



David J. McCutcheon

Photograph : Suhrid Kumar Bhowmick

DAVID J. McCUTCHION



Unpublished Letters
and Selected Articles

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DAVID J. McCUTCHION
Unpublished Letters and Selected Articles

Introduced, compiled and edited by
Suhrid Kumar Bhowmick

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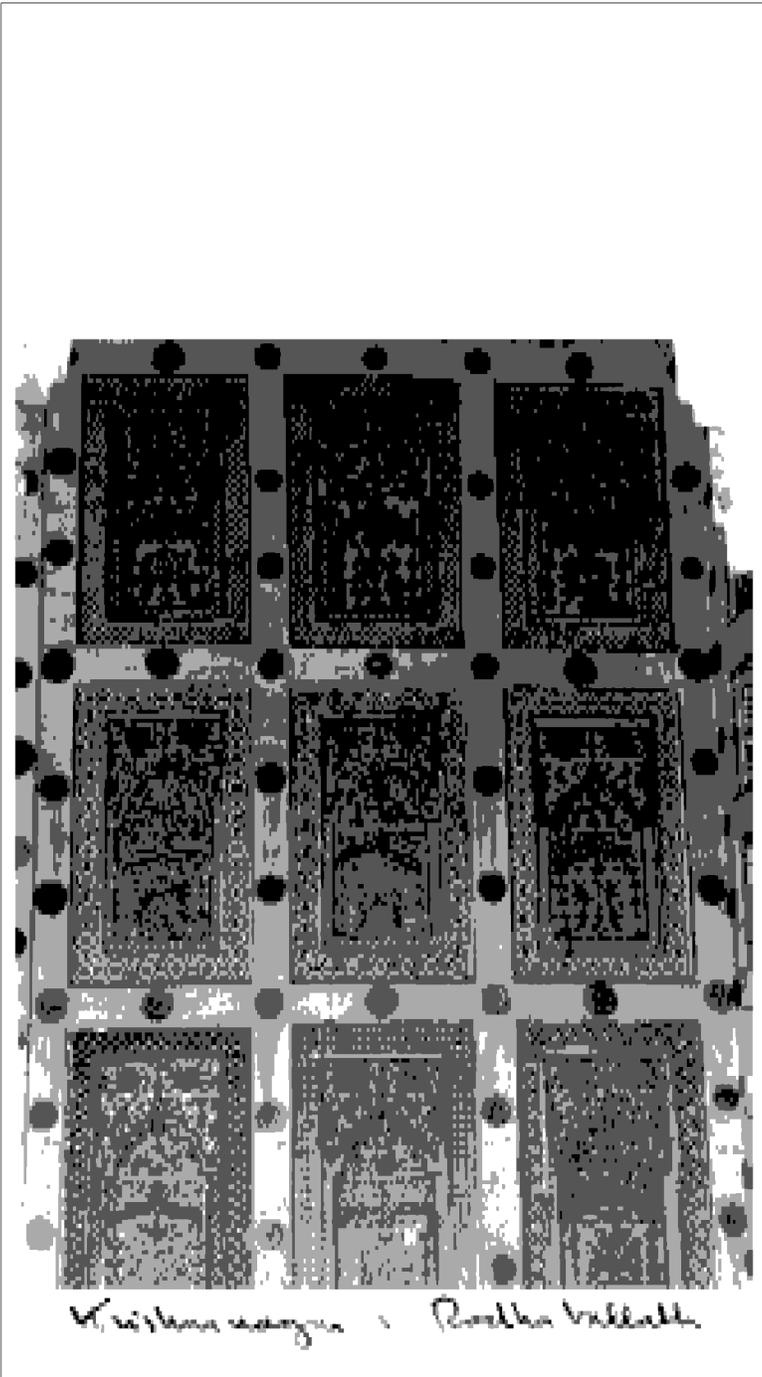
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INTRODUCTION

Letters written to me by my teacher Professor David J. McCutcheon are being published for the first time with an earnest desire of the people of *Monfakira*, a cerebral publishing organisation interested in traditional and country-art including folk literature. They are extremely careful about their job. After going through the letters they opined that the letters need no footnotes etc. since they quintessentially express the writer.

I want to mention only that there was no scope of having a job after completing M.A. in comparative literature at that time as there was hardly any institution in our country which had this subject to be taught in colleges. So usually those who got admitted in this department came here out of sheer interest in this subject and without any motivation to earn with a job. I remember that there were 7 or 8 students in our class, out of which a couple of female students got married prior to the final examination! Some senior students went abroad to America for higher researches. One of my friends went to Assam to teach English in a college. There was a scarcity of college teachers in English at that time as the Government had established a good number of institutions for higher education. Contemplating this I joined the Sundarban H.D. College which was a three to four hours journey from Canning town. After a couple of months the Calcutta University told me to have a degree in any one of the subjects recognised by the University in order to be approved as a lecturer. I appeared for the M.A. examina-

tion in Bengali and passed. I gave this news to some of my teachers as well as David also. He was happy to find that I would no more be jobless.

The letters are mainly on two subjects : i) Terracotta art and temples, and ii) Scroll paintings. The tradition of scroll paintings made him too excited for the Patua art which he expressed to his parents in a number of letters. I quote here in the following the first portion of such one of his letters to his parents :

'4 Nundy Street

Calcutta 29

31st March, 1970

Dear Mum and Dad,

Now don't think I'd forgotten Mum's birthday—I have simply had no time to write earlier, and was distracted by much work, various preoccupations. I have just got back from a very gruelling trip in the heat for four days with a great deal of walking. I went back once more to the remote village of a former student of mine, Suhrid Bhowmik, where I went about 18 months ago in winter. It is 5 miles from the nearest bus route, alternatively 7 and half miles by rickshaw + 2 miles walk across the paddy fields. I went there in connection with another project which I and Suhrid are doing together to bring out a collection of the patua songs and paintings, some of whom are still active in his village. These painters paint long scrolls to illustrate popular and mythological stories, which they can carry from village to village singing the stories. The tradition is almost dead, but in Suhrid's village there are four patuas about whom we propose to bring out a book. I took photos of them working, singing and talking. It was very interesting to

meet them and realise their different personalities. But very hard work in this season—especially as they live a mile away from Suhrid's house in another part of the village, across a huge paddy field. I was also chief guest at the prize giving day of the local school and had to make a speech.....'

Both of us planned to develop the art which was rapidly deteriorating. To bring the scrolls to a big market he talked with his boyhood friend Derek who had a toy-shop in London.

He planned to hang some beautiful scrolls there for exhibition and sale. But just after we had started to send scrolls by sea-mail, David passed away. Actually David possessed a creative set of mind. He used to tell me that the practice of bargaining for price with the poor folk-artists would jeopardise their creative pursuits. These are written in details in his letters on patua art.

I am grateful to Sri Chitrabhanu Chakraborty who has translated my Bengali article 'David Smriti' to English as 'In Memory of David'. It's a very faithful version. The article was written within two or three months of just after David's demise, for a special issue of Bengali journal 'Kaushiki', to commemorate David. The editor was our common friend Tarapada Santra of Anandaniketan Kirtishala. A good number of Bengali friends of David were its contributors. After it Prof. P. Lal published a voluminous book in English, *Shraddh-anjali*, a collection of articles by David's other friends of different places including some of his letters. The letters which David wrote to his parents were brought here by Prof. Lal from country-house and published them in his book. I take the opportunity to quote a few lines in this article previously— from a letter in his book.

I am indebted to David's successor, Jennette, his only younger sister and his cousin Paulin for their generous permission to publish David's works here in book form. In this book some uncommon articles have been brought out— two of them remained unpublished earlier and have been retrieved from an old trunk of valuables. I remember the book 'The Brick Temple of Bengal' based on the

works of David and its writer Dr. George Mitchel and Dr. Robert Skelton, an intimate friend of David, who took much care for David's works to keep in his institution, Victoria and Albert Museum in London— according to David's last will.

Sri Shyamal Bera, a young scholar living by my house brought in my head the idea of publishing the letters. Sri Pradip Ghosh, Director of Loksanskriti and Adibasi Sanskriti Kendra of the Govt. of West Bengal and anthropologist Sri Dipankar Ghosh of the same Institute had told me earnestly of such a publication long before. Smt. Ruby Palchoudhuri, Secretary of the Crafts Council of West Bengal has been helping to continue the work among the patuas.

David might perhaps had written me some more letters, but unfortunately I can't trace them out.

I was a little bit casual about preserving them when he was alive and now I feel guilty for the mistakes. Only four days prior to his death I worked with him when he looked 'normal'. My wife Smt. Bhakti Bhowmik helped me much to find out the letters kept scattered in our house.

I again honour the spirit of 'Monfakira' for bringing out such a book consisting of David's letters and articles.

SuhridKumar Bhowmick
 'Hariad Sakam', Marang Buru Press
 Mecheda, Purba Medinipur.
 November 2008

IN MEMORY OF DAVID

I had a long and close fellowship with noted Indologist David McCutcheon. I had been his student. I was present on that very day as a student when he took his first class in Jadavpur University as a professor. Starting as a student, my relation with him grew firm and undeterred which developed to different spheres at a later stage. Lately, I learnt that he had a keen love for me till his demise. I had passed so many precious times with him in relation to different types of work for the last ten or twelve years. After losing David forever I find those memorable incidents as my invaluable possessions most of which were absolutely unwanted to us one time and causes of irritable pains and for those mistakes we had to work too hard. As the memories of David's untimely death are growing older day by day they are getting more transparent and cathartic too. I can still clearly call in mind the very first class with David on the very first day. Buddhadev babu (Bose) had prior informed us about his assignment. David had entered in our class in a very informal attire (with trouser and *khaddar* halfshirt). It was predecided that he would teach the same as poet Sudhindranath Dutta used to do. He was a young man aged 28 or 30 years old. We honoured him with a certificate from our class written in French. After the initial introductions were over, one of our friends stood up and asked, 'Have you ever read Dante?' It was totally an irrelevant question. Some of us felt too annoyed, it seemed to have asked a Bengali professor in literature whether he had ever read

Rabindranath or not. We were eagerly waiting to hear David's answer. He answered naively, 'Perhaps.' It was a just and befitting reply. In course of time he emerged as a person full of wits.

Within a short time it was felt that he was a perfect teacher, who could be referred as methodical. He taught Literature of the enlightenment along with romantic dramas. He used to teach *Hamlet*, *Faust*, *Egmont*, *The Robbers* of Schiller, Lessing, specially *Lacoon*, the explanations of Rousseau, *Gulliver's Travels*, *Battle of the Books*. I deeply realised it that studies of French theatre also contributed immensely to my teaching life. We had tutorial class with him for a long time and we few were his regular students. I learnt Satanic Spirit and the theory of tragedy so well from him at that time that whatever had I studied about these at a later stage of my life I tried to justify them with the light of knowledge as I got from David. Sometimes we discussed about our personal matters in the tutorial classes. I was the student of Gobardanga Hindu College. One day we two friends went to visit Gobardanga, as he had wished. We enjoyed there the whole day. We cruised on a rented boat in the *media* (a big lake) with other friends from that locality. It seemed that David hadn't started to work on temples till then, as I can remember he didn't rush to see the ancient temple beside the lake which looked very romantic from a distance as he used to do afterwards. But he had a strange attraction and sensibility for ancient arts. The friends from there gave us a bag full of ripe 'bel' when we returned. He liked 'bel' the most of all other fruits. I used to keep 'bel' or *morabba* made of 'bel' for him prior to his coming to my Radhanagar residence.

He was a patient of dysentery. David carried the dysentery with him from Santiniketan. During my classes at Jadavpur itself I went to see the ailing David so many times. He used to fall so sick at times that he had to be admitted to different nursing homes for long time. One day I went to see him at the Medical College in a sultry afternoon. I was enquiring about his frail health. Suddenly he told me, 'It seems a heavy storm is lurking, it's better you leave the place and go home.' Within a while the entire sky

got overcast with nor'wester clouds. Today, it is 3 months David has passed away. Coincidentally, the nor'wester days are here again.

One day I graduated out of the homely atmosphere of Jadavpur University, marking the end of my student life. But a deep relation and understanding with David started to develop. So many uncountable memories of work are looming large in my mind as I start writing the reminiscence of David. We both used to go out on bicycle whenever he came to Khanakul-Krishnanagar. Studies on temple was not my subject, I used to do these only keeping in mind to help David. As if it was a competition, we cycled miles after miles beating the dust. He was a wonderful cyclist. He cycled at ease over the land ridges and bamboo bridges. He nonchalantly defied the heat of May, when it is too hot in this part of the world. His only goal was to complete his works on temple properly. He used to do the minor repairs himself when his cycle needed it. Once my cycle failed working in an evening on the banks of Bali-Dewanganj river. David started to look after its repairing.

One day I had an accident along with my cycle. I fell down to the gorge of a broad canal along with my cycle from a very high embankment. My left hand got twisted and high fever came at night. David got too nervous at this incident. He returned to Calcutta by the last train, leaving me behind. He might have missed the train. Though ailing, I wrote him a letter next morning enquiring whether he had reached home safely or not. I also got a letter from him advising me to have an X-ray in Calcutta whenever my health improves a little. But the letter he wrote after receiving my letter was a memorable one :

'So you were worrying about me— and I was worrying about you! But you need not have worried. I had a very good return journey— very quick and cheap. Last time we went that way, it was on a Sunday in winter and the buses were crowded with picnickers, but this time I got a seat all the way back. I was at my house by 9.30, and Rs.10 still in my pocket.'

I can recapitulate an incident of a Christmas holiday. We both went to the Masnad-E-Allah mosque of Hijli by bicycle and from there the old graveyard of Khejuri at a little distance. This old harbour had been reduced to one of the marine sanatoria of the British of that time. Presently, it's lost out in the woods and jungles. The trees and a few dilapidated structures are still standing there. The old graveyard is also still lying there, barring any care. We passed the whole day there in that chilly winter witnessing the inscriptions and their spirits on different graves. David took so many notes and photographs. I saw him releasing deep sigh. Basically, David was a romantic person. I saw David touching the epitomes on the graves with care, also chopping the trees which created chinks. It was so hundreds of years ago that people from his country came here in search of fortune and breathed their last here. Possibly, no Christian had come here for long to this secluded Bengal countryside, nobody knows their whereabouts. David seemed to be lost in bewilderment of reminiscence in this memory-ridden graveyard, riddled with the cries of spouses and parents of so many other people who rendered this Khejuri harbour a lively spot one time.

We returned home late at that night cycling over the unmetalled rural roads. We hadn't had any food the whole day. We had to satisfy ourselves with some puffed rice and *gur*, given us by a dweller. How we passed a whole day of Christmas vacation! David reminded me so many times of that beautiful day. Once he wrote me from England, 'I often remember that very rural path of Bengal and my free roaming in the land of greenery and thatched-roofed huts.'

THE COMET : A small comet was seen in the country in the year before the last year (March-April, 1970). Usually, David didn't use to sleep in our home when he went to our village. After eating he used to sleep in the village school which stood in a barren field beside a waterbody, almost on the fringe of the village. Stormy wind used to blow too hard. Once, suddenly I woke up in the wee hours. I came out and saw a comet shinning in the eastern sky. I

entered the room and called David. He woke up quickly. He was too queered to wake up suddenly. He smelt some sudden danger. He wondered whether there was anything wrong. I asked him, have you ever seen a comet? He quipped, I have never seen it in my life. I told him, come and see it. Then we went beside the waterbody and sat on the grass. He watched the comet for a long time. I told him, there is a general perception here that if a comet is seen, disaster would soon follow. Probably, it brings casualties to famous and dear ones, causes famine and epidemic in the country. He replied, there is a general perception of this kind in my country also regarding to comet. The common people in our country always see this strange star through fearful eyes. After watching it over for a long time he expressed, it's a very strange star. We came back and again lied down. We talked about the formation of the comet, also listening to the strong stormy wind, and screaming of unknown birds and owls outside. After a while we came outside and saw the eastern sky to be completely red. The distant village seemed to be a black line on its lap. We tried to locate the comet in the sky. He said, the bright sunshine has maligned it off.

THE BAMBOO FLUTE : It's unknown to most of us that David could have played bamboo flutes. Long time back David and I went to the western part of Midnapore. At that time we went to the famous Kiarchand temple. Prior arrangements were made for us to stay in the residence of Keshiari BDO as guest. David saw a flute lying on the table at the drawing room of the BDO. He started playing on it. I told him lightheartedly, this is certainly not melodious. He re-buffed, it's actually unknown to you. He also told, the country songs of Bangladesh or the Ramprasadi song and even the Santhal melodies can be played wonderfully on the bamboo flute. Many people discussed at length after the demise of David about those things he loved to do. Everybody was surprised to learn about this information from me. Because no urban friend of him from Calcutta had ever seen him playing on flute. A few days before, two professors of comparative literature from Jadavpur

University had been cleaning up the goods used by David, at the request of the British Council. There they found three flutes made of bamboo from a trunk. He had love for country songs, especially for the simplicity of their melodies and passions. He used to take out his little transis-tor whenever there was any playing of country song on the radio. I used to translate that to him had I been present there. He didn't like those stupid country songs being played on the radio. Sarcastically, he referred them to as 'Ballygunjian country songs'. When he had been staying at Santiniketan he eagerly listened to the songs sung by the santhals which synchronized with their natural movements. David had told me about this so many times.

Initially David used to collect various designs of temples and different elements of Bengali culture. While working on them he developed a strange affinity of love and respect with them. He had realized why some people often burst into tears while listening to the songs of Baishnav Padabali. He saw an old widow crying uninterruptedly in a *kirtan* congegration in East Bengal. He narrated to me in different situations a number of times about the incident as how she embraced a little boy sitting beside her. He did indeed realise that the Indian philosophy which is woven with the culture is not only a pure philosophy or subject but a matter of feeling too. He adopted the habit of putting off the shoes far away before entering a temple and hence started to wear sandals which were too easy to put off or on.

THE FRUGAL : David was too frugal a person as far as expenses to be borne were concerned. He was too frugal to be considered a miser, sometimes. How easily he could have cleaned those torn out vests and wear them! I can recapitulate, once we two were very busy at daybreak for a long time with translations of patua songs. He had worn a torn out vest whose shoulder had elongated over to the elbow. On that very day Dr. Kalyan Ganguli had to deliver a speech on the patuas at the Victoria Memorial. We both had planned to attend there. Due to short of time he came out wearing a shirt and pant in a huff. Later it was found in the

tram that his torn off vest was lurking out from under his shirt. Trying to cover that up he told, I have forgotten to change my old vest. David used to reduce his old shirts into handkerchiefs by cutting them into small pieces. He could bind books beautifully all by himself. Once he had bound an old book in Greek, which could not be found in England, all by himself with a thin thread, wrapped up by leather of red colour and inscribed on it, as the pages would have been destroyed had it been bound by a regular binder. That was the most beautifully bound book in his huge collection of books. He learnt the art of book binding out of sheer interest when he was just a student in school. Just before his death David and I went to a binder at Gariahat to learn about which kind of cloth should be pasted at the rear of an old 'pat' at the lowest cost. As per that binder's instructions I had bought a bundle of cloth at Rs.10 from College Street. We decided to mend the pats with those clothes on any of the given holiday. But ill-fated, David passed away leaving back everything. David knew lots of petty works— which could be attributed to his frugal character. He could hemmed up his own torn off shirt himself. He was not a prodigal. He could devour that much food which he just needed. He did never leave a single rice in his plate after eating. At the later stage David used to spend those money for the works on temple and afterwards for the patuas, which he had saved by his frugality. He had gifted uncountable number of pictures of terracottas and temples to so many people on the basis of simple requests. He had to spend hefty amounts to enlarge and print many pictures just to give them as gifts. He liked to do these, because the communications made by these gifts were very helpful for the sake of the works on temple. Sometimes he had to suffer too much for these. At times some of his friends used to issue long requests for innumerable pictures. Though undesirable he had to send number of photos as gifts. I can discuss later on if I get the opportunity to express about how he helped so large number of patuas out of his hard earned money. One such witness is Sri Sudhangshu Kumar Roy of Coomarswamy Institute. To write something in memory of David is not possible in

this little span. I can't believe that David is no more with us. He was the only helpful adviser behind my multiple kind of works. Many of my belongings and most of my valuable books were gifted by him. I used to take care of his belongings when he used to stay away at England. I had to search out worms in his books and to inspect them regularly— I had to act as his caretaker. This year he returned before the autumn vacation. Just prior to the Durga Puja he handed over to me a small packet and referred it to as Puja gift. After unwrapping I found a beautiful Parker pen.

Hardly could I imagine that day that the first complete prose to be written by this pen would be the reminiscence of David McCutcheon.

Suhrid Kumar Bhowmick

UNPUBLISHED LETTERS OF
DAVID J. McCUTCHION

Written to
Sri Suhrid Kumar Bhowmick
from 1964 to 1971

4 Nundy St.
Calcutta 29
27.2.65

Dear Suhrid, will let you know when I propose to visit Tamruk. If you come with me, would you meet me on the way, or at Tamruk, or come to Calcutta first? Meanwhile, please make enquiries about interesting temples in Hooghly or Bidnapore district. By (interesting I mean ① old, ② of unique design (pre-20th century), ③ decorated with



Sri. Suhrid Chowdhury
Raja Ram Mohun Roy
College,
P.O. Namque Para
Hooghly

terracotta figures.

I am so busy, I cannot promise a visit to your college in the near future, though it is always a pleasure to talk about the temple.

Yours sincerely,
David McCutcheon

Dear Suhrid,

It is nice to hear from you again. I had been told by a friend at the Radicals Office that you were now teaching in a college in Hooghly : I hope you are enjoying it, and finding the place rewarding. I once visited Krishnanagar in Hooghly district, and I was told it was the birth place of Ram Mohun Roy : is that the same as Radhanagar and Nangulpara? I did not find any temple decorated with beautiful terracotta. I found a Gopinath mundir (5-ratna), and nearby a large temple with a single tower decorated with lotuses, but no figures, and coloured. Does the temple you are referring to have figures? Do describe it more closely— is it a

Dear Suhrid,

Congratulation on passing your Bengali M.A.— that is very good news.

It is too late to go to Tamruk before the summer now. It is already getting hot, and my week-ends are all engaged for the rest of March. But if you don't think it will be too hot, we could go on April 5th. Otherwise leave it till after I return from England next July.

I am still hoping to visit the Sunderbans one day.

Yours sincerely

David McCutcheon

4, Nundy Street, Calcutta 29

21st Feb. 1965

55/5 Purna Das Road, Cal- 29

11. 3. (19)64

hut type temple, is it dated, what is depicted in the panels over the entrance? After visiting Krishnanagar, I walked to Ubidpur, but was again dis-appointed by the undecorated, cemented temple.

I have been to many places this winter season, especially in Hooghly District— e.g. Sinet, Krishnapur, Gurap, Arambagh, Guptipara; also Jaugram and Kulingram in Burdwan District, at Christmas and New Year I was away for 10 days in Murshidabad and Birbhum; more recently I have spent 4 days in Midnapore and Bankura; and 4 days in Purulia district. Today I was in Jaynagar-Mazilpur south of Calcutta. I have not yet been to Tamluk, and have plenty of other places still on my list— most of them needing more than one day. Of course all this has made me terribly busy, getting behind with my work. Last Thursday I gave a lecture on temples and terracottas with slides at the British Council, which I am repeating twice next week.

I'm glad you liked my article on East Pakistan— I tried to be as objective as possible, but some people say I am unfair to Calcutta (I don't think so). Of course you may translate it and publish it in your magazine.

With all good wishes,

Yours sincerely
David McCutcheon

I am now staying with a Bengali family near Gariahat— 3rd street on the left going North.

4 Nundy St., Calcutta 29
27. 2. (19)65

Dear Suhrid,

I'll let you know when I propose to visit Tamluk. If you come with me, would you meet me on the way, or at Tamluk, or come to Calcutta first? Meanwhile, please make enquiries about interesting temples in Hooghly or Midnapore districts. By 'interesting' I mean (1) old, (2) of curious design (pre-20th century), (3) decorated with terracotta figures.

I am so busy, I cannot promise a visit to your college in the near future, though it is always a pleasure to talk about the temples.

Yours sincerely,
David McCutcheon

4 Nundy St.,
Calcutta 29
17. 3. (19)65

Dear Suhrid,

I got your card too late to let you know that I would be away at Malda on the day you were coming to Calcutta. The best way to meet me is to ring me up when you come to Calcutta (46-4311). I am usually out all day Sunday; and I expect to be away at Easter time. The best time to ring me is any morning before 10, or most afternoons (except Tuesday) between 2 and 4. I spent 3 very rewarding days visiting the old mosques and mausoleums of Gaur and Pandua.

Yours,
David McCutcheon

4 Nundy St.,
Calcutta 29
16. 5. (19)65

Dear Suhrid,

I shall be going to a seminar in Mysore in June, leaving Calcutta May 28th for about 3 weeks. So we will have to postpone our Midnapore trip. I have not yet printed my pictures of Malancha— terribly busy preparing a seminar paper, etc. etc. I shall get my Malancha pictures after a week on Monday, and try to write you a description then. I hope to get the Rammohan biography soon.

Yours,
David McCutcheon

4 Nundy Street,
Calcutta 29
20th July, 1965

Dear Suhrid,

Thank you for your letter. Here is the account of the temples at Malancha which I promised you. It is very factual and straightforward : I leave all the decoration to you. Use as much of it as you need in any article you care to write. I have not yet been able to decipher the inscriptions on the North and East sides of the Kali temple. I enclose four photographs. If any more are necessary, you had better come and see the lot in order to choose which you need.

I did not get back from the South till the 29th June. After the seminar at Mysore University, I toured the temples of Mysore state for about a fortnight. This was very strenuous, with poor food and unpredictable bus services. From Madras I was also able to visit Mahaballipuram and Kanchipuram. I took many photographs, although unfortunately in Bangalore I was sold two rolls of dud film, so that I lost all the photos I took on trips from Bangalore.

I was interested to read in your letter that you found terracotta figures at Tamluk. However indistinct they may be, they would be very interesting if they are as old as the 13th century— but are you sure the temple is as old as that?

I do not intend to make any excursions during the rainy season, not at any rate before September. For one thing, colour film rapidly spoils in this heat, and for another the conditions are not good. But we may go to Tamluk in September. During the Puja vacation I hope to go to South again— to Hyderabad and the Deccan.

I have received one copy of your magazine with my article on E. Pak (East Pakistan) translated by you. I am glad your readers liked my article, and did not get foolishly offended.

Probodhbabu has still not got for me the copy of Collet's biography, which he promised. So the article is still not written. Just now I am very busy with a report of the Mysore seminar. In

early September I shall give two short radio talks on the temples of Bengal.

All good wishes,

David McCutcheon

4 Nundy St.,
Calcutta 29
6. 11. (19)65

Dear Suhrid,

Last Sunday I got back from a long tour in M.P., Maharashtra and Andhra. I saw many beautiful but little known temples. The journey took over a month : Raipur— Bilaspur— Nagpur— Warrangal— Hyderabad— Vijaywada.

It would be very convenient for me to visit Tamluk next Sunday, Nov. 14th. Would you be free to go with me then? If necessary I could be free on the Saturday also. Do write back immediately to say whether you can accompany me, and to fix a place and time to meet.

I received your letter of 12th August. Did you write the article on Malancha temples?

I did not find any trace of the two students you sent to our Dept. Perhaps they had III class degree, in which case a new University regulation does not permit us to accept them.

Our Dept. is holding a Yeats Seminar and exhibition at the end of December. I hope you will be able to come. I will be very busy preparing for it the next few weeks. I must also write a paper.

I am very sorry I did not write your Rammohun article. The man who promised to get me Collet's book still has not got it.

With all good wishes,

David McCutcheon