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The Phrase, "Towers Of Silence." GEORGE BIRDWOOD..

Category: Letters to the Editor

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THE PHRASE, "TOWERS OF SILENCE."

TO THE EDITOR OF THE TIMES.

Sir,—The voluminous literature produced in Bombay during the past 20 years by the new generation of Zoroastrian *dusturs* ["High Priests," literally "regulators"] and other young Parsi "Orientalists,"—all directly inspired by the enthusiasm for "Zendic studies," and the life-long labours in promoting them, of the venerable Kharshedji Rustamji Cama, "the great lay *dustur* of the Parsis" of Darmesteter ["Le Zend Avesta," I., vii.]—is at last gradually evolving its inevitable effects in the present remarkable intellectual and moral fermentation among the Parsi communities of Western India, one of the most significant symptoms of this ethnical revival being the agitation that is being raised by them for the substitution of the primitive Aryan rite of cremation for the adopted Turanian practice of exposure in the disposal of their dead.

But to-day my simple, or rather my immediate, object is to afford some clue, while I am yet able to do so, to the absolute identification of the authorship of the English phrase, "Towers of silence," now universally applied to the *dakhmas* ["vault," "place of the dead," "tomb," "coffin," compare Greek *dochē* "receptacle," *docheion* ink—"horn," Italian *doga* "a barrel,"? and *doge*, and English dock, conduit,? and duke], or bastion-like edifices, on the gloomy platforms of which the Parsis of the Disruption, whether in India or Persia, have ever laid down the corpses of their departed ones to be torn by devouring jackals and hungry vultures.

When, after 14 years' absence, I returned to Bombay, in 1854-5, the local tradition in the mouths of such men as the Rev. Dr. Wilson, the learned Dr. Harkness, and the learned Dr. Richard Tudhill Reid, was that the happy phrase which gives their only halo of spiritual suggestion and serenity to these lugubrious "towers" was coined by

and serenity to these lugubrious "towers" was coined by Mr. Robert Xavier Murphy. He had originally come out to Bombay as a master, under the auspices of the Native Education Society; but being an unusually accomplished classical scholar, of great natural abilities, with a special aptitude for acquiring Oriental languages, and a young gentleman of most gracious temper and manners, he was soon recognized as one of those "general utility men" who are always in request in India, and, in spite of his studious habits, confirmed by his delicacy of constitution, was incontinently used up as a stop-gap in all sorts of posts that happened, from various causes, to fall unexpectedly vacant. In this way he became temporarily editor of the *Bombay Gazette* in 1834, and was entangled in that connexion in a heated polemic with the eminent Sanscrit and Persian scholar General Vans Kennedy, Oriental translator to the Government of Bombay. Again, in 1839, on the death of Dr. Brennan, he acted as secretary to the Bombay Chamber of Commerce, pending the permanent appointment to the office of Mr. T. J. Scott; and in the same year, and also in consequence of Brennan's death, he did duty as editor of the *Bombay Times* until the memorable coming, from Cupar-Fife, of the learned Dr. George Buist, the John Delane of Indian journalism, for his wonderful domination over the highest authorities of State, and the most brilliant student of physical science this country ever sent out to India. But Robert Xavier Murphy did not find his proper *métier* in Bombay until, on the death of Mr. John Vansell in 1852, he was appointed Oriental translator to the Government. He took up his new duties with the highest hopes of being able to devote a long life to the linguistic and philological researches in which he held all his delight. But within two years he became completely shattered in health, and, invalided home in 1855, died at Kingstown, Dublin, on February 26, 1857, in the 54th year of his age.

He had already written well, and therefore much, on a variety of Oriental subjects, philological, literary, antiquarian, sociological, and ethnographical. He was a great authority on the folklore of Bombay, and it was he who traced out the fact of the island of Bombay, excepting the palm-waving tract of Mahim, being regarded by the aboriginal *Holis* of Western India as the dreadful abode of the souls of all the wicked people who died on the mainland of India—a superstition which explained the habit of the older generation of toddy-drawers of the

island, from Angrias Colaba, across the water, returning to the mainland before nightfall. He is more widely known to the students of the history of "the loyal Town and Island of Bombay," by "Murphy's Map," so called from its having been prepared under his direction in 1846. Beside writing in the *Bombay Gazette*, *Bombay Times* [now *Times of India*], and the "Journal of the Geographical Society" of Bombay, Murphy contributed largely to the *Dublin University Magazine* in 1847-48-49-50, so far as my observation carries me, and possibly to 1854. I am unfortunately not able, for I am unequal to the fatigue of such mechanical examinations, to refer to the particular article in which the fine figure of speech, "Towers of silence," is first used by him. But, touching the hearts of his readers, it at once "caught on"; and not only Englishmen, but Frenchmen, Germans, and Italians, and all Europeans, indeed, now always denominate the *dakhma* of the Parsis, "Towers of silence." Niebuhr's expression in

1764 is "Cemetery of the Parsis." The contemporary Frenchman [1767] figures the great *dakhma* on "Ghandy's ground," but does not name it. Fryer in 1672 describes it in emphatic terms, but does not figure it on his map, and Davies' scabble of Bombay in 1626, the earliest known attempt at a map of Bombay, shows no trace of it. There is not the slightest doubt of Robert Xavier Murphy's having invented the poetical phrase; for, beside the authorities for the tradition above quoted, I have it on the testimony of one of the regular readers of his "proofs," who spoke also of the sensation made by the phrase at the time it was first heard, giving as it did a touch of that magic which spiritualizes sense to those altogether repulsive—as they were previously regarded—*dakhmas* which tower over Breach Candy like the outposts of the nether world. But for Murphy's sake, and for the sake of the phrase itself, one would fain trace it to its actual incunabula in his writings; and my hope is that this letter may induce some younger hands than mine to undertake this labour of love.

The phrase would be still more germane to the lofty and striking funereal towers, of the belfry type, in which the Achæmenian Persians were wont to entomb their dead; yearly placing on the tops of them all sorts of rich confections and fragrant flowers, on which the spirits of the departed were believed to regale themselves [see "Lalla Rookh"]. But if instead of returning to burial, a rite the ancient Persians adopted from their Semitic neighbours, the Parsis of Western India revert to cremation, it is to be hoped they will carry out this most impressive rite on the summits of lofty towers, after the model of their ancient *puraitheia*, for this would invest the rite with the most picturesque solemnity; while we may presume that it was the primitive Aryan rite of cremation that led to its purgative fires being revered by the Zoroastrians as the supreme emblem of the all-purifying and all-redempting grace of Ahuramazda throned eternally in his highest Heaven, the Empyrean, Garodemana.

I have the honour to be, Sir, your most obedient
servant,

GEORGE BIRDWOOD.