

THE EXCEPTIONAL 'BATTLE OF MAIWAND' PAIR AWARDED TO SURGEON-GENERAL A. F. PRESTON, WHO AS REGIMENTAL SURGEON OF THE 66TH FOOT, WAS SEVERELY WOUNDED; SHOT THROUGH BOTH LOINS AND LEFT FOREARM WHILE ATTENDING A WOUNDED SOLDIER ON THE FIRING LINE DURING THE BATTLE OF MAIWAND. DURING THE CHAOTIC RETREAT TO KHANDAHAR, HE SUFFERED MISFORTUNE AFTER MISFORTUNE AND WAS INCREDIBLE LUCKY TO SURVIVE, BEING EVENTUALLY SAVED BY CAPTAIN SLADE R.A. PRESTON SUBSEQUENTLY WROTE A DETAILED REPORT ON HIS PART IN THE BATTLE AND IN PARTICULAR THE RETREAT WHICH MAKES FASCINATING READING. BROUGHT TO THE ATTENTION OF THE COMMANDER-IN-CHIEF OF THE FORCES FOR HIS SERVICES AT MAIWAND, HE WAS PROMOTED FOR THE PART HE PLAYED AND WAS LATER WIDELY CREDITED AS ARTHUR CONAN DOYLE'S INSPIRATION FOR SHERLOCK HOLMES'S COMPANION DOCTOR WATSON, WHOSE FICTIONAL SERVICE IN AFGHANISTAN CLOSELY MIRRORS THE REAL-LIFE EXPERIENCES OF PRESTON. LATER SERVING AS PRINCIPAL MEDICAL OFFICER AT HONG KONG DURING THE PLAGUE OF 1894, AND WENT ON TO BECOME HONORARY PHYSICIAN TO QUEEN VICTORIA AND KING EDWARD VII



AFGHANISTAN 1878-80, NO CLASP 'SURGN. MAJ: A. F. PRESTON. A. M. DEPT.', JUBILEE 1897, SILVER ISSUE

M.I.D. London Gazette 19 November 1880 as being wounded

Alexander Francis Preston was born at Killinkere in County Cavan, Ireland on 23 May 1842. His father, Decimus, was Rector of Killinkere, while his mother was the daughter of General Armstrong of the Royal Artillery. His grandfather was William Preston, Judge of Appeal, playwright, and early advocate of Catholic Emancipation.

Preston studied medicine at Trinity College, Dublin from 1861, and trained at the city's prestigious St. Stevens Hospital. At twenty one he became a Licentiate of the Royal College of Surgeons, Ireland. He embarked for Bengal on 20 May 1863, becoming an Assistant Surgeon in the Army Medical Department on 30 September. Preston also passed a course in Military Law. He was assigned to the 27th (Inniskilling) Regiment of Foot on 13 February 1866, and then to the Royal Artillery on 20 July 1867.

On 14 September 1867 Preston married Elizabeth, of the prominent Armenian Agabeg family, at St. Stephen's Church, Dum Dum, Calcutta. He advanced to the rank of Surgeon on 1 March 1873, but returned home on furlough on 22 April 1874. Promoted to Surgeon-Major on 28 April 1876, Preston embarked for Bombay on 12 January 1878, and thence to Afghanistan and was posted as Regimental Surgeon of the 66th, there as replacement for Surgeon Major Birnie who had been invalided on 11 March 1879

THE BATTLE OF MAIWAND

The Battle of Maiwand was one of the largest battles of the 2nd Afghan War (1878-1880). A British-Indian force under General Burrows had been sent to intercept Ayub Khan, who had launched a bid for the Afghan throne, as he advanced from Herat towards Kandahar. On 27 July 1880 Burrows' force, consisting approximately 2,500 British and Indian men, was overwhelmed by an Afghan army ten times its size. Burrow's sustained casualties of 969 killed and 177 wounded, or near half his force. Preston's Regiment, the 66th Foot, the only British Regiment present, suffered 286 killed and 32 wounded, over half the number of those engaged. Of this number, 10 officers of the 66th Foot were killed at Maiwand, and only 2 were wounded, including Doctor Preston.

<https://www.britishempire.co.uk/forces/armycampaigns/indiancampaigns/campafghan1878maiwand.htm>

The battle itself was fought in such a searing heat, it was remarkable that Burrow's force was able to put up such a fight but the battle at Maiwand was just the start of the disaster. The trials and privations endured through the terrible retreat, in which for over thirty hours the troops were without food or water, equalled the horrors of the battle itself. Indeed, a large percentage of casualties suffered at Maiwand, actually occurred during the retreat:

"..The Afghans harried the tail of the retreating column and picked off stragglers, but did not otherwise try to cut off their progress. When a serious attack looked imminent the guns were unlimbered and brought into action. The retreat to Kandahar was one of those terrible episodes in the history of the British and Indian army dominated by the awful thirst, the suffering of the wounded men and animals, and the terror of passing near hostile villages. The journey was a nightmare, involving the crossing of a 16-mile desert and fighting against armed villagers..."

After 33 hours of relentless pursuit by hostile tribesmen, the exhausted survivors reached Kandahar.

SURGEON A. F. PRESTON AT MAIWAND

Prior to the start of the battle, Preston had set up a Regimental aid post just behind the 66th Foot's firing line, which would be the first place casualties were assessed and treated before

being sent to the main field hospital located near a mile to the rear. However as action was joined, Preston moved up to the firing line so he could treat casualties where they were wounded. Whilst treating a wounded soldier of the 66th, Preston was himself dangerously wounded; being shot in the arm and both loins. Carried to the rear, Preston's ordeal had only started for during the chaotic retreat to Khandahar, he suffered misfortune after misfortune and was incredible lucky to survive. For all survivors, the retreat was horrendous but for those wounded, without treatment or water, unable to help themselves, what they suffered must have been even worse. This and the lack of transport accounts for the extremely low number of wounded who survived. We are lucky as far as Preston is concerned because an enquiry into the conduct of the engagement was set up and every surviving officer was required by The Commander-in-Chief to write an account of the part he played in it. Preston's account, therefore, is taken from 'Reports and Narratives of the Officers who were Engaged at the Battle of Maiwand, 27th July 1880. Intelligence Branch, Army H.Q. India' extracts of which reads:

".... The movements on their part from their left flank was checked by volley firing of the 66th Regiment at about 100 yards. The Regiment after this was ordered to lie down. Shortly afterwards, while attending to a wounded man of the 66th Regiment, I was myself dangerously wounded and carried off the field...."



Preston was the first officer casualty of the 66th during the battle and was placed on a dhooly and taken to have his wounds attended to, presumably at the Regimental aid post, before being transported to the field hospital located at the Mundabad ravine, where the baggage was also located. He continues:

the wagon to be watered and when they were brought back were so utterly exhausted, that not withstanding every effort on the part of the drivers, they could not be got to move.

I lay helpless on the wagon for, I should say, a couple of hours expecting at every moment that some of our party would be shot as the villagers here, as they did all along the road, kept continually firing at us. However, as a few stragglers of the 66th came up, I asked them to stay by me, and use their rifles in return. In this way the villagers were kept off.

After some time, a camel with a pair of kajawas came up with Apothecary Cordiero of the Subordinate Medical Department (Bombay), who had been walking all night. He stopped the camel, and had me put in one of the kajawas, and regardless of his own safety remained with me for a long time and did everything in his power to assist me. I had not proceeded far in the kajawa before the cords holding it together commenced to give way, and to save me from falling the camel had to be made to lie down quickly..”

A kajawa was a hybrid framework part pannier, part stretcher, lashed on each side of a camel's hump. It would have been less than comfortable for a fit combatant; but for a wounded man the rolling movement of the animal must have made it excruciating.

“While lying helpless on the ground in the broken kajawa, I was passed by a large body of Sind Horse under the command of Colonel Malcolmson.

It seems whilst Preston was helplessly lying on the ground after the straps of his Kajawa had again given way, not only was he passed by Colonel Malcolmson but by General's Burrow and Nuttall, none of whom stop to enquire about Preston or the men with him. Shortly after Captain Slade, one of the heroes of the retreat came up and his actions were entirely different;

“After I had been lying on the ground for some time, Captain Slade of the RHA came up with one of his smooth-bore guns, and seeing me, and the situation I was in at once determined on endeavouring to save my life, and not to leave me to my inevitable fate. His horses were so utterly beaten that they would not have been equal to my additional weight; so in order to save my life he abandoned the gun and had me put upon the limber. Even then it was only by his splendid management and his presence of mind and great coolness in danger (for the inhabitants kept firing at us all along) that he succeeded in getting his horses to move at all...”

Slade would write; *“At about 9 o'clock, I was obliged to abandon another 6-pounder, as the horses would go no more, there was heavy firing from the villages and Doctor Preston of the 66th was lying on the limber dangerously wounded. Though we were absolutely obliged to leave the gun, we were enabled to save the limber and its freight.”*

Preston reached safety of Kandahar and although numerous sources incorrectly say he was wounded again and mentioned in despatches for his services at Kandahar, it clear from his own narrative that his wounds were of a dangerous nature that caused him to be invalided; being shot in the arm and both loins. This makes it clear that within weeks after Maiwand, he would not have been near fit enough to return to duties. This confusion seems to be down to his service papers noting him being wounded in two different entries on his papers and incorrectly being taken as wounded on two separate occasions.

Preston's service record also states that Major-General W. H. Seymour brought Preston's service in the Second Afghan War to the attention of the Duke of Cambridge, then Commander-in-Chief of the Forces. Preston was invalided to England on 10 November 1880, receiving a year's pension for wounds, and was permitted to visit the south of France with his family.



In April 1882, for his services in Afghanistan (Maiwand), The British Medical Journal announced:

“Surgeon-Major A.F. Preston, M.B., A.M.D., has been considered by the Secretary of State for War, to have merited special advancement in consideration of his service during the late Afghan campaign and has been rewarded with promotion to the next higher rate of pay in his rank, with seniority next to the junior officer on such higher rate of pay. Surgeon-Major Preston was in medical charge of the 66th Regiment at the battle of Maiwand and was severely wounded (shot through both loins and left forearm) while attending a wounded man of his regiment in the front line of fire and was mentioned in despatches.”

LATER SERVICE INCLUDING THE PLAGUE IN HONG KONG

His strength recovered, Preston returned to India in September 1884 and was promoted to Brigade Surgeon, with the rank of Lieutenant-Colonel (London Gazette, 4 January 1887). Preston left India for good on 27 January 1890. Advanced to Surgeon Colonel on 28 May 1892, Preston sailed to Hong Kong where he served as Principal Medical Officer on the island during the outbreak of bubonic plague that killed thousands in 1894. Preston supervised the whitewashing of houses by the King's Shropshire Light Infantry, and oversaw the use of disinfectants. He applied the most up-to-date science and saved many lives, not just in Hong Kong but throughout south-east Asia, where the virus could easily have spread. Local resistance to Western medicine was gradually overcome. Preston is mentioned in a list of officers who rendered special service in Hong Kong, in recognition of which, he was promoted to Surgeon Major-General (London Gazette, 30 March 1896).

Note: Although a full roll does not exist, as a senior officer during the plague, Preston would almost certainly have received the Hong Kong Plague medal in gold. Unlike the medal awarded to servicemen which were issued in silver, with a ring suspension and naming added by the regiment, the gold medals were issued in a case with no suspension and apparently unnamed. Though from the few that have appeared on the market, most appear to be privately named and some with a suspension added.

Preston left Hong Kong on 26 March 1896, arriving home in Portsmouth exactly one month

later. Queen Victoria and King Edward VII both employed Preston as Honorary Physician. Preston was rewarded for his devotion to the Queen in her last days at Osborne, rising to the highest possible rank, Surgeon General, on 11 March 1901 (six weeks after the Queen's death). He received the 1897 Jubilee Medal (confirmed on roll). The 1907 Medical Directory lists Preston as: '*Hon. Phys. to H.M. the King*'.



Briefly Director General of Army Medical Services, Preston's last military appointment was as Principal Medical Officer of the 3rd Army Corps, based in Ireland. Leaving the Army with a good service pension on 23 May 1902, he devoted his leisure to golf, travel, and sport, and was a stalwart of the Royal Irish Yacht Club. He was an active Freemason, joining the Khyber, Bombay, and Hong Kong Lodges at different stages of his Army career. Preston's obituary in the British Medical Journal said of him:

'His great abilities were hidden by his geniality.'

Preston died at 53 Redcliffe Gardens, West Brompton on 24 July 1907, aged 65. Buried at Kensal Green Cemetery.

THE REAL DOCTOR WATSON?

Arthur Conan Doyle had a medical background, graduating as a Doctor of Medicine from the University of Edinburgh in 1885. The 1891 Medical Register shows him living at 1 Bush House, Elm Grove, Portsmouth, a few hundred yards from the residence of Surgeon-Major Preston in Brunswick Terrace. At the time of *Maiwand*, Conan Doyle was working as a ship's surgeon aboard the whaler *Hope of Peterhead*, but from 1882 he ran a private practice in Portsmouth. In his memoir *Memories and Adventures* (1924), Conan Doyle described how, in 1882:

'A new wave of medical experience came to me about this time for I suddenly found myself a unit in the British Army. The operations in the East had drained the Medical Service and it had therefore been determined that local civilian doctors should be enrolled for temporary duty of some hours a day.'



SURGEON PRESTON AS A YOUNG OFFICER

Conan Doyle worked at The Royal Victoria Hospital, Netley in support of the Army doctors, and may even have treated Preston during his recovery. Already a prolific author of short stories, Conan Doyle became Joint Secretary of the Portsmouth Literary and Scientific Society. On 20 November 1883, one of Netley's most senior doctors, Surgeon-Major George Evatt, gave a talk to the Society entitled: 'The Army Doctor and his Work in War'. According to the Sherlock Holmes Society of London, this talk may have touched on Surgeon-Major Preston's exploits at Maiwand. Several ex-Indian Army officers retired to Portsmouth in the 1880s, and it is likely that Preston's tale was much discussed. Evatt knew Preston well, later succeeding him as Principal Medical Officer of Hong Kong. It is very probable that Preston's story inspired the young author. This conclusion is supported by a close reading of *A Study in Scarlet*, the first novel of the Sherlock Holmes series. Conan Doyle wrote it during 1886, three years after Evatt's talk, and its plot begins with Dr John Watson narrating his experiences of Afghanistan:

'The campaign brought honours and promotion to many, but for me it had nothing but misfortune and disaster. I was removed from my brigade and attached to the Berkshires, with whom I served at the fatal battle of Maiwand. There I was struck on the shoulder by a Jezail bullet, which shattered the bone and grazed the subclavian artery. I should have fallen into the hands of the murderous Ghazis had it not been for the devotion and courage shown by

Murray, my orderly, who threw me across a packhorse, and succeeded in bringing me safely to the British lines. Worn with pain, and weak from the prolonged hardships which I had undergone, I was removed, with a great train of wounded sufferers, to the base hospital at Peshawur...I was despatched, accordingly, in the troop-ship Orontes, and landed a month later on Portsmouth jetty, with my health irretrievably ruined, but with permission from a paternal government to spend the next nine months in attempting to improve it.'

The similarities with Preston's real-life tale are hard to ignore. Patrick Mercer, whose 2011 book *Red Runs The Helmand* expands on Dr Watson's service, believes there can be no doubt that Conan Doyle based the character of Dr Watson on Preston. This being the case, Preston can be credited with inadvertently creating the most famous duo in crime fiction. In the next scene of *A Study in Scarlet*, Watson is astonished when, on being introduced to Holmes, the detective says to him:

'You have been in Afghanistan, I perceive.' When asked how he knows this, Holmes replies: *'The train of reasoning ran: "Here is a gentleman of a medical type, but with the air of a military man. Clearly an army doctor then. He has just come from the tropics, for his face is dark, and that is not the natural tint of his skin, for his wrists are fair. He has undergone hardships and sickness, as his haggard face says clearly. His left arm has been injured. He holds it in a stiff and unnatural manner. Where in the tropics could an English army doctor have seen much hardship and got his arm wounded? Clearly in Afghanistan." The whole train of thought did not occupy a second. I then remarked that you came from Afghanistan, and you were astonished.'*

This memorable encounter between doctor and detective is the reader's first taste of Holmes's extraordinary deductive powers. It lays the foundation for all subsequent cases, and underpins the relationship between the two characters. It is a partnership built on mutual respect: Holmes admires Watson's physical endurance, while Watson is enthralled by Holmes's mental skill. As far as Watson being based on Preston, a brief search on the internet will come up with countless articles and theories going back many years.



Condition VF, the first with minor correction to second part of rank, or better. Sold together with a very large and impressive folder of research that includes London Gazette entries, service records, genealogical searches, and a copy of the recipient's Will.