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Campaigning against the Sikhs in India: Captain Frederick Wale's memoir of the Battle of Ferozeshahⁱ

The early years of the reign of Queen Victoria were an active time for the forces of the East India Company. The relations of British India with its northern neighbours became fraught with complications. In the background lay the rivalry between the British and the Russian Empires. The fear of Russian proximity, and the need to prevent Russia from exercising her influence too close to the borders of British India, had encouraged the authorities in Calcutta to exercise a vigorous influence of their own over the kingdoms to the immediate north of Britain's Indian possessions. By bringing these lands into closer association with Britain, the Indian government aimed to create a network of buffer states.ⁱⁱ In theory, as long as Britain respected their independence, they could be expected to remember that they little to gain either by crossing Britain, or by falling into Russia's orbit.

These considerations guided British policy towards Afghanistan, when in 1839 Britain intervened to depose its Emir, Dost Mohammed, and to bring back Britain's client, Shah Shujah, to Kabul. Unfortunately, the scheme was over-subtle, patently self-serving, and inattentive to the problems of the terrain.ⁱⁱⁱ Whoever ruled Afghanistan had to possess a strong will if he was to stand any chance of stamping his authority over its turbulent warriors and tribal jealousies. But Shujah was a weak character.^{iv} In the eyes of many of his subjects, he had lost the mandate of heaven when he had first fled his kingdom. That Shujah was prepared to buy his passage home at the price of British dependency was felt to be an insult, above all by the clans who had been closest to the Dost and seen their loyalty rewarded.^v The First Afghan War began with the fanfare of the Simla Manifesto, trumpeting the justice of Shujah's

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claim. It ended in 1842 with a harrowing retreat and a humiliating failure, because Dost Mohammed got to keep his throne.^{vi}

The Indian government appeared to be guilty of that most dangerous fault, deviousness and incompetence combined. To other clients, British patronage now seemed more predatory, but less dependable. The Afghan War frayed at the tie between Britain and another northern neighbour, the empire of the Sikhs in the Punjab. The fits and starts in Britain's frontier policy gave the Sikhs cause to doubt the value of British friendship.^{vii} The Afghan campaign also lent itself to an artificially low rating of Britain's military effectiveness. Ultimately, it failed because its leaders were confused about what they were supposed to be doing, but this political error was easily misread so as to suggest that the British soldier lacked staying power.^{viii}

Yet most of the problems confronting Britain in the Punjab were not of Britain's making. The power of the Sikhs had been built up by their great Maharajah, Runjeet Singh. Runjeet managed to satisfy the British, and to make the connection with them a profitable one to himself. Compared to his Japanese or Chinese contemporaries, Runjeet was quick on the uptake, because he recognised the advances Europeans had made in the art of war, and resolved to have his own soldiers equipped with modern guns, and trained along European lines by European military instructors imported for the purpose. In the Sikh host, the Khalsa, these Frenchmen and Italians found a willing pupil, and one whom they had little to teach about courage.^{ix} While some Asiatic societies had scant respect for the professional soldier, the tenets of the Sikh religion encouraged a strong corporate spirit and service ethic which were suited to military life. Runjeet Singh led a people whose religious traditions had given them an aptitude for warfare.^x

The problems for Britain in the Punjab began in 1839 with Runjeet's death. The

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Sikhs had been held together by a resolute and capable chief. In his stead, the court of Lahore began to tear itself apart, in a succession of sordid intrigues and treacherous assassinations.^{xi} Sovereignty eventually passed to a minor, the Maharajah Dalip Singh, and the affairs of the kingdom were overseen by his mother, as regent. Jeendan's situation, like that of any woman who has to rule on behalf of a child, was very difficult, and in this instance, doubt was cast on the boy's paternity. Soon after Dalip's claim was established, the brother of the Maharani, Jawaheer Singh, took charge of the government, but was soon killed in his turn.^{xii} Perhaps Dalip was the old Maharajah's child, but his mother was not distinguished either for her ancestry or for her virtue, and so it was no secret that Runjeet could only have favoured the Maharani for her beauty. Her reputation and her precarious position gave her little leverage over an army which was hungry for action.^{xiii}

So by 1845, the Sikh state was in too troubled a condition to be capable of making a balanced judgement about how to deal with Britain. The Khalsa charged at the problem like a bull at a gate, and the price the Sikhs were eventually compelled to pay for their mistake would be the loss of their national independence. For the British, the Sikh kingdom was meant to serve as a friendly buffer state, protecting India from the threat of Russia.^{xiv} Instead, the Indian government found itself with another block knocked from under its frontier policy, when the Sikhs launched an invasion of India all by themselves.

On 11 December 1845 the Sikh forces crossed the River Sutlej, marking the start of a highly unusual war. Unlike most of the wars of empire in the nineteenth century, Britain was on the defensive, and ranged against forces of roughly equal calibre to her own. The British forces were commanded by Sir Hugh Gough, with the Governor-General, Sir Henry Hardinge, acting as his second-in-command.^{xv} The first

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engagement of the Sikh war, on 18 December, was at Moodkee, but the critical encounter came three days later at Ferozeshah. This battle, which the Sikhs very nearly won, was classed as one of the most memorable days “in the annals of our Indian Empire”.^{xvi} Below are presented two extracts from a memoir of the Sikh war by an officer who fought on the British side. The first describes the moment when news of the invasion reached the soldiers at Ludhiana. The second is an account of the Battle of Ferozeshah.

The author of this memoir, Frederick Wale, lived and died in the Company’s service. He was regarded as “a fine, gallant, cheery officer”.^{xvii} On the outbreak of the Sikh War, he held the rank of Lieutenant in the 48th Regiment of Native Infantry, where he had the post of adjutant.^{xviii} Wale survived the Sikh War, but in 1858, he was killed in the Mutiny. His last exploits outside Lucknow were noted by Lord Roberts of Kandahar, who judged that Wale’s men “behaved extremely well.” In a heartfelt tribute, his friend, Colonel Mackenzie, stated that Frederick Wale was greatly mourned by officers and men alike.^{xix} Wale respected his Sikh adversaries at Ferozeshah, and he later showed a talent for winning their confidence. By the time of the Mutiny, Wale was in command of his own corps, the 1st Sikh Irregular Cavalry. After his death, the regiment which he had founded played a prominent role in the China expedition of 1860, and came to be known as “Probyn’s horse.”^{xx}

“In the years 1845 and 1846 I was stationed with my regiment on the banks of the Sutlej river at a place called Ludhiana, a large military post then occupied by seven regiments of the line, two regiments of artillery and two brigades of horse artillery, making altogether a very pretty force commanded by General Sir H. Wheeler, the smartest officer in the service, and one to whom I was much indebted for great

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kindness which he always displayed to me on all occasions. At this time this post was considered a very important one, as our neighbours the Sikhs were in a very troubled state, and there was no knowing when they might take it into their heads to cross the Sutlej river. The place itself was not strong, there being only a small fort more for the protection of military stores than for any other purpose. On one side of the cantonment flowed the Sutlej and the other side was a larger sandy plain not protected in any way.

In the month of December 1845, events took such a menacing line on the opposite side of the river that the Governor-General thought it necessary to leave the mountains, and come to the frontier to be at hand in case of disturbances, and it was about the 12th of the month that he made his appearance at Ludhiana and received the troops, with the appearance of which he was pleased. After the review he intimated to Wheeler that there was a likelihood of the Sikhs crossing to attack us, and although he could not say anything positive about the matter, he would recommend the Brigadier to be in readiness. He then returned to his camp which was pitched about 20 miles away. We were all very jolly at the thought of there being a chance of something to do. We had heard that the Sikh soldiers had sworn on the Grunth, their holy book, to cross the river and annihilate all the Feringhees, which they thought there was little difficulty in doing with the large force they had at their command. Things went on that day as if nothing was going to happen, and no one dreamt there was any chance of a move for some days at least, as no orders had been given and the Brigadier himself had received none positively.

Towards the evening of the same day, rumours got about there was to be a move, that the Sikhs had crossed in large force at a place called Ferozepore, about 80 miles down the river. Every one asked his neighbour if there was any truth in the report,

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and no one seemed to know anything more than that it was a report. About 9 o'clock that same evening, the order came out that all the troops were to be under arms at five next morning. This unexpected event created a great commotion. The cantonment immediately became alive with officers and orderlies galloping about in all directions, artillery wagons rushing backwards and forwards to the arsenal for ammunition, men shouting, camels hollowing, horses neighing, and bullocks adding their discordant sounds also by way of enlivening the scene. ... I went to my Commanding Officer's quarters at midnight upon some business and found his house in rather an unpleasant state, for being a married man his wife was sobbing and his little children looking and wondering what the matter was.

... The noise and confusion went on the whole night and until daybreak, when the morning gun fired, which was immediately followed by blowing of bugles, trumpets, and beating of drums, for the assembling of the troops. The morning was very foggy and cold, and so thick was the mist that it was impossible for the commanding officers to find the different positions for their regiments, some of which were running into each other. However, in course of time it cleared up, and the whole brigade appeared under arms. A more lively sight I never saw, every one very happy and in good spirits. Our Brigadier, after telling us we were likely to have some rough work and that he knew all would go through as soldiers should do, gave us the order to march, when the bands struck up some merry tune and the soldiers three cheers, and off we went, commencing the first march of a campaign from which it was destined many a poor fellow should never return.

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[after Moodkee]

... On the morning of the 20 Dec 1845, we all paraded in front of the camp, and the C.C., Sir Hugh Gough, came to each regiment, and complimented men and officers on the result of our first fight. We were then dismissed, and glad enough to have a day's rest. There was little going on this day except a continuous burial of the dead. [T]he village of Moodkee or rather the town was either by mistake or otherwise set on fire, which afforded a good opportunity for the soldiers to amuse themselves in plunder. Several of them came into camp with valuables. At mess in the evening, our Brigade Major came into the tent, and told us there was probably some hard work cut out for us on the morrow.

... The next day I rode a horse belonging to an officer of my regiment who kindly lent it to me. The horse, poor brute, was shot in the evening. At five o'clock, the morning cold and dark, the army was under arms, and soon we were on our road to attack the Sikh entrenched camp about ten miles distant. The camp contained 60,000 of the enemy, strengthened with upwards 200 pieces of cannon. Before attacking the enemy's position, we had to form a junction, with a force consisting of 5000 men under Sir John Littler, and to effect this it was necessary to make a detour of several miles in order to avoid getting too near the enemy. In the afternoon, a cloud of dust was seen in the distance, and then we saw Sir John Littler's force was close at hand, and soon after our juncture was completed.

Arrangements were soon made for an attack in the enemy's camp. It was now about two o'clock in the day, when the army was placed in battle array. We had a very fatiguing march through heavy sand, but a broiling sun on our heads, and no water. Consequently the troops were exhausted. However, fatigue was soon forgotten

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when the enemy's heavy cannonade first opened upon us. The whole of the infantry now formed into line, and the battle opened with the fire of the artillery. Our guns were much smaller than the enemy's, and consequently [we] were unable to silence them. We had not remained long in position when we were ordered to advance, and right glad we were to go to the front. As nothing can be more annoying than standing still to be shot at, the whole line gave a tremendous cheer when the advance was sounded, and we had not gone far when we came well under the fire of the enemy's batteries.

What with the smoke and dust, there was little to be seen of the engagement. My division at the commencement of the fight was the reserve, but we were soon called to the front. The advance of my brigade, which was all I could see, was very steady until we came close upon the batteries, when the fire was very hot, and the line wavered a little. Just at the time, Lord Hardinge rode up, and called out, "Forward my men!", when the line made a splendid charge, and captured the guns in front. A tremendous fire was still going in other directions, and each division of our army at length captured the guns opposed to it, and attacked the enemy's camp at different quarters. The worst part was now over. We had gained the entrenchments, and in front now stood the gorgeous camp of the Sikhs. Here a rich prize was apparently in our grasp. On entering the camp, the Sikh infantry retired before us, firing and retreating at the same time, until we fairly drove them out of the field. In every direction was to be seen the most beautiful tents, many with silver poles, and hung with shawls in the inside, horses and camels without number, gun carriages upset and broken, and the ground strewn with dead and dying.

The enemy's cavalry and infantry were flying in all directions, pursued by our own horse, who made great havoc amongst them. I never saw troops so reckless of danger,

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or more intent on slaughter, some rushing into the tents in hopes of finding some unfortunate Sikh, others firing into the tents from the outside, quite forgetting their comrades on the other side. In the midst of the confusion mines were blowing up in all directions, sending many a poor fellow to his last home. The ground at times shook as with an earthquake, whilst the noise of these tremendous explosions for the moment bewildered one, at the same time enveloping one in a cloud of dust. There was no being safe, the Sikhs having undermined the whole of their camp, lighting the slow matches as soon as they retreated. The greatest confusion ensued on our side. Discipline there was none. The soldiers, almost dead with thirst, broke from the ranks and went in search of water. They had tasted none that day, and marching under a burning sun over a heavy sand was sufficient to make them throw off all restraint, and to think only of alleviating their own suffering.

There were two wells in the whole camp, and these were choked up with dead bodies of the enemy. Some managed to procure water from them, but it was so tainted with blood there was hardly any possibility of drinking it. However, many managed to do so. So thirsty as I was, I refused a little offered to me as a great kindness by a sepoy of my regiment. Things went on in the greatest confusion until dark, when the enemy taking advantage of it made their appearance again. Officers were now using their utmost exertion in getting their men more into order, the enemy having somewhat rallied whilst our own troops were crowding upon the wells, most of them in want of water, others in plundering. Things now looked in rather a deplorable condition. However, after a time we managed to get together a sufficient number of men to form a large square. In this position we remained during the night, the enemy firing upon us, and we in return occasionally returning the compliment. The quieter we remained, the less we were molested, the darkness preventing the enemy seeing

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our exact position. Their random fire then did little execution. Sometimes a large party would be seen close upon our front, their white turbans and dresses being easily visible. Then would our men open a fire upon them, and they in return brought up their guns and gave us much more than was pleasant.

The appearance of the camp on fire was very fine, and the scene altogether very impressive. Everyone looked forward anxiously for daylight. To be shot at in our helpless state was anything but palatable. Sometimes a shower of grape would come whizzing over our heads, at another into our ranks. The cries of the wounded were heart-rending. There was no helping them. They were only told to remain quiet. Now and then you would hear that poor so-and-so was killed, and further than an exclamation of "poor fellow", nothing more was said in reply, or little more thought of him for the time being. The dead silence of the men, interrupted only with the groans of the dying, produced a very solemn effect. Every man knew his own life to be in the greatest danger, and that probably before daylight appeared he would share also the same fate.

The remaining part of the army under Lord Gough was much in the same condition as ourselves, and had taken up the same defensive position, forming a square. They did not however suffer so seriously. They were in another part of the camp about a mile distant. To avoid the fire as much as possible, all the men were ordered to lay down, except the first rank of the square, which remained in a kneeling position. By this means we escaped many shot, which now harmlessly flew over our heads.

Towards the middle of the night, the fire of the enemy increased, and it soon became evident our position would not be long tenable, the soldiers getting exasperated, asking to be led at all hazards against the enemy, or to retreat to some place more secure. Sir Harry Smith who commanded us was obstinate, and refused to

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listen to any advice on the subject, and made up his mind to remain where he was, and so we did until the fire became rather too hot for Sir Harry himself. We were not sorry to get the order to move, although to all appearances it was a very hazardous measure. Knowing that the Sikhs were on all sides, and the troops being in a very undisciplined state, a well-conducted attack upon us would probably have left few to tell the tale. Things were in such an uncertain condition the Commanding Officer and myself each took one of the Regimental colours, and tearing them from the staff, wrapped each of us one round his waist, knowing they would be safer than in the hands of the colour sergeants, who in the confusion which was likely to occur might not guard them with the same care as we should, and who would more keenly feel the disgrace of their falling into the hands of the Sikhs. We turned out of the camp by the same route we entered it, and strange to say, were very little molested in our way.

After a time we arrived at the edge of a belt of jungle, where we remained till the morning. The night was very cold, but we lit fires, and sitting round in circles warmed and made ourselves as comfortable as we could. The scene was a very picturesque one, so many fires burning, surrounded by soldiers with their fire locks in their hands, ready to repel any attack. Having had nothing to eat or drink since we left Moodkee, we were all much fatigued. Sleep also was out of the question, unless one could manage to keep an eye open to look out for squalls. No sooner did the day of dawn appear than bugles sounded for the assembling of troops. Cartouche boxes were refilled with cartridges, and all knew there was plenty of work still to be done, and that the Sikhs were not to be trifled with.

Sir Harry Smith, placing himself at our head, advanced in the direction of the Sikh camp, from whence proceeded the roar of the artillery. It was disheartening to think the guns we had taken the evening before, for which so many lives had been lost,

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should have been for the most part recaptured by the enemy in the night, and that all our trouble would be over again. Although many of the guns had returned to their former owners, still most of their bravest defenders had been slain, and were now but feebly manned by men whose hearts were still bold, but whose confidence and courage had been damped by the defeat of the day before. Lord Gough had remained in the camp all night, and before we joined his force, some guns had been taken, and there was little left for us to do. The enemy during the night had laid more mines, and during the whole of that day, explosions were taking place. The camp was easily cleared of the enemy, and once more it came into our possession, and we congratulated ourselves that all was over.

Our army now amounted to not more than 3000 men / infantry, with artillery and cavalry which were almost useless, the horses being done up. During the confusion of the night, great numbers of men had lost their regiments, and not knowing where to go, retired into Ferozepore, a station distant about 10 miles. Others had wandered and lost their way, so that our muster was miserably small, and those nearly tired out. We were not long at rest when report told us we were to be attacked shortly by a fresh body of the enemy, and soon after the horizon as far as one could see on either side was covered with dust, and soon was to be seen an extended line advancing slowly and in good order. It resembled much a wave of the sea coming over the plain. It was a beautiful sight, and one I have as vivid a recollection of as an occurrence of yesterday.

There was nothing to be done but to fight to the last. There appeared little hope of being able to compete with such a force amounting to 30,000, but to retreat was out of the question, and either victory or death only remained. My own feelings were perfectly indifferent to death. I felt so completely done up with fatigue and thirst I

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cared little what was to become of me. I had fully made up my mind that we should be cut to pieces, having lost much confidence in our men, who were much disorganized. Sir Harry Smith and Lord Gough were in conference with each other as to the best way to repel the attack. My regiment and H.M. 50th and parties of other corps were placed in square right in front of the enemy (the use of which to this day I never could make out), and when the enemy had advanced sufficiently near, they opened a cannonade upon us, and a cannon shot coming into the square made the men so unsteady it was requisite to alter the position, when Sir Harry placed us behind a mound or sand hill which covered us from their fire for the time being.

The Sikhs now commenced in right earnest. Our artillery which was on our right now became the object of attack. We had but a few rounds of ammunition left, and at last our gunners fired with blank cartridge in order to keep up appearances as well as possible. I saw on this occasion a tumbril (an artillery ammunition wagon) going across the plain at full gallop, with four horses without riders. Suddenly a shot struck and blew it up, killing one of the wheelers. It was an extraordinar[il]y destructive sight, perhaps hardly ever witnessed before. We had a few rockets left, which did much execution amongst the enemy's cavalry. From the position I was in, I could distinctly see the effect produced, which was great. The enemy now advanced a little closer, and at this time was within 300 yards of us.

From behind the mound we could distinguish all that was going on. The Tej Singh, the commander of the Sikhs, we could see seated upon his elephant, and the different officers riding about as if haranguing their men. To see this enormous force, to all appearance in splendid order, so close to ours in such a disorganized state, was sufficient to tell any one that Providence alone could save us, but the strength of our side could avail little. An order shortly came to retreat behind the entrenchments of

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the enemy's camp, and we laid in line behind the small embankment, sufficient to protect us from musket shot. The enemy kept up a cannonade without ceasing. Most of the shot went over our heads. Occasionally one would come and knock the embankment to pieces in front. This continued for a long time.

At last, much to our dismay, we saw our artillery and cavalry moving far to the rear. This was an unpleasant sight, and there was nothing left for the infantry but to remain in their present position to await the attack of the enemy, or rather on their near approach to make a simultaneous charge with the bayonet. I was standing at one time close to the Commander-in-Chief, who was looking on as coolly as if in a field day. He sent an aide-de-camp to the Governor-General to say that he was about to gain another glorious victory. The Governor-General who was at Ferozepore had sent to ask how things were getting on, and this was his reply. The old chief must have thought somewhat different, but was not the man to admit any fear for the result of an action.

Here we remained, expecting every moment to hear of the advance of the enemy upon us, and after a time we perceived that the Sikhs were changing their position, as we thought preparatory to an attack. However, at last their fire ceased, and to our astonishment and satisfaction, we saw them going to the rear and beating a retreat. Providence had indeed preserved us by a piece of sheer luck. Our artillery and cavalry being useless had been ordered by mistake into Ferozepore. The order had not come from the Commander-in-Chief, but from an officer on his staff, who seeing the probable annihilation of these arms had taken on himself to order them off the field, and in doing so they passed over the flank of the enemy, who I suppose being much afraid of being outflanked, thought it better to retreat. And so they did, for we saw nothing more of them, and the remnant of the Sikh army crossed the river into their

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own territories.

Thus ended the battle of Ferozeshah, to the delight of all. Never was an action gained under more extraordinary circumstances than these, for had our artillery and cavalry remained on the ground, the chances are the victory would have been to the Sikhs. The officer however who took this responsibility upon himself was obliged to resign the service, although impartial judges must attribute the success to his conduct. We were not sorry to see the Sikhs had crossed the river, for the fact was the greatest fire-eaters had enough of their company for the present, and although glad enough to renew their acquaintance after a time, still now felt very happy to be without them.”

- i This project owes much to the kind encouragement of Mr. George MacDonald Fraser.
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- vi Kaye, I, p373; Kaye, III, pp382-3.
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- ix Bruce, pp47-50.
- x Cunningham, p44, pp76-81.
- xi M'Gregor, II, pp14-20.
- xii Cunningham, pp287-8.
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- xiv Sir Henry Montgomery Lawrence, *Essays, Military and Political, Written in India* (London, 1859), p263.

xv James, pp106-108.

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xviii *East India Register and Army List* (London, 1845), p138.

xix Lord Roberts of Kandahar, *Forty-one Years in India* (2 vols., London, 1897), I, p408; A.R.D. MacKenzie, *Mutiny Memoirs* (Allahabad, 1891), pp200-1.

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