From the Archives

THE CANNON AND THE CANNONEERS OF BYGONE INDIA.

By

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Incredible as it may seem, the evolution of the cannon from a mere metal hollow cylinder, closed at one end, and having a range to be counted in hundreds of yards, to the present day highly scientific instruments of destruction, throwing a projectile heavier than many of the ancient guns themselves to a range counted in tens of miles, has taken place within the lifetime of many who have not yet reached the allotted span.

The ordnance of Elizabethan days were identical in all but name with the cannon used in the Crimea, the Indian Mutiny, and the opening stages of the American Civil War, and the cannoneers of Drake, Sir John Hawkins, and the fighting Veres of the Dutch War of Independence in Armada days, would have found no difficulty in stepping straight into the places of a gun crew of the 'sixties. Nor would those of Captain Best, who gave the Portuguese their first lesson at Swally in 1612, of Captain Andrew Shilling who beat them again at Jask, and of the doughty merchant captain John Weddell, who took Ormuz in 1622, and shattered the Portuguese fleets in the Persian Gulf in 1625, have been any more backward in handling guns used as late as the 'seventies, when muzzle-loading ordnance were still in vogue in the British artillery. So far as regards rapidity of fire, the old gunners were quite good, judging by John Weddell's report that "our ordnance plied so fast as small shotte, until the enemie fledde before us like unto smoake before the winde." As the Dutch and English and the opposing Portuguese fleet were said to have fired no less than 16,000 shot in one day, his boast of rapid fire is justified. Certainly he says nothing of accuracy; perhaps a wise omission.

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The sonorous and romantic titles of Cannon Royal, Culverin, Demi-Culverin, Basilisk, Minion, Falconet, Murtherer, Patereroe, which entrance us in the pages of Purchas's "The World Encompassed," and that fascinating romance of the Armada, wherein figure Salvation Yeo and Amyas Leigh, were bestowed on ordnance practically identical with the Victorian cannon of 64-pounders downwards. The ranges given by Sir William Monson in his "Naval Tracts" of 1615, which give from 2,000 to 800 yards at random (extreme elevation) to 800 yards down to 150 point blank were little exceeded by Victorian cannon. It is on record that so late as the year 1838, the Maharajah of Lahore was enchanted with the skill of a British artillery officer, who, on the plain at Mian Mir, demolished an open umbrella with a nine-pound shot at 300 yards, a feat considered by all a marvel of skill and accuracy.

To confine ourselves to Indian cannon, and the cannoneers who worked them. Though artillery was introduced by the Portuguese in the 17th century, and widely used in Indian Wars, until considerably later the guns were cumbrous and badly worked. Noise and size were considered far more important than range and accuracy. To this obsession were due such monsters as the Malik-i-Maidan of Bijapur, the Great Gun of Agra, weighing some twenty tons, which lies buried in the sands of the Jumna, and a number of others, all just as unwieldy and useless, which lie corroding away in the ancient forts or near the decayed cities of southern India and Bengal. Many of them could not be mounted, and the majority were seldom, some even never, fired, for, being incapable of elevating or traversing, the target was the universe, and the shot went as far as the powder could carry it, and in whatever direction the muzzle happened to point. Of this description were the guns used by the Persians in many of their sieges in Khorasan. These guns were cast on the spot, within range of the city, the elevation and direction being guessed at. As the target was some miles in extent, they must have hit something or other, but most probably the effect was more moral than material. Such guns were broken up, and in that condition were removed to the next siege, where the process was repeated.

With few exceptions, mostly imported from Europe, the guns, great and small, used by the Moguls and others, were of brass. Even the field guns of the East India Company were made of this metal until the end of their reign. Until the mid-nineteenth century, their iron siege guns were imported from England. The reason for the use of brass was not preference, but necessity, for iron was scarce, and local skill and facilities rendered it practically impossible for any but the smallest to be made of this material. On the other hand, the supply of brass was inexhaustible, for every village and town possessed innumerable brass or copper utensils, which in time of need were requisitioned. For instance, the Zam Zamma of Lahore, and its sister gun, were cast in the year 1759, from this sort of material provided by the requisition of the household utensils of every Hindoo in Lahore. Another curious material used was that of the bells of the old Jesuit Church established in Agra in 1624. When the Jesuits fell from favour, Jehangir demolished their church and gave the peal of bells to a Jat chief. They were found in the possession of his descendants by the French adventurer, Madec, in 1764, and though he endeavoured to save them, the need for guns was so great that the bells were melted down into an 18-pounder gun. It was by means of such material that Thomas, Sombre, De Boigne, Madec and others provided themselves with guns, or replaced those which they had lost. Nothing was easier than to replace guns, provided the beaten force was not too badly routed or closely followed up, for they would halt in safety, requisition the material, cut down a few shisham trees for carriages, and in a few weeks stand forth fully equipped with complete batteries. As showing how late brass guns were used, that lately used as a time-gun at Lahore was cast by A. Wilson at Cossipore in 1842, and was used in the Punjab War of 1849. This class of gun lasted until much later.

But even more interesting than the ancient ordnance of India, used by the native princes, were the men who worked these guns, for from the time of Jehangir, right down to that of Tippoo Sahib, Scindia and Holkar, Europeans were the leading artillerists in Indian Armies. The history of these men has yet to be written;

indeed it can be, for except for scanty mentions of them in the pages of Tavernier, Bernier, Manucci, Irvine, and a few others, together with the records of the East India Company, but little is available.

The first mention we find is in the Diary of John Jourdain who records that as early as 1610, William Hawkins, the merchant ambassador of the East India Company to Jehangir, led sixty Europeans in Jehangir's service to a church parade at Agra. As they marched under the Red Cross, we may conclude that they were English, or their fellow Protestants, Dutchmen, who at all times were almost as numerous as the English in the native armies. We do not take count of the Portuguese, who were much of the same mixed race as those now called Goans.

William Finch, who was in Lahore in 1613, mentions that he was accompanied by Captain Boys, three Frenchmen, and a Dutch engineer, who were leaving the service of Jehangir, and with him all died at Baghdad on the way home overland. The importance of the European artillerymen, and the length the Moghul emperors were prepared to go to obtain them and retain their services, is amusingly described by Nicolo Manucci, who himself was at one time chief gunner to Dara Shekoh, brother of Aurangzeb. But here it is necessary to explain that Manucci, who wrote his memoirs fifty years later, seems to have confused Akbar and Jehangir, for Akbar died in 1605, whereas the English did not arrive at Surat until 1608.

The anecdote runs:—

"Finding that his gunners were of no use, and knowing Europeans to be the most expert, the king asked the Indian governor of the Fort of Surat to send him a good gunner. There was at this time a very skilful Englishman at Surat, who was sent to the king, and engaged at a salary of Rs. 500 per month. However, being very fond of strong waters, which could not be procured at Agra, owing to the Mohamedan Law, the gunner in spite of all those rupees was most unhappy. One day the king directed the Englishman to fire at a sheet which had been stretched on two poles on the other side of the river. The gunner intentionally fired the shots in the air, and the king was much put out, thinking he had no skill. He asked the gunner

why he had missed the target, when he was reputed to be so skilful. The Englishman answered that he could not see until he had drunk wine; whereupon the king commanded that they should bring him spirits, of which there was no lack, for they were given to the elephants to increase their courage. When he saw the spirits, the Englishman seized the bottle and put it to his mouth with the same eagerness that a stag rushes to a crystal spring. One draught he finished the lot, and then licking his moustache turned towards the target, and rubbing his eyes, which he said were now clear, directed them to take away and replace it with a pot on a stick, which he demolished with the first shot. The king was so amazed at seeing such a good shot that he gave instant orders to permit the Europeans to distil and drink whatever spirits they chose, saying that without spirits they were like fish out of water and could not see straight. To this day the Feringhis alone in the Moghul empire have the privilege of distilling spirits."

The gunner must have been as doughty a drinker as he was a gunner, for the spirits distilled for elephants were the crudest and strongest of arrack. But at all times, until recently, gunners were always doughty drinkers. In 1642 we find Peter Miller and Daniel Chester, and an unknown Dutchman, gunners to the Persians at the siege of Kandahar, without whose aid the place would not have been taken. Most scurvily were they treated by the Persians, who after the siege dismissed them to find their way back to India as best they could. Two of them died on the journey.

In 1653, Nicolo Manucci mentions that Thomas Roach and Reuben Smith were chief gunners of two hundred Europeans in the service of Shah Jehan; John White and John Campbell being his gun founders, a position the latter utilised to cast the Royal Arms of England on the Moghul ordnance. A year or so later Manucci himself was chief gunner to Dara Shekoh, commanding about eighty more English, Dutch, and Portuguese gunners whose pay was Rs. 80 to Rs. 200 per month each, great money for runaway seamen, whose pay under the company was limited to 25 s. per month.

The spearhead of the army of Aurungzebe was composed of 100 cannon, each having a European gunlayer who did nothing else but superintend the loading and lay the gun, the remainder being done by Indian matrosses (gunners). The oldest European tomb recorded north of Hindustan was that of Joseph Hicks, gunner to Mahabat Khan, Governor of Kabul. Hicks died there in October 1666, and the tomb was seen by Masson, the traveller, in 1832, and by numerous officers and travellers who were in Kabul between that date and 1842. However, it had disappeared when sought in 1880, probably having been destroyed on account of the interest shown in it.

About the same time John Barnes was with Asalat Khan in Balkh, a very far cry from Surat, but no further, or indeed not so far, as other Englishmen travelled in search of employment before and after. Dropping down the ages we find many mentions of desertions from the Company's and merchant services, to the armies of the native princes, where they were always in demand as gunners and received high pay. Amongst such was Thomas Platt, who was with Mahomed Amin Khan at Dacca in 1670. Like a number of others, Platt met his death at the hands of his employer, who, being offended at defiance by the Englishman, had him and his mates bound hand and foot, put aboard a boat, and sunk in mid-stream of the Meghna.

In 1711, the Dutch ambassador to Bahadur Khan at Lahore mentions that John Wheeler, commander of the Feringhis in that service, ranked as a commander of 500 horse, and drew a salary of Rs. 2,000 a month. This does not imply that the numbers of men under him was so considerable, but does mean that it was considered very important. In 1722 Clement Dowson, who with Nathaniel Webb, James Lyons, and William Hocking, were gunners to the Nawab of Gujerat, mentioned that in the opposing army there were twenty others, English and Dutch, and sixty more at Delhi alone, all "well paid and considered."

In 1726, James Plantain, once a pirate king in Madagascar until the place became too sultry for even him, set sail thence with the surviving dozen of his men, to join Angria Pequera, the arch-pirate of the western coast, and to become himself his chief gunner, and the others commanders of pirate vessels. In 1750, William Irvine mentions an unnamed Irishman as gunner to the Subah of Bengal, and from thence onwards down to 1805, Europeans in such employment were even more numerous.

The Nawab of Oudh employed Sombre, commander of a company of freelances, who had a hundred of the rascality of all nations as gunners with him. At the same time a Frenchman named Madec served Main Jafir and others with another free company of near upon two hundred Europeans, mostly Frenchmen, firstly renegades from their own country and then deserters from the British. George Thomas, the Irish raja of Hariana, served the Polygars of Madras and the Nawab of Hyderabad as a gunner before joining Begum Sumru, and later becoming independent; while his conqueror, the Frenchman Perron, who commanded the great army of Scindia, and was dictator of Hindustan for some years, also commenced life as a gunner in native service, after deserting from the French.

James Skinner records that over one hundred European and Eurasian gunners in the army of Scindia were slaughtered at their guns, in the great battle of Malpura, between Scindia and the Rajputs of Jaipur. The artillery of Ranjit Singh was not, as generally supposed, brought to its great excellence by his French generals, but by deserters from the British artillery, such as John Brown and others, some of whom actually fought against us. So much for the men.

Let us conclude with a brief description of how the guns worked by them were made, premising that from the Zam Zamma to the 3 and 6-pounder battalion gun, the process was identical in all but bulk. For this we are indebted to Major Reynell Taylor, a British political officer who was engaged in settling the country in the period between the two Sikh wars, and was escorted by a battery and some battalions. belonging to the Durbar. These were under the

Eurasian, Colonel John Holmes, and the guns having been much scored by the hammered iron shot used with them, became unserviceable. Hence they were recast. Major Taylor's journal reads:—

"8th December 1848. Saw the preparations for casting guns. It is ingenious but simple. The first process is the formation of a mud model of the future gun round a pole. The pattern is beautifully made and shaped and moulded to the exact size required. When dry, the mud composition of the mould was centred on this pattern to a thickness of about half a foot. This was allowed to harden. After this, the centre pole was withdrawn, and the pattern crumbles to pieces within the mould. This mould is now fire hardened to brick-like consistency.

"Into the mould the metal is run from a mud furnace. Before running the metal, an iron bar covered with composition, and moulded to the exact size of the bore, is suspended within the mould in the exact centre, to form the bore. The gun is cast in a vertical position. Thus the whole gun, trunnions and all, is cast at once, and turned out of the mould nearly ready for use."

A few days later, Major Taylor records in his journal: "The new guns being now mounted and ready for use, were tried and found to be quite good." When we add that the shot were of hammered iron or lead, and the shell of brass or lead, costing, the former a rupee and the latter Rs. 3 each, it will be seen that both cannon and projectiles have gone a very long way since the year 1848.