Macan, Arthur Jacob

by Keith Haines

Macan, Arthur Jacob (1774–1819), politician, soldier and banker, was the youngest child of seven (six sons and one daughter) of Thomas Macan (1717–95). Thomas had been born McCann, a descendant of one of the most important Gaelic clans in Co. Armagh, but on 27 October 1751 considered it expedient to make a public renunciation of catholicism in St Patrick's cathedral, Armagh, at which time the family name appears to have been redesignated as 'Macan'. Thomas went on to become the richest citizen and longest-serving sovereign of Armagh city.

On his father's death (January 1795), Arthur Macan succeeded him as sovereign, at the age of 20 or 21. The ensuing years in Armagh were characterised by denominational violence (including the battle of the Diamond (September 1795), which resulted in the formation of the Orange order), which Macan lacked the experience to control. He was also suspected of being a United Irishman and, although charges were never brought against him, at the end of 1797 he considered it prudent to resign 'to go to Bengal' (Stuart, 477), where four of his brothers were, or had been, serving.

In 1801 Macan purchased a cornetcy in the 27th regiment of light dragoons, and served in the second Mahratta war (1803–05). In August 1803 he was camped at Secundra (now Sikandra) near Agra with two of his brothers: Richard (1754–1812), a much-respected soldier (and later a major-general), who was appointed a brigadier of cavalry; and Thomas (1768–1848), who became a brigade-major in Richard's unit. Probably on Richard's recommendation, Arthur, though still a cornet, became quartermaster of the second brigade of cavalry. The appointments were made by the commander-in-chief in India, General Gerard Lake (qv), who had recently been the commander of the British army in Ireland charged with defeating the United Irishmen. (It is not known if Lake ever knew of the suspicions surrounding Arthur Macan, but the two travelled home from India together on the same ship in February 1807.) Macan and his brothers served in early 1805 at Lake's unsuccessful siege of Bharatpur, the surrender of which was accepted at the second siege (January 1826) by a nephew of the Macan brothers, Turner Macan (qv).

Arthur accompanied three of Turner's sisters on his return to the subcontinent (April 1808), arriving in Calcutta (Kolkata) in January 1809. Seven months later he became aide-de-camp to his brother Richard, who had been appointed commandant of Fort William in the city. In February 1812 Arthur was granted furlough to travel with his brother to St Helena, but soon after the journey started Richard died of a fever and was buried at sea. Arthur returned to Calcutta at the end of the year, when he was made an aide-de-camp to Major-General Miles Nightingall, the new commander-
in-chief to Java. He resigned his commission, however, and in October 1815 was briefly to be found conducting business back in Armagh.

Macan then adopted the career path of his late brother Samuel (1771–1808) and joined one of the most successful banks in India, Alexander and Co., a leader in insurance and the indigo trade. This move must have been facilitated by his personal domestic wealth and/or the income he would have garnered as regimental quartermaster, as a position in the bank necessitated evidence of financial independence. Sailing to India in early 1817, he became an able and well-rewarded banker, acting as executor of the estate of several soldiers. His former role as a public official proved useful when he was appointed to the committee of Calcutta town hall (October 1817).

He acted as guardian to a second cousin, Anna Maria Lind (1802–62), daughter of his cousin Robert Macan (1774–1820), of Ballinahone House, Armagh. She arrived in India in mid 1817 and quickly married an Englishman, Alexander Francis Lind, who later bemoaned the fact that Arthur Macan neither offered him any financial advice nor bequeathed him any part of his substantial property. Lind also revealed that Arthur had returned from business in Saugor, where he had made his will. After failing to change out of wet clothes, Arthur caught a fever and died shortly afterwards, on 19 September 1819. He was buried in plot 623 (no longer extant) in South Park Street cemetery in Calcutta. His will stipulated: ‘I bequeath my body to my surgeon who may please to take it for dissection.’ It was written of Arthur that ‘with a pure and steadfast faith in the tenets of the Gospel, he endeavoured in every situation to make his actions accord with its divine precepts, and devoted his time, his talents and his fortune to relieve the distressed, and to encourage virtue and piety, of which he was a bright but unostentatious example’ (Bengal Obituary, 142).

Arthur Macan’s altruistic disposition was manifested in his will. He left personal items and the equivalent of about £20,000 to members of the Macan family, and small sums to acquaintances and personal servants, and also to the Macans of Ballinahone for the education of four of their children at Gracehill school, near Ballymena, Co. Antrim. The sum of 10,000 rupees (£1,000) was provided for educational purposes in Calcutta. £1,100 was allocated to his friend Arthur Irwin Kelly, the sovereign of Armagh, for dispersal to the poor of Lurgan and Armagh. Macan was, however, principally remembered for the bequest – probably as a tribute to his father, who became blind in his later years – ‘for building and endowing an Asylum for the Blind in [Armagh] on the plan of that of Liverpool but open alike to all religious persuasions’, which finally opened in the 1850s.