

In Memoriam

J. G. KOENIG
The First Naturalist of the Modern India
 (1728 - 1785)

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"Johann Gerhard König, commonly called John Gerard Koenig by contemporary English writers, was born at Lemenen in Courland (Denmark) on 29th November, 1728¹. We know that he was a pupil of Linnaeus who commemorated his name by bestowing the generic name *Koenigia*² on a curious little plant discovered by Koenig during the latter's travels in Iceland in the year 1765.

The exact year in which Koenig first arrived in India is not known with certainty but it was probable about 1767³. We know at least that, in a letter written to Linnaeus from Tranquebar on 26 July 1769, he refers to another letter written more than three months before, but this former letter is apparently not now extant.

Koenig apparently came to India, under the protection of the King of Denmark, as Physician to the Danish settlement at Tranquebar⁴. It seems probable, however, that he accepted this appointment mainly as giving him an opportunity of improving the, at that time, very scanty knowledge of the Natural History of India. Little is said in contemporary accounts of his medical duties, but we know that he resided for several years at Tranquebar where he applied himself indefatigably to acquiring a knowledge of Indian Plants. It is more than probable that he also made considerable collections of insects and that it is to his energies that we owe the

long list of insects described from Tranquebar during the succeeding twenty years by Fabricius, with whom we know that Koenig was in communication. He seems, indeed, to have paid some attention to every branch of Natural History, as we read of his giving assistance in mineralogy to Dr. James Anderson, who in 1795 was Physician General at Fort St. George. It is, however, as a Botanist that Koenig is best known and all of his published writings deal with Botany, with the exception of his paper on Termites. Little is on record concerning Koenig's life at Tranquebar but we can picture him performing the routine duties of Medical Officer in charge of that small Danish Settlement and devoting every spare moment to the acquisition of specimens and knowledge of that Natural History which is loved so well. Whenever his opportunities and finances afforded, he made occasional collecting expeditions from Tranquebar and thus visited the Dutch, French and British Settlements along the Coromandel Coast and in all of them entered into friendly relations with everyone whose tastes were similar to his own. Dr. Russell, who met him in later years and who writes feelingly of his uniformly friendly relations with Koenig, says of him at this period that, "More covetous of fame than of fortune, he preserved in his pursuits with an enthusiasm that set bodily fatigue, spare meals, and a scorching climate at

¹The place and date of birth are given by Hagen (Bibliotheca Entom. I, 428).

²Mantissa Linn. Gen. Pl. p. 13.

³Dr. Russell says "probably in 1768". Foulkes (*Madras Journal of Literature and Science*, No. 11, New Series - May 1861) says that Koenig "had preceded Rottler in the mission by nearly ten years." Rottler arrived at Tranquebar on 5th August 1776.

⁴In his "Biographical Memoir of Dr. Rottler", published in the *Madras Journal of Literature and Science*, No. 11, New Series -- May 1861, the Rev. T. Foulkes notes that "besides [Koenig] the naturalist, who was for a while the

Medical Adviser of the mission [the Danish Mission at Tranquebar], and not ordained, there was at the same time a missionary of the same name in holy orders at Tranquebar. In the documents that I have consulted the accounts of these two individuals seem to be hopelessly intermingled. The Clergyman died in 1795, after 27 years' residence in India."

⁵Dr. Russell (Preface to Volume I of "Coromandel Plants") says "the Pullicate Hills, in April 1766." The date is an obvious *lapsus calami* for 1776 as just previously he had given 1768 as the probable year of Koenig's first arrival in India. The Pullicate Hills are evidently the same as the Palliacatti Mountains referred to by Koenig. Pulikat is on the coast a few miles North of Madras.

defiance; while the simplicity of his manners, and his unassuming readiness to impart knowledge to others, conciliated, almost at first sight, the benevolence of those with whom he conversed.....and everywhere he acquired friends."

The slender salary of his appointment at Tranquebar proved, however, quite inadequate to bear the expense of his travels, however frugally conducted, in search of novelties, and in about the year 1774 Koenig, by the influence of some of the many friends he had made during his wanderings, obtained an appointment as Naturalist to the Nawab of Arcot, in whose service he remained for several years, and during this period he made excursions amongst the hills near Vellore and Ambur, and to other localities which promised to yield novelties. Thus in year 1776, he made a short collecting expedition to the Nagori Hills⁵ with Dr. George Campbell, a young medical man in the service of the East India Company and stationed at Madras, and who seems to have given proof of some talent as a botanist. His friendship with Koenig, accentuated perhaps by their companionship during this excursion, appears to have kindled his enthusiasm into a resolve to devote himself seriously to the study of Botany, for shortly after this he sent to England for a large consignment of books on this subject; but, says Russel, "they never reached him; for being wounded, and taken prisoner, in the unfortunate defeat of Colonel Baillie's detachment, in September, 1780, he died a short time after, universally lamented."

During at least portions of the time during which he was in the service of the Nawab of Arcot, Koenig resided in Madras and his intercourse with the English employed there in the Company's service seems to have gained him the friendship of all of them who took any interest in Natural Science. Many indeed, were glad to receive instruction from a pupil of the celebrated Linnaeus, and amongst these are mentioned especially Dr. James Anderson, afterwards Physician General at Fort St. George, and Dr. Roxburgh, afterwards Inspector of the Botanical Gardens at Calcutta, who was then living at Samalkota.

It was probably during his residence in Madras that Koenig has outlined a scheme for the investigation of the natural resources, not only of India, but of South Eastern Asia, but this he was quite unable to carry out with his own slender resources, added to which his salary from the Nawab of Arcot was not paid regularly. Moved by these considerations, in 1778 he represented the facts of the case to the Board of the East India Company, which was pleased to grant him a monthly allowance "in order to enable him the better to prosecute his researches."

"With this aid, he proceeded in the month of August 1778 to the Straits of Malacca and Siam; from whence he

returned towards the end of 1779. From his report to the Board of Madras, it appears, that he had the good fortune to meet with several new subjects of Natural History, and to make some discoveries in Botany and Mineralogy, which he flattered himself might prove acceptable to the Public; particularly in respect to the article of tin ore..... He intimated also his intention of sending to St. Helena, by the ships then on departure, the seeds of such esculent and other plants, and of such trees or shrubs as he had then got ready, and might probably be of use in that island" (Russell).

After his return from Siam he appears to have entered into a more formal Agreement under which he was to devote his whole time to the service of the East India Company, whose Board in Madras was pleased in 1780 to make an addition to his salary, which met with the approval of the court of Directors in England.

In the same year (1780) he made a short excursion to Trincomali, in Ceylon, and in early in 1781 a second excursion to Colombo. He must, however, have been in Ceylon before, as an earlier visit is noted in his paper on Termites published in 1779, and it was during this earlier visit that he met with *Eutermes monoceros*. As he notes (page 331) that this was subsequent to his trip to the Nagori Hills, which took place in April 1776, he must have visited Ceylon between this date and 1779.

The beginning of June 1782 witnessed the arrival in India of Dr. Patrick Russell, whose name survives to the present day throughout India in both the Scientific and English names of Russell's Viper, at once one of the best-known and most deadly of Indian Snakes. Koenig and Russell met at Tranquebar, immediately after the latter's arrival, and at once formed a friendship and commenced a correspondence which lasted until Koenig's death three years later. With his accustomed liberality Koenig not only gave Russell a copy of his own list of the Plants of the Coast of Coromandel but also a number of specimens, as an inducement to the latter to interest himself in Indian Botany.

During the next two years we have no direct knowledge of Koenig's movements or doings but it may be gathered between the lines of Dr. Russell's remarks that his health was beginning to show signs of becoming undermined by his strenuous labours in the Tropics during a period of upwards of twenty years. Dr. Russell tells us at least that he had hinted more than once that Koenig ought to prepare his manuscripts and specimens, so that, in case of his death, they might be published, if possible by Sir Joseph Banks or at least under his auspices.

For some time Koenig had been under a promise to

(Contd. on page 83)