

The multifaceted Dr John Berry White and the Berry White Medical School in Dibrugarh, Assam, India

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For the first time, the scattered information related to the multifaceted Dr John Berry White (1834–1896) and the establishment of Berry White Medical School (BWMS) have been validated. The BWMS and its up-gradation in 1947 forms the nucleus of medical education in Assam. The multifaceted John Berry White beyond his duties as Military Surgeon and Civil Surgeon to the Government of Upper Assam, played a vital role in developing tea, railways, coal and oil; engendering a rare narrative that straddles history of both healthcare and industries in 19th century Assam.

On 23 July 1858, the future founder of the Berry White Medical School (BWMS), Assistant Surgeon Dr John Berry White (JBW), joined the Bengal Medical Service. The 23-yr-old Irishman (born on 5 June 1834)¹ was apparently ill on arrival and posted to Assam to recover in the presumed colder climate. In 1835, the same climatic advantage had sanctioned tea cultivation in Assam². By 1858, when JBW joined the 42nd Native Infantry Regiment (previously the 1st Assam Light Infantry) stationed in Dibrugarh, tea plantations had already claimed 8000 acres in Assam³. The surgeon and tea would subsequently develop a much deeper connect over time. In 1859, JBW was also appointed Civil Surgeon of the Bengal Medical Service for Lakhimpur district. Though these records mention MD against his name¹, none of the Bengal Medical Department lists sourced, display an MB or MD⁴. On the strength of his combined military and civil portfolio, designated the Chief Military and Civil Surgeon to the Government in Upper Assam (Lakhimpur), JBW became an important member of the administration⁵. The erstwhile Lakhimpur not only included Dibrugarh, but also covered most of Upper Assam, which encompassed several districts of present-day Arunachal Pradesh. Lakhimpur district would be the focal point for tea, oil, coal, railways and the first medical school in 19th century Assam. JBW would play an active part in their development through his position, proximity, philanthropy, personal interest and acumen.

JBW's first military assignment as Assistant Surgeon in Medical Charge of Abor Expeditionary Force took him to Pasighat (then part of the North East Frontier Agency), to counter an uprising by the Meyong (Abor) tribe. In quelling

the uprising, British casualties were mainly due to poisoned arrows. Even in the 21st century, tribal communities of North East India are proficient at using poison extracted from the aconite plant to paralyse prey while hunting or fishing⁶. Using cupping, suction and ligatures above the wound, JBW was able to ensure good recovery from the effects of the poison. His Commanding Officer reporting to the Commissioner of Assam stated, 'I have to add also the highly meritorious conduct of Assistant Surgeon White, whose devotion and attention to the wounded, in positions of great risk, was beyond all praise'⁷. JBW's performance in his first assignment was characteristic of the organized, informed, often innovative and praiseworthy manner in which he would work throughout his life.

As Civil Surgeon of Lakhimpur, JBW presided over the various medical departments of this widespread district. Among his prescribed duties was the regular medical inspection of tea gardens and evaluating their medical staff (compounders)⁸. JBW was deeply dissatisfied with the standards of the compounders, while confronting inadequate medical facilities, contaminated water, unhealthy housing conditions; epidemics of malaria, kala-azar, diarrhoea and other diseases that killed innumerable people, including the tea-garden workers. Though a few licensed doctors and health workers were brought from Kolkata and Dhaka, the healthcare infrastructure was far from sufficient. JBW's initial efforts in augmenting healthcare began by training local youth, using personal funds to procure basic equipment, and collaborating with the Baptist Missionary set up near Graham Bazaar in Dibrugarh⁹. It is this part of his work that is often considered the real precursor to BWMS, and attains

near hagiographic status, given the paucity of primary tangible records, at least as on date. JBW also encouraged meritorious Assamese youth to study medicine and continue studies abroad¹⁰.

After 12 years of service as Assistant Surgeon, JBW was promoted to the rank of Surgeon in 1870 (ref. 4), then to Surgeon Major in 1876 and posted to the 44th Native Infantry in 1877 (earlier the Sylhet Light Infantry)¹¹. It is about this time that his interests in various other fields come to the fore. Subsequently, as founding director of the Assam Railways and Trading Company in 1881 and a member of the London Committee of the Indian Tea Association, his efforts were pivotal in setting up the Dibru-Saidya railway¹². JBW is also accredited with a salient role in opening a coalfield at Makum and the Assam oilfields¹³. His

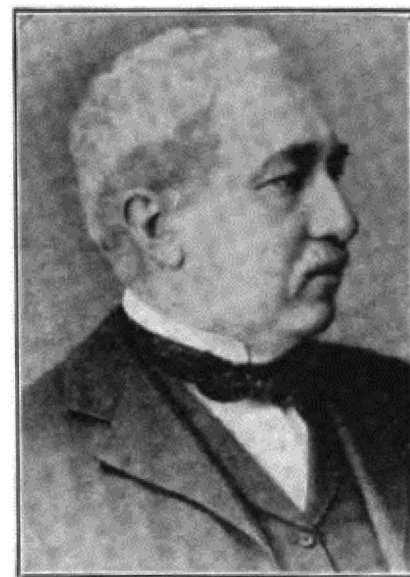


Figure 1. Dr John Berry White, Vice Chairman of the Indian Tea Association, London, UK during 1895–96 (ref. 20).

final posting was the 43rd Native Infantry in 1880 (earlier the 2nd Assam Light Infantry)¹⁴. After 24 years of service in Assam JBW retired on 15 July 1882 (ref. 15), with a service record that merited the honorary rank of Brigade Surgeon, post retirement¹.

On the ground 'the Dibru-Saidya railway was completed in various stages between 1882 and 1885, though its length was only seventy-eight miles, it served a large number of important tea estates and provided an outlet for the coal and oil from Makum'¹⁶. JBW was present for its official opening on 18 February 1884, inaugurated by the Chief Commissioner, Charles Elliot. The train left Rehabari Railway Station in Dibrugarh for a trip to Margherita and back, carrying 400 passengers⁵. JBW also bought 25 shares in *The Assam Times* to be published at the Radhanath Press set up by Radhanath Changkakoty in Dibrugarh. When the press was destroyed by fire in 1883, JBW arranged for a replacement from England, via the Chief Engineer Assam Railways and Trading Company. Unfortunately, the new manager did not hand over the equipment, but kept it for printing railway tickets. Changkakoty finally did manage to turn things around and began publication in 1895 from Dibrugarh¹⁷.

The Royal Society for the Encouragement of Arts, Manufactures and Commerce requested JBW to present a paper in London 1887, to commemorate 50 years of the tea in Assam. This paper remains widely quoted as a reference for the status of tea in 19th century Assam¹⁸. At the age of 53, JBW married Marianna Louise Lacy in London in 1887 and their only child Eileen Matilda White, was born in 1889 (ref. 19). This is the only tangible fact about his personal life that we were able to retrieve, as the names of his parents and any other family members remain unknown to date. JBW was elected Vice Chairman of the Indian Tea Association in London during 1895–96 (Figure 1); yet another position of rare privilege²⁰. He died in London on 19 November 1896, aged 62 (ref. 21). He would remember Assam in his legacy, marking out Rs 50,000 for establishing a medical school in Dibrugarh.

On 28 June 1902, the former Chief Commissioner of Assam, John Henry Stedman Cotton, speaking at the Assam Dinner in London (a tradition begun by JBW in London after his retirement)

said, 'Dr. Berry White was devoted to Assam and in his will, he left a generous legacy of fifty thousand Rupees for the establishment of a Medical School at Dibrugarh. There were difficulties in the way but I am glad to tell you that they were overcome, and during this month my locum tenens, Mr. Fuller has had the pleasure of opening this School. I myself laid the foundation stone and watched its building with paternal care'²². Work on BWMS began by 1898 and is noted in the Assam State Archives, as 'Establishment of the Berry White Medical School in Dibrugarh' in 1898, 1899, 1900 and 1902 (ref. 23). The sum given by JBW was supplemented by the Government and the school began functioning in 1900. Sir Joseph Bampfylde Fuller, first Lt. Gov. of Eastern Bengal and Assam officially inaugurated BWMS in June 1902 (ref. 24).

In 2017, we visited the dilapidated remnants of BWMS in Graham Bazar in Dibrugarh; and learnt that plans for restoration and a museum have been put in place. BWMS originally contained laboratories and dissecting rooms with accommodation for 200 students. Under the Assam Medical Act, it offered three courses; the four-year LMP (Licentiate Medical Practitioner) course for assistant surgeons; the two-year LCP (Licentiate Compounder Practitioners) course for compounders and the one-year course for dhais (nursing assistants); examinations were conducted by the Assam Medical Examination Board. Matriculation was the minimum educational qualification required for admission. The staff were drawn from superintendents and specially selected instructors from Government Senior and Junior Services²⁵. Table 1 provides a list of lecturers, subjects taught and Medical Superintendents of BWMS from 1901 to 1947.

In 1938, the Assam Branch of LMP in its annual meeting under the chairmanship of Lokapriya Gopinath Bordoloi, the then premier of the Congress Government of Assam, decided to convert BWMS to a full-fledged medical college. The Assam Medical College and Hospital (AMCH), Dibrugarh, was established on 3 November 1947, through a process of upgradation of BWMS, and inaugurated formally by the First Chief Minister of Assam, Bharat Ratna Lokopriya Gopinath Bordoloi. The admission of the first batch of students was completed in September 1947 with six seats²⁶. The

website of AMCH has good information on the early pioneering faculty, who would subsequently lay the foundation for medical education in the North East Region (NER), by guiding and teaching at Guwahati Medical College and Hospital, Guwahati, and Silchar Medical College and Hospital, Silchar, in the 1960s.

We had the good fortune to interact with some senior medical practitioners from NER, in Dibrugarh who recalled relevant associations with BWMS and AMCH. Dr Talimeren Ao, who was the flag-bearer of the Indian contingent in the 1948 Summer Olympics in London, UK, and captained the India national football team in its first official game, had enrolled in AMCH for an ENT course after his MBBS from Calcutta. Due to health issues, he returned home to Kohima, where he was the first Medical Superintendent of Naga Hospital. A part of this story was narrated to us by Dr L. M. Murry, the first PG surgeon in Nagaland and immediate successor of Dr N. Iralu. They both were alumni of AMCH, and we had the good fortune of interacting with them in Kohima. Dr Sagun Jain from Dibrugarh had a wealth of information about his student days in AMCH in the early 1960s. He recounted that his admission to the FRCS programme in Edinburgh, UK, was approved on the strength of being from AMCH, which was recognized by the British Medical Council. Jain was emphatic that the good will enjoyed by AMCH was derived from its predecessor BWMS.

In the course of our interaction with the medical fraternity in Dibrugarh, Guwahati, Silchar, Kohima, Imphal, Shillong and Agartala, the name 'Dr John Berry White', opened a magical flood of memories and deep respect. Yet, the narrative had hardly gone beyond the reminiscences; and the scattered data had not found place in any peer-reviewed journal. In this note, the multifaceted JBW and BWMS have been validated using data culled from books, archives, records and personal interactions. JBW's bequest is significant as it established the first medical school by 1900, while lack of funding delayed the opening of King Edward VII Memorial Pasteur Institute and Welsh Mission Hospital (both in Assam's erstwhile capital Shillong) till 1917 and 1922 respectively. JBW's vision though the LMP programmes of BWMS yielded the double dividend of

Table 1. List of available lecturers, subjects taught and Medical Superintendants of Berry White Medical School (BWMS) from 1901 to 1947

Date	Details
1901*	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lt. Col. Ewan Cameron MacLeod IMS; born 18 August, 1868; joined service on 29 January 1894. Civil Surgeon Lakhimpur and Medical Superintendent BWMS from 1 April 1901 and again from 17 August 1918. • Dr Kali Prasanna Basu LMS; born 1874 Jessore; joined service in 1897. Assistant Surgeon 3rd Grade, lecturer in Chemistry and materia medica. • Dr Sushil Chandra Bhattacharji, LMS; born 15 April 1872, Calcutta; joined service on 17 January 1896. Assistant Surgeon 2nd Grade, lecturer of anatomy and surgery continued up to 1903.
6 September 1904*	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dr Kali Prasanna Basu LMS; born 1874, Jessore; joined service in 1897; was Assistant Surgeon 3rd Grade, lecturer of chemistry and materia medica. Trained at X-ray Institution Dehra Dun February–April 1908.
1908 [#]	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dr Asher Leventon, Civil Surgeon and Medical Superintendent BWMS till 1918
1910*	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dr Sushil Chandra Bhattacharji, LMS; continued as Assistant Surgeon 1st Grade, lecturer of anatomy and surgery. Presumably continuation of service from 1901. Held charge as Civil Surgeon from 11 to 20 March 1910 and Medical Superintendent BWMS.
1910–1912*	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Krishna Hari Das, LMS; born 1876, Gauhati; joined service on 6 April 1902; Civil Surgeon, lecturer and Medical Superintendent BWMS.
1911–16*	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dr Kali Prasanna Basu LMS, held charge of Civil Station Dibrugarh, attaining Senior Grade 1 with periods of training in pathology, X-rays.
1913*	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Purna Chandra Lahiri LMS; born 21 July 1889, Rangpur; joined service on 18 April 1913. Temporary Assistant Surgeon from 18 April to 23 May 1913 and lecturer from 1 July 1920.
1915–1917*	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Paresh Chandra Guha, LMS; born March 1888, Dacca; joined service on 11 April 1913. Assistant Surgeon and lecturer and again from 19 February 1919
11 November 1917 and 9 December 1917*	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dr Kali Prasanna Basu officiated as Civil Surgeon, Lakhimpur and Medical Superintendent BWMS.
1918 [#]	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dr Asher Leventon Civil Surgeon and Medical Superintendent BWMS moved to Campbell Medical College, Calcutta. He named his home 'Dibrugarh' on retirement in 1924.
1918*	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Jamini Nath Ghosh, MB, born 8 September 1885, Faridpur, joined service on 6 January 1915. Temporary Assistant Surgeon and lecturer from 24 November 1918 to 14 July 1920.
1919*	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Nisa Nath Ghosh, MB, born 14 February 1891, Hoogly; joined service on 5 March 1916. Temporary Assistant Surgeon and lecturer from 1 January 1919 to 7 April 1919.
1921*	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Robindro Mohan Deb MB, born 24 October 1896; Sylhet; joined service on 23 September 1919. Temporary Assistant Surgeon and lecturer from 6 June 1921. • Lt. Col. Hubert Innes, MD (London) IMS, born 24 August 1873; joined service on 28 January 1899. Civil Surgeon Lakhimpur from 7 March 1921 and Medical Superintendent BWMS
?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dr Colin McIver[#]
1936**	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lt. Col. J. L. Sen Civil Surgeon and Medical Superintendent BWMS
1947 [#]	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dr Donnelly, Civil Surgeon and Medical Superintendent BWMS. He handed over charge to Maj. J. R. Kar

*Ref. 23; [#]Ref. 9; **Ref. 28.

training manpower *in situ* and a viable nucleus from which medical education in the NER was initiated. AMCH born out of BWMS was pivotal in establishing the Guwahati Medical College and Silchar Medical College. JBW's role in the State's industry (tea, coal, oil and railways) and healthcare development is widely acknowledged, and especially endorsed during negotiations for restoring the BWMS building²⁷.

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