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978-1-108-04656-5 - An Historical Disquisition Concerning the Knowledge Which the Ancients had of India: And the Progress of Trade with that Country Prior to the Discovery of the Passage to it by the Cape of Good Hope

William Robertson

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An Historical Disquisition Concerning the Knowledge Which the Ancients Had of India

William Robertson (1721–93), Principal of the University of Edinburgh and historiographer to His Majesty for Scotland, published this work in 1791. Already famous for a *History of Scotland*, which went into many editions, and a *History of America*, Robertson aimed to synthesise all earlier western accounts of the subcontinent from classical times to the sixteenth century. Beginning with a consideration of the practical difficulties facing explorers from Europe and Africa who headed east, Robertson discusses the (legendary) Pharaoh Sesostris of Egypt, Alexander the Great, and Roman military incursions into, and trade with, India, before turning to the Portuguese, Spanish, French and English explorers of the early modern period, furnishing his account with copious source notes. A long appendix then describes ‘the genius, the manners, and institutions of the people of India, as far as they can be traced from the earliest ages to which our knowledge of them extends.’

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A N
 H I S T O R I C A L
 D I S Q U I S I T I O N

C O N C E R N I N G

The Knowledge which the *Ancients* had of
I N D I A;

A N D T H E

PROGRESS of TRADE with that COUNTRY
 prior to the Discovery of the Passage to it by the
CAPE OF GOOD HOPE.

With an A P P E N D I X,

C O N T A I N I N G

Observations on the Civil Policy—the Laws and Judicial Proceedings—
 the Arts—the Sciences—and Religious Institutions,
 of the *INDIANS.*

By WILLIAM ROBERTSON, D. D. F. R. S. Ed.

PRINCIPAL OF THE UNIVERSITY, AND HISTORIOGRAPHER
 TO HIS MAJESTY FOR SCOTLAND.

L O N D O N :

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 AND E. BALFOUR AT EDINBURGH.

M D C C X C I.

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P R E F A C E.

THE perusal of Major Rennell's Memoir for illustrating his Map of Indostan, one of the most valuable geographical treatises that has appeared in any age or country, gave rise to the following work. It suggested to me the idea of examining more fully than I had done in the Introductory Book to my History of America, into the knowledge which the Ancients had of India, and of considering what is certain, what is obscure, and what is fabulous, in the accounts of that country which they have handed down to us. In undertaking this inquiry, I had originally no other object than my own amusement and instruction:

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But

P R E F A C E.

But in carrying it on, and consulting with care the authors of antiquity, some facts, hitherto unobserved, and many which had not been examined with proper attention, occurred; new views opened; my ideas gradually extended and became more interesting; until, at length, I imagined that the result of my researches might prove amusing and instructive to others, by exhibiting such a view of the various modes in which intercourse with India had been carried on from the earliest times, as might shew how much that great branch of commerce has contributed, in every age, to increase the wealth and power of the nations which possessed it.

THUS the Historical Disquisition which I now lay before the Reader was begun and completed. What degree of merit it possesses, the Public must determine. My grateful recollection of the favourable manner in which my other works have been received, naturally increases the solicitude with which I wait for its decision concerning this which I now publish.

WHEN

P R E F A C E.

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WHEN I first turned my thoughts to this subject, I was so fully aware of the disadvantage under which I laboured in undertaking to describe countries of which I had not any local knowledge, that I have been at the utmost pains to guard against any errors which this might occasion. I have consulted, with persevering industry, the works of all the authors I could procure, who have given any account of India; I have never formed any decided opinion, which was not supported by respectable authority; and as I have the good fortune to reckon among the number of my friends some Gentlemen who have filled important stations, civil and military, in India, and who have visited many different parts of it, I had recourse frequently to them, and from their conversation learned things which I could not have found in books. Were it proper to mention their names, the Public would allow that by their discernment and abilities they are fully entitled to the confidence which I have placed in them.

IN the progress of the work, I became sensible of my own deficiency with respect to another point. In order to give an accurate idea of the imperfection both of the theory and practice of navigation among the Ancients, and to explain with scientific precision, the manner in which they ascertained the position of places, and calculated their longitude and latitude, a greater portion of mathematical knowledge was requisite, than my attention to other studies had permitted me to acquire. What I wanted, the friendship of my ingenious and respectable Colleague, Mr. Playfair, Professor of Mathematics, has supplied, and I have been enabled by him to elucidate all the points I have mentioned, in a manner which, I am confident, will afford my Readers complete satisfaction. To him, likewise, I am indebted for the construction of two maps necessary for illustrating this Disquisition, which without his assistance I could not have undertaken.

I HAVE adhered, in this work, to an arrangement I followed in my former compositions, and to

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which

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which the Public has been long accuftomed. I have kept historical narrative as much feperate as poffible from fcientific and critical difcuffions, by referving the latter for Notes and Illuftrations. I flatter myfelf that I may claim, without prefumption, the merit of having examined with diligence what I fubmit to public infpection, and of having referred, with fcrupulous accuracy, to the authors from whom I have derived information.

College of Edinburgh,
May 10th, 1791.

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