



## THOMAS LEGGE: IRISH ADVENTURER TURNED FAKIR

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Thomas Legge, from Donaghdee in Ulster (Northern Ireland), developed an interest in Indian alchemy and divination and ended his days as a fakir, living naked in an empty tomb in the deserts of Rajasthan outside Jaipur. A life like that of his father, a respectable businessman who ran a modest shipping business, did not hold any attraction for the youthful Legge. At heart he yearned for excitement and adventure and spurned his father's attempts to set him up in a business. Wanderlust got the better of Thomas and he ran away from home and joined the *Swallow*, a sloop of war heading for Madras.

After several months at sea, Legge realized that the tough life of a British marine was not for him and he deserted as soon as the ship docked in India. He tramped his way northwards across central India to Hyderabad in the Sindh, supporting himself by begging. This was about 1775. He stayed in the area for another five or six years before heading through the great Rajasthan desert to Jaipur. He stayed there a while before becoming a mercenary in the service of the JatRana of Gohad, under another European adventurer called Major Sangster. This Scotsman was a master of the art of casting cannon, which rivalled the very best the East India Company could turn out. He could also make excellent muskets at a cost of ten rupees each, and was a brilliant raiser of troops. This skilful soldier must have recognized in Legge something of a kindred spirit, for he taught the Irishman everything he knew. But once again Legge's desire to travel got the better of him. Armed with the knowledge gained from Sangster, he said goodbye to his mentor and set off on his travels once again.

He ended up in Kabul, Afghanistan, where his military skills were highly sought after and earned him three rupees a day in pay for his services. He stayed in Afghanistan for several years and was well looked after by his hosts. In return, he made himself

invaluable to them, training their soldiers and making weapons. He made himself so useful, in fact, that Legge realized they would never willingly let him leave. So he fled in secret, escaping north across the Hindu Kush to Badakshan. Once again, the European mercenary was welcomed with open arms and invited to stay. Legge liked it there and stayed for several years, even to the point of marrying and settling down.

Eventually, he went further north to Bokhara, where his skills were in demand once again. As always Legge's only difficulty in these places was to get away safely. After this he took up residence in Herat and Kandahar. Legge spent more than twenty years travelling from place to place, providing his services to almost every power between the Indus and the Caspian Sea.

Then he grew tired of this life and returned to Jaipur to settle down and live out the remainder of his life peacefully. He married a great-grand-daughter of Favier de Silva, a celebrated Portuguese astrologer, who was sent out to India by the King of Portugal to advise Maharajah Jai Singh of Jaipur on astrological matters.

With this marriage and his skills, Legge secured a place for himself in the upper rungs of Jaipur society. He was given the command of a battalion in the Jaipur army, but his first action with it turned out to be his last. He was badly wounded while trying to storm a rebel stronghold. Shortly after this Legge went to Colonel Todd's camp to obtain medical assistance.

"I was poked down with a pike, and shot through my thigh, and I've come to your honour's camp to get cured, for they can make no hand at it at Jaipur."

Legge explained. He stayed for several months, during which Todd heard all the incidents of his adventurous life, and recorded the pleasure he had listening

"to the variegated history of this singular being, who had retained, amidst these strange vicissitudes, an artlessness of manner and goodness of heart which were displayed in many notable instances during his abode of some months in our camp."

Todd was fascinated by the wandering Irishman, who practised the healing arts,

alchemy and divination. Legge also had a vast store of extraordinary Central Asian legends which he would willingly retell to anyone who would listen. As Todd quickly came to realize, he was also quite mad. Legge firmly believed that he had discovered the Garden of Eden deep in the Hindu Kush on his wanderings.

“The road which led to it was through a spacious and dark cavern, and an angel with flaming wings guarded its entrance. Deep down in the heart of a mountain was situated a beautiful garden, filled with delicious fruit, with piles of gold bricks at one end, and silver at the other, and various other marvels.”

Oddly enough, throughout all his far flung adventures, Legge devotedly carried a copy of the Bible with him everywhere. A Scottish doctor treated him, and although Legge's Ulster accent was unmistakable, he thought he recognized a strong Scottish accent and that Legge was a fellow countryman. “At this Tom's meek spirit took fire; the *quaere* involved a double insult, to his country and to his veracity, and he exclaimed with warmth ‘You may take me for a Spaniard or a Portugese, or what you *plase*, sir, but I tell you nothing but the truth, your honour, when I say I'm an Irishman.’ Colonel Todd calmed Legge down, saying that he believed him, but the doctor was Scottish and thought from his accent he was, too. Legge relaxed and smiled back, ‘Sure, an' was not me mother a Mackintosh?’ ”

Tom's wound did not heal, and he felt himself slowly wasting away. “I do not fear death, your honour,” he told Todd, “and when I could get my life written and my boy sent to Calcutta I should die contented.”

After several months, Legge left to return to Jaipur. He hadn't left the camp long, when despair overtook him and he threw away his clothes and took up residence in a deserted tomb, proclaiming himself a fakir. He renounced his former life and survived on the intermittent charity of passers-by. Legge's appalling state was discovered by the wife of a fellow European mercenary. She did what she could to relieve Legge's suffering, but it was too late and he died shortly afterwards in 1808. It's not known if he was buried in the tomb in which he had lived.

Source: ‘A particular account of the European military adventurers of Hindustan 1784-1803’ by Herbert Compton

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