"Where ignorant armies clash by night" and the Sikh Rebellion: A Contemporary Source for Matthew Arnold's Night-Battle Imagery

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Brief Article

“Where ignorant armies clash by night” and the Sikh Rebellion: A Contemporary Source for Matthew Arnold’s Night-Battle Imagery.

Walter H. Kokernot

The source for the night-battle imagery that concludes Matthew Arnold’s “Dover Beach”—“And we are here as on a darkling plain / Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight, / Where ignorant armies clash by night” (ll. 35-38)—is almost unanimously thought to be a passage from Thucydides’ account of the night battle of Epipolae:

By this time the Athenians were getting into a state of so great confusion and perplexity that it has not been easy to learn from either side just how the several events occurred. In the daytime things are clearer, of course, yet even so those who are present do not know everything that happens, but each man barely knows what happens near himself; but in a battle by night . . . how could anyone know anything clearly? For though there was a bright moon, they could only see one another, as it is natural to do in moonlight—seeing before them the vision of a person but mistrusting their recognition of their own friends. . . . For the front lines [of the Athenians] were already all in confusion . . . and the two sides were difficult to distinguish. . . . [The] Athenians were trying to find their own comrades, and regarded as hostile whatever came from the opposite direction, even though it might be a party of friends belonging to the troops already in flight, and as they were constantly calling out the demand for the watchword, the only means they had of distinguishing friend from foe, they . . . caused much confusion in their own ranks. . . . And so finally, when once they had been thrown into confusion, coming into collision with their own comrades in many different parts of the army, friends with friends and citizens with fellow-citizens, they not only became panic-stricken but came to blows with one another and were with difficulty separated. 1

What lends special weight to this surmise is the fact that Arnold’s father, Dr. Thomas Arnold, translated Thucydides and, as Tinker and Lowry note in
their commentary on Arnold’s poetry, “Thucydides was of course one of Dr. Thomas Arnold’s favourite authors, and was studied in the fifth and sixth forms at Rugby. There is evidence that the passage about the ‘night-battle’ was familiar coin among Rugbeians.”

The passage—which Tinker and Lowry say was probably the “most important sentence for Arnold” (p. 175)—reads as follows in Dr. Arnold’s translation: “They saw one another as men naturally would by moonlight; that is, to see before them the form of the object, but to mistrust their knowing who was friend and who was foe.”

However, while noting that it is “almost beyond dispute” that this account of the battle of Epipolae is the “ultimate source,” Paul Turner argues that there may be “grounds, perhaps, for believing that the source was not drawn upon by Matthew Arnold directly,” but that he came to it via The Bothie of Tober-na-Vuolich, a poem by his friend and fellow Rugbeian, Arthur Hugh Clough. The Bothie was written in September 1848 and published in November 1848 (at which time, Turner notes, Arnold read it), while the last lines of “Dover Beach,” were written “at the end of 1848, or the beginning of 1849.” The relevant portion of Clough’s poem reads:

Where does Circumstance end, and Providence, where begins it?  
What are we to resist, and what are we to be friends with?  
If there is battle, ’tis battle by night: I stand in the darkness  
Here in the mêlée of men, Ionian and Dorian on both sides,  
Signal and password known; which is friend and which is foe man?  
(IX, 49-53)

The similarity between these lines and the passage from Thucydides is quite obvious and Turner says: “The question now arises, whether Arnold struck independently upon the same idea, or owed it, in any sense to his reading of Clough’s poem” (p. 174).

Though any attempt to pin down a source for an author’s inspiration is, of course, speculative, I want to suggest a new candidate. As a number of details show this new candidate is, in tandem with Thucydides, a likely source for Arnold’s night-battle image—probably a direct one. More importantly, regardless of whether or not Arnold had it in mind, the chances are good that the mid-nineteenth-century reader of “Dover Beach” would have thought of it, thus influencing such a reader’s perception of the poem.

The new candidate is a pair of battles that took place during the First Sikh War that lasted from December 1845 to February 1846: the battle of Moodkee and the battle of Ferozeshah. Though little remembered today, the dramatic news of the Sikh war dominated English newspapers and magazines of the time, gripping readers not only because the accounts of the battles were dramatic and stirring but because, for a few tense weeks, the fate of England’s empire in India seemed to hang in the balance.
The central facts of the battles are these: On December 18, 1845, a force of about 10,000 Sikhs gathered near the village of Moodkee after the British had massed troops on the border between British and Sikh territory. On December 19, the Sikhs, commencing their rebellion with an artillery barrage, crossed the Sutlej River and advanced on the British. The battle raged late into the night, at which point, as the modern historian, Byron Farwell, puts it:

There was considerable confusion on the battle field as soldiers groped their way about in the dark and the dust in the jhow jungle. The men were exhausted and nervous from the excitement, tension and bloody fighting. Soldiers in such a condition and in such circumstances—particularly inexperienced soldiers, as most of these were—tend to shoot each other in the dark, and this happened. The soldiers nicknamed this battle ‘Midnight Moodkee.’ Some men had lost their units and many regiments did not know where they were and had lost contact with other regiments.6

Less than two days after this, late in the afternoon on December 21, the Sikhs and British met again at Ferozeshah. This battle was not only, as Farwell (and many others) observe, “the most savage battle in Anglo-Indian history,” but was also, like “Midnight Moodkhee,” fought in extraordinarily confusing circumstances: “Brigades and regiments, Indians and Englishmen, became confused and lost in the gathering darkness” (p. 42). The darkness and chaos, in fact, made it impossible for the British commanders, General Sir Hugh Gough and General Sir Henry Hardinge, to know who had prevailed in the battle until dawn’s light revealed that the British had overcome the Sikhs, though the rebellion was not fully quashed until the battle of Sabroan on February 10, 1846 (p. 43).

Farwell cites a British soldier’s diary entry for the night battle at Ferozeshah:

No one can imagine the dreadful uncertainty. A burning camp on one side of the village, mines and ammunition wagons exploding in every direction, the loud orders to extinguish the fires as the Sepoys lighted them, the volleys given should the Sikhs venture too near, the booming of the monster gun, the incessant firing of the smaller one, the continual whistling noise of the shell, grape and round shot, the bugles sounding, the drums beating, and the yelling of the enemy, together with the intense thirst, fatigue, and cold, and not knowing whether the rest of the army were the conquerors or the conquered—all contributed to make this night awful in the extreme. (p. 42).
Indeed it was a dreadful night. As Farwell writes, the British soldiers were desperately thirsty (the Sikhs having “fouled the wells with gunpowder and corpses”) and a “sharp cold wind” blew over the plain, “chilling the untended wounded who lay where they had fallen and cried out in vain for water and blankets” (p. 42).

As brief as these descriptions are, the parallels to the account of Epipolae are clear, so clear, in fact, that much of what Tinker and Lowry say about the Thucydides passage could well be applied to them: “Here are to be found all the details used by Arnold: a night attack, fought upon a plain at the top of a cliff, in the moonlight, so that soldiers could not distinguish between friend and foe, with the resulting flight of certain Athenian troops, and various ‘alarms,’ watchwords, and battle-crics shouted aloud to the increasing confusion of all” (p. 175).

Accounts in the media of the day make the parallels even stronger. For example, the letter of a seventeen-year-old cavalry soldier (printed in the Illustrated London News three months after the fighting) describes the poor visibility and confusion as to the whereabouts of the enemy and one’s comrades:

I must tell you something of my father, and the narrow escape he had that evening. My dad, with his regiment, lost sight of the brigade soon after we made the move round the enemy’s flank. The dust and smoke were so great you could not see your hand before you. . . . When my governor found himself all alone with his regiment, he was rather puzzled what to do; but rather than stand still, he moved on with his regiment towards some dust he saw in the distance, not knowing whether it was the enemy or ourselves that was kicking it up, and caring very little which but on he went. After ten minutes cantering, he was astonished to hear his men cheering, and asked why they did so! They said they saw the Sikhs ahead.7

Similarly, Sir Hugh Gough, the Commander-in-Chief of the Army in India, describes the confusion on the battle field, writing to the Governor-General in India (Sir Henry Hardinge) a day after the fighting:

The attack of the infantry now commenced. . . . Night only saved them from worse disaster, for this stout conflict was maintained during an hour and a half of dim starlight, amidst a cloud of dust from the sandy plain, which yet more obscured every object. 8

A note from a cavalry soldier to his parents likewise touches on the chaotic nature of the battles. Describing the initial charge of the British at Moodkee he writes:
The ground we charged over was bad for cavalry. It had been ploughed, and was covered with thick high bushes, which completely separated our regiment into small parties. We had no infantry with us at this time, and a regular hand-to-hand conflict took place between us. I had my cap cut off by a Sikh, but he was immediately cut down, and I was thankful I did not lose my head. We had charged so far that we were completely surrounded by them, and they were firing upon us in all directions.

He then goes on to describe Ferozeshah and the aftermath (as dawn revealed it):

Away we went, and again charged them right up to their canons’ mouths. They poured a tremendous shower of grape into us, but we did not let them load a second time, but cut them down; the dust and smoke were so thick that the horses did not see the trench, and a number of our poor fellows fell there, and were ridden over by their comrades. . . . About 7 o’clock it was quite dark, and the regiments that were most cut up retired from the field; but a continual firing was kept up the whole night, and as soon as day broke we were at it again. As we rode over the field, it presented a shocking sight. There were a number of poor fellows with their limbs shattered, exposed to the burning sun all day and the cold at night; horses, camels, and bullocks lying in all directions; broken swords, muskets, and all sorts of arms lying strewn around.

And a story in a supplement to the Sunday Times of March 1, 1846, quotes the letter of a “young friend” who says: “As for the manoeuvres that were performed in the conduct of the battle, I know nothing and shall not, I daresay, till I see them detailed in the newspapers; but to my apprehension, it was all confusion from beginning to end.”

Such descriptions of the fighting, then, do accord quite well with Thucydides’ account of Epipolae: in both battles, the fighting took place on a plain, darkness made the enemy difficult to distinguish and soldiers struck at the enemy almost at random, much of the struggle was hand-to-hand combat, and as the battle progressed, the general confusion intensified. But is this enough to draw a link to Arnold and “Dover Beach”?

Before considering that question, one must ask if Arnold would even have taken much notice of these stories from India. It is, of course, impossible to be certain, but it is hard to imagine Arnold, or almost any British citizen, not being seized by the stories coming out of India. Certainly, at least, we do know that at around this time Arnold was much addicted to news coverage;
we see him, in a September 23, 1849 letter to Clough upbraiding himself for being too caught up in current events: “When I come to town, I tell you beforehand I will have a real effort at managing myself as to newspapers & the talk of the day.”

At any rate, news of the Sikh invasion first reached England about a month after the event and, by mid-February of 1846, the papers and magazines were filled with dramatic accounts of the battles, *The Times* of London, for example, in a three month period after news of the battle reached British shores, containing almost every day several long stories about the events, and a supplement to the March 1, 1846 *Sunday Times* filling eight full pages (it was loudly titled “War in India. Glorious Victory of the British Troops”; a similar supplement appeared in the April 5 *Sunday Times*).

These accounts were often sensational and, without doubt, very much on the minds of the British populace as, in fact, a story in the *Dublin University Magazine* of May 1847 makes clear. Describing the rebellion, the magazine notes that “the events which followed [the Sikh crossing of the Sutlej] are known to all; and the triumphs of Moodkee, Feerozsheeha, Allewal, and Sabraon, achieved under circumstances of the greatest difficulty, form one of the most stirring, affecting, and brilliant chapters in all the annals of our wars.” And the Earl of Ripon, in a meeting of Parliament, echoes that thought when (as recorded in the *Times*), he says: “I shall not trouble you by entering on any detailed account of that which has already been so incomparably described, and which must still live vividly in the memory of all who have read the despatches.”

The stories were not merely stirring and vivid to the memory; they were also of huge importance and vital interest to the British. As the Prime Minister, Robert Peel, said (as recorded in the March 3, 1846 *Times*) in an address to Parliament:

I believe the night of the 21st of December was one of the most memorable nights in the military history of this country. . . . For those who have unfortunately fallen, their lives will not have been sacrificed in vain (cheers); they will constitute one of the greatest defences of this country.

But it is the earlier-cited letter in the *Illustrated London News*—from the seventeen-year-old cavalry soldier—that gives us the best sense of both the importance and the drama of the moment when, describing the battle of Ferozeshah, he writes:

Now, then, uncle, I must hurry over the account of the next action, which lasted twenty-four hours—the Waterloo of India. . . . We had scarcely gone a mile when the blackguards came down on us again.
That was the critical moment; the fate of India was at stake; it was a regular case of fight or die, and the former we did in style. (p. 189)

It is difficult to imagine such stirring events—covered in the media so heavily, and with such excitement and enthusiasm—not making an impression on Arnold, and so one might quite plausibly suspect that the details of the fighting in India (perhaps in tandem with the memory of Thucydides) inspired Arnold's imagery in "Dover Beach."

However, a much plainer, much more direct connection moves us from plausibility to probability. In its May, 1846 edition, Fraser's Magazine for Town and Country printed a lengthy article on the events in India: "The Sikhs and the Late Campaign." The article details what led up to the conflict, and describes the battle of Moodkee in much the same way other publications had described it, but its portrayal of the battle of Ferozeshah provides us the most striking parallel yet to Thucydides:

Meanwhile the struggle went on with unabated fury in front. The second line of infantry on the right had closed up to the support of the first, and the whole were pressing forward with the bayonet, when the sun went down, and in a few minutes afterwards, the darkness of an Oriental night closed over them. What a night was that! By dint of a prowess never surpassed, rarely equalled, these resolute soldiers had forced their way within the second line; and were now so completely mixed with the enemy, that no man could tell whether the form which stood next to his own was that of a friend or a foe.  

As striking as this parallel is—observe that the final clause almost copies Dr. Arnold's translation word-for-word—one might counter that with this article, the connection to Arnold and Thucydides becomes only more plausible, not probable.

But we move from plausibility straight to probability when we see the title of the article immediately preceding it: "Arnold's Lectures on Modern History." Needless to say, it would be odd if Arnold had not read this article about his father; one can, therefore, say, with great confidence that Arnold would at least have been reading in the vicinity of the essay on the Sikh war (it begins on page 606; the article about his father ends on page 605). And given the intense public interest in the story and Arnold's own (admitted) interest in current events, it seems quite likely that Arnold would have turned to the next page and read the account of the fighting, nor would he have failed to observe the similarity in wording between the essayist's description of the fighting and his father's translation. It was, after all, "familiar coin" to any Rugbeian.

It becomes improbable, then, that Arnold was, as Turner suspects,
relying solely on Clough’s use of the image in The Bothie of Tober-na-Voalich (for the simple reason that Clough wrote his poem in September of 1848, some two-and-a-half years after Arnold would have encountered the image in Fraser’s). It is equally possible that Arnold’s mind was drawn back to India at this time—and the accounts of the battles that so resemble Thucydides—because it was in November 1848 that the Second Sikh War broke out.

It is possible, too (even probable, given the similarity of the phrasing) that Clough also saw the image in the Fraser’s article and relied on it for his poem, but who chanced on it first—Arnold or Clough—is, of course, impossible to determine and not terribly important. The really significant thing is that the article shows us that Arnold’s image did not likely originate with Clough and, as I speculate, had a broader significance than would a very old reference to an ancient historian. The Fraser’s article, at any rate, answers the objection that Buckner B. Trawick raises when he writes that “it would be rather strangely coincidental for both Arnold and Clough to draw on Thucydides for the same figure within two years of each other . . . The evidence . . . indicates that Arnold was borrowing from Clough (either inadvertently or intentionally) instead of from Thucydides.”

The probability that Arnold drew on the conflict with the Sikhs matches up nicely, however, with one of Turner’s key points. Turner argues that the best evidence for a connection between Clough’s poem and “Dover Beach” is that Arnold seems to be commenting on the optimism he saw in The Bothie. He speculates that Arnold “took for his starting point a memory shared with Clough—a schoolboy memory of a passage in Thucydides. He then set to work on the fundamental theme of the Bothie-love, life, happiness, and the world—and gave it a treatment which seemed to him more consistent with reality” (p. 178).

A different scenario (though with much the same result) now seems more likely. That is, Arnold’s “starting point” would seem not to be a “schoolboy memory” but the media accounts of the battles in India coupled with the essay in Fraser’s, the latter reading (at least) certainly not failing to remind him of his father’s translation of Thucydides. He would certainly have also noted the intense (at times jingoistic) pride, certainty, and optimism of the media stories (the absolute conviction, in fact, that the battles had ended once and for all the trouble with the Sikhs). Sir Robert Peel, for example, in the Times of April 3, 1846, read a dispatch from Sir Hugh Gough, who wrote: “Never, in the page of military history, has the hand of an all-wise Being, been so signally manifested; to Him, therefore, be the glory; we, as his instruments, feel the pride.” This was followed, the Time’s reporter notes, by “Loud cheers.” The Times of March 3, 1846 (p. 3) provides another (quite typical example) when it records the conclusion of one of Peel’s speeches before Parliament:
Let us, without divisions or differences of politics and party, all concur in bearing testimony to these brilliant services, so worthy of the name of England. (Cheers) My own opinion is, there never was a greater or more happy instance of extreme forbearance, of greater justice, of firm resistance of all temptation. There never was a greater combination of all these high qualities with the highest degree of fortitude and the most brilliant display of military talent, in the defence of the British territory. (Cheers). For those who have unfortunately fallen their lives will not have been sacrificed in vain (cheers); they will constitute one of the greatest defences of this county; when we see what can be effected by discipline and valour like that manifested on the 18th, 21st, and 22d of December last, we feel increased confidence that in a just cause this country must be victorious; the memory of the men who have now fallen through their devotion to their duty, will long survive, to animate the British army by their example—to make us proud of that name which we bear in common with them—and to animate us, if we should ever be called on for similar exertions, to equal devotion, equal perseverance, and equal courage in the cause of a great country. (The right hon. gentleman was loudly cheered, on resuming his seat, from both sides of the house.)

Arnold, witnessing a new Sikh war breaking out just two years later, must have sensed a keen irony, an irony heightened by Fraser’s using an image that, as Tinker and Lowry note, suggested to him the question, “Who could be certain of anything?” (p. 176). And this irony, coupled perhaps with Clough’s use of the image in his poem, may well have reinvigorated the image in his mind, and led him, as Turner says, to treat the theme of the Bothie with more realism.

In the end, however, no-one can say for certain how “Dover Beach” was composed, but even if Arnold somehow did not see the essay in Fraser’s, even if he had not been thinking of the conflict in India when he wrote “Dover Beach,” the connection to the Sikh wars would have been clear to many (if not most) of the readers of the poem—especially had it been published soon after it was composed (it did not appear in print till 1867).17 In other words, when most readers, even most educated readers, read that “we are here as on a darkling plain / Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight,” and, particularly, “Where ignorant armies clash by night,” they probably would have missed the parallel to Epipolae. But surely a great many of the poem’s readers (again, had it been published soon after its composition) would have immediately thought of the accounts of the battles about which they had just been reading. Arnold’s image, then, becomes even more powerful, far more
vivid, no longer just an erudite, even pedantic reference to an obscure classical source, but one that applies directly and dramatically to its time.

Notes


10 "General Summary," *Sunday Times* (London), March 1, 1846, p. 6, supplement.


17 Readers have long speculated why Arnold delayed publication of the poem. Perhaps the connection to the battles of the First Sikh War provide another explanation. Arnold's bleak use of the image may have contrasted too sharply with the unfailing certainty of the stories about the war. Another possibility (though it would cut against the argument of this article) is that Arnold wanted to use the image but did not want it to be too closely linked in his reader's mind with a modern event.