hadn't arrived yet, so they had to rely on the full moon to get to Birmingham, to either Erasmus Darwin's or other clubs. There was a priest there, discoverer of oxygen, a Unitarian minister, but he did science as well. Then there were people like Josiah Wedgwood, who came from Shropshire to these meetings. And there was William Withering, the man who separated Digitalis from the Fox Club, Digitalis Purpurea, for the treatment of heart diseases and all that. So there were doctors. And then there was James Watt. So there were all these people, and they used to sit in the dining room having their dinner. I don't know whether they had haggis and one or two drams as well to get their brain going.

They thought about all things like how to use power to do mass production, how to do other things. There was Matthew Bolton there, and there was Brimbley advocating the canal system, to take ore to the mills and factories and the finished products away. So it was a hotbed of innovation and everything else. So that was the Lunar Society. And it was established in 1765, ran until 1813, and then it went defunct.

In 1980, Dame Rachel Waterhouse, she became a Dame Leader. She was Mrs. Rachel Waterhouse when she decided that she would form a new Lunar Society, a modern-day Lunar Society. She invited about 200 'Brummies', which was very fortunate. I was one of those. We all went there, and we used to have dinner from time to time and talk about how to try and bring Birmingham back to its place of prominence that we used to enjoy at one time. So the Lunar Society was revived and it's still going and going quite well.

So that is the background to the Lunar Society and I was very, very honoured and privileged to be part of that.



However, tonight we're going to talk about this man here, John Elliot Drinkwater Bethune. It is because he, together with some Indian friends, established the first Hindu girls' school dispensing Western education in the capital of Bengal, which was a province of India.

Why in Calcutta or as it is now known Kolkata? Because Calcutta was, of course, the administrative headquarters of the East India Company. So that's where everything was happening, and Bethune opened the first girls' school.

Stone laying of first school 1849



Before I go any further, I'll have a confession to make. The publicity for this talk in the Northern Times suggested that I had an interest in establishing connections between Dornoch and India, which I do. But you may have reasonably assumed that John Bethune had connections with Dornoch, and this talk would be about those connections. I'm sorry to say that I could not find any evidence that he had direct and verifiable connections with Dornoch, despite the fact that he had plenty of Scottish blood in him. But worry not. We'll have this deficiency corrected now, through me, because from now on, people, especially in Dornoch, will say, oh yes, when they hear the name John Bethune, oh yes, that was the fellow Manish Basu talked to us about. So that's the connection established.

Now, what sort of a man was he? What made him do what he did? How can one describe his character? I hope to give the answer to all these things in my talk now.

It is said that we are all products of interaction between nurture and nature, and our character, our behaviour, and our aspirations depend on the interplay between these two factors, nurture and nature. It can also be described as the interaction between seed and soil. Our nature has to do with our familial bloodline. In other words, our ancestry, as well as the culture in which we are born. In other words, these are the characteristics that made us the equivalent of the seed. While nurture, or the soil, has to do with influences and training from family and friends, religion, education, politics, etc. And it is in this soil that the seed is nurtured and it grows.

John Bethune was born truly British, in the sense that his father, John Drinkwater, was an Englishman from the Lancashire - Cheshire area and the Drinkwaters were a well-known family in that part. They were big landowners and they were heavily into the textile industry. They had an influential Whig background, as well, at that time. His mother Eleanor was Scottish, with perhaps a few drops of residual French blood in her. But the Bethunes were originally from, or at least one Bethune and a few of his followers were from France. His mother descended from Bethunes of Balfour and Fife, who had settled there from France in the 13th or 14th century, and became large landowners and local lairds. Her grandmother, Mary Bethune of Balfour, married

William Congleton of East Lothian and their son, Charles, married Anne Elliot, who descended from the Elliots of Minto, the Earls of Minto.

Charles and Anne had three children, William Congleton, Gilbert Congleton, and Eleanor Congleton. After a while Charles and Anne decided to go down to Salford and they took Eleanor with them. In Salford Charles practiced as a physician.

After the death of Charles, the lands and lairdship of Balfour were transferred and handed on to the eldest son William and when he died suddenly, the title and inheritance passed on to Gilbert. Eleanor met and married John Drinkwater in Salford.

John Drinkwater, despite his family background in the textile industry became a military man. He joined the Royal Manchester Volunteers to fight against the rebels in the American War of Independence. Later he fought on a ship during the Battle of Corsica in which Horatio Nelson was a commodore and the two became very good friends. He was also present in the Battle of St. Vincent in the Caribbean where a few English ships defeated a whole Spanish flotilla. In this battle, Nelson excelled and showed remarkable leadership qualities and on the basis of John Drinkwater's report of the battle to the Parliament he was promoted to the rank of Admiral. So they remained very good friends. John Drinkwater also participated in the Siege of Gibraltar and later he was appointed the Comptroller of Army Accounts at the recommendation of Sir Gilbert Elliot, an influential man in the British Parliament.

Following the sudden death of Gilbert Congleton of Bethune of Balfour the title and lands and everything else came through Eleanor to John Drinkwater. Thereafter he was known as John Drinkwater Bethune. Thus his son, my hero, became known as John Elliot Drinkwater Bethune. To avoid any confusion between the two John Bethunes, I will from now on refer to the son, my hero, as J.E.D.

While he was working as the Comptroller of Army Accounts, John Drinkwater and Eleanor, his wife, came to live in Ealing in London and that is where J.E.D Bethune was born. He was not born in Scotland, but Indians still consider him to be a full Scotsman and they would like him to be a Scotsman and remain a Scotsman.

I have given you the familial origins of J.E.D and before I go into his educational and political development, I would like to talk a bit about the physical, intellectual and cultural changes that were occurring in at this time. In other words, the soil in which J.E.D would grow would have some influence on his personality and character.

This brings us to the Industrial Revolution, a term usually associated with accelerated pace of economic change, the associated technical and mechanical innovations and the emergence of mass markets for manufactured goods. Beginning in the last part of the 18th century with mechanisation of cotton and woollen industries of Lancashire and other places. After the harnessing of steam power, cotton and woollen factories were increasingly concentrated in towns and there was hugely increased rates of urbanisation, rapid population increase, etc. I want to talk a little bit about these changes brought about in Britain and British society by the Industrial Revolution.

The Industrial Revolution came about around the last quarter of the 18th century and it started with the development of industry, development of machinery, iron, cotton,

textiles, porcelain, etc. The mass production of these substances through generating power, newer and more efficient machines, and good artisanship were all hallmarks of the Industrial Revolution. This meant, of course, that markets had to be found or developed to sell the large volume of products that are being produced in factories and mills and free market economics came into being.

To mass produce objects in the mills and factories, raw materials had to be found in large quantities and the mining industry flourished. The infrastructure which would enable the raw materials to be brought to the mills and factories and the finished products to be transported to the markets had to be developed. These physical developments in tandem brought about great changes in the fabric of British society. Large numbers of people were working in mills and living near mills. Most of these workers were recruited from the countryside and they came to work in the large, industrialized cities like Birmingham, Manchester, Paisley, Glasgow, etc. This of necessity led to the development of innovative ideas and actions about civic amenities for the workers and their families, maintenance of public health in the urban centres that develop around mills and also safety of the workers at work and all those things developed gradually from this business urbanization, people coming to work in and around mills.

There also developed ideas simultaneously about civil rights; rights of the individual or the worker to represent his views to the administrative powers, and responsibility of the state to its citizens. All these ideas came along followed by enlightenment values and liberal political values and ideas. In the late 18th and 19th centuries David Hume and others wrote about freedom, morality, ethics, etc, etc. Then Jeremy Bentham, the utilitarian, affirmed the work ethics model, the greatest good for the greatest number. It was a time of great intellectual activity, progress and social change in Britain.



During the East India Company days in 1797 paintings by Thomas Daniel percolated through to Calcutta and had an impact on the thought processes of young Indians. Schools for boys had been established by missionaries during the early days of the East India Company and a few Indians, merchants and officials of the Mughal court visited Britain in the late 18th and early 19th centuries and they brought back Enlightenment ideas to their

homeland. The ideas were about individual rights and responsibilities, responsibility of the state towards its citizens, the idea that one should have the right to question everything, including religious dictates, and ideas about free market economics, which allows entrepreneurship to flourish. These new ideas imbued young middle-class Indians in Bengal, where Calcutta is situated, with a great sense of idealism and excitement, and Bengal went through a period of moral regeneration and renaissance during that time. The Enlightenment ideas affected all these areas in India at that time. The big names did a great deal. Ram Mohan Roy came to the British Parliament to represent the views of Indians but gained little notice. Sadly he died and was buried in Bristol.

This was the world in which J.E.D. was born, received his education and spent most of his working life. He was brought up in this cultural background that had evolved in Britain. Later he would work in India, where the culture was different, but there were areas where cooperative development of ideas and work become possible.

With regard to his formal education, because he was born in Whig, in a Whig-landed gentry family, he almost automatically gained entry into Westminster School at a young age. He was only 13 years old at the time, and he excelled at school becoming a King's Scholar two years later. Good Westminster students, after matriculation, were offered automatic entry to Trinity College, Cambridge, and J.E.D. became a student in Mathematics and Sciences in Trinity College. He qualified as a fourth Wrangler in Maths and Sciences and also obtained his BA. when he was 22 years old. Wrangler is the topmost achievement you can have in Sciences. In Maths in particular, in Cambridge he was fourth. He didn't become the first or second or third. He was fourth Wrangler, so he was very, very good, in fact.

During his time as a student, and later as a don in Trinity, he wrote notable books on the trials of Galileo Galilei to show that the scientific evidence the church had brought against Galileo to impeach and imprison him were false and were trumped up. Galileo had, of course, declared on the basis of evidence that it was the earth that went round the sun and not the other way round as suggested by the church. J.E.D. also wrote scientific articles on motion, its relationship with force, and wrote critical essays on the work of Kepler, the famous German physicist. He translated one of the popular dramas of Friedrich Schiller, the famous dramatist and moralist and philosopher of Germany, called *Jungfrau der Orleon*, or *The Maid of Orleon*. The subject of the play, *The Maid of Orleon*, was Joan of Arc, and Schiller in his play depicted Joan of Arc as a whore and not as the saint that the church had ordained. Schiller was a rationalist and reformer, and he was trying to make the point in this play that one should be directed by existing evidence and one's conscience to make moral and ethical judgments and not be dependent on or be directed by the church's directives. Rely on your own conscience and on evidence.

However, J.E.D did not agree with Schiller's assessment of Joan, and he himself wrote another play in which he argued that Joan was a noble soul with a great sense of self-sacrifice and concern for the underprivileged. In the play, he also painted Joan as having a profound sense of the spiritual, and he had this noble feeling and sentiment about women in general. J.E.D was obviously a very intelligent young man, a high achiever who reasonably expected his abilities to be recognized and given due respect by others.

Nonetheless, he was upset when he was not elected to the office of the Great and Good Society in Trinity, and he gave up the idea of remaining in science and he decided to go into law. A decision which seemed to me to be a bit precipitate and seemed to denote a flaw in his character. He seemed to make major life-changing decisions when he became emotionally upset by events beyond his control. For example, this decision to change direction from a career in science to law, and later another decision to give up a promising career in Britain and accept the offer of a job in India, came after his offer of marriage was spurned by his then betrothed. Both these decisions, to me, sapped him emotionally.

He did join Downing College in Oxford and qualified MA in law two years later and was then called to the Bar and Middle Temple a year later in 1827. He worked as a barrister in London until 1833 when he was made Counsel for the Home Office. While at the Home Office, he drafted the Municipal Reform Act, the Tithe Commutation Act, and the County Courts Act, all of which were well-received by Parliament. At this time, he became involved with an organisation called the SDUK, Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge.



This was a society that was brought into being by another great man, Henry Peter Brougham, 1st Baron Brougham and Vaux. He was born in Westmoreland, but he was educated in Edinburgh University in the early 1790s and subsequently became a leading lawyer, parliamentarian, and Lord Chancellor. He was a Whig, but a Whig with a conscience and leftward leanings. He was involved in the anti-slavery movement. He was defence counsel for the rebel weavers in Manchester who wanted to form a union. He was a spokesman for the radicals after the Peterloo massacre, and he criticised the decision of the magistrates of Liverpool and Manchester, which had led to the massacre. He set up a number of educational organisations for mill workers and artisans who had not had the chance to have formal education; the SDUK was one of those, and there were two or three others which I won't mention.

The idea of starting these educational institutions for workers and people who weren't able to have education was to explain to them why it was necessary for the artisan, the worker, to be good in his work and to be innovative. He argued that by being so they could produce better commodities, which would sell better in the open market and thus not only benefit him and his family, but also benefit the society he was a part of. These were liberal ideas propounded by John Stuart Mills, which had led to the formation of the Liberal Party, and Lord Broome encouraged J.E.D to work for the SDUK and also become a member of the Liberal Party.

Thus, J.E.D became well known to influential people in London through the good work he was doing at the Home Office and through his socio-political work, and it seems he was considered to be potentially a bright prospect for politics in Parliament. He was recommended by Lord Minto, Elliot Gilbert, who was on the Court of Directors of the East India Company and other influential friends in the Liberal Party for the jobs of the Head of Legislative Council in India and a member of the Supreme Council of India. The feeling was that this would provide him with the opportunity of excelling as a politician and administrator and thereby act as a stepping stone to higher things in the British Parliament.

He did not seem to be sure about the prospects of the job in India, but nevertheless, he accepted and arrived in Calcutta in 1848. J.E.D accepted the job probably because he wanted to get away from Britain after the failed efforts to get married. However, not long after he took charge of the Legislative Council of India, he tried to put into effect two new acts which put him in bad order with the ruling establishment in India, in Calcutta, and in Britain as well. The first of these, called the Black Act, attempted to place British-born subjects under the criminal jurisdiction of ordinary courts. These

ordinary courts were often presided over by Indian judges and it raised the prospect of British subjects being judged by natives. There was outrage because at that time the Britisher could only be judged in courts that were presided over by British judges. The court of directors of the East India Company were outraged with J.E.D's action and ordered the legislation to be suspended. J.E.D didn't take notice of what the directors felt and what they wanted him to do. Instead, he pushed through a second act designed to stop Hindu converts to Christianity from forfeiting their rights to inherit family property.

His liberal philosophy and way of thinking dictated that justice had to be evenly distributed across both the racial divide and the divide between the ruler and the ruled. Unfortunately for him, but fortunately for Indians in Calcutta, the British establishment did not sympathise with his liberal views. They felt that he had been sent there to rule and to distribute justice in the way the court of directors of the East India Company wanted. Most of the members of the court of directors of the East India Company, were in the British Parliament too and that's what they wanted him to do. When he didn't do so, he was sidelined and moved from the Council of Legislation to the post of Chairman of the Educational Council of India.

It was then as Chairman of the Educational Council he decided to set up a school where Hindu middle class Bengali girls could receive Western education. He got together with some other Bengalis who were also interested in making Western education available in the country and together they established in 1849 the first Hindu girls' school dispensing Western education in Calcutta.



The school developed quickly and following Bethune's death in 1851 it was taken over in 1856 by the Government and became known as the 'Bethune School' educating middle-class girls of Calcutta. The Western education consisted of science, the English language of course, philosophy, logic, etc.

The school has gone from strength to strength and this grand building is now known as the Bethune Collegiate School, Kolkata. J.E.D Bethune died 157 years ago and about 100 years after his death India gained independence. India has been independent for about 60 years now but he

is still revered and respected in Calcutta and his death is commemorated every year on the 19th of January, his date of death. Girls from Bethune Collegiate School and the City Fathers place flowers on his grave and songs extolling his farsightedness, his feeling and concern for females are sung by his graveside. Indians consider him to be a great soul, almost a Mahatma, just like Gandhi. Someone who gave his life to improve the status of women, acknowledging his contribution to improve and modernize India through female education, A postage stamp was circulated by the Indian post office when Bethune School and College reached its century.



He was a remarkable man. Highly intelligent man of high moral principle, idealistic, and self-sacrificing. He left all his possessions, both in India and Britain, to the school. He was very human too, in that he seemed at times to be ruled by his heart rather than his head, especially when he felt that things were not proceeding or reaching a logical conclusion. Some characters seemed to have had an effect on his relationship with others. The establishment came to believe that he could not make a good colonial administrator and he was not considered for further progress in the colonial service or in the political arena in Britain. His path for return to civic services in Britain was effectively blocked and he was more or less forced into a decision to spend his life to improve female education in Bengal.

Sadly, he was not able to develop deep friendships in India either, it would seem, possibly because he had to act like a colonial administrator and had to keep a certain distance between him and the ruled. I feel sad whenever I think of him, this lovely man, dying so far away from home, all alone, not having friends or relations by his death bed. He's not even known in his own country and that makes me feel even sadder.

His feelings for the girls in his school were deeply affectionate and respectful and this is the poem he wrote specially for it to be inscribed on his headstone.

*'Silent tears of noble hearts are saying, I to them was dear.
Pitting hands of fair young girls are laying garlands on my dear.
May a token where my dust reposes mark the loved one's tombs.
Blue forget-me-not and pale wild roses clustering around in bloom.'*

Isn't it lovely? So ended the life of my hero, John Elliot Drinkwater Bethune, the King of Calcutta. He had not had the chance to establish a connection with Dornoch when he was alive, but I hope I've been able to establish a connection this evening, 167 years after his death.

Thank you very much indeed for listening.