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Viscount Hugh Gough: 'An illustrious Irishman' and controversial British military commander

In 1986 an equestrian statue depicting Viscount Hugh Gough and describing him as an 'illustrious Irishman' whose achievements have 'added lustre to the military glory of his country' was sold to a private buyer by the Office of Public Works, allegedly on condition that the statue leave Ireland. The statue, originally erected in Phoenix Park in 1880, had been beheaded by vandals in 1944, and was blown up by the IRA in 1957. The OPW kept the broken statue in storage for almost three decades until a buyer was found and it eventually ended up in the possession of a distant Gough relative in England. Just who was this 'illustrious Irishman' honoured in this way but later so reviled his statue had to be exiled? Hugh Gough, a Limerick Protestant, was a renowned commander in the British Army but was later denounced by anti-imperialists for his colonial role in the Chinese Opium War and the Sikh Wars in India. The National Library recently catalogued and made available the Gough papers, a collection relating to Hugh Gough and his family. The papers reveal much about the life of this 'illustrious Irishman' and his lengthy military career.

Hugh Gough was born in Limerick in 1779, the fourth son of military officer. Hugh joined the army at the age of thirteen and served at the Cape of Good Hope and the West Indies soon after. He married Frances Stephens in 1807. Their close relationship is evident in the many affectionate letters between the couple in the collection. For example during the Peninsular War Gough wrote very regular letters to Frances, which describe in great detail his experiences in the military and give insight into his personal character. He was most disappointed that she could not join him in Spain in 1810. He also wrote of his conflict over the urge to seek honour and glory in the army and his desire to be home with his wife and children. Their first child, a son, died at two years of age while Gough was serving overseas in 1813. A daughter, Letitia, followed in 1815 and eventually four more children.

Gough was seriously wounded twice in the Peninsular War and applied for a medical pension in 1815, citing his injuries. He spent the next few years on half pay but it is evident from his correspondence however that financial worries were a significant concern for him and that, as a younger son, he felt obliged to work to earn a living. In 1819 Gough was given command of the 22nd regiment of Foot which was sent to Ireland in 1821. The regiment was based in Cork but was also active in Galway and Tipperary where they played a role in suppressing the agrarian violence led by 'Captain Rock' and the Whiteboys. The 22nd regiment was sent to Jamaica in 1826 but Gough did not join him, unwilling to leave his young family. Instead he leased Rathronan house and estate in Tipperary where he and his family settled for the next eleven years. He served as a magistrate and immersed himself in the local community.

However Gough became restless once more and made various attempts to return to active military service. He came very close to leaving the army entirely in 1834 in a fury over being passed over for the vacant position as colonel of the 87th regiment. He was eventually persuaded not to sell his regimental commission and in 1837 he was offered the command of the Mysore division in the Madras Army. He and Frances moved to Bangalore, little anticipating that it would be over a decade before they returned to Ireland to live. Gough was subsequently sent to China where he was commander-in-chief of the British forces during the First Opium War, a war described as the beginning of modern Chinese history. Gough was instrumental in the negotiation of the Treaty of Nanking in 1842, which the Chinese later referred to as the first of the unequal treaties due to the lack of obligations on the British side. The Treaty forced the Chinese government to open its ports to foreign trade and resulted in the cession of Hong Kong to the United Kingdom as a crown colony.

The Chinese papers in the Gough collection provide a rare insight into the Chinese perspective of the Opium War and of the relationship between the British Army and Chinese government. They include detailed correspondence of Hugh Gough with Karl Gützlaff, a German missionary to the Far East who served as an interpreter for the British diplomatic missions and acted as an essential intermediary between the British military and the Chinese population. The papers include Gützlaff's translations of Chinese documents about the British military and government as well as some documents in Chinese. It is interesting to read the Chinese perceptions of the British soldiers, describing them as 'rebellious English foreigners' and 'barbarians' and accusing them of rape and rapine.

Although Gough received praise and honours for his role in the Opium War, the war itself was the subject of some contemporary criticism. For example, William E Gladstone denounced the war in Parliament as "unjust and iniquitous" for its promotion of the opium trade and argued that it would cover Britain with 'permanent disgrace'. Hugh Gough himself addressed the question of the legality and morality of the war in a letter regarding prize money for the British soldiers. He was having difficulty securing the prize money he believed his troops were entitled to due to debate over whether the British government was in fact at war in China. Gough considered the issue to be quite simple; they were either at war and the soldiers were entitled to prize money or they weren't, in which case he was a murderer: 'if we were not at war with China, there is not a man in Europe more richly deserves hanging than myself. If we were at war I will fearlessly assert no army every better merited every reward'.

Gough appears to have been less interested in diplomacy or the political ramifications of his actions than in military action. In India, he wrote in a letter home that the Governor General was anxious not

to fall into the trap of 'making war without ample cause for doing so'. He stated that while such an attitude might be 'all right politically, but it hampers me, so as to give perfect security to all points'

In 1843 Gough returned to India where he was appointed commander-in-chief of the British Army in India. He spent the next 6 years in India, where he was in command during the Gwalior campaign in 1843 and the Anglo-Sikh Wars of 1845-1846 and 1848-1849 which were fought between the British East India Company and the Sikh Empire. The collection contains numerous documents such field returns, maps and plans of attacks relating to these wars, of particular value to those interested in military strategy and tactics. It also includes a number of despatch and letter books containing copies of hundreds of official letters between Gough and various correspondents including the Duke of Wellington, the Earl of Ellenborough, Lord Fitzroy Somerset and Sir Frederick Currie, resident at Lahore. Initially Gough's success in the Anglo-Sikh wars earned him praise and accolades such as the 'saviour of British India' while the Battle of Subraon in 1846 was described as the 'Waterloo of India'. He himself wrote in glowing terms to his son George of their victory in December 1845 as a 'glorious victory' and the hardest fought action that ever took place in India. He believed he was doing God's work and cared little for criticism at home for the losses sustained: 'the fearful losses will in their estimation be laid to my rashness, but whatever they may say believe this one fact, that for that apparent rashness India was lost' (16 Jan 1846). He wrote of the difficult position he found himself in in India: 'It is rather hard my actions in China were not accounted of any moment because they were effected without much, indeed very little loss. In India I am a reckless savage devoid of stratagem and military knowledge because my loss is severe'. He was confident of his decisions: 'Posterity will do me justice and the stoutest of my maligners may yet learn that my confidence in my army went far to serve India'.

However during the second Anglo-Sikh War Gough increasingly came under heavy criticism in the British press and from some of his colleagues in the army. He was blamed for the severe losses suffered by British troops at the Battle of Chilianwala in January 1849 and was criticised in the British press for his 'Tipperary tactics' – which apparently referred to his preference for frontal assaults. It was decided to replace Gough with Sir Charles Napier due to the losses and bad press but before the replacement could occur, Gough brought victory in the Sikh War with the decisive Battle of Goojerat in February 1849. Although Gough stood down from the command in May 1849 and soon after departed from India, the victory at Goojerat meant that it was an honourable departure and he returned to the United Kingdom as a victorious commander. Gough however resented his treatment from Wellington, Hardinge and others and complained bitterly about it in letters to his family and friends, describing it as 'barefaced trickery' and a 'most wanton act towards an old servant of the

state'. The supposed betrayal by Hardinge was particularly difficult, a man Gough had described in 1846 as having 'the feelings of a brother towards him'. He however refused to publically defend his military command, allegedly believing that it was 'inadvisable' during his lifetime to reveal the differences of opinion between the military and civil authorities.

The victory at Goojerat ensured that Gough was made a viscount on his return to England and received a generous pension as well as many other honours. He returned to Dublin to live and died in 1869 at his home in St Helen's, near Booterstown, Dublin. A statue was erected of Gough on his horse in Phoenix Park in 1880 but following repeated acts of vandalism and an attack by the IRA, it was eventually taken down in 1957 and now stands at Chillingham Castle in England.

Box

Gough in Ireland

Gough was proud to be an Irishman and settled in Ireland when not serving overseas where he owned significant landholdings by his death. Although he was overseas serving in India, he was aware of the horrific conditions occurring in Ireland during the Great Famine of the 1840s. He wrote to his son George in November 1846 from India expressing concern about their tenants in Ireland, describing Ireland's affairs as in 'a frightful state'. Although sympathetic to the unionist Protestant cause, he attempted to remain at a remove from politics. In 1832 Gough was invited to join a group styling themselves the Committee of Protestant noblemen which pledged to sought to 'maintain the rights of property and the union with Great Britain as established by law –to uphold the integrity of the Protestant church in Ireland and the king's authority therein.' Gough however declined the invitation, stating that his position as a military man made him unwilling to engage in political discussion 'however highly I may approve of devotedly wish to for the success of any particular cause'. The committee was a covert one and Gough was requested to destroy their correspondence –an edict he obviously disobeyed given their presence amongst his papers.

Box:

The Gough collection

The Gough collection was catalogued as part of the 2015-2016 research studentship, an annual position in the National Library organised in association with the Irish Committee for Historical Sciences. The Gough papers (Ms 50,120) cover topics as diverse as detailed accounts of the various military campaigns in which Hugh Gough served, private family correspondence, drawings and paintings of scenes from India, estate accounts and deeds, and letters relating to the secret Committee of Protestant noblemen. Encompassing in excess of 4000 items, the collection will be of significant value to those interested in Ireland's military history or in the Opium War or Anglo-Sikh Wars of the 1840s. Gough played an important role in the British military from the Peninsular Wars (1808-1817) to the First Opium War and the Anglo-Sikh Wars in the 1840s and his papers are a very valuable source for the history of these military campaigns.

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Further reading:

David George Boyce, *Nineteenth century Ireland* (Dublin, 2005)

Robert S Rait, *The life and campaigns of Hugh, first Viscount Gough Field Marshal* (London, 1903)

Michael Barthorp, *Queen Victoria's commanders* (Oxford, 2000)