

CHAPTER VII

BELVEDERE AND DARJEELING

There are two other houses whose history is bound up with that of Government House, Calcutta, namely, Belvedere (called Viceroy's House since 1934) and Government House, Darjeeling: Belvedere because it is a Government House of the old days and because it was used for the official residence of the Lieutenant-Governor of Bengal from 1854 to 1912 and is now used by the Viceroy in place of the present Government House, and also because it is the oldest official residence of the Governor General of India in existence; and Government House, Darjeeling, because it has been the hill residence of the ruler of Bengal for the last 55 years.

Although Belvedere was not purchased as the official residence of the Lieutenant-Governor of Bengal till 1854, it had been the private country house of Governors before the time of Warren Hastings, being in those days to the Governor's official residence in Calcutta what Barrack pore was and still is to Government House, Calcutta, for Governors Verelst (1767-1769) and Cartier (1769-1772) had occupied it as a Garden House. In March 1774 the Directors allotted one of the Company's country houses for the use of the Governor General. Warren Hastings replied saying that as all the country houses had been sold the year before he had taken it upon himself to purchase (for £7,500) the house occupied by his predecessors, Mr. Verelst and Mr. Cartier, called Belvedere but that as he did not wish to bring the Company under any engagements respecting it till their orders had been received he proposed in the meantime that the Board should allow him a yearly rent for the house equal to 10 per cent of the purchase money. The Directors agreed to his proposal for renting the house and apparently said nothing about purchasing it from him, but all the same Belvedere then became for the first time an official residence of the Governor General. In 1777, however, Warren Hastings built a house of his own, close to Belvedere and to the South of it, which stands to this day and is called Hastings House and thereafter had no use for Belvedere which early in 1778 he leased to Major Tolly, the excavator in 1780 of Tolly's Nullah, the lease being converted into a sale in 1780. It was during Tolly's occupation that Hastings and Francis had their duel close by in 1780 and the wounded Francis was carried into Belvedere. From then until 1854 the house passed through several hands until it became the official residence of the Lieutenant-Governor, and, later still, once more an official residence of the Governor General. The shape of the house to-day corresponds with the shape given in the map of Calcutta and its environs made in 1794 by A. Upjohn from the survey taken in 1792-1793. Among its occupants was General the Honorable Sir Edward Paget, Commander-in-Chief in India from 1822-1825 in the time of Marquis Hastings and Earl Amherst whose pictures hang in the Breakfast Room at Government House, and shortly afterwards it came into the occupation of the Prinsep family who finally bought it outright in 1841 and sold it to the East India Company in 1854. Charles Robert Prinsep, who carried out the transaction was Advocate General, Bengal, 1846-1849 and 1852-1855. The price mentioned in a minute by Lord Dalhousie was Rs.80,000 and he estimated a further Rs.20,000 for repairs and adaptations, a total of Rs.1 lakh or £6,700. This, it will be noticed, was rather less than the price paid for it by Warren Hastings 80 years earlier.

Since then the house has been improved from time to time by successive occupants. Its architecture is of a pre-Italian renaissance style developed on an ordinary Anglo-Indian building. The construction of a verandah on the East side and the reconstruction of a more commodious West wing were carried out by Sir William Grey in 1868-1870 and Sir Ashley Eden (1877-1879) added the whole of the centre main façade with the steps on the North side.

Sir Frederick Halliday, the first Lieutenant-Governor to occupy the house, is interesting not only because he held office all through the Mutiny, but also because he held office all through the Mutiny, but also because he came out to Bengal in 1825 when Earl Amherst was Governor General, when Belvedere was the residence of the Commander-in-Chief and when Lord Wellesley had left India but 20 years.

He must therefore have been familiar with Government House when it was a comparatively new structure and must have met people who remembered Belvedere when Warren Hastings lived in it and before that when it was occupied by the old Governors of Bengal. He therefore serves as a link in the history of the house.

Government House, Darjeeling, was provided as an official residence for the Lieutenant-Governor in the time of Sir Ashley Eden (1877-1879). The portion of Birch Hill on which it stands used to be called The Shrubbery and there was a small house on the site of the present one which Sir Ashley's predecessors used to occupy sometimes when they went to Darjeeling. It was purchased from the Coochbehar State in 1877 and additions and alterations were carried out by the Public Works Department to adapt it for the Lieutenant-Governor's residence, only small portions of the original building being retained. The grounds were laid out in 1878 and the reconstruction of the house was finished by the end of 1879, it being first occupied in the summer of 1880. In order to provide suitable accommodation for State and public functions, the Durbar Hall was built to the North of the house by Sir Charles Elliott (1890-1893) linked up to the house by a covered passage. This is the only part of the old building still in existence, the main house having been so damaged by the earthquake of January 1934 that it had to be entirely demolished, a new Government House in ferro-concrete being built in its place in the time of Sir John Anderson which is expected to be ready for occupation by the summer of 1936.

Round about the time when the Lieutenant-Governor was succeeded by a Governor, various other buildings were erected in the grounds - the Guest House in 1911 and the Cottage in 1913. Richmond Hill and Rivers Hill where the Private and Military Secretaries live were purchased in 1914 having been in existence as private houses for a good many years previously. A terrace garden was designed and made by Lord and Lady Lytton in 1926 just to the North of the Guest House, while to the South of the Guest House and between it and the A.D.C.'s quarters is a sunken water-garden made by the Hon'ble Lady Jackson in 1928.

None of the other features of the extensive and pleasant grounds of Government House, Darjeeling, call for special mention and so the Story of Government House closes. A glance through the index which follows, in which will be found the names of Kings, Queens and Princes; Divines, famous Statesmen and Soldiers; Wars, Treaties and reclamations; in fact everything that goes to the making of history, will show what an

important and Central position Government House held in the life of British India during the whole of the memorable 19th century. If a full account had been given in these pages of all its occupants and all the illustrious personages who have entered it on business or pleasure it is no exaggeration to say that scarcely a name of any eminence whatsoever in the life of India from 1803 to 1912 would have been missing. The scope of the book has, however, been restricted so as to make it more or less a mere guide book in which are mentioned in detail only those whose portraits still hang on the walls or who have taken a hand in adding to the fabric of the house and who died sufficiently long ago to have passed into history. For this reason no biographical details have been given of Lord Curzon but this much may be said about him. He and Lord Cornwallis (1786-1793 and July to October 1805) are the only Governors General who have been appointed for a second term, Lord Curzon's second appointment being all the more remarkable in that it followed immediately after the termination of the first with an interval of seven months' leave. As Government House is Wellesley's gift to Calcutta so the Victoria Memorial may be said to be Curzon's and indeed there was a great similarity in many ways between these two outstanding men. Had they changed places it is probable that we should still have had just such a Government House and just such a Victoria Memorial as we have to-day, and that the course of the history of British India would not have been much different. The last words in this book shall be words written by Lord Curzon:

"Since Government House was built by Lord Wellesley at the beginning of the 19th century until its final abandonment as the residence of the Viceroy in 1912, it was occupied by twenty-four Governors-General of India, or an average of a little more than four years each. Some of them were among the foremost men of their time. Within its walls grave decisions were taken, momentous scenes enacted, important movements born. When the house was built, the British Empire in India was like a little patchwork of crimson spots on the map of the Indian continent. When it was abandoned, that color had overspread and suffused the whole."

"Where the two Hastings and Wellesley and Hardinge and Dalhousie had conquered and annexed, their later successors organized and made firm. But from the same Government House, and from the same desk in that house, all these men issued the orders that first created and then consolidated an Empire. As I sat at the table I could picture to myself the wide brow and aristocratic lineaments of Wellesley, the austere dignity, the frail but overpowering energy, the laborious application of Dalhousie, the patient and pathetic serenity of Canning the imposing presence of Mayo, the courtly charm of Dufferin. Even when the luster lit up the great Ball Room on the night of some splendid entertainment, I could see Lord and Lady Hastings advance with an excess of old-world ceremonial, or the form of John Lawrence, uncouth and careless, stride up the floor."

"During the seven winters that I spent at Government House I came to know a good deal about those who had preceded me, partly because, the Government of India being a Government that does its work for the most part on paper, I was able, when I chose, and was often obliged, whether I chose or not, to read their printed views in Minutes or Dispatches; partly because, of my own accord, I made a special study of their published Lives or Journals, as well of the memoirs and narratives of the time; so that in the end they ceased in my

imagination to be a mere procession of figures marching 'after the high Roman fashion' across the stage, and became instead a company of fellow-workers and counselors, who had done the same thing that I was trying to do, and who, from the stores of their experience or wisdom, offered to me invaluable advice or warning."