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978-1-108-07183-3 - Major James Rennell and the Rise of Modern English Geography

Clements R. Markham

Excerpt

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## MAJOR JAMES RENNELL

AND THE

*RISE OF MODERN ENGLISH GEOGRAPHY.*

## CHAPTER I.

HOME AT CHUDLEIGH.—SERVICE IN THE NAVY.

THE answer to the question "Who was the first and greatest of English geographers?" can be made with confidence. James Rennell may not have been the father of English geography, but he was undoubtedly the first great English geographer. Much laborious work had to be done before geography became a science in this country. Materials had to be collected, instruments and projections had to be invented and improved, correct methods of criticism and accurate habits of thought gradually had to be established, before the work of the scientific geographer could commence.

The fathers of English geography were Richard Eden and Richard Hakluyt, who in 1555 and 1589 published the first collections of voyages and travels. They stimulated the love of adventure, and encouraged the spirit of enterprise which has ever

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since continued to supply geographical food, and all the incalculable advantages to the country which such nourishment ever produces. Side by side with the supply of knowledge must advance the means of obtaining it. Scientific measurements are essential to accurate geographical information. While Hakluyt was collecting his records, Davis was inventing his quadrant, Molyneux was constructing his globes; and somewhat later, Wright was utilising the projection of Mercator. A little later still Purchas made his Pilgrimes tell their marvellous tales of adventure by sea and land; while Napier invented logarithms, Henry Briggs and Edmund Gunter brought them into practical use, and Hexham furnished English readers with the atlas of Hondius.

Thus the accumulation of geographical knowledge advanced hand in hand with the science of accurate measurement and delineation; and in the twenty years previous to the birth of Rennell, Hadley had invented his quadrant, Harrison had constructed his first chronometer, and the earlier circumnavigations of the eighteenth century had been projected. The publication of the Nautical Almanack, by Nevill Maskelyne, was not commenced until twenty-five years after Rennell was born. It was necessary that knowledge should be accumulated during a lengthened period, that great advances should be made in the perfecting of scientific appliances, and that the critical faculty should have been cultivated by deductive reasoning, before there could be modern successors to Eratosthenes and Hipparchus, to Strabo and Ptolemy.

A geographer is so many-sided that it is not easy to give a comprehensive definition of the term. He should have been trained by years of land or sea

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surveying, or both, and by experience in the field in delineating the surface of a country. He should have a profound knowledge of all the work of exploration and discovery previous to his own time. He should have the critical faculty highly developed, and the power of comparing and combining the work of others, of judging the respective value of their labours, and of eliminating errors. He must possess the topographical instinct; for, like a poet, a geographer is born—he is not made. He must be trained and prepared for his work, but he must be born with the instinct, without which training and preparation cannot make a finished geographer. He must have the faculty of discussing earlier work and of bringing out all that is instructive and useful in the study of historical geography; and he must have a competent knowledge of history and of sciences which border upon and overlap his own, so far as they are understood in his day. Such men do not arise until the time is ripe for them. James Rennell possessed all these qualifications. He also had the advantage of succeeding to the labours of earlier foreign workers in the same field. De L'Isle and D'Anville had gone before him. They were the first French geographers, and Rennell was aptly called "the English D'Anville."

The birthplace and youthful surroundings of our first English geographer will, therefore, have a special interest for the student of his life-story; for we thus become acquainted with the images which filled his brain at the time when his geographical instincts first began to develop themselves.

In driving along the high road from Exeter to Plymouth for ten miles, the traveller comes to the ancient market-town of Chudleigh, on the banks of

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the little river Teign: "lying under the Haldon Hills to the west," as old Westcote describes it. About a mile from Chudleigh there were two freehold properties, called Waddon and Upcot, owned by Captain John Rennell, of the Artillery, who was married in 1738 to Ann Clarke, of Chudleigh. The Rennells had been inhabitants of Chudleigh for many generations. It is probable that they descend from the Reynells of Plantagenet times. Waddon had been in the family since the days of Queen Elizabeth, but the home of the captain of the artillery and his wife was at a house built by his grandfather at Upcot. John and Anne Rennell had two children—Sarah, born in 1740, and James, born at Upcot on December 3rd, 1742, and baptized by Mr. Bayley, the vicar of Chudleigh, on the 21st of the same month.

The earliest thing that James Rennell could remember was parting with his father at Woolwich when he embarked for the wars. Soon afterwards the news of the captain's death arrived at Chudleigh. He had fallen in some action, the name of which is not recorded,\* about two years after the battle of Fontenoy. In July, 1747, Mrs. Rennell was left a widow with two children, and her affairs were so embarrassed that the property had to be sold. At first she found a home with a distant cousin of her husband, Dr. Thomas Rennell, the rector of Drewsteignton, near Exeter. Dr. Rennell, who was father to the Dean of Winchester, used to say in after years that he taught little James to read; but the boy had no very pleasant memories connected with Drewsteignton and his Barnack cousins, as he called them. Before

\* Baron Walckenaer says it was at the Battle of Lawfeldt.

very long Dr. Rennell succeeded to the living of Barnack, in Northamptonshire, and the widow had to seek another home. She married a Chudleigh neighbour, named Elliott, a widower with a family by a former wife, and very limited means. They lived at Exeter, and the daughter, Sarah, was received by her step-father; but he could not afford to keep the boy or to give him much help. When Mr. Elliott died, twelve years afterwards, his step-son Rennell wrote of him:—"I am persuaded Mr. Elliott's heart was very good. He only wanted the means to serve me."

James Rennell was but ten years old, and he was left in a forlorn position. It is believed that he was at Pynsent's Free Grammar School at Chudleigh for a short time. Yet this was the commencement of a very happy period in his young life. Mr. Bayley had died, and had been succeeded as Vicar of Chudleigh, in 1752, by the Rev. Gilbert Burrington.

The new vicar's family consisted of his wife, who was a Miss Savery, his sister Miss Burrington, an old relation named Mrs. Sampson, and a baby, which was quickly followed by two others. These warm-hearted people received the fatherless boy as their own child. He cordially returned their affection, and with them James Rennell's life became a very happy and pleasant one.

There were many associations connected with Chudleigh, as the home of his ancestors, which were likely to fix themselves on the boy's mind, and all the surroundings would be calculated to stimulate his youthful geographical tendencies. The old church, built five centuries before his time, would form the central point of his survey. Inside were

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the effigies of grim Sir Piers Courtenay and his wife, ever kneeling side by side, and the Prophets and Apostles quaintly painted on the panels of the ancient screen. Without, the old tower rose above the vicarage garden, and over the street down which the Plymouth coach drove every day, with the guard sounding his horn, and waking up the little town from its slumbers. Farther afield there was many a scene of enchantment for a young boy. The surrounding country is intersected by a great number of those deep and solitary lanes, with their banks of ferns and wild flowers, which are so characteristic of Devonshire. A mile north of the town are Waddon and Kerswell Rocks, and on the other side are all the sylvan beauties of Ugbrooke Park, with its "castle dyke," its noble clumps and avenues, and the stately grove of beech-trees, the favourite walk of the poet Dryden. Most beautiful of all was the Chudleigh Rock, rising in a perpendicular cliff, and seen through breaks in a wild and tangled wood, where a noisy stream rushes and eddies among moss-grown stones, and in one place falls in a creamy cascade. The mouth of a dark cavern is seen on the face of the cliff, and from the summit of Chudleigh Rock there is a glorious view of the ridge of Dartmoor, broken by the granite masses of Hey-Tor and Rippon-Tor.

Amidst these scenes James Rennell passed the happiest days of his boyhood, his spirits brightened and his heart softened by the constant affection and care for him shown by the family at the vicarage. Even in these very early days he seems to have looked at the scenery around him with the eye of a young geographer; and there is a tradition handed down by the Bishop of Barbadoes, who married one

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of the Barnack Rennells, that young James constructed a plan of the country round Chudleigh at the age of twelve.

The Plymouth coach would keep up some sort of interest in naval matters at Chudleigh; the geographical instinct would be another originating cause; and thus the thoughts and aspirations of James Rennell were turned seawards when he was approaching the age of fourteen. The vicar had an opportunity to help his young friend to attain his desire. His brother-in-law, Mr. Savery, of an old Totnes family, was a retired barrister, living at a place called Slade, near Ivy-bridge. He was a friend of Captain Hyde Parker, who was commissioning the *Brilliant* frigate, and thus it was that Rennell obtained his first naval appointment, with the rating of captain's servant, in January, 1756.

England was on the eve of the seven years' war with France, which was declared on the 18th of May, 1756. Those were the days when Lord Anson, the circumnavigator, was First Lord of the Admiralty, and when Hawke and Boscawen commanded our fleets. Life in the navy was much rougher than it is now. There was seldom anything but ships' provisions in the midshipman's berth, and these provisions were not so appetising as they became after the Mutiny of the Nore. The weekly accounts of those days give bread, beef, pork, pease, oatmeal, butter, cheese, beer, with salt fish on banyan days. The reports of surveys on provisions, especially on cheese and beer, were revolting. Pea-soup and lobscouse were tolerable, but dog's-body and burgoo were merely filling, without relish. Clothing was not fixed by any rules, except for commissioned officers. Before Lord Anson's time,

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indeed, the lieutenants purchased the soldiers' old coats at Gibraltar or Port Mahon, trimmed them with black, and wore them as uniform. In 1747 the Admiralty issued orders that a uniform should be worn, consisting of a blue coat with white collar, cuffs, and facings; yet as late as 1759 young Rennell saw a master of a king's ship wearing a red coat with black facings, and thinking himself very smart. It may have been an old coat of one of the lieutenants, who then wore blue uniforms; the ranks being distinguished by gold lace, and the midshipmen having those picturesque patches with button and twist, which still survive.

But although the life in a midshipman's berth was rough, it was not always unpleasant. In spite of noise and interruption, there was reading and study, as well as agreeable intercourse. Then, as now, the truest and most enduring friendships were formed amongst midshipmen, as we shall see in the course of the present biography; and the midshipman's berth has been the nursery not only of the naval preservers of our country, but also of renowned generals and learned chancellors. The poet Falconer was the contemporary of young Rennell, and has graphically described the midshipman's berth.\*

“In canvass'd berth, profoundly deep in thought,  
His busy mind with sines and tangents fraught,  
A Mid reclines: in calculation lost  
His efforts still by some intruder crosst.  
Now to the longitude's vast height he soars,  
And now formation of *lobscouse* explores.  
Now o'er a field of logarithms bends,  
And now to make a pudding he pretends;

\* Written a few years before 1762: probably in 1758.

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## A MIDSHIPMAN'S BERTH.

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At once the sage, the hero, and the cook,  
 He wields the sword, the saucepan, and the book.  
 Opposed to him a sprightly messmate lolls,  
 Declaims with Garrick\* or with Shuter† drolls ;  
 Sometimes his breast at Cato's virtue warms,  
 And then his task the gay Lothario charms.  
 Cleone's grief his tragic feelings wake,  
 With Richard's pangs the Orlopian‡ caverns shake.  
 No more—the mess for other joys repine  
 When pea soup entering shows 'tis time to dine.  
 But think not meanly of this humble seat  
 Whence spring the guardians of the British Fleet.  
 Revere the sacred spot, however low,  
 Which formed to martial acts a Hawke, a Howe.”

Here we have the picture of a midshipman trying to work out his sights in the intervals of amateur cooking and in the midst of much uproar ; while another, sitting opposite to him, declaims snatches out of old plays ; both occupations instantly ceasing on the arrival of the pea soup

Before entering upon these exciting scenes, young Rennell had to take leave of his friends at the vicarage. The Rev. Gilbert Burrington continued to be his adviser, and always acted as his agent. Rennell constantly corresponded with him from the time of his entering the navy until the old vicar's death, thirty years afterwards. He thought and spoke of the vicar and his family with the tenderest affection, and when they were mentioned, even by a stranger, his eyes filled with tears of gratitude.§ Many were the

\* David Garrick was born in 1716. He was then in the height of his fame, having taken Drury Lane in 1747, and retired from the stage in 1776. He died in 1779.

† A celebrated comic actor in those days. He died in 1776.

‡ The cockpit, which was on the *Orlop* deck.

§ Letter from Mr. Topham to Mr. Burrington.

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messages he sent to Mrs. and Miss Burrington and to old Mrs. Sampson ; and the midshipman's letters invariably ended with "love to the dear children." Tom, Robert, and Gilbert Burrington were their names, and Tom was old enough to write to his midshipman friend before he finally left England. When Tom reached the age of fourteen, young Rennell was already receiving a good salary in India. He sent the boy fifty guineas through his father, with these words :—" Thy father was my friend ; let me be a friend to thee for ever." No lapse of time could efface from the mind of young Rennell the deep debt of gratitude he owed to the Burringtons, to whom was due all the brightness and happiness of his boyhood at Chudleigh. We can picture them to ourselves crowding round the Plymouth coach outside the vicarage gate, and waving their farewells, while the young midshipman climbed up and was driven away.

James Rennell joined the *Brilliant* frigate (Captain Hyde Parker), in January, 1756, and during the two following years he was cruising on the coast of Spain or in the Channel. He received great kindness from the captain, and was happy with his messmates. One of them, a midshipman named Topham, was his great friend. Writing to Mr. Burrington years afterwards, Rennell said of himself and Topham :—" In our former humble station we always endeavoured to promote each other's happiness, when we lived together as messmates for nearly three years." With such friendships the duties on board a frigate and the life in a midshipman's berth were made very agreeable.

More active service for the *Brilliant* commenced when she was ordered to join the squadron under the