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## ‘Views in the Himala Mountains’

The Drawings of James Baillie Fraser



James Baillie Fraser in 1833, drawn by William Brockedon (1787-1854), who crossed the Alps 58 times researching *Illustrations of the Passes of the Alps by which Italy communicates with France, Switzerland, and Germany*.

This year's frontispieces celebrate the bicentenary of the publication of James Baillie Fraser's *Views in the Himala Mountains* and of his book *Journal of a tour through part of the snowy range of the Himala mountains and to the sources of the rivers Jumna and Ganges*.<sup>1</sup>

Born in Edinburgh in 1783, Fraser was brought up at Reelig, the family estate near Moniack west of Inverness, and educated privately in Edinburgh, before going in 1799 to British Guiana, now Guyana, first as an apprentice merchant and later managing the family's plantation there. A collapse in sugar prices left the family in debt and the Frasers looked to India to restore their fortunes. In 1813 James travelled to Calcutta and early in 1815 joined his brother William, who was a political agent for the British forces engaged in the Nepal War, at Nahan in Himachal Pradesh, where a siege of the fort at Jaitak was in progress.<sup>2</sup> While the army was bogged down there, William was sent eastwards with a force of 600 irregulars to liaise with local rulers in the valleys of the Tons, Giri and Sutlej

1. The best online version of Fraser's *Journal* is at [www.loc.gov/item/05006365](http://www.loc.gov/item/05006365). An excellent image of Fraser's map may be found on p25.

2. See Fraser's entry in the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* by Toby Falk for more details.

Rivers, and to investigate trade routes via the Sutlej to Tibet and James went with him. The Tons and Giri are tributaries of the Yamuna, while the Sutlej, farther west, drains to the Indus.

When Nepal settled for treaty in May 1815, the pair had reached Sarahan in the Sutlej and William was recalled to Dehra for new duties. James, with a smaller force of 60 soldiers and porters, parted from his brother in the lower Tons valley to explore the sources of the Yamuna and Bhagirathi rivers. The Bhagirathi is regarded by the Hindu faith as the source river of the Ganges, although modern geographers would prefer the longer Alaknanda.

While with the army at Black Hill near Nahan, James had become an enthusiastic sketcher. He wrote to his sister Jane Anne:

*When at Jytock [Jaitak] with General Martindell's Army, I got seized with a desire to delineate some of the objects that there met our view and the first impulse was in an odd place, in our Batteries, when really it was not quite pleasant for the Enemies Shot were playing over our heads quite briskly ... When the Devil of Drawing broke loose there was no holding him.<sup>3</sup>*

James sketched throughout his Himalayan travels and kept a diary. His *Views in the Himala Mountains* exhibits 20 of the watercolour sketches he made, and his *Journal* records his travels, supplemented somewhat chaotically by an account of the War, and numerous lengthy anthropological, geographical and mineralogical observations. His sketches were elaborated in Calcutta with the help of regular instruction from the English artist William Havell, who was resident there between April 1817 and January 1819. Havell went out of his way to praise Fraser's work and Joseph Turner also praised some drawings sent home when he visited Edinburgh in 1819. So this was an extraordinary artistic development. 'The Devil of Drawing' had raised him to the top of his new avocation in the space of a very few years. The printmaking firm of Robert Havell & Son, perhaps acting on advice from William Havell, nephew of Robert, converted James's drawings to large hand-coloured aquatint plates and Rodwell & Martin published them in book form in 1820. Havell & Son's next project was to prepare the huge prints for John James Audubon's *Birds of America*. The AC Library owns a copy of the now rare *Views* and it may be of interest to members to know that copies change hands for upwards of £30,000.

I now offer a few comments on the thirteen plates selected for this year's frontispieces, in order of use, which follows Fraser's itinerary. **Plate 4** shows the siege of Jaitak. Elephants were used to carry or drag heavy guns up to Black Hill. **Plate 12** shows some of 'Fraser's Irregulars', so called because the force was assembled from defeated opponents bought into service: a common practice in the Presidency armies of the East India Company. So all were from the hill states. The Frasers' initial journey followed the Giri river and **Plate 16** shows the village of Shai on its east side, reached on 9 May.

3. National Register of Archives of Scotland, James Baillie Fraser Papers, B3.



An excerpt from Fraser's 1820 Map of the Himala Mountains, showing the headwaters of the Jumna [Yamuna] and Bhagirathi rivers in Garhwal. The red numbers added indicate the locations for four of Fraser's plates from his *Views in the Himala Mountains*.

Fraser remarked that 'The village is poor and chiefly in ruins, but its situation is not unpleasant.' On 20 May the brothers reached Nowagarh Fort, situated on a high wooded peak at the head of the Giri valley. **Plate 2** presents the fine view of the Himalayan range obtained from there. They then crossed into the Sutlej valley, and after visiting Rampur moved north to Seran [Sarahan] on 16 June. The eight-year-old Rajah was in residence at his summer palace in Seran, shown in **Plate 1**. In the background there is a view possibly showing the north-west aspect of the Bandarpunch group of peaks.

Since William was then ordered to return, they set off for the upper Tons valley, once more crossing the head of the Giri. Near Urshalun, James climbed a nearby peak and sketched another fine view of the distant snowy ranges (**Plate 3**). Descending to the Pabbar or Pabur river, the party made their way south passing the impregnable Fort of Raengarh (**Plate 7**). The road kept to the west side of the river, and where the Pabbar joined the Tons, a whole day was consumed in getting the company across the Tons to its east bank, one at a time. This perilous process is illustrated in **Plate 10**. Further south, near the village of Doongri, James and William parted company. William headed south to Dehra and James with his small company of 60 men crossed the watershed to the east where he sketched the upper Yamuna valley and Bandarpunch peaks, the subject of Plate 8 and then descended to the Yamuna.

The traverse of the Yamuna to its source was laborious and difficult, with frequent dangerous paths and bridges, but eventually James and a few companions reached the shrine of Yamunotri, where he made a magnificent sketch of the source with one of the Bandarpunch peaks in the background (**Plate 20**), probably Bandarpunch II known also as White Peak. After descending a little, he persuaded the party to make a high eastwards traverse across the lower slopes of the Bandarpunch group, in order to shorten the journey into the upper Bhagirathi valley. There were protests regarding 'poisoned air' from the men, but James insisted and they proceeded. The 'poisoned air' took its toll and progress was slow. They spent a night in a wet cave known as Bheem ke Udhar, pictured in **Plate 7** but came down safely to Sookhi in the upper reaches of the Bhagirathi valley.

The party arrived at Byramghatee [Bhaironghati] on 19 July. James described the place:

*A very singular and terrible place. The course of the river has continued foaming through its narrow rocky bed and the hills approach their heads, as though they could meet at a prodigious height above. At this point the Bhagiruttee is divided into two branches; that which preserves the name descends from the eastward, and the other, of a size fully equal, called the Jhannevie, joins it from the north-east. Both these rivers run in chasms, the depth, narrowness and rugged wildness of which it is impossible to describe.*

Fraser was able to do it justice, however, in a wonderful sketch that became **Plate 19**. A final short stage brought the party to Gangotri. James allowed himself a modest pat on the back:

*We were now in the centre of the stupendous Himalas, the loftiest and perhaps the most rugged range of mountains in the world. We were at the source of that noble river, equally an object of veneration and a source of fertility, plenty and opulence to Hindustan; and we had now reached the holiest shrine of Hindoo worship which these holy hills contain.*

The final frontispiece, **Plate 11**, shows the small temple of Gangotri, built only a few years before by the Gorkhali general Amir Singh Thapa, a devout Hindu, with the mountains, which Fraser called 'Roodroo Himala' behind. That group of mountains around the Gangotri glacier constitute a modern Himalayan playground but to the Hindus they were the locks of Shiva from which the holy Ganges sprang.

Fraser's journeys were certainly remarkable for a European and it may be that he was the first such to reach the sources of the Yamuna and the Ganges. However, it should not be forgotten that these had been places of regular pilgrimage for Hindus for centuries beforehand. Fraser's main achievement was surely to bring European artistic sensibility and skill to bear on recording these beautiful valleys and peaks.

Until quite recently it was possible to wonder how much of the beauty of the plates in Fraser's *Views* was down to Fraser, and how much was down to the undoubted gifts of the printmakers Robert Havell & Son, since none of Fraser's original watercolour drawings from his Himalayan tour have survived. However, determined research by Mildred Archer and Toby Falk recently uncovered Fraser's original watercolours for a second publication of 24 plates: *Views of Calcutta and its Environs* (London, 1824-6).<sup>4</sup> These watercolours were discovered in the library at Longleat and were described in a long auction note by Christie's, which sold them for just under £250,000 on 13 June 2002.

It is plain that Fraser's Calcutta watercolours, painted around 1820, were superior to the published plates, and so there is no reason to suppose that his Himalayan watercolours were anything other than the authentic sources of Havell's plates in *Views*. His manner of painting is remarkably similar to some works of William Havell's and to many works of George Fennel Robson's. Discrete receding zones of lowered colour and tone are used to create strong perspective, accentuating impressions of distance and therefore height, and creating most attractive effects.

Fraser began his journey home in 1820, spending time in Persia and arriving in London in 1823, the year he married. In the mid 1830s he returned to Persia on behalf of the Foreign Office to report on Russian influence in the region. His last years were spent on improvements to his Scottish estate, where he died in 1856.

Fraser's life was an extraordinary succession of accomplishments, in India and in Persia, but none was more extraordinary than his achievement of mastery in watercolour painting, starting at the age of 31.

4. See M Archer and T Falk, *India Revealed: The Art and Adventures of James and William Fraser 1801-35* (Cassell, 1989), Archer & Falk, *The Passionate Quest: the Fraser Brothers in India* (Alfalak/Scorpion Publishing, 1989). T Falk, 'From Watercolour to Print. James Baillie Fraser and his Views of Calcutta', *Under the Indian Sun: British Landscape Artists*, eds P Rohatgi and P Godrej (Bombay, J J Bhabha for Marg Publications, 1995.)