

# The Bengal Club

Richard I. Lauf

Lives of great men all remind us  
We can make our lives sublime,  
And, departing, leave behind us  
Footprints on the sand of time;

This Longfellow quote has stuck in my mind since seventh grade. Our class was performing a play for Library Week and our characters represented genres of reading. The classmate playing "Biography" declaimed this verse periodically throughout the play. In the interest of full disclosure, I should point out that I was playing the part of the "Nonsense, Wit and Humor" books - with equally appropriate quotes. Our director, the grade school librarian, no doubt took some perverse satisfaction from what she saw as character typing.

Nonetheless, the Longfellow quote appeals to me, for it connects the lives of great men to our own and implies we should learn from them in order to improve. In our fastidious age, the idea of great men has fallen into disfavor, at a minimum because of the term "men." Some overly egalitarian quarters reject the very notion that "greatness" be applied to some and not others. My paper tonight will reflect on a great man and also on the ways that his literary clubs helped shape, deepen and preserve his "footprints on the sand of time." In his history I see lessons for us as individuals and as Literarians.

Let me introduce my man and his clubs. The man is Sir William Jones, known to his contemporaries as "Oriental Jones" or "Persian Jones." He is more familiar to modern scholars as the father of modern linguistics and the man who first convincingly and analytically posited a lost Indo-European language from which most of the European languages and many of the Oriental languages descend. This alone would be a large enough "footprints on the sand of time," but he also made remarkable achievements in literature and law.

And what about his clubs? He was an active member in "The Club" or "The Literary Club," a group which at the time really needed no other qualifiers. We may want to clarify it as the Dining Club at the Turk's Head Inn, or perhaps most tellingly as Samuel Johnson's club. I believe this experience showed him the power of a club of well-chosen members to learn from and inspire individuals to their best work. Shortly after he had arrived in Bengal in 1783 as a British jurist he founded the Bengal Asiatic Society. The Asiatic Society endures to this day in Calcutta as a center of Asiatic scholarship.

Jones was born in 1746. His father, a minor mathematician, died when Jones was three. His mother handled his early education at home using a surprisingly progressive approach for the eighteenth century. She rejected what she called "the severity of discipline" preferring "to excite his curiosity." When he would ask about some topic, she would tell him to go "read and then you will know." I recall comparable responses from my mother to questions. He was able to read any book in English by age four. His mother pushed him to gain a complete command of English and made him learn and recite speeches from Shakespeare at an early age.

It would be a serious understatement to say he was precocious when he finally attended Harrow. When he was twelve, his classmates wanted to perform Shakespeare's *Tempest*, but had no copy of the play. Jones sat down and wrote a correct copy from memory. His masters reported he had an excellent sense of prosody as he studied Latin and Greek. He translated the Pastorals of Vergil into verse. He learned Hebrew well enough to begin reading some of the Psalms. In his spare time he learned French and Italian.

When he arrives at University College at Oxford, among other studies he takes up Arabic, finding a native speaking Arab to work on his pronunciation. His Latin and Greek reach the point that at age seventeen he writes a comedy in Greek using the style, language and meter of Aristophanes. He finds that there are few adequate books from which to learn Persian, but notices some unexpected parallels between Persian and Arabic which enables him to learn Persian anyway.

His family's finances were always marginal, but his mother scraped and scrimped in order to invest heavily in Jones' education. After two years the finances could no longer support his Oxford studies. Like so many talented but poor scholars of the time, he takes up a position as private tutor to Lord Althorpe, son of Earl Spencer. This gives him time to read the Old Testament in Hebrew. After a year, he finally gets a paid fellowship to Oxford to continue his studies, although he continues to work with his pupil, even accompanying Althorpe once he enters Harrow. Having been exposed to the Spencer family, he adds efforts to acquire the graces of a gentleman: fencing, riding and dancing.

At age twenty one, he begins his commentaries on Arabic poetry and translates an Arabic manuscript on Egypt and the Nile. As his reputation in Eastern languages builds, Jones somewhat reluctantly undertakes a request of the King of Denmark to translate an eastern manuscript of the life of Nadir Shah from Persian into French. The Danish King awards him membership in the Royal Society of Copenhagen. One gets the impression he had hoped for something more tangible from either the Danish king or the British crown who pushed him to do the translation.

Throughout this time, Jones continues to write and publish. He writes a treatise on Oriental Poetry, the treatise written in French. He begins a Persian grammar and a Persian dictionary to fill a gap for Englishmen wishing to learn Persian before heading east. He viewed this as a very practical undertaking to help the British East India Company and the other British traders, diplomats, and administrators. This idea that language and literature is a very practical pursuit recurs throughout Jones' life and work. His hope that the East India Company would express their gratitude financially was likewise disappointed.

Over time, Jones' interest in law and government grew, in particular a deep belief in the English constitution. At age twenty four he decides to take up law and is admitted to the Middle Temple. This decision was partly driven by interest, partly by his view of what a law career could contribute, partly by ambition for position and influence. He announced in the preface to his Commentaries on Arabic Poetry that he will give up his pursuits in Asian literature for his law career, but points out that the law has a role to relieve the oppressed, assist the miserable and to check the despotic and tyrannical. (Might this thought surprise some of our attorneys?) His interest in position was more complex: he recognized the limitations put on him by a class-bound aristocratic society and the limits of his finances. He seems to have a genuine belief that the law offers the opportunity to gain adequate financial independence so that he is not beholden to wealthy or aristocratic patrons. (Might this surprise even more of our attorneys?) While he retained a warm relationship with the Spencer family over his lifetime, he nonetheless saw the need for patronage as infringing on one's integrity, no matter how benign the relationship. He took Cicero as a role model, planning to have a successful twenty year law career, gain financial independence and leisure, then return to his studies of Asiatic literature.

After being called to the bar, Jones really does set aside his Asiatic studies. He is appointed a Commissioner of Bankrupts, which gives a small annual stipend. He takes up his legal practice, riding the legal circuits and building a middling professional practice. While practicing law, he publishes a translation of Isaeus' work on the succession of property and forms of pleading in Attic courts. His interest grows in comparative law. Eventually he publishes his Essay on the Law of Bailments, drawing on Roman, Greek, Hindu, Mosaic, Islamic and Visigoth legal traditions. This remained the standard British legal text on bailments until Justice Story's Commentaries appeared in the 1830's. Black's Law Dictionary still uses some of Jones' taxonomy regarding bailments.

In 1779 he undertook what can only be called a naïve effort. He was representing a legal client's interests regarding some property in Virginia. The American representatives were in the friendlier environment in France rather than London. Jones and his client went to Paris to make their case before the Americans. There he met Benjamin Franklin, then serving as the American minister. They enjoyed each other's company. It became clear that the Americans

were quite dug in on some principles, the largest being that they have rights independent of the British crown. He found that the colonists' cry of "no taxation without representation" would not be satisfied by sending a few representatives to the British Parliament. George III and government of Lord North on the other hand had no intention of giving into what they saw as rebellion, pure and simple. They also stood firm in their belief that the Americans owed the British treasury, drained by the substantial financial costs of defending the colonies from the French and Indians.

Jones had no diplomatic brief at all from the British government, nor any request from Franklin for help in resolving the conflict. Jones could not resist the notion that scholars should play a constructive role in bringing peace. Without any real diplomatic remit, he used a ruse to put forward his ideas on how to achieve peace between the American colonies and Britain without giving the Americans parliamentary representation. His ruse would be recognized at once by Franklin for what it was. Jones' story was this: he sent Franklin what was supposedly his translation of "a curious fragment" of Polybius. It uses the Social War of 357 BC as the allegorical mechanism to propose a nine point solution to the American War largely based on a commercial association, but without any recognition of independence. From today's vantage, it seems an incredibly naïve proposal, but one deserving points for creativity and erudition. One wonders how many senior State Dept. officials today would even recognize the name of Polybius, much less have the background to understand the disguised peace formula. Needless to say, the plan went nowhere.

This was a tempestuous time in British politics. George III and his ministers were fighting the war in the American colonies, dealing with domestic turbulence like the Gordon riots, and trying to clarify administration and justice in India between the government and the East India Company. Meanwhile the Whigs and Tories were busy battling each other over the monarchical/parliamentary balance. Jones had little patience with party or faction, trying to avoid being pulled into partisan controversy. He preferred to retain his independence in support of the English constitution and liberty. He did however make clear his opposition to slavery and the slave trade, itself a controversial position. Over the course of the American Revolution he increasingly saw justice in the colonists' demands for more independence – a position not likely to endear him to George III or his ministers.

Jones can seem a bit of a boy scout in the midst of these controversies. He made a run for the Oxford University seat in Parliament in 1780. Yes, the University had its own representative in Parliament. For today's non-specialist in British politics, I will simply say that the traditions, conventions, and protocols (mostly unwritten) surrounding a late eighteenth century run for Parliament makes our election laws look positively straight-forward and transparent. A candidate was not supposed to solicit support for the seat – friends were to do that canvass for

him. Of course, *sub rosa*, one needed to discreetly interest those friends in the task. The other candidate in the canvass double-crossed Jones, who notwithstanding upheld his end of the political agreement. Opponents painted Jones as a far more radical candidate than he really was, damned him by association with much more radical Whigs, or even with republican thinkers opposing the monarchy entirely. They generally engaged in politics as we know it still, attack ads and all. When Jones saw he would lose the vote, he withdrew his candidacy.

For almost five years Jones had been seeking a position as a justice on the Supreme Court in Bengal. This position attracted Jones in no small part because the salary would enable him to accomplish two objectives. First, it would move him much closer to the goal of independence, an independence he planned to use later as a Member of Parliament who could actually act with integrity, above the persuasions of money or the patronage of the powerful. His need for independence and integrity had also kept him a bachelor, even though he met the woman he hoped to marry some years earlier. Jones refused to marry for money or position, nor to marry anyone until he had the financial means of support to avoid reliance on families or others. He had been keeping up with her only through letters and occasional visits to her family while on the circuit. Both of them seem to have exercised a remarkable patience in the matter.

That said, his idealism did lead him to see the Indian bench as an opportunity to “contribute to the happiness of millions or at least of relieving their miseries.” He also noted, “As to myself, I find such distraction among my political friends that I should be glad (if I had no other motive) to be fixed at a distance of 16,000 miles from all their animosities.” The usual mix of policy, politics, and personal games among the powerful contributed to a five year delay in making Jones’ appointment, even though no one seemed to doubt that his language and legal skills, particularly comparative legal studies, made him the ideal candidate for the job. At least some of the policy debates arose from legitimate questions of how to dispense justice in India, and more importantly, how to divide responsibilities between the government and the East India Company. The out-sized character of Warren Hastings as Governor General in India was an ever-present factor in the debates even at a distance.

Jones finally got the judicial appointment in March of 1783. In April he married Anna Shipley, whom he had kept waiting for thirteen years. Shortly before leaving for Bengal, the Crown knighted him. After a six month voyage, he arrived in Calcutta and took up his post. The post was demanding. The Court met in the mornings, while in the afternoons or evenings, the justices rotated in the role of justice of the peace to decide smaller matters among the Indians. The schedule was grueling. We sometimes forget how harshly the tropical climate and tropical diseases treated the British. Jones often writes in his letters that either he or his wife is sick, sometimes to the point of incapacity, with dysentery or various tropical fevers. Empire

extracted its costs from its servants of the Crown and their families as surely as from native populations.

Partly due to Hastings' influence, in all but heinous crimes the British administrators were trying to dispense justice as defined by Indian traditions. This proved difficult given the limited understanding they had of Indian ideas of justice. The Court had its own "pundits" (yes, that's where our usage of the term comes from) – Indians who were to read the traditional law and explain it to the Brits. Some of their version of the law came from translations into Persian of the original Sanskrit texts. Jones was able to read the Persian texts himself and realized that the pundits' translations and interpretations were not always accurate. In fact their versions for the judges were sometimes for corrupt sale to the Indian parties to a case. Further, no one knew how accurately the Persian translations even reflected the Sanskrit originals.

This cultural gap led to very practical problems for the British judges. In some cases they knew that at least one of the parties was perjuring himself. What are the Hindu views of perjury? How does one write an oath to swear-in witnesses that carries the same moral force the oaths of witnesses carry among British subjects? Can Brahmin priests absolve someone of perjury? On what basis might they do this? Similarly, what would constitute a binding oath as viewed by a Moslem? If you are trying to run a court seen as just by Hindus and Moslems, these questions carry consequences.

Given his dedication to properly fulfilling his judicial role, Jones concluded he needed to learn Sanskrit himself. This was easier said than done. The Brahmin priests were very reluctant to share what they saw as holy knowledge with non-Hindus, particularly the foreigners ruling their lands. One British administrator had gained a grasp of Sanskrit, but was transferred back to England shortly after Jones' arrival. At length, Jones found a professor of Sanskrit at one of the native universities who taught Sanskrit to the Brahmin priests. Not himself being a priest, the professor was more open-minded about meeting the request for instruction.

The demands on Jones' personal time limited his attention to the almost endless list of questions running through his mind about the enormous, old and rich culture India presented. To have any hope of broadening European, and particularly British knowledge, he realized he needed to enlist help. In January 1784, he gathered a number of the British gentlemen in Calcutta to propose the founding of an Asiatic Society in Bengal. The group embraced his proposal and the Society was formed. They offered the presidency to Hastings, who declined the honor citing the press of his position, but recommending that Jones assume the role. He did – a role he retained until his death ten years later.

Learned societies had been springing up in the great European capitals in the eighteenth century. Jones had the personal experiences of two organizations to use as reference points.

In both cases, the selection of club members loomed large. In the Royal Society he saw too many members selected for their birth or their connections. By contrast, about the Club at the Turk's Head he made an observation not unknown in these rooms, "Of our club I will only say that there is no branch of human knowledge, on which some of our members are not capable of giving instruction." He urged three principles for membership in the Asiatic Society: first the potential member has to have expressed a voluntary desire to join, and possess "a love of knowledge, and a zeal for the promotion of it." Not bad qualifications to consider.

Each year he gave an anniversary address as the club's president. They still make good reading today. His first address covered the vision and principles for the club, emphasizing the need to gain accurate knowledge of all aspects of Asia, beginning of course with India. I should also note that he recurs to his theme that language acquisition is a means to the practical ends of gathering accurate knowledge. Here's Jones: "You may observe, that I have omitted their languages [that is from the list of work needed by the club], the diversity and difficulty of which are a sad obstacle to the progress of useful knowledge; but I have ever considered languages as mere instruments of real learning, and think them improperly confounded with learning itself: the attainment of them is, however, indispensably necessary." One can almost hear the echo of his mother's "read and then you will know" in the mature Jones. I find this a defense of language learning we should consider today as foreign language instruction falls from not only our K-12, but even our universities. After preparing this paper, I was practically ready to look for a tutor in Sanskrit myself!

In the second year he fleshes out the dream by providing a fairly detailed list of topics he felt the club and its members should explore to improve their understanding of Asia. For himself, he pledged to give five major addresses – one for each of the principal nations of Asia as he understood those "nations." To motivate the members to undertake this work, he pointed out the need to surpass any similar French efforts.

He began the series with the Hindu nation in his Third Anniversary Discourse on February 2, 1786. This discourse contained his major contribution. His study of Sanskrit when added to his encyclopedic knowledge of both European and Oriental languages gave him the insight. In one of the most significant papers ever presented to such a gathering, he told the members:

"The Sanskrit language, whatever be its antiquity, is of a wonderful structure; more perfect than the Greek, more copious than the Latin, and more exquisitely refined than either, yet bearing to both of them a stronger affinity, both in the roots of verbs and in the forms of grammar, than could possibly have been produced by accident; so strong, indeed, that no philologer could examine them all three, without believing them to have sprung from some common source, which, perhaps, no longer exists; there is a similar reason, though not quite so forcible, for supposing that both the Gothic and the Celtic,

though blended with a very different idiom, had the same origin with the Sanskrit, and the Old Persian might be added to the same family."

Historians have since found that a French Jesuit priest some nineteen years earlier had likewise observed similarities between Sanskrit and other languages. Nonetheless, Jones in his presentation marshals linguistic evidence in support of the hypothesis in a new way, debunking facile etymological "sounds like" reasoning and digging deeply into the changes that language and words undergo over time and place. Modern linguistics can be said to have begun with Jones.

Jones went on with his researches in India until his death in 1794, leaving a legacy of papers astounding in their breadth and erudition. He not only continued to press ahead with Sanskrit literature, but he gave papers on botany, mythology, comparative law and religion, and many others. He published verse and translations. He proposed a phonetic alphabet for transcribing the sounds of any language. This was one of the early attempts to find a way to represent spoken language, although it was superseded in the early nineteenth century by more effective phonetic alphabets. He completely planned a definitive digest of Indian law, both Hindu and Islamic, to guide British judges, but died before its complete realization.

By any reasonable estimate, we can judge Jones to be one of Longfellow's great men. I want to now turn my attention to some of the behaviors and characteristics which led to his remarkable accomplishments.

Jones relentlessly pursued self-improvement. In 1780, he wrote a memo to himself saying, "Resolved to learn no more rudiments of any kind, but to *perfect* myself in, First 12 languages, and the *means* of acquiring accurate knowledge" of such topics as history, arts and nature. Jones had in fact already mastered twelve languages including classical Greek and Latin, six modern European languages, and Persian, Turkish, Arabic and Hebrew when he said this. At his death he knew twenty eight languages.

At P&G employees had to write personal development plans each year tied to their specific job assignments. Over the course of my career I wrote some thirty such plans for myself and reviewed hundreds of similar plans from people who worked for me. Not once did I write or review one that compares to a memo Jones wrote to himself as he was on his way to his Indian assignment, what he called "Objects of Enquiry during my My Residence in Asia":

"The Laws of the Hindus and the Mohammedans  
The History of the Ancient world  
Proofs and Illustrations of Scripture  
Traditions concerning the Deluge, & c.  
Modern Politics and and Geography of Hindustan



Best Mode of governing Bengal  
 Arithmetic and Geometry, and mixed Sciences of the Asiatics  
 Natural Productions of India ...”

The list goes on from here; I have given but an excerpt. The astonishing thing is to look back after his ten years in India and to realize how much progress he personally made on the list and the degree to which his intellectual leadership of the Asiatic Society fostered further contributions by others in the club.

Jones did not rest in his efforts to improve his own skills, always driven by his desire for the betterment of humanity. To give an example of his dedication, consider how he spent the days when he was vacationing in Krishnagar. Krishnagar was a northern hill station to which the British officials headed to avoid the heat and humidity of the Bengal summer. Jones regularly needed to recover his health there, impaired by the long working hours in the tropics. He reported that he spent each day this way:

“Morning

One letter  
 Ten chapters of the Bible  
 Sanskrit Grammar  
 Hindu Law & c.

Afternoon

Indian Geography

Evening

Roman History  
 Chess  
 Ariosto”

From time to time, papers delivered in these rooms have reported on our members’ vacation experiences. How many of us would like to compete with Jones’ idea of leisure? And I’m sure we all read a little Renaissance Italian before retiring.

He used the fellowship of his clubs to broaden his own understanding. He clearly valued and learned from the contributions of the other members. Conversely, the sweep of his interests led him to pose problems and questions that inspired others to dig deeply into subjects he indicated. When he urged Lord Althorpe to join Johnson’s Club in London, his description of some of the other members shows his deep respect. Here is just a sampling of his descriptions of some specific club members to entice Althorpe:

“An elegant and lively scholar...  
 A man of wit and vivacity...  
 The pleasantest companion in the world...  
 A man of the world with a sterling understanding...  
 Of great talents both natural and acquired...”

I believe I could with equal fairness use similar terms to describe my fellow Literarians to a prospective member.

This underlying respect enabled the members to disagree on subjects while retaining personal attachments. I will however point out that by the end of his time in Johnson’s Club, Jones found that Johnson’s Toryism and monarchism versus Jones’ firm Whiggish views and growing sympathy for the American colonists rendered it almost impossible for him to discuss the American Revolt in front of Johnson. We all have our limits, I suppose.

Woody Allen once observed, “Half of life is just showing up.” I see no reason to expect that scholars two hundred years from now will have any reason to check the regularity of my Monday evening attendance in these rooms. They have checked Jones’ participation in his clubs. He regularly ranks near the top of the membership in reliability. Jones showed up. The overall attendance at both clubs did seem to vary over a wide range during the course of the year. One wonders how much this variability had to do with the papers to be presented. I hasten to point out that I attribute tonight’s crowd to the opening of our new season rather than the paper.

At the outset I mentioned the modern view which sometimes has trouble digesting the notion of greatness. Part of this comes from the zero-tolerance we show towards departures from our own age’s pieties, even by people living two hundred years ago. By this test, Jones would no doubt be rejected for greatness in some quarters. My own view is that no matter how erudite, no matter how open-minded we are, and no matter how progressive our ideas seem to our own age, we are still limited by our, and our society’s, deepest presuppositions. So while Jones was remarkably attentive to the welfare of the Indian population to whom he dispensed justice, he was certainly a product of the colonial enterprise – an enterprise so deep as to be invisible to its practitioners. Admittedly, a British judge presumes a great deal acting as the Supreme Court in another country.

I will toss any such critics a couple of quotes to confirm their worst suspicions. In speaking of the Asiatic Society Jones offered this: “We have a still nearer interest in knowing all former modes of ruling these inestimable provinces, on the prosperity of which so much of our national welfare, and individual benefit, seems to depend.” Despite his dedication to liberty for Englishmen and then the American colonists, and despite his very progressive instructions to

the Bengal juries, he was still capable of offering this comment regarding his system of government and liberty in England versus in India: "I hold (and no sane man of sound intellect can disagree) that such a system is wholly inapplicable to this country, where millions of men are so wedded to inveterate prejudices and habits, that if liberty could be forced upon them by Britain, it would make them as miserable as the cruelest despotism." While our age can't help being struck by the irony of his reference to "prejudices and habits," let him among us without any buried assumptions of our current age cast the first stone. Jones remains a great man.

After Jones' death in 1794 his club, much like ours, had an appreciation of him presented by the succeeding president, Sir John Shore. Shore's remarks include an encomium that could be an inspiration for any member of a distinguished club when he said Jones was "anxious for the reputation of the Society, he was indefatigable in his own endeavors to promote it, whilst he cheerfully assisted those of others." He recognized that trait of character we sometimes refer to as clubability by observing "his presence was a delight of every society, which his conversation exhilarated and improved, and the public have to lament not only the loss of his talents and abilities, but that of his example."

Oriental Jones inspires me. His clubs underline the importance a convivial gathering of intelligent and engaged men can play in encouraging and facilitating intellectual growth. I opened tonight with the Longfellow poem reminding us of "lives of great men." It seems appropriate to close this look at a particular great man with one of Oriental Jones' own poems, On Parent Knees. It is an English translation he made from the Persian, and is still anthologized in the Oxford Book of English Verse. It was even set to music in a song cycle by Gerald Finzi in 1956. I believe he lived this Persian ideal:

On parent knees, a naked new-born child,  
Weeping thou sat'st, while all around thee smil'd:  
So live, that, sinking in thy last long sleep,  
Calm thou may'st smile, when all around thee weep.

### References:

- *The Works of Sir William Jones with the Life of the Author by Lord Teignmouth* was published in 1807 in London by John Stockdale. The thirteen volumes convey the enormous scope of Jones' erudition, even for those of us who are unlikely to work through his Persian grammar, or peruse the finer points he makes concerning plates of Persian, Arabic or Sanskrit manuscripts. (Sir John Shore referred to in the paper became Lord Teighmouth.)

- The most current and comprehensive biography of Jones is Garland Cannon's *The Life and Mind of Oriental Jones* (Cambridge University Press, 1990)
- Jones' *Discourses Delivered before the Asiatic Society* can be found at [http://books.google.com/books?id=mNk\\_5vKDvj8C&printsec=frontcover&source=gbs\\_ge\\_summary\\_r&cad=0#v=onepage&q&f=false](http://books.google.com/books?id=mNk_5vKDvj8C&printsec=frontcover&source=gbs_ge_summary_r&cad=0#v=onepage&q&f=false)
- An outline history of the Asiatic Society can be found at <http://www.scholarly-societies.org/history/1784as.html> or at [http://www.banglapedia.org/httpdocs/HT/A\\_0326.HTM](http://www.banglapedia.org/httpdocs/HT/A_0326.HTM)
- Edward Said's book, *Orientalism* (1978) is a long analysis of how the idea of "the Orient" was created as an intellectual construct by men such as Jones.
- The Finzi setting of *On Parent Knees* can be heard sung by baritone Stephen Roberts at [http://www.hyperion-records.co.uk/dw.asp?dc=W1297\\_GBAJY8101502&vw=dc](http://www.hyperion-records.co.uk/dw.asp?dc=W1297_GBAJY8101502&vw=dc)