

THE INDIAN CORPS IN FRANCE





[W. & D. Downey.]

HIS MAJESTY THE KING-EMPEROR.

Frontispiece.

THE INDIAN CORPS IN FRANCE

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WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY
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WITH PORTRAITS, ILLUSTRATIONS AND MAPS

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TO
HIS MAJESTY THE KING-EMPEROR

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ANALYSIS
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INTRODUCTION

I AM not at all clear why an Introduction should be needed to this important and thrilling narrative of the deeds of the Indian Corps in France in the early days of the Great War, in addition to the excellent Preface which has already been contributed by the Authors. Still less is it clear why a remote spectator should have been urged to undertake the task. It can only be because a former Viceroy must have enjoyed many opportunities during his term of office in India of making the acquaintance and realizing the superb qualities of the Indian Army, that he should be invited, or would consent—as I have willingly done—to join in this tribute to their latest achievement.

I have seen it frequently stated, even by high authority, in the course of the present War, that the Indian Army is raised, trained, and equipped for service in India alone or upon its frontiers, and that the call to external warfare was therefore both novel and disconcerting. Such a claim would not only be indignantly repudiated by the Indian Army itself, but it finds no foundation in history. During the past half-century, the foreign campaigns in which that Army has been employed, greatly to its credit and glory, have extended from Egypt and even Ashanti on the West to China on the East, and have embraced most of the intervening countries. Even

before this War began it was the pride of the Indian Army that its British units saved Natal in the Boer War of 1899-1900, that it rescued the Legations at Peking in 1900, and that on its banners were inscribed the names of hard-fought engagements in almost every part of the African and Asiatic Continents.

The Indian Army, in fact, has always possessed, and has been proud of possessing, a triple function : the preservation of internal peace in India itself ; the defence of the Indian frontiers ; and preparedness to embark at a moment's notice for Imperial service in other parts of the globe. In this third aspect India has for long been one of the most important units in the scheme of British Imperial defence, providing the British Government with a striking force always ready, of admirable efficiency, and assured valour.

None the less there was a vast and vital difference between the field of war for which the Indian Expeditionary Force left the shores of India in August 1914, and any previous campaign in which its predecessors had been engaged. These had for the most part been conflicts in which the Indian Forces had had to encounter an enemy of minor importance and at no high level of military organization. Only once, nearly 40 years earlier, when Lord Beaconsfield had brought 7000 Indian troops to Malta, as an evidence of Imperial unity and purpose, had an Indian Military Contingent been seen to the West of the Suez Canal. Now, however, General Willcocks' Army Corps was to be pitted against the most powerful military organization on the globe, against a European enemy who had brought to the highest pitch of sinister perfection both the science

and the practice of war, and who was about to plunge not Europe alone, but the entire civilized world, into such a welter of continuous devilry and horror as the mind of man had never imagined and history had never known. The landing of the two Indian Divisions, numbering 24,000 men, on the quays of Marseilles in September and October 1914, was a great event, not merely in the annals of the Indian Army, but in the history of mankind.

This book describes the manner in which that force, and the drafts and reinforcements by which it was followed, comported themselves in the fearful struggle of 1914-15. That the Indian Expeditionary Force arrived in the nick of time, that it helped to save the cause both of the Allies and of civilization, after the sanguinary tumult of the opening weeks of the War, has been openly acknowledged by the highest in the land, from the Sovereign downwards. I recall that it was emphatically stated to me by Lord French himself. The nature and value of that service can never be forgotten.

Neither should we forget the conditions under which these Indian soldiers served. They came to a country where the climate, the language, the people, the customs, were entirely different from any of which they had knowledge. They were presently faced with the sharp severity of a Northern winter. They, who had never suffered heavy shell fire, who had no experience of high explosive, who had never seen warfare in the air, who were totally ignorant of modern trench fighting, were exposed to all the latest and most scientific developments of the art of destruction. They were confronted with the most powerful and pitiless military machine that the

world has ever seen. They were consoled by none of the amenities or alleviations, or even the associations, of home. They were not fighting for their own country or people. They were not even engaged in a quarrel of their own making. They were plunged in surroundings which must have been intensely depressing to the spirit of man. Almost from the start they suffered shattering losses.

In the face of these trials and difficulties, the cheerfulness, the loyalty, the good discipline, the intrepid courage of these denizens of another clime, cannot be too highly praised. If disappointment, and even failure, sometimes attended their efforts, their accomplishment was nevertheless solid and striking. The writer was at Neuve Chapelle, just after that historic combat. No record in it excelled that of the Indian troops. This volume contains the tale of other deeds not less heroic and daring. When the first V.C. was pinned on to the breast of an Indian soldier, not only was the promise given by the King-Emperor at the Imperial Durbar of 1911 redeemed, but the valour of Hindostan received at last the full recognition of its supreme merit.

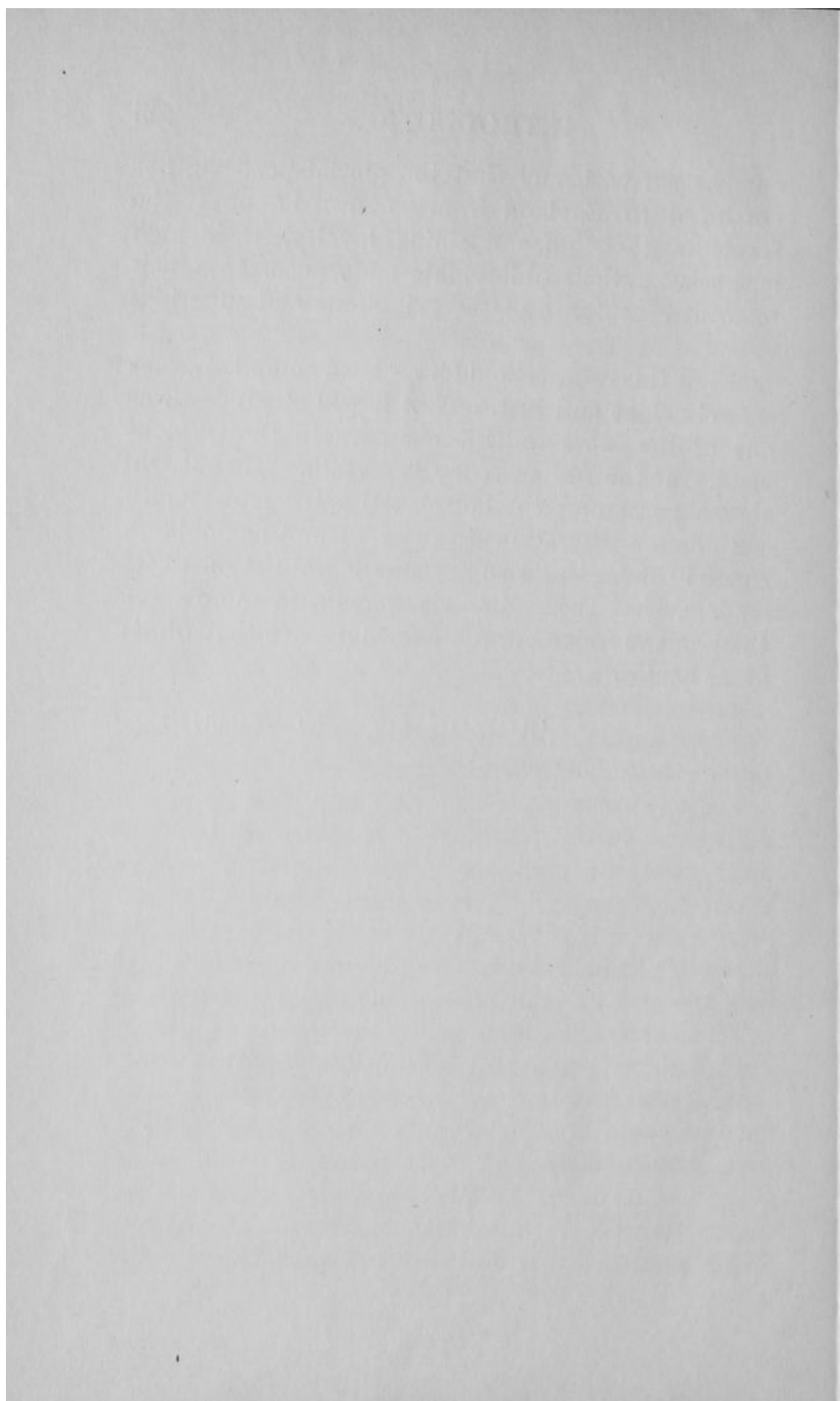
This volume deals chiefly with the stormy incidents of war. But any one who visited the Western front during the period which it covers, and saw the Indian regiments either in the trenches or in reserve, will also carry away with him many a picture of the good fellowship prevailing between British and Indian soldiers, of the deep and characteristic devotion of the latter to their British officers, and of the happy relations between the men in *pagris* and the inhabitants of the country. The letters of the Indian soldiers to their folk at home would stand

comparison with any that the official post-bag has conveyed to England from our own heroes at the front, in their uncomplaining loyalty, their high enthusiasm, their philosophic endurance, and their tolerant acceptance of the privations and sufferings of war.

That this record should have been compiled seems entirely right and just. That it will stand forth as one of the most radiant chapters in the glorious history of the Indian Army is certain. That it will act as a stimulus to the martial spirit and loyalty of India for generations to come, cannot be doubted. Nor will it be less a source of congratulation to its readers, that the Indian Army will, in more ways than one, receive a well-earned recognition of its great achievement.

CURZON OF KEDLESTON.

October 1917,



PREFACE

THIS book is an attempt to describe the fortunes of the Indian Army Corps in Flanders. Sir Frederick Smith was asked by Lord Kitchener to undertake duties in relation to the records of the Corps, and he served upon the Staff from the month of October 1914, until he became a member of the Coalition Government in the late spring of 1915. The War Office then appointed Lt-Colonel Merewether to take his place. Both these officers in the course of their duties had access to the Corps and Divisional Diaries, and to regimental and other records, and both were honoured, as far as was proper, with the confidence of the General Officer commanding the Corps, Sir James Willcocks. But the account which follows of the fortunes of the Corps does not, of course, pretend to anticipate the official War Office history. It is published at the desire and under the authority of the India Office; but the authors, and no one else, must be answerable both for allegations of fact and for expressions of opinion.

Far the greater part of the labour involved in the preparation of the book has fallen upon Colonel Merewether, who has been retained in England by the India Office in order that he might devote himself to the work. It was, however, his earnest desire that his predecessor should assist him in dealing with the period before he joined the Corps, and the

History has therefore been produced as the result of joint authorship, for which both writers are responsible.

The present struggle has been waged upon so immense a scale: so vast have been the numbers engaged, so infinitely varied the theatres, and so sedulously preserved the "fog of war," that it seems certain no single writer will ever produce a complete history of it, and probable that no combination of writers will present an adequate account in our lifetime. But the piety and industry of individual students may shed a tiny ray of light upon the small segment of ground where their comrades lived and fought and died. And in this way some deeds of shining heroism may be rescued from the frosty grasp of the military censors. It may even be that the confluence of many individual efforts will afford the only prospect of that ultimate History of the Great War which will at once affright and inspire our grandsons, and reduce every other military history to the remoteness of Cæsar's "Commentaries."

Many immortal deeds have been wrought in this war without record and without recognition. Of these many had a flame and quality of valour far transcending achievements which have lived for centuries in the pages of historians, or have been made musical in the verses of great poets.

All the Armies of all the Allies have suffered by the suppression of contemporary narrative.

Perhaps we shall never have a complete story of the Guards Brigade before it became a Division; of the Territorial Army hardening into veterans in a sea of blood; or of that Scottish Army—the largest under one standard since Bannockburn—

which fought and perished in the unhappy but glorious struggle of Loos.

Many units of all kinds have failed to receive contemporary justice, but perhaps none more conspicuously than those of the Indian Army Corps. Ludicrous expectations were formed of the part they were to play. The most exaggerated statements were rife as to their numbers. Legendary accounts of their performances in the field filled the press before they had left their place of concentration at Orleans. And at the end when, broken and bruised with fighting, they were carried (what was left of them) bleeding from Flanders, there were many who in perfect good faith said that the Indians had been failures. It would be truer to say that the Indian and British Regiments which together composed the Indian Army Corps in their turn saved the Empire.

No one who saw it will ever forget the landing from the great transports which began to swing into the harbour of Marseilles in the autumn of 1914, or the laughing, sunburnt, careless faces of the young British officers who leaned over the bulwarks and called aloud to learn whether they were coming too late. In six months nearly all were dead. The arrival of the Indian Corps was an event to him who could presage the future, as fraught with tragedy and pathos and "the purple thread of doom" as the landing of that earlier force which marched to Mons with the same gaiety, the same valour, and the same bloody predestination.

We have claimed in an earlier passage that the Indian Corps saved the Empire. The proposition to those who know the facts is almost self-evident. The

original Expeditionary Force, with the supplementary Divisions, had gone through the Retreat, the Marne, the Aisne, and the bloody hand-to-hand fighting which at every step marked the race to the sea.

At the time when the Indians landed, the resistant power of the British Army, cruelly outnumbered, and exhausted by constant fighting against superior artillery and a more numerous equipment of machine guns, was almost overcome. And except the Indian Army there were no other trained regular soldiers in the Empire available at that moment for service.

The Territorial Army—the finest material in the world—had not completed its training, and was not used and could not be used, in its own unitary organization for many months. The Kitchener Armies were still a shadowy embryo in the womb of improvisation.

The Empire was saved by an alternation of shifts and expedients, each of which just succeeded because of the deathless valour and devotion of the human beings who were associated with each endeavour.

It was saved first by the Expeditionary Force, secondly by the Indian Corps, thirdly by the Territorial Divisions, and fourthly by the Overseas and Kitchener Armies. And there is enough glory and enough sacrifice for all.

Of the Indian Corps it may be said that as much was asked of them as has been asked of any troops at any period or in any theatre of this war. They stemmed that first German onslaught through the late autumn of 1914, which ended in the bitter fighting at Givenchy. They played a glorious part in the battle of Neuve Chapelle. The

second battle of Ypres, the struggle for the Aubers ridge, and the desperate assaults of Loos—all claimed a toll of blood from this devoted Corps. They were asked to do much, and they tried to do everything they were asked.

In the pages which follow, small attempt has been made at rhetoric. It seemed to the authors, as they examined laconic diaries and soldierly notebooks, that the story was too noble, and in many ways too terrible, to require or indeed to justify the use of rhetoric. If the account of the fighting seems in places cold and uninspired, those who are responsible can only plead in extenuation that the story itself is one of almost monotonous heroism among surroundings which hardly ever vary, and they hope that the simplicity and sameness of the narrative will not have impaired its power to interest.

They are bold enough to believe that they have in the main overcome the extreme difficulty of disentangling the narrative. Unless they are too sanguine, the account which follows of the principal actions in which the Corps was engaged will in its main features be found accurate, and they do not believe that it will be discredited, or very much modified, by later research. No pains at any rate have been spared in the examination of the available material, or in interviewing surviving officers upon incidents in which they bore a part.

The authors will be repaid for their labours if they make it easier for the Empire to do justice to the Force of which they were humble members, and whose stubborn valour they witnessed with a determination to preserve some memorial, however inadequate, of its quality.

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