

The Annual Confidential Report and Promotion in the Late Victorian Army

IAN F. W. BECKETT

University of Kent

Email: i.beckett@kent.ac.uk

ABSTRACT

The annual confidential report offers insights into both the manner of promotion in the late Victorian Army and the personalities of some of its key figures. This article looks in depth at the form, function and usage of the Annual Confidential Report, arguing that it was a flawed system which hampered the ability of Lord Roberts and Viscount Wolsley to promote the best officers to high command.

In October 1902 General Sir Evelyn Wood appeared before the Elgin Commission examining the conduct of the South African War. Wood had been Adjutant General in the War Office from 1897 to 1901. Understandably, one of the principal avenues of enquiry was the quality of military leadership in South Africa. Asked about officer training, Wood placed blame on the annual confidential reports upon which the Selection Board relied for information when considering promotions to higher ranks: 'The confidential reports up to recently have not been sufficiently drastic and straight; it is only in recent years that the man making the report has understood that his own character is also at stake for fairness and for telling the facts as they really are.'¹

To Wood, promotion up to the rank of Major appeared automatic. Thereafter, it was a matter of seniority tempered by rejection only in the very worst cases despite the fact that selection of higher commands by merit alone had been supposedly in force since 1891. Wood suggested that there were three distinct categories of officers that could be identified from confidential reports. There were those whose fitness for advancement was undoubted, and those with such a bad record that their unfitness was readily apparent. The great majority, however, were 'colourless men', who had been promoted 'simply because "there is nothing known against them"'.

¹ House of Commons Parliamentary Papers 1904 [Cd. 1790] *Report of the Royal Commission on the War in South Africa*, Minutes of Evidence, p. 176, c. 4166, Wood, 29 Oct. 1902.

THE ANNUAL CONFIDENTIAL REPORT

The quotation was taken from Wood's own memorandum on selection written in October 1900.²

The criticism of confidential reports was not new. In October 1888, Sir George Chesney, the Military Member of the Viceroy's Council, had complained that there was a reluctance to report adversely on subordinates by those 'who in their desire to make things pleasant, do not put before A.H.Q. & Govt. their real opinions about officers'. According to Chesney, district commanders in India would not commit to paper what they really thought of an individual so that 'no one wd. infer from them, what has been notorious for years to everyone in the army, except apparently the General O.C. the district, that he is a thoroughly useless officer'. Referring to the case of Lieutenant Colonel Williams of the 16th Bombay Cavalry in March 1889, Chesney similarly claimed that inspecting officers 'will not do their duty but are too anxious to make things pleasant all round'. The result was that the authorities were aware of an officer's incompetence but 'there are no public vouchers to that effect, and they cannot establish a case merely on private opinion but must have something official and definite to go on'.³

Equally, Lieutenant General Sir Donald Stewart, soon to become Commander-in-Chief in India, wrote in 1880,

The curse of our service is that people - I mean most people - won't say what they think about an officer till it is too late. Then the authorities that ought to know all about the Army then round and say there is nothing on record against so & so as if that were a sufficient recommendation in his favour.

Subsequently, Stewart told his successor, General Sir Frederick Roberts, in May 1887 that he did not consider J. F. Cadogan of the 33rd Bengal Infantry capable of commanding a regiment 'and yet I am not certain there is anything very strong on record against him'.⁴ Amid the recriminations following the disaster at Maiwand in Afghanistan in July 1880, the Commander-in-Chief at the War Office, George, Duke of Cambridge, criticised the Commander-in-Chief in Bombay, Lieutenant General Henry Warre, for his selection of Lieutenant General James Primrose for the command at Kandahar. Warre tried to deflect criticism by suggesting that he should not have been expected to report on someone of equal rank. Cambridge retorted that a candid view should have been given: 'In high positions disagreeable things have

² Ibid., p. 179, c. 4246; National Army Museum (hereafter NAM), Roberts Mss, 7101-23-207, Memorandum by Wood, 15 Oct. 1900; also in The National Archives (hereafter TNA), WO 32/8367.

³ NAM, Roberts Mss, 7101-232-14, Chesney to Roberts, 1 Oct. 1888, and 12 Mar. 1889.

⁴ National Library of Wales, Hills-Johnes of Dolaucothi Mss, L13655, Stewart to Hills, 16 May 1880; NAM, Roberts Mss, 7101-23-78, Stewart to Roberts, 5 May 1887.

to be done at times for the good of the public service.' Cambridge also suggested that he had advanced Primrose in rank previously in the belief that he was able, and could not have known otherwise unless properly informed through reports.⁵

Newly appointed Cambridge's successor as Commander-in-Chief, Field Marshal Viscount Wolseley complained to Roberts, now also a field marshal and commanding in Ireland, in September 1895 that the Selection Board was necessarily guided by confidential reports but, in the case of officers of the Indian army, they were of little use: 'All their geese are swans.'⁶ Wolseley was invariably prejudiced against the Indian army but there was generally perceived to be a problem. Indeed, when commanding in Ireland between 1890 and 1895, Wolseley had used the same phrase in noting of the confidential reports by his four district commanders,

[O]ne must take their opinion of officers in conjunction with what we think of those Generals & how we value or estimate the worth of their opinions. To some amiable men all geese are swans, & I must say this of all of them, that when they find fault & report that any officer is below par, he must be a real fool.⁷

Shortly before retiring, Wolseley agreed with Wood's criticisms of reports, suggesting there was a system of 'promotion by seniority in all ranks, *tempered* by a somewhat rarely exercised rejection for well recognised incompetency'. While Wolseley felt the Selection Board had been reasonably successful, not enough was known about Majors or seconds in command of battalions.⁸

Wolseley also once remarked of the Military Secretary, Lieutenant General Sir Edmund Whitmore, that 'I never knew anyone more anxious to do right, but he thinks one man is much the same as the other & hates passing any man over because you have a better man available for the vacancy'. For all their differences on strategic and military matters, Roberts would have concurred heartily, having noted that 'as rule, I have observed that whether men behave well or ill, they are spoken of in the same terms, and get the same reward'.⁹

Not surprisingly, Wolseley and Roberts had their own methods of determining military merit. As is well known, both operated their own 'rings' of selected officers.

⁵ NAM, Warre Mss, 8112-54-673, 705, 707, Warre to Whitmore, 5 Dec. 1880, and Cambridge to Warre, 11 Nov. and 31 Dec. 1880.

⁶ Ibid., Roberts Mss, 7101-23-89, Wolseley to Roberts, 4 Sept. 1895.

⁷ National Library of Ireland (hereafter NLI), Kilmainham 1313, Note by Wolseley, 30 Dec, 1893.

⁸ TNA, WO 32/8367, Wolseley to PUS, 15 Oct. 1900.

⁹ Liddell Hart Centre for Military Archives, Alison Mss, Box 1, Wolseley to Alison, 22 Mar. 1885; NAM, Roberts Mss, 7101-24-101, Roberts to Dillon, 4 Apl. 1880.

THE ANNUAL CONFIDENTIAL REPORT

For Wolseley the Asante campaign in 1873-74 had marked the real beginning of the Wolseley or 'Ashanti' ring. As Wolseley wrote in his autobiography, 'he had long been in the habit of keeping a list of the best and ablest soldiers I knew, and was always on the look-out for those who could safely be entrusted with any special military piece of work'. There is evidence for this 'list'. On his way out to the Gold Coast, Wolseley gave Captain George Furse 'a paper bearing a long list of names, asking him at the same time to mark with a cross any name which he considered to be that of a good and efficient officer'. In December 1884 Wolseley told his wife, after an old associate, Sir William Butler, had proved troublesome, he would 'drop him from my list'.¹⁰

Wolseley always claimed that he picked solely on merit and even his critics acknowledged that he had the knack of selecting able men. He had a penchant for courage but also for intellectual reputation, particularly favouring Staff College graduates. There were obvious disadvantages, Wolseley becoming increasingly a prisoner of his early successes, feeling it desirable to keep employing the same individuals lest his rejection of them might reflect on his earlier choice. He also assumed that selected individuals would always be willing to fill specific roles in his military corrective when they themselves were growing in stature and seniority.¹¹ Another drawback, as suggested by Cambridge, was that 'if the same officers are invariably employed, you have no area for selecting others, and give no others a chance of coming to the front'.¹²

Roberts was equally careful. One of Wolseley's protégés, Lieutenant General Henry Brackenbury, was appointed Military Member of the Viceroy's Council in 1891, throwing him into close proximity to Roberts, who was Commander-in-Chief in India from 1885 to 1893. In May 1894 Brackenbury specifically compared Roberts's methods to those of Wolseley, suggesting that any officer 'placed in a great position of authority and responsibility will select as his tools for the work in hand the men whom he has tried, and found never to fail him, and will prefer them to those who he has not tried, or to those who he has tried and not found perfect'. Brackenbury had asked Roberts about the Wolseley ring, to which Roberts had replied that Wolseley was perfectly right: 'No officer who has the responsibility laid upon him of

¹⁰ Field Marshal Viscount Wolseley, *The Story of a Soldier's Life* 2 vols. (London: Archibald Constable & Co, 1903), II, p. 201; Sir George Douglas, *The Life of Major General Wauchope* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1905), pp. 63-64, 74; Hove Reference Library, Wolseley Mss, W/P 10/38, Wolseley to Lady Wolseley, 23-29 Dec. 1884.

¹¹ Adrian Preston (ed.), *Sir Garnet Wolseley's South African Diaries (Natal), 1875* (Cape Town: A. A. Balkema, 1971), pp. 88-89; Ian F. W. Beckett (ed.), *Wolseley and Ashanti: The Asante War Journal and Correspondence of Major General Sir Garnet Wolseley, 1873-74* (Stroud: History Press for Army Records Society, 2009), pp. 39-45; idem, 'Command in the Late Victorian Army', in Gary Sheffield (ed.), *Leadership and Command: The Anglo-American Military Experience since 1861* (London: Brassey's, 1997), pp. 37-56.

¹² A. R. Godwin-Austen, *The Staff and the Staff College* (London: Constable, 1927), p. 207.

carrying out a big job would ever be such a fool as to entrust the details of it to men he did not know he could rely on.¹³ Roberts himself told Brigadier General Henry Wilkinson in February 1887 that he was guided in his choices by his own knowledge of officers, advice from the HQ staff and higher commanders, the opinion of the army generally, and confidential reports. Even this was not a foolproof method so far as confidential reports were concerned. Thus, in September 1887, having been informed by the Military Secretary that Major Howard Brunker of the Cameronians 'had been found wanting when in the presence of the enemy in South Africa', Roberts complained that he could hardly have known this. Brunker had been favourably reported on for the past two years in India, and any previous confidential reports had not been forwarded from the War Office.¹⁴

The officer corps of the British and Indian armies was relatively small, but this did not mean that everyone was well known to everyone else, as frequent comments in private correspondence make only too clear. Thus, the confidential report remained significant. General Sir William Lockhart, for example, noted in July 1898 that he considered Lieutenant General George Sanford the best candidate for the Bombay command. It was suggested that Sanford was 'eccentric'. Lockhart commented, 'but then I have not seen his confidential report'.¹⁵

Clearly, the issue of the annual confidential report is one worth considering in connection with promotion. One of the difficulties in assessing the impact and accuracy of reports is the lack of surviving papers relating to the work of the Military Secretary, responsible to the Commander-in-Chief for personnel issues. Just two general letter books have survived, covering the period from 1871 to 1893, and what is characterised as the Commander-in-Chief's Selection Book, covering the period from 1882 onwards.¹⁶ The latter summarises the information utilised for promotions from Colonel to Major General, briefly indicating the general gist of confidential reports only to 1887, at which point the column for 'Confidential Reports on Colonel' is used only to record whether a promotion is by selection or seniority. Personnel records as such have not survived with the exception of those of a small selection of leading soldiers, or whose careers were presumably thought of interest. For the Victorian period, there are relatively few but they do include those for Sir Redvers Buller; the Duke of Cambridge; Charles Gordon; Herbert Kitchener; Hector Macdonald; Lord Roberts; the Hon. Reginald Talbot, who commanded the Heavy

¹³ Royal Artillery Museum, Brackenbury Mss, MD 1085/3, Brackenbury to Buller, 9 May 1894.

¹⁴ NAM, Roberts Mss, 7101-23-199-4, Roberts to Wilkinson, 22 Feb. 1887; *ibid*, 7010-12-100-1, Roberts to Harman, 9 Sept., 1887.

¹⁵ British Library (hereafter BL), Asia, Pacific and Africa Collections (hereafter APAC), L/MIL/7/15520, Lockhart to Newmarch, 15 Jul. 1898.

¹⁶ NAM, 1998-06-194 and 195, Military Secretary's Private Letter Books; 1998-06-197, Commander-in-Chief's Selection Book.

THE ANNUAL CONFIDENTIAL REPORT

Camel Regiment on the Gordon Relief Expedition; and James Henry Reynolds, who won the VC at Rorke's Drift.¹⁷ A few additional confidential reports have also been preserved for similarly distinguished soldiers including the Duke of Connaught; Lord Methuen; W. H. Mackinnon, who commanded the City Imperial Volunteers in the South African War; and Evelyn Wood.¹⁸

Few mention confidential reports in memoirs, the notable exception being Richard Meinertzhagen, who included extracts from his confidential reports from 1900 to 1924. Meinertzhagen suggested that, despite their invariably flattering nature, he had 'a wonderful aptitude for hiding my faults, and not allowing my little weaknesses to see daylight'.¹⁹

Officers were reported on in a number of ways that added to their overall record. There are surviving reports on Indian army officers who attended the Staff College from 1882 onwards.²⁰ Similarly, there are reports on engineering subalterns leaving the School of Military Engineering at Chatham between 1889 and 1892.²¹ Fortunately, too, all summaries of confidential reports (and a few full reports), primarily for infantry and cavalry officers, have survived for the Irish Command between 1871 and 1894.²² Summary confidential reports have also survived for officers at command and staff levels in the Indian army and the British army in India from 1888 onwards.²³ Most leading figures such as Wolseley and Roberts expressed themselves freely on the quality or otherwise of fellow officers in their private correspondence but Roberts also kept copies of some confidential reports made on senior officers on the conclusion of his campaigns in the Afghanistan in 1879, and in South Africa in 1900.²⁴ Consequently, there is sufficient material to make an informed assessment of confidential reports.

The form of the annual report changed over time. In 1874 the first page of the report for infantry and cavalry officers required an assessment of the state of an officer's health; whether fit for service, and with good eyesight; and whether a good

¹⁷ TNA, WO 138.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, WO 27/489.

¹⁹ Richard Meinertzhagen, *Army Diary, 1899-1926* (Edinburgh: Oliver & Boyd, 1960), pp. 290-96.

²⁰ BL, APAC, L/MIL/7/3424-27.

²¹ TNA, WO 25/3950.

²² NLI, Kilmainham 1307-1313.

²³ BL, APAC, L/MIL/7/17038-50.

²⁴ NAM, Roberts Mss, 7101-23-148, Reports for 1879, reproduced in part in Brian Robson (ed.), *Roberts in India: The Military Papers of Field Marshal Lord Roberts, 1876-93* (Stroud: Alan Sutton for Army Records Society, 1993), pp. 68-69; *ibid.*, 7101-23-188, Reports for 1900, reproduced in full in André Wessels (ed.), *Lord Roberts and the War in South Africa, 1899-1902* (Stroud: Sutton Publishing for Army Records Society, 2000), pp.126-30. Additional Confidential Reports by Roberts are in TNA, WO 105/25 and 27].

horseman. The commanding officer was required to indicate his reasons for considering an officer fit for his current position and for advancement, or reasons for dissatisfaction. The back of the form carried details of date of birth; whether an officer had been a cadet at the Royal Military College, Sandhurst or had attended the Staff College; whether he had attended schools of instruction; whether he had passed for promotion; whether he had command of any languages; and whether he was married or single. The form also required details of whether an officer had been distinguished in the field, such as receiving a mention in despatches or orders and decorations; as well as full details of military service and appointments. The inspecting officer - usually the district commander - would then comment upon the report.²⁵

By 1885, the first page of the report also required details of an officer's general ability; general professional requirements; capacity for command; self-reliance; readiness and resource; judgement and tact; temper; his practical proficiency in application of drill, reconnaissance, outpost and patrol duties, and horsemanship. The back of the form had not essentially changed although it now also required whether an officer was qualified in signalling, and the name and address of next of kin.²⁶ By 1891, it had changed again. The first page now sought detail on general ability; general professional acquirements; practical proficiency in drill and field movement; professional zeal; smartness in performance of duties; level of horsemanship; and an officer's capacity for command in terms of judgement, tact, temper, self-reliance, and power of commanding respect. There also had to be an assessment as to whether an officer was equal to, or above, or below the average in his unit; and whether he could exercise proper influence for his rank over officers, NCOs and men. The back of the form now had additional separate sections for what level of promotion an officer had passed; whether he had attended schools of instruction for musketry, military engineering, signalling, cavalry, pioneers, mounted infantry, veterinary work, supply, transport, riding, and gymnastics; and whether he had acted as an adjutant.²⁷ New guidance issued in 1893 required to know additionally where an officer had attended a school of instruction; whether he had been adjutant of a militia or volunteer battalion; and the level at which Persian or Hindustani had been passed.²⁸

The surviving Irish Command report summaries have few for engineer or artillery officers. The front of the form was common to those of infantry and cavalry officers but the back required information on particular professional attainments. The artillery form in 1887 wanted information on an officer's knowledge of the

²⁵ NLI, Kilmainham 1307, Form for Captain William Abberley, 2/8th Foot, 2 Jul. 1874.

²⁶ Ibid., Kilmainham 1310, Blank Form, 7 May 1885.

²⁷ NLI, Kilmainham 1312, Report on Major Somerset Kevil-Davies, 2nd Gordon Highlanders, 29 Jul. 1891.

²⁸ Ibid., Kilmainham 1313, Note by Childers, 20 May 1893.

THE ANNUAL CONFIDENTIAL REPORT

instructions laid down in the field artillery manual; and his power of applying the same in the field, by battery and in brigade, and in relation to other arms. For garrison artillery officers there had to be an assessment of an officer's general knowledge of the instructions laid down in manuals for garrison and siege artillery; his degree of practical knowledge of the work of heavy garrison ordnance; his knowledge of hydraulics applied to artillery service; and his knowledge of steam and machinery, of electricity, and of drawing. In the case of engineering officers, the 1893 form required information on professional qualifications listed as attendance at the Staff College; and knowledge of field engineering, permanent fortification, construction and estimating, field telegraphy and signalling, electricity, submarine mining, surveying, railways, and ballooning. It also required the knowledge possessed of foreign languages, and of musketry. A solitary report form on a medical officer, also from 1893, was again common to that of others so far as the first page was concerned. On the back, it required to know whether an officer has passed in military law; if he had done so at a training school, in the medical staff corps, or at Aldershot; if he had passed a riding class; and whether he possessed other special acquirements and qualifications as a medical officer.²⁹

In theory at least, the amount of detail required was considerable. Additional reports might be required, especially if an officer appealed against the judgements passed on him. Moreover, the more senior the officer, the more comments were applied up the chain of command. In those reports forwarded to the India Office for onward transmission to the War Office, for example, comments on senior officers in the Bombay and Madras presidencies were made by the governors of those presidencies as well as by the Commander-in-Chief in India. When Lieutenant Colonel the Hon. Paul Methuen was about to be appointed Assistant Adjutant General to the Irish Command in 1877, his predecessor, Charles Wynne-Finch, told him that dealing with the confidential reports for seven cavalry regiments, 21 infantry battalions and three companies of engineers, as well as for all the staff, was 'the "devil"' in terms of work. The process began each August and continued until the following March.³⁰

Perusal of the Irish reports suggests that Wood was essentially correct: those detailed comments recorded in summary returns tend to relate routinely to the commanding officer and second in command of units but, otherwise, only to those with obvious failings. In both October 1873 and October 1874, for example, all 31 captains and lieutenants of the 6th Dragoons were simply reported as satisfactory.³¹ To some extent, it depended upon the GOC. Upon assuming the Irish Command in October 1880, General Sir Thomas Steele directed that only unfavourable reports

²⁹ Ibid., Kilmainham 1310, Report on Lieutenant Colonel Edward Elliott, A Brigade, RHA, 2 Aug. 1887; *ibid.*, 1313, Blank Engineer and Medical Forms, 1893.]

³⁰ Wiltshire and Swindon History Centre, Methuen Mss, 1742/6335, Letters on Appointment to Dublin, Wynne-Finch to Methuen, 19 Mar. 1877.

³¹ NLI, Kilmainham 1307, Reports of 13 Oct. 1873, and 1 Oct. 1874.

should be recorded. By contrast, when in Ireland, Wolseley insisted that the first four officers in a unit should be reported on as to their fitness for promotion if it was a two-battalion regiment, or the first six officers in the case of a three-battalion regiment. Forms had to be filled in correctly and fully; periods of half pay should not be counted as employment; the place of birth must be accurately given; there must be a complete address for next of kin; and only the commanding officer and the inspecting officer were permitted to complete the boxes for additional comments.³² Yet, even in Wolseley's time, every subordinate officer in a regiment could be returned simply as satisfactory, as in the case of all 26 captains and lieutenants in the 1st King's Own (Royal Lancaster Regiment) in October 1891, and all 24 captains and lieutenants in the 1st Royal Sussex Regiment in July 1893.³³

There is also evidence of the reluctance to be specific in comments. In August 1884, Major General Lord Clarina, commanding the Dublin District, indicated that Lieutenant Colonel John Blaksley of the 1st Buffs (East Kent Regiment) was not a success 'although I am not prepared to give any specific reasons for expressing this opinion, but he is certainly not popular with his officers & is disliked socially according to common report'. The Military Secretary responded by demanding a full report: 'It is necessary that reasons should be fully given for forming an adverse opinion regarding any officer, but Lord Clarina, although he has formed an unfavourable opinion of Lt. Col. Blaksley, states that he is not prepared to give any reasons for having formed it.' Clarina replied with details of Blaksley's want of tact and judgement, defending his own original intention as being a desire

to avoid troubling the authorities with unnecessary correspondence, & in the exercise of his important command he has never shrunk from taking on himself as much responsibility as possible, therefore he (Lord C.) some months since settled a misunderstanding which had arisen between Lt. Col. Blaksley & his officers, with regard to a question relating to the Officers Mess; on which occasion he (Lord C.) could not fail to perceive that "he" certainly did not command their esteem, & that "he" had displayed great want of judgement.

Cambridge concluded from the evidence Clarina now presented that

unless this officer can so far alter his mode of carrying on his duties as to conduce to a more cordial feeling towards him on the part of his subordinates it will become a matter for consideration whether in the interests of the Service and the well being of the Battn. Lt. Col. Blaksley

³² Ibid., Kilmainham 1309, Note by Boyle, 2 Oct. 1880; *ibid.*, 1313, Note by Childers, 20 May 1893.

³³ Ibid., Kilmainham 1312, Report, 22 Oct. 1891; 1313, Report, 20-21 Jul. 1893.

THE ANNUAL CONFIDENTIAL REPORT

should not be called upon to retire from a position which he does not appear to be sufficiently qualified to fill in a very essential point.

Blaksley denied being on poor terms with his officers, and entered a heartfelt plea to be allowed to continue in the army, at which point Clarina indicated that he wished to say no more to damage Blaksley's prospects. He trusted that the episode would have taught Blaksley the need for requisite tact.³⁴

In the following year, Clarina was again compelled to elucidate further his remarks on Lieutenant Colonel Edwin Oldfield, and Majors John Harkness and John Vincent of the 1st Northumberland Fusiliers. Not having previously seen Oldfield, Clarina had relied on the report of the battalion's former commanding officer, Lieutenant Colonel Norman Macdonald, that Oldfield had 'completely lost his head on parade'. Similarly, he had relied on Macdonald's view that Vincent lacked tact and judgement. Clarina excused this on the grounds that, with between 500 and 600 officers in Dublin District, he 'need scarcely observe that it is manifestly impossible for him to become personally acquainted with the qualifications of every individual officer, therefore he is obliged in a great measure, to rely on the information he obtains from Comg. Offs'. In the case of Vincent, it transpired that Macdonald, in turn, had based his own view on what he had been told of Vincent's performance as adjutant of the 3rd Northumberland Fusiliers. Meanwhile, Harkness had been promoted to command the 2nd Battalion on the basis of Clarina's satisfactory reports for 1883 and 1884 yet he now claimed Harkness had little ability. The Duke of Cambridge required to know how these reports could be reconciled, noting that he,

is obliged to rely on the reports received from Genl. Officers to assist him in deciding as to the fitness of an officer for promotion, and specially in the selection of a Lieut. Colonel for the responsible position of the command of a Battalion, and H.R.H. is placed in a very difficult position, when, after acting on such a report and appointing an officer to a command, he receives an unfavourable report from the same General Officer.

Clarina replied that he felt 'no difficulty in reconciling the apparent anomaly of his having in three separate reports rendered in three different years expressed opinions regarding an officer at variance with one another'. He had seen Harkness only in the capacity of an acting magistrate in 1883 and 1884, and was not aware of his more general failings until the battalion was concentrated in Dublin in 1885. Rather giving

³⁴ Ibid., Kilmainham 1309, Steele to Whitmore, 27 Aug. 1884; Boyle to Clarina, 16 Sept. 1884; Clarina to Boyle, 23 Sept. 1884; Whitmore to Clarina, 26 Sept. 1884; Steele to Whitmore, 9 Oct. 1884; *ibid.*, 1310, Note by Clarina, 28 Oct. 1884.

the game away in precisely the way that general criticisms of the annual confidential reports have already been implied, however, Clarina also wrote,

No man can possibly more dislike having to make a disparaging remark as to the capacity of an officer than he (Lord C.) does, and he trusts H.R.H. will credit him with the desire to faithfully discharge the somewhat invidious duties which an Inspg. Gen. Officer is required to perform & that his explanation may be considered sufficient.³⁵

Even Wolseley, who was usually more than willing to express his dissatisfaction with officers, could pull his punches on occasion. Thus, in October 1891, Wolseley described Colonel Montgomery Williams, commanding the Regimental District at Birr, as 'absolutely useless in any Military position' and 'absolutely unqualified' for further promotion. Yet, Wolseley indicated that he would find it difficult to put his exact reasons for these judgements into an official document. Since Williams was due to retire anyway, it would be better merely to say that, in line with previous reports, he had been found wanting in the district's essential recruiting work through lack of energy and want of 'go'. Similarly, in August 1892 Wolseley chose not to disclose in full to the officer in question, Lieutenant Colonel William Roberts of the 2nd Duke of Cornwall's Light Infantry, adverse reports upon him. Wolseley commented that 'I don't think one can expect to obtain usefully guiding information from those in command relating to the men under their orders, if their reports are to be shown to those concerned.' He went on,

In these days of selection, it is very easy to tell a Lieut. Colonel that he has not been selected for promotion, because there were others whom it was considered in the interests of the Army & of the State were more fitted for higher positions. One can do this without hurting an officer's feelings, for you don't tell him he is useless, but that there are others better than he.³⁶

In much the same way, while suggesting that adverse remarks should normally be communicated to officers, Roberts as Commander-in-Chief in Madras had declined to pass on his full report to Brigadier General George de Berry in January 1883. The latter would not be re-employed and was due to be retired in a matter of months: the full extent of the criticism would only pain an old soldier.³⁷ De Berry, who had first seen action in the Sikh Wars but none since the Mutiny, was duly retired as a Major General in June 1883.

³⁵ Ibid., Kilmainham 1310, Note by Clarina, 14 Oct. 1885; Macdonald to Turner, 13 Oct. 1885; Turner to Clarina, 5 Dec, 1885; Prince Edward of Saxe-Weimar to Harman, 12 Dec, 1885.

³⁶ Ibid., Kilmainham 1312, Wolseley to Harman, 4 Oct. and 17 Oct. 1891; *ibid.*, Wolseley to Harman, 27 Aug. 1892.

³⁷ NAM, Roberts Mss, 7101-23-97, Roberts to Dillon, 31 Jan. 1883.

THE ANNUAL CONFIDENTIAL REPORT

On occasions, too, there was a desire to give an officer the benefit of the doubt. In January 1875, Cambridge proposed to remove Colonel Joyce from the 68th Sub District at Galway as a result of the report by General Lord Sandhurst. Sandhurst, however, indicated that 'it did not occur to me to suggest this officer's removal. Although I may believe him to be unsuitable for an independent Command'. Joyce's correspondence had suggested to Sandhurst that he was of 'flighty intelligence' and 'impudent in speech'. Sandhurst recommended proceeding cautiously as he had not disclosed his views to Joyce but the latter had already been called upon to resign and was now demanding to know the cause. Lieutenant General Sir Edward Holdich, commanding the Dublin District, upheld Sandhurst's view and Joyce was told bluntly he could sell his commission, go on half pay, or retire on full pay as he was over 60.³⁸

In May 1885 there were adverse reports on Captain Charles Mayne of No. 1 Battery, 1st Brigade (Western Division) Royal Artillery at Carlisle Fort, Cork. Mayne had appeared to be drunk on a number of occasions, once while at the theatre in Cork, but was otherwise considered a good officer. Mayne was refused the interview he sought with the Duke of Cambridge and passed over for promotion. But, since the Duke wished to give Mayne the chance to redeem himself, he was given a year's probation during which he would be reported on monthly.³⁹ In August 1887 General H.S.H. Prince Edward of Saxe Weimar acknowledged that Colonel John Kinchant of the 11th Hussars was wanting in tact, as suggested by Major General the Hon. Charles Thesiger, who commanded the Cavalry Brigade at the Curragh, as well as acting as Inspector General of Cavalry in Ireland. Prince Edward felt Thesiger over ready to take offence. In the event, Kinchant retired in November 1887, being granted the honorary rank of Major General.⁴⁰

Kinchant's case raises the issue of where there was disagreement on the quality of an officer and adverse comment, of course, could have its roots in personalities. In terms of the former, for example, there was disagreement over a number of years of the merits of Colonel Thomas Crawley, a British officer serving as Assistant Adjutant General first at Lahore and then Allahabad. In 1891 Major General Sir Hugh Gough, an Indian army officer commanding at Lahore, considered Crawley thoroughly conversant with his duties but the Adjutant General in Bengal, Major General William Galbraith, a British officer, considered Crawley had a 'buoyant temperament and average ability'. In 1892 the Commander-in-Chief, Roberts, concluded that

³⁸ NLI, Kilmainham 1307, Sandhurst to Horsford, 9 Jan. and 29 Jan. 1875; Fendall to Joyce, 6 Feb. 1875.

³⁹ Ibid., Kilmainham 1310, Steele to Whitmore, 2 and 7 May 1885; Boyle to Young, 12 May 1885; Young to Boyle, 14 May 1885; Boyle to Young, 19 May 1885; Boyle to Young, 27 Jul. 1885.

⁴⁰ Ibid., Thesiger to Beckett, 29 Aug. 1887; Beckett to Dormer, 18 Oct. 1887; Dormer to Beckett, 19 Oct. 1887; Prince Edward to Harman, 20 Oct. 1887.

Crawley was a 'satisfactory officer without any special qualifications'. By 1893 Major General Viscount Frankfort de Montmorency, who had followed Gough in command at Lahore, reported that Crawley was on sick leave and that he would find it difficult to suggest any post or command for which Crawley was fitted. Brigadier General Gerald de Courcy Morton, who was acting Adjutant General in Galbraith's absence, concurred, describing Crawley as 'feeble' although conceding this might be due to ill health. Roberts indicated, 'I do not think this officer is fitted for further employment on the Staff'.

Yet Crawley survived and, transferred to Allahabad, albeit a lesser post, was found excellent in all respects by Brigadier General Horace Evans of the Bengal Staff Corps, commanding there, after two months' acquaintance in 1894. Back in post as Adjutant General, Galbraith still felt Crawley below average and that, inexperienced as he was in dealing with British officers, Evans was 'naturally impressed by Colonel Crawley's knowledge of them, but I cannot concur in his extremely higher estimate'. The Commander-in-Chief in India, now General Sir George White, also felt Crawley had 'zeal and considerable experience', but not 'the gifts that go to make a high commander'. Evans duly reported favourably on Crawley again in 1895 to the evident continuing surprise of Galbraith and White.⁴¹

Similarly, there was a clash in 1889 between Major General Henry Davies, commanding the Cork District, and Lieutenant Colonel Thomas St Clair of the 2nd Princess Charlotte of Wales's (Royal Berkshire Regiment). St Clair had reported adversely on Major Justinian Ponsonby, after which Davies had suggested St Clair lacked tact and had a temper. St Clair claimed that Davies's hostility towards him originated from the time they had served together in Southern District previously, and that any reported discontent within the regiment was due to his arrival from the 1st Battalion with the intention to introduce reforms. A minor disagreement had led Ponsonby to complain directly to Davies but, as Ponsonby had apologised, St Clair had not entered an adverse report on him as when 'promotion by selection is so much the rule he feels the seriousness of an unfavourable report'. Davies, in turn, took strong exception to any idea that he had been influenced by unsubstantiated reports from within the battalion. The Duke of Cambridge upheld Davies's report, St Clair having been reported upon for his temper as far back as 1878.⁴²

⁴¹ BL, APAC, L/MIL/7/17038, Bengal Reports, 15 Mar. 1891; *ibid.*, Bengal Reports, 15 Mar. 1892; *ibid.*, Bengal Reports, 15 Mar. 1893; L/MIL/7/17039, Bengal Reports, 15 Mar. 1894; *ibid.*, Bengal Reports, 15 Mar. 1895.

⁴² NLI, Kilmainham 1311, Davies Report, 6 Aug. 1889; Note by Davies, 29 Sept. 1889; Prince Edward of Saxe Weimer to Whitmore, 4 Oct. 1889; Beckett to Davies, 19 Oct. 1889.

THE ANNUAL CONFIDENTIAL REPORT

Two years later, in July 1891, St Clair suggested that Ponsonby had many good qualities and, on the face of it, was qualified for promotion. Yet, at the same time, St Clair was

compelled to say that he [Ponsonby] is of a hasty disposition, inclined to magnify personal matters and to be contentious. He is exceedingly selfish and vain, and sometimes narrow minded. He has little perseverance at work which entails discomfort and is too fond of leave and of society. He is not good at either drill or field work.

Ponsonby's eyesight was also poor, and St Clair felt that he should not succeed to command of the battalion. Davies did not agree, arguing that he had always found Ponsonby smart and efficient, and had no hesitation in recommending him for the command. For good measure, Ponsonby sent in a medical board report indicating his eyesight was good. Cambridge again found no reason to question Davies's assessment in the light of St Clair's own record, concluding that Ponsonby was fitted for promotion.⁴³ As it happened, Davies himself had been admonished by Cambridge in January 1890 for two seemingly contrary reports on the Assistant Adjutant General at Cork, Colonel W. Lewis Ogilvy. The last confidential report in June 1889 had been entirely satisfactory yet Ogilvy was now reported as unfitted for his duties. Cambridge directed Ogilvy either to take more interest in his duties so as to avoid any further condemnation by Davies, or resign.⁴⁴

A similar personality clash occurred in December 1891 when Lieutenant Colonel James Stewart Mackenzie of the 9th Lancers reported unfavourably on Major Bloomfield Gough following their disagreement over the treatment of a military prisoner in the regiment. Both had distinguished themselves in the Second Afghan War but it was known that they were not friends. Lieutenant General James Keith Fraser, the Inspector General of Cavalry, was unable to offer any view based on personal observation. He was inclined to believe Gough's side of the story on the basis of Gough's known gallantry. By contrast, Major General Somerset Wiseman Clarke, commanding the Belfast District, was more ready to back Mackenzie. Given that Fraser was non committal and Wiseman Clarke's view unfavourable, Gough was warned that he should have chosen his reported words to Mackenzie more carefully, and he must be made aware that further advancement depended on future satisfactory reports.⁴⁵

⁴³ Ibid., Kilmainham 1312, St Clair report, 24 Jul. 1891 with comments by Davis; Harman to Childers, 20 Nov. 1891; Childers to Davis, 23 Jan. 1892.

⁴⁴ NAM, 1998-06-195, Harman to Davies, 3 Jan. 1890, and Harman to Ogilvy, 3 Jan. 1890.

⁴⁵ NLI, Kilmainham 1312, Report by Mackenzie, 18 Dec. 1891, with comments but Fraser and Wiseman Clarke; Gough to Childers, 19 Dec. 1891; Mackenzie to Childers, 21 Dec. 1891; Wolseley to Harman, 31 Dec. 1891; Childers to Wiseman Clarke, 1 Feb. 1892.

One lasting dispute that was played out in the confidential reports was between Roberts and Hugh Gough's brother, Sir Charles Gough. In December 1879 when the then Major General (local Lieutenant General) Sir Frederick Roberts had forced his way into Kabul following the murder of the British envoy there, his force was besieged in the Sherpur cantonment. Commanding a brigade on the lines of communication, the then Brigadier General Charles Gough was ordered to advance from Jagdalak to reinforce Roberts at Sherpur, some 70 miles away and with snow thick on the ground, although the peremptory orders from Roberts actually contradicted those Gough received from his immediate superior, Major General Robert Bright. Roberts believed that Gough had been unnecessarily slow in taking 12 days to get through to him. In fact, there were fierce attacks on those detachments Gough had left to defend Jagdalak and other posts.⁴⁶ Thereafter Roberts seemingly went out of his way to damage Gough's reputation despite the latter being praised by the then Commander-in-Chief, Sir Frederick Haines, and awarded the KCB.

There were derogatory reflections in Roberts's correspondence, with Roberts doing his best to ensure Gough would not get the Madras command in 1890, as well as what Gough took to be a damning slight in Roberts's autobiography, *Forty One Years in India*, published in 1896. But confidential reports also served Roberts's purpose. Thus, in 1888, when commanding the Oudh Division, Gough was characterised by Roberts as able and energetic but, 'Of his power to act with decision when a crisis arrives I have some doubt.' The 1890 report was the same.⁴⁷

Whatever the drawbacks in the reporting system, it is clear that those officers who were unsatisfactory were noted. Reports could often be frank, or at least extended only the faintest qualified praise. An example of the former is the October 1880 report on Lieutenant Louis Carden of the Royal Artillery, namely that, 'This officer appears to have little professional zeal. I have not formed a very high opinion of his capacity as an officer, if he has any he succeeds in disguising it.' An example of the second is Wolseley's comment on Lieutenant Colonel Robert Oxley of the 2nd Gordon Highlanders in November 1893:

More full of zeal than brains: he seldom leaves the Barracks except on duty & works unremittingly for his men. If attention to business & unnecessary care for his Battn. & for its good name & credit could of themselves make a

⁴⁶ Brian Robson, *The Road to Kabul: The Second Afghan War, 1878-81* (London: Arms and Armour Press, 1986), pp. 161-65, 178.

⁴⁷ NAM, Roberts Mss, 7101-23-100-3, Roberts to Stewart, 5 Apl, 30 Aug. and 29 Oct. 1890, and Roberts to Newmarch, 9 Nov. 1892; *ibid.*, 7101-23-105, Roberts to Gough, 13 Feb. 1897; *ibid.*, Gough Mss, 8304-32, Gough to Roberts, 5 Feb. 1897; Morton to Gough, 16 Mar. 1897; Gough to Harriette Gough, 12 and 28 Dec. 1879; BL, APAC, L/MIL/7/17038, Bengal Reports, 15 Mar. 1888 and 15 Mar. 1890.

THE ANNUAL CONFIDENTIAL REPORT

good C.O., then he ought to be about the best in the Army. But his Battn. is not well taught in the art of fighting. Col Oxley is an old fashioned officer who seems to think drill the end and instead of being merely a means to an end.⁴⁸

Ultimately, of course, what mattered most, as Wolseley and Roberts invariably stressed, was how an individual performed on the battlefield. Some who had been praised routinely in successive reports fell short of expectations. Sir John McQueen had received glowing reports previously but, having failed to conduct the Black Mountain expedition of 1888 to Roberts's satisfaction, was now 'quite the most unsatisfactory commander I have had to deal with and I would never trust him with the conduct of another expedition.'⁴⁹

Similarly, in 1894, Sir George White found Brigadier General Alex Kinloch at Peshawar 'altogether a man of considerable mark, which he would probably make greater on service'. A year later, following Kinloch's indifferent performance on the Chitral Relief Expedition, he had greatly disappointed White and 'shown none of the dash or enterprise I expected of him'. Redvers Buller suggested privately to White that Kinloch's chance had come too late after prolonged Indian service and exposure to the sun. He should no longer be considered for the Burma command for 'it would never do to have a man who proved himself of no use in war, and yet was a great martinet, and very exigent of his Troops, in peace time'.⁵⁰ In the same way, the formerly favourable opinions of Brigadier General Francis Kempster ended with his perceived failings during the Tirah campaign of 1897 although, perversely, his immediate superior gave him a very favourable report in 1899 on the grounds of the 'practical knowledge of his profession gained on active service'.⁵¹

Others who routinely received favourable and even admiring reports also failed the ultimate test including Major General Sir William Gatacre, defeated at Stormberg in South Africa in December 1899; and Lieutenant General (later Field Marshal) Lord Methuen, defeated at Magersfontein in the same 'Black Week' in South Africa.⁵² On the other hand, some men were to fully justify the glowing reports they received,

⁴⁸ NLI, Kilmainham 1308, Report on Carden, 9 Oct. 1880; *ibid.*, 1313, Report on Oxley, 11 Nov. 1893.

⁴⁹ NAM, Roberts Mss, 7101-23-148; *ibid.*, 7101-23-98, Roberts to Dufferin, 4 Nov. 1888. See also *ibid.*, Roberts to Dufferin, 16 Nov. 1888; *ibid.*, 7101-23-100-2, Roberts to Napier, 3 Nov. 1888; *ibid.*, 7101-23-100-3, Roberts to McQueen, 25 Jul. 1891, and Roberts to Stewart, 18 Aug. 1891.

⁵⁰ BL, APAC, L/MIL/7/17039, Bengal Reports, 15 Mar. 1895, and Covering Note on Kinloch, 4 Sep. 1895; *ibid.*, White Mss, F108/36, Buller to White, 30 May 1895.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, L/MIL/7/17040, Madras Report, 1 Jan. 1898; *ibid.*, L/MIL/7/17041, Madras Reports, 1 Jan 1899.

⁵² On Gatacre, for example, see BL, APAC, L/MIL/7/17038, Bengal reports, 15 Mar. 1888; *ibid.*, L/MIL/7/17039, Bombay reports, 11 May 1896; for Methuen, TNA, WO 27/489.

such as the future General Sir Archibald Alison, who was head of the War Office Intelligence Department from 1878 to 1882 and commanded at Aldershot from 1883 to 1888; and General Sir William Lockhart, who died in office as Commander-in-Chief in India in 1900.⁵³

The annual confidential report, therefore, was one of the tools necessarily utilised to assess officers' suitability for promotion. They were most certainly noted in the discussions of the progression of Colonels to the rank of Major General between 1882 and 1887, although this did not always make a great deal of difference. In 1885 Colonel Lord John Tylour was set aside from further promotion, Major General William Cameron having reported that Tylour had no capacity for command and 'I have seldom if ever seen an officer who appears to know less of his work.' Yet, the Hon. Savage Mostyn duly got his promotion to Major General despite Cameron's equally damning report that he was 'a good natured nonentity - to whom it would be dangerous to trust a responsible command'.⁵⁴ However, there were many other factors involved in promotion and appointments.⁵⁵

Evelyn Wood's criticism of annual confidential reports was largely justified in that inspecting officers did tend to identify only the strongest and the weakest officers. As an officer advanced to command and staff level, his abilities were the more likely to come under scrutiny by his superiors. Even then, however, the unwillingness of some senior officers to make proper use of the annual confidential reports, and of others to draw the right conclusions from them, hampered the efforts of men like Wolseley and Roberts to advance the very best to high command. That was the nature of the problem of promotion in the late Victorian army.

⁵³ NLI, Kilmainham 1307, Report on Alison, 16 Aug. 1876; *ibid*, 1308, Report on Alison, 21 Aug. 1877; BL, APAC, L/MIL/7/17039, Bengal Reports, 15 Mar. 1893; *ibid.*, Bengal Reports, 15 Mar. 1895; *ibid.*, L/MIL/7/17040, Bengal Reports, 1 Jan 1898.

⁵⁴ NAM, 1998-06-197.

⁵⁵ Ian F. W. Beckett, 'Kitchener and the Politics of Command' in Edward Spiers (ed.), *Sudan: The Reconquest Reappraised* (London: Frank Cass, 1998), pp. 35-53' *idem*, 'Buller and the Politics of Command', in John Gooch (ed.), *The Boer War: Direction, Experience and Image* (London: Frank Cass, 2000), pp. 41-55; *idem*, 'Women and Patronage in the Late Victorian Army', *History* 85 (2000), pp. 463-80; *idem*, 'Soldiers, the Frontier and the Politics of Command in British India', *Small Wars and Insurgencies* 16 (2005), pp. 280-92.