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Women and children build up the only road
Where overhead the shells of death whine past
And cattle graze indifferent to the din
I felt perhaps I'd understood at last
By close observation of all that nature showed
When life has past, then where does death begin?

This was the letter posted by George Barnsby on February 23, 1944 on the Arakan Front during the fighting for the Ngazun Pass.

The Labour Trade Union & Co-operative Movement's journal in 1932 'The Black Country and the Black Country' included those who had died from the subsequent epidemic of cholera in the Black Country.

This short tribute to the millions of Indians who died in the British imperialist manufactured famine of 1943 - 44, and the British soldier who exposed the famine and gave his life in the war against fascism, is offered without charge by the **GEORGE BARNSBY WORKING CLASS MUSEUM AND FREE COMMUNIST BOOKSHOP**, 141, HENWOOD ROAD, WOLVERHAMPTON, WEST MIDLANDS, WV6 8PJ

THE GREAT INDIAN FAMINE 1943-44
GEORGE BARNSBY

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THE GREAT INDIAN FAMINE

1943 - 44

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George Barnsby was born in India to an army officer's family in 1907. He came back to England as a baby. He received an education usual to that of preparatory school, followed by a public school. Here he showed a talent for drawing and subsequently went to the Slade School of Art where he became interested in Marxism and joined the Communist Party in 1932. When the fascists of Spain, Germany and Italy overthrew the democratically-elected Republican governments in what is often erroneously known as the Spanish Civil War, he joined the International Brigade. In one of his early battles he was captured and spent eight months in a French concentration camp. He returned from Spain in 1938. He spent the period until his call-up in 1941 painting and doing political work in Britain. This work undoubtedly affected my political development, by working in the Communist Bookshop on Lavender Hill which I frequented. The bookshop was run by his widow, Nora, who I have worked for ever since in the Communist Party History Group, now part of the Communist History Society.

By

Dr George Barnsby

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The most vivid and passionate English reporter of the famine was Clive Branson. Not that I knew of Branson at the time. His reports were published only in 1944, by which time he was dead. His book *British Soldier in India, the Letters of Clive Branson*, was published by the British Communist Party and quickly found its way to India.

Branson was born in India to an army officer's family in 1907 but brought back to England as a baby. He received an education usual to an officer of preparatory school, followed by a public school. Here he showed a talent for drawing and subsequently went to the Slade School of Art where he became interested in Marxism and joined the Communist Party in 1932. When the fascists of Spain, Germany and Italy overthrew the democratically elected Republican government of Spain, in what is often erroneously known as the 'Spanish Civil War', he joined the International Brigade. In one of his early battles he was captured and spent eight months in a Franco concentration camp. When he returned from Spain in 1938 he spent the period until his call-up to the British army in 1941 painting and doing political work in Battersea. Here, he unknowingly affected my political development, by working in the Communist Bookshop on Lavender Hill which I frequented. This I have subsequently learned from his widow, Noreen, who I have worked with ever since in the Communist Party History Group, now the Socialist History Society.

Branson arrived in India in May 1942. His first mention of famine in Calcutta was on August 3rd 1943, although he had been reporting food

shortages in Bombay and most other parts of India almost since his arrival in India. Branson quoted newspaper reports that in June 174 people had been arrested for hoarding and profiteering and in July, 622. But what use is this, asks *The Statesman* (a white establishment newspaper), if punishments are so small that profiteers do not worry? People picked up in Calcutta in a state of collapse due to starvation numbered 445 in four days. In ten days 155 bodies had been picked up in the streets of Calcutta. Voluntary, non-official Food Committees were being set up; many of them organised by the Communist Party. Here were most of the elements of the famine. There was no overall grain shortage. The famine was man-made. Wheat was still being exported from India, and if rice had been rationed there would have been no shortage of that. Government officials themselves were joined with hoarders and profiteers. The Muslim League Ministry in Bengal, for instance, consisted of some of the largest hoarders in the country.

Branson continued to quote rising figures of deaths. A *Times of India* report of 13th September stated that Calcutta was only a symptom. The cases are landless labourers from the rural districts unable to afford rice at its present price. In Chandpur 100 unclaimed bodies had been collected from the streets and disposed of by the municipality.

On September 24 Branson wrote,

I enclose in this letter pages of notes re. the famine in Bengal. What I send you are just the facts. But there is one fact that no newspaper prints - that millions upon millions in this country live on the borderline of starvation *always*. Their poverty is too dreadful to describe.... Year after year of living underfed, *appallingly* housed (if one can use the word to describe a tent-like structure made of rags, bits of matting - floor space 4ft by 8ft and maximum height 5ft - in which a whole family shelters in monsoon, cold and heat, the smallest children without clothes at all) and gaining a livelihood by scavenging, doing a sweeper's work in the filthiest places, etc. Such communities are to be found outside every village or town. In speaking of them, one is not speaking of the slum dwellers whose standard

of living is 'higher'. Millions upon millions of poorest peasantry - ill-fed, uneducated, downtrodden - patiently accepting their hideous lives only because they cannot see any way out. This immense abuse of all human decency by our British imperialists - all this is taken by Halifax (British appeasement Foreign Minister-GB) to mean that there is 'popular support for our way of governing India.'

The *Times of India* reported that hundreds of men, women and children from southern and eastern Bengal have arrived and more are coming daily.

Most of them live on the roadside. Thin and weak from lack of food, these people, looking more like animated skeletons than human beings, are moving from door to door, hoping to get some morsel of food. Branson ends his letter, 'I have just seen that the number of destitute people being fed daily in relief kitchens in Bengal is 820,269.'

Branson was writing letters that were censored, and sometimes handed back to him. But by this time the famine was so serious that Branson had considerable support among his army colleagues. He was advocating in India effective rationing of grain and stiffer sentences for profiteers and hoarders. Also support for Voluntary Local Relief Committees that were springing up. But the leaders of the Indian National Congress most likely to do this were in prison and the 'legality' of the Communist Party of India who were organising Food Committees was highly circumscribed with many of its leaders in jail and some even being executed. Branson was also greatly encouraged by the fact that an Indian Relief Committee had been set up in England and the South Wales Miners' Federation had sent a resolution of support and a donation. But Branson stressed that without dealing severely with those responsible for the famine, relief would only set the scene for future famines.

Let me put it this way India is ruled, is run in the present way,

in the name of Britain. Then it is time that every decent human being in Britain demanded immediate changes in the state of affairs. We are the rulers in India, if India suffers from famine under our rule, we are responsible to the starving peasants. We have no right to claim to be rulers if we don't punish with the utmost severity those swine who for profits or any other reason... spread and deepen the distress of the masses.' Nehru wrote, 'While the streets of Calcutta were strewn with corpses the lives of the upper ten thousand underwent no change. There was dancing and feasting and a flaunting of luxury. In this gay life both English and Indians participated for both had prospered in the business of war and money was plentiful.' (The Discovery of India p509).

For many months the military authorities had been wondering what to do with Branson. In March 1943 he reported an 'extraordinary thing'. His name had appeared on orders to be posted to the Gunnery Wing of the Armoured Corp at Ahmednagar. It was extraordinary because it would enable him to fulfil his ambition to become a sergeant-instructor in a technical branch. Secondly he was being posted to the town in which he had been born! In October 1943 Branson was informed that he would be returned to his unit. At a brief interview with the CO and major he was thanked for what he had done and told that his work had been 'magnificent'. At a sergeant's mess dance, which became a sort of farewell party for Branson, he found that some sergeants thought that his case 'stank' and some officers told him that it was not their doing, but came 'from higher up'. Branson's own view was that although officially it was being said that the regiment wanted him back,

Whichever way it happened in detail, the broad fact is that I am being sent away from here by those who are terrified of any real criticism of their way of living and ruling. And on the other side I was able to not only make friends among the Indians, but in practice show them that among the white sahibs there are some men not affected by colour prejudices and who are really fighting for a new world.

Branson's journey from Ahmednagar to his unit took him through Calcutta.

The last part of my journey was like a nightmare. The endless view of plains, crops and small stations turned almost suddenly into one long trail of starving people. Men, women, children, babies, looked up into the passing carriage in their last hope for food... When we stopped, children swarmed round the carriage windows, repeating, hopelessly, Bukshish, sahib, with the monotony of a damaged gramophone... I saw women, almost fleshless skeletons, their clothes grey with dust, not walking, but foot steadying foot, as though not knowing where they went. As we pulled towards Calcutta, little children naked, with inflated bellies stuck on stick-like legs held up empty tins towards us....

By October 1943 Branson's address was unknown. He was in the war zone. 'Only the chai-wallahs know what is happening.' There was time for just one more experience of the famine. He'd had a very good meal at a restaurant 'of which there were dozens with prices extraordinarily low' when he heard a child sobbing its heart out.

He went up to the noise and saw a little girl lying on the pavement, so he got out some annas and knelt down to give them to her. Some Indians had collected around and he asked one of them what was the matter with her. One replied, like a statistical fact, 'She is one of the starving children'.

At that I lost my temper completely and told them that they should bloody well be ashamed to walk past a child in her state. I made some of them take the little kid to a relief centre. The whole incident upset me so much that I can't face going into the town again, because I do not know what I can do to help these creatures - it is not good enough just looking at them in sympathy.

When he was sent back to his unit Branson wrote, 'Thank goodness I am

back with the unit. In every way it is better than Ahmednagar. I am in the pink, very happy to be back among the lads, and always hoping that we can get on with this endless war.' From October 17th 1943, Branson and his tank unit had moved into the war zone and his address was not known.

His letters home continued. In November he reported a good discussion on India with two Indian fellows, the arguments turning, as usual, around the question 'How can it be explained to Indians that the British are allies when the British soldiers refer to us as black bastards and treat us so badly?' He also reported a conversation of a BOR with an African negro soldier (as anyone will explain 'just out of the jungle, they'd be happier with bows and arrows.') who was reading a book. 'Can you read?' asked the BOR rather unnecessarily. 'Yes'. 'What's the book No orchids for Miss Blandish?' 'No, Pygmalion' the African replied. Nothing could present the world situation better, comments Branson.

His next letter reports a conversation with an Indian Congressman waiter in a restaurant. 'Very like some other I have met, devoted to Gandhi and Nehru, ignorant of world affairs - hating the British with a burning hatred'. To him a pro-war, anti-fascist policy meant support for the British. In the end, he very solemnly apologised for talking like he did to a man in uniform. It was very good to have an argument with a man like that.'

In a letter of December 2nd Branson reports 'a really grand time' meeting Professor Sen, principal of one of the Calcutta University Colleges, a student at Cambridge 30 years before and a distinguished mathematician. They talked in the main of the lack of facilities for British soldiers to get to know educated Indians. He had also talked with two Bengali writers and the grandson of a famous Indian doctor. For the grandson, who was in his teens, Branson wrote an essay on modern English poetry, particularly Auden and Spender etc. This was later published in Bengali. Branson concludes,

Every experience I have had bears out the fact that Indians have a tremendous respect for cultured Englishmen and there is not the least trace of hatred as there is for the imperialists.

By December 4th Branson was reporting that it was near to zero hour and he was thinking of his wife. 'Always remember that one is given by fate only one lifetime to work and live for humanity. There is no greater crime, in my view, than to renounce the world ... For we have both lived for one purpose, the emancipation of the working people....' By December 1943 it had been stated that the Bengal famine was officially over. 'Take that with a pound' of salt opined Branson. On Christmas Day. 'We are all making the best of it, but everyone is really back home by the fireside.' They sang songs, told some bawdy stories, ate hot sausages and peas and drank a little beer or rum. January 22nd - 'From now on my letters will consist of scraps of paper written at odd moment a few miles from the front line.. As to my own feelings, very rarely I feel a tinge of fear plus regret. in the main I worry whether I shall command my tank as a Communist ought.'

1944 January 26th - We are now only a few hundred yards away from glory.. One thought runs through my head continually, Spain. Here we have such complete mastery in armament of all kinds. What holds us up is the Jap entrenchments in the numerous small foothills along the Mayu range. These hills are most peculiar. They are piles of sand, harder than loose sand but softer than sandstone. The Japs just tunnel on a larger scale to the way children make tunnels in sandcastles. The whole hillside is covered with thick scrub as much as ten feet high. An important point of the shrub is the large quantity of extremely prickly and tough fibrous bushes, as good as any barbed wire, which the Japs also use to cover paths. These 'paths' are just tracks through the undergrowth, leaving all top surface of elephant grass, leafy boughs etc. untouched so that they are invisible from outside. I give you this description to show you the really appalling job it is for the infantry.

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Branson ended this letter with a poem he had written a few days previously,

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By close observation of all that nature showed.
'When life has gone, then where does death begin?'

This was the last letter Clive Branson wrote. He was killed in action on February 25, 1944 on the Arakan Front during the fighting for the Ngankedank Pass.

The official Bengal Famine Enquiry published in May 1945 admitted that 1,500,000 of the poor of Bengal died in the famine. But that did not include those so weakened by starvation that they died from the subsequent epidemics of cholera, dysentery, or any other disease from which properly fed people would have survived. Three and a half million total deaths are not an exaggeration. Of course, nothing was done to punish the murderers. But ultimate retribution was condign. Indian independence in 1948.

There are two Clives of India. One was Lord Robert Clive the penniless adventurer who *conquered* Bengal. The other is Clive Branson of India who took his Communist principles of equality of all humankind from Britain to India and did as much as any one man possibly could to both protest at the famine and lay the basis for the *liberation* of India. To me Clive Branson is the worthier of respect.

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