

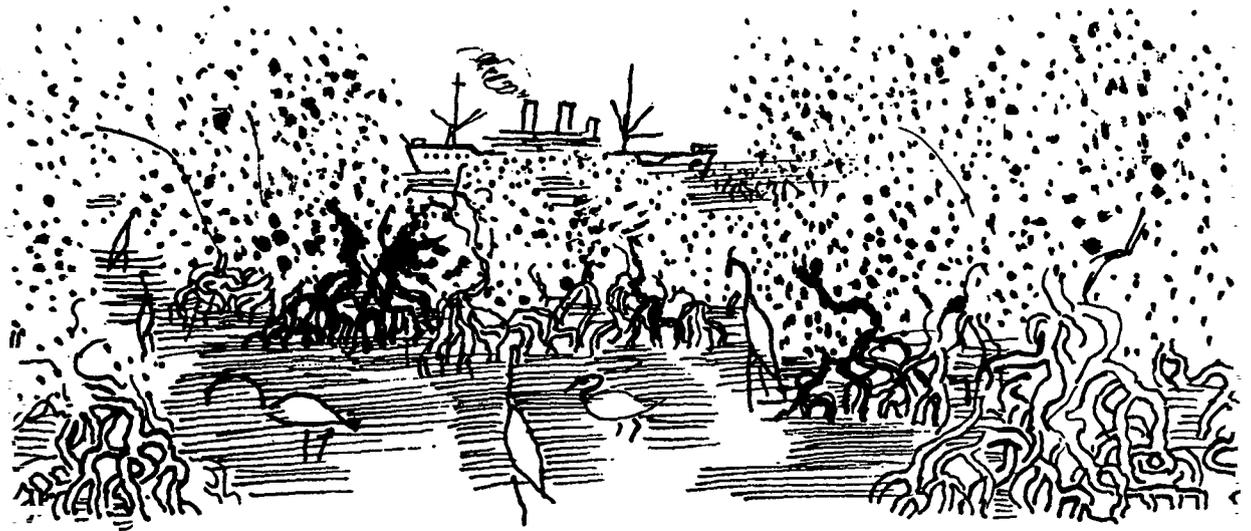
Washington helped to set it: to establish the nature of the president as somewhere between monarch, prime minister, and common denominator, both transcendent and typical, both timeless Delphic oracle and target for ferocious abuse (we find a poet like Philip Freneau treating Washington in both ways). It is a strange, accidental, vulgar-lofty conception, at the heart of the American mystery. It calls for a degree of solemnity (which Mr. Adlai Stevenson is accused of not possessing), and it invites scurrility. During his administration (Washington was no exception) the American president is expected to reveal miraculous qualities (the ritual of choosing him recalls the Tibetan search for a Dalai Lama—some divine child with the precise holy markings). Yet he is left peculiarly vulnerable. Everything is expected of him and nothing is given to him: no titles, houses, decorations. John Adams's petulant remarks on Washington are significant here. It is vain of Washington, he maintains, to have served without pay, and vain to retire from the service of the state; the proper course would have been to carry on like some celestial work-horse. The rewards of such virtue are honorific and largely posthumous.

We are accustomed to think of the American outlook as pragmatic and down-to-earth. So it is, in part; but in comparison with the dense, shrewd, worldly British texture it seems surprisingly thin, diffuse, and heroic. It has no solid chronology; past and future merge, abstractedly, without continuance. The State in America is weak in many ways; devotion to it is not a common American habit; yet—with its presidents at any rate—the State tends to swallow its servants. All this is no doubt less true of some of his successors than of Washington; but how striking it is in his own life. He labours over the years to construct the Mount Vernon that the tourists recognise today. But he works on worn-out soil, the imported shrubs die, America moves away to the west. He has no direct heirs, and if he had, Mount Vernon would have impoverished them. It could only become a ruin or a shrine. There is little permanence for persons or places, only for texts and metaphors. And here we are back with the cherry-tree, Cincinnatus at the plough, the impossible chunks of ice in the Delaware, the imaginary Indian chief at the Monongahela who declared that no mortal bullet could kill George Washington.

Lot's Son

Four in his arms we sleep, Lot lies awake
 All night, he does not let me lie awake
 Or cut my own meat. All night
 Through my ribs I feel his body's heat.
 He will not let me drink from a bright cup
 (Unless he wash it), or climb high up.
 His game: he points his finger at my eye
 Saying, "You are crying," until I cry,
 To make me a man. Rope he holds me taut,
 He knots, undoes the knots, I am caught
 Round myself. A knot ties mother to son
 Not father to daughter; all rope, but Lot,
 Lot who tied us together is undone.

Stanley Moss



The World's Cities: Calcutta

Sudhin Datta

I
AMONG my more fabulous friends is an infuriating philosopher who used to claim that the only way of knowing a place was never to visit it. He is the most single-minded person I have yet encountered; and his paradoxes are the natural product of a speculative intellect that would compose the differences of the real and the negative in related multiplicity. Or such is my guess after looking at the titles of the formidable books he has published since he deserted his native Bengal to return to Oxford; and though that is as far as I have gone in understanding his basic ideas, I now admit the converse of his proposition. For I belong to a family which had lived where Fort William was built after the Battle of Plassey; and removed thence to the centre of the town, it has remained rooted to Calcutta ever since. But I who was born here at the turn of the century, and have spent most of my years in the city, cannot define its character; and when a newcomer asks me what he should see, I am struck dumb.

I see no connection between such failure on my part and the fact that Calcutta is an upstart hardly two centuries old, whereas the rest of India measures antiquity by millennia. At any rate, cities in other parts of the world can be young and attractive at the same time; and even in this immemorial land the populous sections of every town are seldom more ancient than the first capital of the British Raj. Besides, if Calcutta lacks archæological sites, it can boast of lanes as dingy and buildings as mouldy as those of Muttra, Delhi, and Benares, to mention only three out of perhaps a hundred names; and the east has the advantage over the north in possessing a truly disintegrating climate that generates ruins in record time. This the Bengalis seemed to have realised early in their history; and so until, say, two hundred years ago most of them not only lived in mud houses with thatched roofs, but likewise worshipped clay images which, once their day was done, went back to rest in the beds of superabundant rivers and ubiquitous marshes.

But until the 18th century the sacred