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OTHER REVIEW

Empire and information: intelligence gathering and social communication in India, 1780–1870. By C. A. Bayly. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996. Pp. xiv + 412. £40.00. ISBN 0-521-57085-9.

For the interdisciplinarian, Anglo-Indian historiography can be frustrating. In working on Paul Scott's *Raj quartet* (four profoundly historical novels about Anglo-India, 1942–7, better known as TV's *The jewel in the crown*) I have faced such questions as: whether it is reasonable to believe that in 1947 a senior British police officer who owned Pathan clothes and brown make-up used them professionally, passing as an Indian to gather intelligence; what credence the officer's probable homosexuality gives an alternative explanation, that cultural transvestism and Indian guise served private sexual rather than public professional ends; and whether the resonances with Thuggee in the costumed and made-up officer's murder by strangulation (in a Muslim-ruled, Hindu-majority, not-yet-acceded princely state in late July 1947) are of any historical merit. But the archetypes in which writers of fiction can combine scope and particularity are unavailable to the historian, too often confined to the dense and satisfying footnotery of the local study claimed as typical, or happily wandering the open generalizations of the all-India history claimed as exemplary; and for the critic wishing to test the historical probity of a fiction the result is Hobson's choice between easily-found but tangential treatments, and trawling memoirs for the reticent implications of conventional Anglo-Indian understatement.

In the case of Thuggee, the lines of literary descent from Sleeman's Thug dictionary (published in 1828), and Meadows Taylor's massively popular *Confessions of a Thug* (1839), are clear and continuous, passing through a gross of magazine stories and memoirs to John Masters's *The deceivers* (1925; filmed 1988) and beyond. Most are perniciously racist in familiar ways, but many still explore serious issues: in Masters's novel, for example, the British protagonist has in Indian guise become a Thug, and is in constant danger of exposure as a white spy – a motif transposed from the disguised escapes of Mutiny memoirs, where the risk is unavoidable, and here transformed by having the risk deliberately undertaken out of a sense of moral outrage and duty. Kali's cult of murder also proves far more emotionally seductive than the protagonist could imagine beforehand, despite an explicit warning of its irrational power given by the Thug turncoat who acts as guide and servant-mentor; and in playing the feared exposure of white identity against the feared loss of British identity Masters productively scrutinizes questions on which the heated debates about Thuggee between historians nationalist and 'value-free', Orientalist and Subaltern, have shed little light. Nor have I been able to find in their articles any consideration of the parallel with the crusaders' 'Assassins', another war-born western fear of a secret and murderous sect of easterners able to infiltrate one's ranks; nor of the intriguing recent parallel with 'ninjas' – a word which the *OED* (in the first *Additions* volume) dates to Ian Fleming's *You only live twice* (1964), where it is an aspect of Japanese security service training, but which I suspect develops from the disastrous jungle warfare of 1941–3 (Tommy Atkins – and, intriguingly, Johnny Jawan – as too honest for such sneaky terrain, unlike Johnny Jap) and owes its present wide cultural distribution to imaginings of Vietnam. Nor was the

internet any help: searching 'Thug' and 'Thuggee' I got thirty hits, of which twenty-eight derived either from *Indiana Jones and the temple of doom* or an episode of *Highlander* called *The wrath of Kali*, one from a role-playing game featuring thugs, and the last from a paranoid article about conspiracies. It's easy to note the coining and dissemination of stereotypes and caricatures, and the statistics in Meadows Taylor – 1,059 transportations and 412 executions for Thuggee in 1831–7 alone, with a further 120 awaiting sentence, 936 awaiting trial, and 483 turned informer – provide a kernel of 'fact'; but beyond this it seems hard to go.

The impasse is magnificently broken in Christopher Bayly's study, professorial in the best sense, opening a new field rather than magisterially trying to close one. It began as perceived paradoxes about Indian literacy and press freedom, bureaucracy and misinformation, which set Professor Bayly 'thinking about a study of the "information order" of British India, a topic that would occupy the dead ground between what is now a vibrant social history of India and its apparently lifeless intellectual history' (p. ix). In this and more he succeeds, applying Karl Deutch's work on social communication and the thinking of Manuel Castells to his own enormous knowledge of British India: particularly striking is the compression of much hot air about the consequences of the memsahibs to a sequence of telling formulations about the British disavowal of affective and patrimonial knowledges in favour of statistical and rational knowledges (pp. 165–6); the account of William Muir as typifying 'the overlap between political surveillance and orientalism' (p. 326); and the evidence that 'Colonial administration remained peculiarly vulnerable to rumours and rumour-mongering not only among its subjects, but also among its own officials' (p. 162). The book also greatly deepens the history of the Indian police, especially the emergence of its CID from Sleeman's Thagi and Dakaity Department and the politicization of local policing by including sectarian and nationalist issues in the CID's remit even at DSP level. The Thugs themselves (with assassins and ninjas in tow, though unmentioned) emerge from an 'information panic' (pp. 173–6), a product of the 'knowledge gap' both between indigenous and European information orders and within the Company's own divided information system decaying unevenly as it suffered increasing disavowals of contextual knowledge; and also a term with wide application, both to such Indian topics as the obsessive and prurient imaginings of mass rape used in 1857 to justify grotesque and barbaric reprisals, and to issues far afield, from Queen Victoria's fascinating *munshi* to the UN's current dealings with central Africa. It is like being given a course in imperial wiring when one has been staring in perplexity at the casing of the machine.

I am only sorry that Professor Bayly stops in 1870, and hope that someone will apply his technique to the seventy years of the formal empire: not least because *Empire and information* raises the spectre of a dreadful question. 1857 aside, British success in gathering and manipulating information was considerable, and if some parts of their information order (the NWFP is specifically mentioned) were in trouble after 1918, it remained good enough in 1942 for the well-informed mass detentions of Congress leaders during the night of 8/9 August. What then had happened by 1946–7? For if 1857 was the worst nineteenth-century failure of intelligence, it is dwarfed by the catastrophe of Partition. In posing the question, however implicitly, *Empire and information* secures its place not only as the best and most enjoyable, but also the most radical reflection on Anglo-Indian history that I encountered throughout the long and historiographically conservative summer of the fiftieth anniversary of the death of the *raj*.

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