

GENERAL GARRETT, 1791-1869

By D. C. GIBSON

ANTIQUARIAN studies are unjustly neglected by most careerists. Local archives contain much evidence of iron determination to get on in the world, and occasional absorbing glimpses as to how it was actually done. Robert Garrett is a case in point. He rose to the high military rank of Lieutenant-General without outstanding family advantages, but displaying obvious talent and persistence. He was clearly a Jones type, the sort that gets on in the world, as against the species Robinson to which most of us belong.

Robert Garrett was born in 1791 to a family of comfortable rather than splendid social position. The Garrett family was settled in the Isle of Thanet from the mid-fourteenth century, and acquired Nether Court, a small country house near Ramsgate, at the beginning of the eighteenth century. In 1773 Robert's great uncle purchased Ellington, a similar house a few miles from Nether Court. He died a bachelor and bequeathed his property to his nephew and namesake, John, father of our Robert Garrett. Both estates are commemorated in the topography of modern Ramsgate.

Robert's father and uncle therefore were respectable country gentlemen, and they discharged the normal social duties of their class. Both were Justices of the Peace for Kent and Assessors for the Land Tax in the Eastern Division of the Lathe of St. Augustine. Both held commissions in the Isle of Thanet Cavalry, Robert's uncle, Thomas Garrett of Nether Court being Captain of the Troop, perhaps as head of the senior branch of the Garrett family. Both practised a generous hospitality, and as a regiment was always quartered at Ramsgate, army officers were frequent guests at Nether Court and Ellington. In at least one instance this hospitality was amply repaid. One such acquaintance, a quartermaster named Boys, encountered Robert Garrett in Spain, extremely ill and stumbling on foot out of a town on the point of occupation by the French. Boys lent his old acquaintance a horse, on which he was able to escape.

Although the elder Garretts were so hospitable to army officers, neither explicitly encouraged Robert's choice of a military career. Robert was the eldest son, and this was no case of a younger son being pitchforked into a career. The choice was made indeed against considerable family opposition and it may well have been prompted by an

ambitious temperament. The army offered obvious scope for promotion during the Napoleonic wars, and Robert probably wished for a measure of independence from family support. As he wrote to his fiancée, 'My profession will always enable me to appear in the character of a gentleman'. These letters to his fiancée, 1811-1813, provide the principal documentation of Robert Garrett's career. There are sixty-two of them, and they supply a most interesting picture of a subaltern's life in the Peninsular War—the occasional danger and the almost perpetual discomfort. Charlotte's replies have not survived, but they were evidently quite cordial, as the formal address to, 'Miss Bentinck' in the first three letters is altered to 'Dear Charlotte' for the remainder of the series. A pleasing feature of the correspondence is the air of candid equality with which Robert addresses his fiancée, particularly in not omitting the messy and unpleasant nature of his experiences. He wrote on one occasion of taking food from a dead soldier's haversack, and his brief references to his own wounds are explicit without being morbid.

As regards professional matters the letters are an unstudied and convincing display of the qualities of a model career officer of the period. He was unflinching in battle, he accepted his father's money for promotion, and he sought the patronage of men eminent in the army and in English society, including his fiancée's relatives. He had in a sense won an important campaign even before leaving England, for his fiancée, Charlotte Bentinck, was a grand-daughter of the Duke of Portland, and her brother, Lord William Bentinck, held a senior position on Lord Wellington's staff, obviously an excellent position from which to assist an aspiring brother-in-law. Robert Garrett was only nineteen when he landed in the Peninsula, and his letters suggest a somewhat precocious perception of the possibilities of chair-borne promotion. There are occasional requests for Lord William to exert his influence, and one to other friends trying to provide Robert an appointment on the staff.

Robert also, however, displayed more elementary virtues. He was obviously quite imperturbable under gun fire, to which he alludes with startling nonchalance. On one occasion he was cut off with a brother officer while carrying the Regimental colours, which were still objects of direct military utility rather than mystique. He was trapped, according to report, in a plot 'the size of an Irishman's potato garden', but with his companion, he fought off the enemy with the butt ends of the colours till help arrived. This exploit recalls with some exactness the more celebrated feat of Leonard Merryll in the *Yeoman of the Guard*

'Dids't thou not O Leonard Merryll
Standards lost in last campaign
Rescue them at deadly peril.
Bear them safely back again?'

Robert was wounded in the attacks on the forts at Salamanca, and was actually the only surviving officer in his company. He nevertheless continued to press the attack until ordered to retire. Typically and perhaps truthfully, he ascribes this conduct to careerist motives. 'I should much have liked to have been able to carry our point as it would have been a great thing in my favour, having at that time the command of the company.' His skill and courage actually earned the praise of Marmont, the opposing French general, who sent Robert the present of a dog in recognition of his bravery and professional expertise. Marmont was himself wounded at Salamanca, so that the present is impressive evidence of the objectivity and professional detachment attainable by officers of the period. The letters contain interesting accounts of comparable engagements and are something of a Blimp's delight. There, so to speak, was the enemy, and here the thin red line.

The bulk of the letters, however, is more concerned with the perpetual discomfort of camps and billets on the unending marches imposed by Wellington's strategy. Bugs and fleas were Robert's perpetual companions, and he passed weeks without sleeping in an ordinary bed. There was rarely enough water to drink or with which to wash. Thirst and filth actually produced a temporary truce between the outposts of the opposing armies beside the river Douro, both sides filling their canteens and kettles, and talking to each other while doing so. Robert's occasional comfortable quarters are written of with rare delight. For a week only he was able to enjoy hot punch every night, 'not so good' he loyally protests, 'as that made by dearest Charlotte'. The letters also indicate, by inference rather than direct statement, the extreme inconvenience of the war to the ordinary people of Spain and Portugal. It was always dispiriting to occupy a village immediately after the French, who invariably left it almost uninhabitable. British troops were little better, and the greatest happiness was to find a village previously unoccupied by either side. Even in Robert himself one detects a certain insensitivity to the feelings of the indigenous vulgar. He writes from Prinzio, October 1811: 'The people in this place are the most insolent unaccommodating set of any in Portugal. The man in whose house I have got a room allotted to me has done everything to annoy me. Indeed the rascal if he dared would have struck me yesterday, and nothing but the fear of a repetition of a kick in the honourable part, which I was obliged to give him, keeps him in order.' Similarly, from Villa Nova, April 1813. 'We have been here about ten days. This day week three other officers and myself gave a dance to the inhabitants. We mustered about ten very decent couples, but some of the Portuguese "gemmen" (? gentlemen) beginning to quarrel, we were obliged to kick them downstairs, which rather interrupted the glee of the party.' This probably seemed good humoured and necessary

discipline to the officers concerned, but one speculates how Robert himself would have felt had he been kicked down his own stairs at Ellington.

Occasionally, however, contacts with the populace were of a pleasanter nature. Robert writes from Castello Melhor, March 1813. 'I forgot to tell you of an elopment that took place about three weeks ago. An officer of the 40th, which is our division, ran away with the daughter of a Portuguese nobleman who lives at a place about eighteen miles from here and has married her. She is tolerably good looking, and has £6 or £8,000 at her own disposal. His name is Kelly. Whether he has fallen in love with her or her money, I have not heard.' It was, however, no light matter to abduct a nobleman's daughter in 1813. The letter continues: 'Since he married, he and his wife, while out walking were attacked by 2 or 3 armed Portuguese, who sic her mother had sent to kill Kelly. He being aware that such a thing was on foot, was armed with a brace of pistols, and a good thick stick, and kept the fellows off, and covered his own and his Wife's retreat to the village.'

Four months after this episode Robert was severely wounded in the Pyrenées. He was shot in the left arm, and the army surgeons were very insistent for amputation, but Robert here showed early signs of his persistence and capacity to get his own way. He insisted on keeping his arm, and eventually recovered the full use thereof. It was evident, however, that he required convalescent leave, and on this point Robert had an acrimonious but eventually successful dispute with the medical authorities. 'The Inspector of Hospitals', he wrote, 'took upon himself to alter my leave from England to Vittoria or Bilbao, or some vile place or other. I told him my opinion of him in very plain terms; but he was a *dirty mean Scotchman*, and I could make nothing of him.' This was on the 9th September, 1813. Robert at once wrote to his colonel begging him to take steps for Robert to be sent home, and at the same time moved to Tolosa, where he could embark immediately.

The Scotchman's discomfiture was reported in a letter of 25th September, little more than a fortnight after his initial obduracy. The letter is a fine type of those written by millions of homecoming soldiers and deserves quotation in full.

'Passages Sepr 25. 1813.

'My dearest Charlotte,

I have only just time to tell you that I have got my leave, and tomorrow go on board "the Adamant" transport, No. 368, on my way to Portsmouth. We expect to sail on the 27th or 28th. Probably I may be in England before you receive this. My wounds are nearly closed, but as yet my arm from the elbow downwards is motionless and useless. At last my hopes are realized, and I shall be again blessed with the

sight of all I hold dear on earth. As soon as I reach Portsmouth I will write. Drop me a line as soon as you receive this, and direct to me at Greenwood Lord Co. Army Agents, London. To be left till called for.

Yours &c.

Robert Garrett'

Robert found his father waiting for him at Portsmouth, and after calling at the Horse Guards in London, they returned together to Ellington. For some months Robert was the life and centre of a family party, which included not only his parents, brothers and sisters, but also his uncle Thomas Garrett of Nether Court, and some cousins who had known him since childhood. The only serious difference of opinion was over Robert's proposed marriage, which his parents opposed as strongly as they had opposed his initial choice of a career. The opposition was not on personal grounds, but Robert's family were very sensible of the difference in rank between their own son and a duke's grand-daughter. The couple were married in St. George's, Hanover Square, without the prior knowledge of Robert's parents. There was a short estrangement from the elders of the Garrett family, but quite soon Robert and Charlotte were living quite happily at Ellington. Charlotte was allocated a flower garden there for her own use and cultivation.

Robert himself followed the last campaigns against Napoleon with close attention, and maintained a keen interest in his own professional prospects. His own regiment left for India in 1815, and Robert welcomed the opportunity of a posting to a theatre of relatively rapid promotion. He made systematic and intelligent preparation for the journey, collecting notes on the Indian Climate, and on food suitable for Europeans in India. It was uncommon for English women to go to India at this period, but Charlotte was enthusiastic to accompany her husband. Robert's father, however, opposed the idea most strongly, and in this one instance Robert eventually deferred to his wishes. He was posted for a short period to Ireland, where he caught gaol fever and nearly died. Charlotte nursed him through this dangerous illness. Robert's parents moved to Hastings in the spring of 1817, mainly to benefit the health of their daughter Elizabeth, and Robert joined them there for his convalescent leave. In this same year Robert's sister Sarah was married to Lieutenant Johnstone, R.N., an old Harrow school friend of Robert's.

In the summer of 1817 Robert Garrett, now aged twenty-five, seemed securely afloat on a rising tide of prosperity. He was the centre of an admiring and devoted family, of proved professional competence, recently a lieutenant and now a captain by purchase, and he was married to a Duke's grand-daughter with high military connections. This fair prospect was soon to be clouded by personal disaster and

professional disappointment. While still at Hastings he went for a walk with Charlotte and the dog Moreau presented to him by General Marmont four years previously. Charlotte and the dog became separated from Robert, and he called his wife back to him. Wife and dog ran back in prompt obedience, but Charlotte fell over the dog and sustained a severe injury to her spine. She became gradually weaker, and though she still accompanied her husband on a journey to Brussels, she died there in November, 1818. The army was severely reduced in the years after Waterloo and Robert was placed on half pay in 1818. There followed a period when his career actually languished, and his next active appointment was delayed till 1834. He could during this period have lapsed quite easily into the aimless life of a half pay officer as portrayed in Thackeray's *Pendennis*, but his resilient spirit soon developed fresh personal and business interests.

He married again in February 1820, a young widow called Devaynes. This second marriage brought Robert much personal happiness. He became very attached to his step-daughter Louise, and later to his son Algernon born in 1825. His wife had an estate at Updown, near Margate, quite near the Garrett family properties, and Robert undertook the management of this estate. In addition there were considerable American interests left over from Mrs. Garrett's first husband. These seem to have been a useful but uncertain investment, and certainly involved Robert in extensive correspondence, 1830-1851. There are over 150 of these letters from America, and they give some interesting glimpses in Ohio, still largely a pioneering state. Land was sold in 3,000-acre lots for about \$2 an acre. Robert himself apparently owned 8,000 acres at one point, and a sawmill on this estate was a valued acquisition. One minor difficulty was the somewhat chaotic state of American currency in the 1830's, Robert's agent having to accept bank-notes which he later found to be not negotiable. It is nostalgic to read that sterling had at one time an 11 per cent. premium against the dollar, and Robert's agent dispatched him gold bars rather than pay this premium. Robert was evidently on friendly terms with his agent in New York, one Lynde Catlin, for Catlin's letters contain much social and domestic news. He describes a bachelor party in New York for which there were 150 subscribers at \$15 a head, and prodigious expense in music, supper and wines. An epidemic of Asian cholera, introduced by immigrants, is faced with the consolation that America is afflicted by cholera, England suffers from reform, a disease which Catlin's principal evidently considered much the deadlier evil. Robert's second wife, from whom these American interests arose, died about 1850, and the correspondence peters out in 1851.

The elder Garretts of Ellington and of Nether Court died off at quite close intervals in the 1830's. His father's will, proved in 1835,

divided his property equally between his three sons and one surviving daughter. It is in a sense a normal will, but it confirms the general impression of unusual harmony and cohesion in the Garrett family. In itself this is slight evidence, but even a cursory acquaintance with probate documents gives a strong impression of frequent partiality and dissatisfaction with close relatives. Robert's mother made her will in 1838 and she, too, made the same provision for equal division between her children. His uncle, Thomas Garrett of Nether Court, died in 1838, leaving his nephew a silver cup presented by the Thanet cavalry to its former captain, and also a good share of his more valuable property.

The Ellington estate was now in the hands of Robert and his generation of Garretts, and they were soon confronted with the novel phenomenon of railway development. The first railway boom was raging in England in the 1840's, and a line was eventually built through the Ellington estate in 1846. Ramsgate station was apparently near enough to the Ellington mansion to reduce its value for letting. Of necessity the railways had powers of compulsory purchase, but agreement was normal with the local landowners. Unfortunately, the Garrett family had contracted to rent and then sell land to a local builder. Three houses were to be built on land to be called Victoria Terrace, after the Queen whose reign was nearly ten years old. The Garrett family were willing to settle with the railway company, but Wildish held out for more, and the negotiations were protracted over a period of three years. The Garretts were paid compensation of £6,242 in February 1846, at which time the builder's case seemed likely to go before a jury.

Robert's military obligations took him out of the country while these negotiations were still in progress. He purchased a major's commission in 1826 and was recalled to active service in 1834, after nearly fifteen years on half pay. In 1841 he wrote requesting further promotion, and supported the claim with a summary of his youthful exploits in the Peninsula. His claim was recognized by appointment as Lieutenant-Colonel of his regiment, then in Canada, in 1846. Robert made his brother John Garrett his attorney before sailing, evidence of some confidence in his brother, in view of their joint interest in the Ellington estate. Robert introduced a new system of drill while in Canada, but failed to secure the co-operation of the officers already resident. He arrested an officer in a somewhat irregular manner, and was accused of disrespect to the Canadian Commander-in-Chief. The Horse Guards exonerated Robert of any disrespect, but it may be significant that he was posted back to England soon after.

The Guards regiments were sent to the Crimea in 1854, and Robert was then commissioned to garrison duty at Windsor, where he was summoned to dinner with Queen Victoria soon after his arrival. His

regiment, the 46th, attracted much attention at this period, due to widely publicized court martials on two young officers on charges arising out of a system of coarse practical joking on an unpopular subaltern. The incident 'gave much offence, as it was supposed to show that a poor officer had no security against the persecution of men of higher rank of wealth'.¹ Robert was himself involved in an acrimonious correspondence with the Duke of Cleveland, who had contributed to a fund for the officers' expenses. He had also criticised Robert himself, who he alleged, was unfit to command the regiment, and had permitted gross indiscipline for several years. Robert's own reply does not survive, but the Duke described it as five pages of most sarcastic remarks on that nobleman's character, age and military services. The Duke suggested Robert start a libel action rather than 'the other course', and it is clear that duel had at least been contemplated. One letter to Robert regretfully declines to second him in the dispute, as the Duke was a distant relative and made an allowance of £1,000 a year to the writer's cousin. It was of course the first principle of Victorian society not to irritate Dukes who made large allowances to one's cousins. The episode was closed in typical English fashion by being swept under the carpet. A clamour for further enquiry was met by despatching the regiment to the Crimea. Robert again appointed his brother John his attorney before leaving England.

He rose to command a division in the Crimea, and was an active and popular figure in the trenches. A letter to him from an old crony, dated from Windsor Castle, contains practical and detailed advice on methods of looting when the British troops should enter Sebastopol. Robert was advised to cut any good pictures from their frames and to carry them off in a roll. This should not be judged too harshly in the context of the period, but it provides interesting evidence that Robert was expected to secure a good share of any loot available. The letter also expresses as one veteran to another typical old soldiers' nostalgia for the uniforms of forty years ago, the new ones being described as 'new fangled, useless and inelegant'. The Crimean war really launched Robert Garrett as a minor luminary of the Victorian Establishment. He returned from the war with £100 a year for distinguished service, a Sardinian medal for valour, the Legion of Honour, and he was made a Knight of the Bath. His parting with the opposing Russian General was as civil as that with Marmont at Salamanca. General Wesselitskay sent Robert a polite letter in French, together with a present which he modestly describes as a little bagatelle. Robert had sent him a present which the Russian would always cherish as a most agreeable souvenir of their military encounter.

¹ Article in *Dictionary of National Biography*.

After the Crimea Robert served briefly in China, and in India from 1857, the time of the Indian Mutiny. He was particularly warned, apparently by another soldier, against the Ranee of Tiroa, described as a most immoral woman. This lady was about forty, and Robert now over sixty years of age. The evidence adduced of her immorality is quite interesting, consisting merely of 'highly improper pictures hanging about her room'. This is something of a curious sidelight on the Victorian state of mind. Here was this veteran soldier, thoroughly innured to blood and slaughter, but it was thought necessary to warn him against improper pictures.

Whatever the moral hazards, however, Robert continued to press his professional career. He received on the 18th December, 1857, a reply to his application to be Assistant Adjutant-General. 'His Excellency the Commander in Chief' it was stated, 'has recently issued an order that no officer should be appointed to the staff unless he had at least a colloquial knowledge of the Vernacular language of this country.' There are four pages of explanation of His Excellency's decision, which was prompted by the frequent necessity of detailing columns of troops to act independently. Considerable embarrassment would ensue if these columns contained not a single officer able to converse with the populace. This letter came on very high authority, and might be thought to extinguish Robert's hopes of the appointment. Only seven weeks later, however, the 4th February, 1858, there came an order from the Adjutant-General. 'Brevet Major A. R. Garrett is appointed Assistant Adjutant-General of the forces in the Madras Presidency, and will proceed to join them.'

By 1860 Robert had tired of India, and was seeking a post in Corfu, one of the Ionian Islands, then a British protectorate. This is inferred from a letter of the Duke of Cambridge, Commander-in-Chief of the British army. 'I think I ought frankly to state', the Duke wrote, 'that I can hold out little hope of the Corfu command.' This was very exalted obstruction indeed, and it took Robert two years to get his own way. In November, 1862, however, he was receiving letters of congratulation on his important command at Corfu.

The islanders, who were governed by a British Lord High Commissioner, were agitating for union with Greece at this period, and Gladstone was sent as Lord High Commissioner Extraordinary to investigate the protectorate. The British inhabitants both civil and military resented the mission, and Gladstone was not even invited to the garrison mess. For Robert personally the sin of political radicalism was compounded by the social ineptitude of Gladstone's arrival at Corfu. Gladstone's principal qualification for his task was a profound knowledge of the Trojan War, but he betrayed a quite sublime ignorance of modern military etiquette. A salute of guns was fired and a guard of

honour drawn up for Gladstone's inspection. 'The General Officer commanding the Garrison stepped briskly forward, thinking Gladstone was at his side. But he had to return when he looked back and saw the Lord High Commissioner Extraordinary standing perfectly still with a blissful smile on his face and his hand on his heart.'²

The British protectorate came to an end soon after this incident, and Robert, no doubt, assisted at the independence ceremonies. The official documents for this episode breathe a spirit of mutual cordiality and esteem. 'Your departure', the Greeks wrote, 'affects us exceedingly, and causes us to express the warmest wishes for your welfare. Farewell brave sons of England. Love us as we love you, and desire that we may imitate your national virtues.' This is in piquant contrast to a letter of the Duke of Cambridge, who had written to Robert on the necessity of reinforcing the troops, as the inhabitants were extremely bitter, and it was impossible to maintain order. Independence brought an end to Robert's command and he came home to England.

There is no direct evidence of his preference for any particular post in England, but he actually came to Shorncliffe, not far from his boyhood home, which seems surely more than coincidence. He resigned this post, however, on promotion to the rank of Lieutenant-General in 1866. He became a J.P. for Kent and for a few years lived the life of a country gentleman like his forebears. He died quite suddenly in 1869.

The main interest of his life is quite evidently his capacity to get his own way, with army surgeons, high officers in India, and eventually the highest authorities in the British army. His career may also be of some nostalgic interest for those millions of British males who in this century have performed various military duties with so much less distinction than Robert Garrett. Gibbon in a famous passage acknowledged the debt owed by the historian of the Roman Empire to the Captain of the Hampshire Grenadiers. For the present writer, *magnum componere parvo*,³ the Acting Sergeant of the Royal Army Educational Corps has not been useless to the student of General Garrett.

(Based on the Garrett family MSS. in Kent County Archives, KAO U888)

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² Philip Magnus. *Gladstone, a Biography*.

³ To compare a great man with a small one.