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Preface

I have often wondered why Eardley Norton (1852 – 1931) escaped the biographer. In his time, he was popularly regarded as the foremost among advocates in India. Many were the *cause célèbre* and sensational cases in which he had appeared. He was also one of the leading members of the Indian National Congress in its earliest phase.

If those distinctions are not enticement enough for a potential biographer, Norton was, at different times, Coroner of Madras, Madras Municipal Commissioner, member of the Madras Legislative Council, and member of the Central Legislative Assembly. He was also a journalist, poet, freemason and a gifted raconteur. He also took part in a few commercial ventures and had briefly served in the Madras artillery volunteers. The numerous cases he fought included a few in which he was himself a party. In a life densely crowded with eventful activities, there was no dearth of remarkable episodes. There also were setbacks in his life; his incomparable reputation was not free of blemishes. The impact of a scandalous affair was devastating. And yet, this is hitherto the only biography, leave alone a comprehensive one, if a long sketch of his life I had written in my earlier book, *Famous Judges and Lawyers of Madras,* is excluded.

Creating the first work on a subject, while it confers the distinction of being the first, could make you feel like a sailor on an uncharted sea. The voyage led me to search far and wide and forage through a number of old newspapers and magazines and scour many rare books. The finding of sources was the result of both planned

research in libraries and serendipitous discoveries in second-hand bookshops.

The regions to be explored were vast and the diverse treasures lay scattered. I endeavoured to combine, to borrow the words of David Cannadine, the English historian, "the vision of the parachutist with the meticulous scholarship of the truffle hunter." I excavated from under the sands of time vast treasures that lay buried in archival chests. A significant portion of the discovered material was tottering on the brink of disappearing altogether. I am glad that they are rescued from oblivion and preserved for posterity through this book.

The volume of material that went into the making of this book looked, even at the beginning, like a wild, untameable beast. As the work progressed and led to further research, it grew in size and made the task of domestication more challenging. I kept at it, gathering strength from the knowledge that much larger books have been written, the results of greater industry, by others. I am now delighted to present a fully tamed animal!

This book straddles both biography and history. There is much material in these pages that cannot be found in hitherto published works on the history of the Indian national struggle, biographical works on Norton's contemporaries, books on legal history relating to Madras and Calcutta under the British rule, books on the general history of Madras, the city and the Presidency, and books on Hyderabad under the Nizam's rule in the late nineteenth century. To scholars specialising in these subjects as to a general reader who is interested, this book, I hope, will make a strong appeal. I also hope that this book will make a compelling appeal to anyone interested to read memoirs relating to Rugby school and Merton

College, Oxford. Most of the extracts in this book are seeing the light of day after a hundred – in many cases more than a hundred – years.

One last word. All the time conscious that I was writing a biography of someone who commands my admiration, I have sedulously guarded myself against the pitfall of only presenting him in a positive light and attempted to create a veracious account of his life – not an easy exercise in the case of someone about whom adulatory writings are not scanty and of whom balanced appraisals and criticisms had to be discovered with considerable effort. My work is done and I rest my case. Now the jury is out!

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Suresh Balakrishnan
Chennai

INTRODUCTION

"A man's life," said Judge Learned Hand of the United States, "like a piece of tapestry, is made up of many strands which interwoven make a pattern; to separate a single one and look at it alone not only destroys the whole, but gives the strand itself a false value."[1]

This book is an attempt to present the many strands that made the rich tapestry of the multi-phased life of a multifaceted personality. One of the dominating strands was the influence his father's personality and convictions had over his.

Like Father, Like Son

Essential to an understanding of Eardley Norton's character and convictions is an understanding of his father, John Bruce Norton's personality and attitude towards Indians and their rights as native subjects of Britain and the good work he did for their secular education. A chapter in Part One sketches the life of John Bruce Norton.

The son took after his father in many ways. The father's personality had made so profound an impression on him that in going to Merton College, in choosing the Bar as his profession, in penning poetic lines, in working as a journalist, in joining a volunteer force in Madras, in becoming a member of the Madras Legislative Council, in foraying into commercial ventures, in his political ideology, in his view on the ultimate aim of British rule in

India, in labouring on behalf of Indians, and in the daring and intrepidity he showed in his political work and utterances, undaunted by the unpopularity he courted, Eardley Norton followed in John Bruce Norton's footsteps. Even in the choice of school, he wanted to go to Harrow, where his father went, but never regretted his father's choice of Rugby.

It is discernable from his own account of his early boyhood years in Madras that he did not undergo formal schooling until the age of ten. In that period, his father was the most – perhaps the only – important formative influence.

It redounds to their credit that father and son were absolutely free of a sense of racial superiority. When they referred to Indians as 'natives' at times when the term was in vogue, there was nothing patronising about it. If the son was not one of those Britons in India, who only lived and moved and played sports with their own people and frequented their own clubs and were disparagingly called "birds of passage", it was largely due to the lasting influence of his late father. He knew the social and political conditions of Indians, empathised with them and laboured for their welfare, just as his father did in his time.

Few of the qualities that ran as bright threads in the fabric of their characters were intellectual independence, intrepidity and vitality. Probably the foremost of all the qualities that informed their work in public life was intrepidity. They were disposed to not shirk from speaking their minds even on controversial topics. They dared to incur the displeasure of the officialdom, but the unpopularity they courted never fazed them.

Among the son's inheritances from his father was the firm belief that India was a trust in the hands of the British

and that Indians, as and when they had proved themselves worthy of receiving them, must be bestowed greater rights and privileges. From that foundational belief, he never departed.

His love and respect for his father is evident in many places in his writings. For example, in an essay he wrote in 1898, he wished his father was there to see his aspirations for India come true, and this was written a few years after India had made a noticeable stride in political advancement through the passing of the Indian Councils Act, 1892:

> [N]o wiser head or truer heart ever enlisted itself in the unselfish service of promoting Indian progress than that of the man who lived and died undecorated – *plebeius moriar senex*[*] – yet gave without stint of the rich abundance of his experience and of the generous dictates of his beliefs for the advancement of all things tending to union and friendliness and love. I have often thought how proud my father would have been had he lived to see the practical fulfilment of what with him was something more than a day dream, the prescience of a man who was not merely a great lawyer but by instinct and experience in the true sense of the word a statesman.[2]

[*] From 'Sic cum transierint mei/Nullo cum strepitu dies/**Plebeius moriar senex**', meaning "So when my days shall have passed away without noise, **I shall die a plebeian old man**." (Seneca, Thyest., 398)