



'Unforgettable ... He writes with the imaginative
gift of a first-rate novelist. Romance and the
attendant grief of loss permeate the book'

Daily Telegraph

FARTHEST FIELD



'A book that will long survive as a masterpiece'

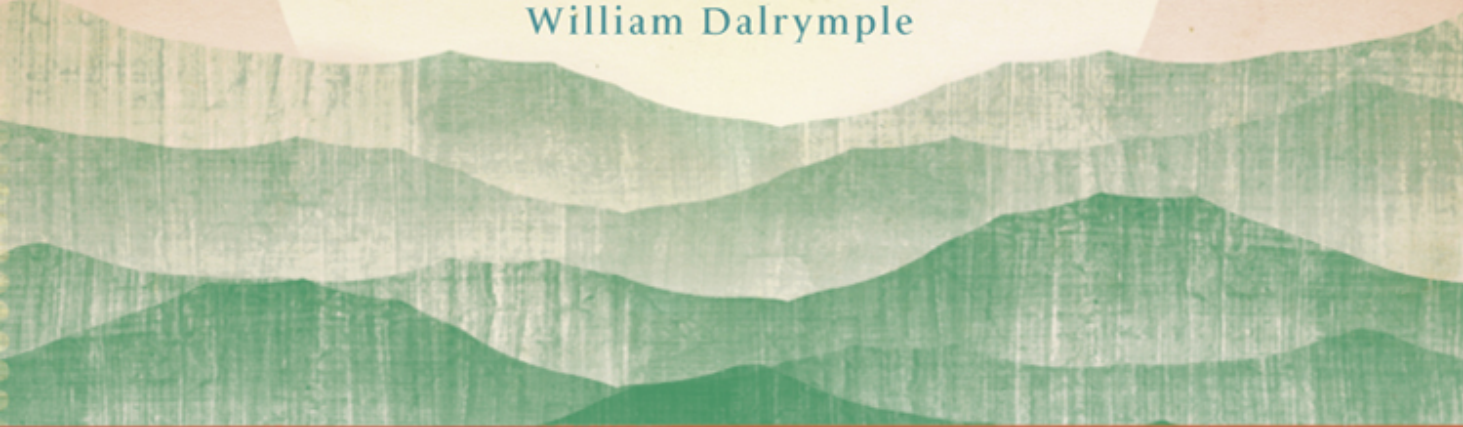
Simon Winchester



RAGHU KARNAD

'One of India's most brilliant and talented young writers'

William Dalrymple



Raghu Karnad

**Farthest Field: An Indian
Story of the Second World War**

«HarperCollins»

Karnad R.

Farthest Field: An Indian Story of the Second World War /

R. Karnad — «HarperCollins»,

Described as ‘a masterpiece’ by critics, this remarkable book tells the story of war through the lives and deaths of a single family. Absolutely unforgettable new writing. If you loved *The English Patient* or Rohinton Mistry’s *Fine Balance* or Katherine Boo’s *Behind the Beautiful Forevers*, you will love this book. Three young men gazed at him from silver-framed photographs in his grandmother’s house, ‘beheld but not noticed, as angels are in a frieze full of mortal strugglers’. They had all been in the Second World War, a fact that surprised him. Indians had never figured in his idea of the war, nor the war in his idea of India – and he thought that he had a good idea of both. One of them, Bobby, even looked a bit like him, but Raghu Karnad had not noticed until he was the same age as they were in their photo-frames. Then he learned about the Parsi boy from the sleepy south Indian coast, so eager to follow his brothers-in-law into the colonial forces and onto the front line. Manek, dashing and confident, was a pilot with India’s fledgling air force; gentle Ganny became an army doctor in the arid North-West Frontier. Bobby’s pursuit would carry him as far as the deserts of Iraq and the green hell of the Burma battlefield. The years 1939-45 might be the most revered, deplored and replayed in modern history. Yet India’s extraordinary role has been concealed, from itself and from the world. In riveting prose, Karnad retrieves the story of a single family – a story of love, rebellion, loyalty and uncertainty – and with it, the greatest revelation that is India’s Second World War. *Farthest Field* narrates the lost epic of India’s war, in which the largest volunteer army in history fought for the British Empire, even as its countrymen fought to be free of it. It carries us from Madras to Peshawar, Egypt to Burma – unfolding the saga of a young family amazed by their swiftly changing world and swept up in its violence.

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An Indian Story

Copyright

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Maps by John Gilkes

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Dedication

For my mother,
who didn't let me forget

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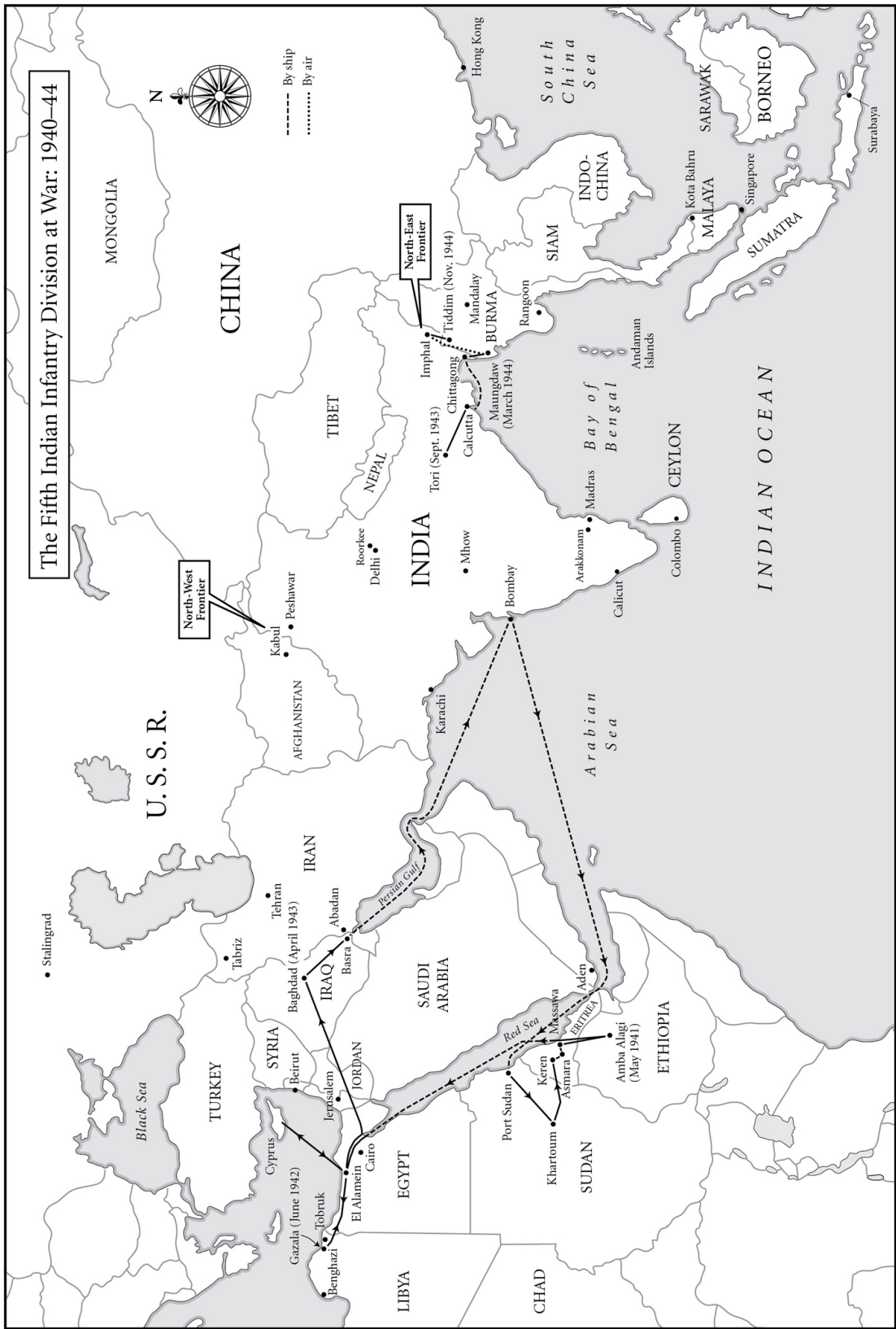
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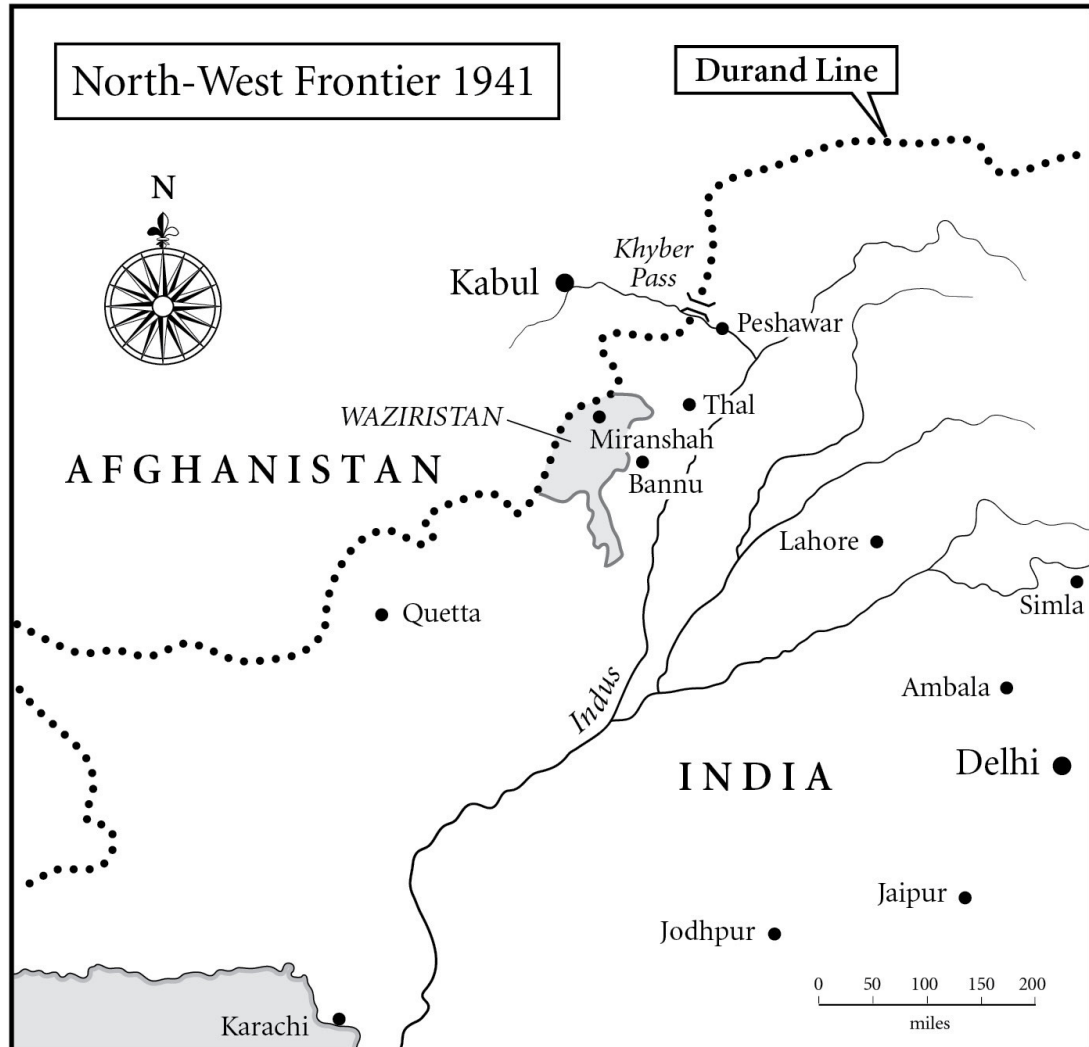
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Prologue

I had known their faces my whole life, but never asked their names till it was too late. Their portrait-style photographs, full of grain and shadow, were not in albums – that would have placed them somewhere in the train of family history, and when the albums were opened, we'd have asked, 'And who's that?' Instead they were isolated in dull silver frames on table tops around the house in Madras; beheld but not noticed, as angels are in a frieze full of mortal strugglers. I never even noticed that I looked like one of them.



I still can't believe I was so late. By the time I asked, not only were those men long gone, but my grandmother was too, and her sisters, and most of their generation. Nugs, my grandmother, could have told me everything, though she might have refused. I think she had banished her youth from her mind by the time she died, though I don't actually know. I never asked. I was a child, curious about anything but family. All I'd wanted from her was the hoard of gold which I believed was hidden under a clicking tile in her bedroom. She told me I could have it after she died. So, after she died, I knew precisely where to look for what had never existed. And what had existed – her story and the stories of those young men in the photo frames – I had to search for without her.

There was an injustice in it, which I sensed as it dawned on my mother how little she knew of their stories either – though one of the men was her own father, and the others her two uncles. She and my grandmother were always close, as I'd imagined a single child and bereaved parent had to be. Half a lifetime they had spent together, but neither one asked or told about what happened. My grandmother, a doctor, had sutured that past shut. Eventually they were both doctors, and when my mother moved away to work in New York for nearly twenty years she wrote back every week, and in the house in Madras I found every one of the thousand letters, bound up into bricks that could build a playhouse. Everything my grandmother could save of my mother's, she had. But of the men, there was almost nothing.

Still my mother did know the names of those who, in the late hours of their lives, held onto strands of the story. With visit after visit, we followed the thinning thread of those lives, right up to the point where it frayed, came apart, and came to an end.

What I learned first, before I even learned their proper names, was that they had been in the Second World War. That was surprising. It was almost outlandish, because Indians never figured in my idea of the war, or the war in my idea of India, and I thought I had a good idea about both. There was certainly no public notion of it; nothing we were taught in school or regaled with from the silver screen, even though the Indian Army in the Second World War was the largest volunteer force the world had ever known. Personally, I hadn't thought Madras could even be mentioned in the same book as Pearl Harbor; I was accustomed to thinking of the war as Western Front, Eastern Front and Pacific. When I looked through the eyes of Indian soldiers, however, the globe turned, revealing new continents.

The larger story was the key to retrieving what I could of their private stories. From the start, to learn what happened to my grandfather and grand-uncles was to discover the lost epic of India's Second World War, as well as the reasons we chose to discard it. I started with names. To the family, they were Bobby, Manek and Ganny; their proper names, which I'd never seen in writing, I confirmed from a registry of Commonwealth soldiers. The registry also listed the units to which they belonged. With luck, I found those units' diaries. This meant that in my desperate pursuit, even at times when I lost sight of them, I still knew the road they had taken.

Graham Greene describes Henry James as once saying that a writer with sufficient talent need only look in through the mess-room window of a Guards' barracks in order to write a novel about the brigade. James didn't say anything about non-fiction, but the challenge of this book felt similar. Could one write a true story on the basis of only glimpses into the lives of forgotten men?

I might have tried to write a novel, but I knew there was nothing I could invent that would outdo the true, brief course of their lives. Instead I approached this book through what I think of as forensic non-fiction: I started out with three unknown, dead men on my hands. Who were they? How did they die, and where, and what took them there? The result is my best shot on the case of the three brothers-in-law turned brothers-in-arms. To deal with their interior lives, which I was determined to do, I took a sort of forensic licence, using fragmented evidence and testimony to build an account of their thoughts and beliefs. This was a compromise, but one that helped me confront the paradox, which only grew in magnitude, of becoming familiar with forgotten men. That apart, I have limited all incidents, anecdotes, speech, and details of movements, operations, environment and milieu to what I learned from interviews or records, or could generally establish as fact.¹

Even what I have categorised as facts are often themselves a kind of fiction, reshaped and revised during their long storage as personal and institutional memories. Nothing drove this home like my face-to-face interviews with Indian veterans of the war. Most were in their nineties. Many remembered their twenties as well as I do mine, but their answers, especially to the question of why they joined a colonial army, seemed to have been mentally corrected over their much longer service in the army of free India. In general, their memories, like all memories, were smoothed and polished by time, as pebbles in a stream. Many of the claims of Army histories and memoirs may be just as unreliable: shaped by agenda, nostalgia and pride.

So this story is imperfect, live flesh drawn over skeletons rebuilt from scattered bones. But it is one in which the lives of a few might stand in for many others. One of the felicities of these men's lives was how they captured, in reflection, the hidden landscape of India's Second World War. But whether or not any single book could document India's engagement, this book does not. It is not a scholar's history, no more than it is a traditional biography. Rather it is an exercise in reaching into darkness and considering what is retrieved.

I have not strained to depict events too far outside the circumference of the characters' lives – especially not those which are best remembered, such as the explosion of the freighter *Fort Stikine*

in Bombay harbour, or the battles of the Italian campaign. This book is less about the devastation of total warfare than about private apocalypse reaching people in places very far away from the war as we have come to imagine it. The limits of documentation mean that many elements of their personal lives are missing, such as relationships within their units, especially with orderlies, jemadars or other ranks. These would have been powerful bonds, but were recorded nowhere that I could find. This is a story about being lost in the middle, and one way that this appears is that its characters are from a middle class. It was a class better informed and generally more politicised than Indians of the ranks; it was the class that staffed the leadership of the Freedom movement as well as of the Indian Civil Service. Their legend is not one of heroic conviction and unity, but of ambivalence and division, which only grew deeper over the course of the war.

When the war was over, the Indian Army – and the more than two million men and women who served in it – found that they had spent the past six years on the wrong side of history. Ever since, having fought for free India would be the price of admission into national memory. Those who survived still had a chance to earn that coin, and many did, in the new wars that began almost at once. But those who died would be left to lie, in silent cemeteries where words carved in marble insisted to nobody: ‘Their Name Liveth For Evermore’. Their faces were lit by the candlelight of private memory, till even that dwindled and was gone.

People have two deaths: the first at the end of their lives, when they go away, and the second at the end of the memory of their lives, when all who remember them are gone. Then a person quits the world completely.

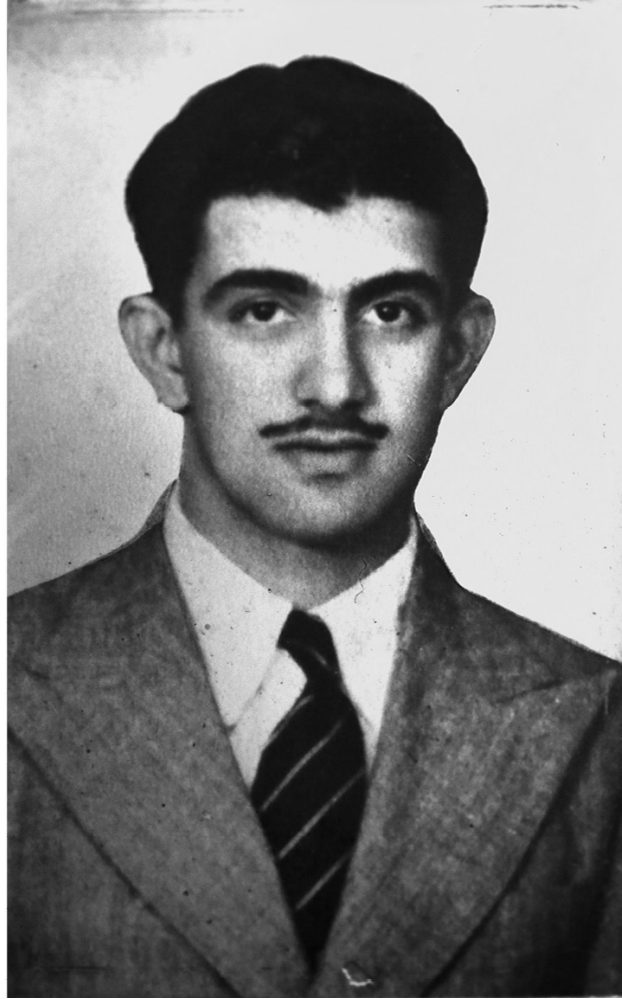
War brings the two deaths close, because it chooses young people most deliberately to die. If he died at twenty-five, those who loved him still had long journeys to make, with little of his to carry with them. He had barely begun to live in the first place. Their lives had barely begun either. Eventually he is kept more as a photograph than a name, and even the photo sinks under the layers of their life’s increase. People can have two burials.

Countries keep alive the memory of the war dead: their own and their enemies’. Usually the war dead are remembered best of all, killed more easily than they are forgotten. But sometimes even countries try to forget their wars, and the second death, of the idea of you, closes in.

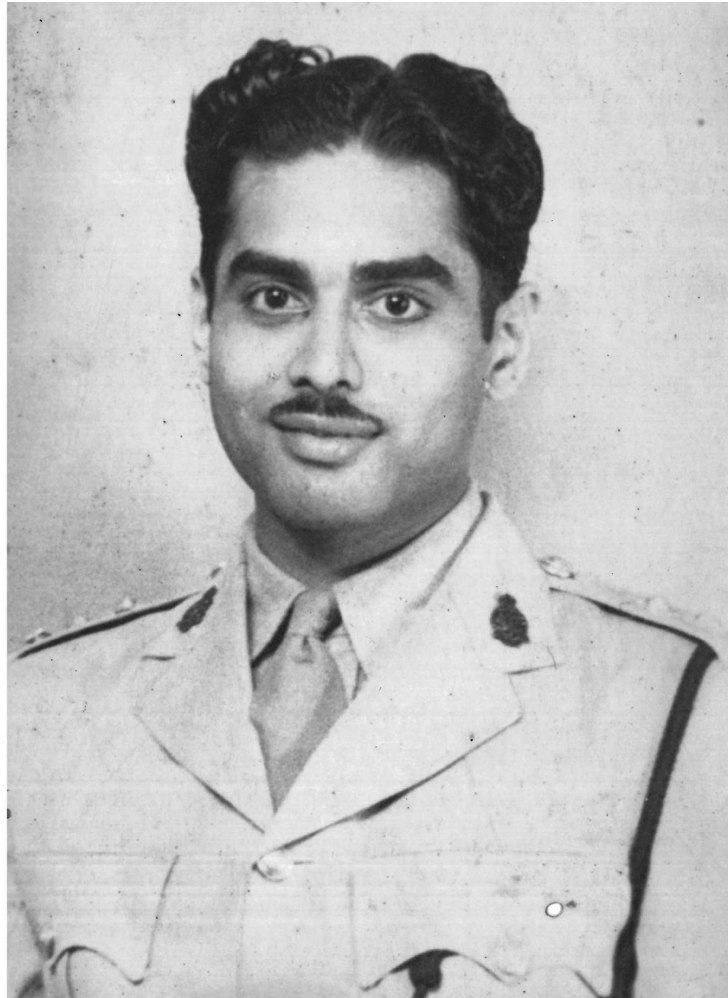
Death is a field from which no one returns. The second death is the farthest field of all. That was where I found Bobby, trying to cross.



Bobby and Nurgesh Mugaseth in Calicut



Bobby



Ganny



John Wright



Bobby and classmates at Guindy College



Nugs (second left) in Calicut
PART ONE

[Home](#)

Everybody's Friend

Calicut, 1936–39

It is said that the news of the world war reached Calicut along with the morning eggs. Perhaps that isn't true at all. Perhaps it's only true that the price of eggs was the first the Calicut Parsis saw of the costs of war; the first of many. Maybe they remembered what happened to the price of eggs, even years and years later, because they wanted to forget what happened to the boys.

If, however, it is true, then it must have begun with a commotion at the Marshall house, nearest the pier. The noise would have been swallowed by the rowdy waves of dawn, on a sea swollen by the late monsoon. If Bobby had been in Calicut, he would have been there in an instant. Rounding the corner to the beach road, he would have spotted the egg boy cowering behind his bicycle; then the Marshalls' cook, aggrieved, wiping his neck with the tail of his checked-cotton mundu; then Keki Marshall, hollering as though he meant to argue the sun back into its bed. He would bloody well not pay four annas a dozen. Not for eggs. Whatever conspiracy of grocers, hoarders and bastards thought they could double the price of eggs overnight, they were going to learn differently from him, war or no war.

But did someone say war?

The egg boy may have been told that rationing and shortages were expected, and eggs would be priced up as a precaution. But he couldn't have explained about the Panzers in Poland, the craven declaration from London, or the Viceroy in Delhi already committing India and Indians to the fray. Instead the egg boy fled. He wobbled his bicycle a safe distance from the gate and rested a moment, calming himself down. Ahead of him was a full street of Parsi homes. He knew precisely how many eggs they took. He knew he was going to catch hell at each doorstep. He couldn't imagine the hell he was going to leave there.

News, like almost everything, travelled slowly to Calicut, though it was the largest town in Malabar. The province lay in the narrow lap of the western coast, with its head leaned up against the high range of the Western Ghats, and its feet dipped in the Indian Ocean. The town was a minor entrepôt for timber, pepper and cashew coming down to the sea, and fish, petrol, shop goods, and the post going back up. Once it had mattered more. It had been the seat of the Zamorin of Malabar, whose rule extended south as far as Cochin, and it was here that Europe first trod on India's soil, when Vasco Da Gama scraped up on the beach at Kappad.

The centuries since had left Calicut to turn in its own slow eddy of trade.¹ Its provincialism concealed the scale of its wealth and commerce, and the rhythms of the town played like a drowsy accompanist behind the full-lunged score of the sea. Arab dhows rode at anchor, waiting to unload sacks of dried fruit from Yemen, then raised their sails and blew away like kites on the horizon's glittering string. Coconut trees crowded the shore, and further inland all was covered in layers of matted green. Pink lotus wilted in the temple pond, and in the courtyards stood elephants, black and mottled and as brilliantly daubed as the lingam within. At the market, Maplah wives in long-sleeved blouses and headscarves mingled with bare-breasted Ezhava women selling clams and jackfruit. The town had no garrison, no real port. So Calicut concerned nobody but the sahibs who owned plantations on the Wynaad Plateau, the many local castes and creeds, and the Parsis.

The Parsis: pale as scalps, mad as coots, noses like commas on the page. They were devoutly civilised, consummately lawful, and still abided by the spirit of the first contract they made in India,² as refugees shin-deep in the surf. *Parsi*: it meant from Persia, and the label never peeled away; the centuries only stiffened their pose, polite and helpful, as India's permanent houseguests.

They were friends to all, up to the King and down to the cobbler, and while they could be silly buggers, there was always a politesse, acceptance of the King's law, distaste for conversion or preaching aloud. They were sporting in business, and businesslike at sport. What Gurkhas were in

the Army, Parsis were in civilian life – the exemplary race, making the best of British command without any desire to usurp it. So they retained the state of public grace that best served private wealth. *Humata, hukhta, huvrastha*: Good thoughts, good words, good deeds.

Bombay was their metropole, Karachi too; further south they got a bit native. In Malabar the men all spoke Malayalam, could gallop it in their mouths, but the women were not exposed too much, for the sake of their complexion, and their accents remained. Women wore saris but the men wore shoes indoors. Like Anglo-Indians, they were attentive to cutlery; unlike Anglo-Indians, they were content – a creed of Oneness had chased them out of Persia, and a creed of Innumerable had received them, and they had prospered, most major of minorities. At the beginning of the new war they were as numerous as they would ever be, and that was only 100,000, a homeopathic dose for India: a thimble of sweet milk set down beside its vats of steaming oils and syrups.

Away from the pier, near the Heerjees' soda factory, was the house in which Bobby Mugaseth grew up with his three sisters. The pier was where Bobby staged one of his classic pranks: going down at dawn, when the boats knocked against it like toddy-drunks clutching at a rail, and dropping into the water for a swim, against his father's rules. Afterward he splashed up the beach to circle the Marshall house, tapping at the louvred windows until Bacha Auntie suffered him coming in to bathe.

Bobby, properly Godrej Khodadad Mugaseth, did believe himself a good Parsi. If his hand was easily turned to mischief, that was not necessarily un-Parsi-like – only unlike the paragons of Parsi merit who occupied the nearer branches of his family tree.

His grandfather Dhanjibhoy had arrived in Malabar in the 1850s, and quickly transformed from a sunken-cheeked boxwallah into the very Moses of Parsi society there. On the broad Beypore he had built Malabar's first steam-powered sawmill, turning its estuary into one of the busiest timber yards in the world, and himself into the patron of Calicut's industrial and civic life.

Bobby was relieved to have never known him, and to encounter him principally through the clipping books in which his obituaries were preserved. He was a 'sincere admirer of British rule and British institutions' (the *Statesman*) 'held in high esteem among a very wide circle of European friends and admirers'. He was 'the Grand Old Man of Calicut' (the *Spectator*). Yet the most captivating image of his grandfather was from the story, gleaned from these admiring reports, of a single spectacular failure.

The coffee-planters of Wynaad had long struggled with transport between plantation and coast. Dhanjibhoy had an inspired solution: a camel caravan. He purchased a herd from the Rann of Kutch, had it transported by boat and equipped in Calicut. But there his animals perished, unable to tolerate the tropical climate. Nothing could displace the picture in Bobby's mind of a silver-bearded prophet, brow shining with sweat, struggling up the slick incline to the promised plateau, followed by a train of damp, doomed camels.

Young eyes primed for slights, Bobby noticed that every obituary tipped its hat to Dhanjibhoy's older surviving son, his Uncle Kobad. None bothered to name the younger son, Bobby's father Khodadad. Kobad, a doctor, had both retained 'a large practice among the European community' and 'nobly maintained the traditional charity of his honoured and esteemed father'. He was in a big book called *Who's Who*, and was the sole Indian member of the Whites-only Malabar Club. Nothing persuaded the British to embrace an Indian as warmly as when the Indian could treat a baby that had squalled through the night.

Kobad served the Empire directly, too. The Great War had ended the year before Bobby was born. In Europe they said there'd be no war ever again, but in Asia it started at once: in the Arab states, in Afghanistan, and eventually in Malabar. The Maplah Muslims, many of them soldiers demobilised after 1918, rose in rebellion and took the districts around Calicut hostage. Thousands were killed, even British soldiers, before order was restored. Afterwards, hundreds of Maplahs were sent to penal settlements in the Andaman Islands. When an Indian delegation was sent to check on their welfare, Kobad was asked to join. The other delegates reported that the convicts were half-dead, but Kobad

authored a minority report, insisting that ‘the Maplah had proved himself to be an ideal colonist and pioneer’. For this – for recognising the humane intentions of the Maplah Colonisation Scheme – he was specially thanked by the Excellency-in-Council in Madras.

Britain was their good master. Dhanjibhoy’s early career had been testament to how the colonial economy rewarded enterprise, and his later life showed how the government rewarded loyalty. The family firm was given a monopoly contract to supply salt to all of Malabar. They had, even in a literal sense, accepted the salt of the Raj.³

They were happily out of the salt trade by 1930, when Gandhi rallied against the monopoly, leading his long march to lift a clump of slimy salt at Dandi.⁴ Inspired, the local Congressmen planned their own salt *satyagraha*, to start out on the Calicut beach and end up at Payyanur. But the police let them have it, right there in front of the Cosmopolitan Club. Bobby could hear the cries from his house, and drew a picture of the thin men being knocked one way and the other by the arcing *lathis* and the curl of the morning waves. Some left on stretchers.

School reopened, and while the Civil Disobedience Movement ran its course, eleven-year-old Bobby led a thrilling double life. The Congress was demanding *purna swaraj*, complete independence. He was swept up in the boys’ talk of boycott and bonfires, and their ardent horror at the convulsions in the furthest reaches of the country: revolt in Chittagong and massacre in Peshawar. At home there was only contempt for Gandhi and his eruptions; Bobby’s father was no less loyal to the British order than his father before him.

Khodadad had always been bright, but had achieved nothing to the hurricane lamp of his brother’s success. What made it worse was that when a certain kind of Calicut conversation came up about Uncle Kobad, it drifted into a vague and unnecessary reproach of Bobby’s father. Khodadad ran the firm, chased shipments at the Harbour Works, and managed the increase of a venture that was already big. He built up accounting successes that interested nobody. His disappointment did not move him to draw his family closer. Instead he pressed his affections like flowers between the pages of two books: his Avesta and his accounts ledger.

He began to assume a pious scrutiny of the community: a prerogative recognised mainly by himself. During Sunday service at the *dharamsala*, a building built by his father, Khodadad would clear his throat if the *dastur* misspoke a prayer, to embarrass him into repeating it. When Khodadad came down the street, kids scattered, abandoning their game. By the time they were teenagers, Khodadad only seemed to notice his children when he carried the *afzerghaniyu*, swinging it on its thin, squeaking chains and puffing sweet smoke into every room of the house. He’d present it to each child, and watch from behind a veil of smoke as each one added a piece of frankincense to earn its benediction.

While the country fought for freedom, it was his sisters who first showed Bobby what that might mean. There were four children – one every four years, like clockwork. Bobby was third; the only boy. The oldest, Subur, was eight when Bobby was born and featured in his life mainly as an exemplar of good schoolwork, which never struck him as much of an identity. Subur was a regular bluestocking, and her academic career was for a while the light of Khodadad’s eyes.

Nurges, the next sister, was clever too, but her nature was tempered by her strident and overbroad compassion. ‘Nugs’ was the one who sighed and worried about the ribbed creatures, man or horse, that pulled the family around Calicut on rickshaws and tongas. To the world she turned a bright and stubborn face, though on her own she was prayerful and nervous about the hard work it took to be a woman, and furthermore, a doctor, which was her intention. Khorshed – ‘Kosh’ – four years younger than Bobby, was spoilt and a baby. She had looted the family’s share of good looks, with an oval face and delicate nose, and without the wide mouth that made them look so Parsi. People said she looked like a movie star – like Ingrid Bergman, they would say later on. Bobby said that was ridiculous.

When Khodadad had a photographer come to take family portraits (always at home, never with backdrops, though it pleased him to have a mat printed with a lion at his feet), the girls behaved but

their faces gave much away. Subur wore the faint beginning of a smirk, Nugs alone would be smiling; Kosh had her cheek and her neck turned just so. Bobby's expression was the most elusive. His face was a good one, with large, somnolent eyes under dark brows, smooth cheeks, and a bundle of dark hair with the slightest widow's peak. He could easily make himself look both handsome and sincere, which was useful for a young man so capricious. But in every photograph his expression was slightly translucent, as if he meant to defy the picture, or anyone looking at it, to record what he really was.

The house belonged to the women. Every room was a warehouse of lace and muslin, light *sadras* and blouse pieces and petticoats, nighties and Chinese borders and vials of rose water. It was the girls who paid the real price of Khodadad's piety, however. Trapped at home, confined for five or six days each month to a dim room that held nothing but an iron bedstead, and kept from going to the cinema – even when the Crown and Coronation showed pictures that would be the summer's sole conversation.

Their freedom movement began with Subur, who won a scholarship to Oxford in 1932, before Khodadad knew women could even go to Oxford. Yet off she went, past the horizon of his control, to dilate on the poetry of the contemporaries of Alexander Pope. For four years she was reduced to a monthly telegram that reported her successes in exams and Society. Then Subur cabled from Marseilles, to say she was about to board the HMS *Strathaird* and come home. She was not returning alone, but with a man she planned to marry: Gopalaswami Parthasarathi. The Iyengar name hit Khodadad like a lead weight, and left the rest of the boy's identity (... a double blue at Wadham, son of a distinguished civil servant ...) barely ringing in his ears.

It was betrayal. The pure blood in their veins had been poured carefully from the cup of one generation into the cup of the next through centuries, without admitting a drop of pollution. Subur was allowing a Hindu's spit in it. A Parsi woman who married a non-Parsi lost her religion and her community. She could never enter a fire temple, not even for her parents' last rites. That Khodadad, whose distinction in Calicut was his religious excellence, had to watch his favourite daughter stray from the faith was vandalism – not only of her soul but of his. A carriage came to the gate one evening and Subur was in it. Her parents had not seen her in four years, and now they would not. Khodadad sat by the door, curled and tense and hard as a scorpion to see that she wasn't let in. Out front, Nugs and Subur hugged each other's heads through the carriage window and sobbed.

Those were hot months, mingling too many tears in the sweat of the coastal summer. Bobby watched from the sidelines, ready to run away into the street and ripen his Malayalam in the sun. The house weighed less heavily on him, except that he was the only boy. He must inherit the town's most eminent trading concern, to manage in his turn. Sons turn into their fathers, Bobby knew, but an end so inevitable could only be treated as impossible: same as death. The picture playing on the screen in Bobby's head was different. Its action would not be caught in the stifling funnel of the southern coasts, between that seaward gate of the Calicut customs office and the cargo bay of the Madras docks. His story would take him further, though he could not yet imagine how far.

He went hunting with the Heerjee boys and daydreamed down his barrel. Out on the estuary were the only decent summer game – fat, mean muggers lying still and inconspicuous by the water's edge, looking like sunbaked cowpats unless one had its jaws open. As long as they were sunbathing, the advantage was yours. Once the crocodiles entered the water, it was theirs. You had to get a mugger at the base of its neck, where the scales weren't armour-hard. If you missed, they were in the water in an instant. They could overturn a boat and slide a child down their throats as if it were a prawn. Or so he'd been told, when he was a child. In the bellies of the oldest muggers there was royal treasure, silver nose-rings and anklets, intact long after the princesses who wore them had been digested.

The moss-mirror surface of the Beypore gave him no foreboding of what lay ahead; bridges on the Ganga, pontoons on the Euphrates or the ferry across the boiling waters of the Manipur. The decade already hastened towards war, but it was someone else's war, very far away. Bobby never imagined, any more than the egg boy, how the war would rise up around India, or how it would divide

the country, divide the army that enlisted him, and even divide Bobby against himself. Or that he, his sisters and new-found brothers, his countrymen and men from all over the Empire, would be drawn out onto roads that led very far from home, and did not all lead back.

If he had known, he might not have been in such a hurry to leave. But nothing was changing yet in Calicut. Every year on his birthday, his family bathed him in milk and rose petals. Every year he protested, letting only his mother Tehmina do it, and every year his sisters would break in, shrieking, to fling the petals at him before he even had his pants on. In his teens, his long face revealed a strong jawline, to balance the effect of the sweet mouth and eyes. As soon as he could, he wore the sharp moustache that was in fashion, like Errol Flynn's – two sabres crossed on his lip. He was seventeen. It was time to get moving.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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