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**Letters on the Nicobar islands,
their natural productions, and the
manners, customs, and
superstitions of the natives with
an account of an attempt made by
the Church of the United Brethren,
to convert them to Christianity**

Johann Gottfried Haensel

Imprint

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Dear Sir,

Your obliging inquiries concerning the attempt made by the Church of the United Brethren, to establish a mission in the Nicobar Islands, I have not been able hitherto to answer as fully as I wished, the documents in my possession being few and unconnected, and a reference to Crantz's History of the Brethren, p. 504 and 614, furnishing but a short notice of the commencement of that undertaking. The difficulty attending our correspondence with our Brethren on the Continent, has likewise so [4] much increased, that I cannot expect to be soon supplied with more detailed accounts from our archives; and the continuation of Crantz's History, in which a concise report of the progress of the mission is inserted, is not translated into English. I was glad therefore unexpectedly to meet with an opportunity of conversing with John Gottfried Haensel, a missionary from St. Thomas in the West Indies, who was formerly employed in the Nicobar mission, and resided for seven years in the island of Nancauwery. This worthy veteran has spent eighteen years in the East, and seventeen in the West Indies, and altogether thirty-eight years in the service of the Brethren's missions; yet by God's blessing, after suffering numberless hardships and dangerous illnesses, at the age of sixty-three he remains a most active, cheerful, and zealous labourer in the Lord's vineyard.

[5] In the course of our frequent conversations on various subjects, relating to the occurrences of his past life, he interspersed so many curious and interesting particulars concerning his residence in the Nicobar Islands; that I could not help requesting him to commit them to writing, as they might occur to his recollection. This he very obligingly consented to do; and though, by my particular desire, he did not study to make out a complete history, the labour and formality of which might have suppressed, in a great degree, the liveliness of his manner, but left the arrangement of the subjects to me; yet I am of opinion, that you will read what he has written with pleasure, and esteem these fragments worthy of preservation. Many of your questions will be pretty satisfactorily answered by them, and I have therefore translated them for your perusal. They

exhibit a degree of patience [6] and perseverance in the prosecution of missionary labours, in hope against hope, such as has hardly been exceeded in our Greenland and North American missions, with the history of which you are acquainted.

The mission of the United Brethren in the Nicobar Islands, was undertaken in the year 1758. A person of high rank at the court of Denmark, having intimated to the directors of the Brethren's missions, that it would give particular pleasure to the King, if some of their missionaries would settle on the Nicobar Islands, and endeavour to instruct the inhabitants in the principles of the Christian religion; they resolved to comply with his Majesty's wishes.

A commercial establishment had been formed on these islands in 1756, when [7] the name of Frederic's Islands was given to them; but the first attempt miscarried, and almost all the colonists sent thither from Tranquebar, soon died. The Brethren, however, were not discouraged. After some negotiation with the Danish Asiatic company, having obtained an edict, granting them necessary privileges to preach the gospel to the heathen, and to maintain their own church-discipline and worship, they agreed to begin the work, and several Brethren offered themselves for this service. The names of the first missionaries were George John Stahlman, Adam Gottlieb Voelcker, and Christopher Butler. They arrived July 2, 1760, at Tranquebar, and were received by the Governor and all the inhabitants, with much cordiality.

As an establishment on the coast of Coromandel, was found indispensably necessary [8] to support the new mission, they bought a piece of ground, about a mile from Tranquebar, built a house, with out-houses and work-shops, and maintained themselves by their several trades. This settlement was called *The Brethren's Garden*.

A second company followed them in the same year. According to directions given by the Brethren in Europe, they carefully avoided all interference with the worthy Lutheran missionaries residing at Tranquebar, by whose pious exertions many Malabars had been converted to Christianity.

The Danish East India company, not being able to renew their settlement in the Nicobar islands as soon as was expected, offers were made to the Brethren by the English Governor of Bengal, to [9] settle

on the Ganges; but they resolved to wait with patience for an opportunity to prosecute their first plan, and obtain the original aim of their mission to the East Indies. This presented itself in 1768, when the Danish government formed a new establishment in the Nicobar islands. Six Brethren were immediately ready to go thither. They settled on Nancauwery.

In 1769, several officers of the company, with a party of soldiers and black servants, arrived from Tranquebar, and brought with them a considerable quantity of merchandize. But they died so fast, that in 1771 only two European soldiers, and four Malabar servants survived. This second failure deterred the company from repeating their attempt, and the project of establishing a factory in the [10]Nicobar islands was abandoned. The four Brethren residing there were charged with the sale of the remaining goods, and experienced no small inconvenience and trouble from this commission.

In 1773, however, a vessel was sent from Tranquebar, which relieved them, by taking back the articles of trade left on hand, and bringing them the provisions they wanted.

As the means of thus supplying the missionaries with the necessaries of life, by uncertain communications with Tranquebar, were too precarious, the Brethren resolved to venture upon annually chartering a vessel for that purpose. Mr. Holford, an English gentleman, residing at Tranquebar, rendered them herein the most essential service. He joined them [11]in fitting out a small ship, which arrived in 1775, with provisions, &c. at Nancauwery, and returned with the produce of the country; the sale of which, however, by no means repaid the expence attending the outfit. Mr. Holford, nevertheless, did not lose his courage. Another vessel was fitted out, and sailed in 1776, but having missed the entrance into the Nicobar islands, after long combating contrary winds and currents, she was obliged to cast anchor near Junkceylon, where she deposited her cargo. A third vessel had meanwhile set out for Nicobar, but was equally unsuccessful. Thus the difficulties attending the support of the settlement increasing, this and other causes, mentioned in the course of the following letters, occasioned the final abandonment of the mission in 1787. [12]

You will however perceive, that Mr. Haensel expresses an opinion concerning future attempts to preach the gospel to the natives of the Nicobar islands, which is by no means discouraging.

With the sincerest esteem and gratitude for the many proofs you have given of your kind notice of the labours of the Church of the United Brethren among heathen nations,

I remain ever,

Dear Sir,

Your most obliged,

and most faithful friend

and servant,

C. I. Latrobe.

London, *May 12, 1812.*

LETTERS

ON

THE NICOBAR ISLANDS.

LETTER I.

As you have desired me to repeat, in writing, the substance of our conversations respecting the Nicobar Islands, and the mission of the Brethren, begun there in 1758, in which I was employed from the year 1779, till the attempt was relinquished in 1787; I will endeavour, as far as my recollection will enable me, to satisfy your wishes.

The Nicobar Islands are situated at the entrance of the Bay of Bengal, in 8° N. latitude, and $94^{\circ} 20'$ E. longitude, north of Sumatra. Nancauwery is one of the southernmost, and forms, with *Comarty*¹ to the north, a commodious harbour, sheltered to the eastward by a long, but narrow island, [14]called *Tricut*, flat, and abounding in cocoa trees; and to the westward, by *Katsoll*, which is larger. Ships may ride here very safely.

On the north-west point of Nancauwery, behind a low hill, and contiguous to the best landing-place, on a sandy beach, lay the missionary-settlement of the United Brethren, called by the natives, *Tripjet*, or the dwelling of friends, where I arrived in January 1779, in company of Brother Wangeman. On our passage hither we were driven by contrary winds to Queda, on the Malay coast. Here we immediately inquired for Captain Light, having often heard at Tranquebar, that he was well disposed towards the Brethren and their missions, of which he had received some account from Dr. Betschler. We were soon conducted to his dwelling, where we met with a most cordial reception. Being here without any other recommendation, his friendship and kindness proved most gratifying and useful to us. Never have I had it in my power to make any returns to this excellent man, for his disinterested favours, but I shall retain a never-ceasing remembrance of them in a thankful heart, and pray the Lord to bless and reward him. His wife was a Malay, and a relation of the King of Queda, a worthy woman, middle aged, of great urbanity of manners, and better [15]informed than the generality of her nation. Her countenance was pleasing, she appeared friendly and good tempered, and rendered us many kind services, which will not go unrewarded.

Captain Light expressed his great surprise, at the courage, or rather simplicity, with which I committed myself to the crew of a Malay boat. For as we had lost our boat, and the road in which

ships come to an anchor off Queda is above two leagues from the shore, we were at a loss how to work into the harbour with our little schooner, without a pilot. A Malay palong passing, I hailed her, and asked the people whether they would take me on shore. They consented, and I went with them. On hearing this, Captain Light observed, that though he was able to speak their language, and accustomed to their manners, he should not venture to trust himself alone with them, on account of their treacherous character. I replied, "that I never thought of being afraid of any one, to whom I had done no harm." This speech he used to quote, but observed, that among these people I might find myself mistaken.

After our vessel had been brought in by Captain Light's good offices, we were detained some time at Queda, which afforded me an opportunity of becoming a little acquainted with the town and the adjacent country. The inhabitants are chiefly Malays; [16]but the right side of the river is inhabited by Siamese, Chinese, and a few Roman-catholic Christians. The Malays are all Mahometans, a false-hearted, cruel, and murderous race; so much so, that it is hardly safe for a stranger to suffer them to follow him, for fear of being slyly stabbed. When they are obliged to walk before others, they are suspicious and cowardly, and can hardly speak for fear. The frequent murders committed by them are all by a treacherous attack from behind. They consider themselves much better than their neighbours, and very righteous, because they *ought not* to eat pork, or drink strong liquors. But they supply the want of the latter by taking great quantities of opium, which stupifies their senses. I saw one of their principal people, during a conversation with me, put three or four pills of opium, as large as a grey pea, into his mouth in the space of a quarter of an hour. They are exceedingly addicted to the vilest lusts, and have no sense of shame in gratifying their passions. Polygamy is common among them. Yet with all their vices, they like to brag of their having the true faith. The Chinese, though more industrious, are not more virtuous; and as to the so-called Christians, I will not judge them.

About four or five leagues up the river, the King of Queda has his residence, in a mean-looking [17]town called *Allessaar*. Many of the inhabitants are Chinese, who have here a large temple; the rest are Malays. The royal palace resembles a spacious farm-house and

yard, with many low houses attached to it, which contain his haram. His own house is far from being magnificent, and it seemed to me, as if his whole dignity and state consisted merely in the number of his concubines. There is else no appearance of grandeur. I frequently made an excursion to this place.

Being at last enabled to proceed, we set sail for Nancauwery. The Captain steered first for Pulo Penang, (now Prince of Wales island) pretending that he wanted fresh water; but he employed his Lascars chiefly to cut rattan², a plant used for rigging. We were glad at length to leave the Malay coast, where, except our cordial reception and hospitable entertainment in Captain Light's house, there was nothing that could be called pleasant, but rather our spirits were vexed, and daily mourned over the shocking state of mankind, without Christ and without God in the world.

We found at Nancauwery three Missionaries, Liebisch, Heyne, and Blaschke. The latter being very ill, returned to Tranquebar by the vessel [18]which brought us hither, and soon departed this life. Not long after his return, Brother Liebisch fell sick and also departed. Our number was therefore reduced to three, and I was soon seized with so violent a fit of the seasoning fever, that my Brethren, expecting my immediate dissolution, commended me in prayer to the Lord, and took a final leave of me. After this transaction, I fell into a swoon, which being mistaken for death, I was removed from the bed, and already laid out as a corpse, when I awoke and inquired what they were doing, and why they wept? They told me, that, supposing me to be quite dead, they were preparing for my burial. My recovery was very slow; and indeed, during my whole residence in Nancauwery, I never regained perfect health.

After the decease of the Brethren Wangeman and Liebisch, I was left alone with Brother Heyne. We were both ill, and suffered the want of many necessaries of life: but the Lord our Saviour did not forsake us; He strengthened our hearts, and comforted us by such a lively sense of His divine presence, that we were frequently filled with heavenly joy, during our daily prayers and meditations. We felt assured, that that God, who suffers not a sparrow to fall to the ground without His permission, would also care for us his poor children. [19]This I have frequently and powerfully experienced,

insomuch, that after seven years residence in Nancawery, notwithstanding all the pain, trouble, and anxiety I was often subject to, I fall down at His feet with humble thanksgiving, and exclaim: The Lord hath done all things well, and I have lacked no good thing. Blessed be my God and Redeemer! Amen.

LETTER II.

The vessel sent to Nancauwery did not arrive till 1781, and brought a very small portion of provisions for our use, and neither wine, nor any other liquors whatever, the crew having expended the greater part of what was destined for us on their long voyage, and during a detention of four months at Queda, on the Malay coast. We were, however, happy to receive Brother Steinman, who was young, lively, and every way qualified for the service, so that we promised ourselves much assistance from him; but in less than a month after his arrival, it pleased the Lord to take him from us by death. You may suppose what we felt on being again left alone, in want of even the most [20] necessary articles of subsistence. But the Lord yet helped us, gave us from day to day our daily bread, and in many heavy illnesses approved Himself as our best physician. Oh! how many thousand tears have I shed during that period of distress and trouble. I will not affirm that they were *all* of that kind, which I might, with David, pray the Lord "to put into his bottle," and ask, "are they not in thy book," for I was not yet fully acquainted with the ways of God with His people, and had not yet a heart wholly resigned to all His dealings. Oftentimes self-will, unbelief, and repining at our hard lot, was mixed with our complaints and cries unto Him. Do not therefore think them so very pure, and deserving of pity as they may seem. Thus much, however, I can truly say, that amidst it all, our Saviour was the object of our hearts' desire; and He beheld us with longsuffering and compassion.

We were as diligent as our wretched circumstances would admit, in clearing land and planting, to obtain what we wanted for our support; and having only three negroes to cook, wash, and do other jobs, we frequently laboured beyond our strength, and brought upon ourselves various illnesses. But there seemed no help for it. At the same time we exerted ourselves to learn the Nicobar language, and in the best manner possible [21]endeavoured to explain to the poor natives, the love of God in Christ Jesus, and the way of salvation through a crucified Saviour.

Not till 1783, had we the satisfaction to see the Brethren J. Heinrich, Fleckner, and Raabs arrive to our assistance, in company of the mate of the vessel, with which they set sail from Tranquebar. While

they were lying in the roads of Junkceylon, a French privateer came and claimed her as lawful prize, because, on searching her, he found a few old English newspapers in a trunk belonging to Mr. Wilson, an English gentleman on board, who had escaped from Hyder Ali's prison. This was pretence sufficient for a Frenchman to seize upon a neutral Danish vessel, nor could any redress be ever procured, to the great loss of the Mission. After long and vexatious detention, the mate and the three Brethren purchased a Malay prow, for 75 dollars, and stole off in the night; as the Malay prince would not suffer them to go. Thus we received, instead of our expected stock of provisions, only more mouths to feed. However, we rejoiced to see our dear fellow-missionaries, and did what we could for their relief. As the prow was unfit to go to sea without proper sails, those with which they arrived being nothing but old, rotten mats, we worked up our whole stock of linen and sailcloth, [22]and even some of our sheets, and were ten days employed in making sails, and fitting her for the voyage. A black sailor was also procured, and the mate, with the Brethren Raabs and Heyne, left us for Tranquebar. I cannot describe my feelings, when I took a final leave of my dear Brother Heyne, with whom I had so long shared weal and woe, lived in true brotherly love and union of spirit, and enjoyed so much of our Lord's help and comfort, in days of perplexity and distress.

The three following years of my stay were spent in fruitless attempts to preach the gospel to the natives, and the arrangements proposed and made by the new-comers, seemed all to fail. But I cannot help observing, that when we speak of the total failure of our endeavours to promote the conversion of the natives, we have cause, in a great degree, to blame ourselves. For my part, I must confess with humble shame, that I soon lost my faith and courage, brotherly love having ceased to prevail amongst us; for how can Missionaries speak, with effect, of the love of Jesus, and its fruits in the heart, when they themselves do not live in the enjoyment of it? It is true, our trials were great, and the prospect, in many respects, most gloomy; but we have seen in other instances, what the Lord can do, by removing [23]obstacles, and giving strength to His servants, if they are one in spirit, pray and live together in unity, and prefer each other in love. This was too much wanting during the

latter part of our abode in the Nicobar islands, and O that all Missionaries would remember, that brotherly love is the most precious jewel in a Mission; and that no sacrifice of one's own opinions and schemes is too great, to maintain it unbroken.

Our external situation became more and more irksome, and we could scarcely procure the means of subsistence. My health had suffered so much by continual sickness, anxiety, and hard labour, (for the greater part of the management of affairs fell upon me), that I was apparently fast approaching my end; at the thoughts of which I rejoiced greatly, delivered my accounts, and all my concerns, into the hands of Brother J. Heinrich, looking forward with longing to be at rest with Jesus. I felt his comfort, pardon, and peace in my soul, and hoped, that every day would be my last. I had running sores on my legs, and a total obstruction, with tormenting pains in my bowels, and expected that mortification would soon take place, and put an end to my misery. Unexpectedly, a Danish vessel arrived in our harbour, on board of which was Brother Sixtus. He was commissioned to examine into the state of the [24]Mission, and to bring home such as were still alive.

A voyage seeming to offer the only hope for my recovery. I was conveyed on board, apparently in a dying state, and set sail the same day for Queda. During the voyage, the pain in my bowels was excruciating, and the motion of the ship afforded me no relief, in-somuch, that I could bear no other posture than lying prostrate on deck. In this situation it occurred to me, that I had once read in Van Swieten's account of his cures, that he had found the plentiful use of honey beneficial in cases of obstruction. As soon, therefore, as we landed, I procured a sufficient quantity, and mixed it plentifully with my food and drink. My only nutriment indeed consisted of rice boiled in water, to which I added an equal quantity of honey, as also to all the water I drank, cold or warm, of which I took plenty, having a constant thirst upon me. Already, on the first day, it operated by sickness at my stomach, and frequent vomitings, which rendered its taste extremely nauseous, and unpleasant. But perceiving that it also relieved my principal complaint, I persevered, and experienced daily more of its salutary, cooling, and healing effects. As there is plenty of honey at Queda, I laid in a large stock for the voyage.

[25] Here I became acquainted with Mr. Scott, an English captain, who informed me that Captain Light was in Bengal, and had lost his wife by death. From hence we returned to Nancauwery, where I found that Brother Sixtus had departed this life, ten days after my leaving the island. Brother J. Heinrich accompanied me to Tranquebar, and Fleckner remained alone.

When we arrived at Tranquebar, we represented to the governor, that it was necessary, that the vessel should immediately return for the relief of the Mission, to which he agreed; and Fleckner being recalled, the Brethren J. Heinrich, Rudolphi, and Soerensen, were sent thither in May 1785. The latter soon departed this life, as likewise Fleckner, at Tranquebar. In September, I returned to Nancauwery, being commissioned to convey the house belonging to the Imperial settlement on Sombrero (Comarty) to our place, which I accomplished. Our old stone house was turned into a magazine, and the Missionaries obtained a comfortable dwelling, and a sufficient supply of provisions, and other necessaries. But as to any success in making the natives acquainted with the gospel, all our exertions seemed in vain.

After my return to Tranquebar, in 1786, Brother Rudolphi left Nicobar, and arrived, after a long and tedious voyage, at Tranquebar, in 1787. [26]Not long after, Brother J. Heinrich departed this life, and Brother Kragh remained alone.

The loss of so many valuable men, the total failure of the object of the Mission, and the want of proper Brethren, willing to devote themselves to so hopeless a cause, at length prevailed, and it was resolved to give up the Mission. I was again deputed to go to Nancauwery, to fetch Brother Kragh, and all effects belonging to the Mission, and to deliver up the premises to the Governor, who, on our representation of the impracticability of our supporting the Mission any longer, had consented to send a lieutenant, a corporal, and six privates, to take possession. I accompanied these people, and delivered to them every thing I could not carry away.

Words cannot express the painful sensations which crowded into my mind, while I was thus executing the task committed to me, and making a final conclusion of the labours of the Brethren in the Nicobar Islands. I remembered the numberless prayers, tears, and sighs

offered up by so many servants of Jesus, and by our congregations in Europe, for the conversion of the poor heathen here; and when I beheld our burying-ground, where eleven of my Brethren had their resting-place, as seed sown in a barren land, I burst into tears, and exclaimed: Surely all this cannot have [27]been done in vain! Often did I visit this place, and sat down and wept at their graves.

My last farewell with the inhabitants, who had flocked to me from all the circumjacent islands, was very affecting. They wept and howled for grief, and begged that the Brethren might soon return to them. We always enjoyed their esteem and love, and they do not deserve to be classed with their ferocious neighbours, the Malays; being, in general, kind and gentle in their dispositions, except when roused by jealousy, or other provocations; when their uncontrolled passions will lead them into excesses, as some of the Danish soldiers experienced. We always found them ready to serve us.