

The Story of Morris

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The Biligirirangan Hills are popularly known for the temple of Lord Ranganatha located atop a sheer, white cliff on the north-western edge of the Biligirirangan range, the semi-nomadic aboriginal Soligas who inhabit the vast stretches of forest spread over an area of 540 sq.km, and in more recent decades, for its wildlife. Little do many people know that, literally, these hills were once ruled by the Morrises: the father and son duo.



The white rock-face of Biligirirangan Hills

Morris's tryst with the Biligirirangan Hills began in the mid 1880s, with Randolph Hayton Morris, son of a rector in a church and an adventurous refugee from Muthill, near Crieff, Perthshire in central Scotland, U.K. In keeping with the adventurous spirit of his times, Randolph Morris ran away from home at the age of 18, to work on a ship, and later landed in India in 1877, during the year of great famine. Initially, he became a coffee planter in Coorg during the coffee boom, and later shifted to the Nilgiris. He was first attracted to the Biligirirangan Hills in the mid 1880s, when he viewed the chain of distant hills from the northern edge of the Nilgiris; due to their

reputation of being an elephant infested terrain, the hills were little-known to the outside world. In 1886, he planned an expedition to explore it. Setting out from Nilgiris, he crossed the Moyar Gorge and followed a narrow game-path, as his local aides hacked a way through the dense, deciduous forest of the outer slopes, to emerge out on the crest of hills. After a few more hunting trips to the hills, he became enchanted by the beauty of the primeval forested area covered with deep valleys, rocky cliffs, evergreen forests and rolling grasslands in the upper reaches, and found that the deep central valley was ideal for the cultivation of coffee.



Ralph Morris during his hunting days. Image : Courtesy Ms.Monica Jackson

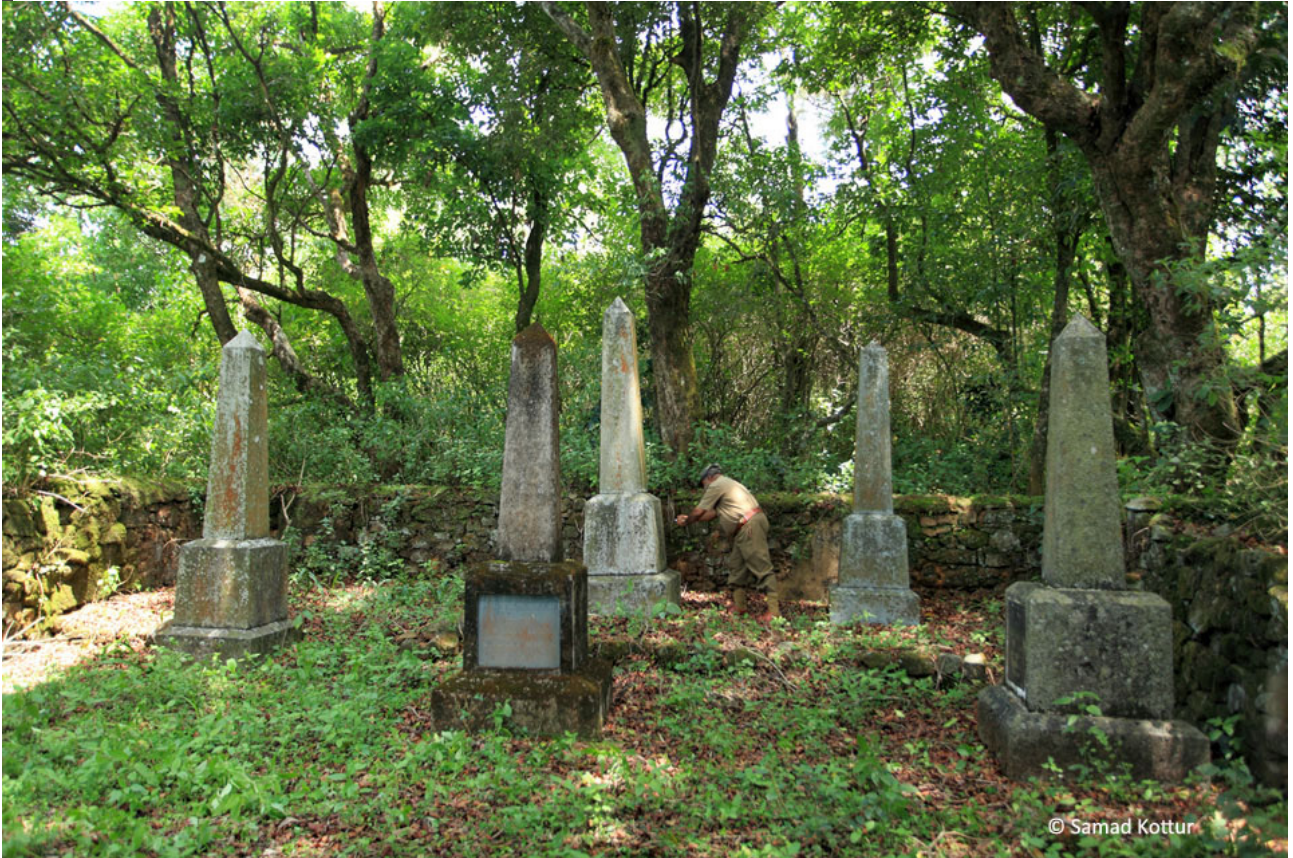
Soon, he acquired a large forest area from the Forest Department, and in 1887, under very trying conditions, he opened the first of his five estates – the Attikan – meaning the grove of wild figs. The next year, he began building a private road into the hills from the hamlet of Punajur. In 1890, he built his stone house, the Attikan Bungalow, in the cove of one of the highest peaks. In the next twenty years, he opened up four more estates.



Attikan Bungalow

In 1895, his second son, Randolph (Ralph for short) Camroux Morris was born in Attikan. When Ralph was barely six weeks old, while on a hunting trip with his wife Mabel and a friend, a gaur wounded by his friend charged at the senior Morris and tossed him into the air. In the process, one of the horns of the bull ripped through his ribs and clean-removed one of his lungs. Until medical help arrived, as his wife tended him, he kept breathing through a six-inch gaping hole in his back. Although he survived, he never recovered fully from this near-fatal injury. Ralph was sent to England to be educated in the Blue Coat School and at the Blundell's in Tiverton, Devon. In the summer of 1912, Ralph gave up his ambition of studying Zoology at Oxford, and returned to Attikan to help his ailing father and later, support his widowed mother. Senior Morris died in 1918, due to pneumonia. He was buried atop his favourite hill at Bellaji in the Biligirirangans, in the very place where he had first built his two-room residence in the late 1880s. His grave survives till

today, along with the memorials of his wife and sons. After his death, Mabel Morris erected a stone bull, the Kaati Basava, over a rock, at the very spot where her husband was gored by the injured gaur, to commemorate his near-fatal encounter (the bull is now installed in a roadside temple). The estates were passed on to his relatives, while the Attikan estate and bungalow were taken over by his eldest son.



The Morris family burial site at Bellaji



Kaati Basava

Ralph Morris succeeded his father as the un-crowned king of the Biligirirangans, a wild-lifer's paradise, and emerged in the following years as a fearless hunter, a naturalist with an indomitable spirit, and a friend of the Soligas. Tales of his close encounters with peril, during his hunting trips, became legendary. A year after his father's death, he married Heather Kinloch, the eldest of the four beautiful daughters of Angus Murray Kinloch, a Scottish planter, naturalist and ornithologist, who had an enormous passion for snakes, then living close to Kotagiri in the Nilgiris. In 1923, Heather and Ralph planted their own estate, the Honnametti, meaning 'golden footprint' and built a bungalow with a long verandah, near the summit of one of the high hills in the central spine of Biligirirangan range. Ralph's three daughters grew up at Honnametti and even his grand-children spent much of their childhood days there, making them the fourth generation of Morris to live in the Biligirirangans.



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Honnametti bungalow



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Interiors of Honnametti bungalow

In those days, the hills and the scrub jungle of the surrounding plateau from which the Biligirirangans rose were teeming with wildlife. Ralph was tireless and adventurous, and roamed the hills endlessly, investing himself in observing and building-up knowledge on the dense forests and the abundant wildlife they harboured. He hunted on foot, with a strict code, and was known for keeping a cool mind in the face of adversity. Also, he was constantly on call for the Soligas, who lived in the many Podus scattered across the vast, verdant expanse of Biligirirangans, to relieve them of rogue elephants and cattle-slaying felines. The observations he made and the knowledge gained during his forays in the Biligirirangans and the surrounding region formed the basis for innumerable articles he published in the Journal of Bombay Natural History Society on the forests and wildlife of Biligirirangans, between 1922 and 1958. In the process, he earned a reputation as an undisputed expert on South-Indian wildlife.



Lone Araucaria tree in midst of the hills, planted by the Morrises



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The split rock near Honnametti

In 1935, Ralph jointly led the Vernay-Hopwood expedition to the remote Upper Chindwin region of Burma, to collect zoological specimens for the Asiatic Hall of the American Museum of Natural History, New York. In the same year, he led another field expedition to the Malayan jungles, to look, though unsuccessfully, for the Javan (Lesser) One-horned Rhinoceros (*Rhinoceros sondaicus*). As an experienced coffee planter, he became the 30th President of the United Planters' Association of South India during 1938-39. Later, he went on to serve as a volunteer in the Second World War and was assigned to serve in the Middle East, where he witnessed the Siege of Tobruk, before returning to Honnametti after the war. As the fame of his exploits spread, Ralph was much sought-after by wildlife photographers, collectors for world museums, Indian Civil Service and Army personnel, and rich Americans, who wanted to indulge in big-game hunting. The many reputed guests that Ralph and Heather hosted at Honnametti included Arthur S. Vernay, Dr. Salim Ali, E. P. Gee, Dr. S. Dillon Ripley, Dr. Leslie C. Coleman (the Imperial Entomologist and the first Director of Agriculture of the then Mysore State) and His Highness Maharaja Sri Sir Nalwadi Krishnaraja Wadiyar IV, the Maharaja of Mysore.

Besides the many trophies he collected during the days of his shikaar, Ralph helped with the collections to various museums including the Field Museum of Natural History, Chicago,

American Museum of Natural History (AMNH), and the Natural History Museum, London. He even sent orphaned tiger cubs to zoos overseas. For example, the backdrop in the Gaur diorama painted by Arthur Jansson at AMNH, show the hills and sholas of the Biligirirangans. (<https://www.flickr.com/photos/57222059@N05/6051756435/>).

Besides this, at the instance of Dr. Salim Ali, he made a collection of over 400 specimens of about 130 bird species of the Biligirirangans, and holds the credit for discovering the southern population of the Pied Tit (*Parus nuchalis*) in the dry forests of Sathyamangalam.

After Independence, Ralph represented the South Indian Europeans in the Legislative Assembly. In October 1952, he joined Dr. Salim Ali and visited Kashmir at the request of the Kashmir Government, to survey the various game sanctuaries, and submitted a report to aid their management. He disposed off his estate before he left India in 1955, to settle in England. Even after returning to England, he was very concerned about India's wildlife and returned to the Biligirirangans a couple of times, to collect specimens for the Natural History Museum in London.



The memorial of Chikka Subba Maistry, who served the Morris family



An old calling phone used by the Morrises

Ralph Morris died in London on December 19, 1977, at the age of 82, after a long illness. All that remain of the legend of Ralph Morris are the Honnametti Estate that he and his wife established, the beautiful vintage Honnametti Bungalow, the many trophies – some of which still adorn the insides of his bungalow, the numerous articles he published in the Journal of the Bombay Natural History and the bird skins and animals he collected. The Soligas believe that he still roams these hills.



S Subramanya

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