

The twilight of the Raj for an ordinary soldier

by Calvin Shields

Kasauli May 1893

The heat was relentless. The Loo gained strength, blowing from the south west spawning dust devils which pirouetted across the parched, vast plains of North West India. In a shimmering fandango they vanished as quickly as they appeared.

It was May 1893, the Monsoon would soon arrive

The land rose to the north in Himachal Pradesh as the plains gave way to the foothills of the Himalayas. Garrisons were established at these higher elevations so that Europeans could escape the debilitating effects of the summer heat. The snow-capped mountains provided a majestic backdrop to these patches of little England

Kasauli was an inferior Hill Station as its elevation was only 6,000ft compared with the nearby, far grander and cooler, Simla at 7,500ft

It was stifling in the small gloomy Garrison Hospital. The hubbub of hawkers, buffalo carts and horses could be clearly heard and the temperature outside was already in the mid 90's

It was the 10th May, a strong, healthy baby boy with bright blue eyes had just been born.

A man in the uniform of a Sergeant Bandmaster of the 5th Lancers was looking down at him. He was an unprepossessing weather-beaten man with a large droopy moustache and striking grey eyes. His face was flustered by the ravages of alcohol so fondly imbibed by the Europeans..

He was the boy's father.

His energetic two-year old daughter was more interested in scampering after a chit-chat than looking at her new brother.

His timorous wife held the snuffling baby close to her, as she lay on the bed covered in sweat, exhausted. The cauldron, which was India did not suit her well, she looked frail and older than her 25 years.

A month earlier they had left the suffocating fly-blown Garrison town of Meerut on the newly opened North West Railway to Kalka. The line had recently opened and mercifully it cut the travel time from a week to just a few hours. The last 16 miles to Kasauli were by bullock cart. The rocky uphill twisting route took more than 12 hours.

The surrounding hills were covered in clouds and large monsoonal drops of rain were falling as the small band of people entered Christ Church. The temperature had dropped noticeably, and when inside they could hear the steady drumming of the rain on the corrugated-iron roof. The vicar had to raise his voice to be heard and he duly baptised the little boy.

It was 19th June 1893.

England December 1897

The Sergeant stood on the heaving prow peering into the gloom, trying to make out the shoreline. A cacophony of screeching seagulls above him suggested they must be close. He pulled his greatcoat closer to him as the silvery drops of rain dripping from the peak of his hat were swept into the void by the freezing wind.

He felt uneasy. His old wounds from the Baluchistan campaign were giving him trouble; maybe it was the cold and damp. He reached into his pocket and took a long swig of rum from a flask. His health was failing, he was only 41 years old. After 11 years in the heat, humidity and squalor of India coming home could only be beneficial.

He found it difficult to regard England as home, as he had spent so much of his life abroad.

He only had vague memories of his early childhood in the crowded little terrace house in Woolwich. When he was eight the family moved to Malta with his father's battalion and three years later transferred to Quebec in Canada for four more years.

He had joined the Royal Artillery on his return to Woolwich at 15 years old.

He took another swig of the rum which by now he could hardly taste. He slowly turned around and looked past the front mast and funnel belching smoke towards the stern. The melancholy clouds merged with the horizon and the wind, now at his back, blew the raindrops in streaks across his face.

They had come along way.

After a short stay in Kasauli the 5th Lancers returned to Muttra descending to the dusty plain of the Jumna river not far from the Taj Mahal.

Four years later a cholera outbreak claimed the lives of many of his comrades, and he decided it was time to leave the Army.

Heene Cemetery, Worthing, 18th February 1901

The winter wind blew noisily through the leafless trees surrounding a small cemetery in Heene near Brighton.

A small group of people surrounded a coffin being lowered into the ground.

A smattering of snow started to fall

The young boy stood with his arms stiffly at his side. His black double-breasted jacket was too big. He wore no tie and his black shirt was collarless. His hair was neatly parted to one side. Motionless, he stared uncomfortably into the middle distance.

He wiped a snowflake away which had tickled his nose, he was 7 years old.

His sister wore a black band in her hair and her dress was covered in a fine black gauze. She was staring at the coffin with tears in her eyes.

Without emotion his mother stood quietly, dressed in a long black skirt with a black high collared neck blouse buttoned to the top. Her hair was drawn back into a tight formidable looking bun. She was looking pale and grim.

It had all been so promising for the Sergeant. He was a talented musician and had attended the prestigious Royal Military School of Music at Kneller hall. He became a well-respected band master. His departure for India changed all that. Maybe it was the effects of that inclement weather, the poor diet, the loss of a child or the alcoholism, but for three years after his return to England he had difficulty in finding employment, even as a labourer.

The drinking increased, he caught pneumonia and died from heart failure.

“Dust to dust” was being intoned by a whiskered vicar as the coffin finally disappeared from view. The sleet laden wind capriciously danced in the branches as two crows noisily flew from their perches in the trees.

The boy looked over the small group towards a milky sun glimpsed fleetingly between the showers of snow. The pale rays glittered off the glass of the nurseries surrounding the graveyard and glanced off the snowflakes in a silent ethereal pirouette. He could hear the clanking of the wind pump on the far side of the cemetery wall.

A portly avuncular man had his arm round his mother consoling her. It was his uncle who was a baker and confectioner who lived in a pub in nearby Cuckfield. They had no children and they had offered to look after the boy until he was old enough to go to the Duke of York’s Royal Military School.

His mother and sister were moving to Brighton to live with his Aunt.

The boy’s childhood had come to a premature end. He would miss playing with his sister in the meadows near their house in Kimberley Terrace. He would miss the hustle and bustle of the new houses being built along his road. He would miss the steam trains racing along the tack which ran close to their house.

He would miss his mother.

The crowd silently filed past the grave, some throwing sticky clay on top of the coffin, some wiping noses on handkerchiefs, others rubbed their hands vigorously against the cold.

The boy followed his aunt and uncle to an uncertain future.