

Macan, Turner

by Keith Haines

Macan, Turner (1792–1836), soldier, linguist and translator, was born on 30 September 1792 at Kilbrogan, Bandon, Co. Cork, the second son of seven children (three sons and four daughters) of Robert Macan (1750–1808), originally of Carrive, Co. Armagh, and his wife Hannah (née Bagwell), of Cork, who had married at Blarney Castle on 4 January 1784. Robert was a son of Thomas Macan (1717–95) (originally 'McCann'), who had been the longest-serving sovereign and richest citizen of Armagh, and on his father's death inherited Carrive (then known as Cariff) and returned there with his family in January 1795.

Turner Macan's early childhood was marked by the intensifying political turmoil in the locality, which culminated in 1798 in the uprising of the United Irishmen and its brutal suppression. In early 1805, when Turner was aged 12, his father purchased him a cornetcy in the recently renamed 27th regiment of light dragoons, probably because he could be chaperoned by his uncle, Arthur Jacob Macan (qv), a lieutenant in the same unit. Turner was promoted to lieutenant at the age of 17. His regiment was placed on alert during the Anglo–Nepalese war (1814–16), and he served at the siege of Hattaras (February 1817) during the Pindari and Mahratta war. In October 1821, after the disbandment of his regiment, he was transferred as a captain to the 16th Lancers, which arrived in India the following year, but did not actively serve with them.

At the end of 1817 he was detached from his regiment for service with the commander-in-chief in India, the 1st marquess of Hastings, probably on the recommendation of his brother-in-law, William Henry Rainey (1780–1830), commandant of the governor general's bodyguard. By February 1818 Turner was listed as 'an extra aide-de-camp to the most noble commander-in-chief'. His principal role was that of Persian interpreter and, in preparation, during the first half of 1818 he attended the college of Fort William in Calcutta (Kolkata), where he obtained medals of merit in Persian and Hindustani.

Persian was the principal diplomatic and court language of India and, in addition to the translation of communications and despatches, his duties included dealing with protocol and etiquette when meeting native princes and maharajahs on tour and on campaign. In September 1822 he acted as escort and interpreter during the visit to Calcutta of the last Zand prince of Shiraz, and in the following year he was asked, with two other officers, to codify the language examinations for British officers.

As Persian interpreter, Macan played a central role in two major military episodes. In November 1824 sepoy troops at the cantonment of Barrackpore, fifteen miles north of Calcutta, were ordered to prepare to travel to participate in the war in Burma.

They believed that they were required to travel by sea, which contravened their religious code, and refused to cooperate. Macan was despatched to translate and deal with their demands. He was not unsympathetic to their stance, but indicated that their grievances were poorly and confusingly expressed. Edward Paget, then commander-in-chief, refused to negotiate with them and, after a final ultimatum, bombarded their camp with artillery, resulting in the deaths of over two hundred sepoys. Turner also acted as the intermediary between the new commander-in-chief, Lord Combermere, and the usurping rajah during the siege and capture of Bharatpur (then known as Bhurtpore) in January 1826. The acquisition of this enormous fortress proved a turning point in the consolidation of British power in India, and its surrender was effectively accepted by Macan.

By the early 1820s Macan had started to manifest an interest in Persian literature, in particular in the Persian literary classic, the *Shahnameh*, which was well known in Indian court circles. It had been completed in the early eleventh century by the poet Firdausi, but over the subsequent eight centuries the text had become corrupted and subject to many inaccuracies and interpolations, and (apart from an abortive attempt in 1811) there had been no serious effort to establish an accurate version. Macan sourced the most authentic editions available and, in the face of much official opposition and indifference and the necessity of much personal expenditure, published a four-volume Persian edition in Calcutta in 1829, although it was rescued only by the financial intervention of the king of Oudh, Nasir-ud-Din Haider. Macan had developed a close personal relationship with the kings at Lucknow, and later claimed to be familiar 'with almost every native of rank and talent from the Sutlej to Calcutta' (*Minutes*, ix, 153, 155–6). He is also credited with finding, during his return to England in the early 1830s, the most complete and authentic version of the *Alif Layla*, or *Book of one thousand nights and one night* (more popularly known as *The Arabian nights*), which he took to India for verification. One of those engaged in the latter process was Sir William Hay MacNaghten (qv), whose family home was in Bushmills, Co. Antrim.

After nearly twenty-four uninterrupted years on the subcontinent, Macan returned to England with Combermere's staff in early January 1830. In 1832 he was asked to give evidence to the house of commons committee examining the renewal of the East India Company's charter. On 22 and 23 March he presented his opinions to the committee for public issues, and on 17 April addressed the session on military matters. He was scathing on the cost of governing India, arguing that 'the cost of stationery and extra clerks connected with our government of India ... is greater than the whole cost of the civil government of the United States' (*Minutes*, ix, 157–9). Suggesting that it was time to permit indigenous Indians a greater role in administering their own affairs, he also argued that the debilitating mania for aggressive expansion should be curbed, claiming that 'more than half our army is required to preserve internal tranquillity and support our civil administration ... Our empire is maintained by the sword' (*Minutes*, xiii, 151–2). He also condemned the obsessive rapacity that bled India and the disreputable waste of public funds.

Macan married (14 November 1822), at St John's cathedral in Calcutta, Harriet Sneyd (1794–1871), younger daughter of Rev. Wettenhall Sneyd, of Newchurch, Isle of Wight. They had three children in Calcutta, and a fourth in Cheltenham in 1831. On 29 June 1832 Turner resigned from the Lancers and became, by purchase, a major of infantry. After being placed on half pay, he made unsuccessful efforts to obtain employment, including an application for governor of the Ionian Islands. He returned briefly to his family home at Carrive (1833–5), which had been inherited in 1808 by his older brother, Thomas, whose ownership proved short-lived when he was shot dead during a duel at Barrackpore on 14 June 1809.

Macan's health had been adversely affected by the strain of his work on the *Shahnameh* and deteriorated after his return to Britain. Somewhat perversely, he argued that a return to the Indian climate might prove beneficial and, through recommendations, was appointed Persian interpreter to the newly created commander-in-chief in India, General Sir Henry Fane, with whom he sailed from Cowes on 1 May 1835. His health never recovered, and he died on 24 July 1836 at Fane's residence on Park Street, Calcutta. He was given an impressive military funeral and buried in plot 190 of North Park Street cemetery, which is no longer extant.

During his brief return to England he became close friends with William Henry Whitbread, MP, who married (4 November 1845) Macan's widow and unofficially adopted their children. Whitbread probably paid for the marble memorial to Turner Macan erected in Armagh cathedral in 1839. Macan's younger son, Henry (1831–62), became a clergyman. The elder son, Turner Arthur (1826–89), had a brief military career and married into the Walpole family. The elder daughter, Caroline (1823–54), married a nephew of the former prime minister, the 2nd Earl Grey; in 1870 their daughter married the 12th earl of Home, and thus Turner Macan was a great-great-grandfather of the British prime minister Sir Alec Douglas-Home. The younger daughter, Jane (1824–92), married the future 5th earl of Antrim and lived for many years at Glenarm Castle, Co. Antrim, where her father's portrait, painted by the leading artist in India, George Chinnery, still hangs.

---

Correspondence relating to the *Shahnameh* (BL F/4/900/25533, -/1190/30875, -/1330/52577); regimental returns of light dragoons (TNA, WO 17/51, 17/272, 17/288, 17/302, 17/314, 17/332, 17/357); 'A list of all the officers of the Army and Royal Marines on full and half pay', 1807–36 (TNA, WO 65); will of Turner Macan, 27 Feb. 1837 (TNA, PROB 11/1873/97); Fane family archives (Lincolnshire Archives, 1 Fane 6/-); *Asiatic Journal and Monthly Register*, i–xxix (1816–30); House of commons, *Minutes of the evidence before the select committee of the affairs of the East India Company* (1832), vol. ix, xiii; Turner Macan, *The Shah nameh: an heroic poem containing the history of Persia from Kioomurs to Yesdijird, that is, from the*

*earliest times to the conquest of that empire by the Arabs*, i (1829); Henry Edward Fane, *Five years in India* (1842); John Pemble (ed.), *Miss Fane in India* (1985); John Macan, *MacCana of Clanbrassil: an ancestral and family history* (1997); Keith Haines, *The Persian interpreter: the life and career of Turner Macan* (2015)

Downloaded from <http://dib.cambridge.org> by IP 100.103.238.216 on Tue Oct 20 20:44:48 UTC 2020 Dictionary of Irish Biography Online © 2020 Cambridge University Press and Royal Irish Academy. All rights reserved. Not for commercial use or unauthorized distribution.