



BESIEGED IN COMMON

Shared Narratives of British Men and Women in 1857

Ira Bhattacharya

WRITINGS on the Indian Mutiny by ordinary British men and women differ significantly from the official reports of it commissioned by the British government and from later accounts written by historians. They include casual notes taken during the events and later expanded into a volume for the perusal of friends and relatives back home, private letters written on the spot, daily entries into diaries and journals kept for the purpose, reminiscences and recollections, and impressions provoked by a return to the scenes of war. Thus the descriptions are varied, heterogeneous, plentiful and fall very much within the tradition of non-fictional narratives by the British in India going back a hundred years and more. They depict both the excitement of fresh encounters with the East and the hardships of living in a hot country where Europeans were susceptible to all kinds of diseases previously unknown to them. Eliza Fay's *Original Letters from India*¹ is a good example of this genre of writing, where the form of the letter and the journal is used to unfold a personal narrative. Though such letter-journals continued to be written during the entire period of British presence in India, they are progressively supplemented in large numbers by other kinds of writings, ranging from personal narratives like diaries, memoirs, and reminiscences, to formal literary texts like poems and novels. Early texts abound in picturesque descriptions and rich documentation of Indian life and character. In them, a search for the picturesque coexists with revelations of life in the *zenana* (women's quarters) and with 'random sketches ... interspersed with legends and traditions'.² Most of these accounts begin with a description of the almost legendary voyage from England to India that marked the transition from a known world to an unknown one. Landing at the port of Madras, or Bombay, or Calcutta, most of them were impressed by the '...Asiatic splendour, combined

with European taste exhibited around you on every side under the forms of flowing drapery, stately palanquins, elegant carriages, innumerable servants, and all the pomp and circumstance of luxurious ease, and unbounded wealth.³

The value and interest of these personal narratives lies not only in the vast range of experiences and feelings which the writers incorporate, but also in the specific viewpoint from which the observations are made. Their perceptions are seldom devoid of ideology. Inscribed in their descriptions is a subtle subtext of superiority, domination and power. The centrality of England in the scheme of things was the unspoken assumption behind all these texts, and India is never seen as anything other than a possession, a jewel to be jealously guarded and polished from time to time so that it does not lose its lustre. Their creative productions are but mere reproductions of their beliefs and prejudices. 'Images were not changed by the Indian reality', writes Allen Greenberger, rather 'the images have influenced the way in which the reality was seen.'⁴ The chroniclers, diarists and memoir-writers have a tendency to dwell upon the ordinariness of their accounts and many deny all claims to real authorship. John Beames in the preface to his book entitled *Memoirs of a Bengal Civilian*,⁵ writes:

If it should be asked why so obscure a person should think it worth his while to write the story of his life at all I reply that it is precisely because I am an obscure person – an average, ordinary, middle-class Englishman – that I write it. There is an abundance of biographies of eminent and illustrious men, but the very fact that they were eminent takes them out of the category of ordinary mortals. Their lives, therefore, though deeply interesting on account of their great deeds, are different from the general run of men who were their contemporaries.

It is generally believed that the lives of great men contribute to the making of history, but in a different way, the subalterns' lives unfold another dimension of history, giving us the texture of the fabric of daily life. Despite the rhetoric of self-disavowal, some of these writers do have a literary self-awareness, a consciousness of speaking to an audience. They do see themselves as witnesses to history and interpreters of an alien culture—a role that makes the task of writing an important and responsible act. 'In varying degrees', writes Ketaki Kushari Dyson, 'the authors of these books are conscious that they are participating in the respectable activity of producing "a new account" of "the East Indies".'⁶

The events of 1857 formed a watershed in the British relationship with India. The mature fruition of the grand imperial design in the first half of the nineteenth century had made the British confident of their superiority. But what happened in 1857 jolted their complacency and made them cautious and alert in their dealings with Indians. This is reflected in their writings as well. To quote Dyson again:

As we move through the journals written in the first half of the nineteenth century, we can, of course, see the Mutiny coming. Not only does the literary style move from the grandiosity of the eighteenth century, through Romantic exuberance, towards the crisper idiom close to the present century, but racial and cultural attitudes change, while threads of continuity with the preoccupations of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries are never altogether lost.⁷

The early nineteenth century saw the emergence of a highly structured English society in India. More and more women came over from Britain and, as a result, the fabric of British social life tightened around the club and the church, excluding the Indian participation that might have occurred in the eighteenth century. The British entertained little social intercourse with the Indians. They lived a life of seclusion in their up country stations or 'hybrid cantonments'—'that place which was English, and yet not English, Indian, and yet not India'.⁸ While men had a task to perform in the empire, women found their uprooted lives much more difficult. Barriers of race, language, a sense of social superiority and habits of behaviour kept them totally cut off from the Indians. To them, the events of 1857 were all the more shocking and their writings reflect their horror.

The British men and women writing their accounts of the mutiny were common people—wives, widows, soldiers, chaplains, judges, magistrates and the like—unremarkable except in the extraordinary nature of their circumstances. Colin Welch⁹ in his introduction to Maria Germon's journal writes that after reading it, one does not get any idea of what the mutiny was about or what lay beneath the surface she records. In Germon's journal, the trivial and the epoch-making are all mixed together. According to Welch, her rare gift was that she could write exactly as she spoke; thus an enormous rat in the bedding coexists with the agony of waiting for relief or anxiety for the safety of her husband. To quote Welch:

By eroding detail time gives to events like the siege of Lucknow an impersonal, stylized quality. Big words like "heroism" and "privation", though just, do not help. Mrs Germon makes us live with her through the siege and see it as she saw it: an affair of dirt and over-crowding; of hideous boils, lice and the death of friends ... of small pleasures like a cup of tea, or singing in the evening, of petty squabbles as to who fetches water for whom, who cooks what food there is and who does the washing up, all conducted to the accompaniment of shots whistling through the windows and walls.¹⁰

Localised in nature, mutiny texts by women who were besieged and did not get to see much, or any, of the outside world contain a detailed account of the daily events and the domestic chores that these women performed during the course of the rebellion. The details become interesting when we consider that

an English family would employ no fewer than two dozen servants, and women were not required to do any household work at all. Compared to their Victorian middle-class existence in England, this was a life of ease and luxury. Their present life then has to be seen in the context of the Victorian society of which they were a part. In the nineteenth century, England saw the rise of many women novelists, the better known among them were the Brontë sisters, Elizabeth Gaskell, and George Eliot, and the lesser known were writers like Dinah Mulock Craik and Elizabeth Sewell. The belief commonly held in those days regarding women was that they possessed certain feminine qualities (of sensitivity, delicacy, etc.) that were best utilised in writing a certain kind of fiction, in which the depiction of family and domestic life was predominant. In other words, women could write best about what they knew best—the sphere of the home. This kind of division of spheres between men and women writers, and the strict definition of what a woman's sphere ought to be, was recognised by many women novelists to be a means or a weapon for limiting and curbing their literary skills. Even writers like George Eliot or the Brontës had, on the face of it, to conform to the parameters provided by Victorian society, although they used various covert strategies to subvert these expectations and there was a secret subtext in their work in which such expectations were being challenged. Southey's pronouncement to Charlotte Brontë that 'literature cannot be the business of a woman's life, and it ought not to be' reflects the attitude men had towards women's writings in mid-Victorian England. As the diarists and chroniclers of the mutiny belong properly to the mid-Victorian era, they too had internalised these attitudes and put self-imposed limits on their writing. The women could not conceive of writing about events that were taking place outside the domestic sphere; they thought it best to limit themselves to what was happening within the four walls of their home. Hence, inexperienced and amateur that they were, they resisted being called writers.

Structurally, mutiny journals take a variety of forms depending on the aim and purpose of the writer. Where the intention is a simple coherent day-to-day record, we find the journal neatly divided into chapters, and each day's activity unfailingly recorded. Maria Germon's and Katherine Bartrum's texts are examples of the above kind, except that Bartrum's narrative is profusely interspersed with letters she wrote to her family and friends in England during the mutiny. In these writings what we get is not an account of the events of 1857 as history, but rather, the writer's private experiences as the one besieged. For instance, Maria Germon tells us of an occasion when she sat down at dinner with the others, 'laughing and talking, quite a merry party, when about nine of the servants came running in saying there was a great deal of firing going on in the direction of cantonments. We all started up—Dr Fayrer and Mr Harris went to see and sure enough there was artillery and musquetry to be heard and then tremendous fires seen blazing up.'¹¹ Mrs Adelaide Case in her journal describes the 'scene of ruin, devastation, and misery which presented itself to our eyes when we got to the Residency and

I never, never shall forget ... the horrors of war presented themselves with full force in the mass of shattered buildings and dilapidated gateways through which we passed.¹² Or, for instance, Katherine Bartrum writes:

I was so glad to hear he (her husband) had had a good tiffin, for the day before when he came he said he had had nothing but 'dal bat' for some days. We happened to be at dinner and I gave him a piece of meat but he seemed too much done up to eat and actually carried it away in a piece of paper to other gentlemen who could get none.¹³

Mrs Coopland mentions a wedding that took place within the Agra Fort while they were besieged there. She writes: 'It was a very gay wedding considering the circumstances and after the ceremony, they pitched a tent on the terrace, and had a dance and supper to which they invited all the officers.'¹⁴ She also mentions other kinds of entertainment that went on inside the fort such as balls and musical parties in the arsenal. This is the human side of the mutiny as recollected and retold by these women.

The text most representative of this genre of journal writing is the one by Maria Germon. When asked to evacuate Secundarbagh and proceed along with the other ladies to Allahabad, she decided to salvage as much of her earthly possessions as she possibly could. It makes interesting reading. In her journal she recalls:

I dressed in all the clothes I could, fearing I might not be able to get the others carried on from Secundarbagh. I put on four flannel waistcoats, three pairs of stocking, three chemises, three drawers, one flannel and four white petticoats, my pink flannel dressing-gown skirt, plaid jacket and overall my cloth dress and jacket that I had made out of my habit – then tied my Cashmere Shawl sash-fashion round my waist and also Charlie's silver mug and put on a worsted cap and hat and had my drab cloak put on the saddle. I forgot to say I had sewed dear mother's fish-knife and fork in my pink skirt and had put a lot of things in the pocket of it. I had also two under-pockets, one filled with jewellery and card-case, the other with my journal and valuable papers. I then, fitted my cloth skirt pocket with pencil, knife, pin-cushion, handkerchief, etc. – all my lace was sown up in a bag which I wore also.¹⁵

Finally, when, with her husband's help she managed to mount the horse, the poor creature, she writes, nearly fainted.

The diaries and letter-journals written by women form a contrast to the non-fictional narratives by men who saw themselves as active agents of the empire and wanted to play a part in actuating Britain's imperial design in India. T. Henry Kavanah, in his reminiscences entitled *How I Won the Victoria Cross*, writes of the Englishman's mission in India:

The white and the black men are dissimilar as day and night. There is no communion of feeling, and little of thought. The house that needs a thousand brooms cannot be swept by fifty: the gem of the East cannot be shaped and polished by the present number of artificers. Its lustre is obscured by the dust of ages, and it is certain that we have too few, and possibly too little time to cleanse it.¹⁶

Words like 'broom', 'cleanse', 'gem', 'artificer', and 'lustre' suggest how the white man perceived India in the mid-nineteenth century. Records of personal experiences of the mutiny left by Englishmen are varied, heterogeneous and plentiful. They enjoyed greater mobility and freedom; as agents of action they participated in military manoeuvres and met with innumerable experiences. Their texts are conceived in a larger geographical and conceptual space. The men, as a result of their direct involvement in 'the action', are able to give a picture of the mutiny as a series of events in flux, rather than as static, as often found in the writings by women. Moreover, the men usually see the mutiny in the larger context of history. It is a rebellion that they must be able to quell by their superior skills and also an opportunity for furthering their military careers in India. They are aware of making history, of winning what they considered a just war. Michael Edwardes is of the opinion that for these men, the mutiny was a battle 'between the forces of Christianity and the outer darkneses of the Moslem and the Hindu'.¹⁷ In their eyes, India was nothing more than one of their 'Eastern Dominions'. Belief in the racial, cultural and military superiority of Britain was not just a subtle subtext in these writings, but the most obvious preoccupation. W.H. Russell in *My Indian Mutiny Diary* notes:

[T]o the intelligent Briton, they are as the beasts of the field. 'By Jove! Sir,' exclaims the major, who has by this time got to the Walnut stage of the argument, to which he has arrived by gradations of sherry, port, ale, and Madeira, 'By Jove!' he exclaims, thickly and fiercely, with every vein in his forehead swollen like whip cord, 'those niggers are such a confounded sensual lazy set, cramming themselves with ghee and sweet-meats and smoking their cursed chillumjees all day and all night, that you might as well think to train pigs' ... The fact is, I fear, that the favourites of heaven – the civilisers of the world – *la race blanche*, ... are naturally the most intolerant in the world.¹⁸

Another British resident records: '...the sepoy is an inferior creature. He is sworn at. He is treated roughly. He is spoken as a "nigger". He is addressed as "suar" or "pig", an epithet most opprobrious to a respectable native ... [British officers] regard it as an excellent joke, as an evidence of spirit and a praiseworthy sense of superiority over the sepoy to treat him as an inferior animal.'¹⁹

The nineteen-year-old Wilberforce, a soldier in one of the regiments at Delhi, thought that the war they were engaged in was no civilised war. In his diary, entitled *An Unrecorded Chapter*, he writes: 'We had to deal with a race whose

interpretation of the word mercy is “the fear that kills”.²⁰ Years after the mutiny he recalls:

...in a shooting expedition in the Himalayas, I came across some of the sepoy who had escaped. In conversation with them, I said, ‘If Lord Dalhousie had been Governor-General, would the Mutiny have broke out?’ The man to whom the question was addressed turned as pale as his brown skin would allow, and visibly trembling even at that distance of time, at the thought of what would inevitably have happened, answered ‘God forbid! He would have swept us off the face of the earth.’²¹

All these young men were steeped in the ideology that placed England at the apex of power in the world, and they regarded India merely as a site for advancing their career and attaining glory. General Sir Orfeur Cavenagh, for example, in his book *Reminiscences of an Indian Official* writes:

My Indian career was the result of a conversation which I casually over-heard, in which a lady visitor, who had been in the East, depicted in glowing terms all the pleasures of an Indian life, and descanted upon the opportunities for advancement which the East India Company’s service offered to the soldier.²²

To the young Englishmen India was a land of immense opportunities and adventure. The personal narratives of men create the knowledge of the Orient as ‘...almost a European invention ... a place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes, remarkable experiences’.²³

The authors of the mutiny texts represent a cross section of the British community in India. Amongst them we have both soldiers and civilians, the latter consisting of magistrates, judges and chaplains. John Beames of the Bengal Civil Service and a well-known scholar, grammarian and philologist, wrote in his memoirs:

The Civil Service was in those days an aristocracy in India, and we were the *jeunesse doree* thereof. We were invited everywhere and dined out three or four times a week besides numerous lunch and garden parties. Mamas angled for us for their daughters for, as the phrase then went, we were ‘worth three hundred a year dead or alive.’²⁴

Three hundred pounds was the widow’s pension! The texts incorporate innumerable experiences including, for example, one chaplain’s journey from London through Spain, Alexandria, Egypt, the Red Sea, Aden, Sri Lanka, Madras, and finally to Calcutta across deserts, rivers, hills and plains. This particular text also outlines the events of 1857 in Barrackpore, Delhi, Agra, Kanpur, Lucknow, Allahabad, and Benares, giving us, at the same time, a picture of English life in these small towns or cities. Texts, such as this, are not attempts at recording the

facts of 1857 as history. Rather, these are personal narratives, combining the scenic, as well as the humane and social aspects of life, with the sudden uprising that caused a rupture in British existence in India.

While the men were out there fighting, dreaming of 'blood and battle', of Victoria Crosses, brevets, and other chances, and reliving Thomas Campbell's 'Soldier's Dream', women were engaged in mock mutiny battles and games with their children, trying to keep them away from the shells and bullets. Harriet Tytler, the lone woman to witness the siege at Delhi records her experiences in a touching narrative. On how she kept her little daughter engaged so that the girl did not run out of the bell-of-arms where they were hiding, Harriet writes:

At last a bright idea entered into my head. It was rather a unique one, which was to scratch holes in my feet and tell her she must be my doctor and stop their bleeding. This process went on daily and for hours. No sooner did my wounds heal, than she used to make them bleed again for the simple pleasure of stopping the blood with my handkerchief. But it had the desired effect of amusing her for hours.²⁵

Such were the ways in which the blood and violence outside crept into the lives of women and children. Julia Inglis describes in her journal the games her little son would play. She writes:

Johnnie's quick ears detected immediately when a bullet fell, and he would run and pick it up whilst it was warm. It was curious to see how the children's plays and amusements harmonized with what was going on around us. They would make balls of earth and, throwing them against the wall, would say they were shells bursting- Johnnie fell down one day and getting up very dusty, said: 'They'll say, I have been mining.' He often asked, 'Is that the enemy or us firing?'²⁶

Upon examining the texts we understand that they are important because they record the more human and ordinary aspects of a popular uprising dismissed by the British historians as a 'sepoymutiny' and eulogised by the Indians as the first 'war of independence'. Trivial though they are as literature, these first person accounts give the experiences of the mutiny a solidity of specification and aid us in perceiving the horrors of war and 'the scenes of ruin, devastation, and misery'.²⁷

The mutiny of 1857 exposed scores of British women, hitherto sheltered by their protective menfolk, to dangers and deprivations unknown to them. Mowbray Thomson in his narrative of the outbreak at Kanpur entitled *The Story Of Cawnpore* (1859) wrote that, '[M]any of these were wives and daughters of officers, who had never known privation in its mildest form.'²⁸ Rendered homeless by the mutiny and occasionally bereft of family, the women and children had to suffer many hardships and miseries. That the women could think

of and accomplish the task of writing their day-to-day journals and diaries is indeed an astonishing phenomenon! Pat Barr writes, 'They suffered extremes of thirst, hunger, fatigue; they shuddered at the close whine of bullet, the crump of shell and they remembered those dreadful days for the rest of their lives—and so wrote of them partly to neutralise and contain their terror of it all, as people do.'²⁹ For the women who were accustomed to a large house manned by innumerable domestic servants and situated far away from the humdrum of the local bazaar and the noisy 'natives', life during the mutiny, compressed in a corner of a room or even outside in the veranda, and surrounded by a continuous volley of shots, was difficult to bear. Moreover, 'if the men could not conceive of it, how much less could the women who experienced the country mainly through their husbands, who were cosseted and debarred from most real investigations of their own, who relied by upbringing and custom, on the infallibility of the masculine judgment?'³⁰

As a reading of British mutiny diaries and journals reveals, the British attitude immediately before the uprising was one of complacency, characteristic of a power that had gained ascendancy. This to some extent explains the expressions of surprise, at both the suddenness and the enormity of the violence that erupted. The mutiny broke out in Meerut on 10 May 1857 and within a fortnight it spread like wild fire to vast regions of northern India. Confident of their mastery over India, the British ignored all signs of the approaching storm. 'We laughed', notes Charles Griffiths, a captain in the 61st Regiment stationed at Ferozepur near Delhi, 'at his [their billiard-marker, a high caste Brahmin] fears, and dismissed from our minds all alarm, vaunting our superiority in arms to the dusky soldiery of Hindostan, and in our hearts foolishly regarding them with lordly contempt.'³¹ J.E.W. Rotten, the chaplain of Meerut, who was proceeding in a carriage along with his wife to St John's Church in the afternoon of 10 May 1857 did not heed the warning of his domestic help who told them not to go to church 'because there will be a fight'.³² The chaplain's carriage had not gone far from the compound when he saw 'above the feathery drifts of sugar-cane, a slender black shaft of smoke climbing to the yellow sky...'.³³ On the evening of the same day, St John's Church was deserted while the city bazaar was in flames. From Meerut the soldiers proceeded to Delhi where Robert and Harriet Tytler had begun the day (11 May 1857) with their usual breakfast. Later, Harriet was to recall every moment of this last meal in vivid detail—the household tailor stitching busily on the veranda outside, the sweet orange pulp of the musk melons which made up the last course, Robert grumbling over the untoward events of the past twenty-four hours. He told Harriet that while he was reading out the orders, the sepoy were 'hissing' and making such a sound as an exclamation of derision or contempt; they refused to stand at attention while the orders were being read out. Soon after, news reached Robert that the sepoy in Delhi had mutinied. This breakfast scene that the English woman recalls is evocative of Anglo-Indian life in general; a life so particularly dull for women that it made Florence Marryat

write: '...every sun set as it rose, and left a feeling behind it of an utterly wasted day, the description of one of which will serve for all'.³⁴ But in her memoirs, Harriet rues the absence of that very orderly life.

In Kanpur (Cawnpore), the mutiny broke out on 24 May 1857, the day of Queen Victoria's birthday. Usually this event occasioned a big celebration, but on account of the unrest, 'the bells in Christ-Church belfry remained alarmingly mute'.³⁵ Not very far from Kanpur was Lucknow, the city of 'gilded mosques, and minarets, and towers'.³⁶ The commanding officer of the forces at Lucknow, Sir Henry Lawrence, was a man endowed with wisdom and foresight, and he had begun all preparations for war. While the mutiny affected large parts of northern India and the English were being massacred in Kanpur, Lucknow, Meerut, Agra and Delhi, in parts of India unscathed by these events, such as Bombay, Poona and the south, British social life continued undisturbed and we have accounts of British men and women attending balls, parties, and occasionally, a Hindu wedding.

To the civilians besieged in the forts and residencies, the mutiny symbolised a strange coming together of people, Englishmen and women, from all parts of the country. Mark Thornhill, who belonged to the Bengal Civil Service, describes the scene at the Agra Fort thus: 'We met like travellers in a fairy-tale, like them we told our past adventures.... As we talked, our conversation, our surroundings seemed to lift us above the petty cares, the dull routine of ordinary life, into a region of poetry and romance.'³⁷ Charles Raikes, a judge of the Sudder Court at Agra describes the mutiny as 'a belt of fire' that had engulfed them by early July 1857. Raikes, a civil servant accustomed to authorise and dictate, found himself 'on the verge of barbarism'. He writes: 'Hitherto, we had been the lords of the nation, flattered, courted by the people, caressed by fortune, confident in our own strength.'³⁸ This reiterates the point made earlier in this essay regarding the suddenness of the attack and the unpreparedness, both physical and psychological, of the British to face the events of 1857. James Mackay, a chaplain describing the events in Meerut, writes: 'The writer arrived in Calcutta at the beginning of the outbreak; and in passing from London to Lucknow he was interested, amused, surprised, shocked, and instructed, by various things which he saw and heard.'³⁹ It is important to note that even in the midst of crisis, class distinctions amidst the very structured British community in India were not forgotten. Not only were the high ranking officers and their families housed differently, but also food and drinks were apportioned according to rank and status. It was not uncommon for two women facing the same crisis and staying in the same fort or residency not to have met at all. Compared to the more ordinary Maria Germon, Katherine Bartrum and Mrs Coopland, Julia Inglis, who was the wife of a brigadier, enjoyed a lot of privileges even amidst acute privation. T. Henry Kavanagh, Assistant Commissioner in Oudh writes in his book *How I won the Victoria Cross* (1860): '...private stores were wastefully used, especially stimulants which would have sustained the sick and wounded afterwards

English provisions were remorselessly plundered, regardless of the morrow; and whilst anything dainty lasted, it was greedily consumed.⁴⁰ Julia Inglis met Katherine Bartrum only at Allahabad aboard a steamer that was carrying them to Calcutta. After listening to Bartrum's tales of horror and suffering, Inglis writes:

Mrs Bartrum (and other ladies) came into the Residency without any servants, and consequently had to do everything for themselves. All they ate was cooked by their own hands, and they had even to collect and chop wood to make their fires, and each had a young baby to attend to. These poor women must indeed have endured great hardships, at the same time, I cannot understand how, surrounded as they were by others who were certainly better off, a little help was not given to them⁴¹

Denis Kincaid in *British Social Life in India* observes that even during the crisis of 1857, the etiquette of Anglo-Indian life remained rigid. While some were drinking Champagne and Moselle the rest were drinking 'the most unpleasant beverages' and eating the most unwholesome food.⁴²

The mutiny texts highlight the disorder brought to the lives of British men and women in parts of India effected by the uprising. Many of the writers described with equal intensity both the daily life of the British in these small towns and the temporary disbanding of that life as a result of the mutiny. Mark Thornhill was stationed at Mathura near Agra as a magistrate when the mutiny broke out. In his book, he narrates the story of his flight to Agra along with his family. His primary concern is to capture the moment of transition from order and decorum to anarchy and bedlam, symbolised in 'the blackened walls and the charred fragments ... broken furniture, scraps of clothing, pieces of glass and china'.⁴³ His 'large and handsomely furnished'⁴⁴ house, which stood by the river, was a symbol of authority and harmony and its destruction is recalled with wistfulness.

British soldiers largely saw the mutiny as an opportunity for adding stars and laurels to their military careers in India. A soldier named Hugh Gough writes of the day he was selected as part of the relieving force for Lucknow under Sir Collin Campbell: 'I slept that night the sleep of the justly happy, and dreamed of Victoria Crosses, brevets, and other chances, which I had thought were closed to me for ever.'⁴⁵ Another soldier named Forbes-Mitchell, a sergeant in the ninety-third Sutherland Highlanders, also came for the relief of Lucknow. He revisited the scenes of the mutiny in 1892, and the visit triggered his reminiscences. The narrative unfolds, with nostalgia, the experiences that befell him as part of the relieving force at Lucknow. It delineates with sensitivity and a touch of humour, the multifarious life of a soldier during the crisis. He started on his journey with 'strongly mixed feelings both of pleasure and sorrow, not unmingled with gratitude ... by the mail train from Howrah in August 1892, to revisit Cawnpore and Lucknow for the first time, with the terrible scenes of 1857 and 1858 still vividly photographed as it were, on memory'.⁴⁶ Dispensing with what he calls

the 'formula of the amateur author' whereby the author reluctantly publishes his narrative 'at the solicitation of numerous friends', he declares his desire to write his recollections for his own pleasure, because, as he admits in his book: 'On revisiting the scenes of the mutiny, I have been forcibly impressed with the fact that like so many memories, the soldiers and civilians who were personal actors in the great uprising are fast passing away.'⁴⁷ His text is replete with anecdotes that describe camp life and the adventures of his regiment. He writes about the amusements the soldiers are engaged in when off-duty, for example, fishing in a nearby river with 'whisky balls'⁴⁸ that not only dulled the fish's senses but also attracted more fish! Written in a simple narrative style, Forbes-Mitchell's book brings to life vivid pictures of the mutiny. Though he was no Scott or Tennyson, he describes scenes with a subtle evocative power, and his writing reveals, at times, his acute awareness of the gap between the richness of his material and the inadequacy of his verbal power. He writes:

After all was quiet, the men rolled off to sleep again, and wrapping round my legs my newly-acquired quilt, which was lined with silk and had evidently belonged to a rebel officer, I too lay down and tried to sleep. My nerves were, however, too much shaken, and the pain of my burnt-hand kept me awake, so I lay and listened to the men sleeping around me; and what a night that was! Had I the descriptive powers of a Tennyson or a Scott I might draw a picture of it, but as it is I can only very faintly attempt to make my readers imagine what it was like ... I dreamed of blood and battle, and then my mind would wander to scenes and I was a little boy again, kneeling beside my mother, saying my evening hymn. Verily that night convinced me that Campbell's 'Soldier's Dream' is no mere fiction, but must have been written or dictated from actual experience by one who had passed through such another day of excitement and danger as that of the 16th of November 1857.⁴⁹

Another interesting account of the events of 1857 is contained in a book by Charles Griffiths,⁵⁰ a captain in the sixty-first regiment stationed at Ferozepore, near Delhi. Describing the events, he writes that there was a humorous side to the desolate picture. The soldiers played 'mutiny games' to frighten their own officers at the dead of the night, and when off-duty, they spent time fishing in a nearby canal. The writer recalls:

To see us on these occasions full of merriment, one would scarcely have realized the fact that the men employed in this peaceful occupation were part of an army engaged in almost continual warfare, and fighting for very existence. Laughter and jokes filled the air, and chaff reigned supreme; while ever and anon we were rudely recalled to a sense of the dangers around us...⁵¹

An account of the mutiny in Delhi by Reginald Wilberforce gives us a picture of those 'stirring days' 'not as history, but, as they presented themselves

to the mind of a boy of only nineteen years old'.⁵² Unclouded by ideology or experience, he writes with the exuberance of a young boy excited, for instance, after capturing a 'nine-pounder gun' from the Indian soldiers at night. When the colonel appeared the next morning on his usual visit, looking at the gun he confronted Wilberforce thus:

"What is that?"
 "Please, Sir, it's a nine-pounder."
 "Who did it belong to?"
 "Her Majesty, Sir."
 "How did you get it?"
 "It came down the street."
 "Lose any men?"
 "No, Sir."
 "Humph! Don't do it again."⁵³

With reference to the light-hearted attitude that prevailed particularly among the young soldiers, Charles Raikes notes: "The men who cared least for all this were those most in danger, our young officers in the native regiments. They rode, swam, and played billiards with as much gaiety as though they had not nightly to sleep in the lines amongst a set of ruffians thirsting for their blood."⁵⁴

In contrast to Wilberforce's jauntiness we have some sharp images of violence, squalor, starvation and death provided by Mowbray Thomson in his account of the events at Kanpur. The writer notes in his preface, 'As our escape was effected in a state of nudity, it was impossible to have any writings to assist in the production of this book: it has been from the first to the last an effort of memory.'⁵⁵ He writes of artillery-bullocks being converted into stew; of stray dogs being tempted into soup-kettles; of the officers' children 'sucking the pieces of old water-bags, putting scraps of canvas and leather straps into the mouth to try and get a single drop of moisture upon their parched lips'.⁵⁶ It is a tale of extraordinary suffering and melancholy. He describes the mutiny at Kanpur, which started on 6 June 1857 when almost all the bungalows of the English were set on fire. 'The ping-pong of rifle bullets', he writes, 'would break short dreams of home or of approaching relief, pleasant visions made horrible by waking to the state of things around.'⁵⁷ He narrates how a shell landed inside the kettle and almost spoilt their meal:

On one occasion, we were warily closing together to eat our evening meal, when the hissing shell kindly announced its approach towards us...that ten-inch missile had nearly terminated our entertainment, but as the ancients used to say, "the stomach has no ears", so we promptly returned to the kettle, and "shelled" out its contents.⁵⁸

Describing the condition of men, women and children besieged without food or water for nearly twenty-one days, he writes: 'Tattered in clothing,

begrimed with dirt, emaciated in countenance, were all without exception; faces that had been beautiful were now chiselled with deep furrows; haggard despair seated itself where there had been a month before only smiles.⁵⁹ Thomson narrates how Havelock's force finally wrested the cantonments from Nana Sahib after twenty-one days of siege. He also describes the massacre in the boats and how he, along with a few other men, swam into the friendly territory of a local zamindar.

The mutiny texts are the richer for the beautiful descriptions they contain of their environs. Griffiths, for instance, compares the 'live shells cleaving the air on a dark night' to 'so many brilliant meteors rushing through the heavens, or like lightning flashes during a storm'.⁶⁰ Describing the explosion of shells on a dark night, he writes: '...shells would burst high over the city illuminating the spires and domes, and bringing into prominence every object around.'⁶¹ Of the old city of Delhi he writes:

Tall and graceful minarets, Hindu temples and Mohammedan mosques, symmetrical in shape and gorgeous in colouring appeared interspersed in endless numbers among the densely packed houses inside the city, their domes and spires shining with a brilliant radiance, clear-cut against the sky...⁶²

Forbes-Mitchell notes in his diary, 'From the heights of the Dilkoosha, in the cool of the early morning, Lucknow, with its numerous domes, mosques, minarets, and palaces looked very picturesque.'⁶³ Mark Thornhill talks about the beauty of Mathura when seen from the river: '... a succession of fine houses that rise like castles, bathing places, and little temples to whose fairy-like lightness no words can do justice.'⁶⁴ From the Agra Fort he observes his surroundings and writes thus: 'The Indian moonlight is always beautiful.... It bathed the marble hall, the trees, and the building around, concealing all the marks of the ravages of time, all the present disorder, hiding them in one soft mysterious glow.'⁶⁵ Mowbray Thomson gives us a picture of the city of Kanpur as it appeared when seen from the river side: 'Hundreds of bungalows, the residences of the officers, stand in the midst of gardens and these interspersed with forest trees, the barracks of the troops, with a separate bazaar for each regiment, and the canvas town of the tented regiments, give to the 'tout ensemble' a picturesque effect....'⁶⁶ These images of nature and of art not only lend beauty to these texts but also give to the events of the mutiny an exotic background, throwing into sharp relief the brutality of day-to-day existence of those caught up in the violence.

A close reading of British mutiny narratives reveals the involvement of various marginal groups in the uprising. An average English household in India in the nineteenth century could employ anything between twelve to thirty-two servants, with whose assistance the British were able to maintain a well-appointed lifestyle despite a hostile climate. In the midst of the hostility and violence of the mutiny these servants, in most cases, extended help and shelter to the British.

Equally important was the help rendered by soldiers who remained loyal to the British. Julia Inglis records the devotion of the loyal sepoys, describing how her son Johnnie 'passed most of his time in the square next to us with the Sikhs, who were very fond of him, and used to give him chappatis (native bread) though they could not have had much to eat themselves, poor men! I used rather to encourage this friendship, as I thought if things came to the worst they might be the means of saving his life.'⁶⁷

At first glance, the non-fictional narratives of the mutiny appear like loose, unconnected pages from history than literary texts. Emphasis on documentary realism seems to overshadow the imaginative and personal dimensions of these texts. But as one reads them over and over, one begins to feel their impact. These accounts of 1857 form a rich body of writings that make the mutiny come alive before our eyes. We see and feel as the ordinary British men and women of the time saw and felt. Personal narratives on the mutiny continued to be published posthumously well into the first decade of the twentieth century. The close of the nineteenth century also saw the publication of one of the best known novels on the uprising—Flora Annie Steele's *On the Face of the Waters*—which Pat Barr calls 'a classic as long as the Indian Mutiny is remembered'.⁶⁸ Steele was a little girl when the mutiny broke out, but the impact of the events of that year was strong enough to have a lasting impression on her. She grew up playing mutiny games with her brother in their large country house in Scotland. In her autobiography written some sixty years after the uprising, Steele reminisces that when she was little she 'burnt and hanged and tortured the Nana Sahib in effigy many times'.⁶⁹ From random notes to letter-journals to meticulously written daily accounts to reminiscences and recollections, mutiny literature forms a rich fabric of intricately woven narratives, all of which make interesting, if not sublime, reading. The shift of interest to another genre, namely, the novel, affords an added embellishment to this huge body of writing which never fails to arouse the reader's curiosity, even to this day.

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SIR GEORGE GREY AND THE INDIAN REBELLION

The Unmaking and Making of an Imperial Career*

Jill Bender

THROUGHOUT his professional life, Sir George Grey's livelihood was interwoven with the British Empire. He served with the eighty-third Infantry Regiment in Ireland, led two exploratory expeditions to Western Australia, acted as colonial governor in New Zealand and the Cape Colony, and enjoyed a career in New Zealand politics. His actions during the 1857 Indian Rebellion, however, generated the most lasting discussion and public debate. As governor of the Cape Colony and high commissioner of South Africa in 1857, Grey contributed regiments, horses and artillery to British efforts in India. Additionally, he reportedly redirected troops bound for China and mobilised volunteers from the German Legion stationed in South Africa to fight in India—all without waiting for the consent of officials in London. He has been both highly praised and heavily criticised for his actions. From his first dispatch during the revolt until well after his death in 1898, Grey's contemporaries sought to understand and explain his role in the suppression of the uprising.

Grey's decisions have continued to spark similar discussion among historians. As Leigh Dale has recently noted, 'Grey's reputation – and debates about it – span the English speaking world.'¹ Much of the scholarship examining Grey's response to the Indian Rebellion has judged his actions, either favourably or critically, in an effort to understand them. In 1961, J. Rutherford argued that Grey, when left to his own discretion, acted admirably and offered considerable assistance to the British in India. However, the eventual intervention of London officials put Grey on the defensive. As a result, according to Rutherford, when orders from London did not suit Grey's own ambitions, he was much less cooperative and did

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