

GENERAL JAMES PRIMROSE: RECONSTRUCTING A LIFE

Part 1

CAROLINE JACKSON

General James Primrose, at the end of a long life of soldiering, achieved national fame and, to some extent, ignominy at the same time. He it was whom General Sir Frederick Roberts rescued after a long forced march from Kabul to Kandahar in August 1880. A month earlier it had fallen to Primrose, as commander of British forces in Kandahar, to witness the dreadful retreat of the surviving British forces after the battle of Maiwand, and to convey the bad news to his superiors. He became the scapegoat for the failure of many in Britain's second attempt in fifty years to interfere in the affairs of Afghanistan, and he left his final posting in India under a cloud, with instructions to return to Great Britain immediately and explain himself at Horse Guards. In April 1882 he was retired with the rank of General, indicating that the Army may have had second thoughts about its immediate reactions to events at Kandahar.¹

The recent discovery of an interesting collection of General Primrose's papers, in the possession of his great-grand-daughter, allows us to see how a career in the British Army in mid-century could offer a fascinating variety of experiences, even if it ended in ungrateful failure. It also gives the opportunity to re-assess how far Primrose's treatment after Kandahar was justified when the problems he encountered lay more with the over-stretch of resources – a familiar feature in the Victorian Empire – than with any failings of his own.

The documents are accompanied by a large collection of his own watercolours, some depicting British troops at rest or on the march in South Africa, others recording the journeys he made to Afghanistan. The most interesting pieces of this archive, which Primrose seems particularly to have retained for posterity, are two personal day-to-day diaries, one covering his time in the Eastern Cape, South Africa, between 1851 and 1853, and the other dealing rather more spasmodically with his time as commander of British forces in Kandahar during the Second Afghan War. The latter is supplemented by a small campaign notebook covering his two journeys from Pune² in India to Kandahar in 1879 and 1880. In addition to these records, the archive holds the originals of his commission documents, and correspondence dealing with his purchase of the rank of lieutenant-colonel, a document recording his appointment as Companion of the Order of the Star of India in 1867, some papers relating to his service in central India in 1859 when the effort to capture the last fugitive mutineers was

¹ *Hart's Annual Army List* (London: 1882), p. 537.

² The 19th century British spelling was Poona. I have retained this spelling where it occurs in Primrose's own writings.

being wound down, and, earliest of all, papers relating to his work in helping with famine relief in Ireland in the 1840s. These documents provide the foundation upon which his career is reconstructed in these articles.

James Maurice Primrose was born on 19th February 1819 in Colchester, Essex. His father, Lieutenant James Primrose, was serving at the time in the 93rd Regiment of Foot, and died in Colchester in December 1819 at the age of 25. Primrose's mother was Elizabeth Colman, the daughter of a Colchester businessman, and he was brought up by her and her relations, from one of whom he would later seek the financial support necessary to buy his lieutenant-colonelcy.

The principal Primrose family connections were in Ireland. The Primroses belonged to the class of Anglo-Irish Protestant small landowners who frequently sent their younger sons into the Army. Many of Primrose's ancestors came from Cahir in County Kerry but several generations back there had been a cousinship link with the grander branch of the family that produced Lord Rosebery (Prime Minister from 1894-7). In deciding on an Army career Primrose was following family tradition, which, in the previous century, had produced Lieutenant-General Gilbert Primrose, wounded a few days before the Battle of Blenheim while Colonel of the 24th Foot. Members of the family had already distinguished themselves in the colonies: Primrose's great uncle Sir Maurice Charles O'Connell, was Lieutenant Governor of New South Wales from 1810 to 1814 and commander of the forces there from 1838 to 1847.

Primrose entered the Royal Military College at Sandhurst in January 1834 at the age of 14. The records show that he was a diligent student of arithmetic and mathematics, French, fortification and military drawing.³ On 6th January 1837 at the age of 17 he was commissioned as an ensign in the 43rd Regiment of Foot, then titled the Monmouthshire Light Infantry. His portrait was painted in the same year, possibly as a memento for his mother, since in 1838 the 43rd left England for Canada, where Primrose took part in the last stages of the suppression of the Lower Canada Rebellion against the British, led by Louis-Joseph Papineau.

The first time Primrose emerges as an individual is in the regimental records of an incident in 1846, when he was a lieutenant, and the regimental headquarters, on the regiment's return from Canada, was at Dover Castle:

While here, several officers of the regiment pulled over from Dover to Boulogne in a racing gig. The crew was composed of Captains Meade, the Hon T. Cholmondely, Lieutenants Primrose, Hon Percy Herbert, Green, Wilkinson, and Dennis, with a beachman to steer. Half-way across a storm came on; it was necessary to bale water without intermission, and only by a narrow squeak the French port was reached. On the Boulogne officials wanting to know the tonnage of their 'yacht' they volunteered to carry up the little canoe. Its exhibition caused much astonishment; the Mayor and all the authorities made

³ The Sandhurst Collection (www.archive.sandhurstcollection.co.uk), Register entry for cadet James Primrose 1834-6. (Consulted 15.4.2012.)

*them forthwith great lions, and the following day they and their gig were triumphantly escorted on board the steamer for Dover. The incident however nearly cost them a reprimand; for the 'Old Duke' chancing to be at Walmer at the time, would have had them pulled up for leaving the country without leave had not Lord Fitzroy Somerset interceded.*⁴

Peace-time soldiering could be a dull affair, especially for junior officers whose promotion might depend on the creation of war-time vacancies, by deaths in battle or the increase in the size of the Army at the start of a war. When an officer wished to retire, the purchase system came into action. However, when a peace-time vacancy was created by the death of an officer, the rule of promotion by seniority applied, and a train of promotions in lower ranks was set off. Throughout his life, Primrose was dogged by shortage of money but this did not become a serious problem until 1856, when he wanted to purchase the rank of lieutenant-colonel. In his first two promotions Primrose was very lucky. His commission as ensign in 1837 came through a death vacancy from typhus while the regiment was in Canada and he rose to lieutenant in May 1841 when Lieutenant Henry Booth died while on leave in England. Similarly he gained his captaincy in April 1848 when Captain William Egerton was killed by the collapse of a grandstand at the horse racing ground at Lismacrone in Ireland. In each case Primrose gained the promotion, without purchase, as the senior officer in his rank.⁵ This certainly made him something of an exception: so long as the system existed there were always more purchase than non-purchase officers.⁶

As a professional soldier of Irish ancestry with a reputation to establish in peace-time, it was natural for Primrose to seize the opportunity of going to Ireland to assist in relieving the misery of the Great Famine that had broken out in September 1845. In 1846 the hard-pressed administration of the Irish Board of Works was permitted to take on Army officers as temporary employees to try to bring order to the local committees tasked with famine relief.

Primrose records that in November 1846 he was one of the officers 'sent from England by the Authorities at the Horse Guards to be employed as Inspecting Officers'.⁷ Initially he was based in Castlebar, County Mayo, and was later moved to Mohill in County Leitrim. In September 1847 the adjutantcy of the 43rd Foot

⁴ R. Levinge, *Historical Records of the 43rd Regiment, Monmouthshire Light Infantry* (London: 1868), p. 246.

⁵ *Digest of the services of General Primrose in The Personnel of the Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire Light Infantry*, a loose-leaf compendium in the archives of the regiment, (Soldiers of Oxfordshire museum archive, Oxfordshire) p. 397A. This invaluable collection of biographies, put together in the early 20th century, has gone missing from the museum archive in the last three years. It is hoped that it will re-surface when the digitisation of the museum's collection is complete. Meanwhile the only biographical note of Primrose that the Museum contains is a shortened Digest of Primrose's life – archive reference SOFO 2480.

⁶ A. Bruce, *The Purchase System in the British Army 1660-1871*, (London: RHS,) pp. 47 & 78.

⁷ Primrose Papers 1/3/1 Draft of a letter from Primrose to the Irish famine authorities, 13 September 1848. Hereafter PP.

became vacant and Primrose was ordered to rejoin the regiment ‘as soon as my services could be dispensed with’; he remained in England as the regiment’s Adjutant until March 1848. In September 1848, he applied to return to Ireland, where he again served as Inspecting Officer until July 1849.

The United Kingdom Government was, by mid 1846, pursuing a strict policy of extremely limited food aid, backed up by public works schemes that offered paid employment to the destitute. Two problems persisted: one was the sheer scale of the calamity caused by the failure of the vital potato crop over three years, and the other was the determination of the Treasury, under Sir Charles Trevelyan, that Ireland should emerge from the crisis through self-help and emigration rather than by large transfers of money from England.

Inevitably this was a sensitive policy to enforce because relief officers often found it hard to resist opening up emergency supplies to aid a population dying of hunger. Primrose and his colleagues worked with local Boards and his letter of appointment in 1847 insisted that one of his prime tasks was to make sure that the subordination of such local Boards to the Government was fully understood:

*In order to enforce on the minds of the public generally, and more particularly, on Members of the Committees which shall hereafter be formed, the deep responsibility that attaches to them, you will cause to be constantly kept in view this essential difference in principle – that it is the Government now coming forward to assist the local means and authorities, and not they assisting the Government.*⁸

During this second tour, Primrose was based mainly in County Leitrim, where the over-crowded villages and small towns were ill-equipped to deal with the consequences of the disastrous situation. One such town was Mohill, which had a population within its Poor Law Union of 66,858 in 1831. Primrose seems to have been accepted there as a neutral arbiter: in May 1847 the Quakers gave him the responsibility for distributing two tons of Indian meal to 3,000 destitute townfolk rather than entrusting it to the parish priest who exhibited ‘arrogance and opposition’.⁹ He kept a letter of thanks from the Mohill Finance Committee, which recorded ‘the zeal and attention he has at all times shown in performing the duties of his office, which have been attended with many difficulties on account of conflicting opinions, and dangers from the extraordinary and deplorable prevalence of Fever to which unhappily so many have fallen victim. The Finance Committee strongly recommends him to the attention of the Relief Commissioners and to Her Majesty’s Government’.¹⁰ The distribution of aid was not his only activity and in April 1847 the Committee of the Mohill Fever Hospital and Dispensary recorded their thanks to Primrose and others ‘for their exertions

⁸ PP 1/3/5. Secretary of the Relief Commission Office to Primrose, 1 April 1847.

⁹ G. Macatasney, *The Dead buried by the dying: the Great Famine in Leitrim* (Kildare: Irish Academic Press, 2014), pp. 144-5.

¹⁰ PP 1/3/6. Lord Clements, Chairman of the Mohill Finance Committee to Primrose, 9 September 1847.



ENSIGN JAMES PRIMROSE, 43RD REGIMENT OF FOOT, 1837

With kind permission of the Hon. Mrs Susan Tyser

in rescuing the inmates and extinguishing the fire which took place in this institution'.¹¹

The Relief Committee at Outragh, also in Leitrim, was equally enthusiastic about the difference Primrose had made: they presented their 'best acknowledgements for his valued co-operation through a period of unprecedented difficulty and distress, and we sincerely hope the Intelligence and Integrity, Patience and Energy which so strongly make his character may meet their due appreciation and reward'.¹² When he left Ireland for the first time in September 1847, the Clerk of Cloone (where 6,000 people were receiving food aid each week) recorded that Primrose's 'zeal and businesslike habits will never fail to secure him respect in whatever position he may be placed'.¹³ Primrose's work in Ireland would have stood him in good stead with the Army authorities, but for him personally the greatest consequence was that while in Ireland he had met the girl (then aged 13 or 14) who was to become his wife, Elizabeth Beresford: her father, the Reverend George Beresford, was involved in famine relief in Fenagh and Mohill. The family remembered well into the next century that when they met again ten years later in Bangalore she recognised him immediately from his voice alone.

When Primrose rejoined his regiment, it was stationed at Clonmel in County Tipperary. It was not expecting any immediate foreign service, since two others, the 1st (the Royal) Regiment of Foot and the 40th (the 2nd Somersetshire) Regiment of Foot had been back in England since 1845 and 1846 respectively and would normally have been called on for foreign service before the 43rd.¹⁴ However in 1851 his diary begins dramatically:

*Early this morning about 4 o'clock I was awoken from a sound sleep by Skipwith sitting on my bed, looking somewhat pale from the effects of too much claret the night before ... he came with the unexpected intelligence that the 43rd were to proceed to Cork there to embark with as much despatch as possible for the Cape of Good Hope.*¹⁵

There was an immediate scramble to get ready. One of the most important things to resolve was who would command the regiment. Typically for the Army at this time, the 43rd was led by senior officers who had made their reputations during the Napoleonic Wars. The lieutenant-colonel, James Forlong, had been severely wounded at Quatre Bras in 1815. The prospect of prolonged action so far from home prompted him to sell his commission, but the opportunity to purchase was not taken up by the senior major, William Fraser. This left Henry Skipwith next

¹¹ PP 1/3/10. Resolution of the Mohill Relief Committee 30 April 1847.

¹² PP 1/3/12. Resolution of the Outragh Relief Committee 13 September 1847.

¹³ *Roscommon and Leitrim Gazette*, September 1847, p. 1.

¹⁴ C. Jackson (ed.), *The Diary of Captain James Maurice Primrose*, (Rhodes University, Grahamstown series, 2016), entry for 19 September 1851, p. 31.

¹⁵ *Ibid.* p. 31.

in line who, in Primrose's rueful words, had 'only been a Major for a few months' and who, clearly having wealth behind him, had purchased his first step as ensign only three years before Primrose had obtained his without-purchase ensigncy. Skipwith nevertheless had a clear run, and he duly purchased the lieutenant-colonelcy and prepared to manage the regiment's transfer to South Africa.

The 43rd left Ireland in considerable confusion and discomfort. Major Fraser, left in command of the Depot, ('very much cut up at our leaving as he never expects to see the regiment again while he is in the service') saw them off from Cork. The officers purchased personal hand-guns and Primrose mentions that he bought a revolver from the Westley Richards company. He also bought a small 'patrole tent' (the French spelling persists in the diary). The ship they were to sail in, H.M. Steamship *Vulcan*, was coaling as they embarked, in order to save time, and it took a few days for the 1,000 men on board to get sorted out. Primrose shared a cabin with Lieutenant Ponsonby who, they soon discovered, had made an ill-advised choice of a cabin that was too close to the ship's boiler, and had a large, leaking porthole. But as Primrose wrote 'one does not come to sea to be comfortable'.

The *Vulcan's* captain was under orders to get his passengers to the Cape as fast as possible – 'his former trip to the Cape with the 74th caused much dissatisfaction to the Admiralty as he was eight weeks on the voyage' – and therefore to steam as much as possible. This meant that before reaching the Equator they had to put into port for coal at Sierra Leone. This gave Primrose a brief view of one of the less glamorous colonial postings. The garrison was found by the 1st and 2nd West India Regiments and after dining at their Mess, Primrose commented: 'It was rather a motley assemblage and I must say most of the men looked somewhat the worse for wear and their faces bore the stamp of being a little dried up'. Their appearance contrasted with the natives he observed coaling the ship – 'splendid men ... any one of them might have served as a model for any sculptor'.¹⁶

From Sierra Leone they had a good run to Simonstown on the Cape peninsula. There were no traditional celebrations for crossing the Equator (which Primrose had dreaded) but he does record the deaths of two pregnant women who the Colonel had insisted must accompany their husbands – 'poor creatures, they were tossed overboard with a couple of roundshot tied to their feet'. In fact, all the women who accompanied the regiment were to be left in barracks in Cape Town, together with the 'heavy baggage'; they must have formed quite a large group when they joined up with the other women whose husbands belonged to regiments that had already passed through. This left the potentially most dangerous part of the voyage to be completed along the jagged coast eastwards, past where the *Birkenhead* would come to grief, to the landing point at the mouth of the Buffalo river, where the port of East London had yet to be built. The landing was made using surf boats, a very challenging manoeuvre in a strong sea,

¹⁶ Primrose *Diary*, entry for 6 November 1851, pp. 36-37.

especially when it came to landing the horses.

Primrose's regiment had been rushed to the Cape Colony to bolster British forces in the Eastern Cape because eastward expansion of the European settlement in the neighbouring Western Cape had come into collision with two forces. One was the Xhosa people, who had been living there as pastoralists for several centuries and who resented seeing their homelands, tribal hierarchies and way of life threatened by Europeans who wanted to push them back eastwards beyond a notional frontier established on the river Kei. The other was the pressure from the north created by the Zulu nation, which wanted to spread into Xhosa lands. In Primrose's time the British did not have any military engagements with the Zulu, but they were a forceful power in the offing and the Xhosa fled before them.

By 1851 a British campaign against the Xhosa had been going on for two years and was part of a much longer struggle for domination and land that had been intermittent ever since the first meeting between representatives of the Dutch East India company and a few minor Xhosa chiefs in 1778. This prolonged period of warfare has by convention been divided up into nine 'Frontier' wars, until recently also known as the 'Kaffir wars'. The Xhosa were driven back across the Great Fish river in 1812, but kept seeping westwards. In 1820 5,000 British settlers were landed to colonise and stabilise the area round Grahamstown. Meanwhile Christian missions had become very active in the Eastern Cape.¹⁷

In 1847 Sir Harry Smith, Governor of the Cape – whom Primrose was to meet in 1852 – put into action his own 'forward' policy at the end of the Seventh Frontier War. He extended the colonial boundaries east and created, in the space thus formed, a new Crown Colony, British Kaffraria. This had been wholly Xhosa territory with its own network of tribal government, but the Xhosa chiefs were placed under white Commissioners. Faced with pressure on their tribal ways, Xhosa opposition soon developed.

Eighteen months before Primrose landed in South Africa, on 24th December 1850, the situation in the Eastern Cape exploded. A British column was waylaid and slaughtered in the Bomah pass; British military settlements, intended for veteran soldiers, were attacked and the settlers massacred, the trusted native settlements on the Kat river rose up in rebellion and Sir Harry himself was temporarily besieged in Fort Cox. After a frustrating week, he fought his way out, with members of the Cape Mounted Regiment, and resumed his command.

In response to these events troops were despatched to the Cape: the 74th (Highland) Regiment, followed by the 12th Light Dragoons, and the 2nd (The Queen's Royal) Regiment.¹⁸ The battalion of the 12th (East Suffolk) Regiment serving in Mauritius was summoned from that island¹⁹ and the 60th (King's Royal

¹⁷ The impact of the arrival of white settlers on the Xhosa is well described in J. Peires, *The House of Phalo: a History of the Xhosa people in the days of their Independence* (Johannesburg: 1981).

¹⁸ K. Smith, *Sir Harry Smith's Last Throw – the 8th Frontier war 1850-1853* (London: 2012), p. 226.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 179.

Rifle Corps) disembarked at East London in October 1851. The new arrivals reinforced the troops already at Smith's disposal: 560 soldiers from the 6th Foot, 403 from the 45th, 472 from the 73rd and 479 from the 91st Regiments of Foot.²⁰ Before the war had broken out, Smith, in accordance with instructions from the Colonial Secretary, Earl Grey, had been sending troops home – movements of which the Xhosa would have been aware.²¹

Simultaneously, a number of Xhosa chiefs moved to the forefront of events as military leaders. Maqomo, whose fortress or 'great place' was in the Waterkloof, Sandile in the Amathole mountains, Siyolo in the Fish river bush. Though the Xhosa were outgunned by the British, they were fighting on home ground, criss-crossed with deep river beds and tree-shaded 'kloofs' in which they hid and picked off the British troops, who attempted to march through the area in single file. After a while, the British learned to send out flankers to protect their columns but the geography of the area meant that they could not use their favoured tactic of frontal assault by rifle volley, still less the cavalry charge. When light artillery and rockets could be brought into action they were very effective, but the nature of the terrain made the movement of guns very difficult. The vulnerability of the British to Xhosa snipers using rifled muskets captured from the British was underlined when Lieutenant-Colonel Thomas Fordyce was shot dead while leading the 74th Highlanders in the Waterkloof.

Primrose and his men were urgently needed as reinforcements and therefore marched into action only two days after landing. On their first march to Fort Grey, Primrose recorded 'the heat excessive and the men very much done up'. The quiescence of the local tribes could not be relied on so that 'when the men wished to get water they are always accompanied by an armed party for their protection'. When they wished to buy supplies in the growing settlement of King William's Town they found 'the inhabitants are fattening on the military. Everything is at war prices'. Primrose gives an interesting picture of a 'patrole' of British soldiers returning to camp:

... such a sight I never witnessed in all my life. Small parties of Fingoes, then a few officers' pack horses, followed by a servant driving a few goats. Then probably a few wagons filled with sick soldiers, followed by a detachment of the Cape Corps and a host of colonial levies – these were dressed in any clothes they chose but all armed with a gun. After proceeding some distance we met the 12th Lancers, at least that portion of them which was with General Somerset's Division. What a sight! The last time I had met them was when we were quartered together in Dublin about 10 months since. Then they were all bright and in most capital order, as most regiments become after a year's sojourn in Ireland's capital. All the men and officers had grown long beards and some were nearly black from exposure to the atmosphere night and day for 44 days – nearly

²⁰ Ibid. p. 180.

²¹ Ibid. p. 42.

*all their clothes were torn off their backs. Their accoutrements had never been cleaned since they started on Patrole. The horses were in wretched condition. The men who owned these horses of course had to march. No one who has not witnessed the return of a Patrole can possibly conceive the appearance of the whole party – the rags, the dirt, some without shoes and with all kinds of hats, the only uniformity being in their arms – in fact as unlike English soldiers as they possibly can be.*²²

The task of the British forces, assisted by some South African irregular troops, was to destroy Xhosa settlements and crops, seize cattle, and to exert a constant pressure to drive the Xhosa eastward so that they would remain beyond the Kei river. It was vainly hoped they would stay there while white farmers moved in to settle, improve and cultivate their lands. Primrose and his men hated this work as monotonous and dangerous, giving no scope for the pitched battles they were trained to expect in war. Before long he was describing it as ‘this horrid war’. The soldiers either spent their time on patrol, looking for ‘Kaffirs’ who, if captured were generally shot, or were sent out to destroy crops. Thus on 29th January 1852 Primrose recorded:

*... nothing having been heard from the Kaffir chiefs we started at 5 o’clock and commenced the work of destruction. The men were told off into working parties of 25 each, provided with sickles, billhooks and old swords. While these men worked 25 others remained outside the field as a resource in case of attack. We worked away till about 4 in the afternoon and of course in this time cut down an immense quantity of Indian corn and destroyed lots of pumpkins.*²³

The weather was a harsh mixture of scorching hot days and cold nights, with many days of heavy rain. Patrols could last several days and Primrose often recorded night bivouacs where he and his companions tried to get to sleep while lying in the mud. On 16th February he recorded leaving camp at 4am and marching in search of Xhosa forces until 4.30pm. At that point ‘we were thoroughly done as we had not even breakfasted. I managed to get a bit of biscuit which kept me from starving. Thirteen hours is too long to go without food and taking hard exercise’. They also knew that negotiations were going on from time to time with the Xhosa chiefs who were under increasing pressure to agree to a peace settlement. This made any British fatalities seem particularly pointless.

Soon after his arrival Primrose met the man responsible for the campaign in the Eastern Cape, Sir Harry Smith, but was not impressed: ‘he made us a speech which from anyone else would have been very complimentary but as he says the same thing to every regiment on their arrival in his command we did not set much value on his encomiums.’ Primrose nevertheless regretted Sir Harry’s departure

²² Primrose, *Diary*, 11 January 1852, p. 50.

²³ Primrose, *Diary*, 29 January 1852, p. 57.



“NEAR KEISKAMMA HOEK, BRITISH KAFFRARIA”.
Watercolour dated 1852 by Primrose. Note the campaign dress of the 43rd's Other Ranks.
The figure in the middle ground is believed to be Colonel Eyre.

Author's Collection

three months later just at the point where peace seemed to be a real possibility. He was succeeded by General Sir George Cathcart, who was under orders to achieve an honourable peace with the Xhosa and to extricate British forces as fast as possible. Primrose was doubtful that the peace Cathcart achieved in 1852 would last or that the Eastern Cape would attract enough European settlers to make it a going-concern. As the war against the Xhosa ended in 1853 Cathcart was intent on establishing Posts, each with a small garrison, about the countryside as a way of making the land safe for new settlers. However, Primrose was sceptical: 'I don't see where the inhabitants are to come from. There is no emigration to this Colony, the goldfields of Australia holding out greater inducements to fortune hunters.'²⁴

Contact with the Xhosa was usually at long range, and, using British rifled muskets picked up from casualties, the tribesmen became proficient snipers. Primrose records that the regimental surgeon was killed while he was treating the wounded, and that the senior Captain of the 43rd was likewise killed while riding ahead of his men through the bush. Primrose shows no sympathy for the Xhosa, even when a woman was killed. There is only a very faint regret in his report of another death:

A Kaffir was taken near our post tis said in the act of stealing a horse. He was immediately taken to Col. Eyre who ordered him to be hanged and he was carried off instanter to a drift close by and hung up to a tree – passing by the spot the next morning I saw the unfortunate wretch suspended. He was an old man and I must say I somewhat regretted his being deprived of life. However tis the only way I believe – and if we could kill a lot more it would be doing much good.²⁵

Ensign Lumley Graham, observing a similar incident involving the shooting of a 'poor unarmed boy', described it as a 'piece of wanton cruelty'.²⁶ Many Xhosa were simply shot on sight but it was the artillery, when the guns could, with great difficulty, be dragged into action, that caused the greatest damage to them and their morale:

The guns as soon as they were in position commenced firing shot and shells in every direction. The effect produced we ascertained the following day as

²⁴ Primrose, *Diary*, 10 February 1853, p. 155.

²⁵ Primrose *Diary*, 9 October 1852, p. 59.

²⁶ N. Mapham (ed.), *Journal of Lumley Graham 1828-1890* (Typescript copy 1986), entry for 24 May 1852, p. 11. The original of this Journal is lost. The Bodleian Library has a copy of the diary from January – September 1853. The Library of the University of Witwatersrand has a copy from April to November 1852. The references in this article are to a typescript copy of the whole diary extant, edited by Neville Mapham. Despite his dislike of Eyre, Graham went on to serve as his ADC in the Crimea where he was severely wounded, losing his right arm (*Personnel of the Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire Light Infantry*, op.cit).

*numerous dead bodies of Kaffirs – of all ages and sexes – were found, some without arms etc, and knocked all to pieces.*²⁷

The knowledge of the brutal treatment meted out by the Xhosa to any soldiers they captured no doubt stifled any tendency to mercy that might have arisen towards them among the British troops. It was a war of reciprocal brutality. The nature of the conflict gave it a vicious character: enemies might pass each other unawares in the deep shadows of the valleys; soldiers were sometimes wounded by assegais wielded from the bush by opponents they did not see; soldiers taken by the Xhosa were known to have been tortured to death and the British could often hear the taunting cries of the Xhosa on the cliffs above them, without being able to see where they were. Primrose records the striking scenes of the death and burial of one of his fellow officers, and the discovery that the body of the regimental doctor had been disturbed by the Xhosa:

*The 43rd have to lament the loss of their senior captain out here – poor Gore²⁸ – he was shot at the head of his company when going into a small bush – foolishly he was riding some 30 or 40 yards in front of them and afforded a sure mark when he got near the bush. ... He was placed on a stretcher and carried in rear of the companies. He was again fired at and he told his men to leave him. About an hour after he died.... We buried poor Gore late at night close to the fires of the camp. Everything was conducted with perfect silence – a small dark lantern being carried at the head of the procession to enable us to distinguish where the grave was dug, and for Greene²⁹ to read the funeral service over. Fires were lighted on the graves the next day to obliterate the spot as much as possible – a precaution we have found absolutely necessary to be observed for on arrival here yesterday some of our people on visiting the spot where poor Davidson³⁰ and the men of the 73rd were buried, found the bodies had been disinterred by the Kaffirs poor Davidson's skull was easily recognised by the holes that the two bullets had made in it. It must have been a horrid sight and tis shocking to think that one's comrades are treated in this manner.*³¹

An important group of bystanders in the struggle were the missionaries, since the Eastern Cape had been fertile and promising ground for a number of missions of European origin before the war. Primrose describes seeing two such stations left abandoned and in ruins after they were attacked by the Xhosa and their allies shortly before he arrived in South Africa. He describes how the missionary and his

²⁷ Primrose *Diary*, 10 March 1852, p. 89.

²⁸ Owen Arthur Ormsby Gore, from County Sligo. “*The personnel of the Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire Light Infantry*” in Soldiers of Oxfordshire Museum archive, Woodstock, Oxfordshire.

²⁹ *Personnel of the Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire Light Infantry* – Dawson Cornelius Greene 1833-1897. Purchased his captaincy in 1849.

³⁰ Davidson was the medical officer of the 43rd Regiment.

³¹ Primrose, *Diary*, 8 April 1852, p. 98.

wife fled from the Scottish mission in Uniondale and were stopped by 'Kaffirs' who stripped them of all their clothes and possessions. He came to the bitter conclusion that 'probably they would have been murdered had not one of the Kaffirs known who they were and begged them off. So much for the attempts of the Missionary Society to tame these worthless savages'.³²

One individual stands out in Primrose's description of his experiences. This was Lieutenant-Colonel William Eyre of the 45th Regiment. Eyre was a hard taskmaster with his forces and could be violent with them if he felt they were neglecting their duties: 'Colonel Eyre being in a villainous temper and thinking the fatigue men were not as alert as might be he rushed amongst my company and actually struck two of my Privates with a knobkerrie while they were lying on the ground.'³³ Eyre was said to be overly keen on capturing Xhosa cattle for the money they could bring, and he became notorious for giving the enemy no quarter. He hanged rebels whenever he caught them alive, and hanged the recently killed – to serve as a lesson to the rest. Primrose both disliked and admired him and at one point launches into an unaccustomed panegyric: 'What a man Col. Eyre is! Such indomitable perseverance – nothing stops him – no hardship and no exertion is too much for him'.³⁴

Eyre's most important contribution to the British effort was that he adapted the approach to the terrain and the nature of their enemy. This meant that, as the campaign developed, the British too hid themselves and waylaid their opponents, and took care, when advancing, to have flankers going forward to the right and left of the main column. The South African historian Neil Mostert is enthusiastic about Eyre's contribution to the final victory:

*He was everything that the 20th century was to consider a guerrilla or special forces commander, should be: tough, violent, merciless with his foe and his own men alike. He was to be the most interesting, resourceful and ruthlessly successful of the British commanders, the only original tactician of the war, the best soldier and a fierce hater of black men.*³⁵

Cathcart valued Eyre's skills and he was made a Companion of the Order of the Bath and aide-de-camp to Queen Victoria in 1853. He continued his flamboyant career in the Crimea, where he commanded a brigade under the overall command of Cathcart.³⁶

³² Primrose, *Diary*, 5 February 1852, p. 60.

³³ Primrose, *Diary*, 29 March 1852 p. 95.

³⁴ Primrose, *Diary*, 24 October 1852, p. 125.

³⁵ N. Mostert, *Frontiers: the epic of South Africa's creation and the Tragedy of the Xhosa people* (New York: Knopf, 1992), p. 1112.

³⁶ Eyre was awarded his KCB for his service in the Crimea, where he was wounded in the face. He was appointed commander of British forces in Canada in 1856 but never took up the post. He died in 1859 and is buried at Bilton, near Rugby. The memorial window to him, mentioned in his DNB entry, is no more.

By mid-October 1852 Primrose was able to record that ‘everyone seems to think the war is at an end’. The Xhosa chiefs were either captured, on the run, or had crossed the Kei river into safety. Cathcart wished to finish the war as soon as possible and the British government was anxious to curtail what had been an expensive undertaking.

Primrose was, however, engaged in one further expedition – against Moshoeshoe, the Basuto ruler of what became the modern state of Lesotho. Cathcart’s purpose was apparently to restore British prestige by punishing Moshoeshoe for his failure to pay a fine. Although keen to go on this expedition, with a chance to see the country, and of seeing action, Primrose was conscious that it might not go down well at home: ‘What John Bull will say when he hears of another war with another Chief who lives upwards of 300 miles from the colony we are anxious to hear...’³⁷

In fact, the whole expedition was curious: Cathcart was anxious to extricate himself from the Eastern Cape as quickly as possible; Moshoeshoe and his sons proved to be much shrewder and more skilful at fighting than the British had anticipated. The fine at issue amounted to 10,000 head of cattle and 1,000 horses. Moshoeshoe complained that this was too high but promised to send in what was demanded within three days. After three days he was still prevaricating and Cathcart moved against him. Primrose describes the confused action that took place on 20th December 1852. It is clear from his account that the British forces met an opponent of unsuspected strength and resourcefulness. In fact, as Primrose tells it, the story was very nearly one of British defeat: they met ‘an immense force’ of Basuto cavalry; the Basutos had the strategic advantage of firing down upon the British who were also outnumbered with approximately 6,000 Basutos engaging the British force of about 1,000 men. When the British, who were running out of ammunition, withdrew at sundown it was ‘the signal for them to advance and they came on with great force and occasionally with great boldness. We were taken in front and on both flanks, the balls whizzing over one’s head in a style anything but pleasing’.³⁸ However, the overall result of the battle was inconclusive and the next day Moshoeshoe sued for peace. Cathcart rapidly accepted and proclaimed an end to the conflict. Primrose noted that Cathcart’s force was surprised at the ‘policy of the Governor in proclaiming peace so soon for we all were desirous of returning and really giving Moshesh a good licking ...’. Lumley Graham commented ‘I don’t remember another instance in history of a war beginning and ending the same day in one battle and that very indecisive’. He also recorded the moment in the battle when Cathcart thought all was lost: ‘At one time Cathcart feared the worst and said ‘At any rate, we’ll die like men’ at which old Cloete [leader of the Boer volunteers] shook his head saying ‘mein Gott, mein Gott, is it come to this?’³⁹

³⁷ Primrose *Diary*, 6 November 1852, p. 129.

³⁸ Primrose *Diary*, 20 December 1852, p. 146.

³⁹ Lumley Graham, *Journal*, 7 January 1853.

The war having been concluded, a period of uncertainty as to what the future would bring clearly prevailed in Primrose's mind. His strategy was to make himself indispensable and to find a patron. The diary shows that he was good at logistical problem-solving, at a time when this skill was not necessarily nurtured in officer training. Thus, for example, he was obviously proud of the way that he organised the passage of 130 waggons back across the swollen waters of the Orange River: using pontoons and swimming the oxen across, he completed the work in four days, when six days had been anticipated; he received (and recorded) the accolade of praise from Colonel Eyre.

Just before Christmas Primrose was offered by Eyre, and accepted, the office of Deputy-Assistant-Quarter-Master-General following the death in action of the holder of that office, Captain Walter Faunce of the 73rd Regiment.⁴⁰ He then returned to his regiment at King William's Town and became involved in the construction of the military posts that Cathcart hoped would be the focus of future white settlements. In March 1853 his diary, and the military campaign of the British in the Eastern Cape, came to an end. The two people in whom he clearly placed his faith as potential patrons and supporters were Colonel Eyre and General Yorke, General Cathcart's second-in-command.⁴¹ In February he dined with Yorke, who hinted that his appointment as DAQMG might be permanent – and then dashed his hopes by emphasising the contractions in staff that would inevitably follow the peace. In March he dined with Cathcart who praised a military plan which he had drawn up. But the next day Cathcart had a decisive meeting with the Xhosa chiefs, at which he insisted that they could not return to their homelands in the Amatolas. On that note Cathcart and his staff departed for Grahamstown, and when Primrose's diary ends he was unhappily unsure of the future, 'as economy is the order of the day'. He must wait to hear 'what is to become of us all in about a week'.

The interest of this South African diary lies to a great extent in its rawness. Primrose simply wrote it and kept it. He did not revise it or add any later reflections to it. Since he was essentially recording the train of events day by day, he emerges as a simple soldier, and not a reflective philosopher. It would, for example, be interesting to know whether he ever pondered the irony of the fact that within a space of five years he had moved from saving the lives of those threatened with famine in Ireland, to taking steps to create just such a famine among the Xhosa in the Eastern Cape.

Following its service in South Africa, Primrose's regiment was ordered to Madras via Cape Town. No further diary emerges from the Primrose papers until the 2nd Afghan War of 1879-1880. But his progress post 1853 can be traced through regimental papers, and the summary he himself provided when, as a General, he filled out the regulation 'annual confidential report' in 1880 and then

⁴⁰ Primrose, *Diary*, 21 & 22 December 1852, pp. 147-148.

⁴¹ Sir Charles Yorke (1790-1880). He was responsible under Cathcart for logistical support for the troops in the Eastern Cape. He later became Military Secretary, first to General Airey and then to the Duke of Cambridge. (*Dictionary of National Biography*).

kept it among his papers. Two sets of correspondence and memoranda in particular, surviving from 1856-9, give a clearer focus on his prospects and machinations for his next promotion, and on his role during the Mutiny in India.

Primrose arrived in India as a Captain but in February 1855 was promoted Major, filling a vacancy caused by the promotion to another regiment of a fellow officer.⁴² Not long after that he clearly became very anxious about seizing an opportunity that was about to occur for him to rise to the next rank – lieutenant-colonel. Faith in the system allowing officers to purchase commissions had been declining for decades and was further shaken by the evidence of some officers' incompetence during the Crimean War. Primrose's negotiations to purchase his next step took place against the background of the deliberations of the Royal Commission appointed to enquire into the system of purchase of commissions, which was established in 1856. The Commission's report came to the overall conclusion that the purchase system damaged the Army's efficiency but its deliberations became dominated by the question of how much abolition would cost, since it envisaged the need for some sort of compensation for those officers who had purchased their commissions. The question was, for the moment, settled by the Prime Minister, Lord Palmerston who in 1862 refused to take any step towards abolition, which was not brought about until 1871.⁴³

Like generations of officers before him, Primrose therefore had to navigate a system where the purchase price of each rank was openly set by government order, but where payments above the regulated price were demanded by officers who wished to increase the return from their capital investment illicitly. He laboured under two disadvantages: he was stationed in Bangalore, and therefore had no up-to-date news of what negotiations might be taking place in London, and he was, as he often emphasised, 'a poor man' – in fact precisely the sort of professional officer whom the purchase system often left languishing in the junior officer ranks.

Primrose's opportunity to go up a step arose when Lieutenant-Colonel Henry H. Skipwith, who had led the 43rd in their move to South Africa in 1851, indicated to the regiment's senior major, George Talbot in January 1856 that he was minded either to retire from the service, exchange into another regiment or go on half-pay, noting that 'as I am not particularly fond of an Indian life, I should not object to do the latter, provided I could secure a sum for doing so, viz £2000. Will you therefore kindly find out in the Regiment (quietly) what can be done in this regard?'⁴⁴ At that stage Skipwith was the regiment's only substantive lieutenant-colonel, although Talbot had become a brevet lieutenant-colonel in June 1854.

⁴² *Digest of Services of General James Primrose*, p. 397A.

⁴³ One of the Commission's detailed recommendations was the abolition of the opportunity to purchase beyond the rank of Major, but this was not taken up by the government. See C.G. Slater, 'The Problem of Purchase Abolition in the British Army 1856-1862' *Journal of the South African Military History Society*, Vol. 4, No. 6, December 1979.

⁴⁴ PP 1/5/1. Copy of letter from Lt-Col. Skipwith to Maj. Talbot, 22 January 1856.

The alternatives posed by Skipwith were in fact a misleading description of a complex procedure. In the normal course of events, Skipwith would only have received such a large sum if he had sold out and left the regiment. If he opted to exchange, he would not have received any payment from his successor, but would simply have joined – ‘exchanged into’ – a home regiment. If he had opted to go on half-pay, an officer who wished to leave half-pay status would have offered a half-and-half deal. Skipwith would then have taken that officer’s place on the half-pay list and received that half-pay, but would also have received from the in-coming officer a lump sum cash payment to compensate him for the difference in value between half-pay and the full salary of a lieutenant-colonel on the Active List.

When Primrose heard Skipwith’s news, he immediately recognised that he needed someone to find out what the officers of the Regiment who were then in England might be planning to do, and to represent his interests with Skipwith. He therefore contacted a Mr J. Maguire in London, ‘knowing the interest you have invariably shown in the affairs of the 43rd Regiment and supposing this may be enhanced by your having a son in the Regiment’.⁴⁵ He explained that the intentions of several of the captains and senior lieutenants were unknown, although some of them might be willing to purchase the commissions above theirs that would become available by Primrose vacating his majority. Primrose needed to discover if there already existed, and if not, encourage the formation of, a chain below him to fill the commissions that would become vacant if he were to purchase the lieutenant-colonelcy.

Consequently he asked Maguire to use his influence with Skipwith ‘to persuade him not to be hasty in his movements in bringing in an officer to serve [in his place], as a step of this sort once lost, years may elapse before we have another such chance’. One potential rival, Captain Greene, ‘won’t give a penny beyond Regulation’. Primrose made it clear that he was, in principle, willing to pay above the Regulation price although ‘I shall have to borrow almost all for the step’. He would therefore have to burden himself ‘with a debt of £700 or more in order to ensure my promotion’.⁴⁶

On the same day, 24th March 1856, Primrose wrote to Skipwith to alert him to the fact that Major Talbot was ‘not for purchase’ so that he himself was the person best placed to benefit from Skipwith’s retirement. He confirmed this by running through the names of all the officers in the Regiment who might be able to bid for the vacancy: none were certain to be ready to make a higher bid. He emphasised that, in his own case, raising the necessary capital would be a problem: ‘Although I have not the money still I intend to borrow what is necessary, for which I shall have to pay an enormous rate in interest, as I have no personal security to offer as my guarantee for repayment ... whatever you do I hope you will

⁴⁵ This was Lieutenant Thomas Maguire, who had already purchased two commissions in the 43rd. PP 1/5/2. Copy of letter from Primrose to J. Maguire, 24 March 1856.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

give us the refusal of the step, and not allow a stranger to come into the Regiment for a lesser sum than you would get in it'.⁴⁷

Two months after Skipwith had started sounding out his colleagues, Primrose wrote to him from Bangalore making an interesting observation about the Army's attitude to the purchase of Commissions at that time: 'The system of paying large sums extra is now nearly abolished in very many Regiments, consequently a man has to consider well before he purchases as to whether in the event of his wishing to retire himself he will get his money back again'.⁴⁸ Nevertheless, the value of keeping promotions within the regiment was something he re-emphasised in a heart-felt postscript: 'I entreat of you not to bring in another man till you find it absolutely impossible to get what you want in the Regiment. Independent of the antipathy we should have in being commanded by a person who knows nothing of the Regiment or its system I cannot say how much I should regret losing such a chance of commanding the 43rd'.

Although Primrose did eventually succeed in gaining the lieutenant-colonelcy there were many alarms and excursions along the way. In May 1856 Skipwith wrote to him that there was a difficulty in him choosing to go on half-pay because the office of the Commander-in-Chief at Horse Guards was demanding a reduction in the number of officers on half-pay following the end of the Crimean War. In June he told Primrose that he could not go on half-pay before he had served 6 years as a regimental field officer, which effectively postponed the date of his departure to the end of February 1857. Meanwhile, in India Primrose had assembled the £2,000 Skipwith wanted by putting himself down to contribute £700 with the remainder split between three officers of the regiment who might benefit from the chain of vacancies that would follow his own promotion. There was no reason for further delay.

Primrose also sought further support at home, by contacting General Yorke, by now the Military Secretary to the Commander-in-Chief, whom he had known in South Africa, and asking him to 'interest yourself in this matter' – in effect, to speak for him. At this point Major Talbot threw a spanner in the works by indicating that he was interested in the lieutenant-colonelcy, but Maguire, still working for Primrose in England, commented that although this would interfere with Primrose's campaign, Talbot was determined not to pay anything beyond the purchase price in regulations. He concluded optimistically 'I cannot but think his [Skipwith's] feelings will be in favour of the Regiment'. Primrose replied that he was still 'determined to endeavour to get the promotion let it cost what it may in reasonable terms. I know officers do occasionally raise money for such purposes and I have been told that Messrs. Cox and Co. will advance it'. He asked Maguire to sound out the bank.

In November 1856 the death of the regiment's senior lieutenant-colonel, James Brown, opened the way for Talbot to succeed him. This left Primrose still

⁴⁷ PP 1/5/3. Copy of letter from Primrose to Skipwith 24 March 1856.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

in negotiation with Skipwith, and in December he wrote to him: "If you give me six months after you appear in the Gazette and I get the Lt.Colonelcy I will guarantee the £500 myself over and above the before mentioned £900. I cannot pay the £900 down for even now I am obliged to borrow". However, a discreet auction was going on and Skipwith was obviously determined to sell out for a higher price. Primrose therefore wrote again to General Yorke asking him to use his influence with the Commander-in-Chief to sanction Skipwith's retirement on half-pay. But at this point Primrose's one family connection in England came to his rescue: his wife's uncle Mr Colman agreed to place £1,500 at his disposal with Cox and Company's bank.⁴⁹

Skipwith seems to have done exceptionally well financially from the settlement: in effect he managed to sell his lieutenant-colonelcy to Primrose, recovered the whole of his original capital investment and got himself on the half-pay list from March 1857.⁵⁰ The evidence in the Primrose papers quoted here shows that the purchase system was now sufficiently fluid to allow such anomalies to occur, particularly where officers such as Primrose saw the need to take advantage of what might be a once in a lifetime opportunity.⁵¹ On 10th March Maguire confirmed to Primrose that he had gained the lieutenant-colonelcy 'notwithstanding the numerous applicants on half-pay desirous of regiments in India'.⁵² On 20th March 1857 Primrose was gazetted a lieutenant-colonel in the 43rd. Talbot had resumed his previous secondment to the staff (where he had already served for 15 years), and this left Primrose in command of the regiment he had served for 20 years.

Although when the news of the outbreak of the Mutiny reached Bangalore, there was general alarm, Primrose's personal circumstances were of the happiest, as on 12th October he married Elizabeth de la Poer Beresford of Fenagh in County Leitrim, Ireland. He was 38 and she was 23, and had come to India with her aunt in order to stay with her uncle, Marcus Beresford, at that time General Officer Commanding in Bangalore.

The second set of papers that remain in the Primrose archive before those of the 2nd Afghan War concern his activities in central India during the Mutiny. Family legend contained half-remembered stories of the strenuous march that Primrose undertook, at the head of the 43rd, in 1857-8 from Bangalore to Kalpi. His eldest daughter Caroline was reportedly born on the journey but neither

⁴⁹ PP 1/5/12. Copy of letter from Primrose to Maguire 24 December 1856

⁵⁰ It is not clear how Skipwith succeeded in the arrangements he made, but he certainly got onto the half-pay list as shown in TNA, Half Pay Register, PMG 4/221. Entry No4139 and TNA, Half Pay Register, PMG4/223, Entry No 3714. The latter entry is annotated 'no issue to be made beyond 22 September 1859 Per Home Office Letter 27th Sept 1859' though the reason is not disclosed.

⁵¹ *Hart's Annual Army List* (London 1858), p. 35. This shows that Skipwith went on to half pay from 20 March 1857.

⁵² PP 1/5/15. Maguire to Primrose 10 March 1857.

Primrose nor his wife left any memoir of either event.⁵³ His regiment formed part of the Central Indian Forces under the overall command of General Sir Hugh Rose and had the task of pursuing and rounding up mutineers. It was under the immediate command of Brigadier Wheler.⁵⁴ In September 1858 Primrose recorded that he had been ‘mentioned in despatches in general orders in India at Allahabad’. In mid-summer 1859 he was commanding a field column stationed at Saugor and working with the splendidly named Sir Richmond Shakespear, agent to the Governor-General of Central India.⁵⁵

By October 1859 he commanded a column of the Bundelkhund Field force. The rebels were by then melting away into distant hills and jungle. In a letter to Brigadier Wheler dated 24th October 1859 Primrose gave a vivid account of his fruitless pursuit of a rebel force said to number 300 men. His soldiers pursued this group for over 16 miles near Gopulpura through deep jungle: ‘I proposed to take the rebels in both flanks, they being reported to be in considerable numbers in the ravine ... they fled at our approach ... at various intervals we came to spots where the rebels had apparently encamped in considerable numbers a few hours previously – some fires were hardly cool at which cooking had recently taken place ... their retreat must have been very rapid, some arms, several brass dishes, lotas, baskets, cloths which had been thrown away were picked up in many places ... I got on their track which I followed through the jungle with the first few men I could muster for about 9 miles, when it became entirely lost ... the main body of rebels entirely escaped with the loss of a few men ... seven armed rebels were seized The accounts they give show that the rebels are suffering greatly from sickness and want of food. They are also reported to have little or no ammunition’.⁵⁶ Thus the tide of the Mutiny melted away.

The only other document Primrose kept from this time was the final letter of thanks to the Bundelkhund Field Force from Brigadier Wheler, dated 1st December 1859, when the Force was broken up and the various elements returned to their home cantonments. Wheler recorded the collapse of the rebellion in his area: many mutineers were ‘known to have died of wounds and sickness in the jungle, and numbers have thrown away their arms in the hope of reaching their homes undetected’. He had harsh words for the local Rajah’s failure to

⁵³ One member of the regiment who did record the 1,000 mile march was Private Moses Prior, who had also served throughout the South African campaign. He wrote home: ‘*I have completed the round number of one thousand miles in pursuit of these mutineers ... we are now under canvass and have suffered much hardship trying to bear against the heat of the weather – some days the sun is 115 degrees hot ...*’. (Prior papers in Soldiers of Oxfordshire Museum archive – SOFO 2435) Letter dated 15 May 1858.

⁵⁴ Lt-Gen. Sir Francis Wheler, CB, 1st Bengal European Cavalry – See B. Robson (ed.) *Sir Hugh Rose and the Central India Campaign 1858* (Stroud Sutton Publishing Ltd for the Army Records Society, 2000), pp. 211 & 304, note 18. See also A. McK. Annand, “Lucknow” Kavanagh and the 1st European Bengal Fusiliers, Lucknow, 1858’ *JSAHR* Vol. 44 (1966), p. 180.

⁵⁵ Richmond Campbell Shakespear (1812-1861) had made his name by negotiating with the Khan of Khiva for the release of Russian captives in 1839. He was Agent to the Governor General for Central India 1849-59.

⁵⁶ PP 1/4/3. Copy of letter from Primrose to Brig. Wheler, 6 October 1859.

provide the British with the information and assistance ‘which we had a right to expect’ but concluded that ‘without that aid, and in so difficult a country, and at such a season of the year, when the grass is so high, and the jungle so full of leaf, the Brigadier is perfectly satisfied that more could not have been accomplished’.⁵⁷

With that the Primrose archive falls silent for twenty years – a period during which he and his family moved to various administrative appointments in India (1853-1868), Egypt (1870-71), Ireland (1871-74), and England (Aldershot where he commanded a Brigade from 1874-76). He would have had every right to expect that his appointment as commanding officer of a division at Pune from April 1877 would be his last, and no doubt one of his most comfortable, appointments. But he would have been wrong and the greatest challenge of his career lay ahead.

⁵⁷ PP 1/4/4. Copy of Brigade Order from Brig. Wheler, 1 December 1859 at “Camp Punnah”.

GENERAL JAMES PRIMROSE: RECONSTRUCTING A LIFE

Part 2

CAROLINE JACKSON

James Primrose's Army career ended in September 1880 when, by then a Lieutenant-General, he was relieved of his command of the British garrison of Kandahar and ordered to report to the Commander-in-Chief at the Horse Guards in London – an ignominious end to his army career. This article examines the circumstances that gave rise to his treatment.

The focus of British activity in Afghanistan had switched unexpectedly from Kabul to Kandahar in July 1880, when Ayub Khan defeated a British force under General Burrows at the battle of Maiwand on 27th July. Ayub was the younger brother of Amir Yakub Khan, who proved incapable of ruling his disturbed country and was suspected by the British of deliberately failing to stop the massacre of the Cavagnari mission in September 1879. Worn down by a task that he was inadequate to fulfil, he resigned and fled the country under British protection in October 1879. By this time the British were warming to Abdul Rahman as a plausible and friendly Amir, and Ayub's purpose in leaving Herat, where he was governor, was to defeat the British and challenge Abdul Rahman for the throne.

The papers of General Primrose are a new source. They contain the following: a small campaign jotter in which Primrose recorded his journeys from Poona to Kandahar in 1879 and 1880. It also contains a few pencil sketches. Two exercise books follow on chronologically and contain a day-to-day diary from April to August 1880; a letter written in April to his daughter Ethel (then aged 13) describing his life in Kandahar; and his own lengthy riposte to the charges brought against him by the army authorities after Sir Frederick Roberts¹ had marched from Kabul to relieve the Kandahar garrison and had defeated Ayub Khan at the Battle of Kandahar on 1st September 1880.

Between his participation in the suppression of the Indian Mutiny and his appointment to serve in Afghanistan, Primrose held a number of staff posts.² At first he remained in India as Deputy Adjutant General of the Madras army (1861-63). After a short period on half-pay he was promoted Adjutant General at Madras in 1865, and his service was recognised when he was made a Companion of the Order of the Star of India in 1867.³ In 1870 he went to Egypt as Deputy-

¹ Gen. (later FM Lord) Frederick Sleight Roberts (1832-1914) had made his name during the Mutiny and was awarded the VC at Khudaganj in 1858. He then took part in the Abyssinian war. His victory at Ali Masjid on 21 November 1878 gave the British access to Afghanistan via the Khyber Pass.

² He recorded his appointments on a copy of the Army "Record of service" form and kept it among his papers – See Primrose Papers 1/6/1. (Hereafter PP.)

³ *London Gazette*, 17 September 1867, number 23302, page 5109.

Quarter-Master-General. Here one of his duties was the supervision of any traffic still using the overland transport link between Alexandria and Suez, since the canal itself opened in 1869, but was not fully operational until 1873. In October 1874 he was back at Aldershot as commander of the 1st Infantry Brigade, and in April 1877 he became a divisional commander in the Bombay Presidency army, stationed at Poona (Pune). He rose steadily through the Army List, becoming a full Colonel in 1862, Brigadier-General in 1874 and Lieutenant-General in March 1880. But he had not commanded men in action since 1858.

He was in Poona when Lord Lytton, who had arrived as Viceroy in 1876, started implementing his 'forward policy' towards Afghanistan, as a means of forestalling what he believed was a threat to India stirred up by Russian interference there. Sher Ali, the Amir at Kabul, was reluctant to accept the British proposals for a permanent military mission in Kabul, and refused to let the British mission, led by Sir Neville Bowles Chamberlain, enter the country. At the end of October 1878, Lytton set an ultimatum of 20th November for him to agree. In the expectation of refusal, British military preparations began. The Commander-in-Chief, India was Sir Frederick Haines,⁴ who supported Lytton's policy, but often expressed concern at the inadequate number of troops he had available for a major operation in Afghanistan.

By the end of October three 'field forces' were on the move into Afghanistan. Lieutenant-General Sam Browne⁵ with the Peshawar Valley Field Force forced his way through the Khyber and on to Dacca; Lieutenant-General Frederick Roberts led the Kurram Valley Field Force and Lieutenant-General Donald Stewart⁶ moved towards Kandahar from Quetta initially with troops from the Bengal army. The original orders to each general called for a limited advance. From the outset Lytton made the limits placed on troop movements in the south very plain: 'The force to be collected at Quetta and possibly move on Kandahar is intended as a demonstration only.'⁷ Once he had reached Kandahar on 8th January 1879, Stewart received orders to push on to Kelat-i-Ghilzai and the Helmand river. Although the winter march over the mountains had been very taxing, Stewart felt that he could easily have gone as far as Ghazni but for his lack of supplies: any food and forage coming up from the south was blocked by conditions in the mountains, and the area round Kandahar could not long sustain a large armed force and followers. At the end of January he occupied Kelat-i-Ghilzai but withdrew to Kandahar a month later and felt that 'our going there has had the best effect on the people of this country, and it shows the military critics of the Continent that we can move about in the depths of winter as well as the

⁴ Sir Frederick Haines, 1819-1909. He became C-in-C India in 1876.

⁵ Sir Samuel James Browne, 1824-1901 had won his VC suppressing the Mutiny in 1858.

⁶ Sir Donald Stewart (1824-1900). An Indian Army officer, took part in the suppression of the Mutiny and, as Governor of the penal settlement on the Andaman islands, was present at the assassination of the Viceroy, Lord Mayo, in 1872.

⁷ British Library, Asia, Pacific and Africa Collections (hereafter BL, APAC), Lytton Papers, E218/126, Minute by the Viceroy, 4 September 1878.

Russians'.⁸

Primrose followed closely in Stewart's footsteps. When Stewart moved to Quetta and then on to Kandahar with the Southern Afghanistan Field Force Primrose was given command of a reserve division of Bombay and Madras troops and ordered up to Kandahar. He began his small campaign notebook when he left Poona on 4th December 1878. He described how his party took the steamer from Bombay to Karachi, and then went by road up the Indus valley to Dadur and over the Bolan pass to Quetta. Here he was clearly rather proud to receive instructions from the Government of India, which meant that he was to 'command all Scinde and arrange entirely all convoys'.⁹ Travelling northwards, they encountered isolated groups of British officers with native troops, engaged in road building, and guarding the passes. It was not comfortable going: 'January 3rd – filthy camp – dead camel near our tents. Pariah dogs fighting over it all night'. They could see their transport animals dying all round them: 'January 8th – Dadur – several transport officers here. They were located in what is called the fort – mud walls very thin. It is full of commissariat stores going on to Quetta. 14 dead camels at intervals on the road this morning, and an innumerable number of bullocks near this place. As soon as they die they are dragged a short distance and allowed to rot.'

North of Quetta they passed traces of some predecessors on this road: '17 January – Marched through Canop. Before leaving breakfasted in the fort with Col M and officers of Jacob's Rifles – queer old mud elevation very high, said to have been made by Alexander the Great'. At Goolistan Karez they met Major Sandeman,¹⁰ and a special correspondent from *The Daily Telegraph*. Sandeman had won the confidence of local tribesmen by his policy of supporting local native administration and was largely responsible for bringing Baluchistan under British control. His success was particularly important because it was necessary for all troops entering Afghanistan by the southern route to pass through the country. As Primrose noted laconically: '[Sandeman] ... [is] collecting revenue. Head men all come in. He has in fact annexed the country for General Stuart.'¹¹

The Kojak Pass, ice-bound at the top, was the last challenge before Kandahar. The cold caused a serious traffic jam: '22 January Convoys stopping the pass – obliged to remain for one night – nearly 7000 feet, detachment of 1st regiment under Captain Campbell – awfully wild place.' There were now upwards of 400 on the march, and the number of dead camels was increasing. On 23rd January he recorded –

⁸ Sir Donald Stewart to Mrs Stewart, 21 March 1879, in G.R.Elsmie *Field Marshal Sir Donald Stewart: an account of his life in his own words* (London, 1903), p. 256. Hereafter Elsmie, *Stewart*.

⁹ PP 1/2/5 Campaign notebook, entry for 20 December 1878.

¹⁰ Robert Groves Sandeman (1835-1892). His success in dealing with local tribes in Beluchistan was essential to preserving the lines of communication between India and British forces in Afghanistan.

¹¹ PP 1/2/5 Campaign notebook, entry for 20 January 1879.

crossed the Kojak – a new road is being made by Lieutenant Wills RE. Here there is a command post and detachment RA mountain battery, under Col. Tulloz. He is now away hunting up some robbers, He had a fight 2 days since. The chief of the robbers, his two sons and a nephew, were all killed. Lieutenant Wills distinguished himself – the detachment of 3rd Sind Horse would not follow him in his charge.

Primrose thought that the cavalry ‘behaved very badly’.¹² The final phase of the journey brought Primrose and his escort down to the well-watered plain leading to Kandahar. But even in camp they were not safe –

Last evening about 4 sitting in my tent, heard a number of shots in camp. Found out several Pathans had rushed the camp with tulwars and two armed with old bayonets or sticks. They succeeded in wounding 7 soldiers and 4 followers. The affair lasted a few minutes only when 5 Pathans were cut down and shot with numerous wounds.¹³

However, the journey had been in vain. By the time Primrose reached Kandahar the British were already negotiating with Yakub Khan to replace Sher Ali, his father, who was dying. The culmination of those negotiations was the Treaty of Gandamak, signed on 26th May 1879 by Yakub Khan and Sir Louis Cavagnari as representative of the British government. The main points of the agreement were that the British would control Afghan foreign policy, with a right to station a representative at Kabul; they would also control the Khyber and Michni passes; Yakub Khan was to receive British financial support.

The immediate consequence of the new relationship between Britain and Yakub Khan was that Primrose had to retrace his steps. On 11th February he recorded ‘General Stewart has orders to send the greater portion of his force back to India ... I have to give up my command and return to Sind ... I can only suppose that I am to return from whence I came and then I shall on arrival ask the CinC India to allow me to go back to Poona.’¹⁴ On 15th February 1879 Primrose left Kandahar, though the notebook shows he was unwell. While at Quetta he had written ‘am very seedy with diarrhoea for two days ... Riding 10 miles was painful work – had to lie down under the shadow of my horse on the way. I took chlorodyne as soon as we camped – and repeated the dose 3 hours after’.¹⁵ The treatment worked. ‘Took chlorodyne 3 times which has a wonderfully good effect’. This effect was not surprising given that its principal ingredients were laudanum (an alcoholic solution of opium), cannabis and chloroform. The notebook also shows that he was a reluctant recruit to Lytton’s brand of aggressive

¹² Ibid, entry for 23 January 1879.

¹³ Ibid. entry for 7 February 1879.

¹⁴ Ibid. entry for 11 February 1879.

¹⁵ Ibid. entry for 25 January 1879.

imperialism. On 6th March he reached Dadur and dined with General Phayre¹⁶, commander of the Bombay division's reserve force in Sind. 'He had received a telegram from the AG in India to say that my services and Colonel Green's were placed at the disposal of the Bombay government, so hoorrah, we move straight to Poona.'¹⁷ The notebook concludes with a sketch of a 'head man of the Balooch Village'. Primrose probably felt he had put Afghanistan behind him for good.

On 3rd September 1879, Sir Louis Cavagnari, his staff and small Indian escort were murdered in Kabul. The murders supplied a clearer justification for British forces to operate in Afghanistan than had been the case a year earlier and their withdrawal had to be reversed. The British also faced the problem of finding a suitable Afghan candidate to support as a new ruler for the country. Primrose and his force therefore marched north once more. He was now under orders to command the troops in Southern Afghanistan and the line of communication between Sibi and Kandahar. The British government's policy now seemed to favour permanent occupation of Kandahar. Primrose replaced General Sir Donald Stewart who was ordered to move his force of 7,000 up to support General Roberts in Kabul. Stewart left Kandahar on 29th March 1880 and had to fight his way through to Ghazni, defeating an enemy force with an estimated strength of 12,000-15,000 before he could enter the city.

Primrose's appointment owed more to the internal politics of British forces in India than to his own talents. There had already been trouble over the dominance of Indian Army officers in the early appointments for the campaign. As J. E. Hills wrote: 'a letter from Horse Guards at home pointed out that all commands of importance had been placed in the hands of the so-called Indian service (Stewart, Roberts, Phayre) and requested that a so-called British officer should be nominated to the command of the Bombay Field Force'.¹⁸ Lieutenant-General Sir Henry Warre, the Commander-in-Chief, Bombay,¹⁹ approved Primrose's appointment as 'the only British officer of sufficient rank and army standing to proceed to Kandahar'.²⁰ Sir Frederick Haines raised no objection, although he expressed concern many times after Primrose was appointed that his force was too small.²¹ Sir Donald Stewart stressed Primrose's ignorance of the situation at Kandahar, but felt that the presence of Oliver St. John as political officer there meant that 'the arrangement is a very good one'.²² H.B. Hanna, commenting

¹⁶ Sir Robert Phayre (1820-1897), an Indian army officer. Took part in 1st Afghan War, suppression of the Indian Mutiny and the Abyssinian expedition. In January 1880 he took command of the reserve division responsible for the line of communication from Quetta to Kandahar. Floods and lack of transport meant that he lost out to Roberts in the race to Kandahar in August 1880.

¹⁷ PP 1/2/5 Campaign notebook, entry for 6 March 1879.

¹⁸ J. Hills, *The Bombay Field force 1880 and the battle of Maiwand* (London, 1900), p. 9.

¹⁹ Lt. Gen. Sir Henry Warre (1819-1895). He had commanded his regiment (the 57th) in the Crimea and in the Taranaki war in New Zealand.

²⁰ National Army Museum (hereafter NAM), Warre Papers, 811222-54-671 E.A. Whitmore to Warre, 4 November 1880.

²¹ R Rait, *Life of Field Marshal Sir Frederick Haines* (London, 1911), p. 300.

²² Emslie, *Stewart*, p. 315.

waspishly well after the event, pointed out that Primrose was given a strong staff 'to neutralise any effects that might be expected to flow from putting a weak man in a position that called for an exceptionally strong one'.²³ On 16th April 1880 the Commander-in-Chief at the Horse Guards, the Duke of Cambridge, indicated his assent to Haines and wrote to Warre, 'that I am glad that General Primrose has been selected to take charge of it [the Kandahar column]'.²⁴ No one questioned the state of Primrose's physical health. He left Poona on 11th March 1880.

His second journey to Afghanistan was less arduous than the first because army engineers had carried out important improvements. The extension of the railway from Sukkur to Sibi ('awfully hot – nothing but sand – frightful place') saved eight days. Gradually Primrose was meeting, on these journeys, the men with whose names his own would always be associated – 'Stayed with Colonel Nuttall and dined at the mess of the Sind Horse ... General Burrows²⁵ in command of the new line of road ...'.²⁶

Primrose's arrival in Kandahar coincided with the General Election at home. This resulted in a major defeat for the Conservative government whose policies had sent British troops into Afghanistan and gave the Liberal government an overall majority of 52 seats. The Viceroy, Lord Lytton, described this as 'an unaccountable collapse', and prepared to hand over to his successor, Lord Ripon, who arrived at Simla in June. There seemed nothing likely to prevent the rapid withdrawal of British troops which the Liberals desired. The most urgent question was to agree terms with Abdul Rahman. These were concluded satisfactorily and he was recognised by the British government as 'Amir of Kabul' at a durbar held in Kabul on 22nd July.

A month after he reached Kandahar, Primrose wrote to his daughter Ethel in England telling her: 'My command is more important than what I had last year at Kandahar ... I have more than 12,000 men in this force – artillery, cavalry and infantry – indeed I may be considered a great swell if you don't mind me using a slang expression.' He mentioned the constant threat of attacks by fanatics although he hoped that the 'great battle' fought by Stewart at Ghazni 'will have the effect of keeping the people quiet and tend to a termination of the war'. His own personal safety, he re-assured her, was guaranteed whenever he went out by '30 mounted men and a company of infantry who are always ready as my personal escort'. He described the difficulties of communication: mail took 12 days to arrive from Bombay 'but it is somewhat uncertain as we have to send mounted guards to escort it from post to post along the line'. His own spirits were drooping already: letters from his wife and elder children in Bombay were highly valued

²³ H.B. Hanna, *The Second Afghan War*, Vol. III, (London, 1910) p. 460.

²⁴ NAM, Warre Papers, 8112-54-701, Duke of Cambridge to Warre, 16 April 1880.

²⁵ George Reynolds Scott Burrows (1827-1917). Before being posted to Kandahar he had been Quartermaster General of the Bombay Army. He had never commanded troops in action before Maiwand.

²⁶ PP 1/2/5 Campaign diary, entry for 20 March 1880.

because 'they are the only pleasure I have'.²⁷

Primrose's diary begins on 17th April 1880 and ends on 11th August. The final entries are sketchy as pressure on him mounted. The name of Major Oliver St. John occurs frequently. As the political officer he was responsible for collecting intelligence about the loyalties and actions of local tribes people, but some felt that he was the wrong man for the job. St. John's previous experience lay in telegraphy and military mapping, and in 1875 he had become principal of Mayo College at Ajmer, which had been set up by the British to educate the sons of Indian princes. In 1880 he was promoted brevet lieutenant-colonel at the instigation of Sir Alfred Lyall, Foreign Secretary to the Government of India. Despite these good connections he did not command universal support. Colonel James Hills thought that the division of responsibilities when Stewart left Kandahar was 'a momentous false step 'since Primrose was placed in military command while the strategic control of the campaign was entrusted to 'a young Major of Engineers whose last duties had been purely civil'.²⁸ The Reverend Alfred Cane, chaplain to the forces at Maiwand, observed St John at close quarters and recorded that 'His aim is to get the Wali [of Kandahar] made Governor of Herat as well. A wild scheme, which the present government is unlikely to support.'²⁹ In the event, St. John did fail to alert Primrose of Ayub Khan's intentions and was lucky to leave Afghanistan with his reputation intact.

Primrose's immediate priority was to strengthen the morale of the Governor of Kandahar province, Sirdar Sher Ali, and his forces. Thus on the evening of 17th April Primrose, St. John and others visited the Sirdar who promised to find those responsible for killing a British Major at Dubrai. Primrose commented tartly: 'If he does, heaven help them. They would be put to death at once. I can quite understand his sincerity as he owes everything to the British and if we left the country he would be compelled to leave it too.'³⁰ From the start Primrose was wary about undertaking major improvements to the existing defences of Kandahar, and he vetoed the more expensive works recommended by Colonel Hills, the Chief Engineer: 'It appears to me useless to expend a lot of money on the Fort when I believe our holding it is merely temporary, for if we remain in Kandahar the cantonment would not be built near the City.'³¹ As Primrose was to point out later when his policy was under attack, General Stewart had also seen no reason to improve the defences. Soon after his arrival and on the basis of the intelligence available to him, Primrose completely misread the potential threat to Kandahar, and thought that General Phayre was wrong to raise the alarm:

The reports he [General Phayre] had received were greatly exaggerated, and

²⁷ PP 1/2/3, Letter to Ethel, 30 April 1880.

²⁸ Hills, op. cit, p. 6. In fact St. John was 43 years old in 1878.

²⁹ B. Robson (ed.), 'The Kandahar Letters of the Reverend Alfred Cane', *JSAHR*, Vol. LXIX, No. 279, p. 149.

³⁰ Primrose *Diary*, Vol. 1, entry for 17 April 1880 – See PP 1/2/1.

³¹ Hills, op.cit.,

*the telegrams which he had sent to Simla and the C in C bear the same stamp. In fact he thinks the whole country is up and that Kandahar is threatened and that General Brooke who is on his way will surely be attacked ... in fact he and Brooke are in a state of alarm, needlessly.*³²

St. John was also feeding Primrose inaccuracies, and over-emphasising the effect of Stewart's victory:

*Colonel St. John tells me that the force in Argestan has dissolved itself and all the people gone to their villages and that probably the people near Chaman will give in also. I believe all this is the result of the victory near Ghazni.*³³

It is also clear that Primrose did not believe that his orders justified him- or others – taking the battle to the enemy:

*17 April Received telegram from Sir R. Sandeman. He is pressing for a large force. I think he has quite enough for defence of the railway – for which the troops are alone to be employed. I believe he would like to have a number of regiments so that he might make raids in the country adjacent. But the Government has positively forbidden us to undertake any minor operation so long as operations are going on at the front.*³⁴

Stewart's 'glorious victory' at Ghazni was welcomed optimistically by Primrose as 'one which must tend to a termination of the war'. Encouraged by St. John he permitted a modest demonstration of British power: 'The headquarters and remainder of the 7th Fusiliers marched in from Quetta this morning. I made them come through the city as a little demonstration, which I was told by Col. St. John had a very good effect, for the inhabitants, not seeing many of our troops, began to imagine we had but a very small force here.'³⁵ He was also commanded by telegram from Simla to fire a salute for the fall of Ghazni.

With the apparent arrival of a more peaceful time, Primrose lost the battle to contain Sandeman, since he was ordered by General Stewart to 'grant Sir R. Sandeman every assistance I could in his proceedings with the Tribes near the railway, the prohibition as regards minor operations being removed. I can't quite understand my having anything to say to the Reserve Division so I have asked for definite instructions on this subject.'³⁶ Until late May, the main problems for Primrose came from the continual cutting by hostile tribesmen of the telegraph wires leading back to India, and from occasional assaults on isolated groups of British troops inside and outside the city. Once the situation in Kandahar became

³² Primrose diary, 20 April 1880.

³³ Primrose diary, 27 April 1880.

³⁴ Primrose diary, 17 April 1880.

³⁵ Primrose diary, 23 April 1880.

³⁶ Ibid.

more tense, with the increased hostility of religious fanatics and the emergence of Ayub Khan from Herat, Primrose's apparent casualness in dealing with telegrams, particularly those from the government in Simla, became irritating to his superiors: Lord Ripon repeatedly asked Haines if there had been any communication with Primrose in the weeks after Maiwand, and Haines replied sarcastically: 'It is wonderful under the circumstances in which he was placed how very little we have received from General Primrose.'³⁷ After the war, when his role was being scrutinised, one of the complaints against him was that he failed to keep in constant touch by telegraph; this was not a complaint ever levelled against his contemporary and future rescuer, General Roberts. The latter took great care to keep the telegraph lines open and in constant use, and also used heliographic communication when this was possible.

Primrose's superiors at Simla and in London probably under-estimated the extreme difficulty of keeping the telegraph open. But there was also a psychological difference: Roberts was ahead of his time in appreciating the importance of communication and, whenever he could, sent home a stream of despatches to his superiors. Primrose was fatalistic when the telegraph failed, and perhaps even welcomed the peace such failure brought. In his 'Statement of Events', written after his dismissal, he refers to the fact that the Government in Simla was 'incessantly' supplied with every detail of information, and 'were in the habit of exercising control over all my operations and movements'.³⁸

While inspecting the garrison and maintaining standards of alertness Primrose sometimes discovered its strength was more apparent than real: 'This morning I inspected the whole of the artillery – heavy battery with four 40 lb howitzers in heavy marching order – each drawn by 20 bullocks! This battery is useless here. They are only fit for siege purposes.' Primrose's troops were still a mixed force whose units were drawn from the Bengal and Bombay armies. During his inspections he found in 'good order' the 19th (Punjab) Regiment of Bengal Native Infantry, the 1st Bombay Grenadiers and the 30th Regiment of Bombay Native Infantry, known by the name of its founder, John Jacob, as 'Jacob's Rifles'.³⁹

It was during these quiet days that Primrose recorded the ceremony organised for Sher Ali, when Lord Lytton made him Wali of Kandahar:

11th May It was decided that this morning some valuable presents, which had been sent from the Viceroy, should be presented to the Wali of Kandahar on his being nominated by the Viceroy to that rank, and a letter from Lord Lytton was also to be read in grand durbar from the Viceroy conveying the authority of the Queen. I ordered a Guard of Honour from the 66th Regiment with Band and Queen's Colour to parade in the Courtyard of the Residence of Shere Ali Khan in the City. And I requested all the heads of department in the various

³⁷ NAM, Haines Papers 8108-9-30 Haines to Ripon, 8 August 1880.

³⁸ PP 1/2/4 *Statement of events*, page 7, paragraph 3 "My Reply".

³⁹ Primrose diary, 3 May 1880.

offices of the Staff to meet me at 7am and we rode into the city with Col. St. John and the Political Officer, escorted by my cavalry escort of the Poona Horse. We were received by the Sirdar and his family of sons and grandsons and there were a great many of the principal inhabitants assembled to do honour to the ceremony. ... The Wali was dressed in uniform of a loose sort of coat – long tunic of dark green embroidered in gold, with a dark coloured helmet (Russian). All the officers were shown to chairs, while the retinue swells sat eastern fashion on the ground – outside and facing the open room in which were sat a large number of great people – beyond them was the Guard of Honour and behind them on a raised platform under a big tent the band was placed. After we had all had cups of tea (which by the bye were also handed to the Guard of Honour) Col. St. John made a short speech to the Wali and the Assembly in Persian, and then the letter from the Viceroy (translated into that language) was read by Col. St. John's political assistant, a Persian gentleman named Nawab Hussein Ali Khan (such a nice person) and at its conclusion the Guard presented arms to the Sirdar and a salute of 21 guns (to which the Wali is entitled in his own country) was fired from a half battery of artillery which had come into the chief square in the city for the purpose. The presents were then produced – the first was a splendid sword and belt. The former had an embossed silver hilt, velvet scabbard and silver ornaments. This I presented to him with a few complimentary words. When he replied he would always draw it on the side of the English. He was also given a lovely gold repeater [watch] set with diamonds and a long massive gold chain, a silver salver about 2 foot long, a silver ewer etc a kind of washing apparatus, a large carriage clock and a bundle of pieces of silks, velvets, damask, which were for the ladies of the establishment. The total value was about 10,000 rupees – not a bad little present.⁴⁰

The next day General Burrows arrived to command the 1st Infantry Brigade, and joined Primrose in receiving an official visit from the Wali. Three days later the garrison was increased by the arrival of the 3rd Sind Horse – ‘horses in splendid order though the heat had been terrible in Sind’ and the 7th [Bombay] Fusiliers – whom he found ‘a weakly lot and very undersized: ‘the men are sickly having over 50 in hospital and the officers are sickly too. I don't think they should have been sent on service as they had suffered considerably from the climate.’⁴¹

General Phayre's communications continued to annoy him (18th May):

Received a telegram from Genl Phayre regarding the requirements for the defence of his line of communication. He modestly asks for 5150 bayonets and 885 cavalry besides mountain guns. I can't agree with him as to the necessity of this force but consider what he has ample – viz 4 mountain guns, 779 sabres and 4,393 bayonets. He thinks only of himself ... if I attended to his requisition and

⁴⁰ Primrose diary, 11 May 1880.

⁴¹ Primrose diary, 14 May 1880.

*drew on the Reserve Division I should denude Sind of all the Native infantry and leave only half a British regiment, 3 batteries of artillery and some cavalry for its defence. Bombay could send no more for I think the Presidency has been drawn almost dry already.*⁴²

He was at this stage being advised, presumably by St. John, that ‘things are quiet’ in Herat. He believed that ‘Ayub Khan has quite given up all idea of coming in this direction with any force’.⁴³ However, the Kandahar garrison was constantly vulnerable to attacks by individual fanatics. Those caught were hanged and their bodies cremated.

However, a week later the picture changed:

*Last evening Lt. Col St. John had a visit from the Wali who brought letters he had received from Ayub Khan from Herat, abusing him in no measured terms for his friendship with the British, calling on him to rise and join in an attack on us, that it was all now settled between the Kabul regiments and his men, and that he intended to lead them to attack Ghirisk on the Helmand. If I have to do this my force will be so reduced at Kandahar that I shall be compelled to draw on the Reserve however disinclined I am to move men at this season of the year when the heat is so intense (in the hospital tents here the thermometer rises to 110 degrees) I think the Wali himself should guard his own position at Ghirisk but of course he would like us to do this for him. I doubt very much the Government ordering our occupation of Ghirisk – I feel pretty confident Ayub Khan won’t come to Kandahar. He is simply trying it on with Sirdar Sher Ali who is too wise to listen to him. I think a very few weeks will see something definite arranged about this war. A telegram received today from England dated 23 May says “Ripon instructed to close war earliest possible time. Evacuation commences when strong ruler found.” The strong ruler will I fancy be Abdul Rahman. I am anxious to know if Kandahar will be held. I am inclined to think we shall go back.*⁴⁴

On 31st May the Wali and his force of 1,200 men left Kandahar for Jemindawar, part of the country bordering on Herat territory. Ostensibly the purpose was the enforcement of revenue collection. However, Primrose sensed that ‘a deeper game’ was being played, and that the Wali wanted to annexe Herat. The threat from Ayub Khan was still discounted. Although he had left Herat and advanced one day’s march towards Kandahar, Primrose recorded calmly that ‘It is supposed his army will dissolve itself and that the Cabul regiments will go to that city!’ In Kandahar he noted that one of the Afghan chieftains dismissed the rumour that Ayub was advancing on Kandahar with 60,000 men, saying ‘Ayub Khan has no

⁴² Primrose diary, 18 May 1880.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Primrose diary, 25 May 1880.

money – war can't be carried on without it'.⁴⁵

Isolated in a sea of rumour and misinformation, the heat still intense, the Kandahar garrison nevertheless seized the next chance to put on a patriotic show. On the Queen's birthday a Review was held 'the usual salutes and feu de joie were fired and a simple march past afterwards. Sher Ali and his retinue were present'. Primrose recorded an act which gave his men a rare opportunity to show their gratitude to him – 'to commemorate the day I ordered each man who wished for it an extra 'tot' of rum. I hope the Government won't make me pay for it, but I don't much care if they do. I know it cheered up some of the men who were heard to say "We gave three cheers for the Queen this morning – now we'll give three cheers for our General"'.⁴⁶

His next concern was the supply of food and water for the garrison. Scurvy had broken out among the troops, so their diet was supplemented with lemon juice. There were great difficulties with the water supply, as local farmers diverted water to their own crops, and there was no independent water supply within the British cantonments. Primrose entrusted this question to the political officers to negotiate locally because the only other option was to send armed parties to prevent the diversion of water.⁴⁷ Opportunistic attacks by individuals on members of the garrison continued. One 'Ghazi'⁴⁸ was apprehended after attempting to kill a grass cutter. 'He had apparently sold a cow to purchase a sword with which he determined to kill somebody. He was a dirty looking scoundrel.' Primrose agreed with St. John that the man should be executed. A few days later his diary contains an entry describing the casual use of electric shock – torture – to obtain information:

*Nothing of importance lately except two affairs of juvenile Ghazis. The first, a small boy about 10 years old, tried to kill a dooly bearer by stabbing him with one of Rogers's clasp knives. The man is not much hurt. The boy was made a prisoner at once and since then endeavours have been made to discover who influenced him to make the attack. The young rascal told lies without end, till the Doctor gave him a shock with a galvanic battery which so astonished him that he at once said he would tell the truth. He disclosed who his father was – a resident of Kandahar who has been taken up by the Police – and Col. St. John is seeing if he can do anything in the matter. But what a fanatical religion this must be which makes murderers of boys because they think they are certain to go to Paradise.*⁴⁹

A week later a teenage boy attempted to kill a soldier of the 66th Regiment in the

⁴⁵ Primrose diary, 30 May 1880.

⁴⁶ Primrose diary, 29 May 1880.

⁴⁷ Primrose diary, 9 June 1880.

⁴⁸ 'Ghazi' is the English version of an Arabic word, meaning a Muslim warrior who takes part in religious warfare. The British noted that some of those who charged their positions in Afghanistan were not armed but still came on with fanatical zeal- and were mown down in large numbers.

⁴⁹ Primrose diary, 9 June 1880.

fort. He was stopped and brought before Primrose to say whether he should be hanged. Primrose preferred to send him to prison:

*Poor little wretch – he could not be more than 15 years old I think. He seemed in a great fright. I could not consent to so young a lad undergoing the extreme penalty of the law. Col. St. John quite coincided in my view and I think he will be sent to the Andamans where he may be taught to live an honest life.*⁵⁰

The diary for June contains references to his feeling unwell: On June 4th he was ‘very seedy all day from an attack of diarrhoea’; the next day he was ‘all right today but shaky’. The wider political situation gave him high hopes of leaving Kandahar in the near future:

*From telegrams received this morning it would appear [to indicate that] the Ministry are determined to evacuate the whole of Afghanistan as soon as arrangements can be made – Kandahar as well ... The Treaty of Gandamak must be considered to have ceased to exist and Lord Ripon to take the opinion of military men as to where our boundary should be – I conclude therefore we shall be out of Kandahar by October or very soon after.*⁵¹

From 15th to 26th June the diary breaks off, and by the time it resumes on 27th June the situation had completely changed. In short entries Primrose recorded the news that Ayub Khan had left Herat ‘with the intention of marching on Kandahar – 30 guns, several regiments and large force of cavalry’.⁵² Colonel St. John initially thought that ‘it seems probable that nothing will be done. In the meantime the excitement occasioned here by the menaced attack seems dying away’.⁵³ But Ripon received confirmation from the British Minister at Tehran that on 25th June Ayub Khan had marched for Kandahar ‘in force’.⁵⁴ The British response, agreed upon by Haines and Stewart, was to order General Burrows to take a brigade from Kandahar towards the Helmund, but not to cross that river.

This force left Kandahar on 1st July, aiming to strengthen the wavering morale of the Wali’s troops (who were already in the field but in a potentially mutinous state). Ripon then became concerned that Burrows’ force was too small: as he wrote to Haines on 4 July:

Are you satisfied with the strength of General Primrose’s force as regards European troops after the reinforcements now under orders to join it shall have arrived? I cannot help being a little nervous on this point if any real difficulty should arise as I understand that General Primrose will only have 3 European

⁵⁰ Primrose diary, 15 June 1880.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Primrose diary, 27 June 1880.

⁵³ Lord Ripon’s “memorandum on the course of events connected Ayub Khan’s invasion of Southern Afghanistan” 31 July 1880, p.1 – See BM Add Mss 43574 Ripon Papers.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

*battalions after he has received the contemplated reinforcements. No one can be more anxious to avoid expense than I am or more reluctant to move European troops through the Baluchistan desert at this time of year but with actual operations impending the first thing is to be safe. If you say that we are so I shall be quite content but I should like to have your own opinion on this point.*⁵⁵

By mid July Ripon noted that Burrows appeared to have lost contact with Ayub's army. He recorded his concern that if Ayub Khan's real motivation was to bid for the Amirship in Kabul he might

*...give us the slip, pass by us to the north, and appear in the neighbourhood of Ghazni proclaiming that a British force had retired before him and that he had made good his march in spite of them. It is needless to point out what an injurious effect the success of the latter attempt would had had on the political situation in Kabul.*⁵⁶

Burrows took with him from Kandahar a force of just over 2,400 men. He was to face an Afghan army of 30,000. Primrose, left in Kandahar, had 2,300 men available, although many of these were sick or wounded. Given the subsequent attacks on Primrose's reputation as an inadequate leader it is interesting to note that he could at this difficult stage, command considerable support in those he led. Major Walter Ashe, who was in Kandahar, noted that:

*In spite of the weakness of our force at Kandahar it has been decided, not by General Primrose, who is too prudent a leader to incur needless risks, but by what is pleasantly called 'high authority' to despatch General Burrows to Girishk, on the Helmund river, to effect a junction with Wali Shere Ali in order to check the advance of Ayub Khan.*⁵⁷

The cavalry under Brigadier General Nuttall left the next day and on the 6th July Brigadier General Burrows marched out, leading the 66th Foot, the 1st Bombay Grenadiers and the 30th Native Infantry. Troops were ordered up from Quetta to plug the gap they left at Kandahar. On 14th July Primrose received the news that the Wali's troops had mutinied:

*... on receiving orders to retire across the Helmand river and join General Burrows [sic] camp. They were joined by the battery of artillery – the guns we had made him a present of some few months since. A force at once started in pursuit – recaptured the guns and killed 60 of the mutineers... two 40 pounders sent in to the Citadel [at Kandahar] this morning has had a quieting effect.*⁵⁸

⁵⁵ NAM, Haines Papers, 8108-9-29 Ripon to Haines 4 July 1880.

⁵⁶ Ripon Memorandum, p. 6.

⁵⁷ Walter Ashe, *Personal Records of the Kandahar campaign* (London, 1881), p. 4.

⁵⁸ Primrose diary, 15 July 1880.

He knew also that General Burrows had been forced by paucity of supplies to retire about 35 miles; this move had, under the circumstances, been approved by the Commander-in-Chief, India. Primrose knew by now that the country round Kandahar was in a ferment and ready to rise. Attacks by individual Ghazis in and out of the city became more frequent. General Phayre reported to army headquarters at Poona that

*...there is much excitement among the tribes and Moolahs of influence are moving about preaching jihad. The movement in Ayub's favour is more extended and determined than I think is believed at Kandahar.*⁵⁹

Then on 28th July the blow fell and the news of the defeat at Maiwand the previous day reached Kandahar. Primrose's diary entry for that day records:

At 2am I was awoken by Burnett with the news that General Burrows had had a battle with Ayub and that the former was totally defeated. The reports brought in were awful as regards the number of men and officers killed. They left the field in the most frightful confusion and parties were dropping in all morning thoroughly exhausted from a desperate march of 40 miles without water. It was believed that Ayub's army were in pursuit. I at once ordered the evacuation of the cantonment, an enormous straggling place that would have taken many men and horses to defend. I had only the heavy Battery 5/11 and 4 guns C/2, part of the 7th Fusiliers and part of the 4th Rifles only, with part of the Poona horse and some few of the Sind horse and 3rd Cavalry. The base hospital was full of sick. Before daybreak the guns were on the move, followed by stores, baggage tents of hospital etc. I sent out General Brooke with a small force towards Kokram to cover the retreat and all morning streams of men in small parties arrived – all in a state of utmost exhaustion. General Burrows and Nuttall arrived in the course of the morning. The accounts given by the former were terrible. He was marching toward Malmund with his whole force, baggage etc. After about 11 miles he came on a portion of the enemy as he supposed, but it was in reality the whole of Ayub's army in position. He got his men into line and the fight went on for 3 hours – Ayub had at least 30 guns, well served, amongst which were some 12lb Armstrong guns, an immense line of infantry and swarms of cavalry, with Ghazis innumerable who came on in the most determined manner. General Burrows made his force lie down and although the shower of shot and shell were incessant few men were lost, but our artillery suffered severely. In fact they bore the brunt of the battle, losing 50 horses in the fight and all the officers with the exception of Capt Slade either killed or wounded. The 30th NI (2 companies) had been placed on the left of the line. The 66th fought grandly, so did the 1st Fusiliers. The Ghazis and infantry

⁵⁹ NAM, Warre Papers, 8112-54-595, translation of cipher telegram to Army Poona from Gen. Phayre at Quetta, 21 July 1880.

were mown down by line upon line – still they came on – 200 dead bodies were seen immediately in front of the company of the 66th commanded by Capt Quarry. After 3 hours hard fighting the 30th NI on the left were seized with a panic (their left had been thrown back) they rushed on the 1st Grenadiers were instantly in confusion and they retired en mass upon the 66th who could not be restrained, and a general rush to the rear was the consequence and then came fearful slaughter. The Cavalry had previously made a most ineffective charge. It was not a charge only a demonstration. General B galloped up to them [and] called on the Brigadier Genl of Cavalry to charge as the only chance of retrieving the day. The reply was the men were totally out of hand and would not charge, but they cut away to the rear and joined in the flight. They had only lost about 38 men! Then came most awful confusion. Officers behaved most gallantly – tried to stop the men and got them to form a line but it was hopeless. Of course this was the chance for the Ghazis and men were slaughtered indiscriminately – 10 officers [of the] 66th were killed. Altogether there were 22 officers killed and a few, 7 I think, managed to get back wounded. The descriptions of how they got through the night were harrowing. They had commenced the march in the morning about 6 – marched 10 miles – then had to fight for four hours and then came the retreat. Many did not get a drop of water after the battle till they arrived at the Arghendab a distance of near 30 miles. The despatches from the Generals I have not yet received, but I suspect the two Cavalry colonels, Col Malcolmson and Major Curry will be mentioned in no flattering terms. If the 30th NI had not bolted and only one good charge [had been] made by the Cavalry I firmly believe the victory would have been on our own side.⁶⁰

It was obviously vital to get the news of the defeat through to the Commander-in-Chief in Simla. The telegraph had been cut but repairs kept it open for half an hour, and ‘a short telegram’ was sent to Simla and to General Phayre in Quetta, who told Primrose ‘he was starting at once to form a column to come to our assistance’. This telegram, sent in his name, became a bone of contention in the controversy about Primrose’s dismissal because many felt that the language used was unduly alarmist – and defeatist. As recorded in the official papers it read:

Terrible disaster. General Burrows’ force annihilated. We are going into citadel. General Phayre telegraphed to collect what forces he can and march on Kandahar. Posts being strengthened at Chaman. Message ends. I have telegraphed Simla. We can send another brigade if necessary.⁶¹

However true the report was, the British authorities did not like their disasters to be so blatantly proclaimed. Lord Ripon wrote to Sir Frederick Haines: ‘I must

⁶⁰ Primrose diary, 28 July 1880.

⁶¹ *Papers relating to the advance of Ayooob Khan on Kandahar* (Command 2690- 1880), paper 8.

confess that the whole course of recent telegrams sent off by General Primrose have seriously shaken my confidence in that officer.⁶² It was almost six weeks, and well after Primrose's dismissal, before Major Frederick Adam, Assistant-Quarter-Master-General in Kandahar, admitted, in a letter to the editor of *The Bombay Gazette* on 9th October 1880, that he was

...the responsible person for having telegraphed that the Brigade was 'annihilated'. When the report was first received, it was so described, and, knowing that the wire would almost immediately be cut, I hastened to write down what had been reported. Subsequent telegrams modified the first report, and were sent off as news came in until the wire was cut for good.

He noted that 'exception' had been taken to the wording, and said that 'the explanation I consider due to General Primrose and I have no hesitation in assuming responsibility for what was my act'.⁶³ But the damage to Primrose's reputation had been done.

Once Maiwand had occurred, the garrison at Kandahar had to work hard to abandon the cantonments outside the city wall, and bring into the citadel all the men, and as much of the baggage and equipment and supplies they could, because Ayub Khan's arrival was imminent. On paper, Primrose had available 2,891 British troops, and 3,655 Native Infantry and Cavalry, but the number of sick reduced these figures considerably, especially in the British regiments.⁶⁴ Hills reckoned that they had only 1,500 infantry, 500 cavalry and 6 guns.⁶⁵ He believed that Ayub had 36 guns and 6,000 infantry. Primrose's diary from here on consists of brief entries recording this work;

29 July A few shots fired in the night, Bazaar and cantonment fired but of course the latter could not be much damaged. Camels all taken to south west corner of the town. Parties engaged repairing walls of town and citadel. Troops all day under arms. Decided on turning out of the city all the Afghans. About 500 people expelled. Telegraph wire laid round the city walls with stations at each gate.

30 July working parties engaged clearing ground in front of Kabul and Herat gates. Some of the enemy's cavalry appeared near old cavalry lines.

August 1 Many more Pathans expelled from the city after diligent search.

August 3rd Walls all round being loopholed properly arrangements of Brigadiers general.

⁶² NAM, Haines Papers, 8108-9-30 Ripon to Haines, 1 August 1880.

⁶³ PP 1/2/4, *Statement of events*, p. 17.

⁶⁴ *Abridged Official account of the 2nd Afghan War* (London 1908), p. 649.

⁶⁵ Hills, *op.cit.*, p.18

August 6th A large encampment of enemy near Picket Hill ... tents etc evidently those which fell into their hands after late action.

That day, Primrose received his first information from inside enemy lines when a soldier of the 1st Grenadiers appeared and was lifted over the walls, since it was too dangerous to open the gates:

He says an officer and a sergeant are prisoners. It is presumed to be Lt. Maclean RA. From information received from him I have ordered the arrest of a swell native, Sultan Mahmoud, who is said to have written to Ayub that he will open the gates.

The next day they found themselves besieged:

Ayub's army has arrived and are encamped behind and to the right of Picket hill. In the day time we fired some shots into his camp which took such good effect that we saw the men rushing to the cover of some trees and soon about 12 guns followed by a string of infantry marched away out of range.⁶⁶

The interval between the battle and the start of the siege also saw the return of the Wali, who supported Primrose's expulsion of the Pathans. Because he needed intelligence about what was happening in civilian Kandahar, on 5th August Primrose summoned the Cutwall,⁶⁷ whom he had arrested and placed under guard in the fort two days before, to a meeting in the presence of St. John, Brooke and Burrows. The meeting was fruitless:

I made the interpreter explain to him that there were undoubtedly suspicious circumstances connected with his late conduct, that he had been directed by the Wali as well as by the military authorities to point out the Pathans in the City with a view to their being turned out, that he had undoubtedly neglected to do this ... and that although he had accompanied General Brooke for the purpose of pointing out the disaffected, he had passed over very many who were afterwards discovered and expelled the city ... He of course denied all knowledge of disaffection or rising, said that every Pathan had gone ... nothing but protestations were to be got out of him ... he was sent back to his residence under guard.⁶⁸

One organisational change that Primrose recorded was 'to assume chief political power'. This meant that all reports, telegrams etc would be sent out in his name, while Colonel St. John took the position of his staff officer in the political department.⁶⁹

⁶⁶ Primrose diary, 7 August 1880.

⁶⁷ Originally a Persian word, meaning Chief Police Officer of a town or city.

⁶⁸ Primrose diary, 5 August 1880.

⁶⁹ Primrose diary, 1 August 1880.

After the arrival of Ayub Khan the garrison at Kandahar was largely isolated from the world. The telegraph was cut and letters carried successfully by messenger were rare. On 11th August Primrose received the news that the Government of India had sanctioned the abandonment of the railway line that General Phayre's men had been guarding on the border with Sind and that Phayre was collecting forces to march north. Colonel St. John reported that 'a large division is on the march from Kabul under General Roberts but this can hardly be expected before the end of the month'. Meanwhile Afghan troops were creeping closer to the walls of Kandahar, shielded from the defenders' fire by the walls of villages and gardens now abandoned by their inhabitants. On the same day Primrose recorded:

Bombarded villages opposite the Shikapur gate this afternoon. The enemy last night had thrown up a small work in front of it about 600 yards from the ramparts in which it is expected guns may be placed and which would annoy us a great deal.

It was at this point that the Primrose diary suddenly stopped. In the month between the battle at Maiwand and the arrival of General Roberts at the end of August, the Kandahar garrison made its first and only substantial sortie from the city. This was directed at two villages, Deh Koja and Khairabad, very close to the walls of the city, from which Afghan marksmen had been harassing the garrison. The aim of the sortie was to clear enemy soldiers from the shelter of these villages, and demonstrate to the Afghans that the garrison still had plenty of life in it. This plan was originally proposed by Hills,⁷⁰ and Primrose put Brigadier General Brooke in charge of it. They knew each other in Poona, and Brooke already had a low opinion of Primrose ('that old donkey')⁷¹ as he did of many of his superiors, including General Warre, the commander of the Bombay army ('I have never met so unsatisfactory and wrong-headed a man.') Hills thought Primrose was unwise in allowing Brooke to modify his original plan, particularly by insisting on an hour's bombardment before the force left the city. Although Brooke argued that the force was too small to be effective, it did, in fact, number 800 officers and men, a sapper detachment and 300 cavalry. Brooke's well-signalled attack ran out of momentum as the Afghans crowded in to attack him in the difficult fighting ground of houses and gardens. When he sent for a further supply of ammunition, Primrose ordered the retreat to be sounded. Brooke stayed behind to help a fellow officer, Captain Cruikshank, who had been wounded, and was shot dead while trying to regain the city. Given the small force involved – about 1,200 men –

⁷⁰ H.B. Hanna, *The Second Afghan War 1878-1879-1880, Its causes, its conduct and its consequences*, (London, 1883), Vol. III, p. 445.

⁷¹ NAM, Brooke Papers, 1993-04-97-100-1 Brooke to his wife, 1 July 1879. Brooke may have had more personal reasons for disliking Primrose, who accompanied his wife on the piano when she sang at Poona soirées. In this letter he refers to "your old friend Primrose".

⁷² NAM, Brooke papers, 1993-04-97-111-2, Brooke to his wife, 12 October 1879.

casualties were heavy with 106 killed and 118 wounded.

At the time this sortie was viewed as a disastrous mistake by the authorities in Simla. But those in Kandahar pointed out that it had a beneficial effect. Having seen the kind of reception they would get if they tried to take Kandahar, the besiegers retired and fell to quarrelling among themselves on the advisability of staying or returning to create a stronger base at Herat. Writing his memoirs 20 years later, Hills, who was no great friend of Primrose, nevertheless recorded that:

... the results not only justified but fully satisfied the exigencies of the case ... no further effort [was] made to attack or take the city. Dissension broke out in Ayub's camp – he wanted to go to Herat but local tribesmen who had supported him wanted him to stay and fight the avenging British. On 22 August Ayub moved to Pir Paimal but the tribesmen would not let him leave. This investment of Ayub by his own people and the fact that the Bombay force still held the city and the country at and around Khelat – i -Ghazi were in truth the main cause of General Roberts meeting no opposition and greatly eased and paved the way for the rapidity of his advance.⁷³

Writing 30 years later, the historian H. B. Hanna thought that Primrose was wrong to leave the responsibility for the sortie entirely to Brooke (who had opposed the whole idea until Primrose put him in charge of it, and who had never before seen action). But he also blamed Brooke for failing to appreciate that the action should be a short one, designed to destroy guns and gain information, rather than a long-term occupation of ground.⁷⁴ Sir Donald Stewart, writing to his wife from Kabul, felt that Primrose should have taken bolder action, and that ‘the whole affair looks as if it has been mismanaged, but there is this to be said – that the force was always too small, considering the strength of the enemy in artillery. This was well known, and General Primrose should have taken out his whole force, and gone himself in command ...’.⁷⁵ This was easier said than done, and as the man on the spot Primrose had to weigh the need to preserve his force, and retain Kandahar, against the possibility that a decisive victory against much larger forces was far from certain – and might turn into another disaster. In any case, the evidence suggests that the fate of the sortie was settled before it began by Brooke’s insistence on a preliminary bombardment.

It was Primrose’s bad luck that Brooke’s widow, convinced that her husband had died unnecessarily in a futile sortie, swiftly published his diary (in 1881) and circulated it widely before publication, complete with anonymous endorsements from members of the garrison at Kandahar and a fulsome tribute from the Queen.⁷⁶ Primrose was able subsequently to provide for the army authorities a powerful answer to many of the criticisms made by General Sir Frederick Roberts

⁷³ J. Hills, op.cit, pp. 40-1.

⁷⁴ H.B. Hanna, op. cit., p. 456.

⁷⁵ G.R. Elmslie, op. cit, p. 374.

⁷⁶ Henry Francis Brooke, *Private Journal*, (Dublin 1881), p. 167.

and others of his actions at Kandahar, including the failure of this sortie. But he did not focus on Brooke's own failings, notably his insistence on a preliminary bombardment, referring instead to the inadequate support provided by the cavalry and the fact that Brooke had become separated from his men. Perhaps Primrose held back out of deference to Brooke's wife. If so, the gesture was not reciprocated.

On 31st August General Roberts reached Kandahar after covering the 320 miles from Kabul in 20 days: the going had been hard and 900 of his force of nearly 10,000 men (British and native troops) were immediately placed in hospital. He was greeted by Primrose, Burrows and Nuttall, and cheered into the city by the whole garrison, which was 'loud in their expressions of gratitude'. But he professed to being struck by the 'demoralised condition' of the garrison, who seemed to consider themselves 'hopelessly defeated and were utterly despondent'. They 'never even hoisted the Union Jack until the relieving force was close at hand'.⁷⁷ It is quite possible that Roberts exaggerated the failings of Primrose and the poor condition of his garrison in order that his own victorious and rapid march might stand out in contrast; his preoccupation with communicating a good image of himself to the press was well known. At this stage it would have been particularly important to him to bolster his own reputation in order to bury the memory of the dubious legality of the executions he had sanctioned at Kabul in revenge for the murder of Cavagnari and his colleagues.⁷⁸ The next day Roberts took command of the army in southern Afghanistan and defeated Ayub Khan, who had not retreated far from the city; both Primrose and Burrows took part in the battle. The battle over their reputations still lay ahead of them.

⁷⁷ FM Sir Frederick Roberts, *Forty-one years in India* (London, 1898), p. 484.

⁷⁸ R. Atwood, *The Life of Field Marshal Lord Roberts*, (London, 2015), p. 97.

GENERAL JAMES PRIMROSE: RECONSTRUCTING A LIFE

Part 3

CAROLINE JACKSON

The battle of Kandahar was Primrose's last engagement. For the Government of India and the Army authorities, it marked the start of a review of how the various Field Forces had performed in the recent campaign, and of how Britain might extricate itself from Afghanistan and yet still exercise influence there. The Army dealt quickly and decisively with Primrose and Burrows, who were both relieved of their commands. In assessing responsibility for what had happened it is necessary to consider a previously unknown document, which was found among the Primrose papers. This is headed 'Statement of Events' and is Primrose's detailed response to his dismissal and to the charges that lay behind it. The document adds to our knowledge of how the Army of the 1880s dealt with failure. It also gives us the chance to speculate on the reasons why the Horse Guards dealt as it did with Primrose himself, and whether its treatment of him was fully justified.

Both Primrose and Burrows submitted reports before they left Afghanistan on their actions during July and August.¹ But General Roberts was specifically requested by the Adjutant General in India to report on 'the military situation at Kandahar as you found it on arrival'.² He produced his report within a month and came down heavily in condemnation of Primrose's whole performance at Kandahar. On 30th September, losing little time, the Attorney General forwarded Roberts's report to the Secretary to the Government of India, Military Department, for the information of the Governor General. On the basis of the report, Sir Frederick Haines told the Government of India that 'Lieutenant-General Primrose has shewn himself unequal to the command and responsibility that have devolved upon him.' He noted that Roberts had focused upon 'the demoralisation of the garrison, to the sortie and to the fact of the British flag not having been hoisted'. Haines then listed Primrose's failings:

I. His general conduct of the command.

II. His reticence and the extreme difficulty with which any information has been

¹ Hampshire Record Office, Burrows Papers, 127AOO/B1/22 – Papers relating to the advance of Ayub Khan on Kandahar (Command 2736, enclosure 4 in No. 35: Primrose to Adjutant General, India, 6 September 1880; enclosure 5 in No. 35, Brig. Gen. Burrows to Assistant Adjutant General, Kandahar Force 30 August 1880).

² British Library, Asia, Pacific & Africa Collections, Ripon Papers E218, printed copy of telegram from Adjutant General, India to Sir F. Roberts, 4 September 1880.

obtained from him. This was most marked in the earlier days of the preparations against Ayub's advance; but his delay in sending in his despatches, the meagre information furnished, and the generally unsatisfactory nature of the despatches themselves, are matter thoroughly known to the Government of India.

III. His want of suggestion.

IV. His telegram of 28th July in which the report of the annihilation of General Burrows' force was announced to the world on [basis of] the statement of certain fugitive sowars.

V. His precipitate abandonment of the cantonments, which must have tended to confirm the demoralisation of the garrison caused by the events at Maiwand,

VI. – of the sortie, it will be noticed that Sir F. Roberts quite confirms the view taken by his Excellency, and communicated to you in my letter of the 29th instant.

VII. Finally, there is the circumstance of Lieutenant-General Primrose having held no enquiry into the serious charges preferred against the officers commanding the 3rd Sind Horse, and the 3rd Bombay cavalry, until directed to do so by Sir Frederick Roberts.

On these grounds, His Excellency recommends the removal of Lieutenant General Primrose from the command at Kandahar; and further, as the command of the Poona Division of the Bombay Army requires qualities of which Lieutenant General Primrose has shewn himself to be entirely deficient, Sir Frederick Haines is constrained to recommend that he be not permitted to return to it, but be ordered to England to report himself at Horse Guards.³

Roberts's recommendation was accepted by the government and Primrose's removal was put in train. Edmund Barttelot of the Royal Fusiliers, observing the departure of Primrose and Burrows from Kandahar, felt 'very sorry' for them 'for personally they were the kindest men I ever met'.⁴ On 26th September Primrose wrote to General Warre, the Commander-in-Chief of the Bombay Army, summarising his response to the questions raised about his performance by the Commander-in-Chief in London, the Duke of Cambridge:

³ BL, APAC, Ripon Papers E218, printed copy of despatch by Maj-Gen. Greaves, Adjutant General, India, to the Secretary to the Government of India, Simla, 30 September 1880. It is marked 'Secret'. It appears that Roberts' highly critical report on Primrose may never have been put in the public domain.

⁴ Walter George Barttelot, *Life of Edmund Musgrave Barttelot, Captain and Brevet Major, Royal Fusiliers, Commander of the Rear column of the Emin Pasha Relief Expedition* (London: 1890) p. 22. (London Library)

The entire force I had before Gen. Burrows' column moved was small enough, heaven knows, and after he left for Ghirisk it was simply impossible before he fought the action at Maiwand to give him another man beyond 50 sabres I sent. It was my intention to have sent about 150 additional men on my getting some reinforcements, but these would have been a mere drop in the ocean ... the whole country was ripe to rise. There were indications of this constantly ... The force I sent with Burrows was approved of as it was originally in support of the Wali. His army either mutinied or dispersed and thus the position was totally changed ... The Duke asks about British cavalry. There were none as you are fully aware and as regards other cavalry I had not three entire regiments.⁵

He concluded his letter with what reads almost as a cry of despair: 'There was a fatality about everything – nothing went right. Anything will justify success but as for disaster, nothing is too bad for those concerned in it'. His wife, who seems to have been of somewhat sterner stuff, protested vigorously to General Warre that her husband was being given no notice of his dismissal:

From a telegram I have had from General Primrose this morning in answer to one I sent him I find that he had no intimation whatever of the Viceroy's most unexpected decision, and he must be entirely unprepared for such a decision. I may be mistaken but I don't think it like the usual ways of Englishmen to condemn a man without permitting him to say a word in his defence, or even giving him an opportunity of doing so. In a letter I had from an old friend in Kandahar yesterday he speaks of the hard work of General Primrose and the good service he had done all through these last most trying months. And this ending to it all seems most cruel and unjust. I do not know whether the Viceroy is aware that the first telegram was not sent by my husband ... I myself think that the telegrams must be the ground they give upon in removing him from his command.⁶

This was a wretched time for Primrose. Sir James Fergusson the Governor of Bombay, who met him on his way home in November 1880, reported to Lord Lytton: 'I had a painful interview with General Primrose who was desirous of seeing me, and who, as is not surprising, seems broken hearted'.⁷ Newspapers in India and in Britain reported public support for Primrose's recall and repeated many damaging accusations against him, with particular emphasis on the wording of the Maiwand telegram. The press also accused him of giving restrictive orders to General Brooke when he was sent out to find and bring home the survivors of Maiwand.⁸

⁵ NAM, Warre Papers, 8112-4-880, Primrose to Warre, 26 September 1880.

⁶ NAM, Warre Papers, 8112-54-888, Mrs Primrose to Warre, 4 October 1880.

⁷ BL, Ripon Mss, Add Mss 843628, Fergusson to Ripon, 4 November 1880.

⁸ *Naval and Military Gazette*, 3 November 1880.



General Primrose in later life

Courtesy of the Hon. Mrs Susan Tyser.

The 'Statement of Events' – a copy of the original in 19 hand-written pages – shows that Primrose did contemplate putting up a fight after his removal but did not take his complaints to any public forum. The document was clearly intended for the Duke of Cambridge and in it Primrose addressed each of the accusations made against him. The charge, which he considered most offensive was the first one, that in 'the general conduct of his command' he had shown himself unequal to the role and responsibility that had devolved upon him. In reply, he simply listed his appointments 'during a career of 44 years, when he had 'met with the approval of those under whom I served' and he asked 'surely so glaring a defect

would have made itself obvious at an earlier date?⁹ Was there anything in Primrose's conduct at Kandahar to justify such an overall criticism, with its conclusion (in the final paragraph) that Primrose never be permitted to have command again?

Primrose had certainly had his detractors while at Kandahar. His policy was not to risk his forces, which he considered worryingly few and those few not all in good shape. This conservative approach annoyed those who felt the garrison should be making more attacks beyond the walls. The Reverend Alfred Cane, a close observer of the Kandahar garrison, writing home from the encircled city after the battle of Maiwand, was one of these critics:

Here we are – not one of the enemy in sight and we remain doing nothing and waiting for 15,000 men to come and relieve us! Ayub meanwhile slipping away no one (of us) knows where. Our generals seem to have lost their senses. The whole garrison is wild with indignation. We have about 1000 cavalry eating their heads off and not one outside the gates. General Primrose is responsible. I always put him down as an old woman. I now find he is indolent, vacillating and without a single idea beyond extreme caution.¹⁰

However, the Army knew when they appointed him that Primrose was not a man to take risks and was more of an administrator than an experienced fighting general – but it was not expected that serious fighting would arise around Kandahar. The authorities may not have known that he was, as he himself attests, often in poor health, and this was certainly not used by him as an extenuating circumstance. Primrose had sanctioned the sortie against the village of Deh Khoja on 14th August but had appointed Brigadier General Brooke to command it, even though the latter was opposed to it. The attack was intended to push back Afghan snipers and to destroy the cover they were sheltering behind. The raid petered out in the confused terrain of the village houses and gardens and Brooke was killed with 105 other casualties. In his journal, which Brooke's wife published soon afterwards, it is clear that Brooke had found Primrose annoyingly slow to act decisively and extremely reluctant to demolish buildings just outside the city walls because this would have 'involved much distress and annoyance to the Afghans'.¹¹ Evidence of Primrose's physical unfitness may be found in Brooke's papers: after Maiwand, when the garrison was rushing to concentrate on holding the Citadel in Kandahar, Brooke noted that 'I was the only General Officer available to issue orders or do work, as General Primrose, who was seedy, was thoroughly wearied

⁹ Primrose Papers, Box 1/2 /4, Statement of Events, page 19. Hereafter P.P. Statement.

¹⁰ B. Robson (ed.) 'The Kandahar Letters of the Reverend Alfred Cane', *Journal of the Society for Army Historical Research*, Vol. LXX, No. 280, p. 217.

¹¹ H.F. Brooke, *Private Journal of Henry Francis Brooke, late Brigadier-General commanding 2nd Infantry Brigade, Kandahar Field Force, Southern Afghanistan, from April 22nd to August 16th, 1880* (Dublin: William Curwen, 1881), p. 130.

out'.¹² But Brooke and others felt that overall responsibility for the fragility of the defences at Kandahar devolved upon General Stewart, Primrose's predecessor:

*We all feel that we owe more than half our troubles and difficulties to the happy-go-lucky style adopted by General Stewart who steadily objected to any military precautions whatever being taken at Kandahar. He is certainly the luckiest man in the world – having got safe away before his faults and oversights began to bear fruit.*¹³

Colonel Hills, who had argued in favour of the sortie strongly objected to Roberts's emphasis on the garrison's demoralisation in his report, and wrote in his memoir of the time that any censure on the campaign should be ascribed to the proper causes, which were 'the plans of the originators and directors of the campaign.'¹⁴

The sense of dissatisfaction with Primrose had come to the surface soon after Maiwand, when the language of the alarmist telegram then supposed to have been written by him was strongly criticised. After the battle, the Viceroy, Lord Ripon, raised the question of an immediate change of leadership with Haines, suggesting the possibility of sending to Kandahar 'an able and energetic officer senior to General Primrose ... what we want in such a position as that is not fitness merely but the very fittest man that we can get'. Ripon believed that 'the reputation of our arms can only be fully redeemed by a display of that vigour and spirit which has procured for us so many successes in Indian history.'¹⁵ The problem was that neither Ripon nor Haines had, ready to hand, any better alternative officer to replace Primrose, while events in Kandahar, from what they could guess from the infrequent telegrams (Army Headquarters in Simla always seemed to underestimate the difficulties of communication from the city) were moving fast. So Primrose had stayed in place, but his adequacy was seriously in question after Maiwand – a point of which he seemed to be unaware.

Primrose also dealt with the criticism about his role in the despatch of General Burrows' force from Kandahar on 20th July. He pointed out that Burrows had been explicitly ordered by the Commander-in Chief in Simla to march north to reinforce the Wali:

*... the government at Simla, who were incessantly supplied with every detail of information, and who, by means of the telegraph, were in the habit of exercising control over all my operations and movements, positively decided that the expedition should be undertaken, and moreover that it should be undertaken with a special stated force ...*¹⁶

¹² Ibid., p.147.

¹³ Ibid., p.153.

¹⁴ J. Hills, *The Bombay Field Force 1880 and the battle of Maiwand* (London: R. Brimley Johnson, 1900), p. 57.

¹⁵ NAM, Haines Papers, 8108-9-30, Ripon to Haines, 1 August 1880.

¹⁶ PP Statement, p. 15.

Burrows took with him 550 Indian cavalry and 1,758 British and Native troops. That left Primrose holding Kandahar with 500 cavalry, 1,230 infantry, one field battery and one heavy battery consisting of four 40 Pounders and two 8 inch mortars but 'the sick were numerous and every regiment was below its establishment'. The telegraphic record reinforced his decision not to undertake any dramatic action in support of Burrows:

*It is clear that the force left for the protection of Kandahar was barely sufficient for that purpose. The Commander-in-Chief himself, in a telegram dated 1 July, expressed his opinion to that effect. It was out of my power to lay hands on any immediate reinforcements, and therefore further to strengthen General Burrows was utterly out of the question ...*¹⁷

The point had also been raised against him that General Burrows should have retired to Kandahar at an earlier date (thus avoiding disaster). But Primrose pointed out that Burrows and St. John opposed this 'as unnecessary and likely to produce ill effects on the natives'. The government at Simla could have ordered the retirement but all their advice went in the opposite direction, and 'they intimated their extreme desire that Ayub should be prevented from marching towards Ghaznee or passing Kandahar.' They had given Primrose full liberty to strike a blow with the proviso 'if considered strong enough'. Primrose asked rhetorically 'What soldier in the face of these opinions would consent to retire?' Burrows was later criticised for crossing the Helmund against strict orders from Simla. Primrose pointed out that he needed to do so in order to disarm the Wali's wavering troops – who in fact deserted to Ayub Khan's side. When Burrows fell back on Kulik-i-Nakhud, 'a strategical point which appeared of the greatest importance' Primrose emphasized that this measure 'was approved by the Commander-in-Chief in Simla'.

When it came to the accusations about the telegram which had all too openly revealed the extent of the Maiwand defeat, he was able to show that the responsibility for it lay with his Assistant-Quarter-Master-General and appended a copy of his admission to this effect. However, there was no way he could evade the fact that as commander on the ground he was responsible for acts carried out in his name.

On the question of the abandonment, after news of Maiwand had been received, of the British cantonments outside Kandahar, Primrose explained that his first concern was 'to ensure the immediate security of the city by seizing all the gates and holding them with a strong force'. In his view there was no possibility of keeping hold of the cantonment site. There were no wells there, whilst in the city water was good and abundant. Also, the inhabitants of Kandahar had become very hostile. It therefore made sense to drive out the whole Pathan population (amounting to 'at least 10,000 men') in case they rose in support of Ayub Khan,

¹⁷ Ibid.

and to concentrate the garrison in the city. As he wrote: 'I would respectfully urge that the measures I adopted saved Kandahar.'¹⁸

Next he addressed the arrival of the bedraggled Wali, who urged Primrose to retire from Kandahar but:

I need scarcely state that I emphatically refused to entertain his proposal. I considered that the interests of India were now centred in Kandahar and moreover in view of the recent detailed orders I had so constantly received from Simla I should under any circumstances have considered it my paramount duty not to depart from the line laid down without further instructions.¹⁹

Once the siege started he found that there were enough provisions to last for more than a month, with plentiful water. He then listed all the measures taken to organise the garrison to defend the city against attack.

On the subject of the sortie in which General Brooke was killed, he gave strong justification for the action: the village was isolated from the main body of the enemy's troops and commanded General Phayre's route from the south; it contained a hidden battery, which needed to be silenced, and the ground around it was favourable to the Indian cavalry.²⁰ When the sortie took place, it was Primrose's intention to have the cavalry hovering in the open plain to prevent the arrival of ghazi reinforcements. As soon as Brooke got into difficulties in attempting to regain the city, he had requested that the cavalry should cover his retirement through the Kabul gate of the city. It was this that led to heavy losses amongst the cavalry which, in moving closer to the city than had been planned, found itself 'in cramped ground and exposed to infantry fire from the village which the enemy by then had re-occupied'.

He gave a positive assessment of the results of the sortie:

Our losses were heavy but were not incommensurate with the results achieved. It would indeed be difficult to over-estimate the effects produced both on our own garrison and on the enemy by this affair. The spirits of my troops which had been somewhat dampened by the battle of Maiwand, and by their long subsequent confinement in the town, were raised and they were once more convinced that they were able to contend successfully with a vastly superior enemy occupying a strong position. On the other hand the losses of the enemy had been extremely heavy: their confidence in their overwhelming numbers received a shock from which they never recovered; their hitherto feelings of security gave way to distrust and caution; they refused shortly afterwards any

¹⁸ PP Statement, p. 18.

¹⁹ PP Statement, p. 7.

²⁰ The cavalry component of Brooke's force comprised 100 sabres each from the 3rd Bombay Light Cavalry, the Poona Horse and the 3rd Sindh Horse – See Primrose's telegram to the Adj-Gen, India from Kandahar, 26 August 1880. See Hampshire Record Office, Burrows Papers, 127A00/B1/22, enclosure 6 in No. 37.

*longer to occupy surrounding villages; they streamed back to their camps in thousands; numbers deserted with their horses and their local contingents dispersed. Above all, I obtained that knowledge of the enemy's forces and position which was so important to a successful defence. On 25th August the investment had ceased and I reconnoitred some of the surrounding country. On the 31st August Kandahar was relieved by Sir F. Roberts and the battle of Kandahar was fought on 1 September.*²¹

He was on weaker ground in attempting to explain why, when Brooke ran into difficulties, there was no support forthcoming from the British troops in Kandahar. Here his only response was to argue that the action had taken place only 600 yards from the city walls, where 'the troops on the ramparts themselves constituted most powerful support'. He did not explain why such support was not used. His inactivity in support of her husband was probably one reason why Brooke's widow and his family swiftly circulated copies of his diary. Queen Victoria had certainly read this by November 1880.²²

Primrose then came to the question of the failure to fly the British flag from the citadel – a point that General Roberts had made so much of. Primrose was clearly not in sympathy with the jingoistic use of the flag in the British popular press as it followed the Army's fortunes. He wrote:

*I should have deemed this point unworthy of notice had it not been alluded to in several newspapers. I would merely mention that on my arrival at Kandahar in April no British flag was flying at any one of the posts. It was believed that there was not a single one in the station. At a later date a fresh search was instituted and one was found, I think after General Burrows' arrival, [it was] hoisted on the citadel and never removed.*²³

The only accusation that he did not answer was his failure to hold courts martial on the officers commanding the 3rd Sind Horse and the 3rd Bombay Cavalry at Maiwand. There is nothing in the papers of General Burrows (which are extensive and extremely difficult to read) to shed any light on this episode. The officers concerned, Colonel Malcolmson and Major Currie, were eventually court-martialled in 1881 and both were acquitted when it became plain that the evidence against them was insufficient. At Primrose's death one newspaper recorded to his credit that he 'would give no countenance to the business' [of the court martial] and in fact gave Malcolmson the chance of commanding a contingent during the Deh Khoja sortie.²⁴

²¹ PP Statement, p. 13.

²² Royal Archives, Queen Victoria to Lt-Gen Sir Henry Ponsonby, 3 November 1880, VIC/MAIN/N/38/303.

²³ PP Statement, p. 18.

²⁴ *Cheltenham Looker-on*, 3 December 1892.

His final paragraphs are worth quoting in full as he addressed the Commander-in-Chief personally:

After a career of 44 years service in all parts of the world, I suddenly find myself as a Lt. General holding an important appointment, brought to a position which, professionally speaking, I may without exaggeration designate as one of positive calamity. Publicly dismissed from my command at Poona and ordered home, deprived finally of a beneficial post, and above all with my military reputation reflected on, I cannot but think that the severity of these measures would be more appropriate to absolute derelictions of duty than to what were at worst errors of judgement. But I have endeavoured to show that even the imputation of errors of judgement would not be founded on justice – except indeed that an ex post facto scrutiny will always indicate imperfections.

If therefore His Royal Highness is of opinion, not only that I tried to do my duty, but that the course I pursued under very difficult circumstances was on the whole judicious, I venture to hope that the Commander in Chief, to whom I now appeal, will not think it inconsistent with justice to relieve me from the severity of judgment which has been passed upon me.

I cannot expect that the action of the Government in India will be reversed in England – but neither can I forego the hope that His Royal Highness may be pleased to take such steps as may seem most fitting to him, which will restore me to my previous professional prosperity, and to the good opinion of my brother officers.²⁵

There is nothing in the papers of the Duke of Cambridge in the Royal Archives, or in his correspondence in the National Army Museum to suggest that he ever saw this statement or reacted to it, yet the fact that Primrose only kept a copy, and not the original, suggests that he did send it to someone.

From the evidence it is hard to avoid the conclusion that it suited Roberts, on his own exit from Afghanistan, to build up the image of himself as a daring and triumphant soldier, the leader of an elite rescue force, while allowing Primrose and his Bombay Army troops to be represented as the blundering alternative. Roberts must always have been conscious that his enemies would refer to the policy of harsh retribution that he had pursued at Kabul in the autumn of 1879. This involved the rapid execution of those supposedly connected with the murder of Cavagnari and his staff. The accused had been given no chance to question witnesses and were allowed no appeal against the verdict; sentence being carried out within 24 hours. All the death sentences had been approved by Roberts. Doubts about the legality of this procedure had been quick to surface once it

²⁵ Ibid.

became known.²⁶ His famous march to the rescue of Kandahar pushed these incidents into the background, and obscured the fact that by the time he reached Kandahar Ayub Khan's quarrelling forces had moved away and the siege was lifted. The executions of 1879 were indeed brought up by Liberals and Irish Nationalists when the House of Commons finally got round to debating Afghanistan in May 1881. The debate was on a motion for a Vote of Thanks to Haines and his victorious generals. This was carried by 303 votes to 20.²⁷

Making Primrose the scapegoat also drew attention away from failures in strategic planning in Simla, and meant that the responsibility of Sir Frederick Haines was unlikely to be questioned. Criticism turned rather on the quality of the Bombay troops who had served under Primrose, and General Warre had to fight hard in defence of the competence of his troops after Roberts made his report. In October 1880 he wrote to Fergusson about a proposal to withdraw the Bombay regiments from Kandahar:

*I propose to address your Excellency in Council officially on a cipher telegram I have received from General Phayre, regarding the abuse that has been heaped upon General Primrose and more especially on the Bombay army by the Bengal local press ... I have never lost sight of the mischievous effect that might possibly be produced if the Bombay sepoy thought that they were to be replaced by the Bengal regiments because they could not be trusted in the field ... [I hope] you will not allow the absolute falsehoods now being disseminated by the Pioneer and other Bengal papers to prejudice your Excellency against the Bombay army.*²⁸

With the two disgraced generals on their way to England and Parliament not due to sit until the New Year, the Army establishment had time to mull over what had happened during the Summer. Much of this private debate focussed on high-level responsibility for what had gone wrong at Maiwand and Kandahar. The exchanges brought out the hostility that could exist within an Army command split into different levels of responsibility, exercised on a far-flung geographical canvass, and handicapped by slow and patchy communication.

The Duke of Cambridge took a lively interest in the post mortem. He blamed Warre for Primrose's appointment:

HRH is of opinion that with the knowledge which he appears to have possessed of the difficulties under which Lieutenant General Primrose had laboured after 43 years service, arising from ill health, Lieutenant General Warre should have

²⁶ Brian Robson, *The Road to Kabul* (London: Arms & Armour Press, 1986), pp. 142-143; Rodney Atwood, *Life of Field Marshal Lord Roberts* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015) pp. 92-93.

²⁷ House of Commons, Debates Vol. 260, 5 May 1881, cols 1842-70.

²⁸ NAM, Warre Papers, 8112-54-987, Warre to Fergusson, 1 October 1880.

*represented the fact to the higher authorities and not appointed that officer to so important a command merely on his own assurance that he was fit for any active service. HRH regrets to be obliged to take exception to the action of the CinC in Bombay in this matter but feels bound to express a strong opinion that Lieutenant General Warre has not acted with the care which the case required.*²⁹

Warre promptly passed the buck to Haines:

*I cannot admit that in the case of Primrose I had any option in the matter, sir Frederick Haines knew perfectly well that there was no other British officer in the Bombay Presidency to take the command at Kandahar. He had appointed Primrose the previous year to the command of a division at Kandahar and I had no reason to believe that Primrose gave anything but satisfaction. The state of Primrose's health was minutely enquired into by Sir R. Temple and me and we both agree that there was no reason for passing him over. Indeed seeing that Primrose had a 2-year extension of his Poona division we could not help nominating him.*³⁰

Warre did admit, however, that from observing Primrose at Poona 'I considered him lacking in energy but by no means lacking in administrative capacity'. This echoed General Stewart's lack of enthusiasm on Primrose's original appointment to Kandahar.³¹

The detailed discussion on the tactics, which had led to the defeat at Maiwand, started in July, when Cambridge wrote to Warre:

*Your very worst fears of the extreme weakness of the Kandahar force have been realised and the result is a great disaster which we heard on Wednesday and which has filled us with grief and anxiety. How so small a force could have been placed at Primrose's disposal and why this was again "subdivided" is beyond my comprehension ... Again I should like to know why Primrose first telegraphs the destruction of Burrows' brigade then informs us that four guns have been saved and a good many officers ... Altogether it is a horrible business as God knows what effect it may produce all over India and in Afghanistan ... from your letter I gather that Primrose was ordered to detach a Brigade to the Helmand. To my mind this, with the small force available, was a great mistake for how would so small a body hold its own against 12,000 men and 30 guns, we having only 6. In short there is a great deal requiring explanation and I am at a loss to understand the position.*³²

²⁹ NAM, Warre Papers, 8112-54-671, E.A. Whitmore to Warre, 4 November 1880

³⁰ NAM, Warre Papers, 8112-54-672, Warre to Whitmore 4 December 1880. Sir Richard Temple was Governor of Bombay 1877-1880.

³¹ G.R. Elsmie, *Field Marshal Sir Donald Stewart: an account of his life in his own words* (London: John Murray, 1903), p. 303.

³² NAM, Warre Papers, 8112-54-702, Cambridge to Warre 30 July 1880.

Later in the year Cambridge expressed some sympathy with Primrose: ‘that I feel sorry for him I cannot deny but it must then be remembered that he has brought the whole thing on himself’. In November he extended his criticism to the troops of the Bombay Army:

I hope you will go carefully into the conduct of the Bombay army where there is certainly something wrong which ought to be corrected or amended. There is not that spirit I fear in the Bombay army which has been shown to exist in so marked a manner in the army of Bengal. A new adjutant General will be of great help to you in this respect. General Burrows showed plenty of courage but certainly no ability and as for Brigadier Nuttall the less said about him the better.³³

Cambridge ended the year still at odds with Warre:

The Commander in Chief in India had a right to expect from you some expression of opinion if you considered General Primrose unequal to perform the duties given to him in the command at Kandahar. I consider the selection of General Burrows and Nuttall most unfortunate, more particularly the latter officer who for years had served in the Police. Seniority is all very well but efficiency is what must be looked for on such grave occasions.³⁴

Cambridge denied that either he or Haines had known anything of Primrose’s health problems. Warre drafted a last shot on the matter:

I regret the necessity for troubling His Royal Highness upon these almost personal subjects, but feeling deeply in common with the whole Bombay army, the very serious reverse which its isolated position, and want of support, brought upon the small Brigade under Brig General Burrows, I feel anxious to clear myself of any responsibility connected with the tactical or strategical movements of the Bombay troops employed beyond the frontier of Sind.³⁵

The letter remains among the Warre papers and is marked in red pencil ‘Not sent, a private note being sent to General Whitmore instead’.

The question of how far the poor information about their opponents mitigated the failures of Primrose and Burrows was also examined. Ripon, who had been nervous about the position at Kandahar for some time, wrote to Haines after Maiwand complaining that:

³³ NAM, Warre Papers, 8112-54-705, Cambridge to Warre, 11 November 1880.

³⁴ NAM, Warre Papers, 8112-54-70, Cambridge to Warre, 31 December 1880.

³⁵ NAM, Warre Papers, 8112-54-987, Warre to Whitmore, November 1880.

*The arrangements for collecting and receiving intelligence in connection with the Kandahar force seem to have been of the most unsatisfactory kind. Would it not be desirable to send up a practised officer to take charge of the Intelligence Department?*³⁶

Haines admitted to Ripon after Maiwand that military intelligence had been 'lamentably weak – it has been left almost entirely to the political officers. We have hardly got any information at all beyond that supplied by Col. St. John.' He added his own view on the difficulties with the Bombay Army:

*There is no doubt a want of unity of command at present. Bombay would gladly take command of the whole movement ... officers on the line of operations continue to address their telegrams to Bombay without informing us of their contents. I have issued orders which will stop this.*³⁷

Hugh Childers, Secretary of State for War, wrote to Lord Ripon in November 1880:

*The military authorities in India apparently did not attach sufficient importance to the fact of Ayub having six batteries of artillery with him. I find that this was known (and even mentioned in newspapers) almost from the first but it did not seem to have been appreciated. For instance St. John's telegrams, which mentioned Ayub's supposed strength in infantry and cavalry, say nothing about his artillery and there is I fear little doubt that to our inferiority in this area we, to a great degree, owe our defeat.*³⁸

Sir James Fergusson believed that there had been a 'grave miscalculation' in failing to make use of the cavalry to obtain information on the enemy's movements.³⁹

By December 1880 the Afghanistan debate had moved on to the question of whether British troops should be withdrawn from the whole country, or remain at least at Kandahar.⁴⁰ As the year ended however, the Duke of Cambridge was still drawing lessons from the events of the Summer. Besides the established inadequacies of Primrose, Burrows and Nuttall, he fretted over the strategic failings that had been exposed, especially the transport of men and supplies:

The transport question has no doubt been a most difficult one throughout and has been the cause of the serious delays which took place in reinforcing Kandahar, which ought to have been done the moment Ayoub's troops began

³⁶ NAM Haines papers 8108-9-30, Ripon to Haines, 1 August 1880.

³⁷ NAM Haines papers 8108-9-30, Haines to Ripon, 1 August 1880.

³⁸ BL, Ripon Mss, Add Mss 843628, Hugh Childers to Lord Ripon, 19 November 1880.

³⁹ BL, Ripon Mss, Add Mss 843628, Fergusson to Ripon, 4 August 1880.

⁴⁰ For a description of events concerning Kandahar after the 2nd Afghan War see Ian F.W. Beckett, 'The Road from Kandahar: The Politics of Retention and Withdrawal in Afghanistan 1880-1881', *Journal of Military History*, Vol. 75 (2014), pp. 1263-1294.

to move from Herat. In fact the reserve Division had never existed except on paper and had never been mobilised which was a horrible blunder. Every corps and detachment ought to have had sufficient transport with it to enable it to go to the front at the shortest notice ...

He recorded Primrose's return:

he has arrived in England and has reported himself but he has not asked to see any of us and consequently I know nothing of him. I presume he felt he had nothing to say for himself and was wisely discreet in keeping out of the way.⁴¹

This suggests that Primrose's statement was never seen by the Duke, though it was written as if it was intended for his consideration.

Primrose's problem was that his 44 years of service had given him, at the very end of his career, a role for which his service had not prepared him. He was clearly a good administrator, able to organise a strong defence at Kandahar, but he was not the sort of fighting general – preferably victorious but if necessary gloriously dead – that the public was increasingly wanting to see. There were merits in his policy of harbouring resources at Kandahar, and of avoiding pitched battles with an enemy of much greater size and unknown strength. He could rightly claim to have 'saved Kandahar' in the weeks after Maiwand. Like many of his contemporaries he also suffered from comparison with General Frederick Roberts. Apart from his ability as a soldier, Roberts was very aware of the need for public backing and the strong support of the military at home and was careful to keep communication open with them. When Primrose's crisis came, he was virtually unknown at home and had no one to speak for him.

In the end the Army did relent and Primrose was retired as a full General in 1882. He settled, as so many Army officers and their families did, in Cheltenham. From there in the autumn of 1892, he went on a visit to Dublin where he was taken ill, and died on 19th November. The whereabouts of his burial place became obscured as other traumatic events occurred in Ireland, and the Protestants retreated from the area he had known, leaving many of their churches in ruins. As a result of the interest aroused by the discovery of his papers, his grave was found to be at Fenagh, in County Leitrim where he had helped alleviate the famine, and where his wife's relatives are also buried.⁴² In May 2017 a plaque to him was unveiled in the church, with the wording 'To the memory of General James Maurice Primrose, 1819-1892, soldier- artist – diarist.'

⁴¹ NAM, Warre Papers, 8112-54-706, Cambridge to Warre, 15 December 1880.

⁴² His wife, Elizabeth Beresford, is buried at Sunninghill, Ascot, Berkshire.