THE LIMNER COMPANY



JOHN SMART (1742 - 1811)

Portrait miniature of an Officer, probably Alexander Dyce (1758-1835), in the East India Army uniform of a Deputy Adjutant-General, Deputy Quartermaster-General or Major of Brigade[1]

Circa: 1790

1790

Oval, 7.5 cm (3 inches) high

Watercolour on ivory

Ivory registration number: Y7D7MW4Y

Signed with initials and dated ‘JS/ 1790’ with ‘I’ for ‘India’

The sitter here is most probably Major, later Lieutenant-General Alexander Dyce (1758-1835) in the Madras infantry of the East India Company, shown in uniform, with his hair powdered. On an artistic level, this portrait fits with the bold oeuvre of Smart’s second half-decade in Madras; the sitter typical of his patrons and depicted by Smart clearly sweltering in the Indian heat.

Dyce’s army career began in 1776, when he entered the East India Company service as a cadet. [2] Significant events in his soldiering career include, in 1781, his appointment as Adjutant to a battalion of Native grenadiers (the only one in the army), marching under the command of Lieutenant General Sir Eyre Coote to relieve the fort of Wandiwash. Dyce was also present at the disastrous attack on Chillimbrum, where upwards of 300 men were killed or wounded. His unsolicited appointment of Quartermaster of Brigade to the 5th Brigade was made by Coote. In 1783, he was made aide-de-camp to the Hon. M. George Bruce, of 100th regiment. He seems to have been present in all subsequent service, being Captain in 1793 before returning to England to prepare for marriage. On his return to India with his wife in 1799 he was made Lieutenant Colonel.

Dyce’s commitment to army duties resumed from 1799 but he was forced to abandon them due to ill

health in 1807, at which point he returned to Europe. His appointment as Major-General on the staff of the Madras army saw his return in 1817. He was involved with decisions both on and off the field until, in 1818, he finally retired from duty, with the Commander in Chief, Lieutenant General Hislop commending his ‘zeal, ability and regularity in which the M-Gen. has discharged the duties of that appointment’. After four years remaining on the staff, Dyce then returned for the final time to England, and died in Cheltenham on Christmas Eve 1835.

After living for over ten years in India, Dyce began an affair with an Indian partner, with whom he fathered a son in 1787/8 (her name remains unknown). As Shuchi Kapila notes in her book ‘Educating Seeta’ (2010), ‘Interracial relationships in late-eighteenth century India rarely excited adverse comment , becoming visible only if there was a “scandal” attached to them or when the wills of British men became public.’ Their son, George Alexander Dyce (1787/88-1835), led an extraordinary life as a European commander (‘Col. Sirdhana’) of the army of the Joanna Nobilis Sombre (c. 1753-1836), popularly known as Begum Samru (née Farzana Zeb un-Nissa. [3] Originally a dancer, she became the ruler of the Indian principality of Sardhana, who converted to Catholicism and headed (sometimes in person) a professionally trained mercenary army.

It is not known whether Dyce’s future wife was aware of his existing family in India, but in 1797 he married Frederica Campbell (1778-1859), a fellow Scot described as coming from ‘desperate gentry poverty in Argyll’.[4] The couple returned to India after the birth of their first son, also called Alexander, in 1798. Leaving their tiny child behind, the couple sailed to India leaving him in the care of two paternal aunts in Aberdeen.

Alexander and Frederica went on to have five further children, but it was Alexander senior (1798-1869) who became well-known as an important literary scholar and was an early donor to the Victoria and Albert Museum (then known as the South Kensington Museum). Alexander’s library of over 14,000 volumes, including many rarities of English, Italian, and classical literature, was bequeathed here, together with his large and various art collection. Valuable for its English watercolours and theatrical portraits, this also contains examples of his own work as a flower painter as well as numerous portrait miniatures.[5]

[1] The Limner Co. would like to thank Stephen Wood for his diligent research and discovery of Alexander Dyce as the probable sitter in this portrait, and for his advice on sources for Dyce’s military biographies.

[2] Information on Dyce’s military career taken from Philippart's East India Military Calendar (London, 2 vols., 1823).

[3] Borpujari, Priyanka (5 July 2019). "India's forgotten power broker—what was her secret?". National Geographic. Archived from the original on 5 July 2019. Retrieved November 2024.

[4] DPhil submitted by Eleanor M. Harris entitled ‘The Episcopal Congregation of Charlotte Chapel, Edinburgh 1794-1818’, 2013, p. 294.

[5] In the V&A, ‘Dyce 91’ bequest was an important portrait of Samuel Cooper, now thought to be by John Hoskins and featured in the exhibition and catalogue, Emma Rutherford and Dr Bendor Grosvenor, ‘Warts and All. The portrait miniatures of Samuel Cooper’, London: Philip Mould & Company, 2013, p.168-9.