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The *Diary* of JOHN BRUNTON

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John Brunton in 1880

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1812—1899

JOHN BRUNTON'S BOOK

Being

the Memories of John Brunton, Engineer, from a manuscript in his own hand written for his grandchildren and now first printed

With an Introduction by

J. H. CLAPHAM

Emeritus Professor of Economic History in the University of Cambridge

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at the University Press

1939

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INTRODUCTION

Late in the Victorian era on the 7th of April 1899, John Brunton, a travelled engineer, died aged 86. He had been in professional practice until his seventy-eighth year. At some time in his old age he sat down to write this story of his life. It was meant for his grandchildren and it shows all the kindliness and simplicity of a man who, one feels, understood the grandfather's art: "your dear Father" and "your dear 'Ama'" [that is, Grannie] come into the narrative just as they should. There are other simplicities in his character and many in his style: "the unhappy farmer [we are in an Indian native state in the 'fifties] was called up and there and then his ears and nose were cut off. Fancy such injustice and cruelty!": my Goanese cook "was very black...but he was a Roman Catholic and therefore a Christian". Brunton is not merely writing in words of one syllable for the grandchildren. He has a mind as simple and direct as his nature is fearless, efficient and prompt. He faces an obstructive mid-nineteenth century War Office official and a mad wolf in India in exactly the same way; and when he has come out of some very

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tight place he observes quietly—"now was not that Providential?"

An engineer's son who had stood at Thomas Telford's knee as a child, he did not allow the influence of a gentlemanly but rough little private school to divert him to any other profession. He went through the shops in the old hard style and began his working life in an out-of-the-way Welsh colliery valley of the 'twenties, where apparently he administered justice as he pleased, and where the parson was afraid of the witch. Later he served the Stephensons on the London and Birmingham and the Manchester and Leeds. After the Stephensons, Isambard Brunel. He built a hospital above Chanak during the Crimean War and met Florence Nightingale ("a wonderful business-like woman") and Lord Lyons. He conducted hospital services himself, reading "one of Kingsley's Sermons". In his off time he did a little amateur archaeology at Troy. When the clearing up began he broke all War Office rules about the disposal of stores—Lord Lyons would accept no responsibility: "I will take all that, my Lord", said he—bought them in and sold them to the Admiralty (hospital fans to ventilate gun-boats' stokeholds), which was easy "as the several departments are ignorant of, and do not

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interfere with each other's transactions". He only got 5 per cent. on what he saved the War Office.

After that to the India of the Mutiny to make railways, shoot muggurs, deal with Rajahs and, being unarmed, flap his sun-topi at the mad wolf. He was dining with the Governor of Bombay when his host read a telegram which reported the fall of Delhi: "the expression on the faces of the row of Native servants fell in a most wonderful manner, I could not help noticing it. It was like shutting down Venetian blinds." The Governor sent him to bed with a "Now Brunton you may be off to Karachi as soon as you like". So he went and found a good master and colleague in Sir Bartle Frere, then Commissioner of Scinde. Besides doing his railway surveys, he cleared one station of malaria by draining a forest pool and sinking a well. On his second visit to India "we got up an Ice Company, and I was appointed Engineer to it"; he found excellent ballast for his line in the bricks of a deserted city; he acted as dispenser of quinine to whole camps and gave a blind man "some harmless drug" because he would have a dose; and he had a whole series of adventures with the Rajah who cut off ears and noses, whom he took for his first steamer trip on the Indus. Eventually he

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bridged the Sutlej and his bridge—like one in a Kipling story—defeated a heavy flood. And before leaving for England, in October 1865, though only a Volunteer, he wiped a Regular Colonel's eye with three bulls on the target. He must tell them this, "in spite of being considered egotistical".

After that a stupendous railway law-suit in which Brunton was chief witness: "my examination in chief extended over 2 years and my cross examination over 9 months." It was a preliminary to the less exciting work of a consulting engineer, to which he settled down in partnership with his son. He managed to have an adventure or two at collieries and slate quarries; but his story breaks off somewhere in the 'seventies when "the construction of Tramways in Towns became a popular notion... both in England and on the Continent—we had the Engineership of the Milan and Vercelli"; and we also introduced the "Brunton system" of tramway rails. "It has been adopted on the Oxford and Karachi Tramways... and has given much satisfaction." There, straddled from Karachi to Oxford, he leaves us; though we would gladly have sailed along the last quiet reaches of his English life with him, if he had launched on them and offered us a seat. For he is telling, in the

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authentic tone and style of the active—not the literary—nineteenth century, what we have very seldom indeed been told, a first-hand life-history of "One of our Conquerors", the versatile and matter-of-fact English engineers who left on that century its clearest, and perhaps even its most profound, identification marks.

J. H. CLAPHAM

September 1939

NOTE. *Apart from a few very brief omissions and an occasional unimportant change of pen-phrasing, the text appears as Brunton wrote it. Spelling of the names of places has therefore not been modernized, though here and there his own practice has been made more consistent.*

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[The following narrative of incidents in my life I most affectionately dedicate to my seven very dear Grand-children hoping that it may be found interesting to them and sometimes amusing; above all I pray that the perusal of it may tend to encourage them to put their simple trust in their Heavenly Father's care who in His mercy has brought me through many difficulties, and has guided and protected me through the threescore and ten years of a not uneventful career.]

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