

## HIDDEN GEMS AND FORGOTTEN PEOPLE



**FRANCIS RAWDON CHESNEY (1789-1872)**

### **Soldier and Explorer “Father of the Suez Canal”**

Francis Chesney was born at Sabbath Hill Road, near Annalong, County Down, the son of a revenue officer, Captain Alexander Chesney, who had served with distinction in America under Hastings and Cornwallis during the American War of Independence. Francis was named after his godfather, Francis Rawdon, Earl of Moira.

At the age of nine Chesney is said to have held a commission in the yeomanry and later attended the Military Academy at Woolwich. He made a personal tour of Napoleon's battlefields after the Penninsular War and walked over three thousand miles in order to study battle strategy, an obsession which preoccupied him all his life. In 1814 when he returned to County Down he was able to rescue the crew of a French ship which had grounded, and was presented with the Medal of the Societe des Naufrages.

In 1829, as lieutenant of artillery he went to Egypt to explore the possibilities of Egyptian and Syrian routes to India. During this trip, which lasted for three years, he visited Damascus, Tiberius, and Djerash, until he reached El Werdi and the Euphrates, which he sailed on a raft. He was able to report the feasibility of a Suez Canal. The British Government failed to exploit the idea and it was left to the French engineer Ferdinand de Lesseps to undertake the project. At the opening of the Suez Canal on 17 November 1869, de Lesseps referred to Chesney as 'the Father of the Suez Canal'; hence his epithet. Because of the success of this venture, a second exploration was instigated in 1835 under Chesney's command. The party landed in Syria and transported across the desert two small steamboats which they assembled on the banks of the Euphrates. Despite one of the boats sinking with the loss of twenty people, Chesney managed, with the remaining boat, to explore the Euphrates, the Tigris and the Karum, and to chart these waters. This venture took him to India, and he did not return to London until 1837. This feat won him the admiration of geographers.

By 1843 Chesney had risen in rank and was appointed Commandant of Hong Kong, and returned in 1851 to “Packolet” near Kilkeel, County Down. He was sent on two missions to Constantinople in order to assess the possibilities of a railway system. During this period he rose from the rank of colonel, through major general, to general in 1868.

## **HIDDEN GEMS AND FORGOTTEN PEOPLE**

During his lifetime Chesney published many works, including those on the exploration of the Rivers Tigris and Euphrates, a book on firearms and artillery, and another on the Russo-Turkish campaigns. He was a Fellow of the Royal Society, a Fellow of the Royal Geographic Society and had conferred on him a Doctorate of Civil Law by Oxford University.

**Victor Price**