George White and the Victorian Army in India and Africa

Serving the Empire

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ISBN 978-3-030-50833-3 ISBN 978-3-030-50834-0 (eBook)
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-50834-0

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The registered company address is: Gewerbestrasse 11, 6330 Cham, Switzerland

Acknowledgments

A timely dinner with my wife, Jessica Miller, and Trina and Ian Beckett following the 2018 “Britain and the World Conference” held in Exeter, set me on the path to this project. I am very grateful to the Becketts for their hospitality and for the idea!

I would like to thank John Laband, Edward Spiers, Rodney Atwood, Tim Bowman, and Douglas Peers for help along the way. Fransjohan Pretorius kindly read a draft of some of the chapters and provided valuable feedback. Daniel Whittingham was nice enough to share page proofs of his recent book on Charles Callwell when Covid-19 and the global pandemic shut down our University library and its lending services.

I would also like to thank Michael Lang and Wendy Morrill, History Department, University of Maine, for their support. Dean Emily Haddad, College of Liberal Arts and Sciences, and the Clement and Linda McGillicuddy Humanities Center, University of Maine, provided important financial assistance, as did the family of Adelaide C. and Alan L. Bird. Mel Johnson, Greg Curtis, Deb Rollins, and Dean Joyce Rumery, Fogler Library, University of Maine, deserve a huge thank you for purchasing digital copies of the George White papers and for assisting in the acquisition of a number of texts. Emily Russell and Ruby Panigrahi at Palgrave Macmillan have been extremely helpful throughout the process and a delight to work with. The two anonymous reviewers provided substantial assistance at the start and close of this project. I also want to thank Jason Begy, who indexed the book. Thanks to the staff members of the British Library, the National Army Museum, The National Archives, the

Ladysmith Siege Museum, the Devon Archives and Local Studies Service, the Wiltshire and Swindon History Centre, and the Public Records Office for Northern Ireland.

Finally, I want to thank my boys, David and Max, who have been stuck in the house with me for the past four months and, lastly, Jessica, who makes everything better.

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

On the afternoon of the 28th of February 1900, a small detachment of Imperial Light Horse and Natal Carbineers commanded by Captain Hubert Gough approached Ladysmith in the British colony of Natal in South Africa. A group of armed Boers situated on a low ridge of Umbulwane, a small mountain which dominated the nearby town, stood in their way. As “Long Tom,” the long range 155 mm Creusot gun which had terrorized the soldiers and civilians of the beleaguered town since late October 1899, opened fire, Gough was given an order by his superior, Lord Dundonald, to retire.[1] Eager to make it to Ladysmith in part to see his brother, Captain John “Johnnie” Gough, VC, he “crumpled up the note,” pushed back the Boers, and rode the remaining three miles through open land to Ladysmith. No shots were fired.

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[1] Hubert Gough, *Soldiering On* (London: Arthur Baker, 1954), 75. In his own memoir, Dundonald refuted Gough’s two claims that there were Boers on the ridge and that he ordered Gough to retire. Instead, he asserted that since there was no Boer force to prevent his movement, he told Gough to “push on towards Ladysmith, I am supporting.” Dundonald, accompanied by Winston Churchill, arrived in Ladysmith shortly afterwards. Douglas Dundonald, *My Army Life* (London: Edward Arnold, 1926), 151. White does not mention Gough in his letters, only Dundonald, when he wrote to his sister Jane, from aboard the RMS *Dunvegan Castle*, “Was it not fine, Dundonald being the first of Buller’s force to ride into Ladysmith.” White to Jane White, 5 April 1900, White’s letters to his sister Jane White, Mss Eur F108/97(a)-(b)(c. 1845–1910), Papers of Field Marshal Sir George White, British Army 1853–1912, C-in-C, India 1893–98 (1845–1912), [GWP], India Office Record and Private Papers, British Library, London.

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S. M. Miller, *George White and the Victorian Army in India and Africa*, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-50834-0_1

As Gough entered the town late in the afternoon, the appearance of his small force, full of health and looking nearly immaculate, contrasted sharply with the men of the Natal Field Force they were rescuing. The siege was in its 118th day and the material situation in the town had deteriorated significantly since the first of the year. Enteric fever or typhoid had spread and the number of casualties moved to the nearby hospital at Intombi was growing to alarming proportions. The population of over 12,000 soldiers and 8,000 civilians had been reduced to eating chevril, horse soup, to supplement their meager rations.[2] Three failed British attempts to force the Tugela River resulting in defeats at Colenso, Spion Kop, and Vaal Krantz (Vaalkrans) had hurt but not crushed morale. Lieutenant-General Sir George Stuart White, VC, suffering from repeated bouts of fever, reduced rations, and the exhaustion of maintaining Ladysmith throughout the siege, emerged from his headquarters, the former town hall, and greeted Gough with a simple and understated, "Hallo, Hubert, how are you?"[3] White then turned to the growing crowds and over the dim of the celebrating voices, H.H.S. Pearse, a special correspondent for the *Daily News*, who had endured the ordeals of the siege as well, heard White's voice tremble with emotion as he spoke to his depleted force. "I thank you men, one and all, from the bottom of my heart," he declared, "for the help and support you have given to me, and I shall always acknowledge it to the end of my life. It grieved me to have to cut your rations, but I promise you that I will not do it again. I thank God we have kept the flag flying."[4]

No longer reliant on runners who were captured regularly by the Boers or the heliograph which could only function when the weather cooperated, congratulatory messages flooded into Ladysmith from around the British Empire. Queen Victoria's telegram was one of the first to come through the wires. Friends and fellow officers like White's primary benefactor, Field-Marshal Lord Roberts, and Major-General John French and Major Douglas Haig, both of whom had left Ladysmith just before it was

[2] Gerald Sharp, *The Siege of Ladysmith* (London: Macdonald and Jane's, 1976), 25.

[3] Gough, *Soldiering On*, 78–9. White was well acquainted with the Gough family; he knew General Hugh H. Gough, VC, Hubert and John's uncle, from the Second Anglo-Afghan War. There is no mention in White's papers of the two brothers' father, General Charles Gough, also a veteran of the Second Anglo-Afghan War.

[4] H.H.S. Pearse, *Four Months Besieged: The Story of Ladysmith being unpublished letters from H.H.S. Pearse the 'Daily News' Special Correspondent* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1900), 211.

invested, sent White their regards. Mayors and provosts from Liverpool to Edinburgh, and leaders of social clubs in New Zealand, Canada, Gibraltar, and Burma all chimed in. The Secretary of State for War, Lord Lansdowne, who White had developed a close working relationship with while serving as Commander-in-Chief in India when the former was Viceroy, messaged, "I cannot tell you what pleasure it gives me to know that your gallant defence which we have watched with so much admiration and sympathy has not been in vain. I know you have suffered seriously in health from the prolonged hardships and anxiety which you and the force under your command have borne bravely."[5]

Lansdowne was correct: White was suffering physically and emotionally. He needed to go home. Although most of his officers remained in South Africa to continue the struggle against the Boers, after the siege was lifted, White immediately made his way to Cape Town to begin his voyage back to Great Britain. White had been to Cape Town only twice before. The first visit took place in 1854, when after his troopship, *The Charlotte*, sank off Algoa Bay with most of its crew, White was stranded in Cape Town for about a month while he awaited passage to Calcutta.[6] The second time was perhaps even more tragic. After arriving on 3 October 1899, he met a "nervous and overdone" Sir Alfred Milner, the British High Commissioner in South Africa and Governor of the Cape Colony, at Government House.[7] Assessing the situation as critical and one demanding his immediate attention, White abruptly left Cape Town and hurried to Natal. War began just a few days later on 11 October. This time, however, a visit to Cape Town brought White some much needed relief. There, he discovered a very kind gesture made by Roberts: Jack, White's only son who was currently serving with the Gordon Highlanders, had been sent to accompany his father home. In mid-April 1900, White returned to Great Britain as the newly christened, "Defender of Ladysmith."[8]

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[5] Lansdowne to White, Bound volume of telegrams to White congratulating him after the relief of Ladysmith, with notes of replies sent, initialed by Beauchamp Duff, White's Military Secretary, Mss Eur F108/62 (Mar 1900), GWP.

[6] White to James Robert White, 29 September, 18 October, and 31 October 1854, White's letters to his parents, Mr. and Mrs. James Robert White, Mss Eur F108/96 (1854–1870) GWP.

[7] White to John White, 6 October 1899, White's letters to his brother, John White, Mss Eur F108/98(a)-(c) (1857–1910), GWP.

[8] See, for example, *Western Morning News*, 16 April 1900, Newspaper cuttings relating to the War in South Africa, Mss Eur F108/72 (1899–1905), GWP.

Yet despite a long and commendable career which included a Victoria Cross awarded in the Second Anglo-Afghan War, command of the Upper Burma occupation force in the late 1880s and Zhob Field Force in 1890, and, as successor to Lord Roberts, Commander-in-Chief in India, White is a relatively unknown figure today. There are a few places where White is memorialized, commemorated, and remembered. There is a statue of a mounted White in Portland Place in London; a headstone at his family plot in the First Presbyterian Church's cemetery in Broughshane, Northern Ireland; and a number of placards and photographs in the Siege Museum in Ladysmith, South Africa. But White remains largely a forgotten figure of British imperial military history. Some of this is due in part to the lack of scholarly work on the subject. There has only been one biography to date. *The Life of Field-Marshal Sir George White* was written by Mortimer Durand, his friend, colleague, and Indian official noted for the 1893 negotiations with Abdur Rahman, the Afghan Amir, which produced the "Durand Line," the boundary between Afghanistan and India's North-West Frontier. It would not be fair to call Durand's 1915 biography a hagiography; it is a thorough account of White's life in two volumes, well-written, and based largely on White's personal correspondences with his family members.[9] Yet, written just after White's death, and supported by White's wife, Amy, it shies away from controversy and makes no attempt to portray him in any but the most positive light.

Perhaps the main reason why White has largely been forgotten is because the siege of Ladysmith was something Great Britain did not want to remember. Although praised as the man who saved the town and its garrison and kept the Boers from organizing a successful invasion of Natal, White was also criticized for making the decisions which led to his force getting stuck in Ladysmith in the first place. To make things worse, even before the South African War ended, White became embroiled in a scandal over messages sent between he and General Sir Redvers Buller, the former Commander-in-Chief of British forces in South Africa, as to Ladysmith's ability to hold out against the Boers' investment. Although publicly White remained silent through it all, (privately, his letters show a very frustrated individual unable to defend himself), and Buller was largely blamed, eventually being dismissed from the army, the incident convinced many that the event was best forgotten. Leo Amery's colorful, multi-volume series,

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[9] Mortimer Durand, *The Life of Field-Marshal Sir George White, 2 volumes* (Edinburgh and London: William Blackwood and Sons, 1915).

The Times History of the War in South Africa, was very critical of White.[10] And the Earl of Elgin's 1903 hearings which produced the significant report of the Royal Commission on the South African War also raised concerns about some of White's decisions.[11] Perhaps ironically, as the status and reputation of the much younger "Hero of Mafeking," Sir Robert Baden-Powell, grew in the years to come, that of the "Defender of Ladysmith" shrank.

White's career in the military, however, merits further investigation. Although a member of Roberts' ring or circle of close associates, as opposed to Lord Wolseley's rival Ashanti Ring, he never identified as such, establishing professional contacts on both sides of that often, overstated divide. For much of his long career he was a regimental officer—first, as a junior officer with the 27th (Inniskilling) Regiment and later, with the 92nd (Gordon Highlanders) Regiment which he joined in 1863 after exchanging for a captaincy, and eventually served as Colonel of the Gordon Highlanders regiment. Although it was Roberts that he owed the most to in gaining promotion and securing positions, it was Wolseley who gave him his first staff position as an Assistant Adjutant and Quartermaster-General in the force sent to Sudan to save Charles Gordon at Khartoum.[12] For most of his later career, however, White saw Wolseley as a hindrance to advancement rather than as a supporter. "Little Bobs" and his wife, Lady Roberts, continued to remain loyal to White.

White made his name in Afghanistan at Charasiab (Char Asiab) and Kandahar in 1879–1880, but he really came into his own and left his mark in Burma where he served first in General Harry Prendergast's expedition to Upper Burma in 1885 and later as commander of the British occupation force between 1886 and 1889. From there he went to Quetta, where, working alongside the very influential British agent, Robert Sandeman, he strengthened the British hold over Baluchistan (Balochistan) and extended their interests along the North-West Frontier. This part of Great Britain's Indian empire, remained a focus of his attention when he succeeded Lord Roberts as Commander-in-Chief in India, and ordered expeditions to

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[10] L.S. Amery, ed., *The Times History of The War in South Africa 1899–1902*, 7 volumes (London: Sampson Low, Marston and Co., LTD., 1907).

[11] *Report of His Majesty's Commissioners appointed to Inquire into the Military Preparations and Other Military Matters connected with the War in South Africa*, 1903: cd 1789 xl, 1; cd 1790 xl, 325; cd 1791 xli, 1; cd 1792 xlii, 1.

[12] White's services were only requested after Khartoum had already fallen and Gordon had been killed.

Malakand, Chitral, and Tirah, the latter being the most substantial campaign to secure the region and establish a viable frontier with Afghanistan. As Commander-in-Chief, White oversaw some of the most significant reforms in the Indian Army since the Rebellion.

After India, White expected his career to quietly end but with war looming in South Africa, he was selected to secure the safety of the Natal colony. He achieved that goal, in part. As he always maintained after the war, had he abandoned Ladysmith and the colony north of the Tugela River, the Boers would have been able to launch an invasion into the south, endangering both Pietermaritzburg, its capital, and Durban, its chief port; a strategy which the Boers identified in the month leading up to the declaration of war as a necessary requirement to achieving a victory. When his part in the South African War ended, White went to Gibraltar and oversaw the reforms to the colony's defenses made incumbent by the advent of longer-range naval guns. Largely a ceremonial position, White oversaw Kaiser William II's visit just before and after his infamous speech in Tangier in 1905 which sparked the First Moroccan Crisis. His last years in command of the Royal Chelsea Hospital finally brought him the rest that he always longed for but routinely rejected in exchange for active service.

An examination of White's career provides much more than insight into these events and the Victorian army, in general. White was a prolific letter writer and note taker, both in his professional and personal lives. He saved copies of most of the letters and reports he wrote and did his best to save the ones he received. When he died, Amy White put a request out in newspapers for any materials related to her husband's life to help with the biography which Durand later wrote. This treasure trove of papers eventually made its way to the India Office and is now housed in the British Library. A careful reading of White's papers reveals an officer with well-informed and strong views on such issues as Great Britain's forward policy in Afghanistan and the risks of war with Russia, the fiscal pressures of conducting military operations on the fringes of the empire, and the challenges of working side by side with civilian administrators in winning the "Hearts and Minds" of local people not fully incorporated into imperial governance. As Commander-in-Chief of India, White had to consider the value of martial race theory advocated by some of his fellow officers, the importance of investing in transportation and communication networks, the structural problems of the Presidency Armies, and the challenges which British legislation, such as the Contagious Disease Acts, could create for local conditions. In addition, White's correspondences show an officer, especially after the abolition of purchase, consumed with navigating personal and professional networks in order to advance his career and secure an improved position which could support both his ambitions and his family and estate.

Finally, a study of White's career can add to the literature on asymmetric warfare by examining the variety of so-called small wars which he participated in during the second half of the nineteenth century. Colonel C.E. Callwell's significant work, *Small Wars: Their Principles and Practice* referenced all of these conflicts from the hill warfare of Tirah to the bush warfare of Burma; and from the desert warfare of the Sudan to the varied terrain and climate of South Africa. As an officer, White participated in, as Callwell identified, campaigns of conquest, punitive expeditions, and wars of pacification and suppression. These included wars fought on foreign soil against a tangible force where there was a clear objective of defeating an acknowledged sovereign or overturning a government; expeditions where the goal was not to completely overrun the enemy but to decisively defeat its army in the field; and, internal campaigns against guerrillas where there was no central government, single authority, or organized army and where objectives might range from the destruction of crops and stores of grain to the raising of a village or, as Wolseley identified, "the capture of whatever they prize most and the destruction or deprivation of which will probably bring the war most rapidly to a conclusion."[13] White's correspondences show an officer who was always assessing the martial abilities of his enemy and the challenges posed to his own force by technology,[14] climate and terrain, and political and fiscal limitations.

Because this project covers a historical period of over 50 years in length and spans multiple continents, it required an examination of a great deal of historiography but it could not hope to be exhaustive. Literature on the Victorian military has grown tremendously since the early 1970s in terms of reach and breadth. Military historians may have been a bit slow in incorporating the tools of social and cultural history, but when they did, the "New Military History" produced important works examining, among other things, institutions, social relationships, and racial and class constructs which permeated all facets of the study of war and society and the military experience. No longer content with disseminating information through monographs and a few peer reviewed journals, military historians have found new outlets for their work, particularly through specialized conferences, the growing number of high-quality journals, and open source media, which have promoted important discussions.

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[13] C.E. Callwell, *Small Wars: Their Principles and Practice*, 3rd edition (London: HMSO, 1906; Lincoln, NE: Bison Books, 1996), 19.

[14] A notable example was the introduction of the expanding Mark IV bullet, the dum-dum, developed in India when White was Commander-in-Chief.

This work relies heavily on White's personal papers. In order to avoid the challenges associated with the problems that brings, as I learned when writing *Lord Methuen and the British Army* more than 20 years ago,[15] a thorough examination of the secondary literature has been critical to this project to validate personal claims, to provide historical context, and to re-examine how letter-writing and journaling explicitly or implicitly creates bias. Exemplary studies of military figures exist and this work is indebted to them.

Although the secondary literature of the Victorian military and empire is referenced throughout this book, it is important to make note of a few key texts and historians here. Edward Spiers' *The Army and Society, 1815–1914* and *The Late Victorian Army 1868–1902* served as important reference works throughout the process of writing this book.[16] Spiers' knowledge of the institution of the Regular Army, the relationship of the civil (Secretary of State for War) and the military (Commander-in-Chief of Forces), the Cardwell reforms, the regimental system, and other topics, is comprehensive. Ian Beckett's many works on the Victorian Army but *A British Profession of Arms: The Politics of Command in the Late Victorian Army* with its emphasis on networks and personal and professional relationships, in particular, provided an essential framework for understanding White's place in the British officer corps.[17]

Just as contemporary British officers like Wolseley and Buller often viewed the Indian Army as a world apart, White's long career in India involved not just a thorough investigation of the British Army but research

[15] Stephen M. Miller, *Lord Methuen and the British Army: Failure and Redemption in South Africa* (London: Frank Cass, 1999).

[16] Edward M. Spiers, *The Army and Society, 1815–1914* (New York: Longman, 1980), and, *The Late Victorian Army 1868–1902* (London: St. Martin, 1992).

[17] Ian Beckett, *A British Profession of Arms: The Politics of Command in the Late Victorian Army (*Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 2018); also see *The Victorians at War* (London: Hambledon and London, 2003), and "The Third Anglo-Burmese War and the Pacification of Burma, 1885–1895," in *Queen Victoria's Wars: British Military Campaigns, 1857–1902*, ed. Stephen M. Miller (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021).

into the geopolitics of the subcontinent, the racial, religious, caste, and regional variations in manpower and recruitment, and the demands and needs of its military at home and abroad. The works of Douglas Peers, David Omissi, Kaushik Roy, and T.R, Moreman were important to provide that knowledge.[18] Brian Robson's *The Road to Kabul: The Second Afghan War 1878–1881* furnished invaluable information on Afghanistan as did Daniel Whittingham's *Charles E. Callwell and the British Way in Warfare* on late Victorian military theory.[19] Finally, Fransjohan Pretorius' analysis of the South African War is unsurpassed and his work provided great insight into Boer strategy and the Natal Campaign.[20]

This book is written largely as a military biography and therefore chapters will explore White's life through a chronological narrative. However, the goal is not simply to update Durand's biography. It is to use White to examine the many issues raised above which are crucial to understanding the late Victorian army and its role in extending and maintaining empire. It will also cast light on civil-military relations, British attitudes towards the people it ruled over, encounters with nature and meanings of frontier, as well as what Britishness meant to an Anglo-Irish Protestant landlord who spent most of his life outside of the British Isles. White's career was so long and rich that it can be used to explore many facets of Victorian society.

In an era of purchase, George Stuart White obtained his first commission without purchase after graduating from the Royal Military College, Sandhurst, in 1853. Chapter 2 will examine the formative years in White's career when he was posted to India just before the start of the Rebellion of 1857–1858. He served primarily in the Punjab during this period, at cantonments and outposts in Sealkote (Sialkot), Umballah (Ambala), Fort Attock, Jullundhur (Jalandhar), and Mooltan (Multan), as well as at

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[18] See Douglas Peers, "The Indian Rebellion, 1857–1858," in *Queen Victoria's Wars*; David Omissi, *The Sepoy and the Raj: The Indian Army, 1860–1940* (London: Macmillan, 1994), Kaushik Roy, *The Army in British India: From Colonial Warfare to Total War 1857–1947* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2013); and, T.R. Moreman, *The Army in India and the Development of Frontier Warfare, 1849–1947* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1988).

[19] Brian Robson, *The Road to Kabul: The Second Afghan War 1878–1881* (New York: Arms and Armour Press, 1986); and Daniel Whittingham, *Charles E. Callwell and the British Way in Warfare* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020).

[20] Fransjohan Pretorius, *Life on Commando During the Anglo-Boer War, 1899–1902* (Cape Town: Human & Rousseau, 1999).

Allahabad, Chakrata, and Simla (Shimla). White was restless, during these years, always worried about his next posting and seeking opportunities for advancement and promotion, concerns which he continued to share in his letters to home throughout his career. He saw others, like those who were sent to Crimea, as more likely to succeed in a military career and more than once considered returning to civilian life. Interestingly, it was only in these years which, in his letters, he displayed racial attitudes which historians have to come to expect of Victorians. In the years to follow, however, when his views were shaped by experience rather than the attitudes of his peers and superiors, White became remarkably open-minded for someone of his time and background. As a regimental officer who rarely heard a shot fired in anger, these years were filled with drill, order, and monotony.

In late 1877, White's regiment was posted to Sitapur. The Russo-Turkish War seemed to be heating up and by early 1878, White "hope[d] the 92nd will form part of any force going from India against the Russians."[21] The arrival of a British fleet in the Straits, however, was enough to bring Russia to the negotiating tables and no British troops were required. Disappointed, White took a leave of absence to return to Whitehall, the home he inherited in Broughshane, County Antrim, and to visit with his wife and 17-month-old baby. Afterwards, as he made his way back to India to rejoin his regiment in March 1879, a passing soldier told him that the 92nd was on its way to join Roberts' column at Kurram, in preparations for an invasion of Afghanistan. Chapter 3 examines the Second Anglo-Afghan War, 1879–1880, the development of White's relationship with his newly found benefactor, Roberts, and his actions at the battles at Charasiab and Kandahar which garnered him the Victoria Cross.

Despite the laurels he gained from the military prowess and bravery he displayed in Afghanistan, White was still just a captain in the army and, to that point, had served for nearly 30 years. Things were, however, finally going to change. First, Wolseley offered him a staff appointment in 1885 in Sudan and then Roberts called him back to India where he was given command of a brigade in the Third Anglo-Burmese War, 1885. After the rapid defeat of Burmese troops, the seizure of Mandalay, and the removal of the Burmese king, Thibaw, White remained in Mandalay and eventually was given an independent command over all the troops in Upper Burma with the task of putting down the rebels, quieting the dacoits (bandits), and pacifying the newly annexed colony. Chapter 4 investigates the two and half years White spent in Upper Burma where he honed his military and administrative skills while working alongside the British political agents, Charles Bernard and later Charles Crosthwaite, to allow for the transition from military to civilian control and to extend the frontier of Burma to the Chinese border incorporating Kachin, Chin, and the Shan states.

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[21] White to John White, 4 January 1878, Mss Eur F108/98, GWP.

White was eager to leave Burma after a couple of years, but Lord Dufferin, the Viceroy and Governor-General of India, as well as Roberts, the Commander-in-Chief, India, were reluctant to let him go. In return for remaining an additional year, White was given his choice of a number of open divisional commands: he chose Quetta. Chapter 5 looks at White's three-and-half-year stint in Baluchistan from late 1889 to early 1893. As he had worked in Upper Burma with Bernard and Crosthwaite, White developed a close relationship with Robert Sandeman, the British agent in the region. The Sandeman system, in which the British attempted to rule through existing traditional institutions while securing the alliance of the local people by recruiting them through a system of tribal levies in order to preserve security, was already in place before White arrived. But with White's support it was strengthened and White also began considering how it could be extended and utilized among the Pashtun tribes of the North-West Frontier.[22] While in Baluchistan, White personally conducted the Zhob Valley expedition in 1890 which extended British control over the region.

The Great Game, the political intrigue between Great Britain and Russia in Afghanistan and along the vast Central and Southern Asian frontier, was on the minds of many British officers serving in India during the late nineteenth century and White was no exception. The divisional command in Quetta greatly heightened his interest in it and when he succeeded Roberts as Commander-in-Chief, India in April 1893, it became a major responsibility of his to oversee British security in the region. Chapters 6 and 7 examine White's five-year tenure at Snowdon and his working relationship with Lord Lansdowne and then Lord Elgin, who served as Viceroys during this period. White was busy with issues ranging from the introduction of new weaponry to the reform of the Presidency Armies and from the issue of promotion of Indian high caste officers to the recruitment of Anglo-Indians. He also had to face the political and fiscal costs of Roberts' aggressive forward policy. Furthermore, during this period, the frontier was anything but quiet. White was responsible for launching a number of expeditions to the North-West Frontier including those to Malakand, Chitral, and Tirah, the latter of which proved to be Great Britain's largest in the region. In 1898, White returned home and briefly took up the post of Quartermaster-General to the British Forces.

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[22] Magnus Marsden and Benjamin D. Hopkins argue that the Sandeman system was the basis of General Gerald Templar's "Hearts and Minds" campaign in Malaya in the early 1950s. See Marsden and Hopkins, *Fragments of the Afghan Frontier* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 231.

Chapters 8 and 9 focus on White's brief period of command in South Africa in 1899–1900. In some ways the selection of White as Commander of the Natal Field Force was inspired; in other ways, it was short-sighted. White possessed much more experience both as a brigadier and as an administrator in a war-zone than did his counterpart in the Cape Colony, General Sir F.W. Forestier-Walker. He was also not beholden to Wolseley, the Commander-in-Chief of British forces, or to Buller, who only departed Great Britain after war was declared. Lansdowne could trust that White would not only do his duty but would keep him in the loop. But unlike Buller or General Lord Methuen, who arrived in November to take command of the British 1st Division which was ordered to relieve Kimberley, White had never served in South Africa. When his regiment was sent out in early 1881 to take part in the First Anglo-Boer War and tragedy struck at Majuba Hill, White was in Calcutta, serving as military secretary to the Viceroy, Lord Ripon. All his efforts to join his men afterwards failed despite Ripon's advocacy. The Duke of Cambridge, Commander-in-Chief of British Forces from 1856 to 1895, believed it would be an "injustice to other majors."[23] At the start of the South African War, therefore, without regional experience, White was dependent on local actors to supply him with political advice as well as knowledge about the land and its people. This proved critical. White ultimately opted to keep troops north of the Tugela River and move his main force to Ladysmith. White's decision to do this will be examined as will his leadership throughout the siege.

When he left South Africa, White took up the post of Governor of Gibraltar. Although largely a sinecure, White's tenure on "the Rock" was busy to say the least. Naturally, there were the many visits by British and foreign dignitaries which White had to oversee, none more significant than the German Kaiser's scheduled visit in March 1904 as well as his non-scheduled return the following year.[24] The British monarch, Edward VII, also came to Gibraltar to promote White to field-marshal and personally award him his baton. More critically, the development of longer-range naval artillery guns kept White busy in Gibraltar as he had to work closely with the admiralty office, in particular Admiral Lord Charles Beresford, then Commander-in-Chief of the Channel Fleet, to insure the safety of the vitally, strategic British colony. But the issue which most consumed White psychologically and aroused great anxiety was the preservation of his Ladysmith legacy. This was challenged first by Buller's "amazing speech" and the "surrender" telegram,[25] then by Lieutenant-General Sir Archibald Hunter's claims about his role at the Battle of Wagon Hill and Caesar's Camp (Battle of Platrand) on 6 January 1900, and, finally, the drafts and eventual publication of the second volume of *The Times History of the War in South Africa*. Chapter 10 will discuss these issues and more including White's role in Indian Army reform during Lord Kitchener's tempestuous period as Commander-in-Chief, India.

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[23] White to John White, 7 March 1881, Mss Eur F108/98, GWP.

After Gibraltar, White did not return to Antrim. Instead, in 1905, he took up his last post as Governor of the Royal Chelsea Hospital, succeeding two field marshals, Sir Donald Stewart and Sir Henry Norman, men White knew from his time in India. His remaining years in London were mostly uneventful. In June 1912, at the age of 76, White passed away. Fittingly, Lord Roberts led the procession from Chelsea to Euston Station where White's remains were then transported to Broughshane.[26]

An historical investigation of White's nearly 60 years of service reveals much insight into the inner workings of the Victorian army. It shows an officer very concerned about promotion and obtaining the necessary influential contacts to succeed in his profession. It also demonstrates the financial difficulties placed on officers on service overseas who were required to secure servants, horses, clothing, and equipment, as well as to obtain housing for themselves and their families, while at the same time trying to maintain their property and possessions at home. Through his correspondences with family, friends, and colleagues, a picture emerges of an extremely well-informed soldier who kept up on global geopolitical affairs, domestic politics, and troubles arising throughout the empire in which situations might require a military presence. A new case study of George White is not just long overdue, it provides an essential examination of the British Empire and the Victorian Army.

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[24] After giving his speech in Tangier which sparked an international crisis, the Kaiser's transport was damaged as it pulled out of the port and needed emergency repairs. It docked in Gibraltar and the Kaiser was once again entertained by White.

[25] White to John White, 16 October 1901, Mss Eur F108/98, GWP.

[26] Order of White's funeral procession, and a list of wreaths, including a sash sent with a wreath from Kaiser Wilhelm II, Mss Eur F108/124 (27–28 Jun 1912), GWP.

CHAPTER 2

The Start of a Military Career (1853–1878)

George Stuart White was born on 6 July 1835 at Rock Castle near Portstewart, County Londonderry.[1] His mother, Frances, was the daughter of Frances Ann and George Stuart, Esq. of Donachy, County Tyrone. His father, James Robert White, a barrister, was the second son, of James White, Deputy Governor of County Antrim. This branch of the White family had left England many generations earlier and had settled in County Antrim.[2] It was George's grandfather, James, who left the Presbyterian Church and adopted the Church of England as his spiritual home.[3] George White remained devoted to both the Anglican Church and to Ulster throughout his life.

There appears to be no particular reason why George White chose the military as his profession as a young man, nor, when he was older, did he reflect on his earlier decision. His uncle John, who had served in the Peninsular War, seems to have been the first White with any overseas

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[1] The site was later known as Low Rock Castle. It was torn down in 2001. "Low Rock Castle," Lord Belmont in Northern Ireland, accessed 18 November 2019, http://lordbelmontinnorthernireland.blogspot.com/2013/07/low-rock-castle.html

[2] According to Leo Keohane, a biographer of George White's son, Jack, the Whites, originally Whyte, were from York and after supporting the Royalist cause during the English Civil War, relocated to Ireland. During the Glorious Revolution, the family supported William of Orange. Leo Keohane, *Captain Jack White: Imperialism, Anarchism & the Irish Citizen Army* (Sallins, Ireland: Merrion Press, 2014), 9–12.

[3] Mortimer Durand, *The Life of Field-Marshal Sir George White*, Volume I (Edinburgh and London: William Blackwood and Sons, 1915), 6–7.

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S. M. Miller, *George White and the Victorian Army in India and Africa*, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-50834-0_2

service. Nevertheless, after briefly attending Bromsgrove School in Worcestershire, where his older brother James was a student, and then King William's College, Castletown, Isle of Man, White headed to the Royal Military College at Sandhurst in 1850.

Sandhurst was a conservative institution both in temperament and in its dedication to teaching traditional subjects.[4] It began to embrace a degree of modernization only after the death of the Duke of Wellington and the end of the Crimean War (1853–1856) which revealed many major flaws in the British Army. It was far from a professional institution when White arrived, discipline was very lax, and most graduating cadets continued to purchase their commissions.[5]

The few letters that have been preserved from White's three years at Sandhurst do not reveal much. He appears to have been mostly content as a student at the Royal Military College and, like many of his peers, displayed more of an aptitude for riding and sport than academic studies. Always a bit socially awkward, he did not make many lasting friendships. White was eager to get his commission and to see active service and had no interest in pursuing staff training at Farnham, an institution which was floundering in the 1850s and would soon be redesigned as the Staff College in Camberley.[6] In November 1853, without purchase, he was gazetted an Ensign in the 27th (Inniskilling) Regiment of Foot, and set off for Dublin to join his regiment.[7]

The Irish infantry regiment, first raised during the Glorious Revolution to defend Ulster Protestants from King James II and his Catholic allies, was a fitting place for White to start his career. It had served during the War of American Independence, in the Wars of the French Revolution and Napoleonic Wars, notably at Waterloo where despite very high casualty rates it held its ground, and most recently in South Africa during the latter

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[4] For more on Sandhurst, see Frederick Gordon Guggisberg, *"The Shop": The Story of the Royal Military Academy* (London: Cassell and Company, LTD, 1900); and, Hugh Thomas, *The Story of Sandhurst* (London: Hutchinson 1961).

[5] Anthony Clayton, *The British Officer: Leading the Army from 1660 to the Present* (London: Pearson, 2006), 106, 139.

[6] In a letter to his sister, Jane, shortly after arriving the Royal Military Academy, White was already expressing his impatience in getting a commission. White to Jane White, 8 September 1850, White's letters to his sister Jane White, Mss Eur F108/97(a)-(b)(c. 1845–1910), GWP.

[7] The commission had been held by the scandalous, self-titled, Viscount Forth, George Henry Drummond. For more on Viscount Forth, see Deborah Cohen, *Family Secrets: Shame and Privacy in Modern Britain* (Oxford: University Press, 2013), 56–83.

Cape Frontier Wars. White had high expectations that his new regiment would be sent to the Crimea where a demand by the British and French in March 1854 had failed to convince the Russians to evacuate Moldavia and Walachia and led to declarations of war. His older brother, James, secured a lieutenancy without purchase, and was at the Siege of Sevastopol and the Battle of Balaclava. James wrote to their parents who were residing at the time in Beardiville, Coleraine, to urge his brother to try to obtain a transfer to one of the regiments in the thick of the war.[8] His brother needed no urging. George had already written to his sister, Jane, "[James] is in great luck. I wish I was a Lieutenant. It would make the difference of about 6 years service to me which is no small consideration to a man who intends [to pursue a military career]."[9] The younger brother would not make it to Crimea, however; instead, on 20 June 1854, he travelled with a section of his regiment to Queenstown (Cobh), County Cork and boarded the Troopship *Charlotte*. His destination was Calcutta (Kolkata).[10]

The journey to India from Great Britain in the mid-nineteenth century could take three to four months. White's first voyage would take more than six. From the start, he had a difficult time. Writing to his mother, he was alarmed by the alcohol consumption of his regiment. "Everybody on the ship is drunk but myself," he complained.[11] Later in his life, White became very active in establishing temperance societies in India and gave speeches to groups in Great Britain when he returned home for good in the 1900s. Things were, however, about to get a lot worse aboard the *Charlotte*. After three months of a "long, dull trip," the ship hit bad weather off the Cape of Good Hope. It continued eastward, and shortly afterwards, it anchored off Port Elizabeth in Algoa Bay to take on drinking water on 19 September. White was desperate to go ashore but he was duty officer for the day and had to stay aboard the ship. When he was finally relieved on the 20th, the “surf was coming up” and he was advised by his superior, Captain C. Warren, to wait for the next day. He ignored the advice, however, later writing to his father, “with the true mischief of an Irishman, I trusted to my powers of swimming to get on shore in case of an upset (little knowing the strength of the surf in Algoa Bay) and the boat was upset, and I with great difficulty reached the shore with nothing but the clothes on my back.”[12] Exhausted and cold, White made his way to a hotel to take off his thoroughly soaked clothes.

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[8] James White to James Robert White, 30 May 1855, Letters from James White to his father James Robert White and to his sister Elizabeth White, during the Crimean War, Mss Eur F108/117, GWP.

[9] White to Jane White, 9 June 1854, Mss Eur F108/97, GWP.

[10] According to William Copeland Trimble, the 27th left for India on 27 June 1854. White's letters disputes this. The right wing of his regiment, which included White, embarked from Cork on 20 June; the left wing, 30 June. White to James Robert White, no date, Mss Eur F108/96, GWP. Trimble, *Historical Record of the 27th Inniskilling Regiment, from the period of its institution as a volunteer corps till the present time* (London: Wm. Clowes and Sons, 1876), 111–12.

[11] White to Frances White, 27 June 1854, White's letters to his parents, Mr. and Mrs. James Robert White, Mss Eur F108/96, GWP.

What White did not know is that about 6:00 p.m., while he was at the hotel, one of the *Charlotte*’s anchor cables snapped. The Captain signaled to the shore for a replacement but the harbor master responded that the water was too rough to assist. Very soon afterwards “the other [anchor cable] went and to the horror of all on the shore we saw the *Charlotte* was gone.”[13] “Shrieks of the women were awful as their children were washed overboard one after another” into the “clouds of foam,” White wrote.[14] Despite being only 150 yards off shore, rescue attempts largely failed. Ninety-nine of the 208 passengers, including 26 children, and 18 of the 24 crew members were lost.[15] White spent the next couple of days helping to recover bodies, fitting them for coffins, and attending funerals. Not only had White lost friends and comrades, all his personal belongings were swept away and he had no money to purchase replacements.

White and the other men of the 27th Regiment made their way to Cape Town, the administrative center of the Cape Colony, to await their new conveyance. This would be White’s only visit there for the next 45 years. He quite liked the colonial town which the British had first taken from the Dutch in 1795, and after returning it to fulfill the peace terms at Amiens, retook it in 1805 and held on to it after the Treaty of Paris in 1815. In a letter home, he compared it favorably to London, noting that the biggest difference was its many “Black People.”[16] White had no idea how long they were going to be stranded in Cape Town. Rumors were rife that another frontier war with the Xhosa was going to erupt but White was hoping none would. “It would be a great go if we were to be kept here for a Caffir war," he wrote home. "For my part, I hope most sincerely we won't as we would run every chance of being shot and get no promotion."[17] Within two years, the Great Cattle Killing would begin which would spread havoc and lead to the deaths of thousands, but White would be long gone from the Cape Colony by then. In November, he boarded the *Maidstone* and arrived in Calcutta early in the New Year.

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[12] White to James Robert White, 29 September 1854, Mss Eur F108/96, GWP.

[13] White to James Robert White, 29 September 1854 and 5 October 1854, Mss Eur F108/96, GWP.

[14] White to James Robert White, 5 October 1854, Mss Eur F108/96, GWP.

[15] White was incorrectly listed in most contemporary reports as being aboard the ship when the tragedy struck. *Hampshire Telegraph and Sussex Telegraph*, 9 December 1854.

[16] White to James Robert White, 18 October 1854, Mss Eur F108/96, GWP.

As a low-ranking officer, White had no privileged information as to where his regiment was going to be deployed. It was not until he arrived in Calcutta on 8 January 1855 that he learned he had another journey of over 1200 miles to make. The Inniskillings were ordered to proceed via steamer up the Ganges (Ganga) River to Allahabad (Prayagraj) and then to march to Lahore and onto Sealkote (Sialkot), a strategically important position in the Punjab, which had only been incorporated into British rule in 1849. The presence of an armed force in Sealkote helped to preserve British interests in the northeast Punjab and influence affairs in neighboring Kashmir. Sealkote would be White's home for the next year.

Despite referring to his new posting as a "healthy station," by June, newly promoted Lieutenant White was writing home that soldiers were dying every day in "this awful hole."[18] White ascribed this to excessive drinking of alcohol and high temperatures. Whether his assessment was correct or not, the 30% invalid rate he reported was quite high. Life in Sealkote became too routine for the young officer. He soon stopped discussing with his family parade, drill, shooting and riding, and doing his best to stay out of the sun.[19] But without influential friends back home, he was stuck there. When Lieutenant-Colonel H.D. Kyle learned that White was discussing switching regiments, he "was most indignant at the idea of my going, [and] he spoke to me about it."[20] Nevertheless, in the New Year when he learned that a junior lieutenant had purchased a rank which made him now senior to White, he began negotiating with a lieutenant in the 87th (Royal Irish Fusiliers) for an exchange. His efforts however failed when the young officer's father had "returned him for purchase."[21] White was not optimistic about his prospects of advancement in the 27th, because, as he wrote to his father, in India, the officers "lived very hard," often got into debt, and therefore could not afford to purchase up, creating a bit of a logjam. White, however, did not ask for assistance from his father to purchase a higher rank but continued to try to secure a better position through exchange.[22]

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[17] Ibid. The wars with the Xhosa along the Eastern Cape Frontier were known as the Kaffir (Caffir) Wars through the nineteenth and mid twentieth centuries. Kaffir is a pejorative with its roots in the Arabic word for infidel.

[18] White to Frances White, 14 June 1855, Mss Eur F108/96, GWP.

[19] White to Fanny White, 29 April 1855, White's letters to his sister Fanny White, Mss Eur F108/99 (1855–1906), GWP.

[20] White to James Robert White, 29 July 1855, Mss Eur F108/96, GWP.

White did his best to interrupt the monotony of his duties with a trip to the higher altitudes and cooler temperatures near the British hill station at Dalhousie. Hiking in the hills and mountains of Central and Southern Asia would remain a favorite past time of his throughout his career in India. He would return to Dalhousie more than once, take trips into Kashmir, west of Srinagar, and even found the time during the war in Afghanistan to ascend several peaks. He also attended races and balls in Sealkote, despite his "most fervent contempt of Indian society at large."[23]

Arriving in India before the Rebellion, at a time before biological racism began to shape imperial views and martial race theory deeply informed military recruiting policies, and growing up in Northern Ireland, race would have meant something very different to White than to late Victorians. Although it is possible that White came into contact with Africans, Asians or the small Black population living in Great Britain, mostly in London, his experience as an officer in the British Army presented opportunities to see a different world and a variety of people not available to most Britons.[24] His short time in Cape Town was eye-opening; his many years in India no doubt had a great impact on the convictions which he brought with him from County Antrim. The use of the pejorative "nigger" does pop up periodically in letters home during the 1850s, as does "coolie," although the latter is not used by White deliberately as a term of derision, but instead to describe Indians who were employed to carry baggage and perform menial labor, although he did not use the word to describe personal servants. Although still deeply problematic,

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[21] White to James Robert White, 8 March 1856 and 22 March 1856, Mss Eur F108/96, GWP.

[22] For more on the purchasing of commissions and the eventual end of the practice, see A.P.C. Bruce, *The Purchase System in the British Army, 1660–1871* (London: Royal Historical Society, 1980).

[23] White to Frances White, 4 January 1856, Mss Eur F108/96, GWP.

[24] Douglas A. Lorimer, *Colour, Class and the Victorians: English Attitudes to the Negro in the Mid-Nineteenth Century* (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1978), 41.

White's writings during this period show a man struggling with racial constructions. For example, in May 1856, White was given a 30-day leave of absence. He travelled to Putankote (Pathankot), Diancoon (Dainkund), Dumtail (Damtal), and Dalhousie. Unable to post letters, White kept a daily journal. After a day of being carried on a dooly (palanquin) for 25 miles, White looked at his Indian servants and contemplated, "If black men can be properly called brethren then in the natural run of thoughts' rapid stream, I was led to consider if Black women can be truly said to belong to the fairer sex."[25] Three days later, he again turned to his journal, and wrote, "these wretched creatures carry wonderful loads up these hills . . . and yet these men eat only once a day and then only a few cakes made of what they call *otter*, which is nothing more than ground barley, and yet I who eat meat twice a day and am ravenous as an athlete."[26] In the years to come, his musings on race disappeared from his letters. His use of pejoratives also vanished. Yet White, residing in India, obviously could not avoid thinking about race, and later in the century, as martial race theory became accepted and advocated by his fellow officers, White would be forced to consider its merits (Map 2.1).

After purchasing an "expensive" house in Sealkote, White was ordered in November 1856 to move to Nowshera, a new station where a British regiment had never been posted before. Barracks had yet to be built. Nowshera lies some 200 miles northwest of Sealkote, past Islamabad, and closer to the Afghan border. White was not happy with the prospect of losing money on the house, nor with the challenges of buying a new house, especially knowing that the regiment could be ordered to a new posting at any moment. Although he enjoyed the nearby hills and the Kabul River valley offered fine opportunities for hunting, he hated Nowshera. The days were too hot, the nights were too cold, "the rats are too numerous to be pleasant," and the insecurity in the region meant that White could not wander from the station "without being in danger of being quietly murdered."[27]

Without hope of getting sent to the Crimea and unable to negotiate an exchange into another regiment, White looked for opportunities to break the boredom. He wrote to his father, "I am getting tired of regimental duty – day after day inspecting rations and seeing rooms are clean – any

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[25] White's journal, 1 May 1856, Mss Eur F108/96, GWP.

[26] White's journal, 4 May 1856, Mss Eur F108/96, GWP.

[27] White to Frances White, 16 December 1856, Mss Eur F108/96, GWP.