

**Memoir of the life of the much-lamented Lieutenant-General Sir R. Abercromby / [Sir Ralph Abercromby].**

**Contributors**

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*Memoir of the Life*

OF THE MUCH-LAMENTED

LIEUTENANT-GENERAL

SIR R. ABERCROMBY,

*Knight of the Bath,*

LATE

COMMANDER-IN-CHIEF OF THE

*BRITISH FORCES*

IN

*E G Y P T.*

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DUBLIN :

Printed by John Shea,

COLLEGE-GREEN.

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1801.



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## Memoir, &c.

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GENERAL SIR RALPH ABERCROMBY, like EPAMINONDAS, like WOLFE, has died of the wounds received in a hard-fought battle, in which he was Commander in Chief, and was victorious. To his country, the loss of such a man, at such a time, is inestimable. For himself it might have been somewhat happier, if the victory had been finally decisive of the fate of EGYPT—more glorious it could scarcely in any circumstances have been. It has crowned one of the most honourable military lives which history shall ever commemorate for the emulation of future times.

Among the military commanders of the present period, no one has obtained greater or more just celebrity, for his virtues as a man, and his abilities as an officer, than the subject of this memoir.

Sir Ralph Abercromby was of a very ancient and distinguished family in North-Britain, possessed of an estate bearing the same name. His father had a numerous family, and according to the custom of the country which gave them birth, the sons were destined for active employments\*.

Each

\* Thus we find one of the brothers of Sir Ralph brought up to the law, another to maritime pursuits, and two more to a military life. The senior filled, with great reputation to his character, the honourable office of a Lord of Session, in which he died.—The next brother entered into the sea-service of the East-India Company, and made several voyages as a Commander in one of their ships, retiring from the fatigues of duty, with a wife he had married in India, and with a considerable fortune. He died in the year 1792; and, to the surprize of the world, and the disappointment of his nearest relations, left almost the whole of his property to his lady, who was married soon after to her solicitor, but survived that connection only a short time. From the nature of her will, the last hope of the Captain's relations was extinguished. The Conveyancer had, in one short trip to the land of Matrimony, possessed himself of all which the indefatigable navigator had amassed in his several voyages across the Pacific and Indian Oceans. But as no part of the family could  
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Each of the brothers in his peculiar profession, has been engaged in supporting the State, in some one of its departments or dominions, and Sir Ralph has no less exerted himself in the same cause, on dif-

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be said to be in straitened circumstances, this unexpected event was accompanied with very little regret. So far as concerned our General himself, whose disposition was the reverse of mercenary, the transfer of his brother's property from his family, did not lessen, in the smallest degree, the affection he bore his memory. James, a third brother of the General, was killed in America, in the hard-contested battle of Bunkers-hill. He was at the time a lieutenant-colonel in the 22d foot. His surviving brother Robert, is not behind him in military rank. He is at this time colonel of the 75th, or Highland regiment, lately stationed at Bombay, the presidency of which derived signal benefits from its Colonel's active zeal, and approved skill. His judicious and successful march across a vast extent of country, to effect a junction with the army of Lord Cornwallis, at Seringapatham, in 1792, may be considered as having tended to secure the East India possessions in the Carnatic; against that once restless and aspiring prince, Tippoo Sultan; and well entitled him to succeed as Commander in Chief of his Majesty's and the East-India Company's forces in Bengal.

ferent stations, and in dissimilar climates. —The first commission he bore was, as cornet of the 3d dragoon guards, into which he entered on the 23d of May, 1756. He obtained a lieutenancy in the same regiment on the 19th of February, 1760; and continued in this corps till the 24th of April, 1762, when he obtained a company in the 3d horse. In this last regiment he rose to the rank of major and lieutenant-colonel, to the former on the 6th of June, 1770, and to the latter the 19th of May, 1773. In November 1780, he was included in the list of brevet-colonels, and on the 3d of the same month, next year, was made colonel of the 103d, or King's Irish infantry, a new raised regiment, but which being reduced at the peace in 1783, the Colonel was placed on half-pay. On the 28th September, 1787, he was promoted to the rank of major-general, and on the 17th September, 1790, he obtained the command of the 69th regiment of foot, from which, in April, 1792, he was removed to an older corps, viz. the 6th, from which he was again removed, the 5th November,

November, 1795, to the 7th regiment of dragoons.

Sir Ralph was employed on the Continent, soon after the present war broke out. On the 25th of April, 1793, he had the local rank of lieutenant-general conferred on him; and, although the ultimate issue of those two campaigns afford but a small amount of glory for the most meritorious officers to emblazon their military escutcheons with, yet Sir Ralph was entitled to a full share. He enjoyed on all occasions not only the esteem, but the confidence of the Duke of York.

He commanded the advanced guard in the action on the heights at Cateau, April 16th, 1794. The Duke of York, in his dispatches relative to this affair, makes the following commendatory representation of his conduct: "I have particular obligations to Lieutenant-general Sir William Erskine, as well as to Major-general Abercromby." His Royal Highness further adds, in his dispatches of the 19th of May: "The abilities and coolness with which Lieutenant-general Abercromby, and Major-general



jor-general Fox conducted their different corps, under these trying circumstances, require that I should particularly notice them." The Lieutenant-general was wounded at Nimeguen, the 27th of October following.

No part of the service of this able officer had ever been so painful to him, or called so forcibly upon his humanity and exertion, as the duty he performed when the army retreated from Holland, in the winter of 1794. The Guards, as well as all the sick were left under his conduct and care, after Lieutenant-general Harcourt had gone into cantonments behind the Ems. His sensibility was as conspicuous as his judgment, in the disastrous march from Deventer to Oldenzaal, at which last place his corps arrived on the 30th and 31st of January, 1795. This was the first time in the General's life, when his talents could not keep pace with circumstances ; but the incessant harrassing of a victorious enemy on the one hand : bad roads, and the inclemency of the weather on the other ; added to the difficulty of procuring

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ring shelter for the men, were sufficient to depress the spirits of the bravest, and leave the most sagacious mind without resources.

The affairs in the West-Indies, as left by Sir Charles Grey, had exhibited a less pleasing aspect since that Commander's return to England. The French, after their successes nearer home, had made very considerable, and even unexpected exertions to recover their losses abroad. This object they attained to a certain degree; they repossessed themselves of Guadaloupe and St. Lucia, made good a landing at more than one place on the island of Martinico, and effected partial descents, and hoisted the tri-coloured flag on several forts in the islands of St Vincent's, Grenada, and Marie-Galante. They possessed themselves of immense booty from the property of the rich emigrants on the several islands, but especially on that of Guadaloupe. On this last only, according to the report made by Fermond to the Committee of Public Safety, the value was estimated at the enormous sum of 1,800 millions of livres.

To stop the ravages thus committing on  
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the British allies, for such the French emigrants were then considered; and to check the deprivations on our own colonies, a fleet was fitted out in the autumn of 1795, to convey a military force to the West-Indies, sufficient to answer the necessity of the case. To General Sir Ralph Abercromby was given the charge of the troops, and he was appointed Commander in Chief of the forces in the West Indies. He accordingly repaired to Southampton on the 30th of August, 1795, and took charge of the remainder of the British troops that had been under the command of the Earl of Moira. Sir Ralph Abercromby was unfortunately detained in that district so long beyond the expected period of his departure, that after the troops had assembled, and were embarked, the equinox set in, and several transports were lost in endeavouring to clear the channel. Notwithstanding these disasters, and in spite of the lateness of the season, every exertion was made, and the General, with his staff, &c. made the best of their way to the West Indies.

On his arrival, no time was lost in forming a plan for the operations of the army, and as soon as the season permitted, the troops moved in every quarter. On the 24th of March, a detachment suddenly attacked and obtained possession of the island of Grenada. The General afterwards found no difficulty in obtaining possession of the settlements of Demarara, and Iſſequibo, in the province of Surinam, in South-America.

The Commander in Chief had made the necessary arrangements with the admiral for conveying the troops destined for an attack upon the island of St. Lucia, and the armament sailed on the 26th of April. The enemy had a garrison in Morne Fortune, of nearly 2,000 well-disciplined black troops, some hundred whites, and a number of black people who had taken refuge in the fortrefs. In carrying the battery Seche, within a short distance of the works of Morne Fortune, the difficulties of approach were found greater, from the intricate nature of the country, than were expected. The General was obliged to undertake

dertake a laborious communication from Choc Bay to that of Morne, by means of a new road, capable of allowing the transportation of heavy cannon. These difficulties, with numerous other impediments which the enemy threw in the way of the army, he however, overcame; and upon the evening of the 24th of May, a suspension of arms was desired till noon the next day:—a capitulation for the whole island ensued, and on the 26th, the garrison, to the amount of 2,000 men, marched out, laid down their arms, and became prisoners of war. Pigeon Island fell of course into the possession of the British Commander.

Brigadier General Moore being left in quiet possession of the captured island, the General hastened the embarkation of the artillery and troops destined to act in St. Vincent's, and by the middle of June, every part of that valuable island was in the hands of the British troops.

The fortunate issue of all these services, enabled the Commander in Chief to visit Grenada, where his presence may be supposed

posed to have contributed, not a little, to conclude the hostilities still carried on under the orders of Major-General Nicholls. Fedon, the celebrated chief, at the head of the insurgents, was not easily to be overcome; his native courage, and acquired talents, added to his fierceness of disposition, had drawn about him a mass of force, partly voluntary, partly constrained.—Major-General Nicholls was now ordered to straiten him in his retreat as much as possible, and to grant him no terms short of unconditional submission. The troops were successful every where, and nearly at the same hour, on the morning of the 19th of June, full possession was obtained of every post on the island.

The General having thus effected every thing which could be undertaken against the French, directed his attention to the Spanish island of Trinidad. The arrival of part of a new convoy from England, enabled him to undertake this expedition with confidence of success. The precision with which the fleet of ships of war and transports had been assembled, prevented

the loss of a moment, when the season for operations commenced. On the 16th of February, 1797, the fleet passed through the Bocas, or entrance into the gulph of Paria, where the Spanish Admiral, with four sail of the line, and a frigate, were found at anchor, under cover of the island of Gaspar-Grande, which was fortified. The British squadron worked up, and came to an anchor opposite to, and nearly within gun-shot of the Spanish ships. The frigates and transports anchored higher up in the bay. The disposition was made for landing at day-light next morning, and for a general attack upon the town and ships of war. At two o'clock in the morning (the 17th), the Spanish squadron was perceived to be on fire; the ships, except one line of battle, were all consumed, and that ship which escaped the conflagration, was taken possession of by the British fleet;—the enemy at the same time evacuated this quarter of the island. The General's whole attention was now paid to the town. As soon, therefore, as the troops were landed, about five hundred advanced to  
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the westward of it, meeting but little opposition ; and before night they were masters of the town of Port d'Espagne, and of the whole neighbourhood, two small forts excepted. The next morning the Governor, Don Chalcon, capitulated with the conqueror, and the whole colony passed under the dominion of his Britannic Majesty.

Thus far our General had succeeded in fulfilling the wishes and instructions of his Sovereign. An unsuccessful attempt upon the Spanish island of Porto Rico, concluded his campaign of 1797, in the West-Indies.

If nothing was gained to the country by this last attempt, no loss of reputation in its military character was sustained by the failure ; and indeed the manner in which the General was received on his return to Europe, testified the estimation in which his military talents were held by the British government.

On the 2d of November, 1796, while on this service, Sir Ralph (for he had now been invested with a red ribbon), was pre-



sented to the second, or North British dragoons, commonly called the SCOTS GREYS; and in the same year he was made Lieutenant-Governor of the Isle of Wight, and afterwards still further rewarded with the more lucrative governments of Forts George and Augustus. On the 26th of January, 1797, he was raised to his present rank of lieutenant-general.

The ferment in Ireland threatening every day to break into a flame, Sir Ralph was not allowed to remain long in a state of repose. He was fixed upon to take the chief command of the forces in that kingdom. He paid great attention to the discipline of the army, and was anxious to restore to the soldiers that reputation, which had been sullied by repeated acts of licentiousness. His declaration "that their irregularity and insubordination had rendered them more formidable to their friends than to their enemies," however true, was deemed harsh by some who neither considered the delicacy and responsibility of his situation, nor the danger of military insubordination, by allowing disorders in any  
army,

army, like those he complained of, to grow by example. The General's removal, however, from his command, was in no respect the effect of dissatisfaction on either side, but the result of an unanimous opinion, that it would be expedient and efficacious to unite the civil and military authority in the same person, the benefits of which had been so obvious in the dominions of the east. In this view of the precedent, it was impossible not to fix on the Marquis Cornwallis.

Sir Ralph was afterwards appointed to the chief command of his Majesty's forces in North Britain, and he was soon after employed in other commands of the highest importance.

When the great enterprize against Holland was resolved upon, Sir Ralph Abercromby was called again to command, under his Royal Highness the Duke of York. The difficulties of the ground, the inclemency of the season, delays, though inconvenient, yet unavoidable, the disorderly movements of the Russians, and the timid duplicity of the Dutch, disappointed

our hopes of that expedition. But, by the Dutch, the French, the British, it was confessed, that, even victory, the most decisive, could not have more conspicuously proved the talents of this illustrious officer.

His country applauded the choice, when he was sent with an army to dispossess the French of Egypt. His experience in Holland and Flanders, and in the climate of the West Indies, peculiarly fitted him for this new command. He accomplished some of the first duties of a General, in carrying his army in health, in spirits, and with the requisite intelligence and supplies, to the destined scene of action. The landing, the first dispositions, the attacks, and the courage opposed to attack, the spirit with which his army appears to have been, by confidence in their leader, inspired, the extraordinary superiority which the British infantry under his command evinced to that which was thought the bravest and best disciplined infantry in the world, demonstrate that all the best qualities of one of the greatest of Commanders, were in Sir Ralph Abercromby united—that they  
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were all summoned forth into activity, in the glorious achievements amid which he fell.

His private character was modest, disinterested, upright—unstained by any negligent or licentious vice. He was a good son, brother, father, husband, and friend, as well as an able and heroic General.

The remains of Sir Ralph Abercromby have been brought home in the *Flora* frigate. It will doubtless be gratifying to his friends, that his ashes should be deposited under the monument which is likely to be raised to his memory.—The ball which struck Sir Ralph, entered his thigh, and rose upwards, so that it was impossible to extract it.

Sir Ralph not only served his country as a warrior, but as a legislator also. At the general election in 1774, when his father was living, he was chosen to represent the county of Kinross in Parliament, and he continued to sit in the House of Commons till the next election, in 1780. His brother at this time represents the same county.

His disposition, however, and perhaps  
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his talents, were better adapted to the determined business of the field, than calculated to wade through the intricacies of political discussion. Sir Ralph Abercromby, therefore, ought more immediately to be considered as a foldier : as an independent character, he will, nevertheless, be estimable in private and political life. He was naturally reserved, and extremely silent in mixed society : but was never known to betray the least symptom of haughtiness. Men of merit always had easy access to him, and when engaged in any particular enterprize, officers of talents seldom escaped his attention. His conduct, indeed, through life, appears to have been founded on the following remarkable lines written by Frederick the Great :

Dans des honneurs obscurs vous ne viellirez pas,  
Soldats, vous apprendrez à régir des soldats.

## A P P E N D I X.

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*The following Letter from General Hutchinson, who has succeeded Sir Ralph in the command of the British troops now in Egypt, is subjoined, as giving a circumstantial account of the action in which that veteran officer received the wound that occasioned his death.*

*Head-Quarters, Camp, four miles from  
SIR, Alexandria, April 5th, 1801.*

I have the honor to inform you that after the affair of the 13th of March, the army took a position about four miles from Alexandria (at present dry) and the lake of Aboukir on their left. In this position we remained without any material occurrence taking place till the 21st March, when the enemy attacked us with nearly the whole of their collected force, amounting probably to 11 or 12,000 men. Of fourteen demi-brigades of infantry, which the French have in this country, 12 appear to have been engaged, and all their cavalry, with the exception of one regiment.—The enemy made the following dispositions of their army:

General Lanusse was on their left, with four demi-brigades of infantry, and a considerable body of cavalry, commanded by General Roize; Generals Friant and Rampon were in the centre, with five demi-brigades and two regiments of cavalry; General D'Estain commanded the advanced-guard, consisting of demi-brigades, some light troops, and a detachment of cavalry.

The action commenced about an hour before daylight, by a false attack on our left, which was under Major-General Craddock's command, where they were soon

soon repulsed. The most vigorous efforts of the enemy, were, however, directed against our right, which they used every possible exertion to turn. The attack on that point was begun with great impetuosity by the French infantry, sustained by a strong body of cavalry, who charged in column. They were received by our troops with equal ardour, and the utmost steadiness and discipline. The contest was unusually obstinate; the enemy were twice repulsed, and their cavalry were repeatedly mixed with our infantry. They at length retired, leaving a prodigious number of dead and wounded on the field.

While this was passing on the right, they attempted to penetrate our centre with a column of infantry, who were also repulsed, and obliged to retreat with loss.—The French, during the whole of the action, refused their right. They pushed forward, however, a corps of light troops, supported by a body of infantry and cavalry, to keep our left in check, which certainly was, at that time, the weakest part of our line.

We have taken about three hundred prisoners (not wounded), but it was impossible to pursue our victory, on account of our inferiority in cavalry, and because the French had lined the opposite hills with cannon, under which they retired. We have also suffered considerably; very few more severe actions have ever been fought, considering the numbers that were engaged on both sides. We have sustained an irreparable loss in the person of our never sufficiently to be lamented Commander in Chief, Sir Ralph Abercromby, who was mortally wounded in the action, and died on the 28th of March. I believe he was wounded early, but he concealed

vealed his situation from those about him, and continued in the field, giving orders with that coolness and perspicuity, which had ever marked his character, till long after the action was over, when he fainted thro' weakness and the loss of blood. Were it permitted for a soldier to regret any one who has fallen in the service of his country, I might be excused for lamenting him, more than any other person; but it is some consolation to those who tenderly loved him, that as his life was honourable, so was his death glorious. His memory will be recorded in the annals of his country—will be sacred to every British soldier, and embalmed in the recollection of a grateful posterity.

It is impossible for me to do justice to the zeal of the officers and to the gallantry of the soldiers of this army. The Reserve, against whom the principal attack of the enemy was directed, conducted themselves with unexampled spirit. They resisted the impetuosity of the French infantry, and repulsed several charges of cavalry. Major-General Moore was wounded at their head, though not dangerously. I regret, however, the temporary absence from the army of this highly valuable and meritorious officer, whose counsel and co-operation would be so highly necessary to me at this moment. Brigadier-Gen: Oakes was wounded nearly at the same time, and the army has been deprived of the service of an excellent officer. The 28th and 42d regiment acted in the most distinguished and brilliant manner. Colonel Paget, an officer of great promise, was wounded at the head of the former regiment; he has since, though not quite recovered, returned to his duty.

Brigadier-



Brigadier-General Stuart and the foreign brigade supported the Reserve with much promptness and spirit: indeed, it is but justice to this corps to say, that they have, on all occasions, endeavoured to emulate the zeal and spirit exhibited by the British troops, and have perfectly succeeded. Maj.-General Ludlow deserves much approbation for his conduct when the centre of the army was attacked; under his guidance the Guards conducted themselves in the most cool, intrepid, and soldier-like manner; they received very effectual support by a movement of the right of General Coote's brigade. Brigadier-General Hope was wounded in the hand; the army has been deprived of the service of a most active, zealous, and judicious officer.

The loss of the enemy has been great; it is calculated at upwards of three thousand killed, wounded, and taken prisoners. General Roize, who commanded the cavalry, which suffered considerably, was killed in the field. Generals Ranusse and Bodet are since dead of their wounds. I have been informed that several other general officers, whose names I do not know, have been either killed or wounded.

I cannot conclude this letter without solemnly assuring you, that, in the arduous contest in which we are at present engaged, his Majesty's troops in Egypt have faithfully discharged their duty to their country, and nobly upheld the fame of the British name and nation.

I have the honour to be, &c.

(Signed)

J. H. HUTCHINSON.