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978-1-108-05976-3 - Narrative of the Circumnavigation of the Globe by the Austrian Frigate Novara:  
Undertaken by Order of the Imperial Government, in the Years 1857, 1858, & 1859: Volume 2

Karl Von Scherzer

Excerpt

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## The Nicobar Islands.

STAY FROM 23RD FEBRUARY TO 26TH MARCH, 1858.

Historical details respecting this Archipelago.—Arrival at Kar-Nicobar.—Communication with the Aborigines.—Village of Saoui and “Captain John.”—Meet with two white men.—Journey to the south side of the island.—Village of Komios.—Forest Scenery.—Batte-Malve.—Tillangschong.—Arrival and stay at Nangkauri Harbour.—Village of Itoe.—Peak Mongkata on Kamorta.—Villages of Enuang and Malacca.—Tripjet, the first settlement of the Moravian Brothers.—Ulála Cove.—Voyage through the Archipelago.—The Island of Treis.—Pulo Milù.—Pandanus Forest.—St. George’s Channel.—Island of Kondul.—Departure for the northern coast of Great Nicobar.—Mangrove Swamp.—Malay traders.—Remarks upon the natives of Great Nicobar.—Disaster to a boat dispatched to make Geodetical observations.—Visit to the Southern Bay of Great Nicobar.—General results obtained during the stay of the Expedition in this Archipelago.—Nautical, Climatic, and Geognostic observations.—Vegetation.—Animal Life.—Ethnography.—Prospects of this group of Islands in the way of settlement and cultivation.—Voyage to the Straits of Malacca.—Arrival at Singapore.

THE earliest visitants of whom we have any certain information to this cluster of islands (situated in the Bay of Bengal, between 6° 50' and 9° 10' N., and 93° and 94° E.), appear to have been Arabian traders, who, on their

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voyages to Southern China, landed on these islands, then known as Megabalu and Legabalu, on the first occasion in 851, and on the second in 877 of the Christian era. Abu-Zeyd-Hassan, one of these adventurers, gave a circumstantial account of these voyages, which has been translated into French, and published by Eusebius Renaudot.\*

After the Cape of Good Hope was doubled in 1497, the Nicobars were chiefly frequented by voyagers in East Indian seas, but without any such visits having in the least contributed to enlarge our information respecting a group so important by geographical position.

In 1602, Captain Lancaster, commander of an English ship, passed ten days on the Nicobars, during which he hardly visited the southern islands, Great and Little Nicobar, but kept to the small island of Sombrero, of the northern cluster, now called Bampoka. He there found trees of such circumference and height, as would serve for the construction of the largest ships. Towards the middle of the seventeenth century, Koeping, a Swede, made his appearance at the Nicobars. Happening to be on board a Dutch vessel, which touched in 1647 at one of the islands, he thought he perceived among the inhabitants certain men furnished with caudal appendages, whereas it was their peculiar clothing, which consists of a long narrow piece of woven stuff, wound

\* *Anciennes relations des Indes et de la Chine de deux voyageurs Mahométans, qui y allèrent dans le IXème siècle. Traduit de l'Arabe avec des remarques par Eus. Renaudot. Paris, chez Coignard, 1718. 8vo.*

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round the body and then left to hang loosely, which gave rise to such a report. With the arrival in Indian waters of Dampier, that daring but most trustworthy of navigators, the information respecting these islands first becomes more definite. He landed in the north-western Bay of the largest of these, to which he assigned the latitude  $7^{\circ} 30' N.$ , and gave a most extensive narrative of his adventurous career from the moment he abandoned the corsair-craft he had brought from Europe to seek for assistance on the Nicobars, to the period when, after braving a tremendous storm in a canoe, along with seven of his companions in misfortune he landed half dead on the northernmost point of Sumatra about 1706.

In 1708, Captain Owen, another English shipmaster, paid an involuntary visit to this Archipelago, his ship having been stranded on the uninhabited island of Tillangschong, whence he escaped with his crew to the islands Ning and Souri, only four miles to the westward, apparently what is now known as Nangkauri. For the first time history now records an outrage of which the natives were guilty towards the strangers.

It would appear that the captain, after having experienced an exceedingly friendly reception, laid down his knife, upon which one of the islanders, very possibly out of curiosity, laid hold of it, pushed the owner aside, and ultimately possessed himself of the knife. On the following day, as Owen was taking his mid-day meal under a tree, he was set upon and killed by several of the natives, who shot him

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down with their arrows; on the other hand the crew, consisting of sixteen persons, were furnished with canoes and provisions, so that without experiencing any further ill-treatment they were so fortunate as to reach Junkseilan.

The first essay towards a settlement of the Nicobar Islands was made by the Jesuits in 1711, upon the most northerly island of the group, Kar-Nicobar. They succumbed however to the noxious influences of the climate, and the few neophytes speedily sank back into heathendom.

The second attempt at colonization by Europeans took place in 1756, when Lieutenant Tanck, a Dane, after taking possession of the entire group in the name of his sovereign, the King of Denmark, named the islands "*Frederiks Oerne*" (Frederick Islands), and founded the first colony on the northern side of Great Nicobar, or Sambellong. In the year 1760 this was transferred by the followers of Tanck to the island of Kamorta, but here too after a short time the experiment failed, owing to the unhealthiness of the climate.

In 1766, fourteen Moravian Brethren were settled on Nangkauri, with the view of extending the influence of the Danish East India Company. The want of information respecting the necessary conditions under which this colony was called into existence, was in all probability the cause of its speedy declension. Within less than two decades the majority of these settlers had fallen under the baneful influence of the climate.

On 1st April, 1778, the Austrian vessel *Joseph and*

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*Theresa*, commanded by Captain Bennet, landed on the N.E. side of Kar-Nicobar, or New Denmark. This vessel had been commissioned by the Imperial Government to select, in the name of H. M. Joseph II., Austrian plantations and commercial stations on the farther side of the Cape of Good Hope. Of this remarkable expedition nothing more has been handed down to us than is related by excellent Nicolas Fontana, who accompanied the expedition as surgeon, in his book of travels, which was published at Leipzig in 1782.\*

Neither the libraries nor the archives of the empire seem capable of furnishing more definite information respecting this interesting undertaking. However, on the other hand, through the kind offices of H.I.H. the Archduke Ferdinand Maximilian with the Government of H.M. the King of the Belgians, there have been found in the Royal Archives at Brussels several highly important documents, bearing upon this expedition, of which M. Gachard, keeper of the State Archives in that country, had the kindness to furnish us with copies; and while we propose in the following remarks to avail ourselves of the most interesting data, the more particular consideration of this circumstance, so interesting in the history of the development of our trade, will be deferred till

\* Journal of the Voyage of the I. R. Ship *Joseph and Theresa* to the new Austrian plantations in Asia and Africa, by Nicolas Fontana, ship-surgeon to Mr. Brambilla, body physician to the Emperor, assistant surgeon in the army. Translated from the Italian MS. by Joseph Eyerle. Dessau and Leipzig,—“*Buch-handlung der Gelehrten.*”

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the appearance of the commercial section of the Novara publications.

A Dutchman, named William Bolts, formerly in the service of the British East India Company, in the year 1774 made to Count Belgiojoso, at that period Ambassador in London of the Empress Maria Theresa, proposals for direct commercial intercourse between the Netherlands and Trieste and Persia, the East Indies, China, and Africa, with the object of supplying the harbours of the Austrian dominions with the products of India and China, without the costly intervention of other countries. This proposition having been brought under the notice of the Imperial Chancellor, Prince Kaunitz, at Vienna, was so cordially received by that minister, that Bolts received an invitation to present himself at the Empress's palace, in order to develop his plans more fully in person in that august presence. Bolts arrived in Vienna in April, 1775, and very shortly afterwards was invested by the Empress with all the requisite privileges for facilitating the prosecution of his great project. The imperial officials at Trieste were entrusted with the equipment and arming of the vessel, the supreme military council were required to provide the necessary pay for the soldiers and subaltern officers, and Bolts by special commission was formally empowered in the name of the Empress Queen, as also in that of her successors upon the throne, to take possession of all the territories which he might succeed in getting ceded by the princes of India, for

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the behoof of such of Her Imperial Majesty's subjects as should purpose trading with the Indies.

It was the wish of the Government that the first expedition should take its departure from Trieste; Bolts however opposed this, for the reason that his vessel must take part of its lading from London, but declared himself prepared to make the most strenuous efforts to found a mercantile house in Trieste, and to take such precautions as should result in the second and all future expeditions being dispatched from Trieste.

Bolts hereupon first proceeded to Amsterdam with his newly-acquired privileges, and thence to London, as yet without being more fortunate in his attempt to set on foot the proposed association in the one locality than in the other. At last, at Antwerp in the Netherlands, he succeeded in interesting in his project a certain Baron von Proli, and two merchants, by the name of Borrekens and Nägeles, and with these three persons he entered into a contract of association, on 20th Sept. 1775. At the same time a fund of £90,000 was raised for the armament of a second trading vessel to the East Indies and China, and out of the same amount to establish a mercantile house in Trieste.

In possession of £25,000 sterling, which he had procured from his associates, Bolts proceeded to London, where he purchased a vessel, which he named the *Joseph and Theresa*, put a portion of her cargo on board, and on 14th

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March, 1776, set sail thence for Leghorn. Here certain articles were to be taken on board, which the Government had promised to have ready, and which consisted of copper, iron, steel, and tools. Before Bolts left harbour on his voyage to the Indies he was invested by the Empress with the grade of Lieutenant-Colonel in their service, and for the better prosecution of his objects was provided by the State Chancery with comprehensive powers,\* and a pass for barbarous countries, called a “*Scontrino*.”† The Empress at the same time provided the daring adventurer with letters of introduction under her own hand to the Emperor of China, the “King” of Persia, and the Indian satraps whose dominions he was to visit.

Baron Proli, one of the chief partners, went first of all to Vienna, and thence to Leghorn, and concluded an agreement with Bolts to dispatch a ship to the Indies in each of the years 1777, 1778, 1779, the cargoes of which should be worth at least £30,000 each, while Bolts, on his part, engaged to remain in the Indies three and a half years from the day of his departure, there to found factories, and to lay

\* “I have drawn up these documents,” writes Prince Kaunitz, in a state paper addressed to the Empress, dated 27th March, 1776, “in such manner as to advance the objects of your Majesty in establishing commercial intercourse between Austria and the Indies, without incurring disagreeable results, which might accrue from the conferring of unrestricted authority.”

† A piece of parchment, cut out of a book in zig-zag fashion, which in former times was necessary in all commerce with barbarians, the captains of privateers, when unable to read, being enabled, by comparing the torn-out leaf (*scontrino*) with the counterfoil, which it was customary to give to all trading persons, to determine to what nationality the vessel belonged.



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out to the best advantage the money realized by the sale of the merchandise consigned to him. The Empress Maria Theresa rewarded Proli for services already rendered, as also for those which he undertook to perform in the establishment of trading-exchanges in Trieste and Bruges, for the support of the over-sea commerce of the Austrian and Belgian provinces, by raising him to the dignity of Count.

The ship *Joseph and Theresa*, bound for the east coast of Africa, as also for the shores of Malabar, Coromandel, and Bengal, set sail from Leghorn in September, 1776, with a crew of 155 men. Unfavourable winds compelled Bolts to make the Brazilian coast, in order to take in fresh stores. Thence he lay a course for Delagoa Bay, on the S.E. coast of Africa, opposite the island of Madagascar, on which, on 30th March, 1777, he was so unfortunate as to get stranded, when he was compelled to start a portion of his cargo overboard. Bolts, however, turned to excellent account his stay on this coast, having purchased from two African kings, named Mohaar Capell, and Chibauraan Matola, a site of ground on both banks of the river Masoûmo, and, at a total expenditure of 126,267 florins (about £12,600), in which was included the cost of constructing the necessary vessels, founded a factory, for whose protection he also erected two small forts, which he furnished with cannon, and named after his two illustrious patrons, Joseph and Theresa.

After a more protracted stay on the coast of Malabar, where he purchased from the Nabob, the celebrated Hyder

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Ali Khan, a number of plots of ground in the vicinity of Mangalore, Carwar, and Balliapatam, the very centre of the pepper trade, and erected a factory at an expense of 28,074 florins (£2800), this enterprising man set sail for the Coromandel Coast and the Bay of Bengal, and about the commencement of 1778 visited the Nicobar Islands, in order there also to found a factory. Unfortunately, of this visit there nowhere survive any detailed particulars, and the only document extant under Bolts' hand, which can throw any light on the subject, is a statement of the expenditure incurred in erecting a fort on the Nicobars, which, together with the purchase of a *goëlette*, and a snow, or two-masted vessel, for the coasting trade between Madras, Pegu, and the group of islands, amounted to 47,659 fl. 48 kr. (about £4760).

At the close of 1780 Bolts returned to Europe, and in May, 1781, cast anchor in the harbour of Leghorn. His exertions and his speculation had not been attended with the success anticipated, and despite fresh assistance afforded by the Austrian Government to the Association, which at first seemed to promise a more auspicious future for the undertaking, yet the political complications of the period, and especially the sudden, totally unlooked-for rupture of peace between France, England, and Holland, ere long entailed utter ruin on the trading company, which, in the year 1785, found itself compelled to stop payment.\* Bolts died at Paris in April, 1808, in

\* A few years previous, in 1782, a certain C. F. von Brocktroff, of Kiel, had addressed a memorial to the Emperor Joseph II., in the course of which he warmly