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FRONTIER HISTORY¹: THE LIMITATIONS OF THE POLITICAL OFFICER

WE soldiers live out our service lives of thirty years, more or less, in India, and come away with a very partial knowledge of the earlier history of the great Dependency in which the prime of our manhood has been spent. To take my own case, I travelled much between the north-western frontier of India and Europe; I visited also the extreme eastern frontier; I travelled India from Simla to Madras and from Peshawar to Calcutta, but I never even knew that Assam had a history. The names Kochh, Kachāri, Ahom, are to us mere meaningless sounds until we consult Colonel Shakespear's volume, and find that they represent dynasties and peoples powerful in the great valley of the Brahmaputra from the early centuries of the Mohammedan era down to the advent of the British Rāj. To enter into any consideration or discussion of such recondite dynasties must really be left to those who propose to make a more or less detailed study of the country and peoples of this, at present, remote region. I say "at present," because I think it possible that in the future a great trans-continental railway may run up this valley past Sadiya to Rima, and so across China to the Pacific coast. When that time comes the Mishmi, Abor, and Naga, hitherto savage and treacherous, will settle down into peace-loving people of business, and will prey, not upon the lives of their visitors, but upon their purses. The idols of Maibong, the carved stones of Dimapur, the Stonehenge of Togwema, and the monoliths of Marāni will assuredly attract those to whom archæology is a study and an attraction. From what we know of the experiences of travellers in these regions, to wit, Colonel Woodthorpe, R.E., and Captain Pottinger, R.A., the general conclusion is that all such travellers have approached and have traversed the abodes of these tribes only at grave risk to themselves, as might be expected when Colonel Shakespear tells us further on of the wily methods by which these tribesmen have on several occasions surprised and murdered our frontier officers. Two Europeans only, says Colonel Shakespear, have succeeded in getting through from China into Assam via Rima and Sadiya, viz., Prince Henri d'Orléans in 1895 coming from Tonkin across South-West China, and Captain F. M. Bailey in 1911 coming from Batang. An account of this last journey appeared in the *Scottish Geographical Magazine*, and later the results of Captain Bailey's final exploration of the course of the Tsang-po appeared there.

Chapter xv. of Colonel Shakespear's book, bearing the somewhat suggestive title of "Regrettable Incidents, Treachery, Methods of Fighting, etc.," is the one to which it is really the duty of a reviewer, especially if he be himself a frontier officer, to draw attention. When we read there how, time after time, despite previous warnings, British officers and their camps and escorts fell victims to the cool effrontery and daring treachery

¹ *History of Upper Assam, Upper Burmah, and North-Eastern Frontier.* By Colonel L. W. Shakespear. London: Macmillan and Co., 1914. Price 10s. net.

of these savages, we are simply left in amazement at the seeming foolhardiness of our fellow-countrymen. It happened that one of the earlier victims, Lieutenant Holcombe, had been a schoolfellow of mine at Shrewsbury. The news of his murder at Ninu, east of Sibsagar, in 1874, made a deep impression upon me. When I arrived in India in 1879, General Nation was then engaged with a strong force in storming Khonoma, and taking a final but tardy revenge for the bold act which, five years before, had cost Lieutenant Holcombe and eighty men their lives, and for the subsequent defeats inflicted on parties under Captain Butler and Mr. Damant. After this and other incidents, it is astounding to read in Colonel Shakespear's book the extraordinary narrative of one of the closing scenes of the Abor Expedition, 1911-12. To be brief : the party consisted of a civil (doubtless political) officer, six British officers, and one hundred rifles. The headman of Shimong, which is situate about sixty miles north of Sadiya, in the Dihang Valley, refused to come in or let them pass. Despite this ominous unfriendliness, the next morning the civil officer with all the British officers and *only ten* rifles, started ahead. The Gām, or headman, and three hundred or four hundred armed Abors awaited them in the village. The advanced British party were surrounded and seized, and their death seemed imminent, when a native officer with twenty-five rifles appeared in sight. This saved the situation. The Abors let go their prisoners, and pretended to have been only joking. The British party returned to its camp, and next day well closed up, and with bayonets fixed, passed once more, and this time unopposed, through Shimong village. This is but a summary. The story should be read in Colonel Shakespear's words. When Mr. Bentinck lectured on the Abor Expedition, 1911-12, before the Royal Geographical Society, the President of that Society, an ex-Viceroy of India, went so far as to say that, whenever one of these frontier expeditions was a success, it was due to the ability of the political officer. It is fairly clear that Colonel Shakespear does not share this belief in the infallibility of the political officer, and in subsequently writing on this point in the *Central Asian Society's Proceedings*, I quoted a passage from Sir H. M. Durand's *Life of Sir Alfred Lyall* (p. 226) to show that Durand took a much fairer and more liberal view of the relationship between soldier and political. Colonel Shakespear does not name his "Civil Officer," but he states that "not long after a post of fifty rifles was established at Shimong from Kebang, as one of the supply depôts to *Bentinck's* party exploring up the Dihang." This question of the relations between the senior military and the political officer of a force operating among frontier tribes is of such vital importance that I can only express my amazement at an ex-Viceroy who indulges in a useless revival of a discredited pretension. After the awful fiasco at Kabul in 1841-2 under the politicals, Burnes and Macnaghten, General Sir George Pollock was sent to Kabul by the Government of India with full military *and political* powers. The Duke of Wellington wrote very strongly at the time to Lord Ellenborough, and told him plainly that military success was incompatible with political interference. None the less, when Gough took the field against the Sikhs in 1848, one historian of that war

(Thackwell, A.D.C. to Sir Joseph Thackwell), writes thus:—"This narrative must not be concluded without a solemn protest against the system of hampering the commander-in-chief with political agents. Major Mackeson controlled the movements of the chief." When we consider that no soldier, being a field officer, would have presumed to offer his advice to Lord Gough, it is amazing to find a political major recommending the chief to attack the enemy at once. Major Mackeson clearly exceeded the bounds of his duty.

Colonel Shakespear gives an interesting "Bibliography" of North-Eastern Frontier literature. Those who have access to official publications may also consult Captain Mitchell's Report on the North-Eastern Frontier of India (Calcutta, 1883). It is a pleasure to read a nicely printed, nicely bound, well-illustrated, and generally well-got-up book like that of Colonel Shakespear. The Index and Maps are useful.

A. C. YATE.

CORRESPONDENCE: THE RAINFALL REGIME OF AUSTRALIA.

MR. B. C. Wallis sends us the following in regard to Mr. Hunt's communication in our last issue (p. 94):—

"In reply to Mr. H. W. Hunt's comments it will be well to remark that I had not heard of the publication *Climate and Weather of Australia* to which he refers, until his notes informed me of its existence.

"Mr. Hunt's comments upon two quotations from my paper may be dismissed, since they are quoted apart from the qualifications to which they are subjected in the passages wherein they occur. On the general question of the utility of equipluves, which is a matter of some importance, the reader and Mr. Hunt may be referred to the paper 'The Rainfall of the Southern Pennines' (*Quarterly Journal of the Royal Meteorological Society*, No. 172, October 1914), and to the tenor of the subsequent discussion. It does not appear to me that the Figs. 39-50 in *Climate and Weather of Australia* (to which reference is made) show by means of their isohyets the relative importance, for example, of the January rainfall at Wyndham in comparison with the rainfall at that place during the other months; and there can be no doubt that equipluves indicate quite clearly that the rainfall of the uplands of the British Isles is relatively most intense in winter and least intense in summer, and is the precise opposite of the conditions which prevail upon the lowlands—an important fact which is not self-evident on the monthly isohyetal maps of the British Isles. Finally, for international comparisons, crude isohyets are of little value, and only pluviometric coefficients can serve as an adequate base on which to found conclusions; hence the Australian maps were published in continuation of the series begun with the maps of Africa published in the *S.G.M.* in July. Mr. Hunt has been misled upon one point, equipluves are not 'based on a purely imaginary factor—one-twelfth of the average annual rainfall,' but are based upon an average day's rainfall, which is no more imaginary than an average month's rain or an average year's rain, but belongs to the same type of unit."