

Cast a Cold Eye, On Life, On Death : Reading Colonial History of Kolkata Through the Story on an Obelisk

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Abstract :

This paper addresses the heroic efforts and the tragic death of Sir William Hay MacNaghten (1793-1841) who was in Madras as a cadet in 1809, became a part of the Bengal Civil Service in 1816. In 1830 he was appointed by Lord William Bentinck, Governor General of India to the post of his political secretary. MacNaghten was also made the Governor General of India's envoy to Afghanistan. Convinced that Russian intentions on Afghanistan and India were dangerously real, he believed it necessary to place Afghanistan under British tutelage. In 1840, following the initial success of the 1st Afghan War (1839-1842), MacNaghten was created a baronet for his services. The full horrors of his story unfolded before the writer when she visited Lower Circular Road Cemetery where MacNaghten is interred in a grave on which stands a fabulous mausoleum and a sarcophagus presumably constructed at the behest of his widow. He was assassinated on 23 December 1841. MacNaghten was shot by Akbar Khan (son of the Emir Dost Mohammed who had been overthrown by the British) with a pistol with which he had presented him only the day before, and then hacked to pieces by fanatical Ghazis. The British garrison in Kabul was forced to surrender soon after.

Keywords : Grave, Sarcophagus, Mausoleum, Assassination, Aghan War, Dost Mohammad.

Those who do not learn from history are condemned to repeat it. In one of the busiest part of the township of Kolkata, right before the approach road to The Institute of Neurosciences, spread over an area roughly of five square kilometers stands an entrance to a cemetery that urges passers-by to pause; "darao pathikbar", says the bard who was interred three days after his wife Henrietta by her side, having mated like swans, for life. This is the grave of Michael Madhusudan Dutta, the Bengali poet of "Meghnadbadh Kavya" well known for his reckless life, who committed the dual sin of crossing kalapani and converting to Christianity, all in one short single span, a shooting star to penurious fame.

A few meters into the approach road to the part of the cemetery which is called "Bethune Beethi", having the privilege of housing the grave of John Elliot Drinkwater Bethune who deserves a lengthy treatise the writer of this post wishes to dedicate to him later, a commanding mausoleum encasing an open marble sarcophagus screams a story of epic proportions. This mausoleum is a museum of material memory alongside one of the most compelling British images of the First Anglo-Afghan War (1839-1842), the story of the great Afghan uprising of 1842, as depicted in Lady Elizabeth Butler's painting, *Remnants of an Army (1874)*. But I find it unnecessary to repeat tales of this Afghan war, intriguing though it may be, replete with all the essential elements of a seventeenth-century horror-cum-revenge play. Instead this post will focus on one man, to whom this mausoleum was erected, William Macnaghten, whose widow is said to have had to collect his dismembered body from the streets of Kabul and bring them back to Calcutta to be interred. After all, as Erich Maria Remarque's degenerate protagonist Ludwig, a twenty year old tombstone-carver interacting with a wide cross-section of German population (including prostitutes, speculators, schizophrenic mistresses, other veterans), muses while witnessing general emotional sentiments regarding death during WWII, "It's strange, I think, all of us have seen so many dead in the war and we know that over two million of us fell uselessly—why, then, are we so excited about a single man, when we have practically forgotten the two million already? But probably the reason is that one dead man is death – and two million are only a statistic."

Elizabeth Butler's painting shows William Brydon, an assistant surgeon in the East India Company, half dead through injury and fatigue straggling a near dead pony limping across an otherwise deserted plain. Brydon was one of the sole survivors of a force of 4,500 strong that was chased out from Kabul after the city's three-year occupation by the British. Brydon arrived at the gate of Jalalabad and lived to tell the tale. This may be read as some sort of a logical

culmination of events leading from the assassination of Sir William Hay Macnaghten who forcibly placed Shah Shuja by orchestrating the surrender to the British of Dost Mohammad, born of a Persian mother, on the throne of Kabul but paid for it with his life.

The story begins with Macnaghten, who having received a knighthood, was appointed envoy to the proposed new royal court at Kabul. It is reported that Macnaghten, long accustomed to irresponsible office, inexperienced in men, and ignorant of the country and people of Afghanistan, was, though an erudite Arabic scholar, neither practiced in the field of Asiatic intrigue nor a man of action. His ambition was, however, great, and the expedition, holding out the promise of distinction and honours, had met with his strenuous advocacy. His incompetence had been proven at an earlier point when he had failed to heed the apprehensive reports of an oncoming assassination attempt on the life of Alexander Burnes. Burnes and his brother were hacked to death on November 1, 1841.

The lonely, desolate life of the East India Company Officer in tropical climate is a topic of hot discussion in colonial studies. Females being few and far between, in the absence of white women the British officers often consorted with local women thus giving rise to entire clans of mixed-race population wherever they went. Authorities were aware of the issue and followed a policy of encouragement to the wives to join their husbands in situations of peace or occupancy, whichever was prevalent at that moment. They would lead a semblance of a normal, householder life, even if occupying a city like Kabul and life under the occupation was regularized and enjoyable, at least for some. Among them was Lady Macnaghten, carrying along with her retinue crystal chandeliers, vintage wines, expensive gowns and scores of servants. Forbes tells us: "Lady Macnaghten, in the spacious mission residence which stood apart in its own grounds, presided over the society of the cantonments, which had all the cheery surroundings of the half settled, half-nomadic life of our military people in the East. There [was] the 'coffee house' after *burra khana* [big dinner or celebration] occasionally in the larger houses." The Army of the Indus, as it was officially called, consisted of 15,000 British and Indian troops including infantry, cavalry, and artillery. It was followed by an even larger force, a motley army of 30,000 camp-followers—bearers, grooms, launderers, cooks and farriers (to shoe horses)—together with as many camels carrying ammunition and supplies, not to mention officers' personal belongings.

No fewer than sixty camels to transport the camp gear of one brigadier, while the officers of one regiment had commandeered two camels just to carry their cigars. Several herds of cattle were routed about intending to serve as a mobile larder for the task force. Lady Sale had an elaborate kitchen-garden attached to her house where she grew sweet peas, geraniums, potatoes, cauliflowers, radishes, turnips, artichokes, and lettuce. Though she professed the Kabul variety of the latter "hairy and inferior to those cultivated by us," she found the Kabul cabbages "superior, being milder," and remarked the moderately satisfactory growth of the red cabbage grown from English seed even in the tropical climate of Afghanistan. Others were more restless. Afghans were particularly discomfited by the traffic in native women that moved in and out of the cantonments. As one historian has noted, "the proverb '*necessity is the mother of invention and the father of the Eurasian*' was manifest". Burnes was assassinated in the context of an uprising directed at least in part against the occupation forces: he was hacked to death by a mob despite trying to reason with them, it is said, in his best Persian.

The revolt spread: the Afghans were bombarding the cantonment, and it was clear that the security of Kabul was in peril. Sir William Macnaghten, advisor to Auckland, was forced to negotiate with the new Afghan leader, Akbar Khan, son of Dost Mohammed. The terms were humiliating—total withdrawal, safe passage, and the return of Dost Mohammed as emir—but Macnaghten was confident they would be met. Instead, Akbar Khan ambushed him and his three assistants. Macnaghten's body was dragged through the streets of Kabul and his head paraded as Akbar's prize: symbols of British defeat and humiliation and a harbinger of worse to come. Having been promised safe passage out of the city by the tribal leaders of an anti-occupation insurrection—rebel leaders to whom guns and treasure had been handed over—British military personnel and some 12,000 camp followers were ambushed and massacred on their way to Jalalabad on January the 13th, 1842.

In Erich Maria Remarque's *The Black Obelisk*, a so-long-timid widow, Frau Niebuhr, has transformed into a caustic, talkative, quarrelsome little pest and demands that her dead husband be commemorated with a mausoleum. I quote:

"A lion," Frau Niebuhr says, "He was a lion! But a leaping lion, not a dying one. It must be a leaping lion."

"How would a leaping horse do?" I ask. "A few years ago, our sculptor won the Berlin Teplitz challenge trophy with

that subject.”

“A true mausoleum should be a kind of a chapel,” I explain. Stained glass like a church, a marble sarcophagus with bronze laurel wreaths...around the outside flowers, cypresses, gravel paths, perhaps a bird bath for our feathered songsters...I wonder whether to tell this heartless devil something about the tomb in the form of a sarcophagus with the lid pushed a little to one side and a skeleton hand reaching out—but I decide against it. Our positions are unequal; she is the buyer and I am the seller.” (Ludwig the obelisk-seller in *The Black Obelisk*.)

William Haley Macnaghten’s mausoleum stands the most majestic amidst a stanchion of boxnut tress in the graveyard at lower circular cemetery. Apart from the customary plaque mentioning the cruel circumstances of his tragic death there is carved, alongside on another stone, a verse from Psalm 23:5

Thou Preparest A table before Me In the Presence Of Mine Enemies Thou Anointest My head with Oil My Cup Runneth Over” (sic)

Far from establishing a friendly rule in Afghanistan to buttress India against Russian encroachments, Britain had suffered instead one of the worst disasters ever to overtake one of its armies. Everyone, including the Duke of Wellington, blamed General Elphinstone for failing to crush the insurrection at the outset and Lord Auckland for embarking on such folly in the first place. No concrete steps were, however immediately taken to avenge these deaths as Macnaghten was generally believed to have gone to his death by his own engineering. His widow remarried into peerage, climbing “higher and higher” by her own admissions, after having scooped the remains of the dead from Kabul and interring them in the grave at Lower Circular Road cemetery and constructing over it a grand mausoleum.

Meanwhile, in *The Black Obelisk*, Ludwig the tomb-crafter is troubled by many people including a pair of lovers whose tryst with destiny takes place in darkness in a corner of his backyard garden and an erstwhile commander Sergeant Major Knopf, who in a state of inebriation in the dead99 of the night, has been serially relieving himself against a black obelisk amongst pre-ordered obelisks that are stored for delivery. Ludwig, in one part of the text, waits to pounce upon Knopf and mete out to him the treatment of his life, having kept handy a rainwater pipe through which he is going to deliver sermonically to the Sergeant major in the form of the voice of the Almighty. After a longish wait, Knopf has arrived to perform the misdeed.

“Knopf!

It (the rain pipe) makes a hollow sound at the other end, behind the Sergeant major’s back, as though it came from the grave. Knopf looks around; he can’t see where the voice is coming from.

‘Knopf!’ I repeat. ‘You pig! Aren’t you ashamed of yourself? Did I create you to get drunk and piss on tombstones, you sow?’

Knopf whirls around again. ‘What?’ He stammers, ‘Who’s that?’

‘Stand at attention, you filthy insubordinate scoundrel of a sergeant major!’ I say, and more sharply in a hissing tone, ‘Heels together you worthless tomb wetter!’

Knopf listens, his head extended sidewise, like a moonstruck hound. ‘The Kaiser?’ he whispers.

‘Button up your pants and vanish!’ I whisper hollowly, ‘And now off with you, you slovenly civilian! Forward march!’

In consternation Knopf stumbles toward the door of his house. Immediately thereafter the pair of lovers start up out of the garden like two startled does and rush into the street. That of course was no part of my plan.” (*The Black Obelisk*)

It was no part of my plan to make any connections between wars, Sergeant Majors, martyrs, war memorials, tombstones, and sarcophagi. I was just a bricoleur, a passer-by.



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