

## Edward Blyth, John M'Clelland, the curatorship of the Asiatic Society's collections and the origins of the *Calcutta journal of natural history*

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**ABSTRACT:** This paper explores the origins of the *Calcutta journal of natural history* (1841–1848) and the search from the 1830s for a permanent curator for the collections of the Asiatic Society of Bengal. Edward Blyth (1810–1873) was appointed, even though John M'Clelland (or McClelland) (1805–1883), who founded the *Calcutta journal of natural history*, had acted as part-time curator of the collections for two years before Blyth's arrival in Calcutta. An analysis of the Society and the journal allows reconsideration of the significance of natural history in India in the mid-nineteenth century.

**KEY WORDS :** Asiatic Society of Bengal – museum – India – natural history – nineteenth century

### JOURNALS AND COLLECTIONS OF THE ASIATIC SOCIETY OF BENGAL

From its inception, the Asiatic Society of Bengal encouraged studies in natural history (Kejariwal 1988). Founded in 1784 in Calcutta by Sir William Jones (1746–1794), it aimed to replicate the form of the Royal Society in London, but with a focus on the study of Asian languages, customs and traditions (Jones 1788). Twenty volumes of the Society's journal, *Asiatick researches*, appeared between 1788 and 1839. *Asiatick researches* was the first major journal emerging from the Asiatic Society in Calcutta. The more long-standing publication from the same institution, the *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal* (1832–present) was itself a continuation of a short-lived periodical, *Gleanings in science* (1829–1831), which had emerged from within the membership of the Society.

Zoology was one of the areas covered in *Asiatick researches* from the beginning, although Schiebinger and Swann (2005) have argued that animals occupied a secondary position to plants, which had a greater commercial value. It is of note that 15 out of 16 articles in volume **19** of *Asiatick researches*, part 1 (1836) and all of part 2 (1839) featured animals, as opposed to an average of one or two articles on animals in earlier volumes, excluding volume **18** (see Table 1). An introductory note by the President of the Asiatic Society, Sir Edward Ryan (1793–1875), in volume **18** (Ryan 1829) may have prompted this change in emphasis, a committee being asked

... to propose such plans, and carry on such correspondence as might seem best suited to promote the knowledge of Natural History, Philosophy, Medicine, Improvements of the Arts and Sciences, and whatever is comprehended in the general term Physics should be deemed to continue to be in existence ... The subjects to which the attention of the Physical Class of the Asiatic Society is principally directed, are the Zoology, Meteorology, Mineralogy, and Geology of Hindustan.

TABLE 1 Natural history articles published in *Asiatick researches* (1788–1839)

volume	year	articles total number	articles on natural history : number *	articles on zoology number	articles on zoology %
1	1788	26	3	1	3
2	1790	28	6	3	11
3	1792	16	3	1	6
4	1795	33	8	3	9
5	1797	25	5	1	4
6	1799	13	2	1	7
7	1801	20	1	1	5
8	1805	10	2	1	10
9	1807	11	2	0	0
10	1810	10	1	0	0
11	1811	10	3	0	0
12	1816	14	2	0	0
13	1820	14	5	2	14
14	1822	10	4	3	30
15	1825	11	2	2	18
16	1828	13	2	0	0
17	1832	10	0	0	0
18 (part I)	1829	16	2 (14 on geology)	2	13
18 (part II)	1833	16	8	7	44
19 (part I)	1836	14	13	13	93
19 (part II)	1839	1	1	1	1
20 (part I)	1836	5	0	0	0
20 (part II)	1839	6	0	0	0

\* including articles about botany, zoology, agriculture and medicine, but not geology (except in volume **18** (part I)).

A large number of papers appeared on geology and zoology in volumes **18** and **19**, provided in the main by the English East India Company's Resident in Kathmandu, Brian Houghton Hodgson (1801–1894), the botanist and palaeontologist Hugh Falconer (1808–1865) and the engineer Proby T. Cautley (1802–1871). The last two made rare and significant fossil finds in the Siwalik Range in the foothills of the Himalayas, which resulted in their jointly receiving the Wollaston Medal of the Geological Society of London in 1837.

In 1814, the Superintendent of the Calcutta Botanical Gardens, Dr Nathaniel Wallich (1786–1854), drafted a letter to the Asiatic Society of Bengal in which he strongly recommended the establishment of a museum, to which he was willing to donate his personal collection.<sup>1</sup> The Asiatic Society of Bengal seized upon the recommendation and resolved that same year to form such a museum forthwith, housing what would be a curious mixture of objects including “ancient monuments, instruments of war peculiar to the East, instruments of music, dried fruits, mineral or vegetable preparation peculiar to Eastern pharmacy, native alloys of metals, and minerals of every description, etc.” (Mitra 1885: 34). From a zoological perspective, the holdings were expected to include “Animals peculiar to India, dried or preserved, Skeletons or particular bones of animals peculiar to India” and “Birds peculiar to India, stuffed or preserved” as though the latter were not animals (Mitra 1885: 34). “Animals” in this context appear to be synonymous with mammals rather than the entire kingdom.

After Nathaniel Wallich gave his collection to the Society and then resigned as Superintendent of the Gardens in 1817, he was succeeded by William Lloyd Gibbons (1768–1826) as the *de facto* curator at 50 rupees per month. Gibbons had served as Joint Superintendent with Wallich from 1815, owing to the distance from Calcutta at which the latter lived (Anonymous 1818). However, even as late as 1836, there was still no means available to pay a curator's salary and while one of the members of the Society, Dr John Thomas Pearson (1801–1851), carried out curatorial responsibilities on a part-time basis (Nair 2004: 2153–2154), the Society deliberated, through the efforts of a sub-group, designated the “Committee of Papers”<sup>2</sup>, as to whether the position should be removed entirely or else be supported through the partial diversion of revenues from other departments. Neither course was deemed desirable, lest the progress of the Society consequently be harmed, especially as the maintenance of the museum was viewed “as a national object, and calculated to be of immense importance to science if placed upon a footing of efficiency, with a professional naturalist at the head . . . particularly in regard to the Natural History of British India and Asia at large” (Committee of Papers 1838). A resolution (Committee of Papers 1838) was passed that a

. . . full and urgent representation [be made] to Government to solicit such support as is accorded in most other countries to similar institutions of national and scientific utility [and] pending the application to Government for pecuniary assistance, it is desirable to maintain the Museum on its present footing and to retain the services of Dr. Pearson, from month to month, until the question be decided.

Sir Edward Ryan (1837) described the situation:

The Asiatic Society, or it may be allowable to say the Metropolis of British India, has had the germs of a national Museum as it were planted in its bosom. As at Paris a new era was opened in the history of its great museum, the Jardin des Plantes, through the discoveries of extinct and wondrous animal forms exhumed from the rocks on which the town was built, and which required all the adjuncts of comparative anatomy for their investigation even by the master hand of the great Cuvier; so in Calcutta through the munificence of a few individuals and development of fossil deposits in various parts of India hitherto unsuspected, we have become possessed of the basis of a grand collection, and we have been driven to seek recent specimens to elucidate them.

Ryan was justified in that the work of Falconer, Cautley and Hodgson, among other contributors, was already significant in the realms of palaeontology and zoology. The material was at hand, the Asiatic Society was fully half a century old, and its importance was such that savant societies around the world, including those based in London, Paris and Philadelphia had corresponding members on their rolls. Consequently, seeking a full-time naturalist to curate the burgeoning material was essential to develop the museum. However, this would require more money than was available to the Society and Ryan was seeking this financial support.

The memorandum to Government requested 200 rupees per month. While the Government recognized that the expense of establishing and running the museum could not be met through voluntary subscriptions alone, it also suggested that the matter be decided by the authorities in England. In this context, the memorandum made reference to the India Museum that had been established on Leadenhall Street in London (at the India House of the East India Company) to which objects of oriental interest, including natural history, were being dispatched, with the expenses accruing to that museum and library already being considerable (Desmond 1982a). Ryan (1837) approached the matter with some delicacy:

though his Lordship in Council concurs with you in thinking that such institutions in Europe, however perfect, do not supersede the necessity of providing similar in India likewise, – with reference especially

to the spirit of literary inquiry and scientific research which it is desired to excite and encourage amongst the native youth of India; still the fact that the Honourable Court have a separate institution of their own, points to the propriety of making them the judges of its sufficiency or the contrary for Indian purposes.

The subsequent petition from the Society received a more favourable hearing from the Court of Directors of the East India Company, which sanctioned the monthly amount of 200 rupees (Committee of Papers 1838). The issue of a permanent curator, however, remained outstanding.

### THE QUEST FOR A PERMANENT CURATOR

Dissent began even before Edward Blyth (1810–1873), the first permanent curator, set sail for Calcutta. In 1835, Pearson had resigned the curatorship (Anonymous 1837) owing (like Wallich, two decades before him) to the distance of his residence from the museum, and in his letter to the Secretary of the Asiatic Society of Bengal, he had recommended that a curator be sought from England at a salary of about £200 per annum, suggesting that two well-qualified persons were the Bennett brothers, one, Edward Turner Bennett (1797–1836) serving as the Secretary to the Zoological Society between 1831 and 1836, and the other, John Joseph Bennett (1801–1875) occupied with curating the Banksian Collection in the Botanical Department of the British Museum between 1828 and 1870. Pearson's request did not bear immediate fruit and he was persuaded to continue for the next three years as curator with a nominal salary. In 1838, the temporary curatorship passed to the Irish-born surgeon John M'Clelland (or McClelland) (1800–1883)<sup>3</sup>, later Secretary of the Coal Committee<sup>4</sup> and, for a brief period, Superintendent of the Botanical Gardens at Saharunpur (1847–1848). A controversy erupted in mid-1839 when M'Clelland was offered the post of curator on a permanent basis, subject to the particular requirement that the curator spend two hours daily on the museum and that he furnish monthly reports on the state of the collections. M'Clelland objected (1839b)

... to any stipulated period of daily attendance beyond what might be necessary to superintend the persons employed in the Museum, and of this the curator himself should be supposed the best judge. He [M'Clelland] has been in the habit of devoting more time than two hours, he might say even five hours, daily to the duties of the Museum, but that was at his own house, where he had painters and other facilities which the Museum did not afford. As to reports, he also thought these should be left to the discretion of the curator, as it would be useless reporting unless there should happen to be something of interest to report about.

Sir Edward Ryan, the President, attempted to allay feelings by suggesting that only an average of two hours was required per day, and if M'Clelland could not give that on a particular day, he could compensate with four the following one. As for reports, he recommended that long ones were not necessary and indeed where there was nothing to report, only a letter need be furnished to indicate that state of affairs (M'Clelland 1839b). Other members of the Society were not so tractable. Henry Thoby Prinsep (1792–1878), a civil servant and eminent historian of India, wondered whether it was correct to allow the present curator to remove objects to his home for study, when they should always be available at the Society for reference. The curator was free to do so when the objects first arrived and before their placement in the museum. But once the latter was done, there was no call for removal, there being sufficient facilities in the premises of the museum itself for such study (M'Clelland 1839b). Eventually the President moved that the rules stated that the

presence of the curator be required for at least two hours per day and additionally that no specimen be removed from the premises. M'Clelland responded by saying that if such rules were to be strictly enforced, they would greatly limit the endeavours of the curator, whoever he might be, and given such stipulations, it would be best if he decline the position. The President, in a renewed attempt to mediate, said that the Society was "so sensible of the value of Dr. M'Clelland's services, that no decision would be formed on his expressed refusal of the office until the next meeting" (Anonymous 1840a). Little came of these attempts and Thomas Thomson (1817–1878), later Superintendent of the Calcutta Botanical Gardens, assumed the role from M'Clelland temporarily after February 1840, before himself relinquishing it by May of the same year, owing to his compelled relocation to work in the Upper Provinces (Anonymous 1840b). Henry Piddington (1797–1858), the physical scientist (who coined the word cyclone), would act subsequently as curator until the arrival of Blyth the following year as a result of his acceptance of the Society's invitation (Anonymous 1840c).

The invitation to Blyth was not a *fait accompli*. M'Clelland had indicated in 1839 that it might be worthwhile looking for a competent naturalist in India to undertake the role of curator, rather than seeking one in England, having first established that by a naturalist he did not mean a "stuffer, nor the mere namer of objects, his assiduity would be of no avail, while his monthly reports, were he to engage to supply them, might bring discredit on the Society" (M'Clelland 1839a). Accordingly, the Committee of Papers of the Asiatic Society despatched a circular detailing the requirements for the position (Nair 2004: 2409–2410):

- 1<sup>st</sup> The Curator should make himself intimately acquainted with every article in the Museum so as to be able to point them out and explain them readily.
- 2<sup>nd</sup> The Curator should have that general knowledge of the departments of Science and Natural History to be able to classify articles in the Museum, or when sent to the Museum, and to replace the tickets if lost or missing on the articles in the Museum.
- 3<sup>rd</sup> The Curator should be able to furnish scientific descriptions of articles of Natural History as well as of fossils and geological specimens received into the Museum that the same may be submitted to the meetings and included in the Transactions of the Society.
- 4<sup>th</sup> The Curator should give his attention to Numismatology, European and Asiatic, so as to be able to classify and explain the different coins possessed or received.

Responses began to arrive. A submission in 1840 by Henry W. Torrens (1806–1852), Secretary of the Asiatic Society at the time indicates that the individuals who had submitted their credentials were G. W. Johnson (1802–1886), Professor of Moral Philosophy at the "Hindoo" College in Calcutta, as well as one Kirby (Nair 2004: 2416–2417). There was also mention of Dr E. Roer (then librarian of the Asiatic Society and closely associated with the Oriental section, later to become editor of *Bibliotheca Indica*) being considered, though Torrens did not believe him capable of the task involved, and suggested a Mr Broome instead, if available, in whom he reposed the utmost confidence (Nair 2004: 2416–2417).<sup>5</sup> Neither the cause of Broome nor of Roer, however, advanced much further, and it was in this climate of uncertainty that the external candidacy of Blyth came to be considered.

## THE ARRIVAL OF THE PERMANENT CURATOR

When Edward Blyth responded positively to the efforts of Horace H. Wilson, Professor of Sanskrit at Oxford University and former Secretary to the Asiatic Society of Bengal, to recruit him for the curatorship of the Society's collections (Nair 2004: 2432–2433), he was already a seasoned hand at zoological research, particularly in the area of ornithology, where his work “had appeared in Rennie's *Field Naturalist*, Loudon's *Magazine of Natural History* (later *Annals and Magazine of Natural History*), Wood's *The Naturalist*, *The Analyst* and the proceedings of the Ornithological and Zoological societies of London” (Brandon-Jones 2015). He had also published, at 26, an edition of Gilbert White's *Natural history of Selborne* (Blyth 1836) and four years later, edited and enlarged the sections on reptiles, birds and mammals for an English edition of Cuvier's *Règne animal* (Blyth 1840; Brandon-Jones 2006). The matter of securing funds for passage to India was, however outstanding (Blyth was an unemployed pharmacist at the time) and Wilson was unequivocal on the subject when he wrote in 1841 to Torrens (Nair 2004: 2473–2474):

There is another impediment of a more serious description: want of money to provide for his passage. . . . He is a young man having his way to make in the world, living as he states from hand to mouth and would as easily raise a Mastodon to life as create a hundred pounds.

The money was forthcoming from the General Department of the Government of India. The Secretary, G. A. Bushby, informed Torrens in 1841 that £150 was available for Blyth's passage, which would either be recovered from the Asiatic Society or deducted from the salary of the curator (Nair 2004: 2459–2460).

The published proceedings (Anonymous 1841a) of the Asiatic Society for June 1841 indicate that a letter from Blyth was read informing the Secretary that he had taken passage on the *Larkins* for Calcutta, even as he expressed his deep obligation for the curatorial position offered and appended the abstract of a memoir he had written on wild sheep. Subsequent to the *Proceedings* (24 September 1841) in which the transfer of the curatorship from Piddington to Blyth was recorded (Anonymous 1841b), the services of Piddington alone as temporary curator were acknowledged by the Secretary (6 October 1841) following the official introduction of Blyth (Anonymous 1841c). The others who had held the post were not mentioned even in passing, including the one who had served in this capacity the longest in the last years of the 1830s – John M'Clelland. Part of the reason for this omission may have been that M'Clelland had ceased activities for the Society to begin a whole new enterprise, starting the first journal in India exclusively devoted to the natural sciences – *Calcutta journal of natural history*, renamed from its second volume, *Calcutta journal of natural history: and miscellany of the arts and sciences in India*.

## LAUNCH OF THE CALCUTTA JOURNAL OF NATURAL HISTORY

Ostensibly, the *Calcutta journal of natural history* was established to fill a long-standing void. The editorial preface to the first volume took pains to underscore the fact (M'Clelland 1841a: 2):

The great object of the publication will be less to afford amusement than instruction; and above all, it will be our ambition to make known the Researches of Naturalists in subjects concerned with Indian productions. With this view we shall bring together such facts as may be collected from time to time, and endeavour to

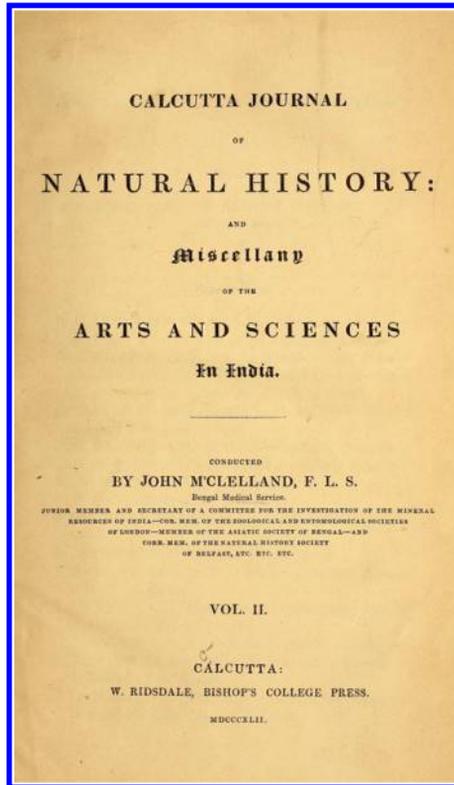


Figure 1. Title-page of the second volume of *Calcutta journal of natural history* (reproduced from a copy available on [www.biodiversity.org](http://www.biodiversity.org), contributed by the Ernst Mayr Library, Museum of Comparative Zoology, Harvard University).

keep before the public the exact state of the several subjects of inquiry, and the claims of those who are employed in them. Having ourselves experienced the disadvantages of many who labour in the cause of science in the recesses of an Indian jungle, we shall therefore be the better able, both as naturalists and men, to appreciate results attained under disadvantages which can only be understood by those who have been exposed to them.

Zoology, geology and botany were immediate candidates for the fledgling journal. Other topics, such as topography, geography, meteorology and statistics (with an intriguing “&c.” after the last, allowing for a far greater ambit for study if required), were considered to be so intimately connected with natural history (if not strictly within its province) as to “render it impossible to exclude them” (M’Clelland 1841a: 3). Other objects for botanists and zoologists to consider, M’Clelland (1841a: 5) averred, were the causes of diseases, such as goitre, guinea-worm and elephantiasis, which was a substantially different angle from those considered for the practitioners of these disciplines in other publications such as the *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal*.

M’Clelland finally turned his attention to the *raison d’être* of the new journal. The *India review*, a short-lived publication (started in 1837 and collapsing soon afterwards), was

concerned with the diffusion of popular science, and the *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal*, was, as M'Clelland (1841a: 5) contended,

too closely identified with that institution to suffer from so puny a rival, were we even ambitious enough to dispute its claims to public favour; our field is altogether distinct, and although a new one, we doubt not that the labours of naturalists are sufficiently important to entitle them to a separate and independent organ.

The necessity of the new journal was subsequently stated by the editor, where he urged his readership to pursue natural history and to publish (M'Clelland 1841a: 5–6):

Indeed it has often been to us matter of surprise, that departments of science so important as those of Geology, Zoology and Botany, should have been so long without a Journal of their own in India. The consequence is, that neither the importance of those pursuits, nor that of the persons devoted to them, is at all understood; and naturalists at length find themselves without any individual connected with the periodical press, or with the learned Societies on this side of India, at all competent to meet their wishes or their views, far less to promote the object of their pursuits. Under these circumstances we have reluctantly deviated from the less obtrusive occupation we had prescribed to ourselves, and are prepared to use our best endeavours to secure for Natural History the advantage of a Journal hitherto much required in India.

M'Clelland (1841a: 7) ended his preface with a note that hinted at the major purpose for launching the journal.

At some future period indeed the geologists, zoologists and botanists might find that the interests of their respective pursuits would be better attended to in separate institutions, and declare their independence of the first Society of Naturalists ever formed in India, just for the reasons we now quit the Asiatic and other Societies in Calcutta. Instead of regarding such movements or dissensions with jealousy or opposition, they are always to be hailed as favourable signs of the progress of knowledge, and of the advancement of Society to that elevated state of civilization, in which the human mind is brought to bear independently on distinct objects of research.

These extracts from M'Clelland's preface help to emphasize several issues. The first is the near coincidence of timing between the appearance of the journal and Blyth's arrival from England. We have seen earlier that M'Clelland was curator for much of the 1837–1840 period, before relinquishing his position owing to terms laid down for the permanent curator that he considered untenable. Second, it has already been noted that he was keen that the curator be found among several promising candidates in India before the Society's embarkation upon efforts to secure the services of one from England. Since M'Clelland was aware that the Society was seeking to place the natural history collections under the curatorship of Blyth who was already known internationally through his publications on vertebrate zoology, it is curious that the appearance of the journal was in the same year as that which marked Blyth's arrival in India. Third, natural history was not being neglected in any of the journals from the Asiatic Society of Bengal, including *Asiatick researches*, *Gleanings in science* and the *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal*. M'Clelland had contributed an article on the Indian Cyprinidae (carp) that encompassed the whole of the second part of volume 19 of *Asiatick researches* that had appeared in 1839. *Gleanings in science* (1829–1831), during its brief existence, contained several articles on molluscs, insects, fish, reptiles, birds and mammals, a practice that was continued through the 1830s in the *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal*. The apparent rationale for the establishment of the new journal was greater attention to the natural sciences, and indeed, M'Clelland had taken such evident steps in this direction by mooted the creation of a society, "The Indian Association for the Advancement of Natural Science" (M'Clelland 1841b), to produce such a journal so as to "concentrate the labours of our naturalists, which have hitherto been interspersed throughout various publications, in a manner to render it difficult to refer to

what really has been done” (M'Clelland 1841b: 14; Desmond 1982b: 186). However, the number of pages devoted to the affair of the curatorship in the first volume suggests that the issue not only rankled, but was central to M'Clelland's disaffection with the Committee of Papers of the Asiatic Society that first adjudicated the matter of the curatorship in 1839, on whose competence he made his feelings known in no uncertain terms while recapitulating (M'Clelland 1841c: 147) in full for the *Calcutta journal of natural history* the circumstance that led to his resigning the curatorship as they appeared in the proceedings of the Asiatic Society of Bengal in 1840:

We do not blame persons for not being naturalists, but when they assume that character under the garb of a Committee, we must hold them responsible for their acts, particularly when directed against individuals whose pursuits might be supposed to be a protection, or when their opinions are calculated to mislead the taste and judgment of the public. The only inference to be derived from the foregoing report . . . is that we have been neglecting the interests of the Museum for objects of more interest to ourselves – that when we ought to have been sitting in the Museum, we have been investigating “groups and families” at home; and every thing calculated to bear upon the disadvantage of this, is brought forward, while all that should excuse it, is suppressed or misrepresented. It is insinuated even that our paper on “Cyprinidae” was written when we ought to have been doing something else, forgetting that it was presented to the Society nine months before the Committee had any claim upon our time; while they keep out of sight the fact of above 360 animals having been added to their collection during the few months we held office, a third of which were collected by ourselves in that short period.

M'Clelland cited the precedent of the President of the British Association, William Buckland (1784–1856), in allowing “Messrs. Hutton and Henslow” to remove specimens for study at home as justification for him to do likewise. He did not spare on the subject of lack of knowledge of the Committee, employing mineralogy to his cause, to scathing effect (M'Clelland 1841c: 149).

The Committee say, ‘our collection of *minerals* is in utter chaos,’ a statement which is not the fact, for they are all arranged; a Committee that would lay down rules for the direction of a Curator, ought to know the difference between minerals and rocks. “Though rich”, say this Committee, “in *anonymous* specimens, valuable in themselves as illustrations of *abstract* mineralogy, but devoid of interest in a geological or geographical light, owing the neglect with which they have been treated, &c.’ We can easily understand that the Committee may have been ignorant of the names of many minerals in the collection, especially as they do not seem to know the difference between minerals and rocks, but it does not follow that such minerals are ‘*anonymous*;’ in fact, the use of the term as the Committee have applied it, evinces a total want of information on the subject; a mineral is not *anonymous* because it is without a label, any more than a man would be so when without a card in his pocket, with his name written on it: a person acquainted with either minerals or men will always know them whether labelled or not. Yet this is the Committee who are ready to take the management of the Museum into their own hands, and as they say themselves, examine the claims of such candidates as may offer for the Curatorship within a period of three months.

M'Clelland's remarks culminated (1841c: 150) with a paragraph in which only one member of the Committee was viewed positively (if with a concluding note of sarcasm) on grounds of professed expertise, ironically the man who had advocated the formation of the museum in the first place, Nathaniel Wallich.

There is but one name attached to the report which can be at all held responsible, in a scientific point of view, for the sentiments embodied in it, and although Dr. Wallich may fairly be exonerated from any great authority on the subject of Museums, yet his own experience ought to have suggested the difficulty of making monthly reports on subjects connected with natural history, he himself finding a single report too much to accomplish in the five years that have now elapsed since his return from Assam.

The article suggested that battle-lines were to some extent being drawn, which would be exemplified by the transfer of allegiance by some members of the contributory contingent on zoology belonging to the *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal*, to the new journal, as a

close study of the authorship in the *Calcutta journal of natural history* has revealed. Among them were the civil servant and malacologist William Henry Benson (1803–1870), the surgeon and ornithologist William Jameson (1815–1882), and M'Clelland himself. Others, such as the Danish physician, ichthyologist and herpetologist Theodor Edvard Cantor (1809–1860), the malacologist and mammalogist Thomas Hutton (1807–1874), and the army officer and ornithologist Samuel Richard Tickell (1811–1875), stayed neutral and published in both journals. Significant among the individuals who persisted with the *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal* without contributing to the *Calcutta journal of natural history* were Pearson and Piddington, both formerly associated with the curatorship of the Asiatic Society. Blyth did not publish a paper in the journal either; however, he did request the insertion of comments in response to the appearance of a notice on Thomas Caverhill Jerdon's *Illustrations of Indian ornithology* (1847) in the journal, which was honoured (Anonymous 1844).

Despite the seeming rancour in print, personal relations appeared to be amicable between the groups. Contributors to the *Calcutta journal of natural history* such as Jameson and Hutton cited membership of the Asiatic Society as part of their credentials, something that M'Clelland did as well, but only once (volume 3), preferring other affiliations in the rest of the series. It is of note that M'Clelland cited membership in the Asiatic Society of Bengal, especially given his statement at the end of the editorial in the first volume of the *Calcutta journal of natural history* where he wrote (M'Clelland 1841: 7) of quitting the Asiatic and other societies of Calcutta to commence upon the publication he had founded for the dissemination of natural history. Blyth quoted from the *Calcutta journal of natural history* during the presentation of one of his characteristically verbose reports on natural history to the Society (Blyth 1842), and spoke with gratitude of the loan by M'Clelland of a copy of *Zoologie du voyage de M. Bélanger*, which had “set him right with regard to the names of certain species, besides furnishing some other information concerning them” (Blyth 1843: 240–247). A number of members of the Asiatic Society who subscribed to the *Calcutta journal*, prominent among whom were the Anglican Bishop of Calcutta and founder of St Paul's Cathedral in that city, the Right Reverend Daniel Wilson (1778–1858); the Irish physician, key innovator in telegraphy and later Secretary of the Society, Sir William Brooke O'Shaughnessy (1809–1889), who ironically was one of the chief advocates for a curator from England (Brandon-Jones 1997); the former curator John Thomas Pearson and the President of the Society at the time of the appearance of the *Calcutta journal*, Sir Edward Ryan. Significant among those who did not subscribe were Torrens and Piddington.

The *Calcutta journal of natural history* was described by Desmond (1982b: 187) as “undoubtedly elitist, rigorously maintaining professional standards”. His view of the origins of the journal followed directly from M'Clelland's thoughts that there was a demand for a journal specifically catering to geologists and biologists. This does not detract from the claim I have advanced for the genesis of the publication in the light of M'Clelland's reaction to the manner in which the matter of the curatorship of the natural history collections of the Asiatic Society was treated by its administration and membership. As it turned out, M'Clelland's journal did indeed provide natural history information from within and beyond India's shores, as well as publicize research conducted by leading naturalists in the country. All three Presidencies of India (Bengal, Bombay and Madras) were represented, accounting for natural history reports across the extent of British India. The *Calcutta journal* also published significant works both in botany and zoology. The former was boosted by the appointment of

Dr William Griffith (1810–1845), a botanist and notable antagonist of Nathaniel Wallich, as editor for the fourth and fifth volumes. Part of the reason for including Griffith was indicated in the preface to the third volume where an effort to increase subscriptions was conceivably aided by his reputation in botany.

#### THE DECLINE OF THE CALCUTTA JOURNAL OF NATURAL HISTORY

Subscription was always likely to be the major concern for the *Calcutta journal of natural history*. Even the journals emanating from the Asiatic Society were initially underwritten by the President or Secretaries, or for *Gleanings in science*, by a member, Captain James Dowland Herbert (1791–1833), who initiated it in 1829 out of a certain frustration with the infrequency of the appearance of *Asiatick researches*. *Gleanings in science*, however, was seen as intimately connected with the Asiatic Society of Bengal, unlike the *Calcutta journal of natural history*, where the rupture was made clear from the start.

Virtually every volume of the *Calcutta journal of natural history* was dedicated to an individual or group, as much an act of canniness in its all-round observance of patronage, potential or realized, as of gratitude. These included the Governor-General, “Lord Auckland” (second volume), the “Mercantile Community of Calcutta” (third volume), the German botanist and explorer Carl Friedrich Philipp von Martius (1794–1868) who was Professor of Botany at Munich (fourth volume), the “Court of Directors of the East India Company” (fifth volume), and the “Government of Bengal” (sixth and seventh volumes). The apparently rude health of the journal in its middle years was however jolted by the transfer of some of the major contributors out of the region, and the death of others, especially Griffith (M’Clelland 1846: v). The cessation of the *Indian journal of medical science* at the time also caused M’Clelland (1846: vi) to assume the additional responsibility of including medical subjects in the *Calcutta journal of natural history*.

To these they have always been open, particularly such as relate to improvements in anatomy, physiology, chemistry and materia medica. The only difference now contemplated is, that such subjects will be conducted by a distinct Editor, as far as possible, without interfering with the original character and objects of the work, except in the shape of a very marked improvement to its general interest and utility.

The ambitions of M’Clelland for his journal were clear even as late at 1847, where the ambit of natural history was to be taken to its greatest extent. It must have been particularly galling for him, therefore, in a somewhat terse postscript, dated 7 February 1848, at the end of the eighth volume (M’Clelland 1848: unpaginated), to have to concede that:

However well a Journal may be supported as to the number and talent of its editorial staff, yet it is necessary, that some one resident at the place where it is published, should take the trouble of superintending the details of printing and publication.

Some uncertainty having existed during the past few months as to how far the present managing Editor might be enabled to continue the personal superintendence of the work, it has consequently been allowed to fall slightly into arrears. Under these circumstances, it is thought necessary to bring the series to a close with the present number.

Desmond (1982b: 187) opined that the real reason for the cessation of the journal was shortage of funds and subscription, rather than lack of time on the part of its editor. Given the ambitions of M’Clelland only the previous year to expand the reach of the journal, this suggestion seems reasonable. As it was, the journal came to a close, never to be recommenced, and the proceedings of the Asiatic Society for July 1848

recorded the re-election of M'Clelland to the ranks of membership through a ballot, having been warmly proposed and seconded at the May meeting of the Society (Anonymous 1848).

## CONCLUSION

I suggest that the near correspondence of dates between the arrival of Edward Blyth in India and the founding of the *Calcutta journal of natural history* is more than coincidence. However, this is not to argue that M'Clelland was opposed to Blyth. If anything, his concerns were with the rules laid down for the curatorship, which he indicated were stifling, coupled, of course, with his lack of regard for the credentials of the committee generating them. It is possible that the opposition that he faced in the Asiatic Society of Bengal on the subject contributed to his departure from active membership for the years that the *Calcutta journal of natural history* was in publication, but not to the extent that bridges were irrevocably burnt – if anything, esteem for the editor was never in doubt, culminating in the expeditious re-nomination of M'Clelland to membership in the Asiatic Society only three months after the folding of the *Calcutta journal of natural history*. In fact, in 1850, M'Clelland, being the senior member present, even assumed the chair for the meetings in the absence of the President, J. Colville. As for the *Calcutta journal of natural history* itself, the first of its kind in India, it represented real possibilities for the dissemination of natural history and allied disciplines, including physics and chemistry, and served as an inspiration and pioneer for such later efforts as the extant *Journal of the Bombay Natural History Society*.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

For critically and constructively reviewing the material that went into the original fashioning of the chapter in my doctoral thesis from which this article is derived, I thank Professors J. Browne and E. Mendelsohn, my advisors at Harvard University. I am beholden to Professor C. Mathew, my father, for his meticulous attention to the reading of the text. Ms M. Sears was of incalculable assistance for corroboration of bibliographic sources at a crucial stage of revision of the manuscript and I remain in her debt. My gratitude is due in considerable measure to the referees as well as to the editors of *Archives of natural history*, whose diligent attention and emendations have improved the flow and accuracy of the paper tremendously.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> From this origin, the collection would be augmented and curated by the Society for more than 50 years before being given over to the Government of India, to oversee its maintenance and growth under the name The Indian Museum.

<sup>2</sup> The "Committee of Papers" was established from within the membership of the Asiatic Society for the express purpose of overseeing such activities as would enhance the visibility of the Society through its collections, while deliberating over key decisions regarding official appointments to the Society.

<sup>3</sup> Sources differ about the date of M'Clelland's birth – some place it in 1800, others 1805; I have followed that given by Riddick (1998: 225).

<sup>4</sup> The Coal Committee, comprising six members at its point of origin, was established in 1835 to investigate the coal and mineral resources of India, in the wake of the introduction of steam machinery into India.

<sup>5</sup> Apart from the brief biographical information available on Roer, there is nothing in the literature that casts light on the discarded candidates mentioned in the text.

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Received 22 May 2014. Accepted 4 December 2014.