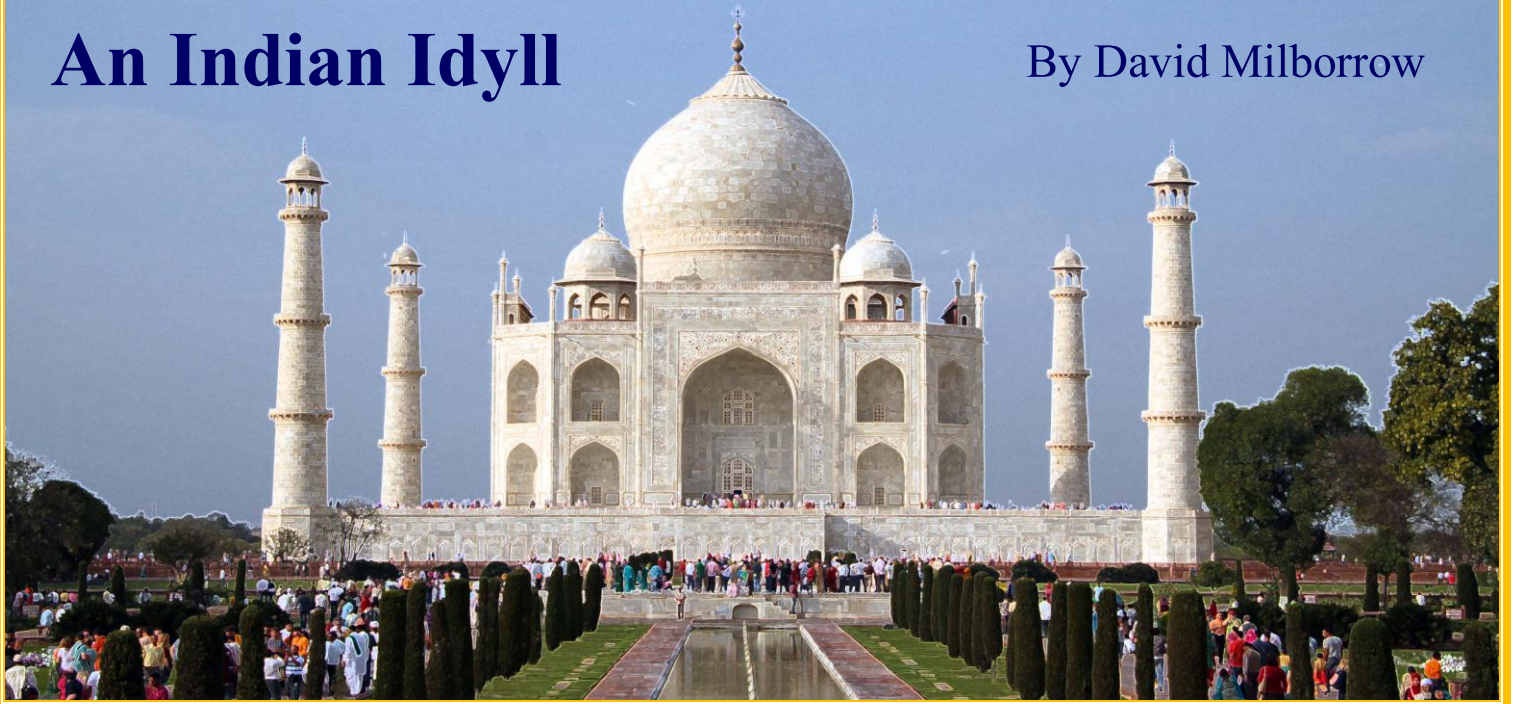


# An Indian Idyll

By David Milborrow



## A Tour of Indian War and Cantonment cemeteries

### Day 1

Dawn at one of Bombay CST, one of the city's main stations; the front is a World Heritage Site; the rear, where the action is, is a sea of humanity - sitting, dozing, sleeping wrapped head to toe looking like corpses prepared for burial, a contrast to the city streets which are just beginning to show signs of life as taxis are washed, and kiosks opening, ready for a long day's trade. Noises, smells, tides of humanity, all remind one that home is far away.



We had flown out from a very quiet London Heathrow on a Jumbo with plenty of empty seats - space was plentiful, just sleep was lacking. We hit the ground running - just hours after landing we had checked into our home for the next 2 days - the YMCA - and I was standing in **St. Thomas Cathedral**, grateful for the respite from Bombay's heat and full-on humidity, thinking I was in a mini St. Pauls as I marvelled at how the British had left such an indelible impression on another country. A five minute visit to find one memorial to 5 sailors lost at sea in WW1 extended considerably as I found a church seemingly where every bit of wall space - ground level to ceiling - was covered by memorials to the British who hadn't made it home; and as most were military - albeit mostly nineteenth century - I knew I was off to a good start.

Then onto the Indian Sailors Home, which contained more than a thousand merchant seamen between contracts and also two impressive memorials - to the missing of the Indian Navy and Merchant Navy of the two Wars. A warm welcome preceded, and the ubiquitous cup of tea concluded, a hot, humid but successful visit, with some 8,500 additional names completed for the Project. My signature in their visitors' book follows many of the great and good of the Commission.

Visits to 2 little churches, one successful, one tba on Thursday, concluded the day's work. An excellent selection of curries on buffet at the YMCA was most welcome; how one feels about curry after 3 weeks remains to be seen.

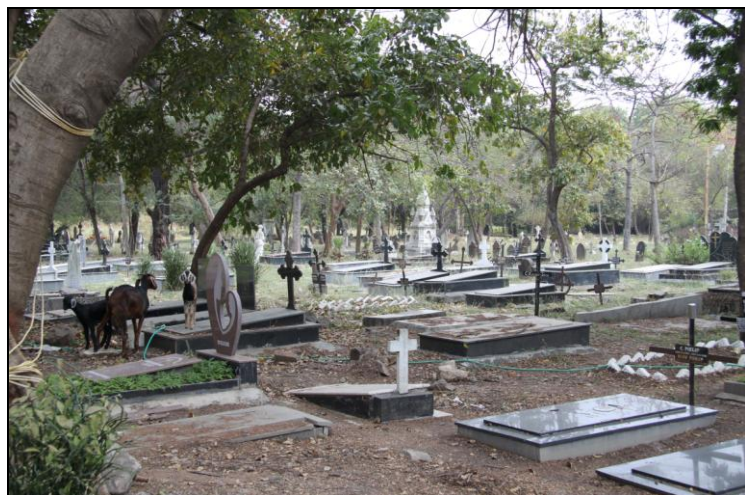
The purpose of today's early morning train to Pune is to visit the CWGC Cemetery at Kirkee (the similarity of this town's name to that of the colour of British military is, I believe, no coincidence), and explore any of the old British cemeteries in Kirkee and Pune that I can locate in the hours I have.

My travelling companions are all young Indian professionals, all so helpful and happy to talk. The accommodation is a sleeping car - not the most comfortable place to sit. The mouse in our carriage provided amusement; I didn't discover his intended destination, or whether he made it.

## Day 2

An eventful and successful day. First traffic accident (motor bike drove into the rear of our taxi, but no harm done except to our bumper), and first vehicle breakdown (car battery failed halfway through the day's itinerary, so required bump starting after each subsequent stop).

Kirkee War Cemetery, as always, a haven of peaceful lawns and colourful plants, and as I only had the 2 Memorials to do (Catherine having already taken all the graves) it felt slightly fraudulent - such an easy visit. A warm welcome and kind hospitality from the CWGC Manager as always. How do they always manage to appoint such gentle folk?



After the War Cemetery I was lent one of the staff to guide us to the **'New' Cemetery** where there are a number of WW1 graves (not yet listed as being in that Cemetery), as well as some nineteenth century casualties. (Ironically, we had already visited the 'Old' Cemetery, where they were just refilling the grave for a burial earlier that day.) We were also directed to St. Sepulcher Cemetery, one not on my itinerary but a vast site, much of which was overgrown and impenetrable, which also contained 3 separate plots of WW1 graves (listed elsewhere, and many marked as removed for CWGC renovation), as well as the by now usual proliferation of late 19th Century Regimental Monuments (did they each have to erect one at the conclusion of their tour of duty?) and the gravestones recording the losses of family members and Civil Service employees. The site was vast, probably 95% inaccessible with grave tops just poking through the undergrowth in places, and took well over a baking hot hour to cover 3 tiny portions which the CWGC keep cleared. Abortive visits to other potential sites concluded the day, and then it was back to the station for the 4 hour ride back to Mumbai. The catering excelled - a constant stream of vendors with hot snacks and drinks, sweets and even English paperbacks.



## Day 3

**Curry flavoured everything for breakfast?** Different, but we are in India. And I did understand the cautions I received before travelling – this is India, do not expect everything to go according to plan. And of course it doesn't. Travelling for the second time to Emmanuel Church ('come any day between 10 and 12 because the workers are here then,') we find that the sexton is out of the city and he is the only one with the key – really?? Next to Christ Church, Byculla, except that the driver takes me to a nearby R C church. Finally I convince the driver of his error, and we arrive at another church stuffed with 19th century military memorials. Then to Sewri, the Christian burial ground for the European population of Bombay for many decades. Within 10 minutes I'm being threatened that my camera will be confiscated because I haven't permission to take photographs.

which being interpreted means I haven't gone to the office and negotiated the amount of the bribe needed to keep the other four men sitting around the table (excluding the cemetery manager, of course, who issued the threat in the first place) from reporting to the Burial Ground Committee of my activities. But I still have my pictures of the only CWGC grave here, which no-one could prevent me photographing. Thelma was a WACI who died in 1945, and was for some reason the only grave left there when all the other WW2 graves were moved in the 50's to Kirkee War Cemetery. When my daughter joined me at Sewri later in the day we visited Thelma again, just 21 when she died.

Much searching produced P & O seamen who fell into the holds of their ships, or overboard into Bombay Harbour, and Civil Servants aplenty, but just only a few military graves. The search for an MOD listed burial from 1948 revealed that the grave had been reused in 1973 – no memorial for this British army signaller remains.

However the peace and goodwill previously purchased in the Cemetery Office produced offers of the unlimited use of the 'cloakroom' facilities – 'if you have a towel' – was a welcome relief after a warm 34 degree afternoon in a dusty cemetery – especially as a 23 hour train journey was the next item on the itinerary.

The evening became a long wait on the station platform for the 20.30 train to Chennai (Madras), and **an extensive series of sellers of snacks**, evening meal, and liquid refreshments meant we were fully sustained for the night.

#### Day 4

To state the possibly obvious, a 23 hour train journey is pretty long. The facilities are all reasonable, and the service constant. It's a little strange settling down in bed to sleep in a semi-open compartment with two perfect strangers, but it's all no more than expected. The railway track can be seen through the hole in the bathroom floor, but enough said there! Each of the main stops en route give us some minutes to leave the train, walk the platform, and watch the hawkers offer their wares to our fellow passengers. Eventually the journey ends in Chennai, and we are disgorged into a darkened city.



#### Day 5

An early departure is needed for the flight to New Delhi, the timing of which had changed three times, and the airline once, during the past 24 hours. Saturday was a whirl of sites, starting with Madras War Cemetery. The dew was thick on the grass, strange birds were squawking in the trees, behind me the traffic roared and hooted. The gardeners hosed down the shady side of the 1914-18 Memorial for me – Steve must judge if it's an improvement! After breakfast (curried vegetable sandwich) with the Cemetery Manager we dived with death to cross the dual carriageway and go several stories up the steeply narrow steps of an overlooking building to take some great views of the Cemetery.



After a couple of abortive cemetery visits, seeing the Chennai War Memorial (the military using the conveniently placed stones to dry their washing) and a highly successful Garrison church stuffed full of military memorial plaques, we arrived at a group of several cemeteries – Armenian, Catholic, Anglican etc. Access to them was down a street where each pavement had been converted into homes served by the occasional water standpipe at which children were showered, teeth cleaned, washing up done and water jugs filled. Lunch was being prepared at the kerbsides; people spilled everywhere, yet waves and happy smiles greeted this stranger taking photos of their domestic activities.

Taking off down different alleyways lead to separate little cemeteries. Many of the **larger stones had been pressed into use as clothes dryers, and the children playing around the stones seemed to have kept the undergrowth down**. It was here that the Commission gardener was invaluable; the graves cared for by the Commission were marked by unfamiliar stones, and which cemetery we were in at any time was otherwise a mystery. A group of graves of Boer pow's was unusual; a chapel attached had been extended into the cemetery area and was in use as a Saturday school and canteen serving lunch to many.

The largest of the cemeteries –St Mary's – was full of anomalies. The rear entrance, which we had to use, and the nearby plots, was apparently used for as a 'cloakroom' by all the neighbourhood dogs – their numbers are obviously considerable. The cemetery was rambling and extensive, with rubbish piles and spoil heaps from neighbouring developments encroaching at the edges. But it was the all-pervading creeper which prevented access to the vast majority of graves. Small areas had been burnt back, but this hadn't improved the condition of the adjacent Commission stones, which were dotted about down winding paths through the undergrowth.