

# William Bell

Born 3.9.1792

Life story by his great great grandson Anthony Maxwell.

Available online at [www.livesretold.co.uk](http://www.livesretold.co.uk).

William Bell was born on 3rd September 1792, the eldest son of a well to do mercantile family living in the busy Edinburgh parish of South Leith.

## Scotland to India

William is recorded as having become a cadet with the East India Company as early as 1806 but he did not arrive in India until 19th July 1809. He was commissioned as a Lieutenant Fireworker in the Bengal Artillery on the 7th November later that year.

At that time, all artillery companies had a rocket troop assigned to them and the dubious duty of leading the troop was given to the most junior subaltern. The rockets were horrendously unpredictable and not though highly of.

It seems that this was where William would have started his military career. He appears to have maintained the rank when he first went into action in the Invasion of Java in 1811. effectively ending Dutch control of the island until the British withdrew after Waterloo in 1815.

In June the following year, Lieut. Bell was at the siege of Djocjocarta in pursuit of the Sultan of Mataram. The sultan's fortified residence, three miles in circumference, was defended by 17,000 regular native troops and 100,000 armed population. However, after a three day bombardment, the works were carried and enemy fled along with the Sultan.

After this, Lieut. Bell was attached to the General Staff of the Army on Java, firstly as the Officiating Chief Engineer which must have been because of experience he had gained elsewhere as he appears to have had no formal training in civil engineering but it was clearly a subject in which he was thought highly of.

One presumes he filled this role in the absence of a qualified engineering officer and that one was later posted to the island as by June 1815 Bell was an Assistant Pay-master on the General Staff at the Army HQ at Weltevreden on the outskirts of Jakarta.

Stamford Raffles was appointed the Lieutenant Governor on Java. Raffles kept many of the colony's Dutch administrators on his staff favouring their local experience over the East India Company's officers and it seems possible that one of these was the father of William Bell's first wife, Jane Thule.

Family tradition maintained by New Zealand cousins has it that she was a Dutch orphan and ward of Raffles and thus presumably in his household. Her surname is seemingly of Baltic origin and quite unknown in the United Kingdom. In a petition

to the East India Company Council many years later, Bell refers to the mother of his elder sons as being European rather than British which adds weight to the story.



Sir Thomas Stamford Raffles, 1826.

The family story goes on to say that two of William and Jane's children were named after Raffles and his first wife, Raffles' first name, largely unused after his time on Java, was Thomas and his wife was Olivia. William Bell and Jane Thule married on 7th August 1815 at Buitenzorg, the Governor's residence on Java.

Under a peace accord, Java was handed back to Dutch administration at the end of 1815 and the expeditionary force returned to India

## India and the Mahatta War

In October the following year the first of the Bell children, Charles Roderick was born in Dum Dum near Calcutta. Within a few months of the birth Lieut. Bell was back in action with the outbreak of the Third Mahatta War early in 1817 leaving Jane now in her second confinement.

Bell's first action of the war was at the siege of Dhamoney on 24th March 1817. The fortress capitulating after only six hours of bombardment and his troop then marched on to Jubbulpore and proceeded against Mundlah, breaching its walls on the 26th. In September, William Bell was promoted to 1st lieutenant. He was then with 4th troop 2nd battalion of the Bengal Artillery in the Grand Army under the Marquis of Hastings.

During October his troop was again in action, at the siege of Gunakota. A breaching battery had been established on the 26th to which further guns were added on the 29th breaking the walls. The demoralised garrison surrendering before an assault ensued.

In the last action of the war in March 1818, the fort at Assurghur refused to surrender and a major siege was brought into place which totalled 61 guns and 38 mortars at the end of the siege. The 4th troop batteries were established early in the siege.

On the 21st an explosion in the breaching battery magazine resulted in the loss of 120 barrels of powder but no loss of life. By the end of month 22 heavy guns were brought to bear and pounded the fort which made a stout resistance.

The garrison eventually surrendered on 9th April. In January of that year, with her husband away fighting, Jane had been delivered of a daughter named Jane Olivia Elizabeth. However, the baby girl died at Cawnpore in July.

## Siblings in India

At this point, I should mention William Bell's siblings who were out in India.

His sister Margaret Bell was married to a brother officer in the Bengal Artillery Henry John Wood. Margaret arrived in India in the middle of 1817 and presumably lived with William and Jane, through whom she met her future husband. Margaret and Lieut. Wood married in July 1818 at Cawnpore.

They had at least five children and one of their grandsons, Charles Wood, married his cousin, Jane Haultain who a granddaughter of William and Jane. Henry Wood was commissioned a year after William and was in Java in 1814/15. He was also at the siege at Bhurtpore in 1825 but really made his name in the Sutlej campaign of 1846.

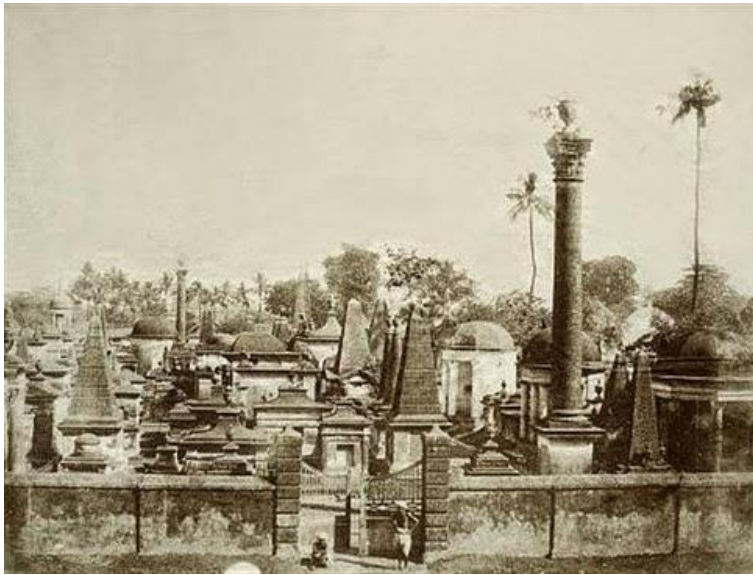
He rose to become a major-general and was knighted by Queen Victoria. Margaret died out in India in December 1845 and Wood died in retirement in Edinburgh in 1858.

I can tell you little of William's younger brother Charles, other than what is recorded on his memorial stone at the North Park Street Cemetery, Calcutta;

*"Sacred to the Memory of Charles Bell second son of Charles Bell, late wine merchant of Leith; he met his untimely fate when chief officer of the "Charles Mills" which ship foundered in the Bay of Bengal on 20th May 1822. This young man was an ornament to his family, beloved and deeply regretted by his relatives and all who knew him. born 19th November 1796, closed his career 20th May 1822. Erected by his affectionate brothers William and John Bell"*.

John Bell was William's youngest brother. When he arrived in India is not clear, but possibly he travelled with Margaret as a 17 year old adventurer. He became a clerk with Alexander & Co. in Calcutta and was later a merchant in his own right but late in the 1820's join the Calcutta Customs where he made his real mark, rising become

the Superintendent of the Preventative Service in 1837. He was instrumental in finding positions in the customs service for William's three oldest sons. John married Eliza Sinclair in 1822 and had at least two daughters. John died in Calcutta in November 1838.



North Park Street Cemetery, Calcutta.

## The Horse Artillery and Bhurtpore

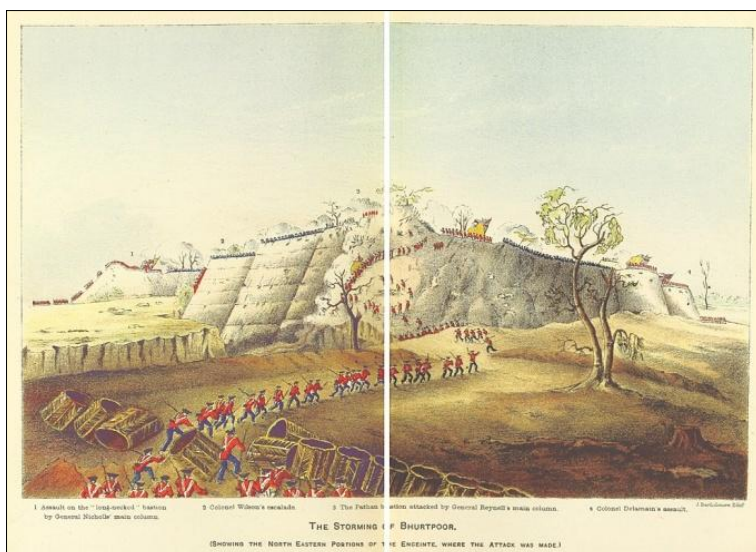
After the Mahatta war, Lieut. Bell was commanding the 4th troop 2nd battalion Bengal Artillery but was fortunate enough to be posted in 1819 to the Bengal Horse Artillery. This was looked on as something of a promotion particularly in terms of pay and additional allowances.

With his second and third sons, Thomas John, in 1819 and William Oswald, being born in 1821, the additional income was undoubtedly welcome. Bell's new command was the 2nd troop of the 3rd brigade Horse Artillery and he then went on to command the prestige 1st troop 1st brigade in 1823, the year in which his daughter Jane Alison was born. He commanded this troop for the next eight years getting his promotion to Captain on 1st May 1824.

In July 1825, Jane died whilst in Mehidpore in central India leaving Captain Bell with four small children to raise, not an easy task for the serving officer especially with the country in much unrest. Captain Bell's last notable military action was at the great siege of Bhurtpore under Lord Combermere late in 1826.

The whole of the Bengal Artillery was called into action. Captain Bell with the Horse Artillery and the Cavalry preceded the main column arriving at Bhurtpore in time to prevent the enemy cutting the dams on the lake which would have flooded the moat about the fortress.

The main train of the army arrived on the 16th December and the first batteries opened up on the 24th. Two mines were driven under the walls but had little effect on the stout defences.



The Storming of Bhurtpore.

The walls were breached by cannon fire on the 9th January but the breach was deemed too steep for an assault. The fire was directed to improve it but only succeeding in pounding the earth into a fine dust. On the 9th an enemy shot passed through a tumbrel and blew up the main depot of ammunition supplying the batteries.

A mine under the counterscarp opposite the breach was blown up on the 12th filling the moat making the breach more accessible. Another mine under a bastion overlooking the breach signalled the main assault on the 18th when the garrison was captured. During the 26 day siege, the artillery fired 61,446 rounds at an average of 46 rounds per gun per day and 12 rounds per mortar; the greatest being 142 and 20.

## Eliza, Elinor and Mary

Less than two months later Captain Bell married for a second time. His bride was Eliza Isabella Aldous, a young English woman who had arrived in India in the summer of 1824.

They were married in the garrison church at Chinsura. 20 months later their daughter, Eleanor Eliza was delivered in January 1829. The pregnancy had however weakened Eliza Bell and she succumbed in July of that year leaving William with five small children.

By 1827 the Artillery was on half tentage and half batta as there was a general peace throughout India. The greatly reduced allowances forced Captain Bell to seek other ways of supplementing his income and he had been undertaking survey work for the public works department.

Ten months after Eliza's death William was at the altar of Calcutta Cathedral marrying his third wife, 29 year old Elinor Howel Stewart, a Scots lady and relation

of the Earl of Bute who was lately the Prime Minister. In 1831 the Bells are to be found in England on William's first home furlough after 21 years service in India. It seems possible that Elinor was pregnant but may have lost the child whilst in England. William makes reference to her being in poor health in a letter written to her niece in July that year. The niece was 19 year old Mary Stuart who was to be William's fourth wife. The correspondence from William to her is somewhat suggestive of a developing romance even at this early and inappropriate stage!

Mary Stuart embarked for India at the end of July 1831 and presumably the Bells returned to Chinsura shortly thereafter and here Elinor was delivered of a son, Henry Reid Bell in May 1832 and a daughter Elizabeth Bruce Bell a year later.

However, all was not well and Elinor had contracted TB and she was dispatched to Hobart in Tasmania where the temperate climate was supposed to aid her recovery. Bell had, through an agent bought a 200 acre farm to the north of the town at Elwick where the modern race course now stands.

It is hard to know what Bell's intentions were at this time but the purchase of the farm would certainly imply that he intended to leave the service and set up in Tasmania. Correspondence from the agent in Hobart is full of advice and recommendations on agricultural possibilities on the island.

However, events overtook any plans for the future when Elinor died in August 1834. Although his eldest son, now eighteen and about to enter the service of the Calcutta Customs under John Bell, the younger children, particularly the babies needed a mother and William married Mary Stuart after the strict ten months formal mourning in June 1835. It seems highly likely that Mary had been in William's household ever since her arrival in India.

## The Public Works Department

William's part time survey work had become full time during 1833 when he became an Executive Officer in the Public Works Department whilst taking the subordinate military role as 2nd Captain with the 1st troop 2nd brigade Bengal Horse Artillery. This latter post he relinquished at the end of 1834 in order to take the office of Superintendent of Public Works in the Province of Cuttack for which he received his appointment in January 1835.

For several years William had been surveying and observing the system of embankments in low lying Cuttack where the land was prone to dangerous flooding due to monsoon and tidal action. His work was highly regarded by all and he was;

*"honoured on several occasions by very handsome acknowledgements of his services by the Right Honourable, Lord Auckland".*

On the 24th April 1836 Mary was delivered of a daughter Mary Stewart Ormsby Bell and in November William petitioned the 'company' for commissions in the company army for his second and third sons, Thomas John and William Oswald, his eldest son, Charles Roderick, already having already joined the customs service. In December,

William had gone down to Cape Fear to personally organise the laying of foundations for a new lighthouse but there he was struck down by 'jungle fever'.

There was no medical assistance at the site and he was rushed back to Calcutta but did not recover, dying on the 21st December 1836 at the age of 44. He was buried the next day at the North Park Street cemetery.

His death left seven of his eight children orphaned and officially in the care of the East India Company as they were all under the age of 21. By February the three eldest boys were all gainfully employed by the customs service and were given a lump sum gratuity of 500 rupees from the 'orphan fund' whilst Mary got monies to enable her to take all the younger children 'home' to Scotland. Mary, of course, was now a company annuitant as were the other younger children.

There is a fine collection of papers surrounding the marriage of Captain Bell and Mary Stuart and his death in the Asian Collection of the Cambridge University Library . These were deposited by the descendents of John Fleming Martin Reid of the Bengal Civil Service who was seemingly William's brother-in-law through his third wife Elinor Howel Stewart. Reid was born in India and married Jane Elizabeth Stewart. He was the executor of William's will which is how he came to have the papers.

---

18.10.19