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LIEUT.-COLONEL B. G. BARBUT.

COMMANDANT AND COLLECTOR OF JAFFNA,
1795—1803.

Few names are so honourably associated with the history of Ceylon in the early days of British rule as that of Burton Gage Barbut, who, but for his untimely death at the age of 44, would have undoubtedly risen to much higher distinction than that which he attained during his eight short years of service. In an age in which not a few persons succumbed to the temptation to acquire wealth speedily by questionable means, Barbut stands out prominently as one with a rare sense of duty, who placed honour before everything else, and deservedly earned the approbation of the highest in the land. "Barbut is the only good Collector" was the opinion of no less a person than Governor North, "who has proved his integrity after examination of a million of malicious petitions against him."

Barbut, who belonged to the 73rd Regiment which had taken part in the battle of Seringapatam, came over with the troops sent by the East India Company to reduce the Dutch fortresses in Ceylon. He held the rank of Captain at the time. He was engaged with the 71st and 72nd Regiments in the capture, successively, of Trincomalee, Point Pedro, Jaffna, Mannar, and Calpentyne, and in December 1795 he was appointed Commandant of Jaffna. Two months later he took part in the operations against Colombo, and repulsed the attack made on the flank companies by the Dutch troops under the command of Lieutenant-Colonel Raymond and Captain Legrevisse. He then returned to India, where he married Miss Eliza Nixon, second daughter of Major-General Sir Eccles Nixon, a lady who was to prove a worthy helpmeet to him during the

regrettably short period of their wedded life. Having been promoted to the rank of Major, Barbut returned to Ceylon and resumed his appointment as Commandant of Jaffna, returning again to India shortly afterwards to see about the purchase of horses for the breeding establishment at Delft—a legacy from the Dutch. The interest which he took in this branch of the Company's activities procured for him the appointment of "Superintendent of the Company's Stud at Delft and Two Brothers", to be followed a few months later by that of "Collector of the Revenue and District of Jaffnapatam." His promotion in the Army was not less rapid, for in July 1797 he had attained the rank of Lieutenant-Colonel.

Barbut was now regarded by Governor North as the handy man of the service, any duty calling for tact and judgment being entrusted to him as a matter of course. He was appointed a member of the Commission for settling the Districts of Batticaloa, the Wann, etc., and in the performance of this duty he travelled extensively in the Northern and Eastern Provinces. To his numerous duties was soon added that of Deputy Quarter-Master General, but far from shrinking from the heavier responsibilities cast on him, we find him only too ready to undertake new work. Irrigation, forest conservancy, the pearl fishery—all these were subjects in which he was deeply interested, and regarding which he made useful recommendations to Government. Barbut was a man after Governor North's own heart, and in one of his despatches the Governor speaks of "his assiduity, firmness, zeal, and success." Indeed, so well did Barbut discharge the heavy duties devolving on him that North, to show his gratification, changed the title of his office to the somewhat sonorous one of "Commissioner Extraordinary of Revenue and Commerce for the Northern Districts," which included the Wann, Puttalam, Calpentyn, Trincomalee, and Batticaloa.

In spite of his multifarious duties, which must have occupied a great deal of his time, Barbut did not neglect his social obligations. In this matter he was ably assisted by his wife, who seems to have been an ideal hostess. The opportunities for dispensing hospitality were few and far between in those early days, but when they did occur, both Barbut and his wife were fully equal to the occasion. Governor North made a tour of the island in 1800 with a large staff, and his arrival in Jaffna as the guest of the chief

Civil and Military Officer necessitated preparations for entertainment on a scale which must have taxed the scanty resources of the place to its utmost. But the Colonel and Mrs. Barbut came out of the ordeal with flying colours. The Revd. James Cordiner, Chaplain to the Forces, who formed one of the party, gives us a very vivid description of the charms of the host and hostess, and of the admirable manner in which the guests were entertained. "In the house of the Commandant, he (the Governor) was welcomed by a most accomplished hostess, and during the period of our residence at Jaffnapatam, we were entertained there with a degree of luxury and elegance excelled in no corner of the world. We had heard much in praise of Mrs. Barbut's charms, but after enjoying the pleasure of her society, her engaging qualities exceeded all our expectations. So much beauty and grace, combined with such attractive sweetness and captivating politeness, are but rarely concentrated in one person. The Colonel, uniting indefatigable attention to business with a cheerful disposition and gentle manners, is blessed with the innate talent of inspiring happiness in the bosoms of all around him."

A pleasing trait in Mrs. Barbut's character was her desire to diffuse happiness among those in less favourable circumstances than herself. The early days of British rule in Ceylon were the darkest for the Dutch, who found themselves thrown out of employment, and regarded with suspicion by the British. The sudden transition from affluence to poverty necessitated the adoption of a standard of living to suit their reduced circumstances. Mrs. Barbut did all in her power to improve the lot of these unfortunate people, and to make them reconciled to the new order of things. With this object in view, she invited them to the public dinners and dances given in honour of the Governor's visit, and Cordiner records the fact that these entertainments were attended "by the most respectable European inhabitants of the Settlement, among whom were twenty young ladies born in Ceylon of Dutch parents. Brought up entirely in that remote corner, it is not to be supposed that their education is perfect; but they are in general comely, and possess a great deal of that artless vivacity and unconstrained deportment which accompany innocence. For many improvements in the style of both their dress and manners they are indebted to the kind patronage of Mrs. Barbut."

During his short but vigorous administration of the Northern Province, Barbut introduced many reforms. Among these was the substitution of the system of selling rents by public auction for the method which obtained previously, of sale by private treaty. By this means he was able to secure a large increase of revenue. He was also instrumental in raising a body of local troops consisting of a hundred men drawn from Portuguese descendants and Tamils, who were employed chiefly on garrison duty. Another direction in which Barbut's activities found scope was the supply of horses for cavalry purposes. To carry out this scheme, Barbut obtained a grant of the islands of Delft and Iranaitivu, and drew up proposals for the establishment of a corps of cavalry 200 strong. He was to supply the mares from his stud, and in return was to be granted "the country in the neighbourhood of Candely Lake on perpetual lease" for the use of the stud, and to be the headquarters of the corps. He was to be appointed Colonel-Commandant, and his brother-in-law, Lieutenant John Nixon of the 24th Light Dragoons, was to be the Senior Captain. Government was to pay for all mares killed or which might die during enrolment.

These proposals were forwarded to General Macdowal, who sent them on to the Governor with a favourable recommendation, adding an estimate of 179,452 rix dollars as the probable annual expense of a corps apparently 240 strong. But the Governor was not disposed to increase the Military expenditure by this sum, and suggested that some saving of expense by the reduction of the infantry was necessary before the proposal could be entertained. The General was, however, unable to assent to any reduction, and Barbut declining to accept a less ambitious scheme proposed by the Governor, the suggestion fell through.

In his autobiography, Revd. Christian David, who was stationed at Jaffna at this time, relates an incident which shows Colonel Barbut in a very favourable light. The Colonel was occupying the building in which the Jaffna Kachcheri is at present located, opposite which there was an old Church built by the Dutch, on the site of which the present St. John's Church stands. This Church was in ruins, and Colonel Barbut was using it as a cattle shed. Revd. David was anxious to obtain the use of the building, and in his own simple language he says:—"I resolved to go every evening to St. John's Church to pray that that the Lord would direct the heart of the Colonel to give up the said building to my charge,

that I might preach the ever blessed Gospel there". His prayer, was answered. One day when he was in the Church, Colonel Barbut came in and ordered the cattle keeper who followed him to remove the cattle from the Church. At the same time he asked Mr. David to call on him at the Kachcheri in the Fort—probably the building now known as King's House—and he would hand the keys of the Church to him. Not only did he do this, but he also notified the people that Mr. David was appointed as a licensed preacher of the Gospel by Government, and that he was authorised to officiate in St. John's Church. His interest in Mr. David's work did not end here. When shortly afterwards Governor North visited Jaffna, Colonel Barbut persuaded him to attend the Church with his suite, in order, as Mr. David says, "to give his countenance to me, and set an example to others."

The death of King Rajadhi Raja Singhe in 1788 without issue and without having named a successor resulted in certain events in which Barbut took a prominent part, and which brought about the illness to which he succumbed. According to the usage of the Kandyan Court, the right of naming a successor belonged to the First Adigar. Pilimi Talawa, who filled this office at that time, nominated Kannesamy, the son of a sister of one of the queens-dowager, in preference to Muttusamy, a brother of one of the queens-dowager, whose claims were superior, and Kannesamy was raised to the throne, assuming the name of Sri Wickreme Raja Sinha. The unsuccessful claimant soon found his life in danger, and with several others of the royal family he solicited the protection of the British Government, who sent him to Jaffna, where he was placed under the charge of Colonel Barbut. He remained here until 1803, when the invasion of the Kandyan territory took place owing to the atrocities committed on certain British subjects. The invading army consisted of two divisions—the first division starting from Colombo under the command of Major-General Macdowal, and the second division starting from Trincomalee under the command of Colonel Barbut. The two divisions met at Kandy on 20th February, and found the town completely deserted.

Colonel Barbut perceived a strong desire on the part of the inhabitants of the northern and eastern frontiers of Kandy to receive Prince Muttusamy as their king, and their disappointment at his not being with the army was so great that Barbut had on his own responsibility caused the Prince to be brought as far as Minnery in

order that he might be close at hand in case his presence was required in Kandy. Government having decided to place Muttusamy on the throne, Colonel Barbut was deputed to escort him to Kandy, and this he successfully accomplished on 4th March.

Soon after Muttusamy's arrival articles of convention were entered into between him and the Governor, Muttusamy signing the convention with the words:—"I may compare myself to a child six months old; Colonel Barbut my mother; General Macdowal my father; His Excellency the Governor the person through whom I live and breathe; and the King of Great Britain the same as my God. To him I can never be false or disloyal." Muttusamy was placed on the throne on 8th March, after which Colonel Barbut made an attempt to induce some of the headmen to come in and declare themselves in favour of the new King, but with no success.

Minor operations were carried on against the Kandians for some time until the rains began to set in, when hostilities were suspended. It was then decided that the greater part of the troops should return to their former stations, and that Colonel Barbut with one thousand men should remain quietly in garrison at Kandy, with which force he was convinced he could maintain himself securely against the whole army of the enemy. General Macdowal, in a letter written to the Governor about this time, praised most warmly Barbut's "experience, penetration, and astonishing fertility in resource" and added:—"If Kandy can be defended, you may firmly rely he will maintain it to the last extremity".

But Barbut had to contend with a more insidious enemy than the Kandians. Fever and berri-berri took a heavy toll of the garrison, and in a letter written to Lieutenant T. A. Anderson by one of the officers the following passage occurs:—"If they keep us much longer in this hole, you will see very few of those fine fellows you left behind return." Colonel Barbut did everything in his power to improve conditions, but the sickness and mortality increased every day. In a report written three weeks after he was left in command Barbut took a somewhat cheerful view of the situation, but he stated plainly that he could count on no help from the European soldiers, although he considered that the Malay Regiment, with the artillery, was adequate to defend Kandy. He said that there were nine weeks' provisions in the town, and that he would have sufficient for six months when the expected supplies came from Colombo or Trincomalee.

About 15th April North received a letter from the First Adigar requesting an interview in order to conclude a treaty. The Governor, eager to do so, but reluctant to show his anxiety, answered that he was about to make a tour through the Seven Korales, and would meet the two Adigars at Dambadeniya on 28th April. Having heard of the intended conference, Colonel Barbut took advantage of the opportunity to pay his respects to the Governor, and repaired thither with an escort of three hundred men of the Malay Regiment. The interview took place on 3rd May. Barbut gave the Governor a very favourable report of the Garrison at Kandy, and while he did not minimise the seriousness of the situation caused by sickness, he expressed the hope that matters would soon improve. Ever ready to attend to the comfort of his men, he asked for a supply of doolies, and an order for them was immediately despatched to Jaffna. It is said on good authority that Barbut discovered at Dambadeniya a plot against North's life planned by the Kandians, and that only the presence of himself and the soldiers prevented this murderous design from being carried out.

The result of the conference between the Government and the First Adigar was that a convention was made on the lines of that concluded by General Macdowal at Kandy. Barbut undertook to obtain Muttusamy's signature to the document, but the fates ordained otherwise. The following day he was attacked with fever, and North hurried him down to Colombo, where he died on 21st May. His remains were interred in the old Pettah Burial Ground, and a tombstone was placed over the grave bearing the following inscription:—"Sacred to the memory of Burton Gage Barbut, Esquire, late Colonel in His Maj's Service, who departed this life on the 21st May, 1803, in the 44th year of His age, 29 of which he had passed in the Service of the King." Thus ended the career of one who throughout his service was inspired solely by a desire to do good to the people committed to his care, and whose example has been followed by his successors in office to this day. One has only to mention the names of Dyke, Twynam, Ievers and Lewis to show how well the traditions established by Barbut have been maintained.

J. R. T.