



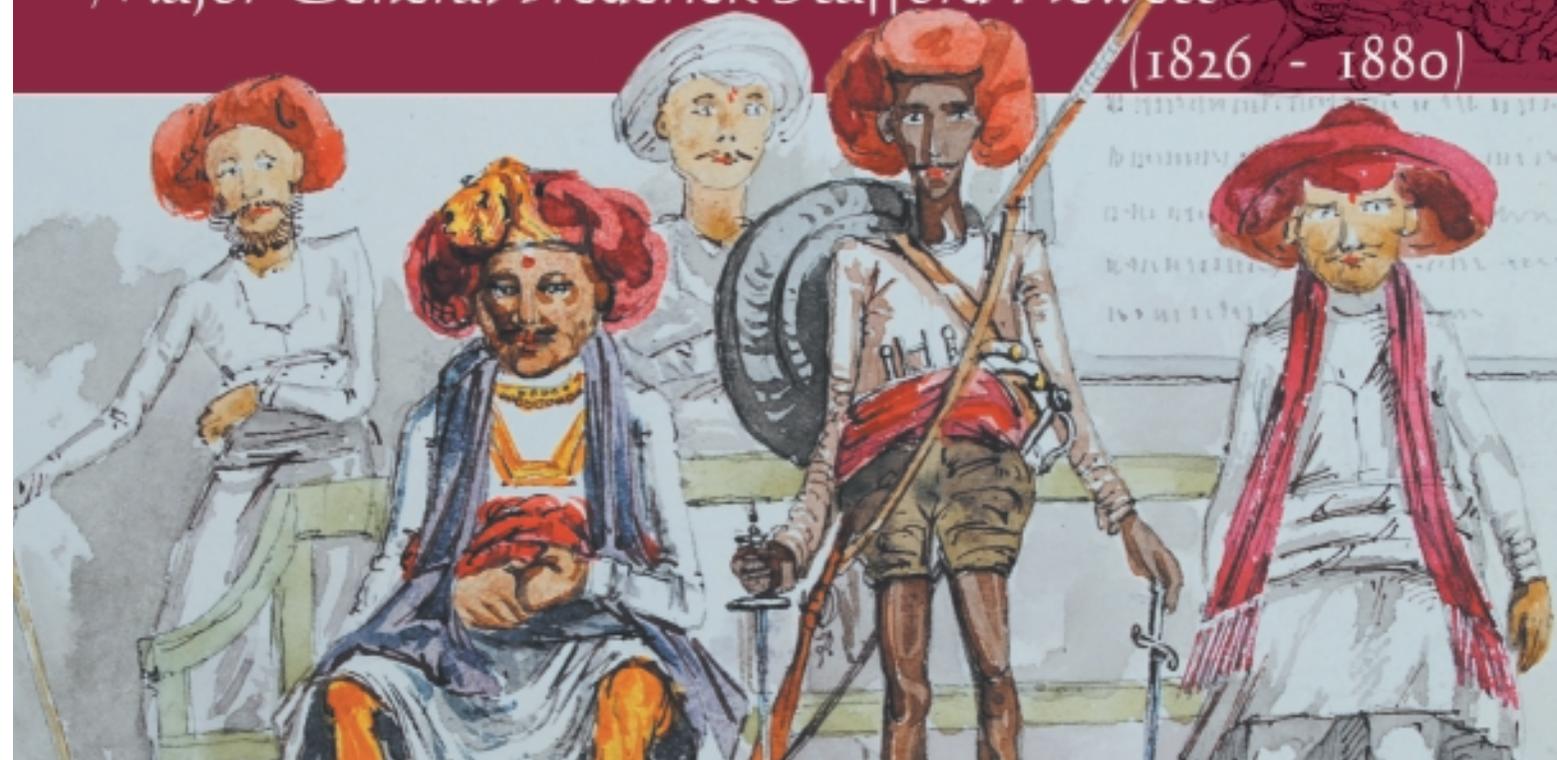
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The Weird & Wonderful World of Major-General Frederick Stafford Hewett

(1826 - 1880)

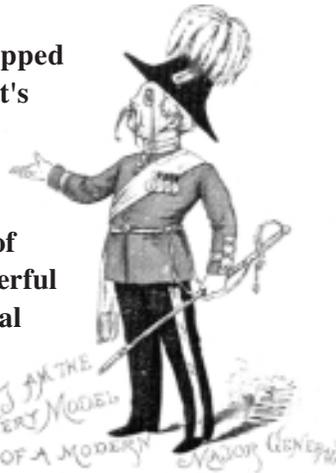


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The Very Model of a Modern Major-General?

In the tightly-mapped landscape of art history, it's rare to find works of art that are both high quality and unrecorded, let alone an entire body of work. The weird and wonderful oeuvre of Major-General Frederick Stafford Hewett is just that: unknown to anyone but the inheritors of his estate but clearly the output of a talented and original artist with a unique vision.



Gilbert & Sullivan's Major-General

Hewett was a career soldier in the Indian Army, rising to the rank of Major General at retirement in 1877. It was a career of solid military achievement in a very difficult period - his time in India spanned the Mutiny and many subsequent bloody rebellions. In the public record, there is only the barest of hints that bubbling away below the

highly decorated military surface, there beat the heart of a gifted and highly imaginative artist.

Viewing Hewett's work for the first time is to discover a new and distinct voice speaking to you direct from the days of the Raj with the deftness and comic touch of a Gilbert & Sullivan. It is as if the Modern Major-General



Procession of the Grand Mogul

of *Pirates of Penzance* (written while Hewett was serving in India) has come to life.

Between 1868 and 1872, Hewett recorded what is effectively a private visual diary, while commanding a regiment of Native Infantry in the region between Bombay and Hyderabad known as the Bombay

Presidency. But like W.S.Gilbert's 'Modern Major General', Hewett shows almost no inclination to touch on military matters. Women's shoes, baobab trees, monkeys, native piercings, skeletons, bats and a phantasmagoria of other bizarre minutiae fill every inch of every page but uniforms, guns and military life in general are almost pointedly absent.



On one level, Hewett's weirdly-inspired doodlings are a delightfully surreal joke but, given the context in which they were produced - the frontierlands of the British Raj in the aftermath of the Mutiny - they also provide a uniquely fascinating insight into the private imaginary world of the Victorian Establishment. The risqué nature of much of the material – sexually, socially and politically - indicates that the drawings were not produced for public consumption but simply for private amusement and - to use an anachronistically vogueish term for which F.S Hewett would have had no time or understanding whatsoever - therapy.

Hewett's collection of drawings and watercolours are the private outpourings of an artistic Mr Hyde to the Dr Jekyll of his official military persona. When soldiers do make the odd appearance in Hewett's work, they are almost always burlesqued, represented as grotesque scarecrows, stick men, toys – figures of fun and amusement, rather than power and control.

Women, too, are represented not as the demure appendages of the British Empire but as monsters, playthings and objects of - often peculiarly specialised - desire. In one typical drawing, a snake peeps out from beneath the lovingly detailed hoops of an elaborate crinoline, wrapping itself around an even more precisely

delineated woman's foot. In another, a woman's shoe takes on a complete life of its own and visits a waterhole for a drink. Imaginative outpourings like this were clearly not intended for Official Despatch.



Hewett's topographical work is a completely different kettle of fish. It was not unusual for Victorian soldiers to produce high quality landscape drawing - every subaltern was taught to draw for military surveying purposes - but

the quality and level of detail in Hewett's topographical work is outstanding, an achievement that was formally recognised by his superiors, who officially commended his drawings of the Kolara tombs at Hyderabad.

It is the minute, almost autistic, attention to detail in his panoramas of colonial India that make them so fascinating. Bombay is particularly well-served. In what is almost a comprehensive set of camera obscura depictions of the small archipelago that make up the town, its manicured 19th century Englishness comes back to eerie life: from the railway station at Thanna to the Free Church of Scotland



and Elphinstone Circle in the centre of the town to the Colaba Lighthouse and the elegant, astonishingly modern-seeming, beachhouse on 'the Sands, Backbay' belonging to a rich Indian businessman called Cursetjee Furdonjee, who – further research reveals – was the recipient of the oldest recorded life insurance policy in India (1848).

Technically accomplished and topographically fascinating as Hewett's drawing undoubtedly is, however, it is the fertility and satirical bite of the artist's imagination that makes his work so memorable. It is as if Tenniel had been asked to draw a year in the life of the British Raj for a special issue of *Punch*.



Hewett's work is altogether more deranged and inspired, however, than a 'drawn to order' political satire. It came to light recently that Tenniel – the illustrator of *Alice in Wonderland* - had attempted to curb the further flights of Lewis Carroll's imagination, citing the author's "wasp in a wig" character as "beyond the appliances of art". For Hewett, nothing was beyond the appliances of art or his own imagination; a wasp in a wig would have been a mere bagatelle.

Trying to categorize Hewett's work is well-nigh impossible; a list of individual titles tell their own bizarre story: 'Monkey in a crinoline'; 'Mushroom Skeletons'; 'Fish-tongue-beards'; 'Leapfrog out of my Head'; Snail headdress. And this was a man who'd never heard of Monty Python or Salvador Dali, in command of a heavily fortified outpost of empire in the formative days of the British Raj.

Like Gilbert & Sullivan's Major-General, Hewett was clearly something of a connoisseur. He knew his "undoubted Raphaels from his Gerard Dows and Zoffanies" all right. There are direct references, even quotations, in his work to artists as various as Michelangelo and Gustave Doré and throughout there are echoes of artists as various as J.J. Grandville, Edward Lear and even Richard Dadd.



Punch, probably a mess-room mainstay, was clearly an influence, too, particularly the work of the now sadly-neglected Forrester Brothers under their pseudonym 'Albert Crowquill', although the absence of an editor telling Hewett what to do, means that, for the most part, his drawings are gloriously untethered not to say unhinged.

A typical Hewett drawing may begin with a commonplace notion - the skull beneath the skin, say, or the idealised woman - but then drifts off like a magic smoke ring in an extraordinary visual stream of consciousness that occasionally just about holds onto some kind of peculiar internal logic but more often than not is revealing of nothing but Hewett's fertile subconscious. Consciously or subconsciously created, the end result is often a potent and memorable pot pourri.

Occasionally, however, the drawings do have a more pointed satirical character. Amid some delightful architectural perspectives of the Fort at Thanna near Bombay is a disturbing depiction of the Fort's 'Execution Tower', followed immediately by a piece entitled, with clear ironic intent: 'The Majesty of English Law!'. It shows a tree festooned with the strange fruit of native corpses and a Grandville-like assortment of bizarre heads and animals - an extraordinary drawing for a senior military commander to produce, even in private.

Elsewhere, Hewett displays a great sensitivity to the beauty of his surroundings. He notices and records the religion, habits and character of the native population, sometimes with a humour that can border on condescension but more often with a genuine curiosity and respect.

Hewett was also a first rate recorder of flora and fauna; he seems to have been particularly taken with native trees, which he records in superb detail. Overall, the range of his output is astounding: from a beautifully detailed watercolour of a 'funny little fish' landed by a fisherman at Madras to the immensely dignified head of a working bison and the casual grace of a leopard awoken from sleep by a big-game hunter crashing clumsily into his world. Taken together as a glorious whole, they show a man

captivated by and in tune with his environment.

As Hewett himself put it in a few lines of text that accompany his insanely elaborate monogram (see back page) at the beginning of his journals:

"But who can paint like Nature? Can imagination boast amid its creation hues like hers? Or can it mix them with that matchless skill in every bud that blows".

All in all, a very unusual soldier and an extraordinary artist.

Andrew Sim 2011

