THE REMNANTS OF AN ARMY

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“L’Angleterre n’a guere qu’un peintre militaire, c’est une femme.”—FRENCH ART CRITIC.

In the regimental museum of The Somerset and Cornwall Light Infantry at Taunton hangs a painting¹ which, eighty years ago, made its début at the Royal Academy. It depicts a man in a poshteen or short fur-lined jacket, mounted on a horse and clutching with both hands the pommel of his saddle. His head is flung back and to one side in an attitude of utter exhaustion, while the head of the poor beast droops in approaching death. In the background is a long line of sad-looking mountains, and nearer to hand the walls of a fortified town with a party of horsemen emerging through a gate to meet the rider. This well-known picture is entitled The Remnants of an Army.

In or about the year 1859, a much travelled English family were staying at the Villa de’Franchi at Sori, near Genoa. One day, Mr. Thompson, who was devoted to the private education of his two young daughters, touched on the history of the British in India and, amongst other things, mentioned the disastrous retreat of our forces through the Afghan defiles only seventeen years before. He described how the whole army was cut to pieces; how only one man, Dr. Brydon, managed to throw off his pursuers and, sorely wounded, reach safety behind the walls of Jellalabad. “Now, there’s a good subject for you to paint when you are grown up!” he laughingly said to his younger daughter. For Elizabeth had already, in her ninth year, betrayed a talent for drawing and painting and, what must be rare amongst women, a particular aptitude for military figures and scenes of army life; so much so that, shortly afterwards, a surprised editor of the Illustrated London News was obliged to return with thanks to “Miss Elizabeth Thompson” a “design for a new uniform for rifle volunteers.”

In 1866 she entered the South Kensington School of Art, where she became a favourite of the principal, Richard Burchett. Further study in Florence and Rome led in 1874 to The Roll Call (Crimean War), which made her reputation.² Amongst other great paintings to come from her brush were Quatre Bras, Balaclava, Return from Inkermann and Steady, the Drums and Fifes!

¹ On permanent loan from The Tate Gallery.
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Elmore, R.A., remarked: “It is impossible to look at that man’s face unmoved,” while another viewer approached the young artist with the words, “I had a wet eye when I saw your picture!”

But few could have known anything about the man who had attained such melancholy fame nearly forty years before and who later on survived another and equally desperate trial down in the Indian plains.

William Brydon was born in London on 9 October 1811. He was of Scots Border ancestry, one forebear having been provost of Dumfries, while another had led a troop of cavalry for the Young Pretender. After schooling under Dr. Rawes¹ at Bromley, in Kent, he went on to study medicine at University College, London, and at the University of Edinburgh. Having decided to make his career in the East, he obtained the appointment of Assistant-Surgeon in the Bengal Army and proceeded to Calcutta in the year 1835.

It was a period of peace in India. Brydon was ordered up-country and for three years did duty with several different regiments in what were then the North-West Provinces. On three occasions he accompanied escorts when the Governor-General and the Commander-in-Chief paid courtesy visits to Ranjit Singh—the “Lion of the Punjab.” In December 1838, at the outbreak of war with Afghanistan due to Russian machinations, he was posted to the 5th Native Infantry and marched with them in the “Army of the Indus” to the capture of Kandahar and Kabul. After the main part of the army had returned to India, Brydon remained behind with the occupation force in Kabul and was attached for a time to one of the regiments in the service of Shah Shuja, who had been restored to the throne in place of the usurper Dost Mohammed, now a “pensioner” in Calcutta. Then in 1841 occurred the murders of Sir Alexander Burnes and Sir William Macnaghten, the British envoys, and the rising of the Afghans, with whom Shah Shuja had never been popular.

The infirm general commanding the Anglo-Indian force completely lost his hold on the situation. A treaty was concluded with Akbar Khan, Dost Mohammed’s son, providing for the evacuation of the force from the country, and in the depths of winter the column set out, complete with womenfolk and camp-followers. Both the general and the colonel of H.M. 44th—the only European regiment involved—were obliged to give themselves up as hostages en route. Akbar Khan, like the Nana Sahib many years later, was hand in glove with the executioners, but this time it was the tribesmen massed for miles on either side of the Khoord-Kabul Pass. The retreat became a massacre in the snow, with the climax on a hill at Gandamak when twelve survivors of the 44th charged into a horde of fanatical Ghilzais and perished to a man.

Brydon, however, with five other mounted officers, had managed to get farther ahead, despite hand-to-hand attacks by the hillmen. But at Fattehbad two of the party fell, and at a point within four miles of Jellalabad and safety three more were slain. The doctor owed his life to an odd chance for, besides

¹ Robert Booth Rawes, M.A. (c. 1785-1841), is locally identified as the original of Mr. Pickwick and in Bromley records a family of stage-coachmen of the name of Weller is frequently mentioned (vide “Bromley, Kent,” by E. L. S. Horsburgh, 1929).
other wounds, he had received a murderous cut in the head from a knife. This
blow, however, had been rendered comparatively harmless by a copy of
*Blackwood's Magazine* which he had stuffed in his forage cap. He was thus the
"last man" (the sobriquet by which he was later known) out of a force of
16,500, less a few prisoners, which had miserably perished over a period of
seven days in that bitter January of 1842.

Having recovered from this fearful experience, Brydon continued on duty
with Sale's Brigade, later to be known as the "Illustrious Garrison," and of
which H.M. 13th (now The Somerset and Cornwall Light Infantry) formed a
part. The defences of Jellalabad were, in the meantime, shattered by an earth­
quake, but speedily repaired. Later, the garrison sailed out and defeated the
forces of Akbar Khan sent against them. At last General Pollock and his aveng­
ing army forced the Khyber and relieved the defenders, and Brydon started
back with them to the chastisement of Kabul.

The route was the same as that taken by the ill-fated column from the
opposite direction, and all troops were kindled to a white heat of fury by the
sights they met on the way. "The bodies," wrote Captain Backhouse, "lay
in heaps of hundreds, our gun-wheels crushing the bones of our late comrades at
every step for several miles; indeed, the whole march from Gandamak to Kabul
may have been said to have been over the corpses of the massacred
army." At last the army of retribution reached Kabul, where the following day they were
joined by the army of Kandahar under General Nott.

Pollock and Nott, both skilful commanders, then engaged the Afghan forces
in a series of battles and completely defeated them. The great bazaar in Kabul,
where the mangled bodies of Burnes and Macnaghten had been displayed, was
blown up; Charikar, where a Gurkha regiment had been annihilated, razed to
the ground; and Istanth, in Kohistan, destroyed and its garrison with it. The
few prisoners, British and Indian, who had been carried off to the country west
of Kabul, effected their own release on the news of Afghan defeats and made
their way to join up with the British forces. So ended this "wild expedition
into a distant region of rocks and deserts, of sands and ice and snow."

For the next seven years, Brydon spent most of his service in the
State of Bhopal, the Begum or Queen of which was later distinguished for her loyalty
to Britain during the Mutiny. In 1849 he was promoted to Surgeon and posted
to the 40th Native Infantry, one of the few Bengal regiments willing to serve
overseas. In 1852, therefore, they formed part of the force sent to Burma and
Brydon was present at the capture of Rangoon, Prome and other places.

In 1853 he went home on three years' furlough which coincided with the
period of the Crimean War. Not long after he had returned to India, the Mutiny
of the Bengal Army occurred and Brydon found himself in the thick of it, being
stationed in Lucknow. While sitting at dinner one evening during the siege of
the Residency, he was severely wounded in the lower part of the spine by a
rifle bullet which passed through his loins from left to right and from which he
was to suffer for the rest of his life. Yet he recovered sufficiently to hold various
hospital charges in Sir Colin Campbell's army and ended by being made
"Surgeon Superintending" at Dinapore. He had been awarded medals for Jellalabad, Cabool, Burmah (Clasp for Pegu) and Lucknow, and in 1858 was made a Companion of the Bath. In the following year "the last man" returned home; it was, unknown to himself, about the same time that young Elizabeth Thompson received the germ of her idea for *The Remnants of an Army*.

Although a Lowland Scot born in London, Brydon's heart must have been in the Highlands, for he settled down at Westfield, near Cromarty. Here he freely gave his advice to all who sought it and continued his military connection by becoming honorary surgeon to the Highland Rifle Militia. For fourteen years he enjoyed his retirement until, in March 1873, he succumbed to the effects of the spine injury he had received at Lucknow. He was buried in the kirkyard at Rosemarkie, overlooking the Moray Firth, where his grave can still be seen.

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*Brit. med. J.* (1873), 1, 480.


