

DOUBLE BOOKED

Nick Smith

If you want something done properly...

One of the most outstanding books of equine photography has just been published, or, to be more precise, self-published. Nick Smith looks at the remarkable story of Henry Dallal's Horse Warriors...

APUBLISHER FRIEND of mine once told me never to pay more than £80 for a book. I'm not sure how he arrived at that figure, and to judge by his private library he almost certainly never stuck to his own advice. But his words haunt me still and whenever I'm tempted to pay upwards of this mythical integer my hands start to shake.

Irrational though it may be, this arbitrary self-imposed ceiling has often saved me from buying a book that deep down I know I don't want. On the other side of the coin, it has also provided deep satisfaction when something I bought for a song while still an undergraduate makes it past the eighty-quid barrier. It doesn't exactly make me feel like Chuck Yeager when he broke his barrier, but it's nice all the same.

You might wish to imagine the quandary I found myself in when photographer Henry Dallal's new book *Horse Warriors* emerged from the stable recently at exactly £80 (there is a cheap version available for £50, but I wasn't interested in that). In terms of its editorial content, it is, to say the very least, a niche title, being a pictorial essay on India's 61st Cavalry. On his acknowledgements page Dallal says that it is 'a pleasure to share with you this celebration of the splendour of India's last active horse regiment, an experience that for me has become a feast of fascination with India, its colour and

magic.' Just in case Dallal needs reassurance, the pleasure is all mine, because this is a sumptuous book. I may not know much about equine pageantry, but I know a thing of beauty when I see it, and if ever there was a beautiful book then *Horse Warriors* is it. I signed the cheque with a steady hand and ripped it from its counterfoil without demur.

I like Henry Dallal's photography, and I always have done. I think he'd be a special photographer whatever he shot, but horses are his game. His first book – *Pageantry and Performance* (2003) – was a terrific photographic portrait of the Household Cavalry (familiar to most of us for their ceremonial 'Trooping the Colour'). Dallal really understands these sinewy, intelligent and handsome animals, and importantly he really understands the people who devote their lives to them. His photo-essay on the Household Cavalry is genuinely perceptive and intimate, while being the product of years of commitment to the task. How he got an 'Access All Areas' pass to a military regiment is a mystery, but it's a reflection of his dedication as a real pro. A clue may lie in his portraits of Her Majesty the Queen, which are informal and relaxed. Instead of the usual matriarchal scowl, Dallal coaxes from Queen Elizabeth a friendly smile, interpreting her formidable royal personage as a sweet, if slightly bossy, old lady. Her Majesty is known to be rather ►

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fond of Dallal's photography, so it could well be that permission came right from the top.

Pageantry and Performance might never have happened. Dallal touted his proposal around every publishing house he could think of before realising that 'no-one was ever going to touch it'. Believing that he had a book of real merit on his hands, he decided to publish it himself. This is the point where such stories normally follow a depressingly predictable path: unscrupulous vanity publishing houses fleecing the naïve and hopelessly deluded author, while countless boxes of unsold copies moulder in the cupboard under the stairs. Dallal was too clever to let this happen: he brought in corporate partners (my copy is 'In association with BAE Systems'), stayed in control of every aspect of the publication, and kept his costs stripped to the bone except for where it really mattered. At the time, London coffee table book publishers were charging big money for poorly bound titles that were printed on awful paper with repro barely better than your local newspaper. In response, Dallal single-handedly brought out a work of such high production values that it was almost embarrassing.

By his own admission he 'learned a lot' from the experience, and five years later he launched *Horse Warriors* at a glittery occasion at the Nehru Centre in Mayfair. As you might expect, there was plenty of 'book launch' wine sloshing around, while dignitaries – including Prince Michael of Kent and the High Commissioner for India, Shri Shiv Shankar Mukherjee – enjoyed a *son et lumière* showcasing Dallal's new portfolio. A superb retrospective of Dallal's work hanging in the downstairs reception rooms provided an object lesson for anyone thinking there's no difference between digital and film photography: wall after wall of huge silky prints made from colour transparency film stock, rich and fine in texture and detail, matchless in tone and hue. Dallal's masterpieces are his equestrian silhouettes shot through

the dust straight at the early morning sun. This is hard enough to accomplish on a digital camera, with limitless opportunity to shoot and reshoot while verifying your work in the field. To capture it all on film, effectively blind, without knowing what you've got in the camera, on horseback – something very few photographers have ever attempted – and to end up with these images is something special indeed.

With books like *Horse Warriors* the devil is in the detail, and Dallal is a stickler, as well as something of a showman, as we shall see. Between the foil-stamped boards there are some two hundred images beautifully reproduced on heavy, coated art paper with spot lamination on the photographs themselves as well as some of the text ornaments. The dust jacket is folded over at both top and bottom, giving it a reassuringly expensive feel, while the interior of the slipcase has been constructed from red board to match the exterior cloth (which might be going over the top, even by Dallal's standards). Thorough chap he is, Dallal signed my copy of *Horse Warriors* twice: once on the title-page in conventional black ink, and again in a less restrained gold ink on the picture that adorns the slipcase. It's a wonderful photograph of the 61st Cavalry on early morning training manoeuvres. With a longish exposure of (something like) an eighth of a second, Dallal has managed to perfectly capture the blurred motion of the horses as the pale sunlight catches the odd bit of brass and the regimental flag.

Although he would never say so aloud, Henry Dallal's *Horse Warriors* is a triumph of individual determination: a case of 'if you want something done properly, then do it yourself'. After all this luxury and the master-class in self-publishing, disbursing the mythical sum of £80 somehow seemed more like a privilege than a debt. ■

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HARRY JUDD

IT IS WITH great sadness that I would like to inform my friends and colleagues of the passing of my husband, Harry Judd. He was a true gentleman in all senses of the word and I will miss him greatly.

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