

# The Rajah From Tipperary

by [Geoffrey Clarfield](#) (January 2023)



*Fort St George, Madras, George Lambert and Samuel Scott, 1731*

**He was born on a farm** in Tipperary Ireland, sometime in the mid 1700s. His childhood was mired in poverty. He could neither read nor write. Yet by the time he was forty he spoke English, Hindi and Persian fluently. He drilled his Indian soldiers in his native Irish Gaelic language so that he could keep his military tactics secret. He was known as a man of his word when the time and place he lived in such behaviour was rare, among both “Europeans” and “Indians”. He meant what he said and said what he meant.

Either he ran away to sea as a young lad or, was press ganged into his Royal Majesty’s fleet at a young age. In Madras he deserted and became a soldier of fortune, first joining Indian rebels and then serving the Nizam of Hyderabad.

There he learnt the formal arts of war from the many British and European mercenaries who were fighting for the plethora of Hindu and Muslim princes and chieftains (as well as the French and the near independent entity of the British East India Company). These rulers, while often pledging allegiance to the Mughal Sultan in Delhi, were more and more, behaving as independent Sultans and Rajahs. They fought their neighbours. They expanded and contracted their kingdoms according to the winds of war, which were blowing constantly across the dusty plains, deserts and tropical forests of the Indian sub continent.

George Thomas was to become a brilliant and brave soldier, a tactician, a leader of men who were loyal to him as they were to no other mercenary or prince at the time, in an era when a follower's life was worth less than his Rajah or Sultan. Instead, Thomas, repeatedly, treated the lives of his soldiers and families as equal to that of his own. In doing so, he created loyalties which were unusual if nonexistent, during this chaotic period between the fall of the Moghuls and the triumph of the British Empire in India.

Thomas was loquacious, charming, strong, diplomatic and temperamental. He was prone to binge drinking. In India he kept a bevy of lascivious dancing girls that travelled with his camp. He was handsome, licentious, as were most mercenaries of the time, yet he also gained a wife (whom he married in India) and four children whom he supported there to his dying day.

Midway in his career he became the lover and military right-hand man of a powerful Indian Muslim Sultana. She betrayed him time and time again and yet repeatedly, he would save her and her kingdom from personal or political disaster. Ultimately, she converted to Christianity, endowed churches and hoped for forgiveness in the Catholic afterlife for her multiple treacheries during her own here on earth.

Lamenting that India was congenitally unstable and that there was no security in working for any Indian prince or princess, Thomas knew that any one of them might betray him at the drop of a hat. He had also aroused the destructive envy of other European mercenaries as he was the best of the lot.

And so, in his despair he set out to create his own kingdom in what is today Haryana, a territory north of Rajasthan and south of Kashmir. For a few short years, he was successful and independent, the lord of his own realm but in the end he was defeated by a French general and overwhelming military odds. Both during and after his death, George Thomas was known as the Rajah from Tipperary. This is his story.

## **Growing Up in Ireland**

We know very little about the first twenty years of George Thomas's life. He was born in Roscrea County, Tipperary in 1756 to a Gaelic speaking family. He grew up on the family farm and was no stranger to the hard life of the agricultural round. He was raised a Catholic during the time of the Penal Laws when the British made being a Catholic a social and economic liability.

The Penal Laws were a series of unjust statutes passed by the British parliament to make life unbearable for Catholic Irishmen. They included the Education Act of 1695, the Banishment Act of 1697, the Registration Act of 1704, the Popery Acts of 1704 and 1709 and the Disenfranchising Act of 1728. The idea was through the use of carrot and stick (mostly stick) to motivate Gaelic, Catholic Irish men and women, rich and poor, to adopt English, joined the Anglican church and give up notions of Irish distinctiveness.

Edmund Burke, the great 18th century Irish politician and man of letters called these laws, *"a machine of wise and elaborate contrivance, as well fitted for the oppression, impoverishment*

*and degradation of a people, and the debasement in them of human nature itself, as ever proceeded from the perverted ingenuity of man."*

Burke feared that the laws would cause the Irish to revolt, which they did with French assistance in 1798. By that time Thomas' career in India was well advanced.

George's father had been a great equestrian in his day and this may explain George's later feats as a cavalryman in India. When his father died, his mother remarried. George did not abide by his stepfather and so, he left the farm. He went to the Irish port of Yougall and worked back breaking labour, loading and unloading grain for the ships of His Majesty's Navy. He probably learnt to speak rudimentary English there.

Hearing tales of adventure abroad from sailors on leave, he either joined the navy or, was forcibly enlisted by what were then called "press gangs". At the age of 22 in about 1778 he found himself on board a ship bound for the Indian Port of Madras (Fort St. George) where he planned to desert at the first opportunity.

## **India-Bound**

Between 1774 and 1780 one quarter of enlisted sailors deserted the Royal Navy.

Discipline was fierce, often arbitrary and unjust. If, for whatever reason, one sailor killed another he would be tied to the dead body and cast into the sea with it. There were no polite distinctions between manslaughter or murder. If you drew a knife on a fellow sailor and drew blood, your hand would be cut off. Anyone convicted of theft on board would be tarred and feathered.

Then there were the rations, one pound salt pork or two pounds

beef on alternate days, one pound of biscuit and one gallon of beer each day and a weekly issue of oatmeal, butter and cheese. And finally, the rum ration; a half pint at noon and a half pint at six in the evening. If after this you could not hold your liquor and showed signs of drunkenness, you were flogged.

On a British man of war many of the sailors were allowed to keep their wives with them and when they reached ports the ships commander allowed the local prostitutes on board for what one author called a “bacchanalia” for the bachelors on board.

In those days the voyage to Madras could take six to nine months. During that time Thomas learnt skills: discipline, staying out of trouble, becoming a sailor and significantly, gunnery as well as the management of stores, two skills that would stand him in good stead during his career as bandit and mercenary. It is possible that his ship was engaged in battles at sea.

In the Royal Navy being Irish did not help Thomas no doubt experienced the inevitable discrimination of Irish sailors by the English. Yet he survived the voyage, learnt to be a sailor and when approaching Madras was ready to make his break.

## **Madras 1780, Depending on Your Perspective**

Recently an etching of the English Fort in Madras during the year when Thomas arrived has been sold on auction:



The artwork is described in the catalogue in the following words:

Madras was the Company's first fortified settlement in India; the construction of Fort St George began in 1640 and continued on and off for another 150 years. It houses all the administrative and military necessities, as well as St Mary's church (the oldest Anglican church in India), finished in 1680. The Old College, the equivalent of the Writers' Building in Calcutta, was one of the Company's few eighteenth-century buildings in the gothic style, and still stands' (Wild, *The East India Company*, p.52). This view of the fort is etched after a line engraving held in the British Library by Jan van Ryne (1712-1760) entitled *Fort of St. George on the Coromandel Coast, Madras, belonging to the East India Company of England*, c.1750. The scene appears in reverse.

And this is where Thomas arrived. No doubt beside this edifice of British authority and urban planning there was the local city, with its mosques, Hindu temples, bazaars and ancient Jewish and Armenian trading communities. The English although all powerful, were a minority, surrounded by protective walls.

## **An Embarrassment of Choices**

Let us stop for a moment and briefly describe the Indian political world of 1780 which Thomas had just entered.

India had been one of the great agrarian civilizations of the ancient world with its own religions; Hinduism, Jainism and Buddhism. It had cities with priests, temples, traders, literate bureaucrats and kings, called Rajahs. Sometimes one Rajah would cobble other rulers together through conquest and negotiation to form an almost sub continental empire, as was the case of the Buddhist Emperor Chandra Gupta, whose forces probably did battle with those of Alexander the Great.

Then in the 12th century, Persian speaking Muslim Turks from Central Asia flowed over the Khyber Pass into the Indo Gangetic plain and founded the Sultanate of Delhi. Over time, adventurers and the sons of Delhi based Sultans then moved farther east and established their own Sultanates, for example in Bengal. These Sultanates and the surviving Hindu Kingdoms of the south battled it out on and off again for supremacy.

But what made these “wars” uniquely Indian, was the idea that ruling elites were fighting to be at the top of a hierarchy of rulers and states. If one Prince surrendered to another, whether Hindu or Muslim, it often meant that he simply became the feudal like dependant of the conquering side until things changed. Likewise, the soldiers who fought the battles of these princes were mostly farmers seeking employment during

the non farming season. They would often desert or go over the winning side on a battle-by-battle basis. (Whoever paid was good). And then came the Moghuls.

These Persian speaking Central Asians were Muslim descendants of Genghis Khan. Under the emperors, Babur, Akbar, Humayun, Shah Jahan and Aurangzeb they established a hereditary dynasty that conquered and ruled almost all of India. It is easy to stereotype the Moghuls as "oriental despots" or as religiously bigoted Muslims, solely intent on holy war or Jihad. The Moghul empire at its height was wealthier and more religiously and socially tolerant than any kingdom in Europe at the time. For example, Emperor Akbar was interested in all religious and tolerated the Jews, Hindus, Jains, Zoroastrians and Christians who were living in his empire at the time:

Professor Walter Fischel, one of the modern European pioneers of Indian historiography, wrote the following:

*Among the various religious groups who met at Akbar's court, in his " 'Ibadat-Khana", hall of worship (1578), the Persian court historian Abu'l-Fazl mentions not only "Sufis, Sunnis, Shi'as, Brahmans, Sabbeans, Zoroastrians, Christians," but also explicitly, Jews.'*<sup>6</sup> *The "House of Wisdom" "shone re-splendent with the light of holy minds—Sufis, doctors, preachers, Jains, Christians, and Jews." That Jews participated in this "parliament of religion" which was set up by Akbar is furthermore attested by the Jesuit father and traveller, A. Monserrate, who gives a description of the discussion in which Jews also actively took part. An even more detailed account of such disputations with Jews participating can be derived from the famous Persian book on comparative religions called "Dabistan", which mirrors many of the events of Akbar's time.*

With the death of Emperor Aurangzeb the political power that once radiated out of Delhi outwards to the borderlands of the empire, was reversed and princes, many of them Hindu, although swearing allegiance to the Sultan in Delhi, once again carved out their own semi independent kingdoms.

All of this was complicated by the growing military might of the British East India Company which having started out in Bengal, more and more, behaved like a state unto itself and began to conquer India starting in the east and then moving south and west. Not to be outdone, the French established their own presence, both trading and military on the coast of Southern India, not far from Madras in Pondicherry. Both the French and English fought major wars on the subcontinent in the 1700s and both schemed with and against local princes and Rajahs.

As social conditions and security in India declined, many ethnic groups took up banditry as more lucrative than farming, trading or mercenary work, with many of them opting in and out of mercenary work for local princes, the French or the English. With proper introductions Thomas could have joined any of them, for the British even allowed deserting soldiers and sailors to sign up after they had gone AWOL.

Had Thomas got caught deserting the British when he disembarked in Madras, he could have been flogged by the navy within an inch of his life. Instead, he did what so many reasonable and pragmatic Irishmen do when abroad, he looked for a local Irish pub in Madras and found it.

The pub was one of the many grog shops as they were called in those days and run by a fellow Irishman from Tipperary named Kelly who had fought for the British in India. He knew the score and the lay of the land. Thomas risked his life and told Kelly of his plan to desert and become a freebooter. We

do not know how it happened, but Kelly must have hooked him up with a group of what he perceived of as rebellious tribal raiders called the Polygars. Soon after, Thomas was quit of Madras and riding horseback with his new found Indian land buccaneers. He was finally free.

## **Revolts and Rebels: Who Were the Polygars?**

The Polygars were a loose affiliation of small landowners, mercenaries and equestrian bandits whose loyalty shifted with the wind. At times they were armed and supported by the British East India company, at other times they received French support. Still at other times they were independent brigands, looting, burning villages, raping and stealing from the villages in their Southern Indian territory.

The last thing they believed in was external authority so, we can understand that if the Polygars were aware that the French, the British and bigger Rajahs and Sultans were engaging the talents of European mercenaries, they too would only benefit by accepting one to join them.

Thomas had nothing to lose and everything to gain by joining them as he was a gifted man on horseback.

Having received his “basic training” in the British navy no doubt Thomas soon learnt the art of the sword and gun and the techniques of bravely fighting hand to hand at close quarters for which he later gained fame. And no doubt his ability to learn the ways of the local cultures and dialects stood him in good stead with his new “employers” who probably gave him nothing but a cut of the loot from their raids.

Sir Thomas Munroe, an official of the East India Company at the time wrote that about eighty Polygar local leaders ruled over approximately thirty thousand armed peasants whose goal was wanton raiding and looting in Southern India. The Polygars

seemed to have had diverse social origins.

*These Polygars had achieved their position in a number of ways. Some had originally been renters of districts, or servants of government who had received their villages, at first in inam, as a personal allowance for the support of their rank, and had revolted in times of disturbance. Some received their districts as the usual rent, partly as a personal jagir and partly for the service of a body of horse and foot soldiers. Some were commanders of a body of peons paid in money, not by Jagir, then became renters of districts after being absolved from military service and finally by holding those districts for a number of years during times of confusion, came at last to be denominated zamindars and to have the term of peshkash substituted for rent.*

As far as Thomas was concerned his job was to raid, under the authority of a Polygar leader which led to him witness entire villages destroyed, young girls gang raped and the enforced relocation of peasants at the point of a sword. Among the Polygars he learnt to fight, to raid, to loot and to watch his back. He also learnt all about the chaos and cruelty of India during a time of rising uncertainty.

Some 20<sup>th</sup> century Indian historians have re framed the Polygars as independent chiefs and fighters low on the South Indian hierarchy who opposed both local rulers and the British. They are seen by some as proto independence fighters, what Western scholars call "social bandits," men low on the totem pole who in times of injustice and turbulence take up the gun and the sword.

Without engaging the wrath of the many better read historians

of India it is most likely that Sir Thomas Munroe was not too far off the mark as politically, 18th century India was a time of lawlessness, warfare and strife, an interregnum period between the decline of the Moghuls and the triumph of the British over India.

When central authority is weak anthropologists tell us that banditry and warlordism in whatever forms show themselves (such as those of the warlords of China during the 1930s or in today's Libya and Mexico) raises its ugly head and only the people suffer. Such was the case in 18th century India.

Thomas learnt to survive in war torn southern India. His value on the mercenary market was rising, for he had survived his baptism in fire among the Polygars. He looked northeast for better opportunity. Battle-hardened, he left the Polygars and travelled to the kingdom of the Nizam of Hyderabad to join his growing number of European soldiers of fortune. It did not matter that he was an Irish Catholic. In the spirit of Akbar, Indian rulers whether Muslim or Hindu were religiously more tolerant than any king or prince of Europe at the time and so Thomas was most welcome to join the Nizam's army.

## **Indian Culture in the 18th Century**

If we judge civilizations by their stability and remark that the poor in stable, pre industrial states are usually better off than during unstable times, then we can say that the quality of life in India was in decline during the fall of the Mughals and the rise of the British. However, this does not mean that India was in cultural decline. It was not ancient Rome and if today is any measure of the durability of Indian culture, Hinduism, Indian Islam and modern science are all alive and well in that modern democratic state.

So let us pause for a moment and explore what India's elites were doing during the 18th century when they were not fighting

for or against this or that Rajah or the burgeoning French and British military powers. This was the world of George Thomas's new employers.

Let us begin with music. The orientalist William Jones in the late 1700s was the first European scholar of India to recognize the complexity of the Indian Raga system of classical music as it was no doubt performed in and around Calcutta. He did not like the music, but recognized its complexity.

A contemporary scholar of Indian music has this to say about Augustus Willard a British musician who had mastered the art of Raga in the early 1800s. Joep Bor tells us :

*Not much is known about this author, but he was probably the son of a British musician and had an Indian mother. As "a skilful performer himself on several [Indian] instruments", N.A. Willard had a thorough knowledge of the current practice and knew the musicians' jargon. And as an officer in the service of the music-loving ruler of Banda, Nawab Zulfiqar Ali Bahadur, he had direct access to the master musicians who performed at the court. Instead of relying only on texts such as Mirza Khan's Tuhfat al-Hind, he consulted well-known performers, both Hindu and Muslim, and the music scholar Hakim Salamat Ali Khan from Benares, himself the author of a treatise called Mutula al-Hind.*

In Willard's words:

*The only way by which perfection in this can be attained is by studying the original works, and consulting the best living performers, both vocal and instrumental.... Indeed,*

*without the assistance of learned natives, the search would be entirely fruitless. The theory is so little discussed at present, that few even of the best performers have the least knowledge of any thing but the practical part, in which to their credit it must be acknowledged they excel.*

Later musicologists like Fox Strangeways made the first Western recordings of Indian classical music. By the late 1890s gramophone companies began to record classical music for the growing Indian middle classes. Western music never conquered India. Likewise, the miniature arts of manuscript illustration were flourishing and survived well into the 19th century. Our museums are full of them.

Then there was religion. Hinduism endured and Hindu scholars maintained the study of the Hindu Classics, the Vedas, the Upanishads and the study of the great epics, the Ramayana and Mahabharata which Western scholars have compared favourably with the Iliad and Odyssey. Among the Hindus, Ayurvedic medicine was widely practised. Unlike in 18th century Britain they did not bleed their patients.

Muslim scholars, in touch with trends in the Arab middle east upheld the study of the Quran in Arabic as well as Muslim jurisprudence. Both Hindu and Muslim participated in the worship of saints and in the performance of their poetry and songs at their respective shrines such as Ajmer.

Architecture flourished as did the decorative arts and India was still a major supplier of dyed and printed textiles to Europe.

Hindu Maharajahs such as Jai Singh took an interest in observational astronomy. Historians wrote military and political history in Persian and the greats of Persian literature were studied and imitated at the courts of the various Sultans and Rajahs. Emperor Shah Allam himself was a

master of Urdu poetry.

We can conclude that the difference between Western Europe and India during the 1700s was the absence of a scientific and technical revolution which was to transform Europe and then the world. However, the subsequent history of both colonial and independent India suggests that the “argumentative Indian” as defined by Nobel Prize winning laureate Amartya Sen, provided fertile ground for the modern adoption and explosion of science and technology that is sweeping across India today.

As far as religious toleration is concerned, 18th century India was light years ahead of Western Europe. It is becoming more and more difficult then to describe 18<sup>th</sup> century India as a culture in decline.

### **Into the Arms of the Sultana**

We do not know how long George Thomas worked as a mercenary for the Nizam of Hyderabad, perhaps six or seven years, but he no doubt learned the arts of being a soldier from the many European mercenaries who were his commanders. Restless as ever, he eventually left as he heard about a remarkable woman who not only ruled her own kingdom but supported the Mughal Emperor who supported her.

But how to get there? It was out of the question to go alone as the countryside was filled with bandits of different kinds. So, he joined the bandits who roamed widely and with whom he got to Delhi. These were the Pindaris.

The Pindaris were mounted horsemen, adept at the use of the sword and the spear. They were semi-independent mercenaries, both Muslim and Hindu with their own leaders and social organization called the *durrah*. They worshipped a common deity called *Ramasah Pir*. During the rainy season they would stay with their families around the Naramada river but during the

dry season they would go raiding.

They were unpaid, mercenary cavalry who specialized in guerrilla harassment of large armies, attacking civilian hangers on. They excelled at spreading chaos. They enslaved and sold their captives. First, they had worked for the Mughals during their conquest and consolidation of their empire in India, then with the Hindu Marathas who rebelled against them, then with any Rajah or Sultan who cut deals with them.

Wherever they went and for whomever they worked they would capture and waste enemy resources, gather intelligence about the enemy for their employer, destroy lines of communication and supply and raid the supplies of the enemy, always on horse, always unconventional, like flies attacking a carcass.

Despite the slow and steady conquest of India by the British it took the British Crown until the early 19th century to decisively defeat them. By 1819 under the authority of Governor Francis Rawdon Hastings they were defeated in battle. And then many of them joined the British army. Thomas joined them and made his way to Delhi.

Given Thomas' later reputation for daring and out of the box military thinking we can only conclude that he learnt much from the Pindaris. From them and the Polygars he learnt the unorthodox ground up version of war in India, from the Royal Navy he learnt discipline and order and from the European mercenaries in Hyderabad he learnt just what it meant to be a European leader of Indian soldiers.

Clearly many of the bandits who made their way with him to Delhi stayed on and Thomas has been said to have been inordinately proud of what he called his Irish Pindaris, many of whom were loyal to him until his final military defeat years later.

## The Butcher from Germany

Thomas was soon to join the militia of Sultana Begum. Who was she? The first thing to know is that she was someone's wife and not just anybody. Walter Rheinhardt Sombre was a German mercenary, born in Eisenberg in Germany in Jan 27 1723. He had been a butcher before becoming a soldier of fortune and as we learn more about this man he later turned his butchery skills to other men in India, noticeably captured British soldiers.

In 1887 in a book called *The Fall of the Mogul Empire of Hindustan*, the author H.G. Keene tells us:

*In the meanwhile the unscrupulous heroes who were founding the British Government of India had thought proper to quarrel with their new instrument Mir Kasim, whom they had so lately raised to the Masnad of Bengal. This change in their councils had been caused by an insubordinate letter addressed to the Court of Directors by Clive's party, which had led to their dismissal from employ. The opposition then raised to power consisted of all the more corrupt members of the service; and the immediate cause of their rupture with Mir Kasim was about the monopoly they desired to have of the local trade for their own private advantage. They were represented at that Nawab's Court by Mr. Ellis, the most violent of their body; and the consequence of his proceedings was, in no long time, seen in the murder of the Resident and all his followers, in October, 1763. The scene of this atrocity (which remained without a parallel for nearly a century) was at Patna, which was then threatened and soon after stormed by the British; and the actual instrument was a Franco-German, Walter Reinhardt by name, of whom, as we are to hear much more hereafter, it is as well here to take note. This European executioner of Asiatic barbarity is generally believed to have been a native of Treves, in the Duchy of Luxemburg, who came to*

*India as a sailor in the French navy. From this service he is said to have deserted to the British, and joined the first European battalion raised in Bengal. Thence deserting he once more entered the French service; was sent with a party who vainly attempted to relieve Chandarnagar, and was one of the small party who followed Law when that officer took command of those, who refused to share in the surrender of the place to the British. After the capture of his ill-starred chief, Reinhardt (whom we shall in future designate by his Indian sobriquet of "Sumroo," or Sombre) took service under Gregory, or Gurjin Khan, Mir Kasim's Armenian General. Broome, however, adopts a somewhat different version. According to this usually careful and accurate historian, Reinhardt was a Salzburg man who originally came to India in the British service, and deserted to the French at Madras, whence he was sent by Lally to strengthen the garrison of the Bengal settlement. The details are not very material: Sumroo had certainly learned war both in English and French schools. He again deserted from the Newab, served successively the Principal Chiefs of the time, and died in 1776.*

In short, Rheinhardt first fought for the French. Then he worked for a Swiss Corps based in Calcutta. Then he served in the cavalry of Sufdur Jung. Then he worked for Nir Kasim the Nawab of Bengal who was fighting the British.

During one incident Rheinhardt was given orders by the Nawab to kill four hundred British prisoners, soldiers one and all. He did so by inviting them to dinner and the ordering his men to kill every last one of them. The British later called this the "massacre at Patna" and as they consolidated their power from east to west, they never forgot about Rheinhart's savagery and inhumanity. In the eyes of the British he was a marked man.

Yet the Emperor appointed him ruler of Agra and gave him land to tax and farm in an area called Sardana, near Delhi. His wife, the Begum, would join him as an equal in his rule and then as sole ruler after his death.

It is important to remember that by that time the Mughal Emperor, Shah Allum had lost almost all his political power. He was dependant on rogue Hindu warrior chiefs from the Maratha tribe of Western India who "fought in his name" and hired European mercenaries like Rheinhardt to fight their wars. As a reward Rheinhardt was given the "kingdom of Sardana" not far from Delhi as his personal reward and medieval like fiefdom.

### **Who Was Begum Samru?**

Begum Samru was Reinhardt's (second) wife who after Reinhardt's passing became the independent ruler of a sovereign kingdom under the dwindling authority of the Moghul Emperor, Shah Alum, who still held court in Delhi. She began life as an orphan, perhaps even sold into slavery by her mother and from an early age became Tawaif or what the British called a "Nautch dancer." Historians dismiss this aspect of her upbringing treating it as the vocation of a common prostitute. This is a cross cultural error.

When the dynasty of the Muslim Mughal emperors who conquered the sub continent in the 16th century went into decline, the locus of courtly high culture migrated to the residences of the various princes who ruled their own parts of India. Although these rulers were nominally dependant on the Sultan in Delhi, and later on the infiltrating and then conquering British, they patronized an urban developed culture which included sophisticated forms of poetry, singing and dancing. At the center of this artistic next were women called Tawaif. Begum was one of them.

Tawaif is an Arabic word which in its plural form means group, in this instance a female singer/dancer and her accompanying musicians, usually players of the bowed sarangi and the tabla drums. Tawaif became the name for these women. They were phenomenally gifted singers and dancers within the Hindustani artistic traditions, masters of the complex system of scales and rhythms called raga and tala, versed in poetry, politics, literature and world affairs.

They were the complete opposite of the traditional Muslim or Hindu wife who lived in near seclusion. They lived in special quarters called khotas, multi storied mansions where they lived and entertained local elites. They did not marry, were financially independent and sometimes had children from their aristocratic and princely lovers. If the female child of this union showed talent, then she was given the opportunity to be trained as a Tawaif and thus centuries old music and dance (such as Kathak) were developed and more importantly preserved by these gifted matriarchies.

Despite the fact that Tawaif lived like Geishas or the Heiterati of ancient Greece, the aristocratic men who patronized their salons would often send their own children to study with them as they were the sources of sophisticated behaviour and knowledge of the arts in those days called "ilme majlisi." In that sense they acted as the "finishing schools" of the princely Indian elites of the north.

In 19th and 18th century India Tawaif are the closest thing that one can get to what some scholars now refer to as a liberated woman or a woman living freely such as the literate Italian courtesans of the Renaissance. So, it is not surprising to find that some did indeed marry their clients and rise to the top of society, similar in some ways to today's custom where female pop stars marry millionaires or members of the aristocracy in North America or Europe.

The most famous Tawaif to show this kind of upward mobility

was Begum Samru who as a young tawaif, became partner and wife of the European adventurer by the name of Walter Reinhardt Sombre who led a mercenary army of Indians and expatriates.

And so when Rheinhardt was in Delhi, attending to the Sultan and already in charge of a fair amount of land, he saw Begum dance, fell in love married Begum Samru and shared his kingdom with her. Until his death their marriage was peaceful, their partnership one of equals.

Who knows, they may have even loved each other.

### **The Luck of the Irish**

This was the status of the principality of Sardana ruled over by Samru and his Begum when Thomas arrived. He joined the Sultana's troops and quickly rose through the ranks. When Rheinhardt died he became the commander of Begum's troops and it is said her intimate companion. Apparently she taught him to read and write in Persian and Hindi. But like in all good love stories something went wrong and it went wrong not once but twice.

This is how Thomas described her in 1796:

*Begum Samru is about forty five years of age, small in stature but inclined to be plump. Her complexion is very fair, her eyes large, black and animated. Hand of the most costly materials. Her dress perfectly Hindustani. She speaks the Persian and Hindusthani languages with fluency, and in her conversation is engaging, sensitive and spirited.*

She also road to war with her soldiers on horseback or perched

on a war elephant and showed no fear in battle. Thomas got along with her splendidly. However, she did have a few skeletons in the closet. Authority in those days was hard to maintain. People below, above and beside you were constantly trying to rob you of your prestige and power or a combination of any of these.

Once upon a time, two of the Begum's slave girls fell in love with two of the Begum's Indian soldiers. The four of them planned to rob the Begum's house in the town of Agra near Delhi where she kept much jewellery and other precious items. The conspirators tried to burn down the house but things did not go as planned. All four were caught. The two men were court martialed and executed. The two women were slowly whipped to insensibility in front of the Begum and then buried alive.

Soon after an Afghan adventurer swept into Delhi, captured the Moghul Emperor in Agra, threatened to kill him, and when he discovered there was no treasure to steal he blinded the Emperor while asking a court painter to record the procedure. Begum and Thomas were away in Sardhana at the time.

To make a long story short Thomas and Begum Samru managed to come to the rescue, defeat Khan and save the Emperor who then gave her the title of "most beloved daughter" thus giving just one more level of social legitimacy to the Princess and her Irish hero.

When we read about the cruelty of Khan and the Begum we must remember that in the late 1700s the British would hang, draw and quarter anyone they convicted of treason. In 1782 the British crown hung drew and quartered a Scottish spy for the French named David Tyrie.

The Hampshire Chronicle reported Aug. 31, 1782:

*After hanging exactly twenty-two minutes, he was lowered upon the sledge, and the sentence literally put in execution. His head was severed from his body, his heart taken out and burnt, his privities cut off, and his body quartered. He was then put into a coffin and buried among the pebbles by the sea-side; but no sooner had the officers retired, but the sailors dug up the coffin, took out the body, and cut it in a thousand pieces, every one carrying away a piece of his body to shew their messmates on board. A more dreadful, affecting execution was perhaps never seen.*

With the wealth of historical information that we now have at hand it is difficult to say whether British or Indian justice was to be preferred in those days.

The supporters of the Emperor whether extracted from obscurity like the Begum or like the Maratha chiefs who claimed to support the emperor but mostly fought among each other, were part of a jumble of continuously changing alliances all who claimed to be on the side of the Emperor.

Thomas remained loyal to the Begum and the Emperor. In his early years in Sardhana he also became an able administrator of managed lands and a formidable frontier warrior against the Sikhs who were bearing down on Sardhana from the north west. This is where he gained his reputation as man of honour who should not be easily crossed.

One of his main strengths was his ability to drive himself and his men to levels of endurance that were not customary at the time; sudden marches, quick military manoeuvres, sudden and surprisingly fierce but strategic attacks and the ability make his cannon and swords on the move.

Many of his officers were expatriates like himself, some of them having Indian mothers and British fathers while most of

the serving soldiers from the peasant class. He led from the front as had the Begum before him who was famous by going out to battle at the front of her soldiers and on horseback or on war elephant.

As one commentator put it;

*By his courage and energy he made his rule respected and for long years after tradition had handed down the legendary deeds of the mighty Jehaz Sahib(His Honour the Sailor) who first taught the sons of Nanak to respect the marches of the Great Moghul.*

### **Falling Out of the Begum's Bed**

Smith managed the forces of the Begum well. He defeated the Rajputs and began to fight off the Sikhs. It is rumoured that he became her lover and that she taught him Persian and Hindusthani. He expanded her and the emperor's domain, maintained the loyalty of his European and native officers and soldiers.

In his absence a French freebooter by the name of Lavassoult married the Begum and took over her forces. Despite the Begum marrying off her daughter to Smith (which would have meant he had slept with both mother and daughter and which did not seem to bother anyone at the time!) he decided that he would declare himself independent.

When he did so, the Begum held his family hostage. Hot blooded Smith rode into town to free them and was captured. That would have been the end of him had not the grateful Shah Allam, the emperor, intervened with the Begum and had him deported to the British border.

And so Thomas then fought for various Marataha princes or warlords who were now the real power in and around Delhi and northern India before the British occupied that part of the Indian Subcontinent after its own later wars against the Marathas.

One Maratha prince hired him and then they quarrelled. Another prince hired him and then they quarrelled. One prince may die and the other make Smith an offer. What we do know is that by this time he called himself the Rajah from Tipperary. He had his own European officers, loyal men, his own artillery and blacksmiths and a group of his very own dancing girls, from the same social class as the Begum who had first got her chance with her German butcher husband years back.

The more successful Smith became the more he was envied and the more enemies he made. So he decided it was time to be king. Soon after he established his own kingdom, just north of Delhi.

### **The Man Who Would Be King**

Let us hear what Thomas himself told his biographer about the establishment of his own kingdom in the Punjab:

*Here I established my capital, rebuilt the walls of the city long since fallen into decay, and repaired the fortifications. As it had been long deserted, at first I found difficulty in procuring inhabitants, but by degrees and gentle treatment, I selected between five and six thousand persons, to whom I allowed every lawful indulgence.*

*I established a mint and coined my own rupees, which I made*

*current in my army ... I employed workmen and artificers of all kinds, and I now judged that nothing but force of arms could maintain me in my authority, I therefore increased their numbers, cast my own artillery, commenced making muskets, matchlocks and powder, and in short made the best preparations for carrying on an offensive and defensive war, till at length having gained a capital and country bordering on the Sikh territories, I wished to put myself in a capacity when a favourable opportunity should offer of attempting the conquest of the Punjab.*

Today his capital city is recalled when visitors tour his ruined fort in the town of Hansi.

During the next three years Smith conquered, expanded and prospered. He took territory from the Rajputs and pushed out into Sikh territory. The Marathas feared him. The Rajputs feared him. The British were wary of him and the more he succeeded, the more this united his enemies.

### **The Golden Bough and the End of Thomas Kingdom**

One of the most widespread myths is that of the Golden Bough, an archaic Roman Temple in the forest guarded by a priest who reigns there because he killed the previous priest and will be gone when next challenger kills him. In many ways Thomas was like this priest.

The more success he had the more enemies he made, including Begum Samru and her allies who finally united in order to defeat him. This time the Emperor did not interfere. And so Thomas like the mysterious hero of the Golden Bough occupied the fort at Hisar which had been founded centuries before and is now a deserted tourist ruin.

... when the Hisar was founded in 1354 AD, as 'Hisar-e-Firoza' by [Firoz Shah Tughlaq](#), who reigned over the Sultanate of Delhi from 1351 to 1388. He built a walled fort with four gates, the Delhi Gate and Mori Gate to the east, the Nagori Gate to the south, and the Talaqi Gate to the west. The construction of the fort started in 1354 AD and was completed in 1356 AD. In the middle of the fort stood the [Firoz Shah Palace](#). Apart from its several underground apartments, the complex had different buildings such as [Baradari](#), Lat ki Masjid, [Diwan-e-Aam](#), and Shahi Darwaza. Near the palace was the Gurji Mahal built by the emperor for his wife name Gujri. The city was named as Hisar-e-Firoza, which means Fort of Firoz in [Persian](#). Timur invaded the city in 1398 AD and his soldiers set fire to the fort.

The city later came under the rule of Sayyid dynasty and Lodi Dynasty before Babur defeated Ibrahim Lodi in the [first battle of Panipat](#). Hisar was occupied by [George Thomas](#), an Irish adventurer, in 1798. The arrangement continued until 1801 when Thomas was driven out by the [Maratha confederacy](#). A French officer, Lt. Bourquian, controlled these areas on behalf of Marathas. He is said to have rebuilt the towns of Tohana and Hissar. The region came under the rule of the British East India Company in 1803.

When he became Rajah of Hansi he did one more bold and emotional act as described by Indian journalist Sandeep Nair:

*Begum Samru made a comeback in George's life at this point, in some style. In his absence, she had tried to marry her lover Le Vassoult, but a section of her army mutinied at this. Le Vassoult committed suicide (typical French*

*dramatics) and the Begum was imprisoned. Her stepson took over the throne. In desperation, she reached out to George. Forgetting how she had betrayed him, he rode out to her rescue, released her from her prison and restored her to the throne without having to fire a single musket. Typical Bollywood movie stuff.*

## **The Defeat of the King**

Thomas fought his enemies until he was exhausted and demoralized. Even his fellow mercenary opponents, who admired him, like Colonel Skinner thought that he would get away during what turned into his final battle and which ended in September of 1801.



George Thomas died at the age of 46. This is the only likeness of him that has survived the ravages of

time.

Skinner later wrote:

*We were surprised he permitted us to remain for fifteen days without attempting to attack us, or make good his retreat to Hansi, for there was no doubt in our minds that, had he tried either plan, he would have succeeded. The state of our guns (fifteen guns had been dismounted and twenty five powder trumbles blown up) and the spirits of our soldiery were such that had Thomas shown any inclination to move towards us we should not have got out of his reach, , for our commander, Major Louis Boru quoin, was not only a coward but a fool. He was one of those who had got on by flattery; and had it not been for Captain Bernier a Frenchman, we should certainly have lost the day, for the major was not seen at all during the battle, and our being saved from total destruction was entirely owing to the exertions of Captain Bernier, who was a brave and able soldier.*

Thomas was surrounded, he could not find a way out, and it is thought that he drank himself into a stupor and surrendered to a French mercenary general. He was treated with respect and handed over to the British who allowed him to freely go to Calcutta and sail to Ireland. He was finally going home. After dictating his memoirs en route to Bengal he died of fever before leaving port.

His biography was published in England in 1805 by the author William Francklin. It is called, *Military Memoirs of George Thomas; Who, by Extraordinary Talent and Enterprise, Rose from an Obscure Situation to the Rank of a General, in the service of the Native Powers in the North West of India.*

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**Geoffrey Clarfield** is an anthropologist at large. For twenty years he lived in, worked among and explored the cultures and societies of Africa, the Middle East and Asia. As a development anthropologist he has worked for the following clients: the UN, the Rockefeller Foundation, the Norwegian, Canadian, Italian, Swiss and Kenyan governments as well international NGOs. His essays largely focus on the translation of cultures.

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