CHAPTER III

EARLY YEARS OF GEORGE THOMAS (1781-1786)

Many remarkable European military adventurers came to India during the 18th century. One of the most colourful figures among them was George Thomas, a native of Ireland, who with some genius and "with audacious enterprise"1 established himself as an independent Raja of Haryana.

He was of Hibernian origin (also called Celtic origin). He was born at Roscrea* in the country of Tipperary**

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* Roscrea was a centre of Monasticism from many centuries. It had its own monastery which was founded by St. Cronen in the 17th century. There was also a Franciscan friary, which was established in the town in the 15th century. Roscrea had many beautiful sights. There was a 2 miles lake towards the East of city. Even Giraldus Cambrensis in his early writings was aware of this holy spot, he refers to it in his work as "the Insula Viventum".+


** Tipperary - country of Ireland in the province of Munster, bounded North-West by Galway, North-East by Offaly county, South by Waterford, East by Leix Country and Kilkenny, and West by Cork, Limerick, Clare and Galway. 'The County was formed by King John in 1210. In 1372, the grant was confirmed to James Butler, Earl of Ormonde, the lands belonging to the Church retaining, however, a separate jurisdiction, and being known as the County of Cross Tipperary or the Cross of Tipperary'.++

about the year 1756\textsuperscript{2} where a number of Cromwell's Ironsides had been settled in the 17th century.

His father John Thomas was a "descendent from Cromwell's military settlers".\textsuperscript{3} It is known "from peacock's list of ships and soldiers sent to Ireland in 1642 ... that a certain John Thomas commanded a small supply Ketch."\textsuperscript{4}

A glance at the conditions of middle of the 18th century Ireland will show the environment in which George Thomas was born and brought up.

Ireland was very badly ruled during the 18th century. The social, economic and religious conditions of the people in Ireland was in a bad state. There were a number of classes and groups inhabiting in Ireland. Among these, the two classes were more important i.e. Anglo-Irish and the Normans. The Normans belonged to Roman Catholic faith and the Anglo-Irish were Protestants. But the Roman Catholics were in great majority in Ireland as compared to the Protestants.

The Protestants were, generally speaking, landowners and the vast majority of Roman Catholics worked as peasants on land.

\textsuperscript{2} (i) M.H., \textit{op.cit.}, p. 6.
(iii) (Grey writes Thomas's birth in 1756),C.G.,\textit{op.cit.},p.36.
\textsuperscript{3} C.G., \textit{op.cit.}, p. 36.
\textsuperscript{4} Ibid.
Condition of agriculture in Ireland was extremely depressing. Lecky writes, "In nearly every part of Ireland agriculture was still extremely crude. Absenteeism, great ignorance, want of capital and want of enterprise, all contributed to depress it, and in the more backward parts it was as barbarous as can well be conceived." That is why, many Irish landlords were poor and in constant need of money. The condition of land labouring class was still worse. They could not earn money for their labour; they were paid by the landlords in form of potato plots or by the grazing of one or two cows. The other factors such as want of employment, exorbitant rents, increasing taxes, low wages and many famines etc. further contributed to the misery of the people.

Moreover, the relations between the Protestants and the Roman Catholics were far from friendly. In this period the majority of the Roman Catholics, being landless, wished to resume the control of land. They did not hesitate in securing the help of European Roman Catholic Powers to achieve this end. Consequently the Protestants enforced a series of penal laws. The code proved to be ruinous to the Roman Catholics in Ireland. According to Shearman, "The code was imposed progressively and at intervals, and

nobody could be sure how far the persecution was going to go. In certain areas there were also episodes of violence and cruelty running quite beyond the cruelties permitted by law.

Thus, the penal laws made the protestant landlord in a Catholic district little less than a despot. The Roman Catholics suffered heavily. In almost every walk of life when a Protestant and a Catholic were in competition the former found the ascendency of his religion an advantage.

The laws in Ireland prohibited the Roman Catholics from receiving any education at all. Lecky wrote, "Debarred from education at home, a great part of the more wealthy Catholic families sent their children to France." But the children of poor Catholic families remained almost defenceless.


But many harsh laws were made in endeavor to make the Roman Catholics of Ireland join the English church. The Catholics were excluded from practice of law, from keeping a school and from university degrees. Later on, the Irish officers and soldiers were disbanded and many went off to the Continent of Europe and Asia to serve in the armies of other nations. No Catholic could sit in Parliament, hold any office in the state, or have any say in the Government of his native land. Then extra laws were passed to punish Catholics - called "Penal laws". The Catholics could have no schools, no lands, no clergy, no churches, no votes, no elections, no arms. They were utterly defenceless.

8. Ibid., p. 200.
illiterate and received only some religious education. Moreover, a Roman Catholic had to abandon his religion for receiving proper education e.g. many Cromwellian settlers became Protestants in Ireland during the middle of 18th century.

In the affair of religion, "neither George Thomas nor his parents were protestants, a fact, which certainly militates against the idea that they were descendants of the Cromwellians." Thomas could not pursue his education due to the poor economic condition of his parents. The home of Thomas was a small farm cottage "where his only compensation for his loss of formal schooling was a strong religious teaching which gave him a natural cultural background in the tradition of the Island of Saints and Scholars."

The father of George Thomas, John Thomas, was a good horseman. Later on his father was killed by a fall from his horse.* George Thomas inherited love of horses from his father. After the death of his father, Mrs. Thomas remarried. The relations of Thomas and his stepfather were not cordial. But Thomas remained at his little farm until the death of his mother in 1776.


10. Ibid., p. 6.

* From Col. John Inglis Eadie, DSO notes - Col. John Englis Eadie was an officer in the British army, who visited Ireland and collected some useful information regarding the early life of George Thomas from various sources.
In 1776, Thomas left his home, and he was employed at the seaport of Youghal in the country of Cork. At the seaport he worked as a labourer on the quays loading and unloading grain. Youghal was a busy port in the middle of 18th century. There was hard work on the harbour of Youghal. There were a number of grain stores and most of them were in the hands of two families i.e. the Flemings and the Farrells. The name of George Thomas appears as a worker in one of these stores in an old account book of the Farrells family.

George Thomas worked on the quays as a simple worker for two years. He left this service and set out from Ireland in search of new job at the end of the year 1778 or early month of 1779. Afterwards he joined British Navy in Bristol about the year 1780. Then he was posted to a Man-of-War ship called the Superb* which was under the command of Admiral Sir Edward Hughes. There was hard life on the harbour. Hennessy writes, "And having been raised in the Catholic and refined atmosphere of Ireland, he would have been sufficiently sensitive not to take easily to the coarseness and crudities of the ordinary seaman." 11

* From the study of these books+, it appears that George Thomas was a sailor in British Navy and he travelled in the ship Superb.
11. Ibid., p. 9.
There were strict laws for the sailors in the British Navy. Robinson writes that in 18th century there were more hardships, less pay, and fewer prospects of loot in the King's ships. The sailor had to maintain discipline in naval service. The Naval laws were based on 'The Black Book of the Admiralty'. A part of Oleron laws were also included which were adopted by Richard Coeur-de-Lion* and "which had special reference to English ships."^13

The following basic rules on the board ship which George Thomas had to know by heart were:

"Anyone who shall kill another on board ship shall be tied to the dead body and cast into the sea with it.


* The name represents Richard I of England who issued these Navy laws when he was going to France, by joining his Fleet at Marseilles. He, at Chinon on the Vienne, issued some ordinances in the English Navy. So, these laws contained about 47 articles which were applied to all the English ships. The Richard's maritime laws were the code known to jurists as the laws of Oleron. Some of them already had been enacted by his mother, Queen Eleanor, under the name of the "Roll of Oleron".+


"Anyone convicted of drawing a knife with intent to strike another with it or anyone who dies so and draws blood shall lose his right hand.

"Anyone convicted of theft on board shall have his head shaved and boiling pitch thrown over him and feathers or down strewed upon him to distinguish him as a thief."¹⁴

There were hard punishments for guilty seamen e.g., if a seaman was found sleeping while on duty he was "hanged to the bowsprit in a basket with a can of beer, a loaf of bread, and a sharp knife. He was to hang there until he starved or cut himself adrift into the sea."¹⁵

Before the end of 17th century, there were no special uniform for officers and midshipmen. The seamen could choose grey or red dress. But in the middle of 18th century, special uniforms were introduced for officers and other ranks. White breeches were introduced instead of blue in 1774. Similarly waistcoats were to be plain. Then buttons were round and an anchor and cable had to be introduced instead of rose on them. Comm. Campbell writes, "In about 1778, uniform for warrant officers was introduced. Midshipman had a stand-up collar with small white turn back; buttons for commissioned officers were

¹⁵. Ibid.
now gilded over and the cable round the anchor was removed. No regulations were issued with regard to boots, swords or hats."\textsuperscript{16} Later on, Naval Captains had full authority to check the dress of their men.

In a ship the sailors were also allowed to keep their wives. Harlots to satisfy men's animal passions were also kept in the ship.

At that time Irish seamen were not well treated by their contemporaries. They were, the "Poor Irish whom the crims brought over to sell either to the gangs or to the privateers."\textsuperscript{17}

On the ship perhaps George Thomas met the wives of some seamen. It is believed that Thomas always avoided the company of women for he knew the dangers of womanizing. However, he was addicted to wine on ship. Hennessy wrote,

"It would be reasonable to assume that Thomas may well have been a little frightened of the women he met in those days. It was scarcely likely that he would have become sufficiently hardened and sophisticated to wallow in the fleshpots, he must have encountered either in England or on his way to India."\textsuperscript{18}

The life of a seaman on the shipboard was very hard. Then "on long journeys, it was often rotten and inedible. There was a daily ration of 1 lb. biscuit and

\textsuperscript{16} Ibid, p. 117.
\textsuperscript{17} Christopher Lloyd, \textit{The British Seamen, 1200-1860}, (London, 1968), p. 138 (Quoted: M.H., \textit{op.cit.}, p. 11.)
\textsuperscript{18} M.H., \textit{op.cit.}, p. 12.
1 gallon of beer, and a weekly issue of 2 pints of pease, 3 oz. Catmeat, 8 oz. butter and 1 lb. of cheese."

During Thomas's journey on man-of-war ship, he got experiences of this hard life. He had many companions, and "most of his companions were the 'rag, tag and bobtail' of the kingdom."  

Thus Thomas worked hard on the shipboard, and he became skilled in his profession. He judged Admiral Hughes's activities within five months. The ship reached Madras from Bristol after about nine months. So George Thomas reached Madras as a gunner on the Coromandel.

   Tea was then allowed to the sailors in the ship by the orders of Admiral Sir E. Hughes during his journey to the East Indies in 1779 to 1782.*
   *Charles Napier Robinson, op.cit., p. 132.


   Mr. Humbley writes that Thomas originally was a common sailor but rose to be quarter-master later.+


   ++But it seems to be wrong, because a Boatswain possessed the status of commissioned officer in the Royal Navy and earned about 32 shillings (gunner got 20 shillings pay). The duties of a Boatswain included responsibility for all rigging, cables, cardage, anchors, sails and boars. But George Thomas did not perform any of these duties. M.H., op.cit., p. 13.
At that time, the French Company in India was making efforts to recover its lost position in the country. Both companies (French & English) were keen to establish their supremacy in the Indian states. To achieve this aim the French sent a squadron of five ships under the command of the Commandant Admiral Bailli de Suffren (1726-1788). These ships sailed from Brest on 22nd March 1781 and reached Madras via Northern route.

   The following writers mention Thomas's arrival in the year 1780:
   i. C.G., op.cit., p. 36.
   The following writers write about Thomas's arrival in 1781:
   The following accounts mention Thomas's arrival in the year 1782:
   (Admiral Sir Hughes arrived at Madras from Trincomalay on 8th Feb. 1782; letter dated 8th April, 1782).

23. G.B. Malleson, Final French Struggles In India And On The Indian Seas, p. 11.
Similarly the English too sent their fleets to India. The strength of the English fleets in India were "nine ships of which six under Admiral Hughes reached the Coromendel coast at the beginning of this year." Many European military adventurers came in these French and English ships to India. And among these foreign adventurers, George Thomas, an Irishman, was destined to play a unique role in the history of northern India. There was a naval war between the French and the British Navy. It seems that before deserting the navy, Thomas took part in 'four inconclusive engagements in those waters between Admiral (Sir E. Hughes) and the Bailli de Suffren'. In these actions, Thomas also fought against the French troops, "aboard one of the vessels of which was his future enemy and conqueror, Pierre Cuillier (Perron), then a Sergeant of Marines." His nickname on board among his troops was Jehazi Sahib - 'Sir Sailor'.

25. H.C. Keene, Hindustan Under Free Lances, 1770-1820, p. 75.
In the end of 1781 or beginning of 1782, he deserted the British Navy*, and wandered in search of a new job in India.

But Thomas was lucky. Soon he met another Tipperary man called Kelly. They became good friends and remained so for a long time. Kelly did not like the British and Thomas favoured Kelly's views. Thomas wanted to serve under Nizam of Hyderabad but on Kelly's advice he joined the service of Polygars, a group of ravining band, who looted all and sundry travellers south of mid-Carnatic.

*(i) It seems that Thomas had made his plan of deserting the British Navy before reaching Madras. But he remained silent due to fear of being caught by the authorities. Not only did Thomas desert the British Navy, but also number of other seamen deserted it. Perhaps they did not like naval service or they wanted an independent service. Some felt oppressed due to strict naval laws. Lloyd indicates that "between 1774 to 1780 out of a total of 175,990 'recruited' seamen, some 42,000 deserted - nearly a quarter of the rating."


(ii) Perhaps he left navy due to lot of hardships, unsatisfactory pay and bad behaviour of his companions. He was ill-treated and his nationality was made a butt of fun; 'A Young Irish gentleman, a native of Tipperary comes to his captain with a complaint that he has been contemptuously treated by his shipmates. They had said the Irish were a nation of Hottentots and supplied two-thirds of Newgate calendar, and that there never was a Tipperary man who had not a piece of potato in his brain'. The skipper regards this complaint from a double point of view. He knows that to make a butt of a comrade leads to much quarrel and dissention, and the young Irishman is hidden to enter into the spirit of pleasantry. To which he replies that his shipmates might reflect upon his brogue, if they liked, but not upon his country. So, he did not escape jesting shafts at his nationality.' ++


27. M.H., op.cit., p. 22.
The Polygars (also Poligars or Polegars) were founded by the dynasty of the Madura Nayaks* in Southern India. These were also called the southern Poligers.

The term 'Poligar' was peculiar to the Madras presidency. The origin of this term can be traced in different languages spoken in South India, i.e. Telugu, Marathi, Tamil and even Canarese. They were generally 'subordinate feudal chiefs, occupying tracts more or less wild, and generally of predatory habits. The word in Tamil is Paleiyakaran, the holder of a Palaiyam or feudal estate; Telugu Palegadu and thence Maratha-Palegar'.

Dubois writes that, "The Poligars in many respects resemble the European barons of the Middle Ages, who from their strongholds ventured boldly to defy the royal authority. They are fairly numerous in the various districts of the Peninsula." Poligar, according to Wilson, means a "petty chieftain in the South of India.

* The founder was Visvanatha Nayak, the son of Nagama Nayak, about the period of 1529-1564. He had vast territory in Southern India. +


especially in Karnataka, occupying chiefly tracts of hill and forest, subject to pay tribute and service to the paramount state, but seldom paying either and more or less independent, subsisting in a great measure by plunder.\textsuperscript{31} According to Caldwell,

\begin{quote}
The title of Poligar is said by General Wilks to have been given by the Vijaya-nagara kings to the chiefs of Telugu colonies planted in the neighbouring provinces for the purpose of over-awing the original inhabitants. But English rejected this theory of name. In like manner, the English seem to have taken their word Pollem, a Poligars' holding, rather from Telugu Palem, than from Tamil Palaiyam.\textsuperscript{32}
\end{quote}

The Southern Poligars were creating troubles in South India since 100 years. Srinivasachari writes,

\begin{quote}
The southern Poligers, a race of rude warriors, habituated to arms and independence had been but lately subdued and those of Panjalamcoorchy were the hardest and bravest of the whole group.\textsuperscript{33}
\end{quote}

They led many plundering expeditions and later on their leader distributed the share of the plunder to his companions. They had an interesting system of sharing.


\textsuperscript{32} R. Caldwell, A Political and General History of the District of Tinnevelly. (Madras, 1881), p. 58.

The normal rule of sharing was that "portions were first set aside for the local polygars or chieftains whose connivance was important; then something was provided for the extensive performance of religious ceremonies and for a kind of family pension fund. Thereafter two shares went to the leader, a share and a half to the actual murderer and a share to each ordinary member of the gang."  

Hamilton wrote, "These Poligers were military chieftains of different degrees of power and consequence, who bore a strong affinity to the Zamindars of the Northern Circars and Thakoors of Rajpootana. Some were leaders of banditti or freebooters, other derived their descent from the ancient rajahs." The description of Col. Fullarton is more informative, "the various leaders, who possessed in 1783 considerable territory, maintained armed forces, and withheld their stipulated tribute on the first appearance of disturbance. These chiefs, as well as their subjects were called Poligers. They amount at present to 32, capable of bringing 30,000 brave, though


(On one occasion, the Nizam of Hyderabad borrowed some battalions of Infantry from a Poligar chief. The trained poligar troops consisted of these battalions).
undisciplined, troops into the field. They had also fortified towns and strongholds in the mountains. They had their plundering habits."  

The Poligars had match-lockmen. But rarely any cavalry, the smallness of their revenues rendered it almost impossible to maintain them. The use of cannon was unknown to them; their only arms were arrows, pipes, and flintlocks. They never risked a pitched battle.  

George Thomas joined the service of one of the Kanara Poligars*. The territory of Kanara was situated in south India. It was about 250 miles in length and had the territory of East India Company on one side and territory of Nizam of Hyderabad on the other side. The Poligars of Carnatic (Kanara poligars) were the "semi-independent and exceedingly lawless class of chiefs, inhabiting mountainous and jungle districts and of whom they were a considerable number in the hill tracts of South India."  

Thomas during his stay with the Poligars learnt about various weapons, which were used by them. He got knowledge about the hit-and-run tactics of cavalry in poligar's service.

* From Col Eadie's notes (According to Grey, "Thomas got employment as a gunner with the various Poligars or chiefs of tribes of mountain robbers who at the period infested southern India." C.G., *op.cit.*, p. 36).
After serving for about five years he left service of Polygars and entered the service of the Nizam of Hyderabad.

In Nizam's service, Thomas was enlisted as a private gunner. The Nizam had many European mercenary officers in his army. These officers were skilled in military activities and art of warfare. The Nizam also employed some trained artillery European officers who knew the art of gunnery. Among them a famous Gascon mercenary officer, Francois Raymond, commanded the army of Nizam of Hyderabad. He was an elegant and experienced French general in the army of Nizam.

There was lot of political uncertainty in the southern regions of India. Moreover, the French and the British were not on good terms. Both were keen for establishing their supremacy in India. On the other side, Tipu Sultan of Mysore was fighting against the British. Tipu was a sworn enemy of the British. He was trying to have an alliance with the French against them. Moreover, the relations between Tipu Sultan and the Nizam were not cordial. So Nizam was an firm ally of the British power against Tipu Sultan. There were also lot of differences among the Maratha leaders and the Peshwa. These powers were rapidly increasing their armies and they employed well trained and experienced European military adventurers in their service. George Thomas was recruited in the army of Nizam of Hyderabad.
Here, in the army of Nizam, he learnt many military tactics from his senior officers. He also got considerable knowledge about the art of gunnery. Thomas also got useful training in the art of rapid fire of cannon. He could now carefully aim the cannon on a target. He was paid regularly in the army of Nizam. Hennessy writes that

his subsequent military success, his excellence as a gunner and his prowess as military commander must all be the result in the Nizam's army training. 39

Thomas earned great respect and firm loyalty from his troops. While in Nizam's army, he served his master honestly and loyally. Not only did he serve the army of Nizam but he also created his own small army - a band of devoted soldiers. This group was called as 'Irish Pindaris' by Thomas. The Pindaris were plunderers and their activities resembled those of the Poligars.

After serving the Nizam he left his service, possibly because he did not like to work under the French commander Gen. Raymond. Crossing the peninsula on foot he arrived in Delhi.* Later he joined the army of Begam Samru of Sardhana in about 1787.


* It appears that George Thomas came to Delhi with the group of 'Irish Pindaris'. Perhaps he collected some money from the various villages on his way to Delhi.