

DILIP BOBB

**T**RAWLING through the detritus of history can yield unexpected literary finds, as Canadian journalist Robert Hutchinson can testify. His love for the Himalayas resulted in an earlier book, *The Raja of Harsil*, and his professional interest in the British Raj has resulted in his latest, *Garden of Fools* based on a forgotten pioneer, engineering genius and India-loving liberal, Proby Cautley. Cautley came to India when he was 17, as a military cadet with the East India Company but etched his name in history by building the Ganges Canal, harnessing melt from the Himalayas to irrigate the land between the Ganga and the Jamuna.

It was a monumental engineering achievement and the author uses that, literally, as bedrock for this book which follows the current literary trend of fictionalising history. Cautley, or his engineering marvel — much celebrated at the time — are barely remembered now, almost 160 years later, except for some permanent markers. One is the IIT campus at Roorkee, originally built as an engineering college at Cautley's urging (one of the hostels still bears his name). There are remnants of the canal network in Uttar Pradesh and Uttarakhand in what is called the Doab region. They were part of the Ganges Canal system, originating in Hardwar,

# Irrigating History

A fascinating, if fictionalised, account of Proby Cautley, the forgotten Englishman who made the Ganges Canal

that Cautley built and the prosperity it brought to the region are still extant.

The Ganges canal, in original records, was debated and almost dismissed as a “Garden of fools” at the highest levels of the British government. Intrigue, calumny, conspiracies and battles that involved the royal family did take place and with added layers of fiction and appropriate romantic interludes, Hutchinson crafts a story that has as many twists and turns as the original canal system itself. The basic storyline concerning Cautley and his obsession with irrigating the Doab, is true enough. His purpose was also noble enough; to help the local farmers, and the urge to put his engineering skills to such use was inspired by the great famine of 1937-38. Ironically, it was the huge

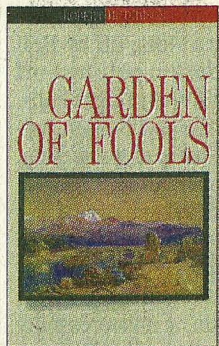
dent in the East India Company's revenues caused by the famine and subsequent relief measures that convinced the directors in London to back Cautley's proposal in 1941. He already had experience in such matters, albeit on a much smaller canvas: Cautley had designed and built the water supply system for Mussoorie and Landour.

The history of the canal is interesting for the high-level opposition it faced in London and India and the challenges of such a humungous project — the priests at Hardwar objected to the flow of their holy river being dictated by mortals till Cautley engineered a compromise. What adds to the readability are the factual embellishments and fictional conversations Hutchinson adds to the narrative, bringing in real life characters and

institutions like Colonel Skinner and the church he built that still stands in Old Delhi, the buildings in Roorkee where Cautley moved to while planning the canal, and the accounts of the ill-fated British military campaign in Afghanistan where many of his friends served and died. There is also the love interest, the independent-minded wife who eventually leaves him because of his dedication to the project.

The book does tend to drag in parts — history does go through lean periods — but is also littered with names of prominent people who had a role to play in the project, in the the British Parliament, and high society in London and Calcutta, and who offer remarkably illuminating insights into the administrative and social structure in India during that period.

The Ganges canal and its creator were never given the due they deserved thanks to the intrigue and the betrayal he was subjected to during its construction and after. It was, nonetheless, a remarkable feat of engineering and what Hutchinson has done is combine his journalistic skills with solid research and added appropriate layers of fiction to give life to an important slice of history to a largely unsung hero, a man described as the most eminent engineer in India during that period and, above all, a Britisher with an Indian heart.



## GARDEN OF FOOLS

ROBERT HUTCHINSON

Palimpsest

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