

ABSTRACT

If You Give an Etonian a Commission: Education and Adaptability in the British Army

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From the 1730s to 1900, scarcely a year passed in which Great Britain was not at war. Generations of British boys idolized military service, and many were groomed specifically for command in Britain's great public schools. Unfortunately, British boarding school educations sabotaged the adaptability and creative thinking skills of students, leading to a dearth in tactical and strategic ability among high-ranking British commanders. This lack of ability became especially dangerous during campaigns against non-Europeans, when commanders were forced to either adapt to new modes of fighting or die. Meanwhile, commanders who either received little formal education or who studied at specialized military academies were able to adjust to new opportunities and found great success on unconventional campaigns. Public school graduates, trained in the hoary traditions of European warfare, failed tragically in similar circumstances. Analysis of commanders of varying educational backgrounds shows the power of education as a tool for molding minds and reveals the deadly weaknesses of the British command structure.

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IF YOU GIVE AN ETONIAN A COMMISSION: EDUCATION AND ADAPTABILITY
IN THE BRITISH ARMY

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DEDICATION

Dedicated to Bucklin, Missouri, and my family.

CHAPTER ONE

The Fatal Flaw of British Officers

In 1883, Sir John Robert Seely, an English historian and political essayist, explained the expansion of the British Empire in these simple words: “We seem, as it were, to have conquered and peopled half the world in a fit of absence of mind. While we were doing it... we did not allow it to affect our imaginations or in any degree to change our ways of thinking.”¹ Over the previous century or two—this absence of strategy unfortunately forbids scholars from agreeing on the date of the British Empire’s founding— thousands of traders and missionaries had poured from the fog of the British Isles and descended upon every corner of the world. They were supported by the slowly widening influence of British arms, imminently successful in Europe and theoretically capable of asserting dominance over vast swathes of newly acquired territory. However, Britain’s store of generals proved unequal to the task of overseas warfare. British forces began losing battles, and not to the bewigged and pipeclayed regiments of France or Spain, but to undisciplined farmers, native tribes, and religious fanatics. The root of the problem was exactly what Seely pinpointed in later years: the geographical expansion of the British Empire did not lead to corresponding expansion in the imaginations of British leaders. Rare was the general who learned from his surroundings and adapted his tactics

¹ John Robert Seeley, “The Expansion of England,” accessed June 17, 2022, <https://web.viu.ca/davies/H479B.Imperialism.Nationalism/Seeley.Br.Expansion.imperial.1883.htm>.

to new situations. Instead, the mores and customs of European warfare were observed to the letter by men who nursed a deep distrust for anything foreign and new.

Why would men stubbornly cling to an outdated set of customs and tactics, when doing so brought about repeated military disasters and great loss of human life? Britain's requirements for military command were not skill in leadership or years of experience, but adherence to a strict social code of gentlemanliness. British historian Byron Farwell writes that "manliness and godliness were considered more important than knowledge for the leaders of men in the armed forces."² These virtues were instilled through indoctrination, preferably at one of Britain's great public schools. Benjamin Disraeli, a British prime minister and statesman, extolls the qualities of an ideal Etonian in his book, *Coningsby*: "He was courageous, just, and inflexible; never bullied, and to his utmost would prevent tyranny. The little boys looked up to him as a stern protector; and his word, too, throughout the school was a proverb: and truth ranks a great quality among boys."³ Courage, justice, and inflexibility were encouraged in public school educations, as was protection of the young or weak. Unfortunately, such educations were designed to form boys into a cohesive, patriotic, honest, dependable unit, the actions of which could be predicted down to their choice in ties and after-dinner conversation. In contrast, good generals are often characterized by brilliance, innovation, and outside-the-box thinking. British public education created better followers than leaders. British commanders educated in the great public schools had the critical thinking skills beaten out of them by

² Byron Farwell, *Mr. Kipling's Army* (New York: Norton, 1987), 140.

³ Benjamin Disraeli, *Coningsby* (Longmans, Green and Company, 1911), 45.

their curriculum, weakening their ability to adapt in the field and ultimately leading to military disaster overseas. Commanders who attended parochial schools or received little education proved more creative and innovative, willing to make changes to traditional military doctrine and producing excellent results when deployed against non-European adversaries.

The public-school-to-officer pipeline was a relatively short one. With a few rare exceptions, students came from middle- or upper-class families and would spend their formative years in boarding school learning to be gentlemen. Though not every public school graduate would go into the army, a large percentage did—the acquisition of glory became public school boys’ greatest desire. The Clarendon Report of 1864, compiled by a royal commission charged with taking stock of the nation’s public schools, devotes an entire section to how schools were prepping their charges for army examinations. Prior to 1849, the hopeful graduate would purchase a commission straight away, or perhaps attend one of the Royal Military Colleges at Sandhurst or Woolwich if he wished to take his career very seriously. After 1849, the Duke of Wellington passed a resolution that “no one should be given or allowed to purchase a commission ‘unless he could prove by examination to have good abilities and have received the education of a gentleman’.”⁴ The purchase of commissions was abolished altogether in 1871, and Sandhurst and Woolwich both instituted mandatory entrance exams in the 1880s. A fortunate few who scored highly on entrance exams were able to skip the Royal Military Colleges altogether and received a direct commission—Robert Baden-Powell, who later founded the Boy

⁴ Farwell, *Mr. Kipling's Army*, 142.

Scouts, failed his entrance examination into Oxford twice but scored highly enough in his army examination to be awarded a direct commission.⁵ The truly ambitious might seek a further course of education at the Staff College, but the college never drew as many students as Sandhurst and Woolwich.

Unlike public schools in America, British public schools charged substantial tuition fees. “Public” simply meant that such schools accepted students from any geographic area or walk of life. Realistically, only upper and upper-middle class families could afford to send their sons to the great public schools. Most prominent schools had been endowed as grammar schools or began as smaller grammar schools and grew in prominence over time. This meant that the school was obliged to teach Latin and Greek almost exclusively, and that expansion of the curriculum was open to severe critique as not following the intentions of the founders. Brian Farwell notes that “Britain’s public schools and universities had served it well until the flowering of the Industrial Revolution, but in an expanding and changing world they neither grew nor changed to any appreciable degree.”⁶ They did change marginally in 1840, when the 1840 Grammar Schools Act made it legal for a court of equity to add to the existing curriculum of grammar schools, supplementing Latin and Greek with literature and science.⁷ But prior to 1840, prestigious schools such as Eton and Westminster were allowed to release their graduates into the world with a thorough understanding of two dead languages and

⁵ Farwell, 147.

⁶ Farwell, 149.

⁷ “Grammar Schools Act 1840 - Full Text,” accessed June 17, 2022, <http://www.educationengland.org.uk/documents/acts/1840-grammar-schools-act.html>.

precious little else in the way of testable knowledge. Even 28 years later, very little had changed. As the commissioners of the Clarendon Report admitted, “School education alters slowly, and runs long in the same groove; a master can only teach what he has himself learnt, and he is naturally inclined to set the highest value on the studies to which his own life has been given.”⁸ Instructors frequently taught at the schools from which they had themselves graduated, repeating the same lectures and information for a new generation of students.

Many headmasters seem to have been secretly aware of the deficiencies of their curriculum. The commissioners of the Clarendon Report sought permission to “institute an Examination... of a simple kind” to be administered to “boys of not more than average industry and capacity and whose names would not, therefore, be found in lists of University honours and distinctions.”⁹ All but two headmasters refused to allow such an examination, and the two who assented did so “with some reluctance.”¹⁰ Headmasters feared the capability of their students if subjected to any test for which they had not received time to cram. The matter dropped, and the commission was forced to ascertain the success of the schools’ teaching by other means. Ultimately, the commission recommended that every boy be required to pass an entrance examination before

8 “Clarendon Report,” Vol. 1, 1864, 12,
<http://www.educationengland.org.uk/documents/clarendon1864/clarendon1.html#01>.

9 “Clarendon Report,” 2.

10 “Clarendon Report,” 2.

enrollment, and should be denied admission “unless he can read and write well, and is fairly grounded in arithmetic.”¹¹

Despite curriculum changes, the study of Greek and Latin remained preeminent. Sydney Smith writes an excoriating article on English schools’ slavish devotion to the classics, noting that “classical quotations are the watchwords of scholars, by which they distinguish each other from the ignorant and illiterate; and Greek and Latin are insensibly almost become the only test of a cultivated mind.”¹² Though not worth anything in and of themselves, knowledge of Greek and Latin became an excellent way to distinguish the gentleman, the pukka sahib, the top-drawer fellow from his compatriots in the lower classes. Greek and Latin were cultivated as a signal to the world of a man’s pedigree. Gentlemen attended good schools; gentlemen learned how to parse Greek and Latin verses. Through a feat of mental gymnastics on the part of the general population, these qualifications made gentlemen imminently qualified for leadership roles in the army.

The snobbishness inherent to and associated with the great public schools was marked practically from their conception. In an 1817 tract, William Vincent described public schools as “an endowed place of education, of old standing, to which the sons of gentlemen resort in considerable numbers, and where they continue to reside, from eight or nine, to eighteen years of age”.¹³ Gentlemanliness and breeding were so conflated with

¹¹ “Clarendon Report,” 322.

¹² J. P. Sullivan, “Sydney Smith on Classics and Classicists,” *Arion: A Journal of Humanities and the Classics* 4, no. 2 (1965): 170.

¹³ William Vincent, *Public Education: Consisting of Three Tracts, Reprinted from the Edinburgh Review; the Classical Journal; and the Pamphleteer; Together with the Defence of Public Schools* (A.J. Valpy, 1817), 2–3.

education that it became impossible to separate them. James George Cotton Minchin, a prolific researcher and writer of the Victorian era, noted that a connection with Eton “is the fashion. Not to know Eton or to be in some way connected with it argues yourself unknown. A school which now numbers more than one thousand boys, and many bearing historic names, is a social engine of enormous force.”¹⁴ This social engine churned steadily, forming dense networks of alumni. Graduates were affiliated with their alma mater for the rest of their lives, and maintained close relationships with their fellow students. The Clarendon Report lamented that these social ties were often the goal of a boy’s entire education: “It is too often the case that boys are sent to school to form friendships and to be made gentlemen, rather than to acquire mental training and the habit and power of work.”¹⁵ Friendships were continued generationally, as fathers who graduated from Eton sent their sons to Eton to meet and befriend the sons of their old schoolfellows. James Minchin, a 19th century British historian fascinated by the great public schools, noted that “an English lad often goes to a particular school, not because it is best fitted to prepare him for the Army or the Bar, not because its bills are adapted to the family purse, not because of its propinquity to home, but because his father, grandfather, and great-grandfather went there before him.”¹⁶ Once involved with a particular school, families maintained their links to that school for generations. The exclusive club of public school graduates rarely extended favor to newcomers.

¹⁴ James George Cotton Minchin, *Our Public Schools: Their Influence on English History*, n.d., 45.

¹⁵ “Clarendon Report,” 90.

¹⁶ Minchin, *Our Public Schools: Their Influence on English History*, 275.

Titles lay thick on the grounds of the public schools, but nobility of name does not equal nobility of nature. Disraeli's ideal public school boy was a proud defender of the weak, and many students were certainly brought up to mimic that standard, but trapping dozens of teenagers in confined quarters and encouraging the establishment of a hierarchy is a recipe for violence. According to researchers and former students alike, cruelty and bullying was the norm rather than the exception. J. A. Mangan notes that "In the second half of the nineteenth century 'a good school' meant 'a good public school', which meant more often than not bullies, beatings, battles, and bruises".¹⁷ Boys who escaped attack from their schoolfellows were often caned by their teachers. Willingness to carry out vicious corporal punishment was viewed as an excellent quality in a schoolmaster. Marvelously, the boys themselves seem to have taken their punishment with remarkable equanimity—standing firm under blows earned respect from peers and upperclassmen alike, and beatings were widely acknowledged as the best way to keep boys in line. Appeals to virtue supplemented repeated canings; hours in the chapel molded students as much as their experiences in the classroom. Unsurprisingly, a so-called "muscular Christianity" developed, focused on conquest, strength, honesty, and the overcoming of obstacles. Minchin, educated at Harrow, enthuses over this attitude: "If asked what our muscular Christianity has done, we point to the British Empire. Our Empire would never have been built up by a nation of idealists and logicians."¹⁸ H. H.

¹⁷ James Anthony Mangan, *Manufactured Masculinity: Making Imperial Manliness, Morality and Militarism*, Sport in the Global Society (London New York: Routledge, 2012).

¹⁸ Minchin, *Our Public Schools: Their Influence on English History*, 113.

Almond, headmaster at Loretto, was one of the many who used his pulpit to foster the proper conquistadorial attitude: “‘Be strong,’ he exhorted his boys, in a sermon entitled ‘The Duty of Strength’. ‘Do not dare to neglect the Divine command to be strong’.”¹⁹ Convinced that God and the headmaster both demanded great physical effort on the part of the faithful, is it any wonder that British boys took to the army in droves, anxious to exert the power over Britain over an immoral and recalcitrant world?

The public schools gave students an education that fitted them for a very specific future. Farwell notes that the schools turned out “young men who, though generally ignorant, were extraordinarily brave, unquestioningly loyal, blindly obedient, and irreproachably well-mannered in their own milieu”.²⁰ Team sports played an important role in encouraging these virtues among students. According to Rupert Wilkinson, “Each school strove to make itself a unique object of loyalty by elaborating its own folklore, language, and customs, and—for some—by stressing its own special variant of football.”²¹ H.H. Almond, an imposing headmaster at Loretto whose interest in character-building was exceeded only by his interest in rugby, stated, “Games in which success depends on the united efforts of many, and which also foster courage and endurance are the very lifeblood of the public school system”.²² This focus on unity through shared struggle may be an excellent way to build an exclusive and homogenous community, but

¹⁹ James Anthony Mangan, *The Games Ethic and Imperialism: Aspect of the Diffusion of an Ideal*, n.d., 27.

²⁰ Farwell, *Mr. Kipling's Army*, 140.

²¹ Rupert Wilkinson, “Political Leadership and the Late Victorian Public School,” *The British Journal of Sociology* 13, no. 4 (December 1962): 322, <https://doi.org/10.2307/587244>.

²² Mangan, *The Games Ethic and Imperialism: Aspect of the Diffusion of an Ideal*, 55.

is a poor way to encourage initiative and individualism, two qualities that make good leaders.

Team sports fostered the strong sense of fair play that permeated British life. To be a cheater or a liar was anathema, and was punished by immediate and vigorous exclusion. British men and boys lived and died by a strong moral code and rather than break the code they would endure extreme hardship. Schoolboys who learned to play fair on the cricket ground or football pitch carried the value forward into their daily lives and into the army. Farwell notes that, “A sense of fair play marked the British method of waging war, and they seldom resorted to dirty tricks such as poisoning wells.”²³ British soldiers never threatened women or children to extort surrender, generally avoided scorched-earth tactics, and were horrified by the cruelty of peasants who cut off and murdered stragglers. In their eyes, taking a prisoner was one thing; lurking in the undergrowth to surprise and kill the sick, wounded, or slow was quite another. While individual soldiers could have, and doubtless did, commit acts of great cruelty, among the officer corps there was a revulsion to any dirty dealing. Unfortunately, in many cases, this made the British army an easy target for the unscrupulous. British officers and commanders were committed to conducting war by a set of gentlemanly rules, and were astonished when non-Europeans refused to play by those rules. Commanders frequently failed to adapt to the new standards of warfare in the colonies. A notable exception was Robert Clive, who commanded the troops of the East India Company during that entity’s conquest of Bengal. He was ruthless, tricky, and completely willing to lie to gain an

23 Farwell, *Mr. Kipling’s Army*, 121.

advantage—qualities that put him on an equal footing with Indian monarchs, who viewed deception as a useful political tool. Though massively unpopular at home, Clive was incredibly successful thanks to his willingness to borrow his enemy’s playbook.

Team sports also encouraged students to depend upon the leadership of a single team captain and to accord that captain great respect and deference, much as officers in a regiment would treat their colonel. Raising future leaders, whether they be army officers, administrators, or inheritors of a seat in the House of Lords, was widely accepted to be an integral purpose of public schools. “The mark of a Public Schoolboy was not only his accent but the casual assurance of the man who knows he was brought up to lead. In addition to supplying their members with a style of command, the Public Schools also accustomed them to the pomp and circumstance of state.”²⁴ The allure of leadership coaxed students to devote a great deal of time and effort to gaining proficiency in sports, and they were rewarded for their efforts with that most dazzling prize, respect. The Clarendon Report commissioners noted that “position and influence in the school, which are the things that a boy most desires, are gained chiefly, and almost exclusively, by excellence in the cricket-field or on the river.”²⁵ Coxswains of the rowing teams at Eton were addressed formally as “Admirals” during school festivals, a mimicry of adulthood that betrays how intensely public school graduates desired to win a command.²⁶ Unfortunately, captainship of a sports team was usually conferred not upon the most

²⁴ Wilkinson, “Political Leadership and the Late Victorian Public School,” 322.

²⁵ “Clarendon Report,” 91.

²⁶ Minchin, *Our Public Schools: Their Influence on English History*, 50.

talented player of the team, but upon a competent player who cultivated the friendship of coaches and other players. In this way, the position was as much political as based on skill. Younger officers from the public schools therefore entered the army accustomed to accepting the leadership of colonels and generals who were poor tacticians and strategists but were well-connected and well-liked. James Minchin seems to agree with this when he claims that a young man with “animal spirits”—generally defined as cheerfulness and exuberance, qualities dear to the schoolboy’s heart—is “therefore a born leader of boys”.²⁷

Being liked, or being the “right sort”, was a requirement for success at public school and in the army. In many cases, strict, student-enforced boundaries were maintained between the sons of peers and their lower-class classmates. Minchin records that during the administration of one headmaster, “Marquises, Lords, and Honourables were allowed to sit in stalls in the chapel and look down on their humbler brethren” and that newcomers to the stalls were expected to bring gifts of candy and nuts.²⁸ In competitive army academies like Sandhurst, there was a general uproar when the introduction of examinations for officer candidates “allowed a few “not of the sight sort” to be admitted... simply because they were clever.”²⁹ These examinations were designed to cover subjects taught at public schools, but most public school students still found

²⁷ Minchin, 134.

²⁸ Minchin, 49.

²⁹ Farwell, *Mr. Kipling's Army*, 144.

them too difficult and resorted to cheating and cramming.³⁰ H.H. Almond “deprecat[ed] the bookish nature of the work required for entry to Sandhurst, and recommended football, hunting, deer-stalking and climbing as the means of cultivating ‘those qualities of brain and character most wanted in a soldier’”. If Sandhurst had been designed to turn out excellent foot soldiers, he would have been correct—climbing and hunting would have been a fitting education in physical resilience and patience. However, Sandhurst was intended to fit officers for command, and the correlation between command duties and climbing proficiency is nonexistent.

Learning was not on the priority list of public schools. Furthermore, administrators, public figures, and statesmen viewed the widespread ignorance of British schoolchildren with a great sense of national pride. Lack of intelligence became a cultural value. Stanley Baldwin, in a speech to the Royal Society of St. George, noted with satisfaction that “the English schoolboy, for his eternal salvation, is impervious to the receipt of learning, and by that means preserves his mental faculties into middle age and old age [better] than he otherwise would (and I may add that I attribute the possession of such facilities as I have to that fact that I did not overstrain them in youth).”³¹ These attitudes, learned young, followed young Britons into their future occupations. In consequence, the culture of the army remained stubbornly resistant to book knowledge in any form. One of the primary reasons that the Staff College never matched Sandhurst’s or

³⁰ Farwell, 142–43.

³¹ Stanley Baldwin, “What England Means to Me” (The Royal Society of St. George, May 6, 1924), <https://spinnet.humanities.uva.nl/images/2013-05/baldwin1924.pdf>.

Woolwich's enrollment numbers was that "keenness"—loosely defined as any great diligence in the schoolroom or eagerness for academics—"was considered bad form."³² Furthering one's education branded a man as overeager and made him an outsider. One officer in the Royal Welch Fusiliers recorded that "training and keenness and Staff College were suspect in the Fusiliers."³³ Gentlemen might speak a little Greek, but they certainly did not waste their time studying such nonessentials as mathematics, foreign languages, etc., in their free time—not when there were hounds to hunt behind or cricket matches to watch. With this attitude pervading the British command structure, it is no surprise that outdated tactics persisted for decades beyond their own obsolescence, or that career commanders often refused technological updates that would have given their men an advantage in the field. Men who refused to learn new languages were unable to understand or adapt to their surroundings in the colonies, forcing an awkward system of bureaucracy dependent on native translators. Heavy-handed attempts at governance were ill-received, because the administrators of the colonies rarely understood the slightest thing about the customs, languages, or history of the native populations they were charged with managing.

Instruction and training could have negated many of these issues, but most officers were not receiving any such training. The institution of examinations in 1849 forced new officers to study more before obtaining a commission. However, in order to pass, most applicants resorted to "crammers": paid tutors trained to literally "cram"

³² Farwell, *Mr. Kipling's Army*, 148.

³³ Farwell, 148.

information into the heads of their clients with all possible speed. Information gained under such circumstances is rarely retained well for future use. Furthermore, tradition-focused career officers hated the new examinations. Instead of being enthused about the expansion of their successors' knowledge base or intelligence, they worried that the introduction of lower-class cadets would cause "the army 'to lose its tone'".³⁴ One young cadet named Charles à Court recorded that "there were some dreadful outsiders among us, as could hardly be prevented in an open examination". These outsiders were later thrown in a lake by their compatriots after daring to accept a dinner invitation from that lowly creature, the commandant's cook.³⁵ Similar bullying and harassment was practiced upon low-class officers disliked by their more snobbish fellow soldiers. "Occasionally one of the 'wrong sort' got into a regiment, but he was usually driven out. Unwanted officers were first politely asked to 'turn in their papers', to resign; if they refused, they were subjected to a 'subaltern's court-martial' and rough handling by their peers."³⁶ The army was more concerned with preserving its own closed-minded, uncreative culture than in infusing new blood and new ideas. On the comparatively rare occasions when an unconnected, non-public-school alum became a successful officer, his peers viewed him with a sort of wide-eyed amazement. In one instance, "Major-General Sir Henry Hallam Parr was surprised to discover... a company of volunteers led by a captain who was the son of a coach-maker in Dover with a senior subaltern who was the son of a

³⁴ Farwell, 144.

³⁵ Farwell, 144.

³⁶ Farwell, 71.

greengrocer... but what really astonished him was that both were ‘smart and efficient officers’.”³⁷ It boggled the British mind to encounter a man who, though not a traditional ‘gentleman’, was nonetheless competent.

From a disciplinary standpoint, public schools served an indispensable role in prepping boys for a lifetime of military service. According to Farwell, “Throughout the army, discipline and steadiness were the qualities considered vital; initiative and intelligence were looked upon as civilian qualities, and therefore suspect.”³⁸ To begin instilling discipline into children was an excellent time-saver. Boys spent most of their adolescent years separated from their parents, existing in a sort of rowdy and unnatural mob, monitored by professors from an appropriate pedagogical distance. Because of a lack of parent figures, the older boys commonly took younger ones under their wing. Discipline for anything but offenses severe enough to become known to the faculty were dealt with peremptorily by peers and senior students, creating an internalized, hierarchical power structure based both on seniority and likability. Being liked was therefore not only a requirement for leadership in sports, but for safety and survival—a boy who was actively disliked by his peers would be more harshly disciplined and bullied by them.

Farwell states that “the public school system was to place a boy in a primitive environment with bad food and few bodily comforts, allow him to be bullied by older boys, and expect him to keep himself reasonably clean and properly dressed, engage in

³⁷ Farwell, 73.

³⁸ Farwell, 104.

active sports, eschew sex, and learn Greek and Latin.”³⁹ This comfortless, regimented lifestyle made the transition from school life to the military an easy one. A boy accustomed to a decade of bullying will not mind an overbearing commanding officer, poorly cooked meals, or physically exacting work. He will accept the hardships of his lot with equanimity and turn out for parade in a beautifully pressed uniform. It will not occur to him that perhaps the commissariat should be reorganized to supply the regiment with better provisions, or that his decades-old drill is useless against his enemies. A decade in a public school bred complete, happy acceptance of the status quo and the type of resolute obedience that led the six hundred into the valley of death. The unquestioning loyalty of the British officer had been practiced from childhood. These men spent their formative years being taught to obey the orders of their peers, to work together to achieve their goals, and to follow the traditions of whatever institution they found themselves. They were so practiced in implicit obedience to professors, coaches, senior classmates, and hierarchical superiors that when they marched into battle they did not have to make the choice to obey; they had been stripped of the willingness to do anything else.

The British obsession with glory, earned through physical prowess in battle, is yet another trait than can be blamed upon a thorough immersion in the classics. Boys raised upon tales of Achilles and Ajax anxiously awaited any opportunity to prove themselves, whether on the cricket ground or the battlefield. Reading the epics of Homer and the works of Henty, a prominent 19th century historian and writer for boys, evokes many of the same feelings and reactions in the reader. The formula of gallantry, courage, desperate

³⁹ Farwell, 141.

warfare, and glory won in battle remains the same whether it was originally written for Roman villagers or British schoolboys. Minchin, in an encomium upon visits to Eton's campus, writes that "From the days of the Olympian games... there is assuredly nothing more splendidly Greek than the Eton Eight in training for Henley. Such thews and sinews must give the hegemony of the world to the country that can produce such athletes."⁴⁰ In the British mind, it was possible to conquer the world through sheer muscle, and brawn commanded more respect than brains. Historians of the British Raj frequently note the British admiration of and preference for Sikh soldiers, who belonged to the tallest and most culturally warlike ethnic group in India. Members of Sikh regiments earned twelve rupees pay to other sepoy's eight and a half, a fact that led to a minor rebellion when discovered.⁴¹ Glory was accorded to doers of great deeds, and great deeds were done by the tall and strong.

Unfortunately, glory is won at great personal risk. Thousands of indoctrinated boys embraced this risk eagerly, with disastrous results. Gallant, hopeless actions like the infamous charge of the Light Brigade were immortalized in poetry, much as Homer recorded the mighty deeds done before the walls of Troy. Charges of all kinds were a favorite of the British playbook; Field Marshal Hugh Gough was famous for his love of carrying enemy positions with the bayonet. Bayonet charges forced soldiers to sprint across battlefields and into fortified positions in order to knife the opponent with the

⁴⁰ Minchin, *Our Public Schools: Their Influence on English History*, 52.

⁴¹ Byron Farwell, *Eminent Victorian Soldiers: Seekers of Glory* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1988), 37.

primitive spear attached to their rifle. Volley firing and artillery duels, while incredibly effective, afforded no one the chance for hand-to-hand fighting, and thus no opportunity to “cover oneself with glory”. While newspaper readers at home decried bloody actions, the men involved—at least those at the officer level—seem to have craved hard fighting.

It is possible therefore to generalize about public school graduates because of the homogenizing process performed by public schools. The public school system built successive generations of men who learned the same lessons, used the same slang, pursued the same vocations, and enjoyed the same hobbies. Widespread distrust of reading and upper-level college training ensured that many of these men never branched out intellectually. One Lieutenant-General Brian Horrocks noted in his memoirs that “We regular army officers of those days might all have come out of the same mould. We had been to identical public schools... We talked the same language and were, I’m afraid, terribly dull.”⁴² Many of the conclusions drawn by this thesis are possible because the vast majority of British officers formed a single-minded, cohesive whole.

Thanks to the public schools, many British officers were bred and trained to be obstinate, obedient, glory-worshipping conquerors. Did this list of poor traits mean that they were all doomed to failure? On the contrary, British generals and their men were supremely successful in European-style warfare. Their drill and tactics were impeccably suited for their own continent, and their stubbornness was becoming for an island nation which alternately refused to be pushed out of European affairs and was dragged into those affairs against its will. However, they were often doomed to initial failure when

⁴² Farwell, *Mr. Kipling's Army*, 145.

they encountered new cultural norms and new strategies. England had helped forge the style of warfare in Europe but failed to realize that their success was due to familiarity with the system they themselves had created, not outright skill or possession of the perfect tactics. Instead, they remained firmly convinced that they had discovered the best method of warfare worldwide, and that their superiority entitled them to victory wherever they chose to plant a flag. It would be as though a modern-day Manchester City fan, after watching his team win the Premier League, expected them to travel to America and win the Super Bowl.

The cracks in the foundation of the British military showed most clearly against new and foreign opponents. The more disparate the British and their enemies were, the more British forces struggled to adapt and to earn a victory. It may seem ludicrous for a global superpower with a supremely disciplined and well-equipped army to struggle harder against undisciplined farmers and machete-wielding natives than against elite European troops, but British defeats overseas at the hands of the Zulu, the Maratha, the Boers, and others prove that advantages in discipline, technology, and materials mean nothing if such resources are poorly expended. Blame and praise must be awarded to the generals, the men in charge of strategically using the resources.

To illustrate how greatly public school educations hampered commanders in the field, their examples are juxtaposed with commanders who received little to no formal education and commanders educated at specialized military academies. Frederick Thesider, 2nd Baron Chelmsford and William Elphinstone represent the great public schools. Both presided over military disasters brought about by ignorance, adherence to tradition, and a spectacular misunderstanding of irregular warfare. Robert Clive, Arthur

Wellesley, and Garnet Wolseley represent the less-educated successes, hungry for glory and renown, who rose from relatively humble beginnings to captain some of the British army's most surprising or innovative campaigns. The military academy graduates are typified by Charles Gordon and Frederick Roberts. Attention is given to those wars and campaigns conducted overseas and primarily against non-European opponents. It is not the purpose of this thesis to contend that the public school system did not turn out excellent generals when fighting in the European style, but to argue that the public school system prevented the intellectual growth and destroyed the adaptability necessary for conducting efficient and elegant overseas warfare. Furthermore, Wellesley and Wolseley were both responsible for tradition-defying reforms that altered the structure of the British military. Though these were not battlefield achievements, they indicate a willingness to change that was not simply absent from the psyches of their public school educated colleagues, but which those colleagues often fought actively against. This thesis will also address such innovations as examples of creativity and flexibility.

CHAPTER TWO

The Undereducated and Overqualified

Introduction:

While British precedent made it difficult for undereducated, unconnected men to rise from the ranks into any type of command, the careers of those that did are almost uniformly brilliant. Brilliant, in this case, is defined as militarily successful, tactically innovative, or strategically gifted. While these men often lacked the honorable predictability that had been so dutifully beaten into their public school peers and instead earned reputations for eccentricity, duplicity, and volatility, they proved both adaptable and competent in times of crisis.

This chapter analyzes three unique men, organized chronologically: Robert Clive, Arthur Wellesley, and Garnet Wolseley. Their military careers are scrutinized with attention to the strategic and tactical skill which they demonstrated, as well as their outstanding achievements and innovations. Though all three men served in India, the other details of their careers are varied and they took part in campaigns spanning four continents.

Robert Clive: The Conquest of Bengal

Robert Clive began his life as a turbulent, unruly child, “out of all measure addicted to fightin’.”⁴³ He received more than his fair share of his father’s irascible temper, and was sent at the age of three to reside with his aunt and uncle. Age seemed destined only to lengthen the laundry list of his offenses—as a teenager he organized a group of boys and ran blackmail schemes, threatening the property of local shopkeepers if his demands were not met.⁴⁴ His education was begun at the local Market Drayton Grammar School, where he caused such a disturbance that he was removed and enrolled in the more prestigious Merchant Taylors’ School in London. Though Clive’s troublemaking could charitably be called inventive, daring, or strategic, “there was in him at no time a disposition for learning. The boy made progress in mischief, but none in scholarship.”⁴⁵ One can assume that his father hoped a dose of public school discipline would turn his problematic, violent, fearless son into an honorable and upstanding member of society. He was, of course, disappointed; Clive would later become a major-general, a baron, and a Knight of the Bath, but never a man of integrity. At the age of seventeen, having already made Britain too hot to hold him, Clive took ship to India on the payroll of the East India Company.

Despite adventures on the voyage out, including a near-drowning when he fell overboard, Clive quickly hated his life in India. He was employed as a clerk in the offices of the East India Company, and spent his days taking stock and balancing ledgers—a far

⁴³ Bence-Jones, *Clive of India* (London: Constable, 1974), 3.

⁴⁴ George Forrest, *The Life of Lord Clive*, vol. 1, n.d., 4–5.

⁴⁵ R.J. Minney, *Clive of India* (Jarrolds Publishers, 1957), 17.

cry from the glorious tales of exotic India that dazzled schoolboys in England. R.J. Minney, biographer and journalist, notes that “by temperament he was fitted neither for the rigours of indoor routine nor for discipline.”⁴⁶ Indeed, he soon won a reputation for insubordination and pridefulness. Stranded, bored to tears, and far from home, Clive contracted a deep hatred for India that would stay with him for the rest of his life. He wrote home to his family and friends, “I have not enjoyed one happy day since I left my native country.”⁴⁷ He sank into a deep depression and attempted suicide within the first year of his employment, but was foiled by a misfiring pistol.⁴⁸

William Dalrymple, a historian who wrote extensively on the East India Company’s conquest of India, paints Clive as a brilliant but deeply anti-Indian young man. He writes that Clive made no recorded attempt to learn Indian languages, remained completely untouched by the natural and architectural beauty of his new home, and dismissed any and all natives he met as “indolent, luxurious, ignorant, and cowardly.”⁴⁹ However, while other John Bulls made the mistake of underestimating their opponents based on such snap judgments, Clive did not let his poor opinion of native princes cloud his estimation of their capabilities. He anticipated treachery, cooperated with powerful Indians when possible, and displayed no trace of the carefree arrogance with which commanders often embarked on colonial campaigns. He did not make the mistake of

⁴⁶ Minney, *Clive of India*, 21.

⁴⁷ William Dalrymple, *The Anarchy*, n.d., 66.

⁴⁸ Minney, *Clive of India*, 23.

⁴⁹ Feiling, *Warren Hastings*, n.d., 31.

believing that non-European armies were automatically less powerful than their European counterparts. He was prejudiced and dour to be sure, but Dalrymple credits him with “a streetfighter’s eye for sizing up an opponent, a talent at seizing the opportunities presented by happenstance, a willingness to take great risks and a breathtaking audacity. He was also blessed with a reckless bravery; and, when he chose to exercise it, a dark personal magnetism that gave him power over men.”⁵⁰

The French conquest of Madras in 1746, immensely concerning for the East India Company, accidentally set their best general on his path to command. Clive was in the town when it was captured by French forces and, obstinate to a fault, refused to promise that he would not take up arms against the French. He escaped the town in disguise and made his way to Fort St. David, further up the coast. Here he met Major Stringer Lawrence, a tough, taciturn old man with experience on the battlefields of Culloden and Flanders. The two were well suited to each other, and Dalrymple credits Lawrence as “the first to spot Clive’s potential.”⁵¹ Under Lawrence’s tutelage, Clive rose into the military sphere and assisted British forces in the temporary defeat of the French and the reconquest of Madras. He gained the rank of lieutenant, but resigned it for a position in the commissariat offered by Lawrence, a lucrative opportunity that Clive hailed with many thanks.

East India Company clerks were required to serve eight years before obtaining the right to trade on their own accounts. In May of 1751, two years after he left the army and

⁵⁰ Dalrymple, *The Anarchy*, 66.

⁵¹ Dalrymple, 66.

accepted his commissariat position, Clive passed that eight year waiting period and immediately began a thriving business venture with a fellow clerk. He was now making his fortune on two fronts, both through his commissariat contracts and his own private venture. However, he had spent the last two years watching the tortuous and bungling efforts of British commanders to further East India Company interests. A catastrophic British attempt to relieve besieged and British-friendly Trichinopoly seems to have spurred him to action. He applied to reenter the army and waived his right to any pay, whereupon he was made a brevet captain.

Trichinopoly was besieged by the forces of Chanda Sahib, the French-allied Nawab of Arcot. British strategy was to further relieve its defenders, swelling their numbers and draining their limited food stores more rapidly. Clive assessed the situation from a different angle, and settled on a bold stroke. On the 26th of August, 1751, Clive volunteered to attack Arcot itself, convinced that its garrison must be depleted in Chanda Sahib's absence. It was monsoon season, meaning that Clive would need to contend with all the muddied roads, haphazard communications, flooding, and damp powder that such weather entails. Undaunted, he took a small force of five hundred men, of whom two hundred were Europeans and the rest sepoys, and marched through torrential rain towards his target. He materialized in front of the fort so unexpectedly, and amid such a dazzling thunderstorm, that the garrison panicked and abandoned their posts. Clive took the fort without having to fire a shot.

The capture of Arcot was the first marked success in the East India Company's military career, and gave Company leaders hope that prolonged possession of Indian territory might be possible, even in the face of French and Indian forces. Arcot showcased

Clive's ability to carry out a quick, well-coordinated attack under difficult conditions. He was able to not only surmount the complications caused by severe weather, but to use that weather to his advantage. The use of speed and surprise was to remain Clive's favorite strategy as a soldier.⁵² This flew in the face of conventional military wisdom and practice:

“War in eighteenth-century India was often a slow, gentlemanly and formal affair, as much a sophisticated chess game as an act of aggression: bribes and negotiation usually played a more important role than formal assaults; armies could be bought off, or generals turned and made to break with their paymasters. Clive was happy to play these games when it suited him, but as often as not broke with these conventions, attacking when least expected and with as much ruthlessness and offensive force as possible, making forced marches in monsoon rains, laying down unexpected ambushes and attacking at night or in thick fog.”⁵³

Clive was once again shirking the rules—and it was very ungentlemanly of him to do so. An Eton-bred commander would never consider lying to the enemy, or attacking out of a thunderstorm without drawing up regular lines of battle. Luckily, the East India Company was reliant on fortune-hunters and merchants, not the upper echelons of British society. Clive's moral acrobatics excited criticism and concern among the population back home, but his companions abroad scarcely batted an eye.

More success came in February 1752, at the Battle of Kaveripak. Clive fought with a force of roughly 2000 infantry against the 4400 infantry and cavalry of the French. After a long back-and-forth action in which neither side could gain an advantage, Clive acted upon a scouting report and sent a force of 200 behind the enemy to attack their battery. The surprise attack was completely successful and triggered a rout. The French

⁵² Dalrymple, 67.

⁵³ Dalrymple, 68.

and their allies lost 350 men to Clive's 70. Clive and Lawrence went on the offensive, fighting several smaller actions and forcing a French surrender on the 13th of June, 1752. In the wake of the immense popularity that followed his military success, Clive married and returned to England, ostensibly to settle down and enjoy his good fortune. Unluckily for him, his attempt to purchase a rotten borough and become involved in British politics went sadly awry, and he returned to India in need of money. This time, with the 7 Years' War in full swing and French power rapidly encroaching on British interests in India, the Crown was interested in the fate of the East India Company. Clive sailed with a Royal Commission to take charge of the troops. As Dalrymple writes, "It was Clive's particular qualities of extreme aggression and devil-may-care audacity that drove the events of the next few months."⁵⁴ The British in Bengal were nominally under the rule of Aliverdi Khan, the venerable and immensely wealthy Nawab of Bengal. His heir, Siraj ud-Daula, was universally hated, and following Aliverdi's death the relationship between the Bengali crown and Calcutta worsened until Siraj attacked and captured Calcutta itself. Clive's force had just arrived on the scene, intended for action against the French, but he saw the fall of Calcutta as a golden opportunity not just to maintain the British foothold in Bengal or moderately expand British influence, but to seize Bengal outright. The local British leaders agreed with him, regardless of the East India Company's misgivings.

Recovering Calcutta was relatively easy with the combined military and naval force under Clive's command. The next day, January 3rd 1757, Clive declared war on Siraj ud-Daula. Ever one for quick action, he mobilized his troops on the 9th of that

⁵⁴ Dalrymple, 70.

month and sailed upriver to Siraj's main port of Hughli Bandar. Another of Clive's signature middle-of-the-night attacks carried the day with minimal casualties. Clive was interested not simply in capturing towns, but in playing the other players; he immediately gave orders to loot and burn everything in reach, acutely aware that fear was the best way to influence Siraj. Houses and magazines alike went up in smoke, and looting parties were sent out to harry and burn the surrounding countryside. By the end of the day, Clive and his troops were all safely back behind defended walls. Clive was already waging a punitive war, and he conducted it with his trademark speed and savagery.

Siraj ud-Daula was not pleased with the loss of his principal port, and promptly sat down before the gates of Calcutta with an army of 60,000. Clive handled the emergency as he had so many others—with a night attack. Demanding the assistance of several hundred sailors to pull guns and carry ammunition, he assembled 470 British troops, 800 sepoys, and seven guns, and marched into the night. The resulting engagement was not the brilliant success that Clive wished it to be—heavy fog disoriented the troops, and Siraj ud-Daula himself, the object of the attack, was not apprehended. While the speed and daring of the attack scattered Siraj's troops and effectively relieved the city, Siraj himself was able to narrowly escape in the confusion. A witness who observed the engagement from a distance recorded the frightening steadiness of the British troops, asserting that “they returned leisurely to their posts and fortified houses, without suffering the loss of a single man.”⁵⁵ This was untrue; the

⁵⁵ Gholam Hossien Khan, *The Seir Mutaqherin*, vol. 2 (Calcutta: R. Cambray and Co., n.d.), 222, <https://archive.org/details/pli.kerala.rare.14578/page/387/mode/2up>.

British forces suffered roughly 150 casualties. But once again Clive's ready willingness to jump into battle bore fruit.

The Battle of Plassey, which took place on the 23rd of June 1757, was not in itself a stunning example of Clive's military prowess. The intrigue leading up to the battle, however, illustrates his uniquely daring political ambition. Siraj ud-Daula was a vicious ruler, and the nobility of his court wanted rid of him practically to a man. Siraj's great mistake was angering representatives of the Jagat Seths, an immensely wealthy banking family who had the money and power to promote a coup. The Jagat Seths and Mir Jafar, an uneducated general who served as their puppet figurehead, approached William Watts, a representative of the East India Company. They offered exorbitant amounts of money for Company military assistance. Clive saw infinite possibilities in a Bengal free of Siraj and his bloodline. A man less confident and less determined would have hesitated from prosecuting a military coup in a hostile country—not so Clive. He obtained a signed treaty agreement from the Jagat Seths, then promptly sent a missive to Siraj ud-Daula accusing him of breaking his treaty with the East India Company. On the march toward Plassey, Mir Jafar went troublingly silent, though he had promised Clive reinforcements in the coming battle. Despite the unanimous verdict of his war council, who advised an immediate retreat, Clive pushed on. Clive's band of 3000 men, bereft of the reinforcements promised by Mir Jafar, defeated the 50,000 men and crack French artillery team of Siraj ud-Daula by the simple expedient of keeping their powder dry. After withstanding a heavy cannonade on the morning of June 22nd, Clive's troops carefully stored their powder and fuses beneath tarpaulins as an afternoon monsoon drenched the battlefield. Siraj's artillery failed to take the same precautions. Siraj's

cavalry mounted a charge, expecting Clive's guns to be silenced, only to wither away in the face of ruthless artillery fire. Their defeat and the death of their commander demoralized Siraj's troops, and the battle turned into a rout. Clive's victory effectively cemented British influence in Bengal. It is not too great a claim to state that without Bengal to fall back upon and draw resources from, Great Britain would never have conquered the rest of India.

There are few examples of British commanders cooperating with native princes, much less participating in coups against perceived tyrants. The Intelligence Branch of the War Office was not formed until 1873, and British military leaders traditionally coped with their adversaries via reconnaissance instead of using inside information from spy networks. Clive was therefore a highly unusual specimen, agreeing to cooperate with an Indian banking clan to topple a monarch with assistance from the inside. It seems likely that a commander with a stronger sense of British fair play and honor would have refused the offers of a traitor like Mir Jafar. Clive, however, immersed himself thoroughly in the turbulent politics endemic to the subcontinent. He was willing to alter alliances and break treaties whenever he sensed an advantage to be gained, advancing his own interests and the interests of the East India Company with ruthless vigor.

In short, Robert Clive was adept at learning from the culture in which he was immersed. Indian commanders and political leaders had long been famous for their brutality, their willingness to abandon alliances, and their complicated relationship with the truth. In the culture of the subcontinent, honesty was not a virtue particularly to be prized, and duplicity in business dealings or political arrangements was the standard. Only a foolish man would expect complete veracity or adherence to Western standards of

war from a leader raised with the standards of such an environment, but subsequent British commanders were often surprised and horrified by the actions of native rulers and generals. Clive did not expect honesty or mercy from his adversaries, and played by their rules, a rare talent among British commanders. This adaptability ensured his success.

Arthur Wellesley: Mysore and the Marathas

Any thesis extolling the successes of the British military would be incomplete without mention of Arthur Wellesley, 1st Duke of Wellington. Though most of that august gentleman's victories were won against European opponents such as Napoleon, he also participated in campaigns in India that showed his tactical genius. As this thesis is concerned primarily with innovation in the face of foreign opponents, Wellesley's Indian experience will be analyzed more thoroughly than his European successes. His attachment to the native troops under his command was unusual and impressive for a British officer of his time, and his ability for defensive warfare no doubt thrilled Clausewitz.

Arthur Wellesley was born in Ireland to titled Anglo-Irish Protestant parents, and was the sixth of nine children. Opinions on exactly when and where he was born differ, as parish records, the claims of his family, and even his own census responses all disagree. Biographers generally agree on the 1st of May, 1769, and Wellesley himself celebrated his birthday on that date. Arthur's education was carried out first at a diocesan school in Ireland, then at a seminary in London until 1781, when he was enrolled at Eton. His father died in the same year. As a member of the landed gentry, he was expected to succeed brilliantly at public school—his older brother Robert had made a splash and earned an excellent reputation at Harrow and Eton. Unfortunately, he loathed the

experience and spent only three years there. Some biographers contend that his childhood as part of the small Irish Protestant minority left him with great loneliness and a sense of being an outsider that never left him—whether this was the origin of his sentiments or not, they were certainly exacerbated by his time at Eton. He told a biographer that he spent most of his time at school alone and “seldom took part in either the cricket matches or boat-races which were then, as they are now, in great vogue among Etonians.”⁵⁶ After his father’s death, Arthur was eventually removed from Eton due to his family’s shortness of funds. His place there was instead given to his two younger brothers, and his mother hoped that her younger and more studious children would make more of the opportunity than their reserved older brother. Though Arthur himself seemed to prefer the idea of a civilian life, he was practically thrust into the army—he did not have the academic talent necessary for a brilliant career at a university, he was too shy for politics, and as a Protestant he was bereft of that last hope of middle sons, occupation in the Church. His mother, Lady Mornington, referred to him as “her awkward son Arthur” and lamented that he was “food for powder and nothing more.”⁵⁷ Things began to look up for him when he began attending the Royal Academy of Equitation in France. He was still unusually frail and shy, but he picked up horseback riding and French, the preferred language of European diplomatic circles. His family was impressed by the change in him when he returned home.

⁵⁶ George Robert, *The Life of Arthur, Duke of Wellington* (London, 1875), 4.

⁵⁷ Richard Holmes, *Wellington: The Iron Duke*, Paperback ed (London: HarperCollins, 2003), 15.

Arthur's older brother, now the suave and politically astute Lord Mornington, immediately exerted his influence to secure a commission for his younger brother. Arthur Wellesley was promptly awarded an ensignship and a position as an aide de camp for Lord Buckingham, and was then promoted to lieutenant. He made an attempt at politics that went surprisingly well and bought his way up the military ladder in order to impress the dour older brother of a particularly pretty girl. The brother was not impressed and the marriage did not go through, but rank once acquired has a way of demanding its bearer's attention. A lieutenant colonel at the age of 24, Arthur Wellesley had no real military training when he was shipped off to fight the French in Holland. His time in Europe soon convinced him that the command structure of the British army was in shambles. Generals waved away dispatches to be perused after dinner, there were too few muskets to go around, and commanders spent their time in "jollifications" instead of managing their operations.⁵⁸ Wellesley later remarked that "The real reason why I succeeded in my own campaigns is because I was always on the spot – I saw everything, and did everything myself."⁵⁹ His single campaign in Holland was enough to convince him of what Garnet Wolseley would conclude was the best command method a hundred years later: an involved commander needed to oversee every aspect of operations to ensure success.

In June 1796, 39 years after Clive began the piecemeal conquest of India at Plassey, Colonel Wellesley took ship with his regiment—the 33rd—for India. He spent the voyage reading everything he could lay hands on about the place he was heading, and

⁵⁸ Holmes, 34.

⁵⁹ Holmes, 34.

began studying Persian and Arabic grammar books. Many British officers were accustomed to communicate via whistles, hand signals, or simply loud English with native populations; Wellesley apparently intended to take the extra time necessary to learn new languages. After a brief stint in the Philippines in 1797, he returned to India and was greeted with the news that his brother was being sent to Calcutta as the new governor-general of British India. The fate of the subcontinent would be ruled by the two Wellesleys, both of whom were intent on the conquest of the whole.

Tipu Sultan, the much-dramatized ruler of Mysore, was one of the last great holdouts against British power. He had a reputation for cruelty that was almost certainly enhanced by British propaganda, but he was also an impressively astute military leader. He was allied closely with the French, and indulged himself by building state-of-the-art rocket technology and by chaining his captives in dungeons that flooded up to their necks. The rockets themselves were not accurate, and did not rival the French-designed models used by Wellesley's later Maratha adversaries, but had an impressive range and were terrifying to troops not trained in withstanding them. From the beginning, Arthur argued that adequate preparation would enable British forces to topple Tipu. Through the unfortunate death of other personnel, Wellesley was given responsibility for all preparations leading up to the invasion. Feeding the mixed British and Indian army while working through 250 miles of sweltering jungle was a gargantuan task. Wellesley solved the difficulties by encouraging merchants to travel with the army and to spread out over a large range of territory to acquire provisions, and arranged contracts with brinjaries, camp-followers who toted supplies of commodities. The army brought its own bullock train in order to transport vast amounts of grain. Wellesley also arranged for the

acquisition and transport of siege artillery, which would be necessary to invest Tipu's capital, Seringapatam. He drilled his men hard in preparation for the invasion, ensuring that they practiced with live ammunition. Ultimately, command was given to General Harris. Wellesley recognized the patronage which had raised him to his position and happily handed over charge of the force to Harris, as well as offering wise advice to his older brother. Lord Mornington was unsure of whether to accompany the army or not; Arthur assured him that any such action would look like interference and destroy the trust of General Harris. Wellesley and the 33rd were ordered to march with and provide advising for six native infantry battalions of Company men. An incident involving great confusion and lack of intel led Wellesley to attempt an ill-advised attack on an unreconnoitred position, which was beaten off with some loss. He resolved never again to attack an adversary whose position had not been reconnoitered by daylight. Seringapatam was taken with heavy fighting but without undue incident.

When the smoke cleared, Wellesley was left in command of the city. He himself felt that it was a fit and proper appointment; he had commanded native troops and got along with them well, a qualification that alone made him unique among British officers. His first steps were to immediately put a stop to the plunder of the city and to restore order among the looting army. Four soldiers were hanged and more flogged before the order was seen through, but Wellesley did not shrink from cruelty when maintaining discipline. On a more generous note, he also called for extra rations for several regiments that had taken the bulk of the fighting, including his own 33rd. A child was placed on the throne as a suitable puppet for the British Resident, and Wellesley was lauded for his talent in dexterously managing the civil and judicial sides of territorial administration. He

even threatened a senior officer who was accused of poor conduct toward Indian civilians, telling the man to either shape up or be removed from command. His impeccable commissariat arrangements enabled him to go on campaign against a rebel mercenary, supporting his army through hostile and barren territory. He caught up to the mercenary at Conaghull and, though seriously outnumbered, inflicted an immense defeat upon him with four regiments of cavalry—two British and two Indian. The mercenary's young son was found among the baggage. Wellesley, generous in victory, looked after him and left money for his upkeep when leaving India.

In November of 1802, Wellesley received the command that would instigate his most impressive campaign in India. Baji Rao, Peshwa of the Marathas, had been ousted from his throne by the Maratha warlord Holkar. He fled to British protection and offered the East India Company rights to direct his foreign affairs and to garrison troops in the Maratha capital in return for help reclaiming his throne. The East India Company, never one to turn down the opportunity of installing a puppet leader, accepted with thanks and nominated the now major-general Arthur Wellesley to command. His preparations were elaborate and included analysis of terrain and specifications for the transport of food and water. He took great care over the details of how individual provisions were to be packed, specifying the importance of iron bound kegs and waxed cloth to cover baskets of bread. Thanks to diligent preparation, the army covered some 600 miles in exemplary time, and Wellesley's rigorous discipline ensured that the native population was free from the looting and pillage that traditionally accompanies army movements. Baji Rao was planted back on the throne, but in short order Scindia, a Maratha warlord, declared against the British. Wellesley, still on the scene, was determined that brutal, immediate victory was

the only way was to proceed and immediately marched upon and took the nearby Maratha fort of Ahmednagar.

Bringing a quick conclusion to war with the Marathas was a difficult proposition. The bulk of Scindia's force consisted of irregular cavalry which depended on speed and surprise to cover vast areas of land. Trapping such a highly mobile force to bring about a decisive battle was Wellesley's goal, and he therefore attempted to coordinate with an independent force under Colonel Stevenson in order to trap Scindia. On the 23rd of September, intelligence brought in by British spies revealed that Scindia's army was camped near Wellesley's force. Wellesley himself decided to seize the opportunity. He might never have a chance to fight a decisive battle against Scindia again and simply could not afford to wait for Stevenson's division to arrive. The ensuing Battle of Assaye was to be what he would later consider his finest battle. With 9,500 mixed European and native troops and 17 cannon, he would take on between 50,000-70,000 opponents with over 100 cannon. Scindia's core infantry numbered roughly 10,000 strong and were trained and captained by European mercenaries. Wellesley's own infantry numbered roughly 4,500 European and native troops. The Maratha artillery was designed by French engineers and worked by French-trained crack artillery teams. Scindia's army took up a position in front of what was accepted to be the only ford across the Kaitna River, intending to sweep the approaches with artillery fire. Wellesley, however, sent out a party to reconnoiter two villages on the Maratha left—he concluded that logically, two villages would not exist on opposite sides of the river unless a hidden ford lay between them. He was correct.

The plan of assault was daring: Wellesley's infantry would cross the ford and then deploy quickly from column into line, and the cavalry would serve as a third line to the rear. The ensuing action was bloody by British standards, but ended in a complete victory for Wellesley. His own personal influence on the battle was marked, as he led a charge of native cavalry against the Maratha guns. Native cavalry has always been the most notoriously unreliable branch of the British army, and more than one battle was scuppered by its precipitate surrender or flight. In this instance, however, they served valiantly and with distinction. The entire action was characterized by Wellesley's intimate involvement. He created the battle plan, personally oversaw the ground, and discovered the hidden ford. He manipulated his small force on the battlefield with precision and skill, and personally led whatever division's action was most crucial for the task at hand. Furthermore, Wellesley personally congratulated his Indian officers in their own language for their bravery. The war dragged on for a few more battles, but Scindia's power was ultimately broken and the East India Company strengthened its grip on the subcontinent.

Wellesley's time in India set him firmly in the path that he would take for the rest of his life. He famously claimed that "I understood as much about military matters when I came back from India as I have done ever since."⁶⁰ While there he discovered a preference for Indian-bladed swords, which did not possess the slim blade required in British army regulations but which served him well in battle. He also discovered a love for bold, decisive tactics, and appreciated the use of surprise when possible. Indian warfare made a similar mark upon Robert Clive. The value of drill and discipline was

⁶⁰ Holmes, 73.

also proven by the fine display of mettle put on by his European and native troops at Seringapatam and Assaye. Requiring any troops to transition from column into line after a river crossing, especially in the face of the enemy, was a risky maneuver—Wellesley carried it out with a healthy proportion of native troops, relatively new to European drill.

The bulk of Wellesley's fame would come later, during the Napoleonic Wars. As his adversaries in that instance were all European regulars, they do not come under the scope of this thesis and must therefore be left undescribed. Before concluding his tale, however, it is important to point out that he used his political power to forward reforms in much the same manner that Garnet Wolseley did. Despite being generally conservative politically, he was passionately interested in religious freedom for the Catholics among whom he had been raised. He gave speeches warmly in favor of Catholic emancipation and used his position as Prime Minister to pass the Catholic Relief Act of 1829, threatening to resign unless the king gave royal approval to the act. He even fought a duel with a violent anti-Catholic earl. All of this is surprising, coming from a man whose childhood was rendered unusually lonely and isolated by his status as a Protestant. On the other hand, it is largely possible that Wellesley enjoyed his time as a diocese school much more than his time at Eton, and may have nursed fond memories of Catholic school friends. Either way, he was a man willing to make changes and to use his position in power for good.

In his unremitting attention to detail, his willingness to use native troops as effectively and with as much respect as European troops, and his determination to adapt quickly to changing circumstances, Arthur Wellesley embodied versatility and resilience. He was blessed with good patronage and opportunities, but seized those opportunities for

himself. His scholarly career did not inspire his family and friends with any hope that he would be the hero of Assaye, Salamanca, and Waterloo, but he proved more a doer than a learner and carried the flag of the British Empire far and away over vast areas of the globe.

Garnet Wolseley: Lucknow, Ashantiland, and the Cardwell Reforms

Garnet Wolseley, the final case study explored by this thesis, gained his fame in the innumerable conflicts that filled the reign of Queen Victoria. He was, quite literally, the “very model of a modern major general”—the lyric from *Pirates of Penzance* was written to celebrate him. One biographer describes him as “the supreme master of irregular warfare in the expanding Empire... the military reformer who strove no less valiantly to keep the British army abreast of the scientific changes that were revolutionizing the world he lived in.”⁶¹ While most officers clung to tradition, Wolseley embraced change with characteristic vigor, welcoming innovation and using it to his advantage.

He was born in Ireland in 1833 to the elderly Major Garnet Wolseley and his much younger wife, Frances Anne. Major Wolseley died in 1840, by which time Garnet had six younger siblings. While the Wolseley family was an ancient, landed, and respected one, the small offshoot that produced young Garnet lacked the land and money needed to live an upper-class lifestyle. A major’s pension does not run to public school educations, so Garnet was educated at home and later at the local village school. Poverty

⁶¹ J. H. Lehmann, *All Sir Garnet: A Life of Field-Marshal Lord Wolseley* (J. Cape, 1964), 13, <https://archive.org/details/allsirgarnetlife0000lehm/page/n13/mode/2up>.

forced him to leave school at the age of fourteen and find work in a surveyor's office, and he wrote to the Duke of Wellington requesting a commission in the same year. That commission did not materialize until he was 18, after three more appeals to the Duke of Wellington and Lord Raglan, the Duke's military secretary. Though commissioned into the 12th Regiment of Foot, Garnet could not afford to live on an ensign's pay in England and so immediately transferred to the 80th Regiment of Foot, which was bound for India.

Byron Farwell records that, while Garnet had none of the money and resources necessary to rise in the army, "he intended to succeed by seeking combat, by great daring and by constant study of his profession. His one fear, as he later confessed, was that he would die before he had made a name for himself."⁶² Breaking into the power structure of the British military without the friendships and patronage found at a public school would only make his task more difficult. Fortunately, he was possessed of immense personal bravery. He led two lone hopes in his first battle, desperate to cover himself with glory despite immense physical risk—"As Garnet moved forward to conduct what was regarded as a suicidal charge, a fellow officer, whose spare shirt he had borrowed that morning, remarked in disgust, 'There goes my change of linen.'"⁶³ The charge succeeded, and for this bit of gallantry Wolseley received a severe leg wound, a mention in dispatches, and a lieutenancy. He was promptly invalided home and transferred to the 90th Perthshire Light Infantry just in time to see action in the Crimea. "As Royal Engineers seemed to lead the most dangerous existence, Wolseley volunteered to serve with them,"

⁶² Farwell, *Eminent Victorian Soldiers*, 193.

⁶³ Lehmann, *All Sir Garnet: A Life of Field-Marshal Lord Wolseley*, 21.

quickly winning a promotion to captain.⁶⁴ The promotion was withdrawn when it was discovered that Garnet was only twenty-one, but Garnet lobbied so fiercely against this injustice that his rank was reinstated on the 26th of January, 1855. He thus became a captain in less than three years, which was “a rare and spectacular rise for a young man in the infantry without wealth or great family connections.”⁶⁵ The incredibly harsh conditions and high mortality rate of life in the Crimea did nothing to daunt Garnet’s spirits. He was severely wounded by a shell fragment that destroyed his vision in one eye and shattered his jaw, but, learning that an assault was being prepared on Sebastopol, attempted to saddle his horse and make his way to the front. Unfortunately for his hopes, he was too weak to mount and was forced to remain behind. Despite his wounds, a setback that might have ended the career of a less determined man, Garnet’s work with the Royal Engineers continued and he was recognized by another mention in dispatches and a promotion to major. Without purchasing a single step, he had risen to become one of the youngest field officers in the British Army.

Wolseley’s next shining moment occurred in India during the Sepoy Rebellion, when he served as part of the relief force that reclaimed Lucknow from the mutineers and lifted the siege on the weary Residency. Wolseley’s lust for fame speedily outstripped his orders. Sir Colin Campbell, leader of the relief force, instructed him to take his command forward through the streets of Lucknow and to halt in a mess house near the Residency. Wolseley suspected that Campbell desired a halt to allow his favored Highlander

⁶⁴ Farwell, *Eminent Victorian Soldiers*, 196.

⁶⁵ Farwell, 197.

regiment to gain the honor of being the first to relieve the Residency, and was determined to secure that honor for his own detachment. He led his men through the streets to the walls of the Residency and located a breach, earning distinction as the first relievers of the Lucknow siege. Sir Colin Campbell was infuriated by Wolseley's violation of orders. Wolseley was not mentioned in dispatches, but was promised another promotion and received it. He thus became a brevet lieutenant colonel at the age of 24. More than anything, the incident proved that Wolseley was willing to overstep the boundaries of the conventional command structure when he deemed it necessary— a rare attribute, and in some commanders' eyes a disagreeable one. When looking back upon the episode, Wolseley accorded a great deal of respect to the Sikh troops he saw in action during the relief. He especially cited an incident in which a detachment of Sikhs successfully fought their way up a narrow, spiral staircase and into a crowded room of enemies: "Few British soldiers would have done this, and yet their loss was small. They knew their enemy's habits and mode of thought better than we did. However, no matter what they knew, it was a splendid illustration of the pluck and daring of the Punjaub (sic) soldiers."⁶⁶ It was a rarity for a British officer to consider the mode of thought of the enemy, or to appreciate that unique tactics carried out by native troops might be more fitting for some situations than British drill. This observation would hold Wolseley in good stead later in his career, in Africa.

⁶⁶ Garnet Wolseley, *The Story of a Soldier's Life*, vol. 1 (Westminster: A. Constable & Co., Ltd., 1903), 303.

Great Britain watched the outbreak of the American Civil War with interest. On November 9th, 1861, a Federal warship stopped and detained two Confederate envoys sailing in convoy with a British Royal Mail vessel. Great Britain immediately outfitted reinforcements to be sent to Canada, expecting that war would soon break out with the North. Wolseley, who had been home on leave, joined the staff of Colonel Mackenzie and promptly was sent to Canada, where he followed news of the conflict with interest. “He differed with most European military observers who felt there were no lessons to be learned from a vulgar brawl between hastily recruited civilians,” and decided to use the opportunity to study new methods of warfare between unique opponents.⁶⁷ He toured the American South armed with letters of introduction written by expatriate Confederates and was struck with the quality of Southern troops. Though commissioned in a service that valued pipeclay and brass buttons over marksmanship or integrity, Wolseley was clear-sighted enough to recognize good soldiers by their bearing and not by their equipment. Lehmann records that “In his [Wolseley’s] lifetime he witnessed many parades of sartorially splendid warriors with well-polished accoutrements, but he never saw one composed of men who ‘looked more like work.’”⁶⁸

After the end of the Civil War, Wolseley remained in Canada as threats of an incursion by an Irish republican group, the Fenian Brotherhood, mounted from across the United States border. He was made a brevet colonel and placed in charge of a Camp of Instructions for Cadets, designed to train militia officers against the potential threat. His

⁶⁷ Lehmann, *All Sir Garnet: A Life of Field-Marshal Lord Wolseley*, 117.

⁶⁸ Lehmann, 123.

training regimen was unique and unconventional; he wasted little time on parade ground maneuvers and eschewed traditions. He was soon beloved by Canadian volunteers thanks to his cheerful but no-nonsense way of doing things. Under his command, recruits were drilled and exercised relentlessly. Always on the lookout for glory, Wolseley was determined to make a success of his training camp. He also saw it as a chance to improve his own command skills, a sign of self-awareness unusual in the British Army. He wrote gleefully to his brother of the mock battles staged once a week, in which they fired off “any amount of HM Ammunitions... It is capital practice for me as I am so little with troops and I now have such opportunities for learning how to handle men. Who knows but that I may be Sir Garnet before another 6 months.”⁶⁹ Ever the optimist, he successfully transformed what many men would have seen as a dead-end assignment into a chance to earn knighthood.

Several years passed before Wolseley again took the field against an active foe, during which time he wrote and published the *Soldier's Pocket Book*. He was concerned that most field guides were written by civilian theorists and not active-duty officers, and argued that, while theoretical works could provide an officer with knowledge of past precedent, they did not tell him how to apply that knowledge. In characteristic fashion, Wolseley decided to rectify this deficiency himself. He claimed that his book was “intended to be a guide to officers from the moment war is declared: it enters into the most minute details on everything connected with the wild life one has to lead in the field... I make no apologies for its shortcomings, but publish it in the hope that that it

⁶⁹ Garnet Wolseley, “Garnet W. to Richard W.,” September 9, 1866.

may be found useful by soldiers of all ranks in Her Majesty's Army."⁷⁰ The book is shockingly anti-elitist in nature, and in it Wolseley espouses a surprisingly unstratified, egalitarian method of conducting military affairs. He opens with an exhortation to officers: "Let us give up the phrase 'officer and gentleman', substituting that of 'soldier' for it: let the word officer be used as seldom as possible, so that the private may really feel that there is no gulf between him and his commander, but that they are merely separated by a ladder, the rungs of which all can equally aspire to mount."⁷¹ Wolseley's ideal army would be knit together by bonds far tighter than the traditional class-based hierarchy, and would have positions open in its upper echelons for skilled individuals of any birth and background. He was opportunistic and interested in the military as a military, not as an extension of the British way of life.

More importantly, Wolseley viewed efficiency and victory as ends which justified the sort of means that public schools decried, such as the endorsement of lies and counterintelligence. His *Soldier's Handbook* even includes a chapter on the usefulness of spies. He wrote calmly in opposition to the virtuous training received by most of his officers: "As a nation we are bred up to feel it a disgrace even to succeed by falsehood... The man who acts upon them [ideals of honesty] in war had better sheathe his sword forever. An English general must make up his mind to obtain information as he can, leaving no stone unturned in order to do so."⁷² The preface to his book espoused a

⁷⁰ G. J. Wolseley, *The Soldier's Pocket-Book for Field Service* (Macmillan, 1871), 5–6, <https://books.google.com/books?id=uVYBAAAAQAAJ>.

⁷¹ Wolseley, 1.

⁷² Wolseley, 81.

uniquely modern outlook on the use of tactical knowledge. Wolseley argued that even the most low-ranking officers of a regiment should be trained to handle groups of men in minor operations:

“...the captain commanding a company out skirmishing, or on outpost duty, requires tactical knowledge as much as the officer commanding the army...Tactical instructions should begin with the company officers learning to handle their fifty or one hundred men as an independent body without supports, when called upon to perform some of the very minor operations of war.”⁷³

This idea sounds remarkably like the command system put in practice during World War I, in which small, independently commanded forces were encouraged to splinter from the main body in order to take cover against overwhelming storms of ordnance. These forward-thinking opinions made Wolseley a standout in military circles, and he was soon firmly allied with the Secretary of State for War, Edward Cardwell.

Edward Cardwell, like Wolseley, had an interest in building a reformed, efficient British military. Wolseley’s military expertise was useful to Cardwell, and the two men worked together to push through a series of army reforms, which covered everything from the abolishment of purchased commissions—a heavy blow to elite generational military families—and the institution of a reserve system coupled with local militias that would immensely increase Britain’s potential force mobilization. Wolseley’s particular brainchild was the introduction of short terms of service, enabling soldiers to enlist for a mere seven years instead of the former regulation twenty-one. Long terms of service had discouraged many from enlisting, as twenty-one years was viewed as almost the

⁷³ Wolseley, 5.

equivalent of a life sentence. The Cardwell Reforms are generally credited with advancing Great Britain into the modern age militarily, and no small portion of that credit rests on Garnet Wolseley's shoulders. Indeed, the egalitarianism that his proposed model command structure would foster resembles the attitude of men in the trenches of World War I more than the strict caste divides in well-heeled regiments of the late *Pax Britannica*. With his larger reserve system implemented, complete with militia involvement, Wolseley moved Great Britain further down the scale toward capability for total war. He was a theorist, but a theorist who had done his training in the field, tested his theories, and was able to put them into realistic practice.

When British-allied tribes in what is now Ghana began suffering under the depredations of the warlike Ashanti, Cardwell naturally recommended Wolseley for command of the expedition sent out to take action. Wolseley accepted and began making preparations with his accustomed energy and aplomb. He hand-picked a corps of officers—referred to in military circles as the Wolseley Gang—whom he believed exhibited great military talent, and most of whom later became immensely famous. Furthermore, he eschewed the usual British campaign routine in which men and officers would be posted overseas, to acquire maps and intelligence once there. Instead, Wolseley marched into the British Intelligence Department and demanded intel on everything there was to know about the situation. “For the first time in British history, the commander of a military expedition sat down and discussed arrangements with key men in the War Office, the Admiralty, the Colonial Office and the various departments that would supply him

with the tools and stores for his work.”⁷⁴ Never before had such detailed reconnaissance and preparation been done for what was a comparatively low-importance campaign. Wolseley even planned his campaign to fall during the healthiest season of the year, and decided on an aggressive course of action that would see his force land, march to the Ashanti capital, defeat the enemy, and reembark all in that single season. The engineering feats of the march to Kumasi, the Ashanti capital, are reminiscent of Caesar’s crossing of the Rhine or Mahomet II’s forces portaging galleys overland during the second siege of Constantinople. Wolseley himself fell ill—but not until after he had spread conflicting, incorrect information to every newspaper and completely confused his Ashanti adversaries. The brilliant officer corps, acting on his orders, pushed forward and built some 237 bridges in the swamps on the way into Ashanti territory, ploughed a road, and strung telegraph wires between hospital- and provision-equipped stations that were erected every seven to twelve miles. If Wolseley’s invasion failed, it would not be for lack of preparation— and it did not fail. Wolseley himself recovered and, a general at the tender age of forty, led his force across the Prah River and into Ashantiland on January 5th, 1874. The invasion was quick, brutally efficient, and completely successful. Several small actions were fought, in which the British forces suffered only four men killed and 194 wounded. Wolseley rode into Kumasi on February 4th, to find the capital deserted. The Ashanti promptly sued for peace and accepted British terms. From beginning to end, the adventure claimed only 68 British lives and made Garnet Wolseley a national hero.

⁷⁴ Farwell, *Eminent Victorian Soldiers*, 212.

To chronicle all of Wolseley's successes would be to write a thesis solely about him. It is therefore necessary to end the tale of his exploits relatively early, and to simply assure the reader that all his subsequent campaigns were carried out with the same level of careful planning and logistic talent. Wolseley was innovative tactically, strategically, and in military reform; he fought ceaselessly to reinvent the British military and to support British soldiers, efforts which made him beloved. In some ways, he predicted tactical shifts that would only slowly come about through bitter trial and error in the first World War. Had he not died on the eve of that conflict, perhaps the situation of the British army would have been different. He was relatively bereft of patronage, did not enjoy a public school education, and made a smashing success of himself anyway through pure hard work and a willingness to improvise.

CHAPTER THREE

Old School Ties

Introduction:

The hazard of researching disasters of the British Army is that they occurred relatively rarely. Technological superiority, an excellent command structure, and a militaristic national character all combined to produce an army that was willing and able to claw its way through obstacles by brute force rather than admit defeat. Irregular tactics were the bane of the British Army and its commanders, but they can sometimes be circumvented by sheer firepower. Many colonized peoples, from Māori warriors to Burmese peasants, discovered this at great cost. Unfortunately, many inept commanders who deserve to take their place in this chapter managed to avoid destruction not because of their own talent, but because they commanded forces who were so well equipped and disciplined that they were able to attain victory through attrition.

The fog of war becomes particularly thick when it comes to assigning blame for military disasters. The slow breakdown of an army is a painful and confusing thing, and discovering the true source of the fault is difficult at best. The following generals have been selected because their actions—or lack thereof—are clearly responsible for an overwhelming defeat. Frederick Thesiger, 2nd Baron Chelmsford, underestimated his enemy and insisted on pursuing a textbook European strategy of occupation against a

tribal people who declined to be occupied. William Elphinstone, a man beloved by his peers, was paralyzed by indecision and the inability to innovate.

Frederick Theziger, Baron Chelmsford: Massacre at Isandlwana

It is telling that, despite his involvement in one of the most comprehensive and surprising British defeats in history, there exist no biographies of Frederick Theziger, 2nd Baron Chelmsford. A multitude of historical works cover the details of his disastrous first invasion of Zululand, and he is mentioned parenthetically in accounts dedicated to other commanders of his day. However, very little information survives about his boyhood. It is undeniable that he was born with the proverbial silver spoon in his mouth. His father, the first Baron Chelmsford, was a talented lawyer and politician and was twice named Lord High Chancellor of Britain. His paternal great-grandfather served as a secretary to Lord Rockingham, a twice-elected Prime Minister, and his uncle assisted Lord Nelson as an aide-de-camp during the Battle of Copenhagen. Young Frederick, blessed with the connections and advantages that such a lineage could purchase, was educated at Eton. Determined to pursue a military career, he made an unsuccessful attempt to join the Grenadier Guards and purchased a commission in the Rifle Brigade in 1844. In 1837 such a commission would have cost a minimum of £450, equivalent to £44,000 in 2021. £450 was the base going rate for such a commission; depending on demand, the actual price may have been far higher. In contrast, the average weekly earnings for a laborer in 1850 totaled 9s. 7d., or roughly £25 a year.⁷⁵ In late 1845, Chelmsford bought an

⁷⁵ W.H.R. Curtler, *A Short History of English Agriculture*, 2017, https://www.gutenberg.org/files/16594/16594-h/16594-h.htm#CHAPTER_XIX.

exchange into the Grenadiers. He rose steadily in the ranks, serving as ADC to the Commander of Forces in Ireland before joining his regiment in the Crimea. While in Crimea, he was made Deputy Assistant Quartermaster General. In 1859, then serving as Lieutenant Colonel of the 95th Regiment, he took part in the final operations of the Indian Rebellion.⁷⁶

Chelmsford earned his army reputation not for strategic brilliance or for any flair in command style, but through his impressive staff work. At his core he was a competent and diligent bureaucrat, characteristics that won him the position of Deputy Adjutant General. He served as such under Sir Robert Napier during the latter's Abyssinian expedition, a campaign that was noted for being "well-organized and successful."⁷⁷ Chelmsford's staff work under Napier won him great recognition; he was mentioned in dispatches, made a Companion of the Bath and ADC to the Queen, and was appointed Adjutant General of India.⁷⁸ It was in India that he made the acquaintance of Sir Henry Bartle Frere, the Governor of Bombay. After a stint in England, unable to afford the lifestyle expected of an officer at home, Chelmsford again applied for overseas service and was awarded the first vacancy: a post in South Africa. This was his "first independent active service command in thirty-four years."⁷⁹ More to the point, it was his first independent active service command ever. He now faced the turbulent political and

⁷⁶ Adrian Greaves, *Isandlwana: How the Zulus Humbled the British Empire* (Barnsley, U.K.: Pen & Sword Military, 2011), 161.

⁷⁷ Greaves, 161.

⁷⁸ Greaves, 161.

⁷⁹ Greaves, 162.

military landscape of South Africa as a 50-year-old major general with zero field experience. Entrusting the command of an entire colonial force, engaged in active warfare against a native people, to a man who had never held a field command, was a spectacularly poor choice. Chelmsford's qualifications for active duty seem to have not been considered before awarding him his new post. He was selected because of his excellent reputation, his powerful friendships, and his string of honors, not for any military talent. More disastrously, his new duties brought him once again into contact with Sir Bartle Frere, who had left India for the position of High Commissioner of South Africa. Frere had grand dreams of creating a South African confederacy of powerful states, all under British dominion, and Chelmsford was more than willing to assist his friend with this ambitious project.

Chelmsford arrived in South Africa during the ninth and final Xhosa War. Adrian Greaves, founder of the Anglo-Zulu War Historical Society, records that "His [Chelmsford's] subsequent experiences against a foe that relied on hit-and-run tactics rather than becoming involved in full-scale battles confirmed his low opinion of the fighting capabilities of black Africans... As a tactician he had proved competent if uninspired."⁸⁰ A more adaptable tactician might have seen an opportunity to learn, but Chelmsford allowed the events of the Xhosa War to validate his preexisting biases. He maintained his belief in the system of European warfare and approached his invasion of Zululand as though it were a simple parade ground exercise.

⁸⁰ Greaves, 162.

The tragedy that was Chelmsford's first invasion of Zululand was made more poignant by the fact that it was meticulously planned months before hostilities ever broke out. Sir Bartle Frere had expansionistic dreams of a unified, British-controlled South Africa and engineered a war to fulfil those dreams. Chelmsford and Frere "expected to defeat the Zulu army quickly and easily, and then march on to intimidate republican elements in the Transvaal."⁸¹ While justifications for war were concocted, arrangements concerning roads, troops, transport, and weather proceeded apace. A date was selected and diplomatic events made to fit the warmongers' calendar. Chelmsford wrote to Sir Theophilus Shepstone, "I am anxious that our arrangements should be as complete as it is possible to make them—half measures do not answer with natives—they must be thoroughly crushed to make them believe in our superiority."⁸² To his credit, he planned his campaign with all the meticulous care that distinguished his work as a staff officer. His army was outfitted with Martini-Henry .557/450 rifles, the cutting edge of firearm technology, and such faith was felt in these new weapons that Chelmsford wrote breezily to Sir Evelyn Wood, "I am inclined to think that the first experience of the power of the Martini Henrys will be such a surprise to the Zulus that they will not be formidable after the first effort."⁸³ This underestimation of his enemy would prove costly.

⁸¹ Greaves, 8.

⁸² Ron Lock and Peter Quantrill, *Zulu Victory: The Epic of Isandlwana and the Cover-Up* (London : Mechanicsburg, PA: Greenhill Books ; Stackpole Books, 2002), 27.

⁸³ Lock and Quantrill, 40.

The invasion force was roughly 15,000 strong, consisting of 5,120 British soldiers of the 24th Regiment, 8,700 native levies commanded by white officers, 1,040 cavalry, and 260 artillerymen, split between three columns that would carry out a three-pronged attack along separate routes. On the 11th of January, 1879, Chelmsford's column crossed the Buffalo River into Zululand. The column was technically under the command of Colonel Glyn, but Chelmsford immediately usurped Glyn's position and remained in charge for the rest of the campaign. He made all tactical decisions himself, without consulting Glyn, unintentionally ensuring that the blame for the future disaster lay squarely on his own shoulders. Difficulties immediately ensued; poor weather and the difficulty of moving tons of materiel along muddy wagon-trails proved to be more of a challenge than Chelmsford, with his months of preparation, had anticipated. He functioned well as a cog in the staff machine, not as an independent commander. However, his confidence was not dampened, and he wrote cheerily that King Cetawayo would either surrender or be captured in a few days' time.⁸⁴

Chelmsford's drive to quickly conclude the campaign encouraged him to ignore repeated advice from experienced campaigners, who warned him that safety and defense was more vital than speed. J.J. Uys, who had fought the Zulu before, visited Chelmsford and advised him to "Be on your guard and be careful. Place your spies out, and form your wagons into a laager."⁸⁵ Before Chelmsford even reached South Africa, General Sir John Mitchel had written to him, advising him that "No plan of operation of yours can in any

⁸⁴ Lock and Quantrill, 90.

⁸⁵ Lock and Quantrill, 95.

way circumvent the caffre [native warrior]. He is your master in everything. He goes where he likes, he does what he likes, he moves three miles whilst you move one....”⁸⁶

Chelmsford ignored this wisdom and plotted a course for his columns that was intended to back his enemy into a corner and force a decisive battle. His plan of conquest was constructed as though the Zulu would behave like regular troops—a fact that Chelmsford should have known was false, with his experience observing the hit-and-run operations of native tribesmen during the 9th Xhosa War. Unfortunately for him, the Zulu were fully capable of maneuvering around his slowly-moving columns at will. He would be denied the luxury of choosing his own battlefield, and, contrary to plan, held only the ground on which his men currently stood.

So matters stood as the Zulu and British armies approached each other.

Chelmsford made slow but steady progress forward, determined to connect with a local leader named Matshana kaMondisa, who had indicated a possible willingness to join the British. Leaving the column to make camp at Isandlwana Hill, Chelmsford and his staff rode to Matshana’s stronghold only to find it deserted. If Chelmsford had been a second Clive, constantly vigilant for treachery, he might have been concerned. Instead, he was simply annoyed and mildly confused. Details of this encampment are necessary to comprehend the disaster that would take place two days later. The camp itself stretched over half a mile, and strict regulations required that the tents used by the white troops be erected with all possible symmetry and decorum. Blame for the position of the camp itself must be laid on the shoulders of one Major Clery, who had selected the lower edge

⁸⁶ Lock and Quantrill, 50.

of Isandlwana Hill despite the warnings of Inspector George Mansel. Mansel pointed out that the encampment could be commanded both by the hill itself, to the encampment's rear, and by Black's Koppie, a knoll at a distance of 300 yards.⁸⁷ Mansel and his vedettes also captured an elderly Zulu, who was questioned and claimed that a Zulu army was on its way. While this information was reported to Clery, sources are unsure whether it was then related to Chelmsford upon his return to camp. Chelmsford was, however, aware of the undefended nature of Isandlwana Hill's rear and claimed airily that "... my troops will do all the attacking but, even if the enemy does venture to attack, the hill... will serve to protect our rear."⁸⁸ Several officers sought to voice opinions about the necessity for defensive precautions, but were all disregarded. Chelmsford, still concerned with speed above all else, did not wish to spend the time entrenching a camp that would be abandoned in a few days' time. He also declined to laager the wagons, because they would be required to move more supplies the next day.

On the 21st of January, a local Zulu chief named Gamdana appeared at Isandlwana Hill, claiming to surrender. He told Chelmsford that "Cetshwayo had sent an impi [army] to eat him up, for surrendering his arms to the English, he had expected the impi that morning but it had not arrived."⁸⁹ The army referred to had in fact made its way completely unnoticed to the Ngwebini Valley, only five miles away. The Zulu took their troop movements very seriously, and took every precaution to cloud their maneuvers.

⁸⁷ Lock and Quantrell, 132.

⁸⁸ Lock and Quantrell, 134.

⁸⁹ Lock and Quantrell, 140.

Scouts were sent ahead of their main column, and armed bands patrolled to decoy away or surprise and destroy any British contingent that came close to sighting the column. The caution was rewarded with almost complete success; while several small skirmishes were had, no British force made contact with the main body of the enemy until the Zulu themselves attacked. No fewer than five reports of the nearby Zulu presence, including Gamdana's, were brought before Chelmsford's staff on the 21st of January, but Chelmsford remained supremely unconcerned by the news that a Zulu force might be approaching. Secure in his own position as British conqueror, it does not seem to have occurred to him that the Zulu would attack him first.

Chelmsford's unconcern was transformed into excitement at 1:30 a.m. on the morning of January 22nd. The previous day he had ordered nearly half the column, commanded by Major Dartnell, to strike off on a reconnaissance mission. The object was to locate and either destroy or make allies of local chiefs, "thus eliminating any hostile force within his proposed enemy-free corridor and, at the same time, ensuring that the Zulu army did not get behind him..."⁹⁰ Major Dartnell's force encountered the Zulu army in the Magogo Hills, though neither side chose to engage. Dartnell sent back to the camp for reinforcements, and a delighted Chelmsford promptly mobilized his cavalry, four 7-pounder guns, six companies of his British regulars, and a contingent of native pioneers.⁹¹ Here was the chance to fight the sort of decisive, set-piece battle that would crush Zulu resistance and enable him to carry out the rest of his projected campaign. With this small

⁹⁰ Lock and Quanttrill, 136.

⁹¹ Lock and Quanttrill, 148.

contingent and Dartnell's he intended to engage and defeat a Zulu army some 20,000 strong. It was not until 6 a.m. that Chelmsford and his staff arrived at Dartnell's bivouac, only to find that the thousands of Zulu warriors menacing the camp the previous evening had seemingly disappeared.

Had Chelmsford been vaguely conversant with the concept of irregular warfare, alarm bells might have begun ringing in his mind. As it was, he was simply disappointed and puzzled. Ntshingwayo, the commander of the Zulu army, had ordered a detachment of his warriors to act as decoys, occupying the attention of Dartnell while the main body of his army moved into position to attack the camp at Isandlwana.⁹² It was for him a tremendous stroke of luck that Chelmsford leapt eagerly into the breach, drawing even more defenders away from Isandlwana to attack an enemy that was no longer there. Dartnell had failed to send out reconnoitering parties and could not even offer information on which way his enemy had gone. As the main column of Chelmsford's force arrived, bands of Zulu warriors appeared on the surrounding hills. A plan was hastily concocted to storm the heights with half the force, forcing the Zulu to retreat into the Martini-Henry wielding arms of the other half, accompanied by the artillery. This maneuver would require Chelmsford's troops to climb and march a distance of over four miles, against an unknown number of the enemy. Long before this plan could be carried to completion, the Zulu on the hills had miraculously disappeared once more. For three hours Chelmsford and his command—which quickly scattered, unable to keep together and keep up with their commander—chased their adversaries through the hills without

⁹² Lock and Quantrill, 151.

ever having a chance to fire a shot. At 9:30 a.m. a carbineer arrived with news that the Zulu were advancing upon the camp in force. Chelmsford read the note and handed it to Major Clery, who asked what was to be done. Chelmsford simply responded, “There is nothing to be done on that.”⁹³ He and his staff then proceeded to eat breakfast.

Meanwhile, at Isandlwana, Major Pulleine was preparing to defend the camp with 1450 men and 2 guns. Lieutenant Colonel Durnford arrived with a column of an additional 500 men during the morning, but even this combination of forces was doomed against the full might of the Zulu army. The Zulu employed their traditional buffalo horns formation, and eyewitness accounts place the strength of the right horn and center at between 12,000 and 15,000 men.⁹⁴ The total force consisted of roughly 20,000 warriors. The British forces were accustomed to volley firing. Armed with their shiny new Martini-Henrys, 250 trained infantrymen were capable of pumping out 1,500 rounds a minute into the face of an oncoming enemy, a truly withering amount of firepower.⁹⁵ Unfortunately for the defenders, their ammunition ran short and the oncoming Zulu warriors were immensely brave. The firing line was overwhelmed by the Zulu chest, some 8,000 warriors desperate to avenge the loss of one of their most popular chieftains. The camp fell into chaos, bands of men defending themselves with bayonets until cut down. The only hope of escape was on horseback; the Zulu were much faster than the fully armed and accoutered British troops and were quite capable of running down survivors.

⁹³ Lock and Quantrill, 160.

⁹⁴ Lock and Quantrill, 186.

⁹⁵ Lock and Quantrill, 209.

Twice during the day, reports were given to Chelmsford and his staff claiming that the camp was under attack. The roll of gunfire, clearly audible from Chelmsford's breakfasting-place, was additional proof that something was deeply wrong. However, observation with a telescope showed that the tents were still up in camp. As striking the tents was the first order of business in case of an attack, Chelmsford refused to believe that the reports were true. He was blindly unable to comprehend any deviation from regulations. It was not until two hours after the last report was received that Chelmsford finally ordered a return to Isandlwana, and only then because messengers arrived directly from Major Pulleine and Captain Gardner intimating that the camp was severely threatened. By the time the column was set in motion, the noise of the guns at Isandlwana had stopped. Around 3:30 p.m., Chelmsford met Commandant Rupert Lonsdale, who had escaped Isandlwana on horseback and who related the bad news. Chelmsford's only response, after a moment of stunned silence, was to whisper, "But I left over 1,000 men to guard that camp!"⁹⁶

The Zulu, having inflicted one of the most decisive defeats that the British army would ever suffer, sacked the camp and moved away almost as quickly as they came. Chelmsford and his column marched back to Isandlwana and spent a horrifically uncomfortable night, unsure whether they would suffer the fate of their compatriots. In a superb example of learning too little too late, Chelmsford "personally saw to the placing of the picquets."⁹⁷ Approximately 1,350 men were dead, imperial troops and native levies

⁹⁶ Lock and Quanttrill, 225.

⁹⁷ Lock and Quanttrill, 227.

combined. Chelmsford himself was now faced with the enormity of the disaster that had occurred. He had failed to take any precautions for the defense of the camp, had severely underestimated the strength and fighting power of his enemy, and had dallied the day away chasing specters through the hills while his camp was overwhelmed and its defenders massacred. He had received multiple reports intimating that Isandlwana was under attack but had refused to believe it.

It was not only Chelmsford's choices that doomed the British forces at Isandlwana. During the battle, the quartermaster refused to resupply the native regiments, contending that all ammunition was to be reserved for the use of the imperial infantry.⁹⁸ Furthermore, had Pulleine given the order to strike the tents—as per regulations—Chelmsford might have admitted sooner that Isandlwana was in real danger. He was also up against the standard obstacles that have afflicted every commander of every time; bad roads, the difficulty of transporting supplies, and unexpected delays all cooperated to worsen his situation. However, he was a staff officer with three and a half decades of campaign-planning experience. He had served as a quartermaster, and should have been well aware of the difficulties endemic to invading hostile, undeveloped territory. He refused to laager his wagons in spite of much advice to that effect, depriving his men of even that line of defense. His overconfidence and lack of insight into his enemy cost the lives of over a thousand men. Even then a man of character might have taken ownership of the situation, but Chelmsford and his staff immediately busied themselves with throwing blame upon anyone within reach, especially Lt. Colonel Durnford and Colonel

⁹⁸ Lock and Quantrill, 208.

Glyn. Durnford was one of the few British officers to remain at Isandlwana and die with his men.

Chelmsford's immense confidence in himself was his undoing. He concentrated so intensely on the grand plan of Bartle Frere that he neglected to appreciate the true difficulty of his undertaking. He viewed his enemy with such contempt that he failed to take basic security precautions and depended on the advanced equipment of his force to crush his opponent. Unfortunately, technological superiority is not the sole prerequisite for victory. Chelmsford's inability to appreciate any type of irregular tactics led him deep into a trap of his own making. He was not only beaten, but played for a fool.

William Elphinstone: Retreat from Kabul

Comparatively little is known about the early life of William George Keith Elphinstone. He was born in 1782, the third of four sons born to Elizabeth Fullerton and the Honorable William Fullerton Elphinstone, director and chairman of the East India Company, who was himself descended from the tenth Lord Elphinstone. The family was possessed of what their biographer describes as a "considerable fortune," the investment of which enabled them to live "in very comfortable circumstances."⁹⁹ The Honorable William commanded troops in the service of the East India Company and served as a director until the age of 86, and Elizabeth served as hostess to the steady flow of well-

⁹⁹ Sir William Frasier, *The Elphinstone Family Book of the Lords Elphinstone, Balmerino and Coupar*, vol. 2 (Edinburgh, 1897), 10.

regarded guests that came with the family's station.¹⁰⁰ It can be inferred from the family's status that the younger William grew up comfortable and well cared for. A letter from his older brother contains the lines, "I hope William is still in England and that he will remain at the College for a year or two," and the family biographer claims that "Like his brothers John and Charles, he received... a liberal education, which included an English College training."¹⁰¹ He appears to have put his family connections to excellent use throughout his life, and the chronicle of his eventual defeat is thick with letters from friends who jumped to his defense.

Elphinstone's oldest brother followed the time-honored English tradition of following in his father's footsteps. The younger sons, anxious for similar orthodoxy, entered the military. Elphinstone joined the 24th Regiment of Foot as an ensign in 1804, at the relatively late age of 22.¹⁰² He was promptly sent to Spain, where he took part in the Peninsular Wars, then was posted to the West Indies, where he was stationed at Barbados and Guadeloupe.¹⁰³ His letters home reflect the leisurely life of the well-connected young officer; he toured sugar plantations, rubbed elbows with generals, and conveyed the well-wishes of family friends home to his proud parents. One letter, dated from the 31st of January, 1812, reads:

"Invitations [are] very frequent to dinners... General Maclean, the quartermaster-general here, has been very civil to me. He says he knows

¹⁰⁰ Frasier, 2:41.

¹⁰¹ Frasier, 2:57.

¹⁰² James M. Perry, *Arrogant Armies: Great Military Disasters and the Generals Behind Them* (New York: John Wiley, 1996), 122.

¹⁰³ Frasier, *The Elphinstone Family Book of the Lords Elphinstone, Balmerino and Coupar*, 2:60.

you; he was long in the same regiment with Lord Elphinstone. There is a Mr. Cantry in one of the regiments here and upon the staff, who called on me the day after I arrived, and inquired how you was, saying you had been very kind to him in some business he had before the court of directors...”¹⁰⁴

That most vital of British assets, patronage, stood well on William Elphinstone’s side. The family biographer, anxious to paint him in a congenial light, insists that Elphinstone’s affinity and talent for military service are primarily responsible for his quick accession to rank, but notes also that his older brother Charles assisted him in purchasing a majority. He saw service in Europe during the Napoleonic Wars and was a lieutenant-colonel by Waterloo.¹⁰⁵ There can be no doubt that he was brave; he personally led the Fifth Brigade during its advance on Napoleon’s force and was made a Commander of the Bath. One of his fellow officers claims that he inspired his troops with the stirring entreaty, “Come on my brave fellows, let us die like Britons, sword in hand, or conquer!”¹⁰⁶ Elphinstone himself came through the battle without a wound and remained in the military even during the long period of peace that followed Napoleon’s defeat, though he went on half-pay for years until growing debts made it necessary for him to return to active service in 1837, the same year he was made a major-general.¹⁰⁷¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁴ Frasier, 2:60.

¹⁰⁵ Frasier, 2:60.

¹⁰⁶ Frasier, 2:62.

¹⁰⁷ William Dalrymple, *The Return of a King: The Battle for Afghanistan, 1839-42*, First Edition (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2013), 21.

¹⁰⁸ Frasier, *The Elphinstone Family Book of the Lords Elphinstone, Balmerino and Coupar*, 2:65.

He was given command of the army in Bengal in 1838, and was thus conveniently on the spot when the situation in Afghanistan became tumultuous.

The events that predicated the British invasion of Afghanistan included an immensely confusing power struggle between the deposed British protégé, Shah Shuja Durrani, and the new possessor of the Afghan throne. Shah Shuja's personal ambitions were not a matter of great import to British officials, but he was immensely useful as a pawn to validate British involvement in Afghan affairs. The British government spent much of the 19th century convinced that Russia had greedy eyes fixed on India, and Afghanistan—or more specifically, the passes through the Hindu Kush—was the most practicable route for a land-based assault on the Indian subcontinent. Managing the allegiances of a variety of Indian and Afghan ethnic groups, tribes, and full-blown principalities was a daunting task for the British government, made more difficult by the fact that the loyalty of each of these players was freely for sale to the highest bidder.

The newest occupant of Shah Shuja's throne, Dost Mohammed, was delighted to play Russia and Britain against each other, seeking whatever alliance would be most valuable to him. Ultimately, war was precipitated by a variety of governmental blunders. The British ambassador to Dost Mohammed, Sir Alexander Burnes, was well-known throughout local circles as an unusually duplicitous and conniving young man, and Dost Mohammed received several messages from Afghan rulers warning him against Burnes.¹⁰⁹ Burnes was a womanizer and a fool, but he did relay the valuable information that Dost Mohammed was entertaining a Russian embassy at his court. This news

¹⁰⁹ Dalrymple, *The Return of a King*, 95–97.

decided Lord Auckland on a plan of action: Afghanistan was to be invaded and Shah Shuja replaced on his throne.¹¹⁰ In all honesty, this portion of the plan went remarkably well. The British army, with an immense baggage train and collection of camp followers, marched into Afghanistan in December of 1838. The going was slow and painstaking, but the army occupied Kabul on the 11th of August, 1839 and Dost Mohammed surrendered and went into exile in November of 1840.¹¹¹ The bulk of the British army returned to India, but the force of 8,000 that remained was too numerous for the liking of Afghan chieftains. Shah Shuja was not popular with his own people, and the continued presence of British troops in Kabul began to look suspiciously like an occupation.

Such was the situation when William Elphinstone arrived on the scene in April of 1841. To Elphinstone's credit, sources indicate that he was well aware of his own inability to command. He was almost sixty, afflicted with gout, and had not commanded an army in the field since Waterloo. He was stricken with fever on his arrival at Kabul, and applied twice to be relieved from his command on plea of illness. The surgeon present in Kabul wrote that "in my opinion, his constitution is shattered beyond redemption,"¹¹² but Lord Fitzroy Somerset wrote cheerily in response to Elphinstone's pleas. In a letter dated November 3rd, 1841, Somerset remarked that "I am grieved to hear you have suffered so much from illness... since it appears you like your command,

¹¹⁰ Dalrymple, 123.

¹¹¹ Dalrymple, 175.

¹¹² Frasier, *The Elphinstone Family Book of the Lords Elphinstone, Balmerino and Coupar*, 2:67.

and that you discharge the duties of it to the perfect satisfaction of those with whom you are associated, and are greatly respected and esteemed. I trust the change of climate will set you up..."¹¹³ Thus lightly did he condemn Elphinstone to his fate, as he would later order the infamous charge of the Light Brigade.

The cracks in the system of British command selection rarely show themselves so clearly as in Elphinstone's case. He was at times unfit even to rise from his bed, and he possessed no great experience or tactical expertise that might have justified his retention in command. He was simply the man nearest the spot, and he was unable to impress his own incapability upon anyone qualified to relieve him. He is the textbook example of a man who should never have been in charge of a military operation.

However, Lord Somerset thought him capable merely because he was respected and well-liked. The entire British system of placing an incompetent in command of a major expedition solely because of his excellent education, his scintillating connections, and his long service, has been responsible for an immense number of preventable deaths.

By September 1841, local tribesmen had become increasingly restless. Even the Durrani tribe, Shah Shuja's own relatives, had grown weary of their Anglophilic new emperor. Prostitution and affairs between the British and Afghan women became incredibly common, an insult to Afghan men. Intelligent observers began to realize how tenuous was the army's situation; numerically it was small, it was quartered in a completely indefensible barracks, small pockets of troops were dispersed throughout urban areas, and the lines of communication to India ran miles through mountain passes

¹¹³ Frasier, 2:67.

that could easily be threatened.¹¹⁴ The final insult that ignited the powder keg that would incinerate Elphinstone and his army was pecuniary in nature. William Macnaghten, a political agent and right-hand man of India's governor general, reduced the stipends that had been paid to Afghan chieftains at the beginning of the occupation by £8,000.¹¹⁵ Unfortunately, the Ghilzai chiefs involved headed clans responsible for guarding the roads and mountain passes. Elphinstone firmly believed that Macnaghten was more in charge of the British forces than he was, but lacked the energy or health to do anything about it. An engineer visiting to acquire intelligence recorded that "he [Elphinstone] said that he did not know the number or strength of the [Ghilzai] forts..." and that Elphinstone begged him, "if anything occurs, for God sake clear the passes quickly, that I might get away."¹¹⁶ The aforementioned passes had already been occupied by outraged Ghilzai tribesmen, who plundered a caravan and cut off the line of communication to India.¹¹⁷ A series of skirmishes between Afghan forces wielding jezails and a bewildered British column headed to Jalalabad occupied the greater part of October. Elphinstone lingered on in bed, declining resolutely to take any action.

In Kabul, Alexander Burnes completed the British disaster by having one of Abdullah Khan Achakzai's attendants severely beaten after sheltering one of the khan's runaway slave girls. It was the last straw for the outraged Afghan nobility, and a jihad

¹¹⁴ Dalrymple, *The Return of a King*, 213.

¹¹⁵ Dalrymple, 247.

¹¹⁶ Dalrymple, 251.

¹¹⁷ Perry, *Arrogant Armies*, 125.

was promptly proclaimed by Abdullah Khan himself.¹¹⁸ On November 2nd, 1841, a dangerous mob collected in the streets of Kabul. Their immediate goal was the death of Burnes, by any means necessary, and to that effect the British Treasury and Burnes' lodgings were surrounded with furious insurgents. The wall of the Treasury was mined and fire set to the house, dense plumes of smoke rising into the sky. As low-ranking officers watched in disbelief, hours passed. The treasury was plundered, office records burnt, and the sound of firing rolled through the streets. Burnes was killed, though sources disagree on who delivered the final blow and in what circumstances, and the mob spread outward looking for new targets. The already rebellious tribesmen of the surrounding areas poured into the city, raising the number of combatants from the scant 300 who had attacked Burnes' house to a well-armed 3,000.¹¹⁹ Meanwhile, on the British side not a soldier was mobilized. The guard around the cantonment was doubled, but not a man set foot into the town. General Elphinstone issued no orders and took no steps for defense. He had, earlier in the morning, made an attempt to mount his horse and had taken a severe fall.¹²⁰ This completed his slide into doddering confusion. The British Military Secretary, George Lawrence, begged Elphinstone to send in the 5,000 sepoy troops lodged just outside town, but to no effect: "my proposal was at once put down as one of pure insanity and, under the circumstances, utterly unfeasible."¹²¹ Instead,

¹¹⁸ Dalrymple, *The Return of a King*, 261.

¹¹⁹ Dalrymple, 274.

¹²⁰ Dalrymple, 265.

¹²¹ Dalrymple, 265.

Elphinstone wrote a series of letters to Macnaghten—who was staying in the same cantonment— and puzzled over a series of possible plans, none of which he put into action. At last he gave up the idea of doing anything at all that day, and concluded, “We must see what the morning brings.”¹²²

Elphinstone could ill afford this indecision; the rebels were well aware of the precarious nature of the British position. In a spectacularly short-sighted move, all British supplies had been stored in three forts—Fort Jafar Khan, Fort Mohammad Sharif, and Fort Nishan Khan— outside the cantonment. These forts were immediately targeted by the rebels; Fort Jafar Khan was destroyed and burnt overnight, and Fort Mohammad Sharif, directly adjacent to the cantonment, was invested.¹²³ Waiting had thus allowed the numbers of the rebels to grow and had cost immense amounts of British supplies, both of food and ammunition. Elphinstone committed himself completely to a strategy of too-little-too-late. At noon he ordered three infantry companies and two guns to make a foray into the town, but such a limited force could accomplish nothing and was speedily beaten into retreat. His initial attempt frustrated, Elphinstone sat on his hands for the rest of the afternoon. Fort Nishan Khan, which housed all British medical supplies and nine months of wheat and fodder, was attacked and its water supply cut off. Captain Lawrence again urged action and offered to relieve the defenders with two companies of infantry, but Elphinstone refused.¹²⁴ He alternately promised reinforcements and denied them

¹²² Perry, *Arrogant Armies*, 128.

¹²³ Dalrymple, *The Return of a King*, 275.

¹²⁴ Colin Mackenzie, *Storms and Sunshine of a Soldier's Life*, vol. 1 (Wentworth Press, 2016), 106–7.

depending on whichever officer he spoke to last, continually swayed by the opinions of others.¹²⁵ The beleaguered defenders held out valiantly, but ran out of ammunition and were forced to retreat to the cantonment, fighting as they went. The commander of the fort, Colin Mackenzie, deplored the loss of his position and wrote bitterly, “Among the errors that lead to our downfall, that of omitting to strengthen my post was the worst. Every Afghan of intelligence has confessed that if I had been reinforced by a couple of regiments, we should have remained masters of the city.”¹²⁶ This opinion was echoed by Lady Sale, an officer’s wife who recorded the events of the insurrection with impressive detail and clarity. She wrote, “Had reinforcements and ammunition been sent to Trevor’s tower and Mackenzie’s fort, they might have held out for ever against any for the rebels could have brought against them.”¹²⁷ As it was, the British army had lost the entirety of their stored food, fodder, ammunition, and medical supplies within thirty-six hours of the start of the revolt.¹²⁸

Once again, time did not mend the situation. Days dragged by as baggage animals and camp followers began to starve. Among the stores left behind in the city and commissariat forts was an assortment of cannon, which the rebels promptly turned against the beleaguered cantonment. On November 6th, Elphinstone forbade his men from returning fire. Lady Sale wrote that he did so because “powder is scarce! There being at

¹²⁵ Florentia Sale, *A Journal of the Disasters in Affghanistan, 1841-2*, 2015, 51–53, <https://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/50219/pg50219-images.html>.

¹²⁶ Mackenzie, *Storms and Sunshine of a Soldier’s Life*, 1:108–10.

¹²⁷ Sale, *A Journal of the Disasters in Affghanistan, 1841-2*, 54.

¹²⁸ Dalrymple, *The Return of a King*, 288.

the time sufficiency for a twelve month siege.”¹²⁹ Elphinstone’s crippling indecision was made worse by Brigadier Shelton, a lugubrious and unimaginative commander who was summoned by Macnaghten from attendance on Shah Shuja. The machinery of command, now split three ways between the three men, ground to a crushing halt. The rebels pulled guns onto the hills commanding the cantonment and began a punishing fusillade on the 23rd of November, prompting Shelton to lead 1,100 men out to clear the heights. His force reached the heights before it was assailed by a mounted force of Afghans. Shelton, whose earliest campaign experience had come during the Napoleonic Wars, formed his men into squares to repel cavalry. The Afghans, supremely unconcerned with European tactics, simply withdrew to the safety of broken terrain and pelted the motionless squares with jezails. Despite being accompanied by a contingent of sappers, the troops raised no defenses and simply withered away, “standing completely still for hours on end silhouetted on the ridge.”¹³⁰ By the time the sepoys fled for the cantonment, over 300 men had fallen uselessly and many more were captured and executed as they attempted to escape. It was the nail in the coffin of British hopes: a complete and utter defeat at the hands of tribesmen who had been dismissed as fanatics and a crushing blow to what little initiative the commanders had left.

The arrival of harsh winter weather and the almost complete depletion of British food stores made matters desperate. The troops began slaughtering transport animals to be eaten, while the camp followers survived on scraps and the meat of stray dogs. Heavy

¹²⁹ Sale, *A Journal of the Disasters in Affghanistan, 1841-2*, 47.

¹³⁰ Dalrymple, *The Return of a King*, 296.

snowfall blocked several passes by which a relieving force might have approached, had any been available. On December 8th, with one day of provisions remaining, a council of war convened at which Elphinstone formally endorsed a surrender. Macnaghten carried out the actual negotiations, and reached an agreement with the rebels on the 11th. The British forces in Kabul were to be allowed free passage back to India, along with an escort and supplies of grain and transport animals to help them along their way. Macnaghten was content with these terms and brushed off Shah Shuja's warnings that the rebels could not be trusted to keep their words. Unfortunately, his own high opinion of his diplomatic skills led to his death; he attempted to foment discord between two rival rebel leaders and was quickly detected. On the 23rd of December, he left the relative safety of the cantonment to meet with Akbar Khan, the rebellion's nominal head, and was summarily seized and killed.

The death of Macnaghten meant that, for the first time, full command of the British force fell upon the ineffectual shoulders of General Elphinstone. He had fussed inconsequentially about Macnaghten's interference in military affairs for months, but now faced the daunting task of managing the retreat alone. Shah Shuja reiterated the warnings he had given to Macnaghten, relaying messages through George Lawrence. Lawrence recorded that "As long as we held our position, the king urged, they could not hurt us; but if we once abandoned it we were dead men." Elphinstone simply replied that "it would not do to remain where we were, and that march we must."¹³¹ Having once laboriously

¹³¹ George Lawrence and William Edwards, *Reminiscences of Forty-Three Years in India: Including the Cabul Disasters, Captivities in Affghanistan and the Punjaub, and a Narrative of the Mutinies in Rajputana* (New York: Cambridge University Press, n.d.), 142.

selected a path of action, he could not abandon it. On the 6th of January the British column marched out of the cantonment through knee-high snow and below-zero temperatures. The promised escort did not materialize, the bridge over the Kabul River was not ready, and the column was accompanied by a straggling train of half-frozen camp followers, who would die silently by the thousands on their long trek to the Indian border. Word was received from Nawab Zaman Khan Barakzai that the British should stop where they were, as he had not completed arrangements for their safe passage. The column was still strung out between the cantonment and the river, waiting to cross. Elphinstone called a halt and then sunk into his accustomed indecision, even as rebel forces descended on the outskirts of the British position and began to loot and burn. By noon, the rebels turned their rifles on the still-waiting British troops. Fifty casualties had been sustained before Mackenzie disobeyed orders, galloping off to restart the column and save his men from massacre, with Elphinstone crying “Mackenzie don’t do it” behind him.¹³² The bottleneck was opened and troops began feeding through, but not quickly enough. By five o’clock, the rearguard and camp followers were only just debouching from the cantonment. The rebels seized this opportunity to scale the battlements and pepper their retreating enemy with jezail fire. Elphinstone had been made aware that the river above the bridge was fordable, but he failed to make that information known to anyone else. The camp followers—laden with “most of the baggage and all of the ammunition”—and the sepoy

¹³² Mackenzie, *Storms and Sunshine of a Soldier's Life*, 1:135.

battled fiercely to get over the bridge while taking fire, and the vast majority of the baggage was simply abandoned in the struggle.¹³³

To lose the entirety of your supplies once looks like bad luck; to lose it twice looks like spectacularly poor management. Elphinstone took no steps to safeguard the baggage or camp followers, and mounted no action to protect his vital supplies. From this point forward, the British retreat began to look similar to Napoleon's disastrous retreat from Moscow. When the rearguard finally reached the army's first resting place at 2 a.m., they had "had to fight the whole way, and pass through literally a continuous line of poor wretches, men, women and children, dead or dying from the cold and wounds."¹³⁴ The tents and food had been left behind with the rest of the baggage, and many of the Bengali sepoy, unaccustomed to mountain winters, simply froze to death. Those that did not die suffered severe frostbite and, unable to walk, were left behind.

The second day was worse than the first, as discipline broke down completely. The advance guard took it upon themselves to move out without orders, perhaps hoping that a dash for the border could save them. One entire regiment deserted and joined the army of Akbar Khan, many frostbitten sepoy fled back toward Kabul, and armed forces of Afghans plundered the remaining baggage at their leisure. As the army pushed its way forward, "the number of mounted Afghans around them steadily increased. They travelled parallel to the British, on both flanks of the column, firing randomly into the jostling

¹³³ Dalrymple, *The Return of a King*, 326–27.

¹³⁴ Lawrence and Edwards, *Reminiscences of Forty-Three Years in India*, 145.

rabble of refugees...”¹³⁵ Elphinstone called a halt when the army had made barely five miles progress, wasting another day and dooming his weary troops to an extra night in the cold. The ground chosen was deadly; the troops lay in the mouth of the Khord Kabul Pass, allowing Afghan snipers to scale the heights and fire on the makeshift camp throughout the night.

A wiser or more experienced commander would have ordered that the army travel at night, when extreme low temperatures packed and froze the snow. This would also have minimized the danger from Afghan irregulars, who were unable to shoot with much accuracy in the dark. William Dalrymple, an Indian historian whose work on the Anglo-Afghan War has won many awards, records that Afghan mujahideen used such tactics in the 1980s with great success. Furthermore, he points out that there was no need to risk the strategically dangerous Khord Kabul and Tezin passes, and that Elphinstone’s force could have travelled by a “far less dangerous route through the Lataband Pass. Why they did not do this remains a mystery.”¹³⁶

As it was, the morning of the third day revealed a large body of Afghans in the beleaguered column’s rear, who pushed the British force on into the mouth of the pass. General Elphinstone’s staff spotted Akbar Khan managing operations from a distance, and Mackenzie and Lawrence were sent to renegotiate the terms of safe passage that had been offered in Kabul. Why Elphinstone did not realize that he had no chips with which to bargain is beyond human ken. Mackenzie and Lawrence were taken to Akbar Khan,

¹³⁵ Dalrymple, *The Return of a King*, 329.

¹³⁶ Dalrymple, 331.

fed, and treated quite graciously. They were still in polite conversation when musket fire broke out in the pass below. Elphinstone, either unwilling or incapable of sending detachments along the heights, had walked directly into a beautifully arranged ambush. The Ghilzais had carefully prepared the pass with embankments that kept them safely out of British range but allowed them to pepper the trapped column with jezails. Lady Sale recorded that some 500 regulars and 2,500 camp followers were killed.¹³⁷ She was in the advance portion of the column, which suffered less than the rest. On average, more than half of the remaining troops fell in the five-mile pass.

The only reward for surviving the ambush was a night spent in the even more bitter conditions at the top of the pass. On the 9th of January, the survivors were only able to make a mile of progress in the face of blinding snow. Elphinstone, fatalistic from the start, was convinced that the hand of doom was upon his straggling little army. That evening he handed over all British women of officer class to Akbar Khan's forces, a heavy blow for British honor. Even this was not his idea; Akbar Khan, perhaps motivated by a desire for slaves or perhaps because of genuine pity, had made repeated offers to save any women, children, and wounded officers who gave themselves up. Furthermore, Elphinstone made no provisions for women who were not officer class, and they were left to their fate.¹³⁸

For those who received dubious sanctuary at the hands of Akbar Khan, it was only just in time; the army entered the Tezin Pass on the 10th and walked directly into a second

¹³⁷ Sale, *A Journal of the Disasters in Affghanistan, 1841-2*, 155.

¹³⁸ Dalrymple, *The Return of a King*, 337.

ambush. The remnants who remained alive stumbled through the pass, taking fire all day. Lawrence later wrote despairingly that “Our military authorities, who proved themselves as incapable of conducting a retreat as they had previously shown themselves in the operations preceding it, had with the most strange perversity ordered our men on no account to return the fire.”¹³⁹ Elphinstone attempted to absolve himself of this incredible order in a memorandum to the government, claiming that “their muskets covered with frozen snow would have been little use even if the men could have handled them.”¹⁴⁰ It seems likely that he was still clinging futilely to the promises of Akbar Khan, having learned nothing from the string of betrayals that punctuated the retreat.

Casualty numbers broke 12,000 on the 11th of January, as the remains of the column emerged from the Tezin Pass. Only some 200 troops remained, with an unspecified number of camp followers and servants. Elphinstone was already conquered, all that was lacking were the formalities. Akbar Khan summoned Elphinstone and Shelton for negotiations that evening. Elphinstone, either too ignorant to apply the pattern of Macnaghten’s death and Lawrence and Mackenzie’s kidnap or too exhausted to care, obediently came to heel. He was fed and warmed at Akbar’s fire and then denied the right to rejoin his troops, who were annihilated the next day at Jagdalak. Elphinstone himself died in captivity on April 23rd, 1842.

Elphinstone’s great personal tragedy was that, until his series of mistakes doomed thousands to death, he was generally beloved. The Elphinstone family chronicle includes

¹³⁹ Lawrence and Edwards, *Reminiscences of Forty-Three Years in India*, 163.

¹⁴⁰ Dalrymple, *The Return of a King*, 339.

a selection of many letters received by the family after William Elphinstone's death, all of which were complimentary in the extreme and offered hope that the late general's name would be cleared from any blame for the disaster. Henry Havelock, who had served as Elphinstone's interpreter, assured the family that "few men have died... who will be followed to the tomb by a greater amount of private regard and regret than General Elphinstone."¹⁴¹ The machinery of the British Army exerted itself to the limit to shield Elphinstone's name from blame, despite his truly inept handling of one of the most disastrous retreats in military history. It was Elphinstone's popularity that had doomed him to command in the first place. In a system where connections and popularity equated to competence, he was elevated to a rank far above his talents. The same men who sought to excuse his faults had put him in a position untenable for anyone of his abilities.

Elphinstone was completely and utterly unable to adapt to change, especially in an emergency. He did not expect an Afghan revolt and he took no steps to protect himself, his troops, his camp-followers, his commissariat, his line of communications, or his route of retreat from the enemy. Despite complaining about Macnaghten's overreach of authority, he did nothing to counter it and in fact seems to have relied on Macnaghten to make decisions. He was outmaneuvered mentally and physically at every turn. He persisted in deeply misplaced trust of Akbar Khan despite a mountain of evidence that his ally was faithless, textbook behavior for a public school boy from a good family. It is rare to find a British commander so poor that the well-drilled discipline of their force collapsed totally in the field, and it is telling that the tragedy of Elphinstone's retreat from

¹⁴¹ Frasier, *The Elphinstone Family Book of the Lords Elphinstone, Balmerino and Coupar*, 2:70.

Kabul might have been even greater had not subordinate officers like Mackenzie directly disobeyed his orders. Elphinstone exists as the quintessential example of the gentleman soldier who should never have been given field command.

CHAPTER FOUR

Theory and Practice

Introduction:

This thesis has contrasted the differing military ability of public school graduates and men who either hated their limited public school education or were taught at village schools. It remains to analyze the careers of the comparative few who pursued higher education at military colleges like Sandhurst and Woolwich. This chapter will compare the careers of Charles Gordon and Frederick Roberts, 1st Earl Roberts. Gordon attended a private Protestant school before his time at Woolwich, while Roberts attended Eton. The two men were both born to military families only a year apart, making them a fascinating case study for comparative education. Both served during the so-called *Pax Britannica*, the long 19th century during which Britain fought war after war in her ever-expanding colonies. Both won their fame in the colonies, Gordon during the Taiping Rebellion and the Mahdist uprising, Roberts during the Second Anglo-Afghan War.

The methods the two men used to succeed were slightly different. Roberts placed great value on duty and victory, whatever the cost. He was willing to use punitive measures when necessary, though he displayed a great deal of kindness for the men under his command. In contrast, Gordon rued any sort of looting and destruction and never attempted any kind of coercive tactics to win victory. Gordon led by example, and Roberts was willing to make an example of others.

Charles Gordon: China and the Taiping Rebellion

Author's Note: The spellings of Chinese place names differ wildly depending on the date of the source. When possible, modern spellings have been used. Unfortunately, many small stockades, forts, and canals extant during the Taiping Rebellion have disappeared over the years, and no trace of their correct spelling remains. In light of this, their phonetic spellings have been used as they appear in primary sources from the period.

Charles Gordon was born in Woolwich in 1833, the fourth child of Major General Henry and Elizabeth Gordon. He and his brothers would be the fifth generation of the Gordon family to serve in the British military.¹⁴² The family moved often because of Henry Gordon's appointments, so Charles grew up in Ireland, Scotland, and Corfu before he was returned to England to attend school at the age of 10. In 1842 he entered Folland's House, a tiny school with only 20 boarders that was run by his governess' brother, the Rev. George Rogers. He remained there for three years and proved himself "to be a good, but in no way exceptional, student."¹⁴³ During this time, Henry Gordon was assigned to the Royal Artillery Barracks at Woolwich. He arranged for his son to enter the Royal Military Academy at Woolwich, which specialized in artillery and engineering training. Charles attended a crammer for a year prior to entering the academy. He proved uniquely averse to authority and repeatedly found himself in trouble with the academy authorities,

¹⁴² C. Brad Faught, *Gordon: Victorian Hero*, 1st ed, Military Profiles (Washington, D.C: Potomac Books, 2008), 1.

¹⁴³ Faught, 3.

was once nearly dismissed from the academy for knocking a rule-enforcing fellow cadet down the stairs, and was set back two terms for hitting another cadet with a hairbrush.¹⁴⁴ He did show talent as a sapper, and graduated in 1852 as a sub-lieutenant in the Royal Engineers. He was gazetted first lieutenant on the 17th of February, 1854, and was promptly sent to the Crimea.¹⁴⁵ Despite the horrific conditions that accompanied British troops there, Gordon never complained and instead wrote to his mother to ignore “the atrocious fibs... of our misery.”¹⁴⁶ He participated on the famous attack on the Redan and, once the war was over, spent several years surveying territory between Turkey and Russia. Advancement in the engineering corps came through accumulating seniority, and Gordon duly received a promotion to captain in 1859.¹⁴⁷¹⁴⁸

He was sent to China shortly afterward, arriving just in time for the last battle of the Second Opium War, and was disappointed to have missed out on the bulk of the conflict. Gordon was deeply religious, and when he suffered a bout of smallpox in the spring of 1862, he believed it to be a sign from God that he needed to curb his violent temper and desire for fighting.¹⁴⁹ A new opportunity was at hand for him to test his determination. The Taiping Rebellion was in full swing, and the British government had become concerned about their trade interests in China. British merchants had made

¹⁴⁴ Faught, 4–5.

¹⁴⁵ “No. 21522,” *The London Gazette*, February 17, 1854, 469.

¹⁴⁶ Farwell, *Eminent Victorian Soldiers*, 103.

¹⁴⁷ “No. 22246,” *The London Gazette*, April 1, 1859, 1414.

¹⁴⁸ Farwell, *Eminent Victorian Soldiers*, 103.

¹⁴⁹ Farwell, 104.

several attempts to raise their own force, optimistically dubbed the Ever Victorious Army, but the wandering American adventurers that took charge of their troops either defected or were quickly beaten. While the British government could not break its official policy of noninterference, they bent to the needs of their merchants and allowed Gordon, newly promoted to major, to be appointed commander of the Ever Victorious Army. According to Arthur Wilson, a journalist and Sinophile who was given access to Gordon's journals, "it was not until it came under Colonel Gordon's command that the Ever-Victorious Army became in any degree worthy of its high-sounding name."¹⁵⁰

Gordon made an impression from the beginning; Wilson claims that "In his new position as commander of the Ever-Victorious Army, Colonel Gordon did not fail to display the judgement and tireless energy which had characterized his brief but not undistinguished career."¹⁵¹ The army had suffered many defeats at the hands of the Taipings and had lost some of their biggest artillery; morale and discipline were at a low ebb. Upon Gordon's arrival in Songjiang in March 1863, his new soldiers refused to march in parade for him. Sources disagree over what actions he took to restore order; he either "brought their pay up to date or else had one of the more insolent soldiers dragged out and shot."¹⁵² In his own memoirs, Gordon noted that "their *slight* morale was shaken

¹⁵⁰ Andrew Wilson, *The "Ever-Victorious Army": A History of the Chinese Campaign under Lt.-Col. C.G. Gordon and of the Suppression of the Tai-Ping Rebellion* (Arlington, Va.: University Publications of America, 1976), 123.

¹⁵¹ Wilson, 126.

¹⁵² Stephen R. Platt, *Autumn in the Heavenly Kingdom: China, the West, and the Epic Story of the Taiping Civil War*, 1st ed (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2012), 318.

under the continual changes of commanders.”¹⁵³ Li Hongzhang, an Imperial governor nominally in charge of the Chinese army, was accustomed to allowing his troops to plunder and steal whatever they wished. Gordon was intent on conducting matters differently, and made his feelings known. He insisted on proper uniforms, drill, and regular pay for his men. Gordon’s army was motley in the extreme: manned by Chinese foot soldiers, it was officered by a variety of European and American mercenaries. After May 1863, the majority of the force consisted of captured rebels, who, presented with an opportunity to earn regular pay in the relative comfort of British employment, were quite willing to turn against their former friends.¹⁵⁴ However, Gordon’s will won out. He transformed his rag-tag crew of conscripts, defectors, and foreign mercenaries into a well-oiled machine.

Fortunately, Gordon was intelligent enough not to force complete regularity out of his unusual army. Though he did emphasize that all-important British value of discipline, he prepared the Ever Victorious Army for speed and independence, prioritizing surgical strikes over a slow, grinding occupation. For engineering works and sapping he depended on the Imperial army, whose commanders and men possessed much more experience in such work.¹⁵⁵ The nature of the ground itself was not conducive to traditional campaign arrangements; as Gordon noted, “The country in which the operations were conducted on consists of the triangular alluvial tract between the Yang-tze-Kiang and Hang-chow Bay;

¹⁵³ Charles George Gordon, *Gordon’s Campaign in China* (Chapman and Hall, Ltd., 1900), 35.

¹⁵⁴ Wilson, *The “Ever-Victorious Army,”* 127.

¹⁵⁵ Wilson, 137.

it is perfectly flat and intersected in every direction by large deep creeks and canals...”¹⁵⁶ Stockades, towns, and bridges, most of them in enemy hands, dotted the waterways. A general who attempted a regular program of siege and occupation would be at an extreme disadvantage; the terrain heavily favored the defenders. Gordon, however, realized that the canals offered him speed and flexibility. In light of this, the army’s greatest asset was a flotilla of steamers and gunboats that were charged with transporting both troops and Gordon’s six batteries of artillery, and could “carry from 40 to 50 men each, thus enabling 2,000 infantry to be moved with celerity in any direction.”¹⁵⁷ To further capitalize on this mobility, Gordon accoutered his force to be prepared for all eventualities. Each regiment was given ladders and tools to enable them to cross any type of terrain, and ammunition carriers accompanied the regiments on the march.

To maximize the independence of his regiments, Gordon delegated almost complete authority to his officers. Instead of insisting on British drill and imposing a traditional command structure, he minimized formalities and allowed his officers to make their own decisions: “...forms and ceremonies were as much as possible avoided (an advantage, as there were many Americans in the force), and each commanding officer, supreme in his command, felt himself trusted.”¹⁵⁸ Punishment for misdeeds was up to the commander of each regiment. Gordon himself was only called upon to adjudicate in extreme cases. He allowed the commissariat, military store, and hospital departments the

¹⁵⁶ Gordon, *Gordon’s Campaign in China*, 26.

¹⁵⁷ Gordon, 37.

¹⁵⁸ Gordon, 38.

same freedoms, only stepping in to dismiss untrustworthy or lazy men. “By this means he eventually got leaders who were zealous and painstaking, and who could be trusted.”¹⁵⁹ This level of delegation and trust was wildly unusual for its time, and it is probable that Gordon only succeeded in it because he was operating independently with very few of his own countrymen. However, it speaks volumes to his creative thinking powers that he did not attempt to make a miniature British army out of the multi-ethnic hodge-podge which he was given. Gordon was a humble man, and simply claimed that “The arrangements were just such as any officer invested with absolute power and a little common sense would carry out.”¹⁶⁰ Such common sense is not so common; Gordon possessed a unique ability to adapt and innovate.

The Ever Victorious Army’s first major expedition under Gordon was against the city of Taicang, held by a rebel leader who had lured in and destroyed Imperial troops under the command of Governor Li’s brother. The town was protected by two large stockades outside the west gate, which were heavily manned. Gordon, quick to capitalize on the maneuverability of his troops, ordered the artillery to open fire while another regiment, capitalizing on irregular terrain dotted with ruins, “pushed on in skirmishing order to cut off the retreat of the defenders of the stockade.”¹⁶¹ As Gordon prepared for an assault, the rebels, seeing their retreat threatened and suffering under the fire of the artillery, promptly abandoned both positions and fled into the town. “Thus fell with little

¹⁵⁹ Gordon, 38.

¹⁶⁰ Gordon, 38.

¹⁶¹ Gordon, 40.

loss the two and only outworks of Taitan [Taicang].”¹⁶² From the beginning, Gordon was more concerned with potential escape of his adversaries instead of their victory. The next day, the 2nd of May, 1863, he sent a regiment to guard the north gate to prevent the rebels from escaping and noted sadly that “had there been troops available” the east gate would have been similarly closed.¹⁶³ In a clever use of force economy, he selected the east gate as the only one to remain open because the roads in that direction led away from any supporting Taiping cities, forcing escapees to take the long way around. The artillery, outfitted with wooden mantlets that shielded the gunners from fire, speedily made breaches in Taicang’s wall. Unfortunately, the rebels were resolved and remarkably brave. Three attempts were made to storm the breach before the attackers were successful, and the losses sustained were significant enough that Gordon’s force was unable to pursue the fleeing Taipings. However, the feat in itself was impressive: Gordon managed, with 2,800 men, to storm a city held by more than 10,000.

After a brief return to Songjiang, the Ever Victorious Army moved to attack Kunshan, a strategically invaluable position astride a network of diverging canals that stretched to Shanghai. Gordon realized that control of Kunshan, and thus control of the surrounding waterways, by British-friendly forces would effectively prevent any attack on Shanghai. The mark of an adaptable commander is that they learn from victories as well as from defeats, and Gordon was intent on improving his tactics: “The experience gained at Taitan [Taicang] showed that efforts should be made to avoid the costly mode

¹⁶² Gordon, 40.

¹⁶³ Gordon, 40.

of attack by breach and assault, and to strike at the rebel communications.”¹⁶⁴ He did not have men to spare, and could not afford to simply hurl his little army at well-defended positions. Two roads extended from Kunshan’s west gate: one to Imperially-held Changshu, and one to Suzhou. The road to Suzhou passed along a large canal and between large lakes to the north and south. Thanks to Gordon’s flotilla, he had the advantage on the water and decided to exploit it. He appended the following chart to his record of the campaign with the note, “It will, therefore, be seen that if the road to Soochow [Suzhou] was cut, the garrison of Quinsan [Kunshan] must either surrender or starve.”¹⁶⁵

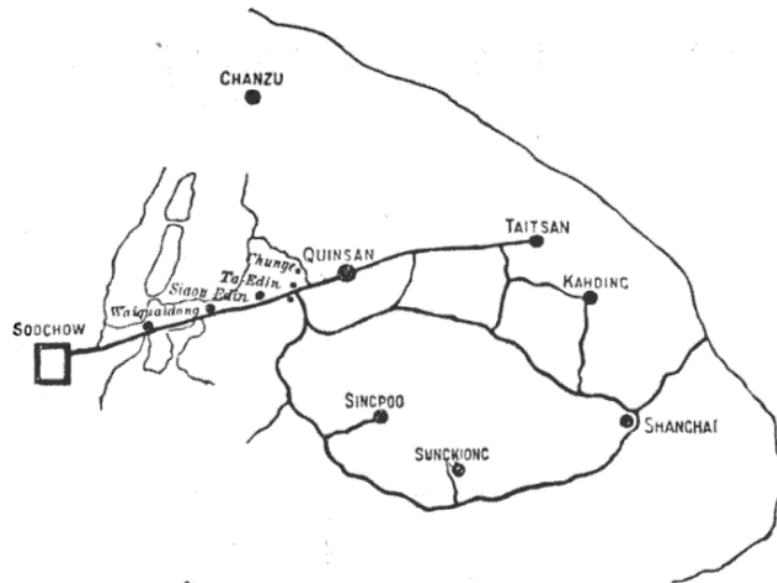


Figure 1: Gordon's Canal Sketch

¹⁶⁴ Gordon, 46.

¹⁶⁵ Gordon, 46.

At 3 a.m. on the 31st of May, a complement of troops and artillery embarked on gunboats and sailed up the half-moon canal that circled the city with the steamboat *Hyson*. First a portion of the troops disembarked at Chunye (shown above) and cleared both the village and a stockade. The stockade was promptly occupied and “thus the grand line of retreat was cut, and with only the loss of two men.”¹⁶⁶ The steamer advanced up the canal toward Suzhou, clearing the stockades of Ta-Edin, Siaou Edin, and Waiquaidong, before returning down the canal at around 2 a.m. June 1st. The garrison of Kunshan attempted an escape and fired on the steamer at Ta-Edin, but were turned back with showers of grapeshot. Gordon’s force entered the west gate of the city at daybreak, having taken the town without so much as leveling a gun against it. Some 4,000 rebels were killed along the canal and another 8,000 surrendered; it was a second impressive victory for Gordon, whose force accrued minimal casualties.

The next target was Suzhou itself, which, surrounded by canals, “was admirably situated for having its communications cut off by a force strong on the water.”¹⁶⁷ Its capture involved a long series of operations, as town after town was wrested from rebel hands. Cutting off Suzhou, with its spider-web of surrounding canals, was not as simple as isolating Kunshan. However, Gordon now had the immediate assistance of Imperial forces, whose additional manpower was invaluable in blocking routes of escape. Burgevine, a European soldier of fortune who had been the previous commander of the Ever Victorious Army before defecting to the Taipings, arrived in Suzhou with a gunboat and an assortment of “foreign” or non-Chinese allies. Gordon respected him as a

¹⁶⁶ Gordon, 47.

¹⁶⁷ Gordon, 49.

commander and as a strategist. His presence in Suzhou made further flanking maneuvers along the canals more dangerous, and it was already difficult to conduct operations in the summer heat, so no offensive took place until late September. It was then that Gordon, always concentrated on lines of communication, decided to protect his own by capturing a key canal that extended toward Shanghai. A surprise attack was mounted in the wee hours of September 29th and proved extremely successful; the position was carried and garrisoned and Burgevine's gunboat was beaten back with the help of the *Hyson*. Though Burgevine attempted another attack on an Imperially-held position, his gunboat was destroyed and his force took heavy casualties. Never one to remain on a sinking ship, Burgevine—and many of his companions—defected back to the side of the Imperials, removing any reason for Gordon to not resume the offensive.

Several forts were carried north of Suzhou in early November, and “the rebels lost heavily, their positions being surrounded and taken before reinforcements could reach them from the city.”¹⁶⁸ Gordon wrote very coolly about his operations, saying “In these attacks an attentive reconnaissance of the rebel works and an overwhelming artillery fire rendered the captures easy.” He agreed on a set of dates with the Chinese generals by which he guaranteed the fall of each fort, and met each expectation almost without fail. The true difficulty of such an enterprise may be estimated by the fact that very few efforts like it have been conducted with such speed and efficiency. It takes a talented commander and a well-coordinated army to move artillery over difficult ground quickly and to carry entire positions before water-borne help can arrive.

¹⁶⁸ Gordon, 59.

By the 19th of November, only one country road remained unguarded around Suzhou. The capture of the inner works, which consisted of stockades erected behind a breastwork and protected by cannon on the city walls, was a bloody joint affair carried out by the Ever Victorious Army and the Imperials. A night attack was beaten back by the defenders on the 27th of November, but a second attack by daylight—and assisted by heavy artillery—on the 29th was successful, and the outer line of defenses was captured. With escape cut off and freshly-raised batteries trained against their walls, the Taiping leaders began working for a surrender. Contemporary sources refer to them en masse as the “Wangs”, as each man held an official title that ended in Wang. Mow or Moh Wang, who opposed the surrender, was killed by his companions on the 5th of December, and the rest promptly opened negotiations for a surrender.

Despite having a reportedly ferocious temper when disobeyed, Charles Gordon was a notably honorable and upright man. These characteristics were much celebrated by his Chinese allies when he first arrived in command, because, unlike Burgevine and other foreign mercenaries, he could be trusted. Therefore, when Gordon discovered that the Wangs had all been assassinated shortly after their surrender, it offended every sense of his honor and decency. Perhaps it was his religious beliefs that motivated him; he hated plunder and destruction, and was always careful to try and keep his own troops well in hand. In his own account of this betrayal, Gordon is remarkably brief. He says only that the parties involved were “treacherously murdered by the Futai [Governor] on the afternoon of the 7th December.”¹⁶⁹ There is no scholarly consensus as to who truly

¹⁶⁹ Gordon, 64.

ordered the death of the Wangs; hypothetically, a mob of half-drunk looters may have been responsible. Gordon, however, was incontrovertibly convinced of Governor Li's guilt, and no amount of denials would placate him. Several sources claim that he loaded a pistol—a strong departure from the rattan cane that was his only weapon for the rest of the campaign—and searched for Governor Li, apparently willing to shoot him down.¹⁷⁰ On the 1st of January, an Imperial messenger arrived with gifts of money, a medal of distinction, silk banners, and a letter from the Emperor himself, all praising Gordon for his successful capture. Gordon wrote back only that he was honored, but that owing to the circumstances of the capture he could accept no gifts—an enormous slight to the Emperor.¹⁷¹ He refused to command any further under Governor Li, and took his force back to Kunshan, where they remained inactive until the end of February.

It seems to have only been appeals to his own sense of duty that urged Gordon back into the field. He notes in his own campaign record that, despite the “inexcusable” treachery of Li, he “did not consider that the object which the British Government had in view when they allowed him to serve the Imperialists should be allowed to fall through...”¹⁷² For the purposes of this thesis, it is unnecessary to chronicle the rest of the battles which Gordon fought in and directed. His strategy was sound, and by its continued use the Taiping rebellion was effectually snuffed out. The Ever Victorious Army was decommissioned on June 1st, 1894, and the last bastions of the Taipings were carried by

¹⁷⁰ Lytton Strachey, *The Eminent Victorians: The Illustrated Edition*, An Albion Book (London: Bloomsbury, 1988).

¹⁷¹ Wilson, *The “Ever-Victorious Army,”* 205–6.

¹⁷² Gordon, *Gordon's Campaign in China*, 64.

Imperial forces in August of that year. So ended one of the most unique campaigns carried out by a British commander. Gordon won 33 successive battles with a force a fraction the size of his enemy, officered by mercenaries, animated only by personal loyalty and a deep belief in their commander's talents.¹⁷³

When the name of Charles Gordon is invoked, students of military history typically think of the Mahdist uprising, Khartoum, and Gordon's tragic death there. However, it was in China that Gordon's genius can be most clearly seen. His time in Egypt and as Governor-General of the Sudan was heartbreaking, as he worked essentially alone in a losing attempt to change the ancient, highly oppressive structure of Egyptian rule. He fought ceaselessly against the slave trade and struggled as the lone incorruptible element in a government accustomed to bribe-taking and corruption. That he attempted reform at all is to his credit, and marks him further as an innovator unique among British officials. When his time in office drew to a close and he was forced to acknowledge his failure, he had a nervous breakdown from which the author of this thesis believes he never truly recovered. The keenly scientific, logical method with which Gordon made command decisions in China bears little resemblance to the confused, semi-delusional meanderings of his later life. He did not intend to return to the Sudan, but was brow-beaten into service after reluctantly granting a single interview to the *Pall Mall Gazette*, during which the interrogating journalist eventually elicited Gordon's favorable opinion of intervention against the Mahdi. The resulting editorial sparked a wave of popular

¹⁷³ Mark Urban, *Generals: Ten British Commanders Who Shaped the World* (London: Faber and Faber, 2006), 157.

demand for Gordon, renowned as a war hero, to take charge of just such an intervention; given his mental state, this was tantamount to murder.

The training Gordon received at Woolwich gave him the theoretical knowledge to efficiently carry out his ideas. He disliked rules and regulations by nature, and free of a public school education would likely have always been an innovator. The specialized training he received allowed him to capitalize on that intellectual ability to the fullest. To illustrate this, one can simply read the closing paragraph of his own Chinese campaign record:

“Should any future war with China arise, too much attention cannot be paid to the close reconnoitring (sic) of the enemy’s positions, in which there are always some weak points; and it is to be hoped that our leaders may incline to a more scientific mode of attack than had hitherto been in vogue. The hasty attacks generally made on Asiatic positions cost valuable lives, invite failure, and prevent the science of war theoretically acquired at considerable cost being tested in the best school, viz., that of actual practice.”¹⁷⁴

It is impossible to find fault with this advice, given Gordon’s unprecedented string of victories. He is a unique example of a British commander for whom putting down an insurrection was not daunting. He was able to adapt fluidly not only to new terrain and opponents, but to an unorthodox command structure which he pioneered. His only notable failure came at the hands of an entire government, fully entrenched in customs and habits that would have been impossible for any one man to break. It is a tragedy that his later eccentricities have been allowed to overshadow the magnificent achievements of his time in China.

¹⁷⁴ Gordon, *Gordon’s Campaign in China*, 79.

Frederick Roberts: From the Mutiny to Kabul

Frederick Sleigh Roberts was born on the 30th of September, 1832, in Cawnpore, India. His father, Abraham Roberts, was in command of the 1st Bengal European Regiment and participated in the First Afghan War; his mother, Isabella, was the widow of an officer and Abraham's second wife.¹⁷⁵ Abraham Roberts brought his family to England when Frederick was two years old, purchased property for them to live upon, and promptly departed again, leaving Isabella to raise seven children. Frederick had already lost the sight of his right eye due to an illness while in India, so perhaps Abraham hoped that the English climate would be more suitable for his children's health. Frederick was enrolled at Eton at the age of thirteen, and his father hoped that he would enter a civilian profession. However, Frederick was intent on a military career. In addition to his limited sight there was the problem of his stature: he was only five feet and three inches tall, well below average and very small for the army. Luckily, "in those relaxed days such matters could be overlooked in a young man of good family with solid army connections. Young Roberts was clever enough, and more important, his father was a general and a gentleman."¹⁷⁶ The system of families ties and patronage worked once again in a public school boy's favor. For once, the subject of these leniencies deserved his chance. Frederick was sixteen when he entered R.M.A Sandhurst, but his father, well aware that pay for officers in England was not enough to survive upon, decided that Frederick should serve the more lucrative East India Company instead of the Queen. Frederick

¹⁷⁵ Farwell, *Eminent Victorian Soldiers*, 147.

¹⁷⁶ Farwell, 148.

transferred to Addiscombe Military Seminary, the training school for East India Company officers, on February 1st, 1850.

On the 12th of December, 1851, Frederick graduated from Addiscombe and was commissioned a gunner second lieutenant. He promptly sailed for England, where he spent a year as his father's aide-de-camp and battery officer.¹⁷⁷ After 1854 he became a quartermaster, in which position he began to earn an excellent reputation as an able staff officer. When the Mutiny broke out, he was appointed to the staff of Brigadier Neville Chamberlain and accompanied a column intended to quickly disarm native regiments showing signs of rebellion. On the 8th of June, a loyal soldier informed Roberts of treason in the column and he immediately informed Chamberlain. Two culprits with loaded weapons were found, court-martialed, and blown from guns.

One source notes that, though Roberts was “recognized for his kindness and compassion... he never allowed his feelings to interfere in any way with his duty—and he was never in doubt as to where his duty lay.”¹⁷⁸ This seems to be quite true. Roberts wrote calmly of the affair: “It was a terrible sight, and one likely to haunt the beholder for many a long day; but that was what was intended. I carefully watched the sepoys’ faces to see how it affected them.”¹⁷⁹ After the fall of Delhi, Roberts was attached to Colonel Edward Greathed’s column as deputy assistant quartermaster general, at that time an office responsible for supplies, intelligence, and operations. The column bivouacked at

¹⁷⁷ Farwell, 149.

¹⁷⁸ Farwell, 152.

¹⁷⁹ Frederick Roberts, *Forty-One Years in India: From Subaltern to Commander-In-Chief*, vol. 1 (London: Richard Bentley and Son, 1897), 124–25.

Agra on the 10th of October, but were attacked during the night and had to fight hard for survival. As DAQMG, Roberts was in charge of intelligence and should have ordered reconnaissance; it was his fault that an enemy camped only four miles away was allowed not only to go unnoticed but to mount a night attack. “For such an oversight he might well have been dismissed, his career ruined, but the blame fell upon the authorities at Agra. Roberts was again mentioned in dispatches of his bravery. He possessed in abundance what every ambitious officer needs—luck.”¹⁸⁰ In Roberts’ own biography, he places all blame firmly on the shoulders of the Agra authorities: “At the end of about four miles we came upon their camp; it covered a considerable space, and must have taken a long time to transport and pitch—a circumstance which made the ignorance on the part of the Agra authorities as to the close proximity of the enemy appear even more unaccountable than before.”¹⁸¹ Lest it be thought that any general fondly writing his memoirs would do the same thing, let the reader return for a brief moment to Charles Gordon, who, in his campaign record, noted meticulously that he had “imprudently ordered a change of plan” while assaulting a vital bridge.¹⁸² He records that this failure cost his force both the bridge and significant casualties.

Roberts may not have possessed the forthrightness of Gordon, but he was certainly lucky. At the end of the Mutiny he returned to England having earned seven mentions in dispatches, £500 of prize money, and a Victoria Cross for the recapture of a

¹⁸⁰ Farwell, *Eminent Victorian Soldiers*, 156.

¹⁸¹ Roberts, *Forty-One Years in India: From Subaltern to Commander-In-Chief*, 1897, 1:277.

¹⁸² Gordon, *Gordon’s Campaign in China*, 72.

standard.¹⁸³ He married and continued his staff duties, winning approbation for his organizational skills during the Umbeyla, Abyssinian, and Lushai campaigns. He earned a C.B. for his work on the Lushai campaign and was gazetted colonel on March 9th, 1875.¹⁸⁴ Though staff work did not provide him opportunities for command, he spent his free time voraciously studying anything and everything concerning military affairs, even enrolling in a telegraphy course.¹⁸⁵ The Great Game was in full swing, and one of Roberts' articles on the Afghanistan frontier caught the notice of Lord Lytton, the Indian viceroy. Sher Ali Khan, the ruler of Afghanistan, refused to receive a British diplomatic mission. A second attempt was turned back at the Khyber Pass, effectively beginning the Second Anglo-Afghan War. Roberts was placed in command of one of three columns invading Afghanistan, his first active field command outside the role of quartermaster in more than twenty years.

Roberts assumed command of the Kurram Field Force, the smallest of the three columns at 6,500 men and 18 guns.¹⁸⁶ His object was to proceed up the Kurram Valley toward Kabul and then to occupy the Khost Valley, a key source of Afghan supplies. He had enough intelligence and foresight to be concerned over his own lack of experience, the long line of communications that would be necessary to link his force with India, and the tensions that might arise from his Muslim soldiers being forced to fight against their

¹⁸³ Farwell, *Eminent Victorian Soldiers*, 158.

¹⁸⁴ "No. 24188," *The London Gazette*, March 9, 1875, 1528.

¹⁸⁵ Farwell, *Eminent Victorian Soldiers*, 161.

¹⁸⁶ Frederick Roberts, *Forty-One Years in India: From Subaltern to Commander-In-Chief*, vol. 2 (London: Richard Bentley and Son, 1897), 117.

religious compatriots. He was also scandalized at the inefficient and broken-down nature of the commissariat department.¹⁸⁷ Most importantly, Roberts was aware that he would need the assistance—or at least the well-wishes—of the chieftains and tribesmen living along the Afghanistan-India border. Unlike Elphinstone, who took the claims of Afghan partisan leaders as pure truth, Roberts was more politically astute. He said “They were friendly and full of promises, but it was clear that the amount of assistance to be given by them depended on whether or not our occupation of Kuram (sic) was to be permanent...”¹⁸⁸ Having made assurances that British authority, once established, would not be taken away, Roberts and his column ventured into Afghan territory on the 21st of November, 1878. He did not make the mistake of failing to reconnoiter again, despite the difficulty of eliciting reliable information from the locals, but sent reconnaissance parties a full fifteen miles ahead through the passes.

This precaution was wise, as Roberts discovered that the Afghan army was moving into position at the Peiwar Kotal. The next day fresh news was brought that the Afghans were in retreat, but again a reconnaissance party revealed that the enemy was in force in such a position that they could not be attacked save in single file. “It was, indeed, a formidable position... on the summit of a mountain rising abruptly 2,000 feet in front of us, and only approachable by a narrow, steep, and rugged path, flanked on either side by precipitous spurs jutting out like huge bastions...”¹⁸⁹ A traditional Eton boy might have

¹⁸⁷ Roberts, 2:122–23.

¹⁸⁸ Roberts, 2:125.

¹⁸⁹ Roberts, 2:133.

asked for volunteers to storm the heights; Roberts spent two days conducting rigorous surveys of the ground and carefully encouraged his troops to believe that exactly such a frontal assault was to be attempted. Well aware that the local drivers and camp-followers were probably informing the enemy of his movements, he did everything he could to convince his column that a direct attack was to be made. Only two staff members and an aide-de-camp were informed of the true plan, which was to feign an assault while half the column marched a circuitous route to turn the enemy's left. Splitting the column was daring and highly dangerous; the loyalty of the border chiefs depended solely upon success, and the enemy was possessed of numbers that could easily swallow up an isolated half of the column.

At 10 p.m. on Sunday, December 1st, the 2,263 men and 8 guns that would form the turning movement left camp noiselessly, "tents... left standing and camp-fires burning."¹⁹⁰ Marching two thousand men and artillery through mountain passes in the dark, with no passable road, was a harrowing undertaking made more worrisome by a few suspected Afghan sympathizers among the 29th Punjab Infantry, who fired shots into the air supposedly to warn the enemy. Regardless of these setbacks, the force carried the neighboring Spingawi Kotal at daybreak and advanced along the spine of the mountains to a position in which they could threaten the enemy's rear, then let the battery of guns they had so arduously carried play along the Peiwar Kotal. The Afghans promptly evacuated, and Roberts' force took possession of the kotal on the next day. Only two

¹⁹⁰ Roberts, 2:137.

officers and eighteen men were killed, incredibly low numbers for an assault on such a strong position.

Roberts' column made steady progress, using a combination of speed and ever-vigilant reconnaissance to avoid any of the ambushes that plagued armies attacking through the defiles of Afghanistan. In early January, an attack by turbulent tribesmen provoked Roberts into coldblooded retaliation. Though the attack was beaten off with little difficulty, Roberts believed that the tribesmen "had not been sufficiently punished to prevent a repetition of the attack, probably with larger numbers; so I ordered the destruction of the hamlets nearest us..."¹⁹¹ He did not make this decision out of anger or frustration, but through the logical belief that deterrence through fear would function in his behavior—a brilliant, if brutal, conclusion. Though the campaign had so far been attended with brilliant success, Roberts realized that without more troops he would be unable to hold the Khost Valley. He attempted to leave the valley in charge of a native official, supported by native levies, but the experiment was doomed to failure by the sheer number of tribesmen who opposed British influence. It is notable, however, that there are few if any other instances of a British commander working so closely with native allies, especially insofar as to trust them with control of a strategically important location.

To illustrate the quality of Roberts' leadership in comparison to other commanders, it is necessary to describe his defense and later evacuation of Kabul in late 1879. For the second time in forty years, a British army found itself pent up in Kabul,

¹⁹¹ Roberts, 2:161.

resisting attacks by an Afghan force intent on ousting them. Roberts did not echo the mistakes of Elphinstone: he protected his magazine and stores, which were located at the Bala Hissar, and was careful to keep his force away from locations in which they could be split up, ambushed, or fired on from above. He made the command decision to withdraw from the city entirely, unsure “how long the people would remain well disposed, or whether they would assist us to keep the enemy out.”¹⁹² He kept his communications open, firmly held key positions on heights near the city, and when it became necessary to abandon the Bala Hissar made sure to evacuate the baggage with the troops. Roberts’ relative success was largely due to the fact that he was well-studied in his unfortunate predecessor; he wrote that failing to secure a key ridge “would have been to repeat the mistake which proved so disastrous to Elphinstone’s army in 1841.”¹⁹³ He was so intent on avoiding Elphinstone’s mistakes that he put a guard over the force’s supplies of forage and firewood, concerned that they might be sabotaged. Ultimately, his efforts were successful: an attack was repulsed and a counterattack so quickly mounted that the tribal confederation occupying Kabul was defeated decisively.

These two engagements are best illustrative of Roberts’ command ability during his time in Afghanistan. He led a column to the relief of Kandahar in late 1880, employing once again the excellent attention to detail and skill with turning movements that characterized his earlier victories. In addition to his military achievements, he was a surprisingly clear-sighted judge of character free from many of the prejudices inherent to

¹⁹² Roberts, 2:280.

¹⁹³ Roberts, 2:297.

the British army at the time. Though he had calmly watched prospective rebels be blown from the mouths of cannon during the Mutiny, he wrote later that measures carried out by the British authorities in India “were right and proper in themselves, but they were on that account none the less obnoxious [to the natives]... In some cases also they were premature, and in others they were not carried out as judiciously as they might have been, or with sufficient regard to the feelings and prejudices of the people.”¹⁹⁴ He did not blame the rebelling soldiers for their choice, but recognized that the Mutiny came about primarily as a battle for authority between the British government and traditional Indian culture. Whether he was correct that Brahmin agitators were behind the rumors that sparked the Mutiny is unsure, but he levelled no blame against them, saying, “It was natural that they should wish to see our rule upset...”¹⁹⁵ He also attempted to delegate control of the Khost Valley to a local native leader, believing that a commander of native religion and sentiments could better pacify the countryside. To the author’s knowledge, there is no parallel for this anywhere in the annals of British history.

¹⁹⁴ Roberts, *Forty-One Years in India: From Subaltern to Commander-In-Chief*, 1897, 1:416.

¹⁹⁵ Roberts, 1:417.

CHAPTER FIVE

Conclusions

This thesis evolved in answer to two apparently unlinked questions. Firstly, why could *Les Miserables* never be set in London? Secondly, why did British troops struggle to fight farmers? The answer to the first is relatively simple: British students, especially those of the 18th and 19th centuries, displayed little of the drive for progress and change that characterized their continental European counterparts. There were no barricades in the streets of London. Schoolboys at the great public schools could not be whipped into frenzied dreams of societal improvement; their curricula saturated them too completely with nationalistic pride and the love of tradition. The answer to the first question is thus also the key to the second. Those same schoolboys, brought up on tales of classical conquerors and raised to be obediently inflexible, knew no other way to solve problems than to throw themselves bodily at them. They joined the army, as they had been raised to do, and marched out into the world with full confidence in themselves and their brother officers, only to be repeatedly stymied by adversaries who refused to play by British rules. Understanding a new and unconventional enemy, especially one who did not recognize or appreciate British dominance, was simply impossible for them.

The case studies examined in this thesis bear out a few simple facts. The great public schools of Britain produced generations of homogenous, highly inflexible young men with a crippling inability to adapt. These men were preferred for prestigious

positions in the army thanks to the social network they developed at school. They attained high rank and considerable power by protecting and participating in the status quo, maintaining the ideals of honor, glory, and gentlemanliness instilled during their school years. In cases where technological superiority was not enough to overcome an enemy, they failed to innovate and brought about disasters. Their counterparts from different education systems, despite their less privileged backgrounds and the difficulty with which they acceded to command, were able to adapt and thrive in similarly challenging situations. To check criticism that circumstances were different for each commander and thus comparison is impossible, the case studies for this thesis were selected purposefully to bear as many identical features as possible. Each man commanded between the years of 1750 and 1880 and campaigned outside of Europe against non-European opponents. All had a force smaller than their opponents' and faced situations in which brute force alone was not sufficient for victory.

The relative success or failure of these men cannot be explained by natural talent and personal idiosyncrasy alone. To do so would be to underestimate the influence of educational background on the human mind. Boys entering the great public schools were submitted to a year-round, intensive, cult-like atmosphere in which desirable behaviors were continually modelled and aberrations were punished. They were prompted to conform both to gain friends and for their own safety; bullying and ostracization were prevalent issues. Being a societal “other” is never a secure or comfortable position. They sacrificed their creativity, their adaptability, and their problem-solving skills to fit in and be loved—a very human choice, and one for which they should be pitied, not blamed. By the time they graduated, years later, any thought of disobeying an order or disregarding a

regulation was past their ability to comprehend. Chelmsford and Elphinstone did not choose to embroil themselves and their armies in disaster. They did not choose to be blind to the nature of their enemies or to misunderstand their situations. They were mentally incapable of anything else.

In light of this, the success of commanders who did not attend public schools is no longer surprising. Robert Clive was too violently unpredictable for boarding school life and his streak of lawlessness was never curbed by years at Eton or Winchester. He had no sense of honor and lived a turbulent, unhappy life, but he had full possession of his creative faculties and used them to great advantage. Charles Gordon entered RMA Woolwich with a mind ready not just to receive training, but to build upon it. They were free to experiment with the forces under their command, to alter their tactics in any way that was expedient, and to capitalize on any opportunity without fear of what “should” be done. They could act independently without reference to the opinions of their peers, which would be impossible for any boy raised in a public school and taught to exist as merely a part of the whole. It is telling that Chelmsford and Elphinstone both found themselves in difficulties thanks to their associations with another, more powerful personalities. Chelmsford embarked on his invasion of Zulu territory because of Sir Bartle Frere, and Elphinstone depended on Macnaughten for everything from tactics to diplomacy. Public school boys, raised in community and encouraged to identify with their schoolmates and peers, depended on outside opinions. Notably, Frederick Roberts, the Eton graduate with Addiscombe training, also remained within the framework of the tight-knit staff officer community for much of his career. In contrast, the other successful

commanders operated without strong input from a higher authority and preferred to make their own campaign decisions with all possible speed and efficiency.

Frederick Roberts illustrates the difference that could be made to public school graduates simply through additional training. He was more capable than Chelmsford and Elphinstone thanks to his time at Addiscombe. Military academies counteracted the ill effects of public school by teaching students the tricks of the trade instead of forcing them to learn in the field. They provided scientific training that could substitute for strategic genius; instead of improvising their own tactics on the fly, graduates of the academies could apply material from their studies to the task at hand. Roberts might not have been successful in Kabul had he not been educated on Elphinstone's failures. It is a tragedy that public schools fostered a counter-educational culture in which officers often poked fun at anyone who attempted to take additional courses or attend Staff College. Had continuing education been the norm then, as it is now in many industries, many lives could have been saved.

One of the greatest challenges in this thesis was in isolating military disasters. During this time frame, the British army was blessed with technology far superior to that of its colonial enemies. The average British commander did not have to be talented to win victories; he simply located the enemy and blew them away. For this reason, many commanders who possessed very little talent went down in history as excellent generals and leaders of men. British armies were chronically outnumbered; there is not a single case study in this thesis in which the British force was larger than that of their adversary. It was necessary therefore to find not only instances in which the British were outnumbered, but in which they were so incredibly outnumbered, outmaneuvered, or out

of position that their guns and artillery could not make up the difference. It was rare for a British army to find itself in a position in the colonies from which there was no escape. The grandest example, and the most costly one, would have been the Mutiny of 1857. Sadly, the Mutiny occurred on such a massive scale and involved so many different British leaders that isolating blame to a single person is both reductionist and frankly impossible. However, it is the author's belief that the Mutiny was caused by the same factors as the other defeats dealt with in this thesis; namely, the shortsightedness and cultural ignorance of British officials and military leaders brought about by their education in public schools.

Why does any of this matter? Is there any value in analyzing the lives of long-dead soldiers who fought their battles half a world away? Of course there is. Man is a social creature, and human life is made up of millions of interpersonal interactions dictated by unique individual minds. From figuring out a friend's sense of humor to studying the behavioral patterns of a distant dictator, knowledge about the minds of others is always useful. Educational background is a hitherto almost untapped source of information on why people do what they do. Granted, personal idiosyncrasy will always win out in some ways. Schools cannot produce carbon-copy children. However, schools can influence the structure of children's minds, how they solve problems, how they react to orders, how they handle adversity, and how they see the world. In short, education is like a vegetable mold; the vegetable will grow into whatever shape the mold dictates, though its color and flavor may vary by plant. A customer unaware that vegetable molds exist will be baffled by the strange and unnatural nature of the vegetables. If the reader

can take only one idea from this thesis, let it be this: *always look for the mold*, both in yourself and in others.

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