

**General Robert Maclagan, R.E. By Major-General Sir
Robert Murdoch Smith, K.C.M.G., R.E.**

(Read January 21, 1895.)

General Robert Maclagan of the Royal (late Bengal) Engineers, who was born in Edinburgh on the 14th December 1820, was the third son of Dr David Maclagan, Physician to the Forces and Surgeon-in-Ordinary to the Queen in Scotland. He was educated at the High School and at the University of his native city. Subsequently, after the usual course of instruction at the East India Company's Military College at Addiscombe, where he greatly distinguished himself, he received his first commission as a Second Lieutenant in the Bengal Engineers in December 1839. Like other young Engineer officers, he thereupon underwent a thorough course of practical training at the Royal Engineer Establishment, Chatham, now designated the School of Military Engineering, before proceeding to India to enter on the active duties of his profession. It may not be amiss to point out that, in all probability, much of the thoroughness and versatility which characterised his subsequent career was due to the nature of his early training, viz., a good school and university curriculum under home influences, followed by two years' theoretical, and two years' practical, instruction in the special subjects appertaining to the duties of a military engineer. This happy sequence of literary, scientific, and practical pursuits undoubtedly helped, in large measure, to prepare him for the varied eventualities of his future career.

Arriving in India, he was appointed to the Bengal Sappers and Miners, the headquarters of which corps he joined at Delhi in March 1842, while the British and Indian forces were still engaged in avenging our previous disasters in Afghanistan. From Delhi he marched in the same year in command of a company to Ferozpur, where he joined the army of reserve held in readiness to support the army in the field under Sir Frederick Pollock. On the safe

return of the latter, after its victorious campaign, the army of reserve was broken up, and Maclagan was transferred first to Kurnal, and afterwards to Karachi, the port of the recently annexed province of Sind. There, under the energetic Sir Charles Napier, he acted for a short time as Executive Engineer until the outbreak of the Sikh war in December 1845, when, along with his chief, he started for the Punjab. He arrived at Lahore in time to take part in the grand review of the British forces on March 5, 1846, by the Commander-in-Chief, Sir Hugh Gough, and the Governor-General, Sir Henry Hardinge. In the course of the war he was placed in charge of the works for the defence of Lahore, a most responsible post for so young an officer. The choice of Maclagan for such a post is, in itself, ample evidence of the fact that at this early period of his career he had already gained the confidence of his superior officers. After a few months' service at Lahore, which, contrary to expectation, was not attacked by the Sikh army, he was prostrated by fever, and sent to Simla. While there he was in the following year selected for the position with which his name was afterwards to be so thoroughly identified, that, namely, of Principal of the Civil Engineering College about to be established at Burki.

The idea of training young Europeans, Eurasians, and natives in different branches of civil engineering, so as to fit them for useful employment in the Public Works Department, was a new one, and the means adopted for carrying it into effect were, consequently, experimental. On the selection of the first Principal and Organiser of the new College depended the success or failure of the experiment. That, under such circumstances, the Government should have chosen a subaltern little more than twenty-six years of age, shows clearly how young Maclagan's capacity, character, and personality had impressed themselves on his contemporaries.

The result showed that the confidence of the Indian Government in the young Principal was not misplaced. From the first he displayed an extraordinary talent for organisation, and an indefatigable habit of taking pains. These qualities, combined with a remarkably genial and kindly disposition, made his reign at Rurki an eminent success.

When the Mutiny broke out in 1857, measures, in which Maclagan took a prominent part, were at once taken by Colonel Baird

Smith, R.E., for the defence of the European community in and around Rurki. The college buildings were put into a state of defence, and the pupils organised into such an efficient garrison, that the mutineers thought it prudent to let them alone. What might otherwise have proved a second Cawnpore was thus happily averted. Throughout that trying and critical period Maclagan's conduct was spoken of by those who were present as beyond all praise.

In 1861 Maclagan, now a Lieutenant-Colonel, was appointed Chief Engineer and Secretary in the Public Works Department to the Government of the Punjab, in which appointment he remained until his retirement from the service in January 1879, after attaining the rank of General. During his long administration of the Public Works Department in the Punjab, much was done in the making of roads, railways, and canals, and in the erection of barracks and other public buildings, towards the development of the resources and the permanent security of what in many respects is the most important province of the Indian Empire.

In retiring from the public service, General Maclagan merely exchanged one field of activity for another. In the *Proceedings of the Royal Asiatic Society*, of which he was a Member of Council, and in the latest edition of the *Encyclopædia Britannica*, he found scope for his literary tastes and researches, more especially in subjects connected with the East; while his continued interest in science was evidenced by his Fellowship of the Royal Society of Edinburgh, and of the Royal Geographical Society of London, of which latter, for a number of years, he was a most efficient Member of Council. It was, however, on work of a missionary and philanthropic nature that his heart was chiefly set. On it he spared neither time, money, nor labour, and whatever his hand found to do in its furtherance he did it with his might.

In every relation of life, public and private, he exemplified, as few men have done, the apostolic definition of charity, which reads almost like a categorical description of the character, temper, and disposition of Robert Maclagan.