

My Sentimental Journey to Elveden: Estate of Maharaja Daleep Singh

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BEFORE SUBMITTING MY PH.D. thesis in Marie Curie University of Paris, I made a trip to Cambridge University in April 1972 to discuss the results of my investigations with my peers working in Rutherford Laboratory. I could never imagine that the last monarch of the Sikh Kingdom of Lahore, Maharaja Duleep Singh, lies buried in the cemetery of Elveden, a few miles away from Cambridge. At the Gatwick airport, I was almost humiliated for visiting England on my French identity card as Visa requirement was not in force in those days. I took a vow never to visit England again during my frequent forays to Europe for research meetings.

During September 2003, I received an invitation from Dr. Bernard King, Vice Chancellor of Abertay University at Dundee in Scotland to deliver some lectures. We met in 1979 when he was a visiting scientist at Guru Nanak Dev University, Amritsar. After a little hesitation I accepted the invitation as I was going to visit Scotland and not England. Bernard had told me that Scots are more like Punjabi Sikh Jats in their behaviour and temperament. I visited universities at Dundee, St. Andrews and Edinburg. The countryside was extremely fascinating with its hills and glens. Almost every village has a golf course in Scotland as the game had its origin there. After spending one week in Scotland, I returned to greater London for my return flight to Delhi.

My host, Gundip Singh Gill, a senior Design Manager with “Imagination Technologies,” picked me up from Milton-Kynes and drove me to his apartment in Helm-Hampsted in outer London. It was drizzling on Friday night when we reached, but we hoped for good weather during the week-end. Next morning, I proposed to Gundip to drive me to Elveden and Cambridge, as I was keen to visit the village where Maharaja Duleep Singh spent his life after he was deported to England. Gundip was not sure about its location but he opened a website on Maharaja Duleep Singh on his laptop and discovered all information about the site alongwith a roadmap to Elveden. It made me sentimental while reading an entry on the website about the near blind queen mother (Maharani Jindan) meeting his son Duleep after thirteen and half years in Calcutta, and felt shocked to discover the loss of his Sikh indentity.

We took the peripheral highway M-25 around London, and then M-11, the expressway to Cambridge. Elveden falls on route A-11, a few miles away from Cambridge city. It was a bright sunny day and Gundip took his wife Hardeep and baby daughter Reet along for a sight-seeing tour of the countryside. By lunch time, we entered Elveden Estate and made enquiries about Maharaja Duleep Singh’s palace. Fortunately, we met someone from his butler’s family who guided us to the Elveden’s church. Inside the church cemetery, we spotted three grave stones marking the burial place of Maharaja Duleep Singh, Maharani Bamba and their son, Edward Duleep Singh. After paying our homage to the last Maharaja of Sikh Kingdom, we took a stroll in the park of Elveden Estate. We were told that it belongs to a Lord, head of the Guinness family, and visitors are not allowed inside the

Elveden Hall, the original residence of Maharaja Deleep Singh. We took some photographs of the imposing palace from a distance.

The total area of Elveden Estate is estimated to be 17,000 acres and it was purchased by the Maharaja in 1863. He completely rebuilt Elveden Hall in 1874 in oriental royal style. Elveden boasted one of the finest shooting estates in Europe and Maharaja organized royal hunting parties at Elveden. At present, it serves as a holiday village with a restaurant and a camping site. A war memorial to World War heroes is erected on the road leading to Elveden.

Our guide has told us to visit Thetford and its Ancient House Museum to know more about Maharaja Duleep Singh and his family. Prince Frederick Duleep Singh, son of the last Maharaja of the Punjab, purchased this house in 1921 in Thetford, three miles from Elveden and donated his art collection to this museum. He was art historian with an M.A. degree in History from Cambridge University. To our delight, we found an album containing family photographs of the Maharaja, a copy of the Bible donated by Lord Dalhousie on his adopting Christianity and some other artefacts of the royal family. A pretty young damsel of the village served as the museum curator. We purchased some photographs and a book by Christy Campbell, "The Maharaja's Box"*. We walked down the ancient streets of Thetford in memory of Maharaja Duleep Singh and the lost glory of the Sikh Empire.

The greatest attraction of our tour was an equestrian statue of Maharaja Duleep Singh, erected on Butten Island in Thetford, by the Sikhs of United Kingdom during Khalsa ter-centenary celebrations in 1999. It has become a tourist attraction for the Sikhs visiting Elveden. A few days before us, Justice Ajit Singh and Gurtej Singh, National Professor of Sikhism, had also visited Elveden. We took the road to London stopping on the way at Cambridge. A stroll in the university campus brought vivid memories to my mind of my last visit to this world famous center of research. We walked along the Cam river, traversing through the corridors of St. John's College, Downing college and the famous Trinity College.

We left Elveden as the sun was going down the horizon. I recalled to my mind the great British Empire where the sun was not supposed to set. I support the sentiments of Sardar Tarlochan Singh, Chairman of Minority Commission in India, that Maharaja Duleep Singh's last remains should be brought to Punjab and given a Sikh 'burial', as he died as a baptised Sikh, and not a Christian in 1893. He took up cudgels to liberate India from the slavery of British Empire but failed in his sacred mission due to a remorseless fate.

