

On The Trail of Two Knights

Sir George Watt and General Sir Henry Collett

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In the late 1980's we got a copy of Ellen Willmot's 'Genus Rosa' which was published in 1914. She deals with rose species of the world, and going through it, we realized that, apart from the swamp wild rose species, *Rosa clinophylla*, about which we had heard before, and had been able to procure, from the wild, there was another species, *Rosa gigantea*, which is native to a particular area in India's north east region. Reading the description of this species by a Sir George Watt from whose unpublished diaries, Miss Willmot had taken an extract, we became excited. Sir George Watt found this wild rose, which, he wrote, looked like huge yellow magnolias hanging from the branches of tall trees, in 1882, in the forests off Ukhrul town in Manipur State, when he was part of a commission to demarcate the boundary between India and Burma (as it was known then). Researching a little more, we found that at practically the same time, that is, 1888, a General Sir Henry Collett found the same wild rose growing in the Shan Hills of Burma. Whilst trekking he saw at a distance of 2 miles something large and white, and seeing it through his looking glass (binoculars) he realized it was a rose. He sent off seeds and stem specimens to the leading taxonomist of the time, Monsieur Francois Crepin, who was attached to the Botanic Garden in Meisse, Belgium, and suggesting that if it was a new species, it should be given the name 'gigantea' as the flowers were exceedingly large.

Sir George Watt called his found species '*Rosa macrocarpa*'. When M.Crepin compared the two sets of specimens sent by the two enthusiastic botanists he found that both the Indian and Burmese plants were the same, and gave the name '*Rosa gigantea*' to this species. The Indian form which Watt discovered, is much creamier, indeed very yellow as a bud, than the Burmese form, which is white. On ageing, however, macrocarpa becomes white. Sir George however seems always to have believed that his species was different.

In January 1990, as we were attending a national rose convention in Calcutta, which is on the east coast, and nearer to the north-eastern state of Manipur, we decided that we would follow the footsteps of Sir George Watt to see if we could be as successful as he was in finding this rose species. We flew to Guwahati in Assam State, the nearest airport, and then went by road to Shillong, the capital of Manipur State and onwards to Ukhrul which is at an elevation of 7000 feet. It was bitterly cold and we were both recovering from food poisoning. But we persevered, much to the chagrin of the scientists of the Botanical Survey of India, who were accompanying us. In Kolkata (Calcutta then) we had visited the BSI offices in Howrah (that hallowed institution set up in 1793 originally by Col. Robert Kyd but which owes its pre-eminent status to William Roxburgh who became its Director in 1796) to look for leads in the herbarium and in their books. Initially, the officials were reluctant to show us anything, but when we came upon the B.S.I. Director on the main steps of the office, and he began to take an interest in our pursuit, we were shown herbarium specimens of *R.gigantea*, and various locations were given on the sheets. One of them being Ukhrul. The Director offered us the assistance (!) of his staff in Shillong, and that is how we had a couple of scientists with us in our search.

After early morning tea, (this itself was quite a feat, as the Naga tribesman who was the caretaker of the state guest house we stayed in dared not be woken by our driver, who feared that in the normal tradition of the fierce Nagas, he would be greeted by a knife before any questions were asked!) we set off, driving up the mountainous forest path to a fair distance, before the road gave out and we had to walk. Suddenly we saw a huge creeper going up a tall tree. Stopping to check, we realized we had hit 'pay dirt'. This was a rose with the largest leaves imaginable, and a number of very big yellow orange hips, but with no flowers. They would have flowered earlier in the season – in the icy winter now, there were only hips, which would be from the last year's flowering season. We were elated at the thought that this could have been the same location, or at least, the very same area where Sir George had found his specimen. We collected some hips and some cuttings and returned to carefully pack them for the long journey back home in southern India, by air, train and road.

When we had grown our plants to a decent size, Viru began breeding with *R. gigantea* and over the years from 1995 when we saw our first flower on our plants, Viru has grown, tested and finally released and registered some of his better seedlings. Some are shrubs and some are climbers, like *gigantea* itself, very big and sprawling climbers, others not so large growing.

When Viru had two large hybrid *gigantea* climbers, one with hybrid tea like flowers, cream with a deep yellow throat, the other creamy white, with double and large blooms, we thought it would be befitting to name these two roses after the discoverers of the species in the wild – Sir George Watt and Sir Henry Collett.

Who were these gentlemen? Sir George (1851-1930) was a surgeon with botanical interests and he came out to India to be employed as a lecturer in Botany in a Calcutta college. Unfortunately by the time he arrived the place had been filled, so the East India Company which had brought him to India, sent him off on various assignments. One was as part of a commission to demarcate the India-Burma border, and it was on this trip that he discovered *R. gigantea*. There were many other plant species he discovered— among them, *rhododendron maccabeanum*, and a *primula (wattii?)* But what makes Sir George Watt a lasting benefactor to India is his stupendous and monumental 12 volume “Dictionary of Economic Products of India”. Sir George returned to Scotland and settled in the Dumfries region to which he belonged. He was born in Old Meldrum and died in Lockerbie.

Sir Henry Collett (1835-1901) was in the British Indian Army in Bengal, and fought in the first Anglo Afghan war. He was a keen botanist, collecting plants wherever he went. On one such reconnaissance in the Shan Hills in Burma he espied a large white flower through his binoculars. He reached the spot and found it was a species rose, a new one to science. He collected plant material and dispatched them to M. Crepin the great taxonomist of the time and to Kew, where, when he returned to England, he even indicated the spot where the *gigantea* plants would thrive better than where they had been planted. Sir Henry’s manuscript, ‘Flora of Simla’ (‘Flora Simlensis’) was published posthumously. He sent back many plants to Kew for identification, one of which was a small species rose, named *R. collettii* in his honor by

M.Crepin. He also had an iris named after him—*iris collettii*. Sir Henry died in Kensington, London.

After we registered our two gigantea hybrids, named for these eminent hobbyist-botanists, in 2008, as 'Sir George Watt' and 'Sir Henry Collett', we thought it would be a good idea to try and locate any descendant families to inform them that we had taken the privilege to name roses after their illustrious forebears. But for a long time we could not get any leads- of course our interest was an on and off pastime. We checked with the Royal Botanic Garden, Edinburgh, (Sir George spent much time there in his last days, he taught Indian Botany in a college nearby) and with botanist friends in the UK, but they said that getting this kind of information would be very difficult, especially in these days when families are scattered all over the world.

Then about the middle of September 2009, while idly 'Googling' on the Net, on a Sunday afternoon, for 'Sir George Watt' I saw an article on his association with Florence Nightingale, written in the Royal Botanic Garden, Canada journal. This had an extract of his Obituary Notice in the London Times dated 5th April 1930, which mentioned a son Dr R. H. Watt and two daughters (no names given). I then Googled 'Dr. R H. Watt' but nothing meaningful turned up in the first three Google pages and just as I was giving up hope, on the fourth page a 'Thomas Hope Hospital' popped up. When I clicked on this site an archival history of this hospital, which was attached to the Royal Crichton Hospital in Dumfries, Scotland , came up. It made interesting reading and very near the end of the article it said that Dr R. H. Watt was joined by his son Dr George Watt in the practice. I began to get excited. I checked on who had written the article and it said 'Morag Williams, Archivist'.

I next Googled 'Royal Crichton Hospital'. Nothing relevant came up. Then I went to 'Dumfries', and the second entry had a ' Morag Williams' on a Natural History and Antiquarian Society website. I clicked on this and on the off chance that this could be the same Morag Williams, Archivist I looked for a contact email address, and yes there was one. So I e- mailed a letter explaining my interest in the family of Sir George Watt and wondering if she was the archivist Morag and requesting for information, if she was, on R.H. and George Watt. Imagine my huge surprise and excitement when next morning when I checked my

messages, there was one from Morag Williams. She was the archivist. She told me Dr. George Watt was dead (as was his father, R. H. Watt)), but he had 2 sons, and she gave me the email address of a Dr Tom Kennedy who had been Dr. George's partner in practice. I immediately replied to her that she was a miracle, and to Dr. Tom, again repeating my entire story of our interest in Sir George. Since then there have been such a flurry of emails that I cannot restrain my whoopees. I have been able to contact some great- grandchildren of Sir George and they are all mightily pleased that we have named a rose for him. I tell them it is our privilege and honour. We are now trying to see how it will be possible for them to grow the rose named for their ancestor, as we think it would be most appropriate that the rose 'Sir George Watt' grows in the Scottish gardens with which he was associated in his latter years.

Surprisingly, that same September Sunday afternoon, when Googling 'Sir Henry Collett' gave up no helpful leads, I thought of going to Genealogies and typing in 'Collett'. I was inundated with literally thousands of 'Colletts'. I typed in Henry Collett with his dates -1835-1901, not expecting much, but 3 messages popped up. A Susan Shenton had been trying in 2004 to get information on Sir Henry's family and had been, I think, flummoxed as I was, to learn that he had died a bachelor and his siblings had all died unmarried or widowed with no children. Without really expecting a response since Susan had written in to the website over 5 years previously, I searched for her email address and sent off a mail explaining my interest. When nothing happened for a week I thought that my email would not have reached, but then it had not bounced back either. I was hopeful, but telling myself not to be. Having succeeded in tracing Sir George Watt's family I could not be doubly successful. But I was!!! Just as I was giving up hope, up popped a message from Susan Shenton. She wrote that I should look up the 'Suffolk Colletts' and a Brian Collett was in charge of collating all Collett material, and sending Collett newsletters to all so named. So back I went to the Genealogy page, looked up Brian; trying to find Sir Henry was a bit difficult and confusing, which is understandable as there are so many Colletts and so many strands weaving and interweaving through the generations.

I emailed Brian Collett, and just like in the case of the Watts, he was hugely interested and excited at this sudden importance to a long ago family member. We are in touch and we need to see that the rose 'Sir Henry Collett' grows in present day Collett gardens.

It has been an exciting and pleasurable endeavour, made more pleasurable by the enthusiastic responses from the descendants of the two knights who long ago, in colonial India, discovered the wild rose which has become our passion and the object of Viru's hybridization.

'Sir George Watt' escorts 'Banaras Dawn' to Scotland

In September 2009 we received an email message:

'My name is Ruhi Thallon (nee Saxena). My father, Major Prem Saxena, cultivated and registered a rose, 'Benares Dawn'. I did not know my father, as my mother left him when I was two years old. Unfortunately I was not able to make contact with him before he died. I have met my relatives and half siblings who resided in Dehra Dun and they told me dad had cultivated a couple of roses, however 'Benares Dawn' is the only one registered. I am keen to find out more about this rose and, if possible have one to grow in my garden in Scotland. I would also like it for my mother, now 82 and still not over my father! Would you know if Doon Roses in Dehra Dun are still in business and whether there is any chance this rose may still be in existence?'

I replied:

'What a pleasant surprise to get your mail. And we can well empathise with your nostalgic search for a rose raised by your father.

Viru remembers the rose 'Banaras Dawn' and has heard of your father. But we do not know if the variety is still available. We looked up our old rose catalogues and we find that Friends Rosery, Lucknow, had listed it in their 1988-89 catalogue. This is what it said:

BANARAS DAWN: (Maj. Saxena, Introducer: Doon Valley Roses) Rs. 10/-

The first Indian bred apricot coloured rose with gold base, with as many petals as in Medallion but much deeper in colour, more shapely and more fragrant. Very floriferous on long strong stems.

We will try to scout around among our rose friends, some of whom are nurserymen, and see if they can come up with any answers. We do not think Doon Roses is in existence any more.

I do not want to raise your hopes however, because over the years we have found many old Indian raised varieties have disappeared- many of my husband's early ones too. We have not been able to keep even the mother plant as he was on a transferable job till he retired.

I will ring up our good friend Mr G.Kasturirangan who owns KSG Sons, the biggest rose nursery in India and ask about 'Banaras Dawn'.

Unfortunately, Mr. Agarwal who owned 'Friends Rosery', Lucknow, and who catalogued this rose, passed away many years back.'

(Benares is the name of a holy town on the banks of the River Ganges, and is spelt either 'Benares' or 'Banaras'. The variety had been registered as 'Banaras Dawn')

Ruhi wrote that her father died in 1975 but the rose was registered in 1979 and Modern Roses 10 listed it. She was naturally unhappy that he did not know his rose had been registered and therefore all the more determined to try and find a plant. We wondered who had registered it, because in those days all registrations had to be done through the I.A.R.I. (Indian Agricultural Research Institute), which would forward the forms to the IRRA (International Rose Registration Authority), U.S.A., and not directly as can be done now. Perhaps the late Mr. Arpi Thakur, owner of Doon Valley Roses had sent in the registration.

We rang Kasturirangan and were pleasantly surprised (actually we shouldn't have been, as Kasturi, as he is affectionately called, is the repository of an unbelievable number of varieties, old and new) to hear him say, 'yes, I know 'Banaras Dawn' and I have a mother plant'. We told him about Ruhi Thallon and her search and requested him to bud a few plants for her. He agreed and we lost no time in emailing Ruhi with this good news. She was naturally delighted and emailed him and also rang him to thank him.

Plants were budded straightaway, at Kasturi's farm on the Bangalore-Mysore Road, but it took many months for them to grow to a reasonable size – a size where they would recover from the trauma of being transported, bare-root and nearly dry, all the way from Bangalore, India, to Hunter's Quay, near Dunoon, Argyll, Scotland, where Ruhi lives.

Ruhi and we were in constant touch, she fretting at the slow growth, impatient to see them in her garden, and we reassuring her that they were growing and that Kasturi was the best judge of when they would be ready to take flight.

A parallel tale: We had been trying to send plant material of our variety, a Hybrid Gigantea, named for Sir George Watt (who had discovered *R.gigantea* in Ukhrul area, in Manipur State, north-east India) to a botanic garden in Scotland. (Please see my article 'A Tale of Two Knights', IRA 2009) Several parcels, with proper documentation, had been dispatched over the past year, with no success. Once a postal strike in the U.K. delayed delivery over-long, another time the weather was bitterly cold, so the cuttings would'nt root and a third time, though the stems reached in record time, somehow they didn't 'strike'. We were despondent, as was our friend in Scotland – Morag Williams, the retired Archivist of the Dumfries Hospital (where Sir George Watt, and later his son, had worked) who had been instrumental in sending me precious information about Sir George Watt himself, and putting me in touch with his descendants. We were at our wit's end wondering how to reach 'Sir George Watt' the rose plant to the environs of where Sir George Watt, the person, had lived and worked.

Surprisingly, another hybrid gigantea bred by Viru, (with the same parentage as 'SGW') and named 'Sir Henry Collett', after the other knight who discovered the species gigantea in Burma (in the Shan Hills) has proved much easier to root from cuttings and has reached southern France and Kent. Just shows how very different siblings can be!!

Suddenly the bright idea occurred to Viru that if we could bud a plant of 'SGW' and grow it to a reasonable size, we could add it to the parcel of 'Banaras Dawn' plants and send them all together to Scotland. Our budding was successful and after a few months we had a strapping plant.

Kasturi called us up in August 2010 (earlier, I had been really bugging him, telephoning every so often to enquire about the growth of the 'Banaras Dawns') to say the plants had reached the size where travel would not affect them. We requested him that when he applied for the phyto-sanitary certificate and all other documentation necessary for sending a parcel of rooted plants he should add 'Sir George Watt' to the list. He readily agreed. But then waiting for the documentation to be completed took all of a month and more—typical bureaucratic delays. Finally one very rainy afternoon he called to say 'the certificates will come tomorrow, so please courier 'SGW' at once so it can be taken along with 'B.D'.s to the Quarantine Office'. In pouring rain we rushed out, pruned, washed and cleaned up the roots and packed and couriered the plant -from Kodaikanal (where we live) to Bangalore (to Kasturi).

The parcel was finally ready to be sent by an international courier service to an eagerly waiting Ruhi. It so happened that a few days after we had sent 'SGW' to Bangalore we ourselves had to go there as we were keen to attend our very good friend Kasturi's 80th birthday-'Shatabhishekam' as it is called on 29th September. We met his nephew Sanjay, who had come for the function from London and who offered to carry the precious parcel personally and post it to Ruhi as soon as he returned back home. This seemed a better idea than the courier. The parcel rested in the refrigerator till such time as Sanjay was to leave, just a few days later. But a problem cropped up. We couldn't contact Ruhi for some days so instead we rang Morag and requested her to accept the parcel, and introduced her to Ruhi. Later when they contacted each other, they made arrangements to meet up at the Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh-- which they did, after a nail-biting delay in the parcel reaching Morag. We were relieved to hear that all the plants were green and in good condition. They are now in the Botanic Garden's quarantine area for three months. Hopefully they will survive and come through the bitter winter- remember they are Indian and acclimatized to warmth.

We are all keeping our fingers crossed—that 'Banaras Dawn' will finally bloom for Ruhi and her mother in Hunter's Quay, Dunoon, and that 'Sir George Watt' will grow luxuriantly in the gardens he created - in the Crichton Royal Hospital, Dumfries and his own house, Rosevale, in Langholm, all in Scotland.

Morag Williams takes up the story...

Girija is not exaggerating when she speak of nail-biting. Sanjay arrived back in London on the Sunday. He posted the parcel to Scotland as soon as possible.

There are other key people in the story: none more so than Richard Baines at Logan gardens, who smoothed the path for Rosa Gigantea hybrid 'Sir George Watt' to be received into the care of the staff of the quarantine department of the Royal Botanic Gardens in Edinburgh.

It was fortuitous that Morag and her husband had an appointment in Edinburgh that week. It was crucial that the parcel should arrive by the Thursday and in time for them to keep an appointment in Edinburgh. It had not arrived by the Wednesday. Would it arrive on the Thursday and in time? Meanwhile Ruhi was on tenterhooks in Dunoon wondering if she would be making a trip to Edinburgh that day, too. Thankfully the parcel arrived and everyone involved set off.

Morag was welcomed by Bruce Robertson at the Royal Botanic Gardens. Ruhi had the longer journey and, as lunch-time was fast approaching, it was decided that the parcel should be taken to the quarantine department for inspection because everyone was eager to discover how the plants had stood up to their long journey in an unnatural environment.

It was a joy to discover how remarkably fresh-looking they were despite imprisonment for several days, thanks to the specialist knowledge and careful packing by our Indian friends. Rosa Gigantea hybrid 'Sir George Watt' emerged as a sturdy, stripped-back plant about 16 inches high. There was some unwelcome news for Ruhi, however, when she arrived. The three Banaras Dawn plants had been admitted to quarantine and would not be allowed to go to Dunoon until given a clean bill of health. Given that it was late October, she was quickly persuaded that all the plants stood a better chance of survival if the first winter in Scotland were to be spent in the most benign conditions available right there in Edinburgh.

Early in February 2011 after a second severe winter in Scotland Morag received an email from Bruce Robertson.

The rose is alive, well, out of quarantine and living up to the specific epithet i.e. “**gigantea**”. Your rose has not been outside so it hasn’t had to deal with our harsh winter. It has put on quite a considerable amount of growth. There is a small bit of die back at the top of the original cutting but I think this is perfectly normal and the new growth all appears to be healthy.

We are thinking of sending the rose to Logan and then hopefully they can propagate it. I cannot help but think that this particular rose is tender. This small but crucial fact should, I think, be borne in mind when the rose is planted out and eventually distributed.

All concerned were delighted at the news and before the end of February a second email arrived to say: The rose is now at Logan. Richard Baines collected it yesterday and took it back along with another rose and some conifers. If you consider what the rose looked like when it first arrived here, then there has been quite a transformation. The main growth is about three feet long. Probably because it has been indoors the foliage is in quite good condition and rather attractive.

In May a delighted Ruhi saw the first delicate apricot-coloured bud of her father's rose and was able to breathe in its delicate fragrance. Meanwhile Morag visited Logan Botanic Garden in May to witness the progress of the *Rosa gigantea* hybrid.

Richard Baines greeted her with the surprising news that the rose had been planted outside the day before. This much-travelled specimen has been placed in a sheltered spot against a high wall. Richard confidently expects it to bloom next year (2012).\

When we were returning to India from the US in 2013 we stopped by in Scotland. In the background of this visit was our hybrid gigantea rose, ‘Sir George Watt’, named in honour of the discoverer of the species gigantea in the mountains of Manipur State in 1882. Sir George Watt was one of the most distinguished ‘renaissance’ men of his times, with a matchless contribution not only in botany but also in education, art and science. One of his greatest accomplishments was the monumental 9 volume Dictionary of Economic Products of India, written as far back as 1906, but still a standard work of reference.

After our successful trip in 1990 to the same area where Watt collected *R.gigantea*, we had named a rose for him. With the help of Mr. Kasturirangan of KSG Sons, we had successfully sent a plant to be grown in the Logan Botanic Garden in south-west Scotland, very near the area where Sir George had lived after his return from India.

As a prelude to our present visit we had established contact with several of his descendants and family friends, as well as with Morag Williams, the archivist at the Royal Crichton Hospital where he had worked. It was arranged for us all to meet and drive to Logan to see the rose planted there by Curator Richard Baines. It was an inspiring moment to see it climbing over 15 feet high on the enclosed garden brick wall, looking perfectly at home. Sadly not in bloom- apparently it flowers only in late August.