

JOHN WATSON LAIDLAY.

John Watson Laidlay was born at Glasgow on the 27th of March 1808. At an early age he went to London, and began his education at a private school at Blackheath.

After passing through the ordinary curriculum there, he commenced a brief course of technical study, preparatory to going out to India, and with this view entered the laboratory of Faraday, by whom he was initiated in practical chemistry. At the same time he studied Hindustani under Dr Gilchrist, and it was here that he made the acquaintance of Bishop Heber.

This period was, however, very short; when he reached only his seventeenth year it was decided to send him out at once to India, and at this point his normal education may be said to have ended, his subsequent learning, the varied extent and scholarly accuracy of which was known only to his intimate friends, being entirely the result of self-imposed study.

In the end of 1825 he reached Calcutta, and joined his uncles, Messrs John and Robert Watson, merchants and indigo planters, Bengal, who subsequently purchased from the East India Company many of their best silk filatures and indigo factories, such as Berhampore, Rampore-Beauleah, Surdah, &c.

He was now constantly in charge of one or other of the filatures, and succeeded in introducing several valuable improvements in the machinery for winding silk.

His spare time he devoted to studying science and natural history, but, above all, the Oriental languages, for which he had a very decided talent; and, in addition to the native dialects, soon made himself familiar with Persian, Arabic, Sanskrit, and subsequently Chinese.

He originated the *Bibliotheca Indica*, a serial publication of native literature, which has proved a most valuable work, and is still continued.

His love of deciphering inscriptions on ancient monuments was great; and, with a view to assisting the labours of those engaged in this work in India, he translated *The Pilgrimage of Fa Hian* from the French edition of the *Foe Koue Ki*, with additional notes and illustrations of his own.

He made a valuable collection of coins, including many uniques; a portion of these were unfortunately stolen, but the remainder, together with his collection of shells, he presented to the British Museum.

His most numerous literary and scientific publications appeared from time to time in the *Journal of the Asiatic Society*, to which he acted as co-secretary, and afterwards vice-president and secretary to the Natural History Department.

He also compiled a comparative dictionary of Chinese words, and made translations of several Persian poems and other works, which were never published.

In 1839 he visited the Straits of Malacca for his health, and there he made the acquaintance of Rajah Sir James Brook. He went home to England in 1843, where he married, and returned the following year.

The remainder of his time in India, until his final return to England in 1850, was spent at Calcutta, where he associated with the leading scientific and literary men of the day, together with many other notable people.

On leaving India he gave up active work, and shortly settled down at Seacliff, Haddingtonshire, where he spent the remainder of his life.

He was now elected a Fellow of the Royal Society of Edinburgh, in whose proceedings he took a lively interest, although prevented by uncertain health from taking an active part in their meetings. He also became a member of various other societies in this country.

At all times of a retiring and unambitious disposition, he showed little inclination to enter society afresh and without the companionship of his former friends, but preferred rather to cherish and extend those kindred studies which had been so much to him in the past. In the quiet of his unostentatious life at Seacliff, he found a never-failing source of pleasure in his library, his laboratory, and in the wider field of nature. His was essentially a pure love of scientific truth for its own sake, and, although furnished with introductions which would have brought him in contact with many celebrated literary and scientific men, his extreme humility and modesty of self-assertion prevented him from availing himself of these opportunities of bringing his own learning into greater prominence.

Thoroughly versed in the classics, he delighted to read and re-read the works of the principal authors, most of whom he could quote at pleasure. Perhaps his favourite modern language was Italian, and Dante his favourite poet. Schiller and Goethe, too, he held in high esteem, while in our own literature he was intimately conversant with all the standard authors.

In the sciences, chemistry, archæology, geology, meteorology, and natural history, each afforded an inexhaustible field of research, his varied reading enabling him to keep abreast of the latest discoveries.

In medicine his knowledge was extensive and accurate, and so late as his seventieth year he attended, for his own pleasure, a whole winter course of anatomy at the Edinburgh University, under Professor Turner.

Some time before his death his eyesight began to fail, and thus he was reluctantly forced to abandon, one by one, his favourite studies; but his memory continued clear until his death, which took place upon the 8th of March 1885.

In private life he was esteemed by all who knew him for the gentleness of his disposition, his kindness and unvarying courtesy to all, rich and poor alike; but few, save his own family, knew his completely unselfish nature, his infinite goodness of heart.

The following papers are recorded under his name:—

On Catadioptric Microscopes. *Journal of the Asiatic Society*, vol. iii., 1834.

Analysis of Raw Silk. Vol. iv., 1835.

On the Rate of Evaporation in the Open Sea. Vol. xiv., 1845.

On the Coins of the Independent Mohammedan Sovereigns of Bengal. Vol. xv., 1846.

Sanskrit Inscription from Behar. Vol. xvii., 1848.

Daily Evaporation in Calcutta. *Ibid.*

Note on the Nido-Scythia Coins. *Ibid.*

Note on the Inscriptions found in Province Wellesley. *Ibid.*

Notice of a Chinese Geographical Work. Vol. xviii., 1849.

Note on an Inscription from Keddah. *Ibid.*

On Preparing Fac-similes of Coins, &c. *Ibid.*

On the Connection between Indo-Chinese and Indo-European Languages. *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, vol. xvi. p. 59, 1856.