

# Garden of Fools: A romantic compelling read

**GARDEN OF FOOLS: (Hardcover) Robert Hutchison Pages 432. Price Rs.599. Pub: Palimpsest Publishers**

By **GANESH SAILI**

Robert Hutchison's latest offering *Garden of Fools* brings alive the story of Proby Cautley, an artillery officer by training, the unlikely civil engineer in the East India Company who channeled the waters of the snow-fed Ganga into the parched fields of the Ganga-Yamuna Doab to wipe out the shadow of famine. It is the story of one man's epic struggle against all odds to achieve his dream. Even if this meant lonesome horse-rides along the riverbanks, overseeing the nitty-gritty of firing brick kilns (a believe-it-or-not 220 million of them), construction of the world's largest aqueduct and regulating dams. In the process his wife deserted him, his health failed but he persevered.



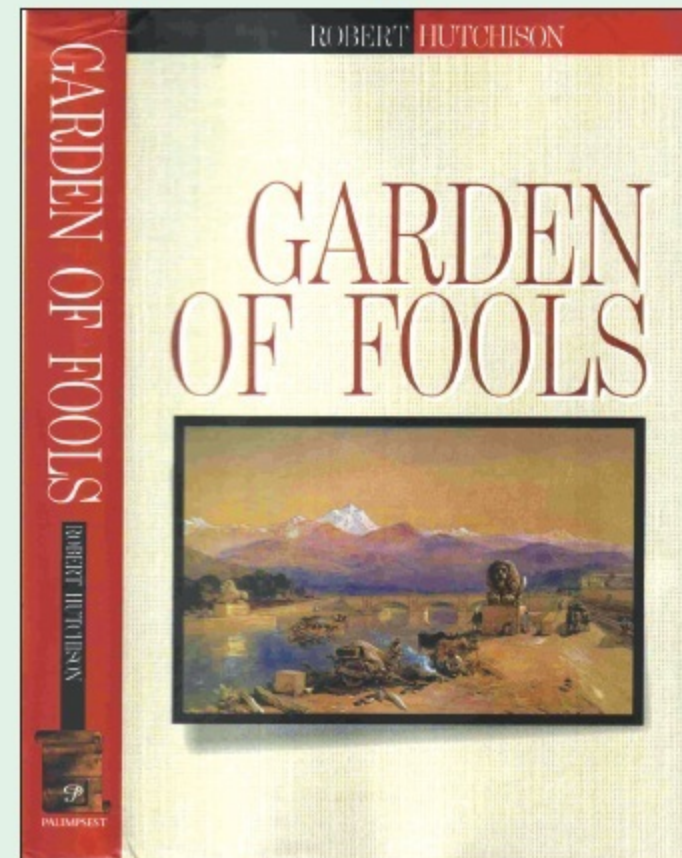
The river fascinated Cautley. All aspects of the holy Ganga consumed him – her flow, her freshes, her habits, humours and the hope she gave to all the people of the Doab. Mother Ganga truly meant life. If the East India Company saw her as a revenue-producing enterprise, he saw her as giving life. He accepted that the farmers who used her water paid a "rent-water" tax, some of which went directly into the John Company coffers, but the larger part he knew would be used for the canal's upkeep, improvements and in extending the tertiary canal systems. His one and only concern in building it was not to amass great personal fortune but to improve the lot of the people who depend on Ma Ganga's holy waters. When inaugurated in 1854 it was the largest work of its kind ever undertaken and 140 years after Cautley's death it continues to live up to his expectations and remains in this modern age one of the largest irrigation works ever conceived. He gave everything he had to achieving this.

One of the things that is most impressive about Cautley was that he didn't build the Ganges Canal for money or fame. He built it because he believed it was needed to save lives and banish famine from the region of the Doab. He earned a modest salary and endangered his health to achieve his goal. Here was a British engineer with an Indian heart. How different his motivation was when compared to the motivation of his modern counterparts around the world – industrialists, engineers and financiers – who for the most part demand mirabolous salaries, stock options and golden parachutes for their so-called humanitarian efforts.

Proby Cautley's Mussoorie connection dates back to 1826. Those were the days when Capt. Young was setting up the Convalescent Depot atop Landour hill:

'The path sometimes wound round the edge of huge rocks, sometimes zigzagged up the face of the hill, then plunged into the depths of a ravine or crept over the giddy summit of a naked crag. In most places the way was not more than a few feet wide, sometimes diminishing to a foot or less! The obstinate little gunth always selected the outer most edge of the track so that when I glanced over its shoulder I could see nothing between us and the unfathomable abyss below. Upon reaching the top of the ridge at the end of the morning I can assure you, dear brother, our relief was immense. The path was crowded in places with coolies bringing up building materials for Captain Young's new cottage at Landour. While Shore went on alone to the shooting box, Young accompanied us to Landour, a mile to the east, and showed us his patch of land. Work had begun on leveling the ground. The view on all sides was a bumpy carpet of green hills that flirted with infinity.

'A sharp slog up Landour Hill took us to a saddle of land where we found a tented community among the oaks, rhododendrons and thunder pines. The camp counted about thirty patients, three orderlies, three nursing sisters and Doctor Isidore Duff with a head of hair that matched the colour of his white head coat. In addition, a depot was being constructed a short distance away under the supervision of Major Nicholas



Brutton of the Eleventh Dragoons. I remembered him from Bharatpur. We found Captain Smith seated at a table inside the mess tent. He looked fit in spite of the heavy bandages around his chest.'

This first scamper up the ramp of Rajpur to Mussoorie was followed by many more. On September 20, 1838 he married Fanny Bacon at the All Saints Church in what is today a part of the Castle Hill Estate. The newlyweds settled into Dumbarnie Cottage on Vincent Hill in what was to be their home away from home while Cautley hared off to the plains to either follow up on the Ganga Canal or collect fossils in the nearby Shivaliks.

Robert Hutchison's on going affair with the Himalaya mingled with memories of the Raj go a long way in making this historical romance compelling reading.