

IMPERIAL ECHOES

Eye-Witness Accounts of Victoria's Little Wars



Robert Giddings

IMPERIAL ECHOES

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of Victoria's Little Wars

by

Robert Giddings

Blow, bugle, blow, set the wild
echoes flying

Alfred, Lord Tennyson (1802–92)



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THIS BOOK IS DEDICATED TO:

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RG

Introduction

. . . to speak a word of that just commendation which our nation do indeed deserve . . . they have been men full of activity, stirrers abroad, and searchers of the remote parts of the world, so in this most famous and peerless government of her most excellent Majesty, her subjects through the special assistance and blessing of God, in searching the most opposite corners and quarters of the world . . . in compassing the vast globe of the earth more than once, have excelled all nations and people of the earth. For, which of the kings of this land before her Majesty, had their banners ever seen in the Caspian Sea? which of them hath ever dealt with the Emperor of Persia . . . who ever saw . . . an English leger in the stately porch of the Grand Signor at Constantinople? who ever found English consuls at and agents at Tripolis, in Syria, at Aleppo, at Babylon, at Balsara, and which is more, who ever heard of Englishmen at Goa before now?

Richard Hakluyt: *Principal Navigations, Voyages, Traffics and Discoveries of the English Nation* 1589.

*

The British overseas empire really begins with these ventures by brave, reckless, buccaneering Elizabethan seafarers which Hakluyt so proudly chronicles. The thrust for empire came not so much from the desire of English monarchs for overseas conquest, but

from the zeal of trading and commercial interests – initiated by such companies as the East India Company, the Levant Company or the Virginia Company. Once the foundations of settlement were made in Virginia in 1606, London was full of talk about serious colonization. By 1642 the West Indies and Bermuda had absorbed some 40,000 colonists.

Colonial trade was increased by each war the British fought overseas, with the Spanish, Dutch and French in the West Indies, North America, Latin America, the Far East, India, Africa and the Middle East. Certain aspects of the economy thrived in war – iron and other metals, leather trades, shipbuilding, woollens, chemicals. The end of each war seemed to bring Britain more overseas territory in which her merchants and empire builders could extend imperial power. The defeat of the Dutch – a nation more conscious of their maritime power than the Spanish – in a series of wars in the 17th Century gave Britain dominion over the East Indies and on the Hudson River. This allowed British influence to extend in America, pushing the French out. The Treaty of Utrecht, which concluded the War of the Spanish Succession in 1713 provided Britain with key naval bases in Hudson Bay, Newfoundland, Acadia, Gibraltar and Minorca. During the 18th Century there were only twenty-three years of peace. The Peace of Paris in 1763 left the British masters in India and North America.

But the 19th Century, and for us in these islands, more particularly the late Victorian period, was the ‘Age of Empire’. The century begins with a few border, frontier and tribal conflicts in the Indian sub-continent which made Arthur Wellesley a household name. As the century unfolded, each passing year brought forth a seemingly unending series of small wars, fought mainly against resisting or rebelling native tribal armies, mostly in India, Africa and the East. By the turn of the 19th and 20th Century Britain’s Empire stands at its zenith. Between 1875 and the beginning of the Great War in 1914, Britain increased its territories by over four million square miles. The word imperialism only comes into general political discourse at this time. It does not appear in the works of Karl Marx (who died in 1883). John Atkinson Hobson, the economist and publicist, wrote in *Imperialism* (1902) that the word was on everyone’s lips ‘. . . and used to denote the most powerful movement in the current politics of the western world’.

As Empire grew, the world shrank. As E J Hobsbawm argues,

the great period of European imperialism created a single global economy:

progressively reaching into the most remote corners of the world, an increasingly dense web of economic transactions, communications and movements of goods, money and people, linking the developed countries with each other and with the undeveloped world. . . . Without this there was no particular reason why European states should have taken more than the most fleeting interest in the affairs of, say, the Congo basin. (*The Age of Empire* 1987 p. 62)

European civilization now required this overseas world – the exotic – for its continuance, development and survival. Western civilization and its technologies needed raw materials – oil, rubber, tin, non-ferrous metals, sugar, tea, coffee, cocoa, nitrates, timber, fruit, meat, vegetables. Awareness of the exotic, the far away, of places with strange names inhabited by curious ‘different’ people begin to feature in European literature in the Middle Ages. Its survival is a testimony to its popularity, and far-fetched or untruthful as much of it may be, its existence certainly points to the great fascination European readers had for these faraway places. To take but one example, the *Voiage of Sir John Maundevile*, which dates from the middle of the 14th Century, purports to be an account of Sir John Mandeville’s travels in Turkey, Tartary, Persia, Egypt and India. Whoever wrote these yarns travelled no further than his study, and compensated for his limited collection of volumes with his capacious imagination – for here we have the famous accounts of the fountain of youth, ant-hills of gold dust, the discovery of Noah’s Ark, the dragon-princess and a race of black people who have only one large foot to hop about on, but which provides them with useful shade in the heat of the noon-day sun. By the time of Marlowe and Shakespeare we find a much more sophisticated fascination with foreign lands and their inhabitants. Shakespeare draws fine studied portraits of ‘strangers’ – Othello, Shylock. The curiosity about the ‘other’ world out there is present in the view of Egypt in *Antony and Cleopatra* and the exotic island in *The Tempest* (‘When they will not give a doit to relieve a lame beggar, they will lay out ten to see a dead Indian’).

India and the East were traditionally associated with riches. When Milton came to describe the glories of Satan’s wealth, he

could find no better images than those drawn from the mythical wealth of the East, and wrote of Satan's throne that it far outshone the wealth of Ormus and of India, where 'the gorgeous east with richest hand showers on her kings barbaric pearl and gold' (*Paradise Lost*, Book One).

By the time of Alexander Pope we are beginning to ransack the world as fast we discovered it, to provide luxuries, ornaments and consumables. The beautiful Belinda renders herself even more seductive decked with goods and finery plundered from the four corners of the earth:

Unnumber'd treasures ope at once, and here
The various offerings of the world appear;
From each she nicely culls with curious toil,
And decks the goddess with glitt'ring spoil.
This casket India's glowing gems unlocks,
And all Arabia breathes from yonder box.
The tortoise here and elephant unite
Transform'd to combs, the speckled and the white.
(*The Rape of the Lock*, 1714)

Developments in print technology, transport and communication, combined with the rapid increase in popular literacy resulting from the efforts of the Sunday School movement laid the foundations of the modern newspaper industry. Jalalabad, Chillianwalla, Aboukir, Magdala, Sindh, Assaye, Mudki, Ferozeshah, Aliwal, Sabraon, Gujerat, Kandahar, Kabul, Prome, Canton, Batavia, Boomplaatz, Tel-el-Kebir, Atbara, Uluni, Majuba, Kamkula, Charasia – the names you find listed in British Regimental battle-honours sound like the invented nomenclature of Tolkien's Middle-earth, yet this was the very stuff of everyday newspaper reading matter during Queen Victoria's reign. The generation which avidly consumed information about the activities of Arthur Wellesley in the Second Maratha War, and news of British colonial wars in Burma, Ceylon, Nepal, Poona, Nagpur, Indore, Rajputan, Ashanti, China, and the North-West Frontier – also began to read about exciting actions and dangerous escapades in fiction. The French translation by Antoine Galland of the *Arabian Nights* (which was carefully upholstered so as to appeal to an already considerable fashion for oriental tales) was translated into English early in the 18th Century. The craze for 'oriental'

literature flourished – Samuel Johnson published *Rasselas* 1759, Thomas Beckford's *Vathek* appeared in 1786, and Byron, Moore and Shelley supplied to need for Arabian and oriental subject matter which was a feature of romantic poetry. Clothes, furniture, music, architecture all showed a flourishing taste for the exotic.

The 19th Century was the golden age of exotic 'Eastern' décor, of the vogue for the *Arabian Nights* (one of the few books Dickens took with him on his trips across America) Egyptian furniture, genre paintings of bazaars, pornography about young English maidens shipwrecked and seduced on the coast of Algiers, 'Eastern' operas by Weber, Rossini, Mozart, Eastern tales, songs about Arab steeds, military bands rendered more exotic with African or Indian drummers or buglers (rendered even more exotic with fez, turban or tiger-skin) and the craze for 'Turkish Music' (featured in the finale of Beethoven's *Choral Symphony*). Aladdin was a popular subject for pantomime. Works such as William Henry Sleeman's *Ramaseena* (1836), Edward Parry Thornton's *Illustrations of the History and Practices of the Thugs* (1837), and Philip Meadows Taylor's *Confessions of a Thug* (1839) and *Tara: A Mahratta Tale* (1863), *Ralph Darnell* (1865) and *Seeta* (1873) and Alexander Kinglake's *Eothen* (1844) presented readers of fiction with a dazzling picture of the hot, sunny far-away world of the Orient and Middle East.

William Makepeace Thackeray (who was born in Calcutta) coloured his masterpiece *Vanity Fair* (1848) with echoes of the exotic world of the Indian sub-continent – the novel abounds with references to brandy-cutchery, brandy-pawnee, tiffin, punkahs, tiger hunts, elephants, mangoes, chutney and curry powder. Charles Dickens' successful merchant, Dombey, has important trading and commercial interests in India and the West Indies:

Though the offices of Dombey and Son were within the City of London . . . yet there were hints of adventures and romantic story to be observed in some adjacent objects. . . . The Royal Exchange was close at hand. . . . Just round the corner stood the rich East India House, teeming with suggestions of precious stuffs and stones, tigers, elephants, howdahs, hookahs, umbrellas, palm-trees, palanquins and gorgeous princes of a brown complexion sitting on carpets, with their slippers turned up at the toes. (*Dombey and Son* 1848)

In *Barnaby Rudge* (1841) Joe Willet serves in the American colonial wars. In *The Old Curiosity Shop* (1841) Grandfather Trent's brother returns to the rescue with money he has made in the Antipodes. Arthur Clennam, the hero of *Little Dorrit* (1855), returns to England after twenty years trading in China. Wilkie Collins' *The Moonstone* (1868) exploited all the mysterious potential of the 'East' – the Moonstone is a vast diamond which had once been set in the head of an image of an Indian Moon-god. An English army officer, John Herncastle, had killed three Brahmin guards and gained possession of it during the battle of Seringapatam. The Brahmins resolve to regain it. The uneasy and sinister atmosphere of the story is established at the very beginning by the appearance of three Indian jugglers. At all levels, the British overseas Empire made its presence felt, in novels, on the stage, in books and magazines for young people and works aimed at children.

The Empire was extended by war, and military and naval conflict in the cause of Empire becomes one of the 19th Century's main sources of excitement and romance in fiction and drama. War ceased to be domestic after the Commonwealth period (except in Ireland). The development of imperialism out of colonialism, which itself was born of the initial rather primitive and modest attempts to expand trade with overseas countries, have very close connections with developments in industrialism in the homeland. There was no final 'industrial revolution'. The system created new class antagonisms and new international relationships. The search for new raw materials, new goods, new markets, ever extending the boundaries of our trade, accumulated an Empire and brought us face to face with other (mainly European) nations who were engaged in the same search. Thus was the idea of 'abroad' created – territory overseas to be exploited, to be grabbed before anyone else grabbed it, or grabbed off somebody else if they already had it. These endeavours created the need for an army and navy to extend, to protect and police British holdings all over the world.

Major wars in the 19th Century laid the foundations of Victoria's vast Empire, celebrated in the Jubilee in 1897. There was hardly a year between her accession in 1837 and her death in 1901 when the British were not at war somewhere overseas – in India, China, Africa, the Far East, the Near East, the Antipodes. As the Revd C S Dawe wrote in *Queen Victoria and Her People*, published by the Education Supply Association for schoolchildren in 1897:

The British Empire consists not only of the United Kingdom and such large countries as Canada, Australia and India, but it comprises also a host of small settlements dotted about the world, and valuable either for purposes of war or commerce. In consequence of our Empire being world-wide, there is scarcely a month when peace reigns in every part of it. We have generally some little war on hand.

The British were ever conscious of the fact that somehow this was simply part of God's plan for the world. In a textbook routinely issued to military cadets at the turn of the 19th and 20th Centuries we find this quite baldly stated:

It is not without some reason, beyond our ken, that the greatest Empire in the world, the greatest Empire of the White Race, happens to hold these lands on the other side of the globe, as well as the temperate regions in North America and South Africa. The wonderful growth of the British Empire, from pole to pole, has been attributed to various sources: by our friends, to British enterprise and statesmanship; by our enemies, to our alleged qualities of greed and cunning. . . . And they cannot reasonably be held to account for such geographical phenomena as the Gulf Stream bearing warm breezes to the British Islands, or the monsoons coming at the right time to water the parching plains of British India. The same inscrutable causes which placed England's geographical position in the centre of the land hemisphere arranged that the great mass of the habitable lands on the earth should be in the temperate zone, where men can best live. (J Fitzgerald Lee: *Imperial Geography*, published in India in 1903, and dedicated to Lord Kitchener, Commander-in-Chief in India).

In public entertainment, musical hall, popular theatre, post-cards, comics and other ephemera, the Victorian consciousness was steeped in the idea of war as something irresistibly fascinating, which happened a long way. The public were early treated to military displays, field day demonstrations with bands, mock battles, mass troop movements and fireworks (sketched by Thomas Rowlandson and James Gillray, satirised by Charles Dickens in *Pickwick Papers*). In 1880 the Royal Tournament was inaugurated. The element of 'show' was vital and soldiers still

wore their red coats right up to end of the century. The Sudan campaign of 1895 was the first time khaki was worn.

The young male readership was directly addressed in *Boys' Own Paper* (started in 1879) and encouraged to be 'masculine' – often in the reproving tones of a schoolmaster ('*Eyelashes*: Leave your eyelashes alone. Cut them indeed! One would think you were a silly girl!') The periodical pushed the idea that the outside world was an exciting adventure playground (*The Fetish Hole: A Story of East Africa* and *Up the Essequibo: The Story of a Boy's Adventures in British Guiana*) and projected the armed forces as an almost inevitable career for its readers. *Boys' Own Paper* carried articles about the practicalities of military life (*The Barrack Bugler and his Calls* and *A Young Soldier's Life Under Canvas*) and played up the glamour and excitement of the services (*Campaigning as it is Today: A Young Officer's Experience in the Soudan*). It was a poetic and glorious thing to die for one's country (*The Powder Monkey's Last Message Home*).

At the height of Britain's imperial sea-power it was the done thing to dress schoolboys in sailor-suits, complete with straw hats. The penny-dreadful market adapted itself to the needs of the day. There were thrilling yarns of campaigning abroad, slaying millions of natives and escaping from treacherous foreigners in the four corners of the globe. Characters in comics actually took part in real campaigns. The popular strip-cartoon duo Weary Willie and Tired Tim served in South Africa, and were rewarded for their unusual vigour, zeal and dedication to duty: 'Timmy, my noble friend', said Lord Roberts, 'I appoint you Governor of Pretoria at thirty bob a week.'

Very young children were introduced to the glamour and myth of Empire at their mother's knee. One of the most popular and frequently reprinted works produced for the development of the young mind in the last century – *The Child's Guide to Knowledge; Being a Useful Collection of Useful and Familiar Questions and Answers on everyday Subjects, Adapted For Young Persons, And Arranged in the Most Simple and Easy Language. By a Lady* – contains a superbly brief history of the Empire:

Q *Where was the Mogul's empire?*

A *In Hindostan, in Asia: it now belongs to England.*

Q *Pray when did the English first establish themselves in Hindostan or India?*

- A *In the year 1610, when a company of English merchants settled at Surat, about 150 miles north of Bombay.*
- Q *But when may it be said that the foundations of our Empire over this immense country were first laid?*
- A *By the great victory of Lord Clive, won June 2nd 1757, over Nabob Suraj ah-Dowlah at Plassey, about 100 miles north of Calcutta.*
- Q *Who consolidated the British power?*
- A *Warren Hastings, who was appointed the first Governor-General of India in 1772.*
- Q *What great General distinguished himself in India at an early age?*
- A *The first Duke of Wellington, then Sir Arthur Wellesley, who won the battle of Assaye, September 23rd. 1803.*
- Q *Have many additions been made to our Empire since that time?*
- A *Yes: the most memorable are the conquest of Scinde, by the late General Sir Charles Napier in 1843, and of the Punjaub [Punjab] by Lord Gough in 1846.*
- Q *Pray where are Scinde and the Punjaub situated?*
- A *On the North-West Frontier of India*
- Q *Is not the extent of India very great?*
- A *Yes: it is about fifteen times the size of Great Britain, and contains a population estimated at 200 millions.*
- Q *Are we not responsible as a nation for the well-being of this immense multitude?*
- A *Yes: God has made England the most powerful of all nations, and we ought, therefore, to govern with mercy and justice.*
- Q *Why?*
- A *Because, if we do so, He will continue to bless and prosper us.*
- Q *What does India produce?*
- A *Rice, cotton, silk, flax, hemp, sugar, opium, tobacco, and many other things.*

The Empire is now officially dismembered. It occasionally surfaces in public memory as a fleeting memory, captured, like a random dream, in films about India or newspaper obituaries of old colonial administrators, soldiers or sailors. From time to time a television drama series may draw on Empire as a backcloth for

some action. But, like a long lost relative, it is likely to crop up from time to time. It is not currently fashionable to quote G K Chesterton with approval. Nevertheless, while in the course of researching this book, ransacking one of the numerous second-hand bookshops whose resources are so valuable when seeking memoirs of deceased and forgotten Major-Generals, I bought a battered old volume of his articles from the *Illustrated London News*. Among other wholly characteristic garrullities, there were some interesting comments about the United States of America and the problems of government organization, communication and geographical size. Few are willing to admit this in good company today, but Chesterton does sometimes get hold of the right end of some very important sticks. There, staring at me on the page, was a brilliant comment on the nature of empire:

There is no such thing as a great power. What is spread out before us is a great weakness. The system in extending its communications always decreases its efficiency; and there never was an empire upon this earth that did not go further and fare worse.

This comment seemed apt at the time. So many of the conflicts dealt with in this book occurred at far-flung corners of Empire, where the fabric of control and communication was stretched so thin as almost to be fraying. The more I read about these escapades, the more I was convinced that here were so many stories that needed telling, and telling – insofar as was possible – in the words of those who experienced these events.

As far as personal experience goes, I was born too late and in the wrong part of the world to have much actual knowledge of Empire. The Empire Exhibition took place a decade before I was born. I was two years old in 1937 when the Congress Party won the Indian elections and the Imperial Conference was held in Lonon. I was twelve when India achieved its independence. But I grew up surrounded by memories, debris and distant echoes of Empire. As a boy I spent some years in hospital, and one Christmas several of my friends clubbed together to buy me a suitable book for Christmas 1946 – *The Empire Youth Annual* (which strongly pluggd the ‘children of all nations’ line). I loved it.

Empire Day, 24 May (Queen Victoria’s birthday) was still celebrated when I was a boy. In Bath, where my formative years were

spent, I was frequently made aware of strong imperial associations, seeing the retired military, colonial and administrative families taking tea in the Pump Room. Pressing my face against junk shop windows in Walcot Street or Manvers Street, I was sometimes able to see a dress sword, accoutrements, a cavalry trumpet, medals, portraits of Sir Garnet Wolseley, Lord Kitchener, General Gordon; paintings and engravings of engagements with exotic names such as Ferozeshah, Omdurman, Multan, Ghazni. I once actually saw a real 19th Century infantryman's shako, which I dearly wanted. It was wholly beyond the family purse. But I could still dream. There were numerous military tattoos in those days, and I was thrilled to see and hear all the imperial and colonial troops and their pipes, bands and drum corps. Rasping, echoing bugles, skirling pipes and the deep, rich sonorities of British military bands filled me with echoes of empire. Marches redolent of those old campaigns and conflicts – *Punjaub*, *Secunderabad*, *79th's Farewell to Gibraltar*, *The Thin Red Line*, *Tel-El-Kebir*, *The Haughs of Cromdell*, *The Campbells Are Coming*, *Goodbye, Dolly Gray* and, of course, Safroni's masterpiece, *Imperial Echoes* (which was used on BBC wireless to herald the news broadcasts). Then there were Korda's films – *The Four Feathers*, *The Drum* – and Hollywood's epics with C Aubrey Smith, Victor McLaglan, Ronald Colman, Shirley Temple, Errol Flynn (with Indian Princes played by Sabu) *Gunga Din*, *Lives of a Bengal Lancer*, *Rhodes of Africa*, *Elephant Boy*, *Wee Willie Winkie*, *Clive of India* – I saw them all at the local flea-pit. At school I traded cigarette cards – *Makers of Empire*, *Regimental Uniforms*, *Drum Banners and Standards*, *Military Headwear*, *Uniforms of the British Empire Overseas*. In spare moments at home I pored over ancient Victorian volumes – *Boy's Own Paper* and *British Battles on Land and Sea* – acquired from elderly relatives. *Chums Annual* I had from my sister's boyfriend, who served in Sierra Leone.

Gradually, during my adolescence, various parts of the British Empire broke free from the mother yoke and became separate nation states. In 1958, the year I graduated at university, Empire Day was officially renamed Commonwealth Day. I can remember reading the Editorial in the *Daily Express* at the time of this 'momentous change' some comment to the effect that officially the name of the day had been altered to 'Commonwealth' Day, 'but the British people will remember'. As, of course, we do. The delicate fingering of the nerve ends of collective memory must in part

account for the immense success of Attenborough's *Gandhi*, and Granada Television's drama series, *The Jewel in the Crown*. The tremendous impact of living memory was demonstrated in Stephen Peet's brilliant documentary television series for BBC, *Tales of India* (1978). Reminders still crop up from time to time, sometimes from unexpected quarters.

There is obviously a sound historical basis for the fact that the British national domestic beverage is Indian tea. No nation's taste in food is so international and cosmopolitan, – Indian, Chinese, Middle Eastern, Far Eastern – and the experience of Empire has been a very powerful shaping influence here. The great British craze for curry is very important evidence. An extraordinary amount of unsuspected but revealing information is to be found between the covers of Pat Chapman's *Good Curry Restaurant Guide* (1991). There were only six Indian Restaurants in Britain in 1950. The die-hard Blimps had to trek all the way to London to enjoy a good sweat at *Veeraswamy's*. Ten years later there were three hundred. Then came several successive revolutions, including fashions for Tandoori cooking, the introduction of unusual and enterprising ideas for curry dishes (certainly encouraged if not actually initiated by Madhur Jaffrey) and then came Balti. Today there are more curry restaurants in Britain than anywhere else in the world – including India. There are approximately seven thousand of them, from Thurso to Penzance – John o' Groats to Land's End. There are curry houses in the Shetlands and the Channel Islands. There are more Indian restaurants in London (over one thousand five hundred of them) than in Delhi. The names of the restaurants are frequently redolent of Empire – *Khyber Pass*, *British Raj*, *Kathmandu*, *Bengal Lancer*, *Days of the Raj*, *Jalalabad*, *Lancers*, *Far Pavilions*, *Gurkha*, *Jewel in the Crown*, *Viceroy of India*.

But what of the soldiers and sailors and their officers who actually acquired and policed this vast Empire? What was it actually like to go up the Irrawaddy, hack through the jungle, sweat across the Sudan? I had often wondered. It was while I was researching a previous book on writings about war that I first began to come across really interesting first-hand accounts of historic military action. I began to acquire a real interest in the memoirs of the old military commanders, and to scan their accounts of actions long past in the far-flung parts of empire. It was often that casual, on the spot, feeling which I found appealing.

From time to time I came across old army periodicals which carried the stories by other ranks of engagements in these small wars. Again and again I was struck by the fresh and vivid quality of the writing.

It dawned on me that here was a considerable resource from which might be assembled an alternative 'non-official' history of some of the landmarks in British imperial history, which might bring the past back to life, culled from the writings of people who were actually there at the time. This, in essence, is what I have tried to do in this book. This is a collection of 'imperial echoes', grouped together on the basis of their location. There is no attempt to create a complete story-of-empire illustrated with eye-witness-accounts. The excerpts have been chosen because I thought they were interesting and worth reading. The vast majority of the text is quoted material, with background accounts only insofar as they are needed to reflect the points behind the fascinating 'echoes'. Because the 'echoes' are the whole point of the book, and give it whatever life and purpose it may have, I have left them entirely as written – warts and all. This may mean that there are a number of inconsistencies, especially in the spelling of place names. It could be argued that this, in fact, increases the curious authenticity of much of the writing. I have attempted to clear up some possible confusion by putting the modern spelling in square brackets after the old spelling on the occasion of first use. The stories speak for themselves. And they speak volumes.

Robert Giddings
Poole, Dorset
June 1995.

INDIA AND THE RAJ
1799-1858

I. Wellington in India (1799–1803)

The major European colonial powers had been rivals in India for many years, rich with pickings for European investors after the collapse of the Mogul empire, (whose dynasty was destroyed by the Marathas [Mahrattas]) but by the close of the 18th Century the Portuguese and Dutch had been out of the running for some time. British domination over France had been achieved as the result of Robert Clive's forward policies and secured as a result of the Seven Years War, 1756–1763.

Although under the Treaty of Paris (10 February, 1763) France and Britain had to restore their mutual conquests, French power was really at an end as she was not allowed to rebuild her fortifications in India and the British had control over Bengal, which they had conquered from the Indians. The British East India Company almost had the authority of a delegated state – with its own officials, officers, administrators and armed forces. British military supremacy was further endorsed by the presence in Madras from the mid-18th Century of an outstanding British regular regiment, the 39th Regiment of Foot, later named the Dorset Regiment (whose regimental motto *Primus in Indis* tells its own story). France's direct rival to the British East India Company – *Compagnie des Indes* – was dissolved in 1769. The series of Mysore wars fought between 1766–1799, culminating in the battle of Seringapatam 6 April, 1799, left the British masters of southern India.

The Governor-General of India, Richard Wellesley, enacting the policies of William Pitt the Younger, had ensured that all traces of French influence in India were wiped out. In consequence, there were no remaining foundations on which Bonaparte could rebuild French power in the subcontinent by exploiting the Marathas. This final campaign saw brilliant service by the Governor General's younger brother, Arthur Wellesley, later known to the world as the Duke of Wellington.

Seringapatam was defended by the Sultan of Mysore, Tipu Sahib, who was killed in the final battle. The garrison numbered 22,000 of the Sultan's best troops, with 240 guns. The besieging British and native forces numbered 35,000 and 100 guns. The final onslaught began at noon on 3 May, 1799, and by half past two it was all over. As Sir Herbert Maxwell describes in his biography of Wellington:

On 30th April a heavy fire was poured from the British batteries at close range, and on 3rd May the breach was pronounced practicable. The assault was committed to General Baird, who marched 4,300 men into the trenches before dawn on 4th May, and kept them concealed till past noon – the hour when Asiatic troops are generally most drowsy. At one o'clock Baird led the assault under a heavy fire from the fort, Wellesley being left in command of the reserve in the advanced trenches. The resistance was fierce, but the assailants swept all before them: at half-past two they were in complete possession of the fort, the palace, and the town.

Brave Tipú Sultan, lame as he was from an old wound, and despondent as he had been ever since his defeat at Malavelly, fought like a tiger to his last breath. When the British mounted the breach he placed himself, musket in hand, behind a traverse, and kept firing on the assailants till the backward rush of his own men carried him away. His body was found among five hundred corpses piled together in the gateway of the interior work.

The British lost in the assault 8 officers and 75 men killed, besides upwards of 300 wounded and missing; the total loss among the 20,000 men actually engaged in the siege, which lasted exactly a month, being 22 officers

and 310 men killed, and 45 officers and 1,164 men wounded and missing.

General Baird having applied to be relieved in order to make his report in person to the Commander-in-chief, Colonel Wellesley, as next senior officer, took over the command on the morning of the 5th, and became responsible for the security of the town and the property therein. A stern task it was, for war was a worse affair for non-combatants and private citizens in those days than it has been rendered since by the common assent of civilised nations.¹

Seringapatam was then subject to what was customary in war at this period – plunder, violence and destruction. We may gather something of the troops' behaviour from this excerpt from a letter written by Arthur Wellesley to his brother on 8 May, 1799:

It was impossible to expect that after the labour which the troops had undergone in working up to the place, and the various successes they had had in six different affairs with Tippoo's troops, in all of which they had come to the bayonet with them, they should not have looked to the plunder of this place. Nothing, therefore, can have exceeded what was done on the night of the 4th. Scarcely a house in the town was left unplundered, and I understand that in camp jewels of the greatest value, bars of gold, etc., etc., have been offered for sale in the bazaars of the army by our soldiers, sepoys, and foreigners. I came in to take command on the 5th, and by the greatest exertion, by hanging, flogging, etc., etc., in the course of that day I restored order among the troops, and I hope I have gained the confidence of the people. They are returning to their houses, and beginning again to follow their occupations, but the property of every one is gone.²

* * *

The extension of British power in India under the crown and the East India Company was threatened again by Bonaparte's incursions into Egypt and India. Native Indian forces exposed to the French were well equipped and trained. Tipoo Sahib, in

particular, had been a great ally of the French; this was attested by evidence captured at Seringapatam. Two Maratha leaders, Doulut Rao Sindhai and Jaswant Roa Holkar, commanded vast efficient armies. At the turn of the 18th and 19th Centuries, the Sikhs were united by the warrior Ranjit Singh who controlled most of the Punjab. In the civil war between rival Maratha chieftains, Baji Rao and Holkar, the British supported Baji Rao. He was defeated at the Battle of Poona in 1802. When the British demand for his reinstatement was refused, British military offensives were launched in the Deccan and Hindustan, and Wellington, who commanded 9,000 regulars and 5,000 native troops, restored Baji Rao as Sindhai's forces withdrew to the south.

Wellington pushed further into Maratha territory and took Ahmednagar (11 August, 1803). It was agreed to divide the British forces, one part to be commanded by Colonel Stevenson, the other by Wellington. The two forces were to attack the rebels from either side on the morning of 24 September. Wellington took 4,500 regulars (19th Light Dragoons, 4th, 5th, 7th Madras Native Cavalry, a detachment of Madras Infantry, a detail of Bombay Artillery, the 74th and 78th Highlanders and four battalions of 12th Regiment Madras Sepoys) with him and advanced to the confluence of the Jua and Kelna rivers. Here he unexpectedly faced Maratha forces of 30,000 cavalry, 10,000 French-trained foot soldiers and 200 guns, the combined forces of Sindhai and his ally, the Rajah of Berar. There was no time to contact Stevenson. He resolved to attack the Mahratta forces across the ford.

This was the Battle of Assaye, news of which turned Sir Arthur Wellesley into a household name:

On the 21st September, the whole of the Mahratta army, joined by their infantry, of which there were sixteen battalions of regulars, was encamped about the village of Bokerdun, and between that place and Jaffeirabad. On the same day, General Wellesley and Colonel Stevenson met at Budnapoor, when it was agreed that the two divisions, then in the neighbourhood of each other, should move separately, and attack the enemy on the morning of the 24th. They accordingly marched on the 22nd; Colonel Stevenson

by the western, and on ascending a rising ground, the host of the confederates was seen extending in a vast line along the opposite bank of the Kailna river, near its junction with the Juah. Their army amounted to upwards of 50,000 men, of whom more than 30,000 were horse, and 10,500 were regular infantry supported by upwards of one hundred guns. The handful of British troops, which now moved straight down upon this formidable array, did not exceed four thousand five hundred men, but the general sentiment was that of their commander, 'they cannot escape us.' As General Wellesley drew nearer the enemy's line, he found their right composed entirely of cavalry, and that their cannon and infantry, which it was his object to take and destroy, were on their left, near the village of Assaye. He, therefore, moved round and passed the Kailna river at a ford beyond the enemy's left flank, forming his infantry into two lines, and his cavalry as a reserve in a third, with his right towards the Juah, and his left on the Kailna. The horse belonging to the Peishwa and Raja of Mysore, accompanying General Wellesley, formed at a distance across the Kailna but had little or no share in the conflict. The position thus occupied by the British, between the two rivers and near their junction, not only brought them upon their object, but was of importance in diminishing the front of the enemy, who changed their position as the British turned the flank of their old ground, and were now drawn up in two lines, one of them fronting the British troops, the other running at a right angle to their first line, with the left of both resting on the fortified village of Assaye. In this situation as the British lines were forming, the Mahrattas opened a heavy cannonade, the execution of which is described as terrible. The picquets of the infantry and the 74th regiment which were on the right suffered particularly; the picquets were for a time halted, and the officer in command of them when urged to advance, sent word that the guns were disabled, and the bullocks killed. General Wellesley received the message with the utmost composure, and coolly replied, 'Well, tell him to get on without them.' The whole line without artillery was exposed to a dreadful fire of round and grape; the ranks of the 74th were completely thinned, and a large

body of the Mahratta horse charged them: the order was given for the advance of the British cavalry—the 19th Light Dragoons, who only drew 360 swords, received the intimation with one loud huzza! Accompanied by the 4th Native Cavalry, who emulated their conduct throughout this arduous day, the 19th passed through the broken but invincible 74th, whose very wounded joined in cheering them as they went on, cut in and routed the horse, and dashed on at the infantry and guns. Never did cavalry perform better service or contribute more to the success of a battle. The British infantry likewise pressed forward, the enemy's first line gave way, fell back on their second, and the whole were forced into the Juah at the point of the bayonet; the fugitives, on gaining the opposite bank were followed, charged and broken by the cavalry; but some of their corps formed again and went off in good order. One large body of this description was pursued and routed by the British cavalry, on which occasion Colonel Maxwell, who commanded them, was killed. As the British line advanced they passed many individuals of the enemy who either appeared to have submitted, or lay apparently dead. These persons rising up turned their guns on the rear of the British line, and after the more important points of the victory were secured, it was some time before the firing thus occasioned could be silenced. The enemy's horse hovered round for some time, but when the last body of infantry was broken, the battle was completely decided, and ninety-eight pieces of cannon remained in the hands of the victors. The loss was severe; upwards of one-third of the British troops lay dead or wounded, but they had, considering the circumstances, achieved a triumph more splendid than any recorded in Deccan history.

Of the enemy, twelve hundred were killed, and the whole neighbourhood was covered with their wounded.³

Like so many of Britain's most successful generals in the nineteenth Century, Wellington cut his teeth as a field commander in those bloody Indian battles and the experience they gave him was to pay enormous dividends in the Peninsular. Those same battles were also forging new traditions for the

British infantry and cavalry, whose colours, standards and guidons still tell the tale through the battle honours with which they are emblazoned.

Notes

1. Sir Herbert Maxwell, *The Life of Wellington* (1899)
2. Lieutenant Colonel John Gurwood (ed.), *The Despatches of Field Marshal the Duke of Wellington during his Various Campaigns in India, Denmark, Portugal, Spain, the Low Countries and France* (1834–38)
3. James Grant Duff, *A History of the Mahrattas* (1826)