

MAJOR HODSON'S TOMB

A disturbing incident took place early last year in Lucknow which did not reach the British press but is a matter of concern to BACSA and its members. The grave of Major William Hodson who was shot dead in March 1858 during the recapture of that city, lies in the grounds of La Martinière College, one of the foremost public schools in India. Hodson was buried here because the site, which lies to the south-east of the city, was in British hands at the time of his death, having been wrested back from its Indian defenders during the Mutiny.

The tomb is a simple box-like structure within a walled enclosure. An elevated plaque bears an inscription with his full name – William Stephen Raikes Hodson – his dates of birth and death, 19 March 1821 to 12 March 1858 and the fact that his father was an Archdeacon of Stafford, a county town in the Midlands. Recent renovation work by the College has smartened up the tomb which is now painted cream with maroon detailing. It is the focus of an annual remembrance ceremony by officers of Hodson's Horse, a prestigious cavalry regiment now amalgamated into the Indian Army. (*see back cover*) The regiment was founded in the dark days of the Mutiny on the orders of Hodson's commanding officer, General Anson. Hodson was a controversial figure in life, as in death. He was described by his teachers at Rugby as 'arrogant, brash and domineering' with a hint that he may have inspired the fictional character Harry Flashman in *Tom Brown's Schooldays*. As an officer, Hodson was appointed adjutant of the Corps of Guides, leading it to success in the Second Sikh War, but he was clearly a difficult man to deal with, and too ready to court unpopularity with his own officers, both Indian and British. 'I don't know exactly why this is' wrote Sir John Lawrence, 'he is gallant, zealous and intelligent, and yet few men like him.'

Charges of financial irregularities were made against him (and dismissed) but the worst indictment was that Hodson shot dead three Mughal princes of Delhi in cold blood after that city was recaptured and he had been sent to arrest them. He justified the shooting by saying that a large crowd was threatening his small band of men, but his second-in-command was not convinced. Hodson had already ordered the execution of a hapless band of Anglo-Indian drummers of the 28th Native Infantry who had somehow got caught up in the whole debacle. It was during the relief of Lucknow that Hodson met his own end, shot by a sepoy who had concealed himself in one of the rooms of a small palace fronting the main thoroughfare.

In May 2017 a group of men led by the right-wing historian Amaresh Misra approached Hodson's tomb with the demand that a new plaque be installed listing his atrocities in Delhi. After a stand-off with the College principal Mr Carlyle McFarland, security staff, police and local administrators, the group members of the 1857 Nationalist Forum, as they style themselves, left the College but headed off to the tomb of Sir Henry Havelock at Alambagh. Havelock's isolated grave and memorial is a protected monument under the Archaeological Survey of India, but the locked gates surrounding it were broken open and a revisionist plaque placed by the obelisk memorial. Neither tomb has been damaged and it is hoped that these are isolated incidents. La Martinière's principal subsequently explained that despite Hodson's reputation, history cannot be simply rewritten to suit today's views. The

College maintains the grave in view of the reputation and service of Hodson's Horse regiment in independent India.

On a different, but related note there are signs that a more mature debate on the British Empire, particularly as it affected the Indian subcontinent, is beginning to take place. The historian Dr Kim Wagner (whose new book is reviewed on page 24) writes that 'mindless empire-bashing is as tedious as jingoistic empire nostalgia...and makes for poor history'. He believes that 'a critical and more nuanced understanding of the past is required if we truly want to address the enduring legacies of Empire...'. Co-incidentally, this is the theme of BACSA's first public lecture series entitled 'Reconsidering the Raj' which is being held over the winter at the Institute of Historical Research in London. A second series in the autumn of 2018 will further explore this topic and details will be announced in due course.

