Letters (60) from Maria Knox, Nasirabad, India, Anne Carmichael-Smyth (3), Kolkata, India, Bath and Birmingham, England, and Harriet Graham (1), Gazipur, India, to their mother, Mrs. Harriet Butler, 1816 November 11-1822 February 17 and undated

The Maria Knox letters are 60 letters written by Maria Knox (née Becher, 1795–1822) to her mother, Mrs. Harriet Butler (née Cowper, previously Becher and Christie, 1770–1847), written between August 17, 1819 and February 2, 1822. The collection also includes 2 notes in the hand of Maria’s husband Alexander Knox (1759–1834), as well a letter from her sisters Harriet Graham (née Becher, 1790–1820) and 3 letters from Anne Carmichael-Smyth (née Becher, previously Thackeray, 1798–1864). Anne was the mother of the novelist William Makepeace Thackeray (1811–1863), who appears as a child in some of his Aunt Maria’s letters.

Maria was born in Bengal, British India, in 1795, the third of four children. The eldest, a brother, died in childhood, leaving only the three sisters. Her father was John Harman Becher (1764–1800), a high-ranking official in the British East India Company. He married her mother, Harriet Cowper, in Kolkata (then Calcutta) on December 25, 1786. She was apparently of mixed British and Indian descent. Sometime at the end of the 1790s, Maria’s mother left her father for Captain Charles Christie, with whom she established an informal marriage. John Harman Becher died bankrupt on October 6, 1800. Captain Christie died on April 30, 1805. On October 28, 1806, she officially married Captain Edward William Butler, with whom she remained until his death on August 1, 1819.

Maria’s parents sent her and her sisters to England as children, a situation common to British children born to East India Company officials. She was raised there by her maternal grandmother and her aunt in the town of Fareham, Hampshire, England. There she and her sisters were given a conservative Anglican education. Maria’s sisters returned to India in 1809, and she followed them in 1814. She married Colonel Alexander Knox on November 22, 1817, in Rewari, Haryana (then part of Punjab). She was twenty-two and he was fifty-seven. It is not known how they met. They lived in Nasirabad, Ajmeer Province (now Rajasthan, also known at that time as Rajpootana; Nasirabad was then spelled Nuserabad or Nusseerabad), where Maria remained until just before her death.

The collection contains three years of letters, all but a few sent from Nasirabad. There are some periods in that time for which no letters exist. In some cases, this is because Maria and her mother were together during that period. In others, letters probably existed but do not survive. The four major gaps, for whatever reason, are 1) September 20 to November 2, 1819; 2) November 2, 1819 to February 20, 1820; 3) February 20 to October 8, 1820; and 4) November 24 to December 23, 1821. This also shows that there are only two letters between the fall of 1819 and the fall of 1820. The majority of the materials in the collection were
written in 1821. The letters also mention correspondence from Anne Carmichael-Smyth, only some of which is held by the Morgan. There is also one letter from Mrs. Butler to Maria, which is held in a different collection.

The address panels on Maria’s letters to her mother testify to Mrs. Butler’s extraordinary mobility during the years following Captain Butler’s death. She travelled extensively throughout Central and Eastern India, often staying with friends whom the letters are sent care of. Maria was often unable to keep up with her mother’s travels, as the crossed-out addresses on her letters indicate that they were forwarded to her mother’s new location.

Maria was in poor health for most of her life. The climate in India severely worsened her condition. Her health is the most consistent topic of discussion in the letters. Her couch appears as the place of convalescence, to which she was frequently confined due to weakness. Besides weakness, her symptoms included headaches, stomach pains, and vomiting. They reached a crisis during her pregnancy in 1821–22, ultimately causing her death on May 28, 1822.

The letters begin just after the death of Mrs. Butler’s husband, Captain Edward William Butler. Letters from Maria and her sister Anne comment on their mother’s attempts to get compensation from a life insurance policy her husband had purchased, which eventually succeeded. They then discuss the consequences of the death of Allen Graham, husband of Maria’s sister Harriet. This leads to one of the major themes of the letters: the actual, planned, or potential departure of various members of the family to England. The widow Harriet Graham did leave India at the end of 1819. Anne and her second husband, Henry Carmichael-Smyth, left for England on February 20, 1820. Mrs. Butler considered going with the Carmichael-Smyth’s, but decided to postpone it. Her vacillation over whether to leave for England was a source of great anxiety for Maria, who feared that she would be isolated in India were her mother to leave the country. Maria and her husband later determined to leave for England themselves, due to Maria’s poor health and Alexander’s dissatisfaction with his treatment by the East India Company. Financial limitations and Maria’s pregnancy ultimately prevented them from leaving India.

Following Harriet and Anne’s departures, the letters begin to discuss their life in England. Some of Maria’s letters are notes attached to forwarded packets from Anne. Life in England was seriously disturbed by Harriet Graham’s death in the first half of 1820.

With one sister dead and the other in England, and her mother in a different part of India, Maria took comfort in her friendship with Charlotte Elliot. Charlotte was a distant relative by marriage, whose husband had died in the 1810s. She lived with the Knox’s from late 1819 until she remarried on August 25, 1821. Maria’s letters describe their friendship and Charlotte’s eventual engagement to Mr. Welchman, a local doctor. Mr. Welchman would later care for Maria near the end of her life.

Charlotte’s previous suitor had been another doctor, Mr. Halliday, whose conflict with the hospital in which he worked is described in the letters. Another interpersonal conflict occurred closer to home, between the Knox’s and the Fagan family. What began with an
argument between Alexander and his subordinate Mr. Fagan became a months-long feud that drew in Maria and Mrs. Fagan. This affair is discussed extensively in the letters.

Maria recounted friendships between British families in Nasirabad in detail. Along with these friendships, however, came the isolation of being part of tiny ruling class which intentionally kept its distance from Indian society.

Political controversies also made their way into the letters. Maria comments on the royal divorce between King George IV and Caroline of Brunswick. Maria and Alexander sided with Caroline. Military conquest and Indian politics were parts of daily life in Nasirabad, and these often come out in the letters.

The letters end with Maria’s pregnancy, which led to her final illness and death in 1822. Maria tells her mother that she is pregnant in her letter of July 5, 1821. Maria was immediately concerned about what the pregnancy would do to her health. During her ensuing illness, Maria openly speculated that she would not survive. Her mother decided to come to Nasirabad to help care for her and the baby. Charlotte’s husband Mr. Welchman, who had received gynecological training in Britain, treated Maria during her pregnancy. After a brief period of improved health in the fall of 1821, her condition declined drastically that winter. Mr. Welchman determined to take her to Kolkata. He hoped that the ocean air would improve her condition. Having left her husband at home, Maria wrote her last letter to her mother at the beginning of her journey to Kolkata, on February 17, 1822. She died three months later on May 28, 1822. Her death announcement in the December 1822 edition of The Asiatic Journal and Monthly Register read: “Mrs. Maria Knox, the lady of Brigadier A. Knox, of the 2d regt. Native Cavalry, aged 27 years.”

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