

Lieutenant-Colonel Godfrey Phipps Baker
1786-1850

Born in South Mall, Cork, Ireland and christened on the 12th April 1786, Godfrey Phipps Baker was the son of Captain Hugh Cossart Baker, 27th Regiment. When he was a boy, the Baker family had the famous Sake Dean Mahomed (1759-1851), the first Indian author of Islamic faith to write in English, living in their household in Cork. Such an exotic guest must have inspired the boy with tales of the East Indies.

As a teenager, Baker went out to India, where he became an officer in the 19th Bengal Native Infantry, stationed near Calcutta. An able young man, he soon rose to the rank of Lieut-Colonel, his service also taking him to the small British settlements then in Malaya. Baker's commander at Malacca was Thomas Stamford Raffles (later famous as the founder of Singapore). In 1811 during the Napoleonic Wars in Europe, Raffles mounted a military expedition to occupy Java in the Dutch East Indies, in which Baker took part. The success of this campaign led to Raffles being appointed Lieut.-Governor of Java, where he quickly went about reformation of the administration - abolishing slavery, establishing a land tenure system, and encouraging self-government among the people. Godfrey Phipps Baker, who was also an amateur archaeologist and surveyor, was commissioned to undertake surveys of, and superintend buildings in Java. In 1812 he received orders from the then British Resident at Jogjakarta to "make plans of the neighbouring country, such as would answer military purposes, tho' without the employment of instruments. This could be effected without giving unnecessary alarm to the Sultan." During a visit to Semarang, Raffles received a report indicating the discovery of an inland hill, full of many carved stones. A certain H. C. Cornelius was dispatched into the area to investigate and spent six weeks with 200 men conducting a preliminary clearing of the monument. Baker went with him, and he was one of the first westerners – if not the very first - to sketch the remarkable 9th Century Buddhist temple of Borobudur, which had been lost for centuries in the jungle, and which since 1991 has been a World Heritage Site. Many of Baker's watercolours and drawings of the ruins at Borobudur and Chandi Arjuna are today in the British Library. Baker's general surveys had a political aim, in that Raffles ordered the survey to identify places where a British-Indian force could potentially later be put ashore on the south coast of Java.

Baker stayed in Java during the British occupation but withdrew with Raffles in 1814 when the island was handed back to the Dutch. In 1817, back in Bengal, Baker married a French woman of good family, Lydia Marie Dubois de Saran, whose family came from the small French enclave colony of Chandernagore, north of Calcutta. They appear to have had no children of their own but adopted twin girls. Their names were Mary Eliza and Sophia Eliza, and they were christened at Calcutta on the 20th December 1822.

After Raffles' death, Baker inherited his superior's collection of maps and charts relating to Java and adjacent islands. In 1832, he offered these to the Government of

Bengal, who declined them. Thereafter Baker lived mostly in France, for a considerable time at Orleans, near his wife's relatives. In 1842 he wrote to his nephew in Canada, saying there were serious reasons why he could not return to England, though what these were, are unclear. However, he did return to England about 1848, and settled in Halifax, perhaps to be near a friend of his, Captain Richard Hart, who was then living in the town. Baker's local residence was in Lord Street; and he made his will in October 1849. This details funds invested with the noted Rothschilds' Bank.

Baker died suddenly at home in Lord Street, on the 4th August 1850, and was buried a few days later in grave number 1276 at Lister Lane Cemetery.

It is interesting to think that a remarkable archive once owned by the founder of Singapore, was presumably once located in Halifax. These items relating to Raffles seem to have passed to Captain Hart, one of Baker's executors. Hart, formerly the British Resident at Surakarta in 1815, donated them to the Royal Asiatic Society in 1850. He later gave a copy of Baker's journal to the India Office Library, and a letter from Baker to Hart is bound in this volume. Today, all these records are in the India Office Library section of the British Library.

Baker's surviving adoptive daughter, Mary Eliza, married an Italian and settled in Florence. His nephews prospered greatly in Canada. His namesake and godson Godfrey Phipps Baker the 2nd, held the important job of postmaster at Bytown, Ontario, Bytown was later renamed Ottawa, which became the capital of Canada. Another nephew, Hugh Cossart Baker, founded the Canada Life Assurance Company, in 1847.

What a splendid variety of international connections!