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**The Phrase "Towers Of Silence."** *GEORGE BIRDWOOD.; GKO. B..*

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### THE PHRASE "TOWERS OF SILENCE."

TO THE EDITOR OF THE TIMES.

Sir,—All concerned for the truth and honesty of the chronicle of the loyal "Town and Island" of Bombay will be grateful to Mr. B. P. Karkaria for his letter in *The Times* of the 30th ult., replying to mine in your columns of August 8 last, on the authorship of the phrase "Towers of Silence," as applied to the *dakhmas* of the Parsis; and let me at once say that, if the phrase cannot be traced to writings of Robert Xavier Murphy prior to the use of it by Mrs. Thomas Postans in 1838, she must be accorded the goodly and assured credit of its "invention."

But I cannot give up my tentative conviction of the author of it being Robert Xavier Murphy without a further reconsideration of the question by Mr. Karkaria in connexion with the information received by me in the past six or seven weeks regarding Murphy, chiefly from a sister of the wife (Lanthe Murphy) of the late Mr. Charles Leggett, my deputy when I was sheriff of Bombay in 1864. Murphy, who was born in 1806, went to India, I now find, in 1822, and among strong testimonials to the value of his official services from Sir John Awdry, Sir Henry Roper, and Sir Erskine Perry, all Chief Justices of the Supreme Court of Bombay, and to the value of his Oriental scholarship and writings by Sir Erskine Perry, Sir Bartle Frere, General Ballantine, Professor Orlebar, and Professor Horace Hayman Wilson, is one from Colonel George Jarvis, a man in many ways of like mind with Murphy, certifying that—"he was first attached to the Department of Public Instruction in the year 1822, or 23, whilst I held the post of Secretary." This gives ample time, antecedent to the publications of Mrs. Thomas Postans and Miss Emma Roberts, for Murphy to have anticipated them in the origination of the phrase "Towers of Silence." Miss Roberts might well have coined it; but it is difficult to conceive of Mrs. Postans' striking it off in the debased mintage of her commonplace mind—there

not being another phrase throughout her informing and lively little book on Western India of any imaginative quality. Mrs. Postans, moreover, prints the phrase between quotation marks. But, if Robert Xavier Murphy is to receive the palm for it, the phrase must be found in writings of his before 1838. I have no doubt whatever myself of its being found in them somewhere ; and I hope by Mr. Karkaria. Murphy wrote more voluminously, and miscellaneously, than I knew when my previous letter on this subject appeared in *The Times* ; and his daughter, in a letter to me, states :—" My mother told me it was he who first called them (the *dakhmas*) by that name (' Towers of Silence '), and she used to read everything he wrote ; and I am quite sure of his being the author of the phrase, and that he did not quote from Mrs. Postans' book." Of course, the *dakhmas* have always been called " towers," for they are towers ; and the poets have ever associated death and the grave with silence :—" Death, the silent home of all." It is quite apart from all such suggestion—while meditating sympathetically with the bereaved on these cruel and repulsive *dakhmas*, in a reactionary and sudden sunburst of the soul, happening on an all hallowing and all consoling epithet that has ever since among the Parsis relieved the grave of half its terrors. But, I repeat, in spite of my personal tradition and belief, and in spite of the evidence of the family, unless the phrase can be traced, chapter and line, to some printed writings of Robert Xavier Murphy before 1838, Mrs. Thomas Postans must hold the palm for it—so gallantly placed in her hand by Mr. Karkaria.

With reference to Mr. Karkaria's quotation from Stocqueler—the latter is quite wrong in what he says about Murphy's having been intended for the Catholic Roman Church. He was not educated at Maynooth, but at Clongowood College, from his 7th to his 16th year ; when owing to a family quarrel he enlisted into the artillery, for Bombay ; where Captain Yeardell, commanding his battery, finding that he was a gentleman, and of rare ability and attainments, bought his discharge, and got him attached to the Department of Public Instruction. I was, I would add, much with T. H. Stocqueler during his last years in London ; and when, after he went to America, he made over, about 1884, his final memoirs, in the name of Siddons, to Messrs. William Allen and Company, his instructions were that the decision as to their publication was to be left to my absolute discretion.

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

October 14.

GEORGE BIRDWOOD.

P.S.—With reference to Mr. Karkaria's remarks on the present method of the disposal of their dead by the Parsis, I would wish, if I am not intruding too far on the hospitality of your columns, to add the following extract (of September 6, 1609) on the subject from the "Travels" of John Jourdain, with which I have been favoured by Mr. W. Foster, who is now editing them for the Hakluyt Society :—

"In this towne (Nausari, the Redruth, that is 'Prieststown,' of the Parsis of Western India) there are manie of

a strange kinde of religion called Parseyas. These people are very tall of stature and white people. Their religion is farre different from the Moores or Bsmians, for they doe adore the fire, and doe contynuallie keepe their fire burninge for devotion, thinkinge that if the fire should goe out, that the world were at an end; and if the fire of their howses be out, they must not goe [to ?] their neighbours to fetch fire, but must goe to the holie fire, as they tearme it. When anie of these people dye, they never burye them, but set them upright in a place provided for the purpose, in any open field; where the fowles of the ayre eate and consume their flesh, but the doggs nor other beasts cannott come at itt, because it is walled round aboute and open above."

This is the first English account of the Parsis and their religion. Compare Herodotus I., 140; also Thomas Hyde's "Historia religionis veterum Persarum."

GEO. B.