

## DISCOVERING THE SIKHS : AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF A HISTORIAN

A Review by Hardev Singh Virk

Author W H McLeod

Published by Permanent Black, Delhi 920040

Price : Rs 550/-; pages xii + 245

The book *Discovering the Sikhs* has been divided into two parts – part I deals with biographical account of the author's life in New Zealand and Punjab, and part II contains his explanations in defence of the specific charges made against his writings. A full chapter is devoted to *the Institute of Sikh Studies* at Chandigarh and the role of Sikh scholars associate with it. Daljit Singh, Jagjit Singh, Kharak Singh Mann, Gurtej Singh and Gurdarshan Singh Dhillon find a special mention by the author. The author makes a bitter attack on the Institute (page 199), "Although the Institute of Sikh Studies may have genuinely believed that what they did was for the protection of the Panth, clearly it was dismally wrong. Victory for the Institute meant the defeat of sound teaching, honest inquiry, and the search for truth." Professor W H McLeod, the author was born in 1932 in New Zealand had his schooling in Nelson College and obtained his Master's degree in History from Knox College in University of Otago. During his university days, the author had close connection with the Presbyterian Church and was a member of the Student Christian Movement. He became a divinity student in the Knox Theological College after completing his M A in History, McLeod was recruited for missionary work in Punjab by Overseas Missions Committee and he joined Christian Boys Higher Secondary School in Kharar during 1958. It was during his sojourn in Punjab that the author became interested in the study of Sikh religion and Sikh history for his doctoral thesis and life long mission. He learnt Punjabi in Gurmukhi script and acquired proficiency to read Janamsakhis and Sikh literature. He got his Ph.D degree from University of London in 1965 and his thesis was published by Clarendon Press in 1968 under the revised title, "Guru Nanak and the Sikh Religion".

In chapter 4, the author vividly describes his experiences in Punjab. He was a failure as a teacher of English in Kharar, "I decided that teaching English to Punjabi boys was not for me" (page 34). But in Baring Christian College (BCC), Batala, he was a popular and successful teacher of history even in Punjabi medium. During his interaction with students and staff at BCC, Batala, the author got a peep into the Sikh way of life in Punjab. On page 43 the author narrates his experiences, "In general the students proved to be very friendly and invited me out to their villages. These students were invariably Sikhs. These experiences taught me a great deal concerning their beliefs, their customs and the agricultural life of village Punjab." He spent 4 years in Batala out of his total sojourn of 11 years in Punjab. In addition to his teaching assignment he was fully absorbed in his research on Sikh religion, its history



and culture. There is no mention of his missionary activities anywhere in this book for which he was recruited and dispatched to Punjab.

Professor W H McLeod has been prolific writer of Sikhism and has published almost a dozen volumes. Some of his famous titles are *Guru Nanak and the Sikh Religion*, *the Evolution of the Sikh Community*, *Early Sikh Tradition*, *Who is a Sikh*, *Sikhs of the Khalsa* and the title under review, *Discovering the Sikhs*. The author gives three reasons for his interest in Sikh studies (Chapter 1, page 3-6). He has been most controversial author on Sikhism after Ernest Trumpp. To make an analysis of his approach to Sikh studies, we must scrutinize the background material provided by the author himself. On page 21, he mentions, "I revelled in such questioning and in the overturning of old beliefs", as a member of Student Christian Movement. He was recruited as a missionary of Presbyterian Church but he was not a believer ! The author calls himself an agnostic (atheist). That clearly shows the game plan of the author to secure a job in India on a false pretext, or we may call it a dishonesty of purpose. On page 47, the author mentions, "I never really believed in any religious system or held any belief in God." And further on page 48, "Sikhism believes in God (or Vahiguru, or Akal Purakh). I do not believe, and my back of belief lies behind all that I have written".

Another prop used by the author to explain away criticism of his works on Sikhism is elaborated in chapter 8 (pages 129-131), "I am a western historian, trained in western methods of historical research and adhering to western notions of historiography. My primary objective has been to communicate an understanding of the Sikh people and their religion to educated western readers and who think in a western mode. This western understanding underlies all that I have ever written and no apology is offered for it." Applying the western method, the author lets loose a virulent attack on the sources of Sikh history and religion, namely the *Janamsakhis*, *Rahitnamas* and *Varan Bhai Gurdas*.

In chapter 9, the author gives an overview of his books already published and draws support provided by Dr Ganda Singh in his editorial in "The Punjab Past and Present". The author examines 124 sakhis and of these 87 were classified as possible, improbably, or impossible. This comprised such major anecdotes as Sajjan the Robber, the discourse with Siddhs on Mount Sumeru, Nanak's visit to Mecca, the meeting with the Emperor Babur and Multan and the Jasmine petal. The author also rejects the historical evidence of Guru Nanak's visit to Ceylon and Bagdad. Bhai Gurdas, a contemporary of 3<sup>rd</sup> – 6<sup>th</sup> Guru is considered to be one of the most authentic source on the guru period and he mentions about Guru Nanak's visits to Mecca, Multan and Bagdad. The encounter with Siddhs is described by Guru Nanak in his composition 'Siddh Goshit' in *Adi Guru Granth Sahib*. If we believe the contentions propositions of the author, it will be damaging for the Sikh faith. The author challenges the authenticity of Kartarpuri Bir (*Adi Guru Granth Sahib*),



originality of Guru Nanak and Sikh faith, and tries to create utter confusion in the minds of Sikh believers by his so called western historical approach.

The Institute of Sikh Studies, Chandigarh took up cudgels to demolish the McLeodian model of historiography which created a phobia amongst Indian and Western historians to find fault with the originality of Sikh faith. In chapter 11, the author tries to play down his critics, especially Daljeet Singh, Gurdarshan Singh Dhillon and Gurtej Singh. He writes (page 178) : "Gurtej Singh may represent the institution at its most influential, but assuredly the statements which he produces are well off the mark". The comments of the author on 'Planned Attack on Aad Sri Guru Granth Sahib' are noteworthy (page 183) : "The book is filled with absurdities and one can refuse to waste time answering it." But the author is vehement in his attack on the book "Ernest Trumpp and W H McLeod as scholars of Sikh history, Religion and Culture" by Dr Trilochan Singh, he writes (page 184) "At least those who read my books will surely have understood that Trilochan Singh makes claims that are simply not true. His manner was not at all appropriate for reasoned discussion and his book should accordingly be dismissed and set aside."

In chapter 12, the author laments his banishment from Toronto due to opposition by the local Sikhs and the Institute of Sikh Studies which made a representation to the university of Toronto during 1990. On the part of the Institute, Kharak Singh Mann and Gurdarshan Singh Dhillon lead the attack. The author laments, "There are seven charges listed against me which I certainly do not accept." The author blames the Institute for banishment of Sikh studies programme from university of Toronto (page 199).

The main text is followed by four appendices and a glossary of terms. The author tries to demolish the myth of Panja Sahib, i.e., palm mark on the boulder. What surprises in chapter 12 under the heading 'Regrets' (p. 210), "I do not regret the controversy that has arisen over my writings, at least not in the general sense." It is a clear evidence / proof of the stubborn attitude adopted by the author and proves his arrogance.

I may close my review with some quotations from 'The Spirit Born People' by Puran Singh (page 86-89) which are relevant to the academic / analytical approach adopted by most of the historians of Sikh religion. "History and biography are both lies, so far as these matters are concerned. Only fools concern themselves with what they call historical events. The greatest events are of the soul and they are revealed in one's own *surtā* (consciousness). Intellectual interpretations exhaust genius, it is self spending of consciousness. Only a spiritual genius can write the authentic history of the Sikhs."

While reviewing the book "Discovery of the Sikhs", I have discovered one of the most prolific but controversial writer of the Sikh history and religion.