

Lieutenant Colonel Booth Hay Metcalfe 1843-1924

Trinity College Cambridge - 83rd Regiment of Foot - Royal Irish Rifles



Booth Hay Metcalfe Richmond North Yorkshire circa 1865

Booth Hay Metcalfe was born in the small village of Muker, North Yorkshire, on 17th February 1843. Eldest son of Lister Washington Metcalfe 1777-1846, a Cheese Factor (Wolesaler), and Margaret Metcalfe (nee Williamson) 1803-1886.

Booth Hay Metcalfe was one of six children born to his parents between 1834 and 1846. His siblings were Lister Washington Metcalfe 1834-1867, James Simm Metcalfe 1834-1878, Mary Isabella Victoria Metcalfe 1838-1839, William Pitt Metcalfe 1840-1876, and Mary Isabella Victoria Metcalfe 1846-1855.

Booth attended Dasselling House in Whorlton County Durham, a small private school having only 6 male pupils. He then attended Richmond Grammar School, Yorkshire, before entering Trinity College, Cambridge, in October 1861. During his time at Cambridge, Booth excelled in sports representing his college at cricket and rowing. In 1863 Booth was a member of the Cambridge First Trinity Crew, competing at the Henley Regatta. Booth graduated from Cambridge with a BA in 1865.

During the same year, Booth joined the 83rd (County of Dublin) Regiment of Foot as Ensign by purchase, at this time based at various locations throughout England.

The 83rd (County of Dublin) Regiment of Foot, had been established in 1793 during the French Revolutionary Wars. Raised to serve as part of Britain's efforts against Revolutionary France, it initially operated in the West Indies and Ireland. The regiment was involved in several key engagements, including the French campaigns in Egypt and the Peninsula War (1808-1814). During the 19th Century the regiment was garrisoned at various colonies throughout the world, including

Ceylon, Canada, Gibraltar, and India, while maintaining a significant presence in Ireland. By the mid-19th century, it had become part of the British Army's regular forces.



83rd Regiment of Foot Colours Emblem hand-painted by Captain George E S Cartwright circa 1866.

In January 1866, the regiment returned to Ireland, and was distributed Headquarters at the Curragh Barracks Kildare, three companies in Armagh, one company in Monaghan, two companies in Sligo and two companies in Boyle.

In the same year, the regiment was armed with the new breech loading Enfield rifles, Snider pattern. The Snider rifle was introduced in this year as the first breech-loading infantry weapon. This new rifle was a conversion of the older muzzle-loading Pattern 1853 Enfield rifle. The Snider rifle was a much more accurate weapon, with a much faster rate of firing. A trained soldier could fire up to ten rounds per minute with the breech-loader, compared with only three rounds per minute with the muzzle-loading weapon.

In March 1867, the regimental depot companies moved to Colchester, while in April the rest of the regiment embarked at Kingstown and were conveyed by the troopship "Himalaya" to Gibraltar. Relieving the 86th (Royal County Down) Regiment of Foot in the Casemate Barracks, the 83rd Regiment would spend the next 3 years at Gibraltar on garrison duty.

Britain had taken control of Gibraltar in 1713 and thereafter had retained a military presence there. During the Napoleonic Wars, Gibraltar had become an important base for the Royal Navy and designated as one of four British fortresses (together with Halifax, Nova Scotia, Bermuda, and Malta). During the 18th century, the peacetime military garrison in Gibraltar fluctuated between 1,100 and 5,000 troops at any one time.

On 10th May 1867, the Honourable Lady Airey presented new colours to the 83rd (County of Dublin) Regiment of Foot, handing the Queen's Colour to Ensign Wyndham and the Regimental Colour to Ensign Metcalfe. In September 1867, Booth was promoted to Lieutenant by purchase, and in June 1868 was reported to be back in Dublin staying at the Sherborne Hotel.

In February 1869, Lieutenant Charles J Wyndham was appointed Instructor of Musketry for the regiment. In December the same year, the Broad Arrow newspaper reported, *"By the annual Musketry Return for season 1868/69 we see that the 83rd Regiment still holds its position as best shooting regiment in the army."*

The best judges of distance among the officers are reported to be Lieutenant Wyndham, Cartwright, and Metcalfe”.



Charles J Wyndham

George E S Cartwright

Booth H Metcalfe

In February 1870, Booth sailed from Southampton to rejoin his regiment at Gibraltar, a few weeks before it was due to be transported to its next overseas posting.

Having served their time in Gibraltar, on 11th March 1870 the 83rd Regiment, commanded by Colonel A. B. Hankey, embarked on the troopship “Tamar” and proceeded to Alexandria on the Mediterranean coast of Egypt. From there they travelled to the port town of Suez on the Red Sea coast by rail and on 25th March embarked on the troopship “Euphrates” for onward transport to India. Arriving at Bombay 8th April 1870, the regiment proceeded to Poona where it was quartered in Wanourie Barracks.

Poona, located 120 miles southeast of Bombay in the western state of Maharashtra, was one of the most important military and administrative centres for the British in India in the 19th century. Established in the early 19th century, the Poona Cantonment (permanent military station) became a key base for British forces operating in the Bombay Presidency and the surrounding regions. The cantonment was strategically important because of its proximity to the Deccan Plateau and its distance from the coastal areas, making it a safer, less vulnerable location to potential attacks from coastal insurgents. The temperate climate of the region also made Poona an attractive location for British officers and troops, especially during the sweltering summer months in other parts of India.

The Poona Cantonment housed various regiments, including the British Indian Army's artillery and infantry units. This led to the development of infrastructure such as bungalows for officers, barracks, hospitals, roads, and a Bazaar. Over time, Poona became a major centre for British military operations in the western part of India, as well as a hub for the distribution of supplies and reinforcements.

Poona's military significance, however, extended beyond its logistical role. It was also a site of political and social importance. It was here that key military events, such as the rebellion of 1857 (known as the First War of Indian Independence), played out. While Poona itself was not the site of large-scale battles, the cantonment area saw unrest and dissent among the sepoys (Indian soldiers) stationed there. The Poona cantonment witnessed mutinies, desertions, and a general atmosphere of discontent, which reflected broader discontent in the Indian army that eventually culminated in the 1857 revolt.

In November 1870, Booth was promoted to Captain and in 1871 received orders to take command of the depot companies of the 83rd Regiment at Chatham, Kent.

A British Army regiment's depot companies played a crucial role in supporting the main body of the regiment. The depot companies were typically based in Britain or Ireland while the main forces were

deployed abroad. Their primary purpose was to recruit, train, and equip new soldiers before they joined their respective regiments at home or overseas.

Depot companies were responsible for maintaining the regimental records, handling logistics, and ensuring that reinforcements were adequately prepared for active service. They provided basic military training, including drill, marksmanship, and physical conditioning, as well as instruction in discipline and regimental traditions. Additionally, these companies managed the regimental stores, including uniforms, weapons, and other essential supplies, guaranteeing that the main regiment remained equipped and ready for combat.

The depot companies also served as a haven for wounded or sick soldiers who had returned from overseas postings, offering a place for recovery and convalescence. During this period in British military history, the health of the British Army abroad faced significant challenges. The harsh climate often experienced abroad, coupled with unsanitary living conditions, led to widespread health issues among the troops. Tropical diseases such as malaria, cholera, dysentery, and typhoid were rampant, posing a constant threat to the soldiers.



Booth photographed with fellow 83rd Regiment officers, Captain George Beazley (standing), Lieutenant Lord Edric Frederick Gifford (sitting right), and Lieutenant Thomas Frederick Gibbs (sitting middle). The photograph was taken at Chatham in 1872

Captain Beazley had been in the army since 1852, when he joined the 3rd Division West Indies Regiment, and had seen action in West Africa before transferring to the 83rd Regiment in 1856. Beazley was awarded the India Medal with clasp for Central India, for his part in the suppression of the Indian Mutiny 1858-61. Later in his career he served in the Bombay Staff Corps as Assistant Adjutant General, he retired from the army after 29 years service in 1881.

In 1872, Lord Edric Frederick Gifford inherited his fathers title to become 3rd Baron Gifford. In 1873, Gifford would transfer to the 24th Regiment of Foot and find himself fighting in West Africa during the Ashanti War 1873-74. For his actions during the Ashanti Campaign, Gifford was awarded the Victoria Cross, presented to him by Queen Victoria in Windsor Great Park in March 1874. During the Zulu War of 1879, Gifford was ADC to General Sir Garnet Wolseley, and while commanding a group of native scouts, came remarkably close to capturing Cetewayo, the Zulu King.

The depot companies of the 83rd remained at Chatham until November 1872, when they were transferred to Newry in Ireland. Booth stayed in Ireland until February 1874, then returned to India to rejoin the regiment stationed there. Booth was accompanied on the journey by Lieutenant Thomas Frederick Gibbs, travelling on the troopship "Jumna" they arrived in Bombay 2nd March 1874.

In March 1875, it was reported that Captain Metcalfe and Lieutenant Gibbs had been granted six months leave to visit Cashmere in Northern India.



Captain B H Metcalfe



Lieutenant T F Gibbs circa 1868

Having returned from Cashmere, by June 1876 Booth was suffering from frequent attacks of “Ague” (malaria) and rheumatism which weakened him significantly. He was prescribed two month’s sick leave, and an array of different medicines including “poppy head fermentations, anodyne liniments, leeches, iodine, gentian, syrup of phosphate of iron and quinine.”

In the 19th Century, the health of the British Army in India faced significant challenges. The subcontinent's harsh climate, coupled with unsanitary living conditions, led to widespread health issues among the troops. Tropical diseases such as malaria, cholera, dysentery, and typhoid were rampant, posing a constant threat to the soldiers.

On 26 October 1876, Booth was ordered back to England to join the regiment’s depot companies and excused any duties whilst on the troopship home due to his medical condition. Booth set sail from Bombay 7th November 1876 aboard the troopship “Crocodile”.

Booth remained in England for some 3 ½ years, until he returned to India in April 1880 to rejoin his regiment. Towards the end of 1880, the regiment was ordered to return to England. In January 1881, however, the 42 Officers and 1,308 men of the 83rd Regiment on board the troopship Crocodile were diverted to Natal in South Africa, where an outbreak of hostilities with the Boers would see the regiment on active field service. In July 1881, the 83rd Regiment became the 1st Battalion Royal Irish Rifles, under the Childers reforms. After spending much of its time on rear-area labouring duties in South Africa, the Battalion returned to England in January 1882.

On 18th January 1882, Booth was promoted to Major. In May the same year Booth, attended Queen Victoria’s Levee held at St James’s Palace and was presented to the Prince of Wales.

In December 1884, the troopship Assistance left Dover carrying Major Booth Hay Metcalfe and the men of the 1st Battalion Royal Irish Rifles to be stationed in Guernsey.



By 1887, Booth had returned to Dover retiring from the army 31st December 1887, with the honorary rank of Lieutenant Colonel. Booth is pictured above (2nd row centre) with some of his men.

It was suggested by some newspapers of the day that Booth had in fact taken voluntary early retirement, in view of the discontinuance of the privilege of a higher honorary rank, which ceased 1st January 1888. Prior to this date, it was customary for retiring officers to be given an honorary rank one above their station on retirement. So, by retiring 31st December 1887, Booth retired with the honorary rank of Lieutenant Colonel rather than Major.

As early as 1882, Booth had begun a relationship with a Jane "Cora" Searle 1851-1928 from Clapham, Sussex. Although it appears that the couple were not married at the time, they had a son together, Birdie Thomas Metcalfe 1884-1963 born in Lambeth, London, 16th January 1884. In September 1887, the couple had a second child, George Kenneth Metcalfe 1887-1951 born at Shoreham, Sussex, and some six years later another son John Frederick Metcalfe 1893-1964, also born at Shoreham.

Following his retirement from the army, records suggest that Booth did not live with Jane and his children, preferring to spend much of his time living apart from the family and pursuing his passion for sports, and in particular sailing. The 1891 Census shows Booth living alone at 8 Regent Street, London. An 1895 directory also lists 8 Regent Street as Booth's address. In the same year, a Cora J Metcalfe is recorded living at 29 Queens Place New, Shoreham, Sussex, with her two children Birdie and George.

B. H. Metcalfe *Signature of the Officer.*

By 1901, Booth was living at an address 27 Pier Street at Northfleet, Kent, with two servants, the Census for that year recorded Booth as Head of the household but noted "away for a week". During the week of the Census, Booth also appeared at an address 68 New Church Road, "Santa Rosa" Aldrington, Sussex, staying with Jane Metcalfe and his two sons George and John.

In 1903, Booth and Jane married 6th August at Holborn Registry Office, London, although no reports of the wedding appeared in newspapers of the day. By 1911, the couple appear in the Census living at an address on the Isle of Wight. This document states that the couple had been married 28 years, suggesting they had been married since 1883. This is contradicted by an article which appeared in

1889 referring to “Major Booth Hay Metcalfe in the army still living unmarried who holds property in Richmond and Swaledale”.

Booth Hay Metcalfe remained on the Isle of Wight until 15th February 1924 when he died aged 80 years.



Captain Booth H Metcalfe 83rd Regiment India Circa 1874

The Yorkshire Post carried an article published 20th February 1924, which read:

“The death took place at Ryde last Friday in his 81st year of Lieutenant Colonel Booth Hay Metcalfe of Muker Yorkshire and Beechwood Ryde. The Times Correspondents writes:

He was one of the oldest surviving graduates of the early sixties at Trinity Cambridge where he made a name in perhaps the best college boat of this period. Many of his years service were spent in India, and he saw service with his regiment in the first Boer War. He was a good cricketer and better boxer. A keen shot, he made good practice the birds until at the age of 75 the injury which finally led to his death manifested itself. Like all the men of his family he loved horses and rode

well but most of all he loved the sea owned a succession of well-known yachts and was one of the oldest members of the Royal Victoria and Royal Cinque Ports Yacht Club. A man of most generous nature his loss will be deeply felt not only by his contemporaries but by many of us a younger generation to whom he stood as the best type of English Gentleman. He leaves a wife and 3 sons.”



The Trinity College Rowing 8: Henley 1863 BHM top 2nd left
(Courtesy of Warwick Metcalfe's Holdings)

Researched and written by Gary Hynard 2025