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LA HERENCIA MILITAR DE JOSÉ MARÍA BLANCO WHITE

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RESUMEN

José María Blanco White procedía de una familia de militares distinguidos e ilustrados. Entre ellos figuran el brigadier Felipe de Neve, fundador de la moderna California; su sobrino el poeta soldado Antonio Crespo y Neve, asistente de Bernardo de Gálvez; Fernando Blanco White, el hermano menor de José María, capturado en la batalla de Somosierra, que escribió un vívido diario de su fuga de un campo de prisioneros de guerra en Francia y de su periplo hacia la libertad, y Ferdinand White, hijo de José María, un oficial británico idealista que rindió servicios en Tasmania y la India, y cuyas cartas a su padre son una destacada fuente para la historia de la desastrosa Primera Guerra Anglo-afgana.

PALABRAS CLAVE

José María Blanco White, Ferdinand White, Tasmania, India británica, Primera Guerra Anglo-afgana.

THE MILITARY LEGACY OF JOSÉ MARÍA BLANCO WHITE

ABSTRACT

José María Blanco White came from a family of distinguished and enlightened military officers. They included Brigadier Felipe de Neve, the founder of modern California; his nephew the soldier poet Antonio Crespo y Neve, an aide to Bernardo de Gálvez; Fernando Blanco White, José María's younger brother, captured at the battle of Somosierra, who kept a vivid record of his escape from prisoner-of-war camp in France and journey to freedom, and Ferdinand White, and José María's son, an idealistic British officer who saw service in Tasmania and India and whose letters to his father are a major source for the history of the disastrous First Afghan War.

KEY WORDS

José María Blanco White, Ferdinand White, Tasmania, British India, First Afghan War.

That José María Blanco White, the least military of men, should have been the father and grandfather of army officers may seem surprising, but his family already had a notable record of military service. His maternal great-uncle, Brigadier Felipe de la Neve, made his mark as a humane and enlightened Governor of California from 1775 to 1782. During his term of office, he founded the first two civilian towns in the province (San José and Los Ángeles), reformed its finances and strengthened its defences. Shortly before his death in 1783 he was appointed Commander in Chief of the Provincias Internas —a vast territory which stretched from northern Texas to southern Mexico— and had he not died prematurely it is likely that he would have ended his career as Viceroy. His *Reglamento para el gobierno de la provincia de las Californias* remained effective until the very end of the colonial era. He is also noteworthy for bringing the semi-autonomous Franciscan missions under secular control, overcoming the opposition of Fray Junípero Serra, the Franciscan Provincial[1].

Felipe's example was followed by his nephew, Antonio Crespo y Neve (José María's uncle), a soldier-poet, Lieutenant in the Compañía de Dragones de Luisiana. On his way to America in 1782 he was captured by pirates and taken to Tórtola and then to Guarico, eventually escaping to New Orleans by way of La Habana. He died at New Orleans in September 1783 at the early age of 34, perhaps as the result of his ordeals. He left a manuscript volume of poems, dedicated to his commander, Bernardo Gálvez, which reflect his independence of character. In the words of Mario Méndez Bejarano: "Piensa más que siente, y considera la poesía un vehículo de la imaginación. Únicamente se aprecia su alcurnia sevillana en la impecable corrección del lenguaje y en la severa dignidad del estilo". His sonnet "Conformidad" might have been written by his nephew José María:

> *La común opinión siempre flaquea*
> *creyendo que es feliz quien mucho tiene,*
> *sin ver que es mucho más lo que desea.*
> *Jamás sosiego la avaricia tiene.*
> *¡Feliz aquel, por mísero que sea,*
> *Que con su pobre suerte se conviene!* [2]

In the next generation José María's younger brother Fernando served in the War of Independence as a lieutenant in the 3rd Seville volunteer battalion of grenadiers. Captured in Madrid in December 1808, following the defeat at Somosierra, he spent five years of capti-

1 BEILHARZ, Edwin. *Felipe de la Neve: First Governor of California.* San Francisco: California Historical Society, 1971.

2 MÉNDEZ BEJARANO, Mario, *Poetas españoles que vivieron en América,* Madrid: Renacimiento, 1921, pp. 286-97.

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vity in France before escaping with ten comrades in January 1814. After many adventures he made his way to England, where he joined his brother in London. There he was befriended by the wife of Dr James Moore, the brother of General Sir John Moore, and was encouraged by Louisa, one of her three daughters, to write an account of his escape from prison camp and journey across France, Switzerland, Germany and Holland to eventual reunion with his brother in London. Just over two hundred years later it has at last been published in an edition by the late Christopher Schmidt-Nowara[3]. While the War of Spanish Independence, produced a mass of memoirs by British soldiers of all ranks, few Spanish veterans put pen to paper, and in that respect Fernando Blanco's record is almost unique. He spent four years as a prisoner, initially on parole at Autun and Dijon, and finally in confinement at Chalons sur Saône. His letters to his parents (now among the Blanco White papers at Princeton University) convey something of the harsh prison regime, while the diary is a vivid record of his escape and journey to freedom. He comes across as a thoughtful and observant young man, ready to shoulder responsibility for his companions. These included the three sons of the Marqués de Castilla del Campo, but there was nothing of the deference to social rank which existed in the British army. Fernando described their servant as a man "whose mind and heart might be the pride of many a learned man". Exposure to a world beyond the confines of Seville led him to question some of his inherited prejudices. At Ettenheim, for instance his initial shock at learning that his welcoming hosts were Jews gave way to self-examination: "At last I awoke from my stupidity". At that time Napoleon's enemies were moving in on Paris from all directions. Fernando and his companions were fêted wherever they went as representatives of an heroic nation which had resisted his tyranny. It is ironic that when he eventually returned to Seville he was regarded with suspicion by the newly re-installed Bourbon regime as being tainted with liberalism. He had to undergo a process of purification which, however, failed to discover the fact that, like many of his fellow-prisoners in France, he had been initiated as a freemason.

A very different military career was that of his nephew Ferdinand White, a British officer in the 40th Regiment of Foot, who served in one of the most arduous and momentous campaigns ever undertaken by the British army in India and Afghanistan. The effects of the First Afghan War, in which he took part, can still be felt in the twenty-first century.

When Blanco White left Madrid for Seville in June 1808 he was unaware that his mistress, Magdalena Ezquaya (or Esquaya, Escuaya), was with child. On 7 January 1809 she gave birth to a boy, christened Fernando, but his father did not hear the news until September 1812,

3 SCHMIDT-NOWARA, Christopher (ed.). *A Spanish Prisoner in the Ruins of Napoleon's Empire: The Diary of Fernando Blanco White's Flight to Freedom.* Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2018. Spanish translation edited by Carmen Castro, Sevilla, 2014.

by which time he had been in London for over two years[4]. Magdalena was then mortally ill, in no position to look after the boy, and in 1813 arrangements were made to bring him to London. There, now named Ferdinand White, he was at first committed to the care of a foster-mother. Blanco's friends, the Christies and the Moores took the boy to their hearts, and Mrs Christie —the wife of the famous auctioneer— virtually adopted him as one of her own family. In the interests of social respectability Blanco passed the boy off for some years as his *protégé*. When he proposed to make public their true relationship, Mrs Christie counselled delay on the grounds that "this sudden change would subject the dear boy to much unpleasant comment. In regard to our family [he] will always be regarded as one of ourselves". Years later Ferdinand would write that the Christies had been to him "quite father, mother, sisters, brothers and everything. I could not have loved my mother more than I do Mrs Christie".

When he reached the age of ten his father sent him to be educated not, as he wrote, at "one of that multitude of establishments for *young gentlemen* with which the country abounds", but in the care of a Pestalozzian master, Monsieur Droz, at Neuchâtel. Earlier, in Madrid, Blanco had been an enthusiastic advocate of the Pestalozzian philosophy of education, based on the principle of *mens sana in corpore sano*, and M. Droz put this into practice. The enlightened curriculum encouraged creativity and balanced the study of academic subjects (especially mathematics) with moral and physical education (the boys were taken on expeditions in the Swiss mountains). In his memoirs Blanco later wrote that sending Ferdinand to Neuchâtel was the best decision he made in his life: "There the boy passed three years of perfect happiness". Blanco had reason to be proud of his son's "nobleness of character and heart".

To his father's dismay Ferdinand showed little interest in a literary career and positively welcomed the opportunity of serving an apprenticeship in business. A clerkship was obtained for him in the firm of Goldschmidt —a merchant bank in the City of London which at that time was heavily involved in speculative ventures in South America. For the first time Ferdinand applied himself to the study of Spanish, the language of his parents. But in 1825 the South American bubble burst, leading to a banking crisis in the City. By that time he was becoming restless and eager for adventure. He wanted to be a soldier.

In early 19th century Britain, army commissions were in practice restricted to those whom Wellington called "men of fortune and education" —youths of the upper class, with private means adequate to the maintenance of their lifestyle and rank in society. Money was requi-

4 See MURPHY, Martin. *El ensueño de la razón: la vida de Blanco White*, Sevilla: Universidad, 2012.

red to buy oneself up the ladder of promotion. Wellington was particularly known for giving preferential treatment to aristocratic young officers. The idea (if it can be called an idea) behind this system (if it can be called a system) was that the army should be commanded by officers who were not "mercenaries", but gentlemen of private means who shared the values of the governing élite. Young officers were expected to learn the art of soldiering by experience in the field, in accordance with that characteristic British preference for practice rather than theory, and for the gentleman amateur over against the paid professional.

Ferdinand White was not a typical officer cadet. Besides being illegitimate (though this was not generally known), he was the son of a foreigner of very limited means, and had not been educated at an English "public" (in fact, private) school. He would never have been accepted had it not been for the financial support of an influential patron (probably the poet Samuel Rogers, a member of the Holland House circle to which Blanco belonged). At the end of 1826 he enrolled as an ensign of the 40th Regiment of Foot. The 40th had won a reputation for valour at Vimeira, Talavera, Albuera, Badajoz, Vitoria, Villalba and Waterloo. Blanco may have witnessed its arrival in Seville in February 1809, after it had marched from Portugal through the Sierra Morena. It was the only British regiment ever to have entered Seville, where it spent some months before proceeding to Cádiz[5]. Many of Ferdinand's senior officers would have fought in the Peninsula or at Waterloo, and doubtless regaled the younger men with stories of their exploits. An officer recruit was expected to pay for his own uniform, sword and pistols. In Ferdinand's case the expense was partly borne by his uncle Fernando in Seville, whom he thanked in an affectionate letter, voicing his youthful hopes of winning "fame and glory". Early in 1827 he set out to join his regiment in Van Diemen's Land.

TASMANIA, JULY 1827 — JULY 1829

Van Diemen's Land (now Tasmania) must have been a rude shock for an idealistic young man eager for fame and glory. The colony, established only twenty-three years earlier, housed some 7000 convicts, transported from Britain to the other end of the world as a punishment and a deterrent to others. On arrival, convicts were hired out to free settlers for employment as labourers. Good conduct allowed them to work their way to freedom, and many such ex-convicts were assimilated into civil society, but criminal behaviour despatched them to a grim penitentiary at MacQuarrie Harbour, on the east of the island —a hell from which there was no return.

5 SMYTHIES, Raymond. *Historical Records of the 40th (2nd Somersetshire) Regiment of Foot,* Devonport: A. H. Swiss, 1894.

The Governor, Sir George Arthur, was a stern but humane reformer who ran his colony on Benthamite lines[6]. He had to contend with serious problems. Parts of the interior were terrorised by violent "bush-rangers" (outlaws, escaped convicts and cattle thieves). To maintain order and to protect both settlers and aborigines the Governor sent troops into the interior. By 1827, however, attacks by aborigines on settlers posed a greater problem, and the army assumed a greater role. Martial law was declared in November 1828. Racial tensions would become so intense that in 1830, after Ferdinand White's departure, the Governor adopted a policy of *apartheid* whereby the natives were driven back into restricted areas, physically separate from the settlers' lands. It was a decision he would later regret.

The function of the colony's military garrison was to support the Field Police in checking the insurgency of the aborigines and the outrages committed by runaway convicts. For that purpose military, units were distributed throughout the island —which involved arduous and dangerous expeditions on foot into trackless and still unmapped territory. This was an unfamiliar and unwelcome guerrilla role for soldiers who had been trained for disciplined formal manoeuvres on European battlefields. Their red uniforms made them an easy target for bushmen. This was not the soldiering that Ferdinand White had expected. Unfortunately his letters of this period have not survived, but in 1829 his father learned of his appointment as aide-de-camp to the Governor. He was evidently beginning to make an impression —and not just on his superior officers: he was imprudent enough to propose to a girl without her father's consent. No father was going to entrust his daughter to a penniless young ensign of dubious origins. He would have to wait another sixteen years before he found a wife.

BOMBAY, 1829 — 1838

In September 1829 the 40th Regiment arrived in Bombay for what proved to be a long tour of duty. The following eight years were to put Ferdinand's character and stamina to the test. The peace which then prevailed in India gave the army little to do. There was not much to occupy the men but constant drill, and this inactivity had an adverse effect on morale. Fame and Glory were in short supply. His letters to his father over the next ten years not only chart his personal development but are also of wider interest as a historical record. In April 1831 he wrote candidly of his state of depression, when he was based at Poona, a hill station noted for its fashionable social life. An ensign's pay was not sufficient to allow him to keep up with the lifestyle of his fellow-officers, and he got into debt. "I do nothing but idle

6 REYNOLDS, Henry. *Fate of a Free People*, Penguin Books (Australia), 2004. See also BAKEWELL, Sarah. *The English Dane*, London: Vintage Books, 2006, pp. 203-25.

away my time in the billiard-room", he complained. "I cannot during this hot weather resist the temptation to drink, and this is destructive to me". For the first —and perhaps only— time he voiced his regret at his choice of career. Why had his father not used his contacts at Holland House to give him a better start in the world? Why had he been so reluctant to present him to Lady Holland? Referring to his father's reputation as a religious controversialist, he went on: "I'm no author, it is true, nor do I care about Catholics or Protestants, yet I think her Ladyship might have taken a fancy to me". She must have thought he was "a horrid, lubberly boy whom you were ashamed of"[7].

Though he could express such thoughts in private, Ferdinand was proving his worth as an officer, and was promoted in 1831 to the rank of Lieutenant. He was popular also, and defended the honour of one of his fellow-officers in a duel (shots were fired but no harm was done). The fact that he sustained his morale during this period, and in even more difficult times to come, was due in no small part to the letters he received throughout these years from Louisa Moore, General Sir John Moore's niece — "the dearest friend I have in the world". On the eve of his departure for Tasmania he had written that "of all the sweet and amiable young women Louisa Moore is the sweetest, the most interesting, most feeling, most clever and most unaffected. She is quite a treasure, and I cannot help regretting *tant soi peut* to have made the acquaintance of so sweet a creature only to be obliged to leave it off". His loyalty to his father is to be seen in his reaction to news of Blanco's move to Liverpool and abandonment of the Church of England: "I have ever reverenced you, my dear father, and I venerate you still more for having pursued the path you have done. I have ever held you up to myself as an example to follow your fearless integrity and your honourable feelings of independence". That he was indeed his father's son is evident from his own frank declaration of independence: "I am not an East Indian — I hate the country — I hate the government — I hate their customs"[8].

In August 1835 he was able to give his father the good news of his appointment as regimental Adjutant, on the recommendation of the Commander-in-Chief at Bombay. He still pined, however, for distinction in a greater theatre of war: "If I am to fall", he wrote dramatically, "let me breathe my last on the plains of Salamanca, or the fields of Waterloo, and if I am to gain renown, let it be conquering a Morow or a Suvorow!" The prospect of remaining in India drove him to declare: "If I live, I shall be an old man at 40".

In writing to congratulate his son on his promotion, Blanco took the opportunity to give him some advice, based on his own experience:

7 HMCO BW I., ff. 48-49 (28 April 1831).

8 *Ibid.*, ff. 50-51 (5 June 1835).

> *Every one of your letters confirms me in the gratifying assurance that your character is already stamped as honourable and virtuous. Beware of the passions of youth, which as far as I can see are your only danger at present. That you will fail in keeping strictly to your resolutions, I fear, must be expected. But do not give up those resolutions on that account: do not surrender to what is wrong. The government of the animal passions during a certain period of life is one of the most difficult tasks in highly civilised life. I know that loose indulgence is criminal, but I also know that improvident marriages are sinful. It is enthusiasm to suppose that bringing beings into the world for whose happiness we cannot well provide, and whom, from that circumstance, we expose to temptations and misery, is sinless. I cannot give you more detailed advice. The only safe rule is this: take the voice of conscience, undisturbed by selfishness, as the voice of God within you … Your practice of daily prayer, in spite of errors, is excellent: it is an acknowledgment of the fault, and a clinging to the source of virtue … Respect the moral dignity of all intellectual creatures. Look on the natives of the land where you are with brotherly compassion: remember they are under your protection for the very reason that you belong to a superior and more privileged race.*

Blanco also approved of his son's initiation as a Freemason: "Your uncle [Fernando], who rose to high degree in France, and was in danger on that account when he returned to Spain, spoke very highly of the institution"[9].

By 1838 eleven years of service in the Far East had begun to take its toll of Ferdinand's health, and he was granted two years' leave of absence, while retaining his Adjutancy. He had left England as a boy; he returned as a man.

HOME LEAVE, 1838-39

Ferdinand's first concern was to be reunited with his father in Liverpool, but Blanco —his health shattered— was now virtually a recluse, and at first could not bring himself to receive his son lest, in his words, "the excitement would prove fatal". In the meantime, there were many visits to be paid: to the Moores (now living in Scotland), to the Christies, and to army friends in Ireland. In a letter to his uncle Fernando in Seville, Louisa Moore wrote:

> *It is nearly twelve years since he parted from us; he was then a handsome lad, very giddy, very affectionate, thoughtless and enthusiastic, generally in extremes, exqui-*

9 LUL, RP XXI.19.29 (2 April 1836).

> *sitely happy if he could dance 6 quadrilles in a night with a pretty girl, and plunged to despair if he missed such a blessing. Well, and the Boy was the type of the Man. He has returned a dark, sunburnt man. If I was not afraid he might take the privilege of reading this, I would say handsome, too. He reminds me constantly of you, and of his father. He has his dear father's melancholy expressions and retains the same warmth of heart*[10].

The eventual reunion of father and son was profoundly emotional. Soon they established a stronger relationship. Blanco —ever the teacher— tutored Ferdinand in the flute and the two read Italian together. They also discussed the future. Ferdinand would have to wait seven more years if he was to be promoted to a Captaincy by regular rotation, and in that time he would be overtaken in seniority by younger men. Marriage on a Lieutenant's pay was out of the question. To purchase a Captaincy would cost the enormous sum of £1100. His father was still under the impression that he was entitled to an allowance from a family property in Seville, but this was a delusion. All the remittances he had received since leaving Spain had been paid out of the pocket of his generous and equally poverty-stricken brother Fernando. The painful truth of the situation emerged when Ferdinand wrote to his uncle to ask if there was any likelihood of getting a loan from his cousin Luke Beck, the current, and highly successful, head of the family business in Seville. Fernando did not hold out much hope, and could not help adding that although he had been a soldier himself, the military profession in England would be "odious" to him, since money seemed to carry more weight there than merit: "Spain, though poor, has never sold military rank"[11].

Before leaving London Ferdinand was presented to the Queen at court by Lord Holland, and had the honour of "kissing her youthful Majesty's hand" at a *levée* in St James's Palace. He had hoped to pay a visit to Switzerland ("a country very dear to me"), but the opportunity of a free passage back to India was too good to refuse. Normally officers were expected to pay the expenses of the journey (£120), but it is a measure of the regard in which he was held that he was put in charge of a batch of young ensigns, which earned him a free passage. This particular voyage took five months in appalling weather (the ship lost two topgallant masts off the Cape of Good Hope), so his qualities of leadership were sorely tested: it was no easy task to sustain the morale of cabined and confined young recruits under such conditions. He took advantage of the enforced leisure to practise on the Monzani flute given him by John Moore as a parting gift, and to read widely in Italian, Latin, French and English:

10 PUL, BW papers Box 9.4 (27 July 1838).

11 *Ibid.*

Vergil, Tasso, Ariosto and Shakespeare, as well as the work of contemporary writers such as Manzoni and Walter Scott.

When he eventually reached Bombay at the end of December 1839 he found a letter waiting for him with good news: Luke Beck was willing to lend the money needed for the purchase of a captaincy. He wrote to his father of his delight and relief, adding optimistically: "The war in Afghanistan is at an end for the present"[12].

THE ARMY OF RETRIBUTION

During Ferdinand's absence events in India had moved rapidly. The British authorities had become obsessed by exaggerated fears of Russian designs on Afghanistan. Control of Afghanistan, they persuaded themselves, was vital for the protection of the north-west frontier of India. Afghanistan had become a "problem" —a problem which was entirely of the government's own making. In December 1838, on the orders of the Governor-General an invading army numbering some 21,000 men began its advance up the Indus valley, heading over the Bolan Pass to Kandahar and Kabul. The invasion met with little resistance, and at Kabul the supposedly pro-Russian Amir Dost Mohammad was replaced on the throne by a puppet ruler, Shah Shija. The political objective of the invasion appeared to have been achieved. But the British authorities had overlooked one vital consideration. In spite of their internal feuds the Afghans were united in passionate rejection of outside interference. The fact that Shah Shija had been foisted on them by foreigners and infidels made his regime odious to the people. It was only a matter of time before the embers of burning resentment burst into flame. The Duke of Wellington had predicted that an advance into Afghanistan would mean "a perennial march into that country", and there were many others who opposed an invasion that was not only dangerous but also entirely unnecessary. As Ferdinand's comrade-in-arms, Bladen Neill, put it in his memoirs: "The dazzling splendour of their [the invading army's] achievements contributed for a time to conceal the iniquity, the impolicy and the errors of our unholy aggression". Sir William Napier would later describe the invasion as "unwarranted, unjust and ill-judged, commenced on false principles and executed with incredible absurdity"[13].

The 40th Regiment did not form part of the invading army. Instead, it was ordered in January 1840 to proceed by sea to Karachi, and from there to proceed up the Indus valley to take control of the Upper Sindh —the gateway to Afghanistan. This operation also was illegal. It

12 HMCO I.62-63 (27 December 1839).

13 BLADEN NEILL, J. M. *Recollection of Four Years' Service in the East with the 40th Regiment*, 1845, p. 65; NAPIER, Sir William. *The History of General Sir Charles Napier's Conquest of Scinde*, Oxford, 2001, p. 54.

violated an earlier pact agreed between the British and the Amirs of Sindh. But the occupation of Sindh was seen as essential to the "security" of the north-west frontier.

The heat and dust of the encampment at Karachi ("Kurachee") was made even more intolerable by prolonged inactivity, but towards the end of June news reached the camp that two parties of Sepoys (Indian troops in British service) had been cut to pieces by insurgent Baluchi tribesmen of the Murri tribe, and plans were laid for a punitive expedition. "I fancy it will be a war of extermination", Ferdinand wrote to his father: "Such has been our career in the East: and so it ever must be: occupation of territory without leave, and massacring to keep it"[14]. Yet he still felt relief at the prospect of action: "We are all delighted. The further we go, the better. I want to see the world". He had to leave nearly all his books behind —all, that is, save Ariosto, Shakespeare and La Bruyère. "I have ceased to look forward to happiness in this world", he declared. "I have strung my mind to do my duty earnestly and cheerfully. If I return, I shall return as an old man before my time, with a feeling of gloomy disappointment hanging over my mind, that I had been denied the ardent wish of my heart — the enjoyment of conjugal affection. *N'importe*"[15].

By September 1840 the regiment, on its journey up the Indus by steamer, had reached Sukkur. His men were "in high health and spirits", but soon there came news of the defeat of a British force in Baluchistan, 200 miles to the north, on its way to relieve a beleaguered garrison at Kahan:

> *such a total defeat as I have never read of in our annals of Indian warfare. The moral effects of this disaster will be tremendous ... Our possession of this vast country is held chiefly by the power of opinion —our arms considered hitherto invincible are much tarnished by the sad defeat. To restore our fame we shall be employed as part of a force to be sent to crush these warlike tribes. But if we killed every one in those hills, not a word, save three lines' mention in a newspaper, will be said of us in England. These tribes [the Baluchis] have given our command here a blow greater than all the Afghans in the late war*[16].

Actually, the Afghans had a shock in store for the British which would completely eclipse the disaster inflicted by the Baluchis. That may explain why the campaign in Upper Sindh has hardly been noticed by historians.

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14 HMCO I.70-71 (6 June 1840).

15 *ibid*., I. 72-73 (22 July 1840).

16 *ibid*., I. 75-76 (8 September 1840. On the siege and relief of Kahan, see NORRIS, James Alfred. *The First Afghan War*, 1838-42, Cambridge: University Press, 1967, pp. 324-333.

In October the 40th Regiment received orders to advance north-west through the Bolan Pass to Quetta. From there, as part of a larger brigade led by General Nott, they would proceed to recapture the fortress of Kalat:

> *Large reinforcements of troops are pouring into Scinde, but our little wing has the honour to lead the way ... I trust fate will be propitious and that I may live to tell you of our successes. If I die, I die the best of deaths, a soldier's. But I start in high spirits, and hope to have some few green laurels to cover my wrinkled brow.*

Ferdinand's eagerness for action was matched by a humane respect for the enemy:

> *These Murrees, like all brave people, are generous. Many of the [British followers who escaped the slaughter on the 31st of August, pressed by hunger, went to the Murree camp where they were fed and allowed to return to Sukhur. They [the Murrees] said they had killed all they could in the fight, but they had no war against unarmed men —a sentiment worthy of Wellington. We are to punish them in the ensuing campaign, but I hope Government will recollect the nobler points of the Murree tribe.*

General Nott himself concurred with this view, describing them as "the most civil and polite of men"[17].

On a more practical note Ferdinand added that the campaign would not be favourable to his saving money, as he would have to pay 75 rupees a month for camels and to increase the wages of his servants. "I have a facility to be poor from you", he told his father: "I cannot for the life of me pay attention to money". Meanwhile, he was packing for the expedition, turning out shirts to make room for his flute and his books. "I dare say Alexander had no more than 12 shirts with him when he was in this part of the world"[18].

At Dadur, at the foot of the Bolan Pass, he learned of his promotion to the rank of Captain, and on November 2nd completed his fifteenth year of service. That same day his company overcame a force of five thousand Baluchis. In spite of having marched a whole day without food or water, "our men went cheerfully against the enemy, as did our brave Sepoys. There is an immensity of pluck in a British breast". For the first time Ferdinand saw men killed: "two poor devils shot by two of my men within 2 or 3 feet of me". This baptism of fire led him to muse:

17 *Memoirs ... of Sir William Nott*, ed. J. H. Stocqueler (1854), I, pp. 467-69.

18 HMCO I.76-77 (Sukhur, 6 October 1840).

> *How little do people at home know what a large portion of their fellow-creatures are hourly engaged in scenes of hardship and danger. To most gentlemen who live at home in ease, the East passes before them as a country of sybarite indulgence … If I live to come home I shall be a broken down man, but I shall have the honest satisfaction to think that I have devoted some of my best energies, physical and mental, in the service of my country. To have been at Talavera would have been more gratifying, but though our exertions in this desolated land will never be mentioned, I am persuaded no better courage and endurance was shown at that celebrated battle than was evinced by our troops*[19].

The regiment wintered at Dadur until February, when the Bolan Pass would become negotiable. During that time Ferdinand was appointed to be a staff officer, but the old melancholy of the Blanco Whites returned. "The best part of my life is gone. I do not look forward again to meet much success where youth and beauty are dominant, so —like the French *belles* who become *dévotes* when their beauty fades— I would become the *savant*". He was unable to disguise from himself the injustice of the cause for which he was fighting: "It is a most disgusting war. It is true they are plunderers, but they have been so from time immemorial —we come here and, to cure them of this habit, set to and plunder"[20].

February 7th, his birthday, found him still at Dadur, where he wrote to thank his father for having introduced him to the "rich pleasures" to be found in Italian poetry: "I can't tell you my passion for Ariosto". Yet there were deprivations which poetry could not allay: "We have not seen a petticoat of any kind for the last three months. It is really a kind of purgatory, this life we are leading. Come, get on, Ferdinand White, don't be standing looking back at what you can't find!"

In February his battalion moved to Bhag, prior to its advance over the Bolan Pass to Quetta and ultimately to Kandahar, the base for an expedition to recapture the fortress at Kalat. From Bhag, on the 8th, he wrote to tell his father of the confidence placed in him by his commanding officer who had commended the "tact without harshness" which he displayed in his dealings with the men under his command.

> *I tell you these things, dear father, for it must assuage those dreadful physical sufferings of yours for a time to hear your son well spoken of in his profession. I have given my attention greatly to the study of Men, and I do know that I am loved and respected*

19 *Ibid.*, I.78-79 (Dadhur, 6 November 1840).

20 *Ibid.*, I.80-81 (Dadhur, 8 December 1840).

> *... There is an ennobling feeling too to know that where I lead, a hundred brave fellows will follow. May God's Providence be with me, and grant that it may ever be in the path of glory attended with humanity*[21].

Blanco never read this letter, for he died at Liverpool on the 20th of March. Ferdinand's hour, unknown to his father, was yet to come. His subsequent adventures have to be gathered from other sources —particularly from the published recollections of his comrades. Isaac Allen, the regimental chaplain, was impressed by the excellent morale of the 40th, and the friendly relationship between men and officers. He praised the regiment's "social virtues", and the fact that discipline was maintained without recourse to corporal punishment[22].

On its march north to Quetta through the Bolan Pass the regiment suffered dreadful losses due to fever and dysentery. From Quetta they marched to Kandahar which —in the words of the regimental historian— they found "infested with religious fanatics whose one idea was to kill the enemies of their faith, whether in so doing they lost their own lives or not"[23]. The British had provoked a *jihad*.

The 40th was still at Kandahar early in 1842 when news arrived of the rising at Kabul and its dreadful sequel. A street riot at Kabul on 2 November 1841 had developed into a full-scale insurgency. Sir William McNaghten, the resident British envoy, was murdered, and his headless corpse dismembered and dragged through the city to be displayed in the market on a butcher's hook. The British army of occupation was now caught in a trap of its own making, outmanoeuvred and isolated. By a treaty of evacuation, the main force was allowed to leave, leaving the women and children behind as hostages. Of the sixteen thousand men who marched out of Kabul on January 6th, only one survived to tell the tale of their destruction in the Khyber Pass. Those who were not killed by guerrilla snipers died of frostbite or starvation. It was a catastrophe comparable with Napoleon's retreat from Moscow, and an unparalleled blow to British imperial pride and prestige. Ferdinand White's friend Bladen Neill later wrote that the "dazzling splendour" of the invading army had failed to conceal "the iniquity, the impolicy and the errors of our unholy aggression"[24].

The 40th Regiment now joined an avenging army assembled at Kandahar to march on Kabul from the west, while another force advanced from Jalalabad on the east. The Kandahar

21 *Ibid.*, I.84-85 (Bagh, 8 February 1841).

22 BLADEN NEILL, J. M. *op. cit.*; ALLEN, Isaac N. Diary of a March through Scinde and Afghanistan under the command of General Sir William Nott, 1843.

23 SMYTHIES. *op. cit.*, p. 292.

24 BLADEN NEILL. *op. cit.*, p. 65.

Division, under General Nott, faced a hazardous and arduous journey through hostile territory, with no prospect of easy success. Ferdinand's hopes of a campaign conducted with humanity were not realised. On 27 August, at Oba, on the road to Ghazni, Nott's cavalry was the object of a surprise attack from the village. Fifty men were killed, and their bodies were horribly mutilated —which explains the subsequent breakdown in military discipline. A company was ordered into the village to conduct a house-to-house search. They met with no resistance until random shots from the fort provoked a sudden frenzy of panic. The officers lost control, the men ran amok, and a full-scale massacre ensued: all Afghan males over puberty were bayoneted, their women raped, and their goods plundered. Ferdinand's friend Isaac Allen later wrote: "Every door was forced, every man that could be found was slaughtered. The place was given up to carnage. The women and children were spared, but the men were indiscriminately butchered. Not less than a hundred of the villagers were massacred for the offences of a few"[25]. A soldier who entered the village the following day described seeing "about a hundred dead bodies lying about, and six or eight children were found roasted to a cinder. One woman was the only live thing in the fort. She was sitting, the picture of despair, with her father, brother, children and husband lying dead around her. She had dragged all their bodies to one spot, and seated herself in the midst"[26]. It was a scene that was likely to haunt Ferdinand White for the rest of his life.

An even more difficult obstacle now faced the advancing army at Ghazni, a massive fortress defended by heavy British guns captured by the Afghans. Though under fire from their own 68-pounder, "Zubber Jung", the British successfully stormed the massive stronghold, and Captain White, in command of the light companies of seven British and sepoy regiments, was singled out for special mention in General Nott's despatches: he and his men "ascended the heights in gallant style, driving the enemy before them till every point was gained". His bravery in a subsequent engagement at Benibadam earned further commendation.

On September 17th General Nott's Division finally reached Kabul. General Pollock's force, which had entered from the opposite direction some days earlier, had already sacked the city in an act of vengeance. Isaac Allen was later to describe scenes of "disgraceful" pillage, destruction and plunder. In a spirit of retribution, Pollock ordered the demolition of the Bazaar, "not just one of the supreme wonders of Mughal architecture but one of the greatest buildings in all central Asia"[27] —an act of vandalism which would never be forgotten in Afghan folk memory. In Nott's opinion, the act was "cruel, unnecessary, and unworthy of

25 KAYE, J. W. *The War in Afghanistan*, vol. 3 (1858), pp. 326-30.

26 ALLEN. *op. cit.*, p. 240.

27 DALRYMPLE, William. *Return of a King: The Battle for Afghanistan, 1839-42*. New York: A. Knopf, 2013, p. 409.

the British character", made even worse by an orgy of plunder, murder and rape. Thus were sown the seeds of future vengeance and lasting hatred.

On 12 October 1842 The British lowered the Union Jack over Kabul and —in the words of the Reverend Isaac Allen— "turned our backs on the scene of former disgrace and present outrage". The so-called "Army of Retribution", including Nott's Kandahar Division, began its withdrawal over the Khyber Pass, fighting its way through gorges sill choked with the remains of men, horses and camels —all that survived of the doomed force which had perished there eight months before[28]. But at Ferozpore, their final destination, Lord Ellenborough, the Governor-General, laid on a grandiose and hubristic review of 40,000 troops —as if they were celebrating a glorious victory rather than an ignominious defeat. Among those decorated for distinguished service in the campaign were Captain Ferdinand White and his superior officer Major Hibbert. Both were awarded the C. B. (Companion of the Order of the Bath), and Captain White was promoted to the rank of Major.

It was not long before the 40th Regiment, though exhausted by its long march, was despatched to a new theatre of war. The death of the Sikh ruler Ranjit Singh in 1839 had led to a power struggle in his kingdom of Gwalior (Punjab). The young Maharaja who succeeded to the throne was supported by the British, but opposed by a large section of the population who took heart from the recent humiliation suffered by the British in Afghanistan. In 1843, while negotiations were in progress, a British force including the 40th was sent to menace Gwalior. "We have no right to seize Sind", admitted Sir Charles Napier, the Resident at Hyderabad, "yet we shall do so, and a very advantageous, useful, humane piece of rascality it will be"[29]. But the British found the Sikhs to be a much more formidable foe than they had reckoned. The Sikh army of 60,000 men, more than double the size of the British force, had been well trained by French officers, and was particularly strong in artillery. The capture of the city of Maharajpur by the British was only achieved after bloody hand-to-hand combat. The Sikh resistance won the admiration of their opponents. "Never did men stand to their guns with more determined pluck", wrote a British officer who took part, but "the men of the 39th and 40th carried all before them, bayonetting the gunners at their guns to a man". Major White was one of those who were awarded a bronze star for their conduct in this battle, fought at Maharajpur at the end of December 1843[30].

Ferdinand White's health was permanently undermined by all that he had endured, but when he left India in 1845 he was in one important respect a happier man. On June 3rd 1844

28 *Ibid.*, pp. 320-40.

29 SPEAR, Percival. *The Oxford History of Modern India, 1740-1975*, 2nd ed, Delhi, 1978, p. 165.

30 WAKELYN, Henry George. *The Autobiography of Sir Harry Smith G. C. B.* London: John Murray, 1903.

his marriage to Henrietta Douglas took place in the Anglican cathedral at Calcutta. On his return to England he transferred to a home-based regiment, the 8th Foot, and settled down at last to domestic life. But the need to support a wife and children added to his financial difficulties. It was in these circumstances that in 1852 he applied for a temporary post with Baring's bank.

BARING'S MAN IN ARGENTINA

His introduction to Alexander Baring was obtained through the eminent scientist Sir Charles Lyell, an admirer of Blanco White and a close friend of the Moore family. The bank wanted a representative who would go out to Buenos Aires to conduct negotiations leading to the resumption of interest payments on the £1,000,000 loan which Baring's had made to the Argentine government thirty years earlier[31]. Ferdinand listed "integrity, secrecy, tact and knowledge of Spanish" as the qualities which fitted him for the post. In fact his only knowledge of business —and of Spanish— was based on his brief experience at Goldschmidt's bank thirty years earlier, but his obvious sincerity impressed the directors, who duly appointed him to the post of the bank's personal emissary to the autocratic Governor of Buenos Aires, Juan Manuel de Rosas[32]. In his travelling bag went a fine pair of pistols —a peace offering likely to appeal to a military dictator. On landing at Lisbon in April, however, on the way out to Buenos Aires, he learned that Rosas had been overthrown two months previously. This further complicated an already complex situation. Though the Argentine Republic was nominally a federation, the province of Buenos Aires was in conflict with the other twelve, and Ferdinand's year-long mission coincided with a period of constant power struggle, revolution, conspiracy, civil war and *coups d'état*. Back in London the bank's bondholders, totally ignorant of these political problems, were impatient to recover their money. From Buenos Aires Ferdinand reported that trying to negotiate was "like fighting with windmills". In spite of this, his reports were notable for their shrewd assessment of the situation. In his opinion any attempt to convert the country's thirteen provinces into one republic was "chimerical", and only the provincial government of Buenos Aires had the resources needed for repayment of the loan: "The province of Buenos Aires is the real republic of La Plata … The British loan is essentially the loan of this province". Moreover, any agreement, he believed, had to link repayment *to* Barings with investment *by* Barings in the province's industry and

31 See FERNS, H. S. *Britain and Argentina in the 19th Century*, Oxford, 1960; D. C. M. Platt, "Foreign finance in Argentina for the first half-century of independence", *Journal of Latin American Studies*. 1983, 15, pp. 23-47.

32 A copy of Ferdinand's MS *Journal of my Mission to Argentina in 1852* is preserved at Baring's archive in London (DEP 2.1.77), along with his despatches from Buenos Aires (HC 1.24, 1-13).

infrastructure: the Argentines must be offered the incentive of a *quid pro quo*. This advice was not what the bondholders in London wanted to hear, but it was sound.

Ferdinand's health was again in decline, a result perhaps of what would now be called post-traumatic stress disorder, and in January 1854 he wrote to Baring's to offer his resignation, "constantly depressed by the thought of how little I have done in return for your liberal and kind-hearted treatment of me". He arrived back in England in April 1854 having —in spite of the difficulties— laid the foundation for the eventual settlement negotiated three years later.

THE END OF THE LINE

In 1855 Ferdinand and his family were living at Parkhurst, on the Isle of Wight, when he retired from the army on half-pay with the rank of Lieutenant-Colonel. On 20 September the following year he died at Dieppe —a resort frequented by half-pay officers and gentlefolk in straitened circumstances[33]. Four years later his widow wrote from Jersey to beg Barings for a loan of £100, to furnish a cottage there[34]. The "irreparable" loss of her "beloved" husband had left her with limited means to educate her three children —hence, perhaps, her removal to Jersey, where living was less costly.

George Frederick White (1845-1922), the eldest of these three children, followed in his father's military footsteps. As an officer of the King's Own Yorkshire Light Infantry, he took part in the Second Afghan War of 1879-80 —a conflict described by the regimental historian as "one of those punitive expeditions which are so constantly called for by the predatory habits of the tribesmen living beyond the north-west frontier of India". The British had learned no lessons. Neither retribution nor punishment were likely to "solve" the Afghan "problem" —a problem created by themselves. Though the expedition temporarily quelled Afghan resistance, it was a Pyrrhic victory destroyed by an outbreak of cholera among the troops: their withdrawal through the Khyber Pass in temperatures of 110-118 degrees Fahrenheit was described at the time as a march of death, "great bloated overfed vultures" hovering over every camping place.[35] George took part in a further campaign against a Pathan tribe on the north-west frontier in 1887-88, and in the Burmese expedition of 1886-89, finishing his career as a battalion commander. The book he wrote in his retirement, *A Century of Spain*

33 Fonds patrimonial, Dieppe, acte de décès, 8 September 1856.

34 Baring's archive, H. C. 1.133.

35 WYLLY, H. C. *History of the King's Own Yorkshire Light Infantry*, I. 349-60.

and Portugal (1909), evidence of the interest he took in his father's native country, includes his grandfather's *Letters from Spain* in its bibliography. His son, Brigadier George Frederick Charles White continued family tradition. His service as an officer in the Royal Artillery began and ended in Gibraltar, where he commanded the Garrison Artillery between 1934 and 1938[36]. With his death in 1953 the military line of the Blanco Whites came to an end. He and his wife were childless.

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