'Our Man in Africa'

BY PETER HARRINGTON

Melton Prior's Victorian-era war sketches for an illustrated London weekly glorified Britain's last surge of imperialism

N 1891, Rudyard Kipling's first novel, The Light that Failed, appeared in print. The central character was a painter named Dick Heldar, a war artist and veteran of the Sudan campaigns of the mid-1880s. Upon returning to England, he began painting scenes of his experiences fighting the dervishes. Kipling did not reveal the inspiration for this character, but he was clearly thinking about the artists who accompanied war correspondents and the British army on its colonial campaigns in the late 19th century. One such "special," Melton Prior, might easily have been Kipling's model. The two did meet over dinner in Bloemfontein, South Africa, during the Boer War in 1900, and Kipling was well aware of the artist's work from the pages of the Illustrated London News.

Prior, born in London in 1845, the



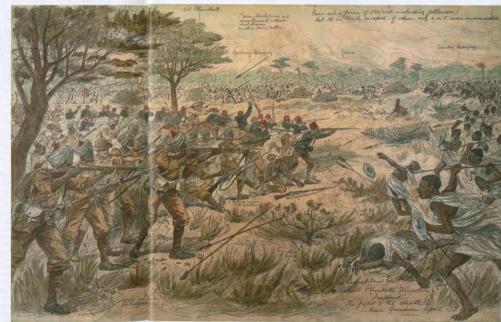
son of a landscape artist and illustrator, came to epitomize the Victorian adventurer-artist at the height of British imperialism. His friend and editor, S. L. Bensusan, asserted that "pretence and affectation played no part at all in his life." Yet Prior never shied away from having his photograph taken—or any form of self-promotion.

In his final years, with the encouragement of Bensusan, Prior began documenting his experiences. Campaigns of a War Correspondent, one of the few records of a working Victorian war artist, was published two years after his death in 1910.

A had advanced in the second half of the 19th century, particularly in portraiture and landscape studies, the camera could not yet capture movement clearly. For military and other action, the illustrated newspapers and magazines still relied heavily on a cadre of artists who traveled the world in search of the stories making headlines.

The two leading rival illustrated weeklies, the Illustrated London News and the Graphic, competed for the best artists. The London News was lucky to secure the services of Melton Prior along with those of a talented Scotsman, William Simpson (1822–1899), while the Graphic employed Frederic Villiers (1831–1922), who has also been linked to Kipling's story. These three men trailed the army on virtually every major British cam-

Sketch artist Melton Prior (left) was admired by his public and peers alike for always getting near the thick of the battle.



This pen and watercolor drawing by Prior depicts a typically heroic stand by British soldiers, in this case against overwhelming odds in Somaliland in 1903.

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paign between 1867 and 1903, and covered wars between other countries as well. Villiers, who also wrote stories for the *Graphic*, even lived long enough to portray the Great War.

In Prior's first campaign experience, he joined Maj, Gen. Sir Garnet Wolzeley on his foray into Ashanti (present-day central Ghana) in West Africa, in 1873, traveling rhrough the dense jungles with the troops to the capital, Kumasi. Besides a revolver, a double-barreled gun, and a plentiful supply of whiskey, he carried several small sketchbooks in which he scribbled the scenes unfolding before his eves.

In his tent at night, he would work these up into larger pencil sketches with annotations to guide engravers back in London. Every week, these sketches down the jungle track to Cape Coast Castle, the seat of colonial government on the British Gold Coast in Ashanti, where they would travel by ship to England, then by train to London. At the London News, other artists would transfer them onto wood blocks that would be carved and readied for printing.

The finished picture's would appear in the large-format Illustrated London News every Saturday. While news of the campaign had already been telegraphed and published in daily newspapers such as the Times, the pictorial press became quite popular by presenting the images behind the news: the jungle, the local people, soldiers on campaign, the leadne officer, and the fighting.

Prior's skill with pencil and ink was ideally suited to pictorial reportage; although he was never considered a great artist, his quickness in recording scenes won him the admiration of many, especially the officers with whom he spent most of his time. Prior always made a point of ingratiating himself to those in authority, and his cooperation with the leading military men won him special treatment: At one point in Egypt, years later, a victorious Wolseley stretched out beside Prior on a rug in his defeated enemy's tent and helped the artist copy Wolseley's plan of the action.

Over the next decade, Prior covered wars in Spain against the Carlists, then an insurrection against the Ottomans in Herzegovina, and conflicts elsewhere in Africa. He attended the failed peace initiatives in Constantinople in 1876, and when a major clash between Turkey and Russia broke out in 1877, he was rushed to the "seat of war," narrowly escaping injury during the bombardment of Rustchuk, a Turkish stronghold in Bulgaria.

Prior would often be found near the fighting. Not merely a witness, he stormed trenches with British troops putting down an Egyptian army revolt at Tel-el-Schir, swa British square crumble at Tamai in the Sudan, and tried mountain fighting against the Aridis in northwest India. He probably saw more combat than mod British officers, given the range of military action he covered, yet his book indicates he was as interested in the lamb stew he shared with a soldier in the desert as in campaign strategy and tatics.

It its 7%, PRIOR was back in Africa, this time in the south, where extensive emineral wealth was attracting European prospectors, entrepreneurs, and adventurers. When they encroached on tribal lands, conflict followed. Local militias, backed by some imperial troops, were being called upon to defend Europeans in boundary disputes. Prior did his best to cover the fighting against the natives, while his London News counterpart, William Simpson, was in Afghanistan to observe the war that had broken out there.

The next year, Prior traveled to Natal, South Africa, to report on the far more organized campaign against the Zalus. Fortunately for him, he was not present in late lanuary 1879 when a Zalu army massacred a British force at Isanhlwana and another small group of redcoats heroically defended Rorke's Drift against overwhelming numbers. He did aketch the aftermath of those battles, and the subsequent six months of fighting. While British regulars bore the brunt of the fighting, many local militias and irregutroops participated, including numerous Dutch farmers. Though eager to fight the Zulus, the Boers were wary of the British, not only for their Iand avarice but also because Dutch Protestants considered the Church of England a disguised branch of the Roman Catholic Church. Tensions between these two European eroups came to a head in 1881.

Prior reported on the conflict, including the repercussions of the second African disaster for Britain, this one at Majuba Hill, where Boers killed, captured, or wounded more than half of a British force of 450. Many of Prior's sketches were based on the evening sama account of his friend and colleague, John Cameron of the Evening Samadral.

The Boer struggle epitomized nationalist aspirations emerging throughout the empire, especially in Egypt, where the population resented not only Ottoman rule but also the presence of the British and French, who were primarily there to safeguard the Suez Canal. Under the leadership of a former Egyptian soldier. Arabi Pasha, a revolt broke out in 1882. Now referred to by the News as "our man in Africa," Prior rushed north across the continent and was on board HMS Alexandria when British ships bombarded the city of Alexandria. After British troops landed to quell the rebellion, Prior accompanied them along the Freshwater Canal to Tel-el-Kebir, where they crushed the Egyptian army.

Next, Sudan was gripped by nationalist fervor mixed with religious fanaticism under the self-styled "second prophet" Muhammad Ahmad ibn as Sayyid Abd Allah, known as the Mahdi. The clear danger this Islamic revolt presented to neighboring ggypt gradly concerned British authorities. After Mahdists attacked two towns, the British hastily assembled an Egyptian expeditionary force under the command of Col. Valentine Baker. Prior had befriended Baker on the ship bound for the Sudanese Red Sea port of Suakim. But Prior hurt his leg in an accident and was forced to stay on board, just off shore.

He was lying in his chair on the deck when he saw through his binoculars "mounted men galloping and others on foot running as hard as they could...at first a few, then more and more, until at last, turning to the captain of the ship who was by my side, I esclaimed with horror, 'It's all up; the column has met with a disaster. It's a bolt." Baker and a few officers fought their way to safety.

Prior sketched battle scenes as they unfolded (right, in Turkey, 1877); in London artists carved their interpretations onto wooden blocks for the final print (below).





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but the rest of his force was annihilated. Three weeks later, fully recovered,

Prior was back on the march with British troops at El Teb in Sudan. He sketched one incident involving the capture of an enemy trench by British soldiers. The place was riddled with rabbit warrens where many of the enemy feigned death, only to jump out and spear the British soldiers from behind. Once they realized what was happening, the British bavoneted any Sudanese they passed. When the sketch was published, questions were raised in the House of Commons over such brutality, and Prime Minister William Gladstone had to defend the army's actions. Finally determining that their inter-

Finany determining that their interrests in sudan were scart, the British sent their former governor general, Charles George "Chinese" Gordon (who had given major impetus to the Mahdist revolt by ending the Arab trade of black slaves, the principal prop to the Sudanese economy) to extricate all troops, mostly Egyptian. Although he managed to evacuate some 2,500 foreigners, Gordon and a forec composed mainly of Egyptians were surrounded and besieged in Khartoum.

Wolseley mounted a relief column in Egypt but proceeded extremely slowly. When Gordon begged for speed, Wolseley sent a "flying column" of 1,500 troops on camels led by Brig. Gen. Herbert Stewart. Prior accompanied them, as did most of the war correspondents. They witnessed two clashes against 5,000 Mahdist warriors in January 1885 that made them realize the true peril of combat. John Cameron and St. Leger Herbert of the Morning Post were killed, as was Stewart; fellow correspondents Bennet Burleigh, Harry Pearse, and Frederic Villiers were wounded, and a bullet grazed Prior. The British were delaved sufficiently; Khartoum fell two

A typical Prior layout in the London News glorifies the doorned Gen. George Colley in 1881, at Majuba Hill in the first Boer War. days before Wolseley and his main force could arrive.

Prior survived Sudan to cover a small campaign in Burma in 1887. But besides a brief soiourn to India's North-West Frontier to cover another tribal revolt in 1897, and to Crete in the same year to report on the conflict between Greeks and the Ottoman Empire, the following decade found him in southern Africa observing events that culminated in the Second Boer War of 1899-1902. In 1903. the London News sent him to eastern Africa to provide sketches of the Somaliland campaign, and the following year he covered the war between Russia and Japan, albeit from a distance since Japan restricted correspondent activity.

This was to be his last military assignment. His travels and the stresses of living on campaign had taken their toll, and following an attack of pleurisy, he died in London on November 2, 1910.

RIOR HELPED CREATE a favorable, heroic image of British imperialism in the latter half of the 19th century. While small dissenting groups opposed some of the colonial adventures in Africa against the Zulus and the Boers, the actions of Her Majesty's government and its army had broad public support. Prior was an ardent imperialist. When asked in 1897 whether war correspondents were a necessity of critilization, he responded:

[W]ar itself is one of the great factors in a nation's progress and pressige, and therefore the war correspondents and war artists are necessary to faithfully chronicle the doings of the army in the field, and take no small part in the march of civilization.

Prior was not indifferent to the sufferings of war. He wrote of the "ghastly experience" of coming upon some 50 dead natives badly mutilated by Schneider bullets in the dense forests of the Ashanti and the "horribly sickening sight" of soldier after soldier being brought in covered with blood.

When he was forced to defend himself during the same campaign, killing two men, he was haunted by the question of whether he had committed murder. Nevertheless, he shared the conviction of many of his contemporaries that what he and his country were doing, in advancing civilization, was right.

He also strove to depict the truth. He once commented:

We go "to the front" as a body of men at risk of our lives for the benefit of the public, and I am proud to be able to asy that in the twenty-one wars in which I have represented my paper, I could swear to the truth of every incident in my sketches, and I am never afraid of being challenged as to any fact I send home.

Prior's work totally dominated his life and his travels took him twice around the world. He claimed that he had spent only one full year at home, and he admitted in his book that these long absences cost him his first marriage.

To get the best view, Prior was often forced to take risks and he certainly put his life on the line many times. For this, he was well compensated and feted at home. In fact, Prior's celebrity earned him access to the right clubs and the right society, and he sometimes presented dramatic slide shows to paying audiences. On one occasion following a lecture on the Battle of Tel-el-Kebir, the Prince of Wales exclaimed, "Everyone has known for years that Mr. Melton Prior is a clever artist, but few probably were aware that he is so graphic a lecturer. I have just been told that this very interesting lecture has lasted an hour, but it seemed to me only ten minutes."

While he considered his work unbiased, there is no denying that Prior's agenda suited the authorities. Indeed, there is little evidence that his work was ever censored or suppressed, and his sketches helped perpetuate the Victorian certainty that Britons were destined for military supremacy over other nationalities. MHQ

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