

Story of a bird book: it's journeys and owners— a postscript

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Singh, B., 2011. Story of a bird book: it's journeys and owners—a postscript. *Indian BIRDS* 7 (4): 123.

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"This is a partly historical, partly fictional recreation of the history of a book's journeys in South Asia. The meetings between Walton and Whistler, and Whistler and Jones, are a presumption by the author derived from the recorded dates of movements of Walton to UK and within India as also of Whistler between 1909 and 1920," Indian Birds Vol. 6 No. 6.

I had lived with the story of that Bird Book, day and night, for a better part of nearly six years before setting it in text. The more it churned in my mind the more I believe in the textual authenticity of my narrative. So, when the ever so meticulous and "correct" editor of *Indian BIRDS* proposed the above reproduced foot-note to the article, I did feel dejected but in no way convinced of the editorial interjection!

But I was elated when within a few days of its publication, there arrived a letter from quarters totally unknown, namely Ralfe Whistler from The Dodo House, Caldbeck House, Battle, East Essex, dated 10th January 2011.

"Dear General Singh,

I was most interested to read your recent article in the Indian Bird Magazine, about the travels of that Bird Book and the mention of my father and the Jones, etc. It's nearly 100 years ago when it all happened; I am 80 and my father Hugh Whistler died when I was 12. But I was lucky to have met here so many of the great Ornithologists such as Salim Ali, Hutchesuka, Stresmann, Ticehurst (*Surgeon Captain, The Indian Army*), and the head of the Smithsonian Museums etc etc. I knew the Jones daughter, Silvia Jones, who came to live with my mother after Partition, and latter she and her two brothers migrated to Western Canada where I met her too. I have spent 7 months collecting birds and

snakes for The Natural History Museum in Northern Australia. So can skin birds too, am by no means a very good ornithologist.

Many of my ancestors served in India and I know of 7 who are buried there; some were in the Army, others teachers. Hugh Whistler's cousin, Lushemir Whistler was the last British General in charge in India, and I knew him very well. I have only been there twice, but did manage a great pony trek from Kashmir to Leh in Ladarkh (spelling), which was most interesting. I wonder if you served there as there were a lot of soldiers from India there confronting possible threats from China.

I was brought up with some 40,000 Indian Stuffed birds in the museum here, before they all ended up in the Natural History Museum. So I got to know a little bit about the families and Orders of Indian and Sri Lankan birds.

If you ever come to England do come and see me here, it's only one and a half hrs by train, from London and I have a large collection of artifacts of the Dodo, bird of Mauritius which became extinct in about 1680; in fact about 700 articles, such as books, pictures, sculptures, textiles etc etc., which I lend out to Museums from time to time.

Good Luck,

Sd-

Ralfe Whistler."

What a pity that Surgeon Captain Ticehurst should have passed away a few years too soon before Hugh Whistler's dream project to write a definitive book on Indian birds in collaboration with his friend, could fructify. A greater pity is that there is no Hall of Fame dedicated to our ornithologists.