

**THE CITY AS COLONIAL MNEMONIC:
MEMORIALS, MONUMENTS, AND HISTORIES IN
KOLKATA'S URBAN SPACES, 1848-1921**

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Introduction

I. QUESTIONS, SCOPE, FRAMEWORK

0.1.1 The Missing Lettering: Arriving at a Research Topic

Shortly after completing my Master's at the Department of English, Jadavpur University, I found myself working on a project that was digitizing the Scottish burial ground on Karaya Road in Kolkata.¹ Led by Dr. Souvik Mukherjee and based at the Presidency University, the project hoped to build a searchable, hypertext database of the Scottish community, documenting biographical details, funerary inscriptions, causes of death, even architectural styles. Potentially, this database could offer valuable insights into the formation of a distinct identity for the Scottish in Bengal, reflected in their culture, trade and commerce, under the broad rubric of colonialism, and offer exciting fresh material for scholars of literature, history of medicine, sociology and political history. Collecting this data was not easy work. We realized that the existing burial records often failed to provide comprehensive information on the inscriptions on the headstones and, being purely verbal in nature, left out the critically important physical characteristics of headstones or tombs. Reading the funerary inscriptions at the cemetery proved a challenge in itself. Even aside from the snakes that one had to keep an eye out for (this was in the early days of the Kolkata Scottish Heritage Trust's efforts to order the space),

¹ The project including all necessary details is available at: <http://scotscemeteryarchivekolkata.com/>

in most cases the inscriptions were almost invisible. They were mostly illegible in digital images and we had to try and look at each from different angles in order for the engraved lettering to emerge.

One day while chatting with the cemetery's resident security guard, Mr. Norman Hall, we were complaining about the fact that it was taking us much longer than we had expected, when he revealed an unlikely truth about the cemetery. Being situated in a financially depressed part of Mullick Bazar, he explained, the cemetery was frequently visited by "anti-social elements." Youngsters would scale the walls after dark and sometimes, among other dubious activities, scratch away the metal lettering on the headstones leaving behind only the engravings. "If you frequented Mullick Bazar's metal shops," he said, "you might find all the letters that are missing from the stones here, all jumbled up."²

My initial intention was to focus exclusively on funerary inscriptions. While most contained only biographical information regarding the deceased, some headstones featured epitaphs or poems cited out of context to serve an epitaphic purpose. The majority were, in fact, quotes from existing poems written either by well-known poets (mostly English Romantics), and some were derived from prescriptive publications of epitaphic poetry that flooded the markets in the eighteenth century in the hope of establishing a standard for expressions of grief. It seemed that a study of funerary inscriptions in graves in and around Calcutta (perhaps even across colonies) would constitute a relatively under-explored archive of "published" literary texts, and open up possibilities of rich intertextual readings, biographical exegesis, and a close study of networks of textual and affective circulation in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries,

² Personal interview with Norman Hall on 4 June 2015 at the Scottish Cemetery, Karaya Road, Kolkata.

facilitated by manuscript and print cultures. I even went so far as to create a digital, searchable database of funerary inscriptions that included biographical information, sources of the epitaph, and possible re-citations of the epitaph in subsequent graves. The possibilities were exciting till I started reading the poems closely. Apart from a few by Samuel Taylor Coleridge or Edward Young that were taken out of context, the rest of it was the equivalent of modern day template greeting cards. As such, they did not seem to warrant literary analysis. It seemed possible and productive, however, to apply Franco Moretti's method of "distant reading"³ to a large digital archive of such poems, yielding fresh insights or proof of existing hypotheses regarding a community's self-image and fashioning, which I demonstrate in my first chapter.

On hearing Mr. Hall's claim that the inscriptions were all out there, jumbled up, we were under no illusion that any effort to retrieve the lettering would result in failure. It suggested, however, a powerful image that beautifully encapsulated in a metaphor a question I had been grappling with since the beginning of the project: it is evident that the European residents of Calcutta put some thought and effort into funerary inscriptions. But who read them, and, most importantly, how did the text come to be socialized? In the case of the funerary inscriptions, the answer was relatively easy: even if they had limited readership at the time of "publication," with the appearance of *The Bengal Obituary*, which came with a political justification for the act of meta-commemoration, they found a vehicle for circulation across the Empire. But in a more generalized form the question that emerged is: how did memorial monuments and spaces acquire cultural meaning at the time of their construction? How did their symbolic meanings circulate geographically and discursively, and how did it change over time – even making a tricky and often conflict-ridden transition to the post-independence urban imagination? And if

³ Franco Moretti, "Conjectures on World Literature," *New Left Review* 1 (January-February 2000): 54-68.

through collective amnesia their original significance is lost, where do we locate their meaning within the cityscape? The project, therefore, veered towards a larger analysis of commemorative practices by the English as reflected in the city's built environment.

0.1.2 Chronology

Setting out the chronology for a research project that is diachronic at its core is a challenging task. Nonetheless, for the sake of delimiting the scope and studying the cultures of commemoration within an identifiable framework, it is important to identify key moments in the life of a monument, a space, or a statue. For a number of reasons, I settled on the *Obituary* as the chronological starting point of my research. There were collections of its kind even earlier and burials for European communities could be traced as far back as the late seventeenth century, but the publication of the *Obituary* marked a moment of unprecedented self-reflexivity surrounding the issue of death and commemoration. Its predecessors (as I illustrate in Chapter 1) were driven by “antiquarian” or archival impulses to resist the natural decay of stones and erasure of inscriptions and, therefore, of memory. The *Obituary* presented an argument that went beyond this motivation and looked to inspire future generations through a sentimental recuperation of, so to speak, the great sacrifices of their colonial ancestors.⁴ At a time when archival records were inaccessible to the average European, let alone Indians, and social histories were rare, the *Obituary* comes as a unique anthropological record that sets out the closest we have to a collective biography of the early colonizers in Bengal.

⁴ *The Bengal Obituary: Or, a Record to Perpetuate the Memory of Departed Worth* (Calcutta: Holmes & Co., 1851), Preface.

With Chapter 2 we travel back in time with the construction of the “Black Hole monument” by James Zephaniah Holwell to commemorate the controversial incident that took place during Siraj-ud-Daulah’s siege of Fort William in 1756. Although the original moment of construction of the monument and the surrounding narrative predates the publication of the *Obituary* by ninety years, the chapter focuses on the construction of the discourse that led to its resurrection under Lord Curzon in 1902.⁵ After a period of forgetting, following the demolition of the original monument in 1821, interest in the Black Hole incident had been revived by Thomas Babington Macaulay’s 1840 essay on Clive, where he asserted its importance in understanding the causality of the establishment of setting up of British rule in India.⁶ The text that brings the historical narrative to bear upon the urbanscape of Calcutta, however, H.E. Busteed’s *Echoes from Old Calcutta* (1882), became a source of inspiration for Curzon’s historical interventions in the city. Similarly, Chapter 3, which takes as its subject matter colonial statuary, brings the discussion to a much later point in history than is indicated by the timeline in my title, incorporating postcolonial responses to the monuments. This is in-keeping with the larger goal of my project, i.e. to study repeated and often divergent processes of meaning-making around commemorative structures.

The last commemorative monument I study is also arguably the most complex in terms of its self-awareness as a defining moment in the historiography of British India. The Victoria Memorial Hall, inaugurated in 1921, was once again Curzon’s brainchild. Although memorials to the Queen had sprung up in nearly every major Indian city, the VMH was, in so many words, meant to be the unified memorial to Victoria that would

⁵ George Curzon, “Unveiling the Holwell Monument,” in *Speeches by Lord Curzon of Kedleston, Viceroy and Governor General of India, 1902-1904* (Calcutta: Office of the Superintendent of Government Printing, 1904), Vol. 3.

⁶ Thomas Babington Macaulay, “Lord Clive,” *Critical and Historical Essays* Vol. I, ed. A.J. Grieve (1907), at <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/2332/2332-h/2332-h.htm>.

embody the “benevolence” of British rule in the colony. Critics of Curzon’s plan at the time had pointed out that the VMH was appearing to serve as much as a memory to the Viceroy’s tenure in India as it was to the Queen,⁷ but these did not prevent it from quickly becoming the most iconic landmark of the city and by far its most popular tourist destination. Without much fear of contradiction, it can be posited as the single largest commemorative project undertaken in the subcontinent under British rule, and with it I draw my research to a close. The meanings of monuments continue to change and while my dissertation brings the study down even to contemporary times, in terms of defining moments in the lives of monuments, the inauguration of the VMH serves as the end point.

0.1.3 Geographical and Spatial Delimitations

On their way to Calcutta, as pilots steered their ships up the Hughli River in the nineteenth century, their navigations would be aided by the sight of “a small masonry building resembling a tomb”⁸ at Culpee, locally known as the Mano Bibir Ghar. In English histories, however, it is referred to as “Pott’s Folly,” and efforts to establish its identity can be found across several issues of *Bengal Past and Present*. Most of these accounts draw upon William Hickey’s *Memoirs* to identify the enigmatic “Miss Pott” to whom the building is supposed to have been dedicated. One of these articles, titled “Sir Joshua’s Model: The Story of Emily Warren and Robert Pott” identifies her as a woman Hickey had met in the streets of London “when not quite twelve years of age, leading her father, a blind beggar, about and soliciting charity from every person that passed.”⁹ The painter, Joshura Reynolds, is supposed to have recognized her beauty and employed her as a

⁷ “The Two-fold Memorial,” in *Cartoons from the Hindi Punch* (Bombay: Hindi Punch Office, 1904), 51.⁷

⁸ “The Editor’s Note Book,” *Bengal Past and Present* 29, part 2, no. 58 (April - June 1925): 235.

⁹ “Sir Joshua’s Model: The Story of Emily Warren and Robert Pott,” *Bengal Past and Present* 26, parts 1 and 2, nos. 51-52 (July - December 1923): 107

model for a number of his paintings. How Emily came to be in contact with Robert Pott, son of Percival Pott, an English surgeon, is difficult to trace, but we learn from the article that in 1780, she made an attempt to sail to India in the guise of a servant boy.

Although this attempt failed, she was later able to secure passage when Pott agreed to exercise his influence upon the captain of the ship *Lord Mulgrave*, and she made it to India in May 1782. However, on board the ship, she was tormented by “prickly heat” and near Culpee drank two large glasses of extremely cold water mixed with milk, which caused her untimely death. Her body is supposed to have been transported to Calcutta, and interred in “the burial-ground of the town.” Eduardo Tiretta was asked to design a mausoleum for her at a cost of three thousand pounds, and a column “amongst the herd of tigers” at Culpee for another thousand.¹⁰ Based on a field survey by one Giles Quinan, an article in *Chowkidar* (mouthpiece of the British Association for Cemeteries in South Asia) has called into question Hickey’s account, pointing out the absence of any grand mausoleum that Tiretta could have charged three thousand pounds for, and suggesting the validity of local lore, which claims it was a memorial monument to a local *bibi* married to a Portuguese settler.¹¹ In either case, it is evident that the first sign of a human-built structure that sailors up the Hughli would notice is a memorial monument, one that probably did not hold the remains of the dead.

British funerary and commemorative monuments, dedicated to individuals and collectives, are not restricted to urban settlements. Indeed, they can be said to be place-makers, imposing their identity upon varied landscapes through processes of cultural production and circulation, although their architectural forms undergo changes with time. They are, however, found in higher concentration within urban spaces, cantonments, and

¹⁰ Ibid, 111.

¹¹ “Mail Box,” in Rosie Llewellyn-Jones ed., *Chowkidar* 9, no. 4 (Autumn 2001): 75-77.

sites of military conflict. As such, a study of these monuments need not necessarily be restricted to a monument, a city or location, or even to a single colony. Scholars in the field have defined the scope of analyses in various ways, opting for an individual monument, a single cemetery, specific architectural symbolisms, or questions of identity and memory in funerary inscriptions. For the purpose of my dissertation, I focus on funerary and commemorative monuments and spaces in Calcutta simply because the methodology I intend to illustrate through my work necessitates close, focused readings that are inter-disciplinary in nature. By bringing together ideas of urban geography, spatial organization, architectural form, textual and visual representation, and public responses to the monuments and spaces, I try to understand in my dissertation how they acquired meaning in the public imagination and changes in their political or historical status under different political regimes.

Some of the choices I make require explanation. Why did I chose to study only cemeteries, monuments and statues within the conceptual framework of “public spaces”? And what are its definitions and limitations? It is an undeniable fact that funerary and commemorative structures exist within churches in and around Kolkata, for example in the stones that pave the passages of the Portuguese Church (or Cathedral of the Most Holy Rosary), the altars and imported sculptures that adorn the walls of St. John’s Church or St. Paul’s Cathedral, or the commemorative plaques dedicated to lives lost in the World War. While they have interesting stories to tell and constitute valuable historical documents, in my view, they appear to be static so far as their meanings are concerned. Commemorative efforts that find articulation in traditional spaces of collectivity and prayer, are relatively less open to alternative interpretations both at the time of their construction and across time. They are placed firmly within a spatial context that gives

them meaning and, on the whole, continue to exist in a similar state subject only to collective amnesia that is merely a function of temporal distance.

This raises an interesting question as to why places of burial in Calcutta were not situated in or around places of worship. A departure from the traditional practice in the Christian world, this trend has its origins in municipal decisions based on convenience as the European population struggled to cope with limited space, high mortality rates, and sultry climatic conditions that were not conducive to congested burials. The question is dealt with in Chapter 1. There are two other exceptions to the study of “public” spaces, where we venture inside St. John’s Church: first, as we follow the reappearance and subsequent removal of the “Black Hole” or Holwell monument from the streets of Calcutta for fear of injuring public sentiment; and the second, in the attempt to provide a safe haven for the tomb of Charlotte, Lady Canning. The chapters, therefore, posit a reading of funerary and commemorative monuments and statues in public, often secular spaces, in an effort to understand how they contribute towards the inscription of a colonial historiography of and within a single city.

0.1.4 Between Urban Memory and History

The word “memory” is missing from the title of my dissertation. It is implied in the use of “mnemonic” or “memorials,” but in its pure form or as a conceptual category it is absent. The reason I opted to leave it out of my title is that in the last few decades, memory studies has gained such importance within critical discourses of literature, photography, performance, society and history, that its mention is bound to create an expectation of serious theoretical reckoning in my dissertation. Memory does play an important role in my understanding of urban spaces and structures and their processes of

acquiring meaning, but given the nature of my archive, a concept that is by definition deeply subjective is difficult to grapple with. The term has been used and interpreted so flexibly, however, it is impossible to speak of an urban past centred on its built environment without at least taking into consideration the possible ways of reading them as memorial constructions.

Indeed, the concept could be interpreted by approaching it from the opposite direction: instead of looking at a particular object through subjects who carry it in their memories, the imagined collective who affectively relate to an object can be identified based on who carries or articulates a memory associated with it. To offer an example, the municipal authorities of Calcutta who decided to demolish the “Black Hole” monument in 1821 because it was not seen as an effective spatial marker of the memory of the controversial incident, may not be regarded as part of the collective who constitute the object’s affective community.¹² Instead, at a temporal remove, Curzon’s relationship with its absence and his desire to rectify this collective amnesia, mediated by H.E. Busteed’s *Echoes*, makes him a significant actor in the object and the event’s memorial afterlives. It seems intuitive that we should describe this lingering of a past event and its disappeared monument as a memory, although any attempt of distinguishing it from “history” can, at best, bring us to vague speculations about the subject-centeredness of the former and a relative “objectivity” of the latter.

Past attempts at distinguishing between the two have been productive in that they have yielded valuable insights into the dialogic relationship between memory and history (specific to the author’s cultural context, of course). The classic study, which even Peter Robb uses as a starting point in his lecture, “Memory, Place and British Memorials in

¹² Letter from W.B. Bayley to H. Shakespeare, Judicial (Criminal), 16 March 1821, Cons. 10, WBSA.

Early Calcutta,”¹³ was by Pierre Nora, who distinguished between “real environments of memory” or *milieux de mémoire*, and “memory [that] crystallizes and secretes itself” or *lieux de mémoire*.¹⁴ The apparent clarity of his definitions disguises a set of rather reductive generalizations, where he claims that memory remains open to “permanent evolution, open to the dialectic of remembering and forgetting, unconscious of its successive deformations, vulnerable to manipulation and appropriation,” whereas history is “is the reconstruction, always problematic and incomplete, of what is no longer.”¹⁵ Nora posits the two in direct opposition, where the prosaic narratives of history belong to everyone and no one, while memory “installs remembrance within the sacred.”¹⁶ His nostalgic approach towards memory has been critiqued in recent years by theorists such as Andreas Huyssen, who calls for moving in a less binarized direction, “that does not rely on a discourse of loss and that accepts the fundamental shift in structures of feeling, experience, and perception as they characterize our simultaneously expanding and shrinking presence.”¹⁷

A similar binary is to be found in the work of Maurice Halbwachs as well. In his understanding, history is an “instrumental and over rationalised version of the past,” and in contrast memory is “intimately linked with collective experience.”¹⁸ He explores in his work the notion of a “collective memory,” which is constitutive of a specific community or group within a city, but can potentially exist in geographically disparate

¹³ Peter Robb, “Memory, Place and British Memorials in Early Calcutta” (lecture transcript), in Ezra Rashkow, Sanjukta Ghosh and Upak Chakrabarti ed., *Memory, Identity and the Colonial Encounter in India: Essays in Honour of Peter Robb* (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2018), 31-53.

¹⁴ Pierre Nora, “Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire,” *Representations*, no. 26, Special Issue: Memory and Counter-Memory (Spring, 1989): 7-24, 7. URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2928520>.

¹⁵ Ibid, 8.

¹⁶ Ibid, 9.

¹⁷ Andreas Huyssen, *Present Pasts: Urban Palimpsests and the Politics of Memory* (California: Stanford University Press, 2003), 24.

¹⁸ Mark Crinson, Introduction, in Mark Crinson ed., *Urban Memory: History and Amnesia in the Modern City* (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2005), xiii.

locations. Halbwachs's collective has as its elementary unit the individual, each of whom may have a different view of the memory: "While the collective memory endures and draws strength from its base in a coherent body of people, it is individuals as group members who remember it."¹⁹ Although this idea – that different collectives have different sets of memories – is useful when applied specifically and with necessary caveats, it is in Halbwach's relation between memory and space that fault lines begin to appear. "When a group is introduced into a part of space," he goes on, "it transforms it to its image, but at the same time, it yields and adapts itself to certain material things which resist it."²⁰ As Mark Crinson writes, "There is little of class consciousness here and still less of historical specificity, but there is much Hegelianism."²¹

The major drawback of these analyses, I feel, is a general reluctance to adapt these questions and test them against less homogenized societies. Specifically, I am thinking of colonies where pre-existing tensions within societies were augmented by racial superimpositions of collective consciousness and memory. For the purpose of my study, however, the question of collective memory becomes relevant only at specific moments in time, when a monument or space is forcibly opened up to reinterpretation and rereading owing to changes in the socio-political sphere. For example, the post-independence relocation of statues of imperialists from the Calcutta Maidan to the Flagstaff House in Barrackpore and gardens of Victoria Memorial Hall in 1969, which implied a relegation of these figures into the static past of museums, far from their public presence and daily performance of colonial triumphalism. While such acts de-contextualize memorial objects, the obvious fallacy in applying Nora's theory is that it

¹⁹ Maurice Halbwachs, *The Collective Memory*, trans. Francis J. Ditter, Jr. (Harper and Row Colophon Books, 1980), 48.

²⁰ Halbwachs, as quoted in Aldo Rossi, *The Architecture of the City* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1982), 130. Quoted in Crinson, xiii.

²¹ Crinson, xiii.

does not overtly account for a geographical displacement of the community forged through collective memory.

It is important also to clarify that the aforementioned collective memory is only one side of the coin: it is a positive memory, so to speak. The same monument can be viewed negatively or indifferently by other communities, and stand for what Lynn Meskell calls “negative heritage,” described as “a conflictual site that becomes the repository of negative memory in the collective imaginary.”²² Are we in a position, then, to reflect once more upon the distinction between history and memory? Could we tentatively posit that if we are to consider a particular statue, the event that it commemorates exists in the memory of people associated with it but more broadly as a historical fact? The statue becomes a signifier that, like Jacques Derrida’s *pharmakon*,²³ serves both as reminder of the event or person, and, by implication, an acceptance that its living memory among the collective has a shelf-life. Like Roland Barthes’s idea of a “work” that proliferates into meaning once it becomes “text,”²⁴ the statue too begins to engender memories to form collectives who engage with its meaning in different ways, not necessarily staying true to its intention.

To juggle the useful phrases offered by Halbwachs and Nora, albeit in very different senses of the terms, I suggest a shift away from attempts at defining or historically studying “collective memory,” turning instead towards “sites of memory,” but without the nostalgic lament for a bygone *milieux*. I use it in a sense where memories about an object or space are read more as an attribute of it – thereby constitutive of

²² Lynn Meskell, “Negative Heritage and Past Mastering in Archaeology,” *Anthropological Quarterly* 75, no. 3 (Summer, 2002): 557-574, 558. URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3318204>.

²³ Jacques Derrida, “Plato’s Pharmacy,” *Dissemination*, trans. Barbara Johnson (London: Athlone Press, 1972), 71.

²⁴ Roland Barthes, “From Work to Text,” in *Image Music Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (London: Fontana, 1977), 155-164.

various collectives who may or may not agree about its interpretation – rather than being localized in the subjectivities who share it. Thus, they become sites of memory that string together collectives or communities diachronically with their varied responses to it. The question that follows is how do we speak of “urban memory”? Is it the memory of an abstract entity that is the city? Or is it the memory of the city including its natural and built environment?

Mark Crinson offers a succinct clarification of what “urban memory” mean in his work, resisting its semantic extension in a vague, anthropomorphic direction:

Urban memory can be anthropomorphism (the city having a memory) but more commonly it indicates the city as a physical landscape and collection of objects and practices that enable recollections of the past and that embody the past through traces of the city’s sequential building and rebuilding.²⁵

There are two significant points to note about this seemingly intuitive description: firstly, Crinson’s definition of the “urban” as landscape, objects and practices; and secondly, his assertion that said landscapes, objects and practices enable recollections of and embody the past. The “urban,” therefore, alongside being a site of memory, is also constituted by cultural practices that facilitate its propagation and circulation. His specification that the city is not a static entity but understood as a sequence of “building and rebuilding” draws attention to yet another interesting dimension of site-specific memory, i.e. that even the memory inscribed around objects and spaces operates like a palimpsest, writing and overwriting traces of past practices and responses. Yet, there simply is no easy metaphor or image that helps us visualize or otherwise define this phenomenon. Crinson’s definition

²⁵ Crinson, xii.

must suffice for now because it does not attempt to simplify either the heterogeneous nature of memory or the instability of an object's meaning.

I realize I have drifted far from the claim that “memory” is not one of the central concerns of my dissertation. It was, however, necessary to arrive at a functional, acceptable definition of “urban memory,” because it implicitly factors in many of the critical moments that bring monuments, otherwise invisible and forgotten, back in focus, challenging their existing meanings. Before we move on to the understanding of history in the urban space, let us add another caveat to the definition: I read Crinson's idea of “urban memory” rooted in practices as potentially implying a wide spectrum of memorial association, not simply memory in a positive sense of the term. Apart from an active impression of an event or emotion associated with a site, the spectrum would also include mis-readings, mis-rememberings, as well as deliberate and inadvertent collective amnesia. In a city that has undergone the transition from being colonial to post-colonial, these categories are more commonly found around sites than intended memorial continuities around sites.

While memory, as I use it in my dissertation, is centred on sites, it is also sustained through a dialogic relationship with “history.” My hypothesis is that even if for one specific generation, who have grown up with “autobiographical memories” of an event or site, its “musealization” or translation into a “historical monument” marks a break in subjective continuity and, in a longer view of history, the two representations of the past interoperate to create narratives. The textual, the visual, the spatial or sculptural are components of this narrative that substantiate and legitimize each other. Given that my dissertation studies several events and narratives spread over nearly a century, it also necessitates a sensitive reading of historiography, which underwent dramatic changes in this period. The landscape of public history-writing in the mid-nineteenth century –

particularly among those that are relevant to India – is dominated by the figure of Thomas Babington Macaulay. Although James Mills’s *History of British India* (first major publication in 1817) remained the reference work for most scholarly pursuits, it was Macaulay’s *History of England* (1848) that competed with the best sellers of its time, “rivalling the works of Scott, Byron and Dickens.”²⁶

It was the result of Macaulay’s self-conscious efforts to bring a historical consciousness to the lives of Englishmen by improving on Mill, whose work was “not sufficiently animated and picturesque to attract those who read for amusement.”²⁷ Here is Catherine Hall’s succinct description of Macaulay’s self-perception:

The classical historical vision was that of a universal human nature. Macaulay, writing at a critical moment in the nineteenth-century European nation building, was emphatically an Englishman, whose nationalism sat uneasily with his universalism and who would write a national history for the English people that would be read globally.²⁸

His importance in establishing a causal historical narrative was to have far reaching consequences for the public history of colonialism as articulated in Calcutta by Curzon, among others, particularly surrounding the “Black Hole” monument, which I address in Chapter 2. As a historian, Macaulay is said to have identified himself Homer, Hesiod, Thucydides, Dante, Shakespeare, and Burke (among others) – writers who imbued their understanding of the past with a sense of justice (historical and poetic). His own history,

²⁶ Catherine Hall, *Macaulay and Son: Architects of Imperial Britain* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2012), 259.

²⁷ Thomas Babington Macaulay, 2 December 1838, *Journals*, I, 88. Quoted in Hall, 242.

²⁸ *Ibid*, 263.

Macaulay hoped, would stand a Homeric test of time, and be read in “the year 2000, even the year 3000.”²⁹

Macaulay’s notions of “universal” values have long been redundant although his ambition is apparent in the rhetorical charge of his historical writings. It would have pained him perhaps to be regarded in hindsight as the archetypal author of Friederich Nietzsche’s “monumental” histories, that glorify the actions of “great” (women and) men of the past.³⁰ Nietzsche’s iconic essay “On the Use and Abuse of History for Life” (1876) categorized historiography into three types: antiquarian, monumental, and critical, each of which could productively flourish under specific historico-political conditions.³¹ Written in their true essence, however, the three forms could be “life-serving,” by which Nietzsche meant “one that is to help its writers and readers existentially as a means of orienting ourselves to our past, present, and future lives.”³²

These three modes, although arguably not with the exact meaning ascribed by Nietzsche, appear in the historiography of colonial Calcutta too. Perhaps they are analogous rather than directly applicable: the antiquarian phase is marked by “Asiaticus”

²⁹ Ibid., 260.

³⁰ Friedrich Nietzsche, “On the Use and Abuse of History for Life,” in *Untimely Meditations* (1876), trans. Ian Johnston (Revised electronic edition, Vancouver Island University, 2010). URL: johnstoi.web.viu.ca//nietzsche/history.htm.

³¹ Nietzsche’s three definitions are worth quoting:

Monumental History: “That the great moments in the struggle of single individuals make up a chain, that in them a range of mountains of humanity are joined over thousands of years, that for me the loftiest thing of such a moment from the distant past is still vital, bright, and great—that is the basic idea of the faith in humanity which expresses itself in the demand for a monumental history.”

Antiquarian History: “Antiquarian history itself degenerates in that moment when it no longer inspires and fills with enthusiasm the fresh life of the present. Then reverence withers away. The scholarly habit lives on without it and orbits in an egotistical and self-satisfied manner around its own centre. Then we get a glimpse of the wretched drama of a blind mania for collecting, a restless compiling together of everything that ever existed. The man envelops himself in a mouldy smell.”

Critical History: “In order to be able to live, a person must have the power and from time to time use it to break a past and to dissolve it. He manages to do this by dragging the past before the court of justice, investigating it meticulously, and finally condemning it...Its sentence is always unmerciful, always unjust, because it never flows out of a pure spring of knowledge, but in most cases the sentence would be like that anyway, even if righteousness itself were to utter it.”

³² Nietzsche, 83.

and Derozario among the early collectors and chroniclers, while a change is apparent in the project of *The Bengal Obituary* (published in the same year as Macaulay's *History*). The latter, along with Macaulay and his successors (H.E. Busteed, H.E.A. Cotton, C.R. Wilson) represent the monumentalists, a movement that is literally epitomized by Lord Curzon at the turn of the twentieth century. The monumental impulse, however, was amply evident through the nineteenth century in the obsessive construction of, first, allegorical and, later, imitative statues of British statesmen and administrators. They were public articulations of a blatantly imperialist agenda designed to colonize the visual landscape and public histories of cities. Critical histories by Europeans and Indians continued to be scripted sporadically from the late-nineteenth century onwards, stemming both out of proto-nationalist political interest as well as with a view to preserving historiographic integrity. Is it possible to contest these narratives on their own terms while relying upon the same archives? Or does a postcolonial narratological critique necessitate recourse to more creative, postmodern, deconstructionist approaches? Some of these questions are addressed in relevant chapters and possible theoretical solutions are suggested in the Conclusion.

II. METHODOLOGY

The SYLFF Fellowship, which enabled me to conduct full-time research over three years, actively encourages inter-disciplinary approaches to issues that have regional or contemporary relevance. This was not only convenient but extremely helpful in my case because it prompted me to try and understand the central question of my dissertation from different perspectives. In fact, the methodological approach I adapt, adopt and hope to illustrate in the subsequent chapters is one of the major propositions of my dissertation. The two disciplines I draw on most significantly – and the areas where I hope my project will have a critical impact – are urban history and cultures of commemoration.

Gathering data for the dissertation began a few years before I wrote the first draft of my PhD proposal. As mentioned before, I had worked under Dr. Souvik Mukherjee on a Digital Humanities project that sought to create a digital database and map of the Scottish Cemetery on Karaya Road, Kolkata. The initial stages involved fieldwork and data gathering at the cemetery itself, although very little of that has fed into the present project. Methodologically, it had suggested to me the importance of understanding cemeteries and commemorative practices of a bygone era not simply through textual or material records but in the context of their postcolonial afterlives as physical spaces within the city. The first consolidated efforts to gather data outside of the Scottish Cemetery project that became part of my doctoral project was undertaken independently. Once again, it involved fieldwork at the South Park Street cemetery, which revealed secrets that had otherwise not been written about. An example of this was my discovery of a secluded plot of land within the Anglican burial ground, where the headstones from

the French or Tiretta's Burying Ground had been relocated after its destruction in the late 1970s. After carefully dusting the enclosure, I was able to collate a list of the headstones that had been rescued at the time, compared against a numbered map of the cemetery along with a complete list of burials. A copy of my list, the only documentation of these relocated headstones, can be accessed for reference at the South Park Street Cemetery.

Beyond the empirical data gathering, my encounters with the existing literature on cemeteries and commemorative monuments reinforced my belief that scholarship on cultures of commemoration cannot afford to read the textual production, circulation and discursive formations only through the tools available to sociological or textual analyses, nor simply as spaces and monuments within the city. In order to understand the commemorative cultures and the processes through which the narratives inscribed into them gained potency, it is imperative to arrive at a broader understanding of the operations of public spaces and the public sphere in colonial Calcutta, the politics of land ownership and inter-community negotiations, and, in parallel, evolving notions of urban design. In order to present a manageable structure for the project, it seemed judicious to focus on specific sites and objects and to study them from different perspectives: the processes that contribute to their coming into being, their contemporary perceptions, literary and visual representations, in some cases re-entry into urban history, and finally their status in the postcolonial city.

For the initial stages, i.e. their coming into being or contemporary perceptions in the urban context, I had to rely on archival material. Thanks to SYLFF's Research Abroad programme, I was able to conduct primary research at the Asia, Pacific and Africa Collection and the India Office Records and Private Papers housed at the British Library between April and July 2018. Working at the British Library almost invariably proves to be an overwhelming experience, with more material forthcoming than one

initially bargains for. It prompted me to include a separate chapter on gender and commemoration, where I study the scrapbook dedicated to the memory of Charlotte, Lady Canning, and other botanical memorializations. Reading through the personal notebooks of Richard Blechynden following Peter Robb's guidance was an exhilarating experience but at the same time deeply humbling because it pointed to the fact of our ignorance about the everyday goings-on in the city and how, at a micro level, decisions that reflect in the urban landscape often seem random and impulsive. One such example alluded to in Chapter 1 is the chopping down of the Baithakkhana tree.

The West Bengal State Archives and the National Archives of India offered a valuable counterpoint to the resources of the British Library. Documents relating to the municipal history of Calcutta shaped my understanding of contemporary responses to the city spaces that were occupied by memorial monuments, the most significant instance being the cavalier attitude towards the "Black Hole" monument leading to its dismantling in 1821. In some cases they force critical re-examinations of cultural histories, while in others they corroborate established narratives albeit with a few caveats. The digitized archives of the Lok Sabha, likewise, provided valuable glimpses into the discussions around the status of statues in postcolonial India, creating an interesting counterpoint to their cultural representation in texts like Mrinal Sen's *Interview* (1971).

And finally, as the final chapter of my dissertation testifies, a significant part of my thinking through the issues I wish to address, namely how the meanings of memorial sites have changed within the postcolonial city, was influenced by my own experiences working and researching in spaces that embody these questions. For a brief spell I worked at the Victoria Memorial Hall, where I was able to garner useful experience through interactions with visitors, both on-ground and on social media, and by observing guided walkthroughs. At the Currency Building, which hosts an exhibition of Bengal art curated

and produced by DAG (erstwhile Delhi Art Gallery), we have had to work with the Archaeological Survey of India, who are in were charged with renovating the colonial building at the heart of B.B.D. Bag. In order to deal with the different nature of the archive that forms the core of individual chapters, I introduce the methodology in respective chapters along with literature reviews that pertain specifically to them. If there is one theoretical thread that runs through the project, it is the idea of reading the city from the perspective of landscape theory as developed in recent decades by W.J.T. Mitchell³³ et al. This is discussed wherever relevant in the chapters.

³³ See W.J.T. Mitchell, "Imperial Landscape," in *Landscape and Power*, ed. W.J.T. Mitchell (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 5-34. I thank Dr. Sandeep Banerjee of McGill University for pointing out the usefulness of this theoretical model.

III. CHAPTER OVERVIEW

0.3.1 Chapter 1: *The Bengal Obituary*: Memory, Landscape, and Text

The opening chapter focuses *The Bengal Obituary* (1848), a collection of over five thousand burial records gathered from cemeteries in Bengal, published by the Calcutta-based undertaker firm of Holmes and Co.. Although compilations of funerary inscriptions, such as the work of ‘Asiaticus’ (John Hawkesworth) or M. Derozario were published earlier in the nineteenth century, the *Obituary* was the first to state its purpose, i.e. to posit an affective argument for the Empire that glorified the past and aimed to inspire future governors of the colonies. Simultaneously, by offering reassurance to natives of England that their beloved dead had not been forgotten altogether, it expanded geographically and temporally the affective reach of the burial grounds in Bengal, granting them at least a verbal presence in the English imagination of grief, mourning, and glorification. Despite the overabundance of information contained in its four hundred odd pages, the *Obituary* does not easily lend itself to analyses of the social or affective history of Bengal in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

For one, being reliant on previous attempts at compiling inscriptions and headstones that were extant at the time, it remains an incomplete documentation of the colonial Christian society in Bengal. It does not, for instance, reflect the large numbers who were buried in unmarked graves or had their headstones replaced owing to shortage of space. A bias towards the wealthier and politically influential sections, therefore, is inevitable. Secondly, it does not offer a spatial understanding of the burial grounds,

which, as Trev Lynn Broughton has noted, are indicators of the social networks and hierarchies.³⁴ Nor does it offer any clue about the positioning, dimensions, or architectural choices – in short, the materiality – of the tombs or headstones. Attempts to read them as text for their literary merit are also frustrated, as illustrated by Broughton's article, and discursive studies of the values espoused by the inscriptions by scholars like Peter Robb and Ashish Chadha³⁵ (other merits of their articles notwithstanding) seem to go little further than substantiating fairly predictable hypotheses. Thus, the *Obituary* almost seems to hide as much as it reveals about the cultures of death and practices of commemoration in early colonial Calcutta.

Do these readings, then, render it useless as an archive of funerary and commemorative practices? I suggest that while the *Obituary* cannot yield much as a comprehensive point of reference, it can be productively studied in conjunction with other methods of reconstructing the cultural practices surrounding the death of individuals. The chapter proposes – and tries to demonstrate – a methodological shift that situates the text within the geographical context of the necropolis in Calcutta in order to understand the cultural and spatial implications of these practices within the broader framework of colonialism. That is to say, it calls for an inter-disciplinary approach that blends urban geography and history, architecture and literary studies, retaining a strong grounding in archival research. Such a reading is not without historical precedence: commemorative monuments were an essential part of the descriptions of London even in the early modern period, where they served as tangible signifiers in public spaces that connected the present to the past. In terms of the narrative too, they offered convenient

³⁴ Trev Lynn Broughton notes that Urquhart's *Oriental Obituary* was the first to do so. See Trev Lynn Broughton, "The Bengal Obituary: Reading and Writing Calcutta Graves in the Mid Nineteenth Century," *Journal of Victorian Culture* 15, no. 1 (2010): 39-59. DOI: 10.1080/13555501003607677.

³⁵ Ashish Chadha, "Ambivalent Heritage: Between Affect and Ideology in a Colonial Cemetery," *Journal of Material Culture* 11, no. 3 (2006): 339-63.

segues from geographical exegeses to a historical one – and authors rarely failed to mention the importance of preserving them, so that their moment in history could not be faulted for breaking the continuum that was so essential to a historicized sense of community across time. Important works on Calcutta's history by amateur colonial historians, such as H.E. Busteed or H.E.A. Cotton, make use of similar strategies and dedicate chapters to the descriptions of burial grounds in and around the city.

However, as we attempt to study the culture of mourning in colonial Calcutta and its subsequent insertion within a political framework, the inadequacy of reading it as independent of the growth of the city and of the European community becomes apparent. The chapter posits that studies of the cemeteries, like studies of the *Obituary*, tend to analyse them spatially and their post-colonial status in isolation. A closer reading of the city today, substantiated by maps and archival research, reveals that the most celebrated cemetery, i.e. the South Park Street Cemetery, was just one among many in a long belt of burial and cremation grounds that extended along the erstwhile western boundary of the city. It was not just a place of burial for Anglicans but a shared necropolis for Catholics, Dissenters, Muslims, Jews, Parsis, and the Chinese community of Calcutta. Along with this unexceptional status of the South Park Street Cemetery in the context of late eighteenth and early nineteenth century Calcutta, its distance from the city proper meant that it was accessed by very few people. This brings us to the question of the reception of the cultural articulations that took place in the form of poetic inscriptions or architectural choices. Thus, other events around the death of individuals come into relative prominence, such as the final journey down Burying Ground Road (the earlier name of Park Street), or announcements read in Church following the death of one of its members.

Rather than detracting from the historical value of the *Obituary*, my reading ascribes to it greater importance, particularly for its ability to facilitate what I call a “deferred readership.” By distilling into a textual form the commemorative practices of colonial Calcutta, it succeeds in producing an argument that transcends the personal, becoming thereby both collective and political. The *Obituary* achieves this not simply by arguing that the future generations owe commemorative tributes to their forebears because of the pains and sorrow that they underwent in establishing the Empire. It does so by appealing to different kinds of rhetoric, not restricted only to the poetic epitaphs. That language – “the calm commerce of condolence,”³⁶ as Esther Schor puts it – carries a distinct political charge that emerges from an economic reading of affect, or perhaps an affective reading of economics. Following Schor and Broughton, we try to read the *Obituary* in the light of Adam Smith’s *Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759), which offers a useful bridge between the analogous emergence of capital and colonial enterprise, under the sign of affect.

0.3.2 Chapter 2: The Empire’s Mythography: The Curious Case of the Black Hole of Calcutta

At my current job as part of the Education and Outreach team of *Ghare Baire*³⁷ at the Currency Building on B.B.D. Bag (earlier known as Dalhousie Square, Tank Square, or Lal Dighi) I occasionally take visitors around the exhibition. Chronologically, the first stop is a gallery dedicated to European artists in Bengal in the late eighteenth century, such as William Hodges, Thomas and William Daniell, James Baillie Fraser, Henry Salt,

³⁶ Esther Schor, *Bearing the Dead: The British Culture of Mourning from the Enlightenment to Victoria* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1994), 11.

³⁷ A museum-exhibition of art from Bengal since the late eighteenth century, curated and produced by DAG in association with NGMA, and commissioned by the Ministry of Culture, Government of India.

and others. Most of the prints in this section show the European parts of colonial Calcutta, rarely venturing north of the Tank Square. There are two paintings that I like drawing visitors' attention to as an exercise in observing artworks closely. They are both of the Holwell monument painted from the western corner, showing the Writers' Buildings extending along the northern edge of the Tank Square. The earlier one, drawn by Thomas Daniell and engraved by William and Thomas in the 1790s,³⁸ is a more matter-of-fact urban landscape, representing the presence of the obelisk along with many Indians who go about their daily lives. It could have been painted at any time of the day, as the lighting appears flat and conducive to factual documentation. The later work by James Baillie Fraser³⁹ from the 1820s is considerably more dramatic. The eastern sky is lit by the rays of a rising sun as the steeple of the newly-built St. Andrew's Church catches its light. The perspective of the artist is at a lower altitude, which makes the monument tower in the foreground.

Even the uninitiated visitor does not fail to notice a significant difference between the two images: while in the Daniells' work, there is a metal railing surrounding the obelisk, the Fraser painting shows a more relaxed interactivity between the "natives" and the colonial monument. The monument looks weather-worn as locals lounge in its shadow, among them a barber, who has set up a make-shift stall to ply his trade against the monument. Fraser's painting, it can be surmised, is one of the last documentations of the Holwell monument, which was dismantled in 1821 by municipal authorities in favour of clearing passage for traffic.⁴⁰ This was not, however, the last time that the "Black

³⁸ Thomas Daniell, "The Writer's Buildings, Calcutta," aquatint, Plate 4 from the second set of Thomas and William Daniell's *Oriental Scenery* (1798), shelfmark: P939, Asia, Pacific and Africa Collections, BL.

³⁹ James Baillie Fraser, "A View of Writers Buildings from the Monument at the West End," aquatint, Plate 6 from *Views of Calcutta and Its Environs* (1824-1826), shelfmark: X644(6), Asia, Pacific and Africa Collections, BL.

⁴⁰ Letter from W.B. Bayley to H. Shakespeare, Judicial (Criminal), 16 March 1821, Cons. 10, WBSA.

Hole” monument would disappear from the south western corner of Dalhousie Square. My second chapter, therefore, is an attempt to understand the unique events and narratives that led to its initial construction, the counter narratives that questioned its affective charge, and its reappearance as part of a larger project to colonize and monopolize Calcutta’s history.

The Holwell monument was constructed in 1758 by John Zephaniah Holwell, one of the survivors of the infamous and controversial “Black Hole” tragedy of Calcutta. Along with the myth of a founding father of the city, namely Job Charnock, the Black Hole myth proved to be one of the most potent and enduring narratives of the colonial presence in Bengal. The incident that took place during Siraj-ud-Daulah’s siege of Calcutta is supposed to have taken place on 20 June 1756. According to the most prominent narrative of events written in the form of a letter by Holwell, interim governor and one of the survivors, to his friend William Davis in February 1757, 146 individuals had been imprisoned in a small dungeon inside the old Fort William, of whom 123 had suffocated to death.⁴¹ In the years after the Battle of Plassey, Holwell’s version of events gained wide circulation around the Empire, arousing a sense of oriental horror, followed by racial triumphalism spurred on by a sense of revenge. The version seemed to justify, even necessitate, the consolidation of British rule in Bengal that would be part of the larger project of civilizing colonized peoples. Holwell had built the obelisk at this own personal expense to commemorate the dead who had been thrown into a pit with no mark of recognition.

⁴¹ See J.Z. Holwell, *A Genuine Narrative of the Deplorable Deaths of the English Gentlemen, and Others Who Were Suffocated in the Black Hole in Fort-William, at Calcutta...in a Letter to a Friend* (London: Printed for A. Millar, 1758).

During the nineteenth century, the Black Hole narrative gained currency in English historiography. Although it was mentioned in passing by James Mill,⁴² it was Thomas Babington Macaulay's landmark essay on Robert Clive (with a section titled "The seizure of Fort William, and above all the 'Black Hole of Calcutta,' must be avenged") that set it in a chain of historic causality.⁴³ By the time the essay appeared in the *Edinburgh Review* (LXX, January 1840), the original monument had already been destroyed. Public attention to the absence of the memorial monument was drawn in the most significant manner by H.E. Busteed in his *Echoes from Old Calcutta* (1882), who found in it a symbol of urban amnesia about the past. Insidiously, by making a claim on the collective consciousness of the city, Busteed reinforced the idea of a single narrative of history that must be remembered and preserved. In the winter of 1880, Richard Rosell Bayne had discovered sections of the wall of the old Fort William during construction work on the new Eastern Railway Headquarters at Fairlie Place. His publications around the discovery in the *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal*⁴⁴ became the foundation of subsequent archaeological attempts to uncover the exact location of the Black Hole prison and of piecing together an accurate map of the Fort William.

There were counter-narratives too, most notably authored by one Akshay Kumar Maitreya, and later in the pages of *Bengal Past and Present* by a seemingly eccentric Englishman, J.H. Little, who sought to completely invalidate the very premise of such an event. The Black Hole myth, however, was not the only contentious point of this debate: one of Macaulay's significant arguments revolved around vilifying Siraj-ud-Daulah as

⁴² James Mill, *The History of British India*, 5th ed., ed. H.H. Wilson (London: James Madden, 1863) 3: 117-118.

⁴³ Thomas Babington Macaulay, "Lord Clive," *Critical and Historical Essays* Vol. I, ed. A.J. Grieve (1907), at <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/2332/2332-h/2332-h.htm>.

⁴⁴ Richard Roskell Bayne, "Notes on the remains of Old Fort William discovered during the erection of the East Indian Railway Company's Offices," *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal* 52, no. 1-4 (1883): 105-119

an “oriental despot,” a characterization resented by several Indian historians who looked to resuscitate his historical identity during the proto-nationalist phase in the late nineteenth century. Partha Chatterjee’s recent work on the Black Hole offers a detailed analysis of such attempts.⁴⁵

The discourse around the monument reached its apotheosis under Curzon, who was inspired by Busteed’s chastisement of the European population of Calcutta for forgetting their history. Ever eager to establish his credentials as a preserver of history, Curzon took it upon himself to collect and verify the data that an army of amateur and semi-governmental historians had gathered, and to give it a concrete articulation in the form of a resurrected Black Hole monument at almost the exact spot of the original but with minor changes. Eventually, in the years leading up to India’s independence, the monument would disappear once again – or relocate – to the safe precincts of St John’s Church under political pressure mounted by Subhas Chandra Bose and fellow nationalists. This chapter, therefore, is an attempt to understand this complex and oft-revisited history, focusing on the negotiations through which a physical monument and its visual representations inform historical narratives, and how through urban histories it returns to claim a place in the sentimental geography of the city.

0.3.3 Chapter 3: Monuments and Statues: Colonial Memory in Open Spaces and Their Afterlives

From monuments or spaces commemorating death, the focus shifts in the third chapter to a broader conceptualization of the Calcutta Maidan as a triumphalist memory park that narrativizes the military achievements of the British across the Empire. Before speaking

⁴⁵ Partha Chatterjee, *The Black Hole of Empire: History of a Global Practice of Power* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2012), 248-251.

of the cultural articulations that took place on the Maidan, however, the chapter explores the implications of Debjani Bhattacharya's significant recent contribution to scholarship on urban development in Calcutta.⁴⁶ Decentring the human history of the city, Bhattacharya's study seeks to understand the origins and changes in the colonial notion of land, property and ownership in the context of the anthropocene. Her work takes us back to mythic pasts that speak of the churning of the ocean and the birth of "*Kilkila*" – identified as the lower Bengal delta – from the breath of the gigantic tortoise, Kurma. Contrasting regional narratives with the colonial interpretation of the topography, Bhattacharya concludes that, in effect, recent geological studies appears closer, metaphorically, to the Kurma legend as it suggests the possibility of Bengal being born out of a "remnant oceanic basin."⁴⁷ Her archival research reveals how the process of colonization of the territory by the British had to first encounter and solve the problem of a constantly shifting, marshy landmass, giving it a fixed definition. Following the clearance of the erstwhile settlement of Gobindapur from the vicinity of the new Fort William, the Maidan itself, she argues, was little more than a *glacis* that surrounded the military base, flooded for significant parts of the year. Before the space was culturally produced, therefore, it had to be managed hydrologically and cartographically.

While this process continued through the early decades of the nineteenth century, in 1828 the British built themselves one of the most iconic landmarks of the city: the Ochterlony monument, in memory of the British military leader, David Ochterlony, who had engineered two significant victories against the Marathas and the Gurkha army of Nepal. Although it was ostensibly a memorial monument, it appears to have become the favourite vantage point of painters, print-makers and photographers, who sought a

⁴⁶ Debjani Bhattacharyya, *Empire and Ecology in the Bengal Delta: The Making of Calcutta* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

⁴⁷ *Ibid*, 3.

panoramic representation of the “City of Palaces.” Indeed, from the Ochterlony monument, only the European front face of the city was visible, the rows of houses, market places, squares and tenements behind being reduced to flattened rooftops, punctuated by the occasional church spire. Much has been written about the erotics of the totalizing view of cities from high places,⁴⁸ and the popularity of these panoramas in the history of Victorian spectacles cannot be overemphasized.⁴⁹ The Maidan continued to serve as a heterotopic space for diverse recreational activities that included, above all, sports, theatre, circus, and variety shows, hot-air ballooning, and public ceremonies of different kinds. The Great Exhibition of Calcutta that took place in the winter of 1883-84 was perhaps an organized culmination of its spectacularity.

Apart from the totalizing views of the Maidan that were taken from the top of the monument, for wealthy British and Indian families, who could afford carriages and, later, cars, the space was carefully planned to optimize navigability and the pleasure of viewing the landscape. The large stretches were punctuated by statues of British military men, whose deeds in India and abroad were celebrated for consolidating the Empire. The chapter offers a case study of one of these monuments, namely, the striking equestrian sculpture of James Outram. I suggest an alternative to the productive methodological approaches offered by art historians like Barbara Groseclose and Tapati Guha-Thakurta, who have studied these statues as aesthetic objects, by turning to a more reception-oriented analysis of their collective visuality within the urban landscape.⁵⁰ This entails

⁴⁸ Michel de Certeau, “Walking in the City,” in *The Certeau Reader*, ed. Graham Ward (Oxford, 2000), 101-102.

⁴⁹ Daniel E. White, “Imperial Spectacles, Imperial Publics: Panoramas in and of Calcutta,” *The Wordsworth Circle* 41, no. 2 (Spring 2010): 71-81. URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24043598>.

⁵⁰ Barbara Groseclose, *British Sculpture and the Company Raj: Church Monuments and Public Statuary in Madras, Calcutta, and Bombay to 1858* (London: Associated University Presses, 1995); Tapati Guha-Thakurta, “Why Statues Matter: The Changing Landscape of Calcutta’s Colonial and Postcolonial Statuary,” lecture delivered at Victoria Memorial Hall, Kolkata, on 3 August 2018.

reading the statues' presence through reports of their inaugural ceremonies as well as responses to them in post-independence political scenarios. They are also situated within a particularly Victorian tradition of naturalist/realist statuary, which would leave an indelible mark on everyday commemorative practices in the post-colonial city even if the imperial objects themselves receive scorn.

As I was writing my chapter, monuments, which Robert Musil had famously declared to be the most invisible of objects, suddenly re-asserted themselves in public discussions in the form of the Black Lives Matter movement. It seemed pertinent, therefore, to reflect not just upon the cultures of commemoration and ideological imposition through tangible objects at the moment of their creation but the cultural responses to them after a significant shift in their political position within the nation. A broad survey, which includes analyses of the Nehruvian response to colonial statuary across Indian cities as well as more recent acts of iconoclasm, focuses on two critical years in the history of statuary in Calcutta: 1969-71.

The public debate around statues in post-independence India had come into force particularly on the eve of the centenary celebrations of the First War of Independence. Pressed in Lok Sabha debates, Jawaharlal Nehru had clarified that he perceived statues in India to be of three kinds: statues of historical importance, statues of artistic importance, and statues that were provocative or offensive to Indians.⁵¹ He expressed his interest in removing the provocative ones with minimum fuss so as to not create ill-will between India and England, while the ones that had historic or artistic import, he suggested, could be moved to museums. Nehru joked that the ones that had neither artistic/historic significance, nor were directly offensive to Indian sentiments, he was

⁵¹ "Removal of British Rulers' Statues," *The Civic Affairs* (July, 1957): 70.

willing to give away as gifts. While the removals took place in Lucknow, Calcutta had to wait until 1969, when the United Front government decided to remove the statues – as Nehru had said earlier – with minimum fuss.

What happened in 1971, however, with the Naxalite attack on statues, was remarkably different and unanticipated. With the colonial statues removed either to the Flagstaff House in Barrackpore or within the safe confines of the Victoria Memorial Hall grounds, the Naxalites targeted statues of Indian luminaries primarily, who were recognized as leaders of the Bengal Renaissance. While this was not overtly an attack on colonial statues, it was an attack on perceived collaborators among the bourgeoisie, recognized and lauded by the British, such as Vidyasagar or Raja Ram Mohun Roy. The methodological approach suggested by this chapter, I hope, would pave the way for studies of monumentality and statuary even in the post-colonial era, where most statues and sculptures are not considered worthy objects of aesthetic analysis. Instead, by looking at them from the perspective of urban anthropological practices of commemoration, I suggest that a longer history that originates in the colonial period may be extended into the present day.

0.3.4 Chapter 4: The Naming of Nature and Gendered Memory

Among public monuments and statues in colonial Calcutta – with the exception of Queen Victoria – there are no representations of the female body. This is in-keeping with Victorian perceptions of what virtues were worthy of public celebration as well as of the conservatism regarding women's visibility in public. Moving away from monuments built by the British, this chapter investigates a relatively under-studied aspect of memorial cultures: naming of the natural of the world through the emerging discipline of

colonial botany, and the memorial associations of gardens and flowers with British women in India. These negotiations take place both within the academic field of knowledge production as well as within realms of pleasure derived from nature, as with the gardens of the Government House maintained by women of the Viceregal families.

The chapter starts by tracing the origins of the Botanical Gardens (at Shipbur) following a set of disastrous famines that devastated the Bengal countryside in the late eighteenth century. Meant initially as an experimental laboratory that would enable more efficient agricultural practices, the Gardens became a site for the collection and study of botanical specimens from across the expanding Empire. The resulting exchanges are testimony to the networks that were forged between English, French and Dutch colonizers in particular, who divided up territories in South East Asia among themselves, and shared a similar interest in botany and zoology. In Bengal, the early efforts were pioneered by Robert Kyd, Nathaniel Wallich, William Roxborough, who held important positions with respect not only to the Botanical Gardens but also the English East India Company and its administrators in Bengal.

After a brief survey of the poetics and politics of naming the natural world after human agents, the chapter turns to a study of the gardens inside the Government House. The first significant contributions to its beautification were made by Sarah Elizabeth Amherst, daughter of William Pitt Amherst and Sarah Amherst, and taken up, after a brief interruption during Bentinck's tenure, by Emily Eden. There are two notable impulses detectable in these efforts: a British fondness for gardens and landscaping as an aesthetic and spiritual end in itself, and a collector's motivation that, like the Early Modern curiosity cabinets, tried to create a natural museum of the Empire's diversity inside the gardens. While the former resulted in amateur illustrations of their surroundings and numerous diary entries that speak of their fascination with the novelties

of the natural world, the latter could only be achieved by maintaining close ties with botanists, who were traveling across the Empire on various bureaucratic as well as scientific missions. The chapter closes with commemorative gestures surrounding the death of Charlotte, Lady Canning, focusing on a scrapbook prepared by her friends and associates following her demise, which includes a page of dry flowers and leaves from her favourite plants in the Barrackpore garden.

0.3.5 Chapter 5: The “Unified Memorial”: Curzon, Victoria Memorial and the Historiography of Calcutta

In over two centuries of colonial rule in India, there is no commemorative monument that matches the Victoria Memorial Hall in Kolkata in terms of grandeur of planning and execution. When it was being conceptualized, the *Hindi Punch* published a caricature that showed a saree-clad woman holding a replica of the building in her hands, while Lord Curzon, its prime mover, admires it. The cartoon is captioned “The Two-fold Memorial” and the accompanying fictitious dialogue suggests that it is as much a memorial to the deceased Queen as it is to Curzon himself.⁵² Taking cue from this observation, the final chapter of my dissertation tries to situate the monument at an intersection: of a history of commemorative practices across the Empire, and of Curzon’s view of history as it was articulated through the built environment of Calcutta, and indeed, India at large. Given how keen he was to rewrite a history of British India, it would not be an exaggeration to suggest that had Victoria died at a time that fell outside of Curzon’s vice-regency, Kolkata today would not have its most iconic tourist attraction – at least, not in the same form.

⁵² *Cartoons from the Hindi Punch*, 51.

In order to understand why Curzon undertook the construction of the VMH with such vigour, it is important to recognize his larger historical project. The chapter addresses two significant aspects of this: firstly, his efforts to establish the hegemony of British rule in India and the relative political positions of native rulers and princes through performative markers; and secondly, his obsession with the colonial history of Calcutta and the desire to tame the ghosts of the past that haunted the city's memory. As an illustration of the performative marker, we turn to Curzon's interpretation of the Delhi Durbar, which had been started by Lord Lyton in 1877.⁵³ The 1903 Durbar is testament to Curzon's ability to wield soft power to elicit allegiance from native rulers in order to legitimize British rule in India – and he did so through an insidious performance of assimilation. For the 1903 Durbar, which was supposed to be graced by the King himself, Curzon opted for an Indo-Saracenic style of architecture, which would be in-keeping with the cultural landscape of Delhi and function as a symbol of the gradual assimilation of the British period within the fabric of India's history. He also proclaimed that it was to be a participatory Durbar, where the Indian people would not simply observe as bystanders while the ceremony unfolded before them. Not only did the plans for the VMH echo the spatial configuration of power that was enacted at the Durbar, as the *Hindi Punch* speculated, the scale of contribution by Indian princes to the Curzon fund for the memorial was probably inversely proportionate to the distance at which they sat from the metonymic symbol of British rule at the Durbar, i.e. Curzon himself.

At the local level, Curzon had announced upon his arrival in India that he intended to oversee the beginning of a new chapter for Calcutta, which would look both to the future and to the past. On his way to India, he had been reading Busteed's *Echoes*, which

⁵³ Bernard S. Cohn, "Representing Authority in Victorian India," in *The Invention of Tradition*, ed. Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983):163-209.

inspired him to recover an authoritative history of the city of Calcutta from forgetfulness and Romantic uncertainties. His efforts to revive the Hasting's House, which was supposed to be haunted by the ghost of Warren Hastings, gave an early indication that a rationalist was at work: intolerant of oral histories and uncertain memories that constituted Calcutta's sense of the past, Curzon looked to tame these spectres and make them useful to the future. Informed by archival documents and personal letters, Curzon swiftly dismissed two of the legends surrounding the ghost of Hastings, purchased the building in 1901, and converted it into a homestay for important guests of the government. (His re-erection of the replica of the Holwell monument, one of the highlights of his historical interventions, is covered in Chapter 2.)

Thus, for a man who was given to what Eric Hobsbawm and Terrence Ranger have called the "invention of tradition"⁵⁴ (as illustrated by the Durbar), and to engendering history, the death of the Queen provided the perfect opportunity to create a grand narrative of Empire that would unfold spatially and architecturally, as a permanent structure. When his plans of establishing the "Valhalla for [British] Indian heroes" started to enter the public sphere, they sparked off debates as to whether the budget laid out for the project could be better utilised in charitable work. Unsurprisingly, he received support from upper caste Hindus, like Thakurdas Mukhopadhyay, who authored a series of articles in *Nabyabharat* defending Curzon's decision and hailing him as a people-friendly viceroy with a hands-on approach to governance.⁵⁵ As Tanika Sarkar has shown, there was an existing discourse which viewed the Queen as the European equivalent of a

⁵⁴ Eric Hobsbawm & Terrence Ranger, *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 1.

⁵⁵ Thakurdas Mukhopadhyay, "Bharateshwarir smarak" [Memorial to Her Highness], *Nabyabharat* (June-July 1901):113-126, 118.

chaste, Hindu widow, and, at the same time, a mother goddess.⁵⁶ Mukhopadhyay would refer to her as *Bharateshwari* – the goddess of Bharat or India.

Curzon was not one to be dissuaded by public opinion and, as his plans gathered momentum, the VMH Board of Trustees settled on William Emerson as the architect who would be entrusted with the task of giving the viceroy's vision a material form. In the third section of the chapter, we take a closer look at the debates around the style of the VMH within the larger context of architecture and power in the colonial period, drawing on the work of Thomas Metcalf.⁵⁷ Although Emerson and Curzon were both admirers of the Taj Mahal (Curzon's efforts to restore its lost glory were instrumental) and proponents of Indo-Saracenic architecture in the subcontinent, Curzon insisted that any marble building constructed in the latter style would inevitably draw unfavourable comparison with the Taj. Unable to think of a single unifying "Indian style," Curzon concluded that like other museums in the western world, the VMH should also be built in a classical style.

In the final section, we trace the presence of two statues of Curzon within the premises of the Victoria Memorial, and the networks of loyalty that facilitated their construction. The one erected just outside the gates of VMH, sculpted by Hamo Thornycroft, was supposed to carry bronze relief plaques on four sides of the pedestal, representing Curzon's major achievements in India: his restoration of the Taj, building the VMH, the Delhi Durbar and his institution of the Imperial Cadets. The statue, however, would be removed post-independence and replaced by one of Aurobindo Ghosh, as Curzon's found refuge in the Flagstaff House in Barrackpore. In conclusion, I

⁵⁶ Tanika Sarkar, *Hindu Wife, Hindu Nation: Community, Religion and Cultural Nationalism* (Delhi: Permanent Black, 2001), 251.

⁵⁷ Thomas R. Metcalf, "Architecture and the Representation of Empire: India, 1860-1910," *Representations*, no. 6 (Spring, 1984): 37-65.

reflect on the colonial foundations of the public history of Calcutta's past and try to suggest possible theoretical solutions which can enable a re-writing through deconstructionist modes of historiographic engagement by re-contextualizing rather than discarding the colonial archives.

Chapter 1

The Bengal Obituary: Memory, Landscape, and Text

I. INTRODUCTION

1.1.1 Scope

In 1848 the undertaker firm, Holmes and Co., published a collection of monumental inscriptions from across burial grounds in the Bengal Presidency in the form of *The Bengal Obituary, or, a Record to Perpetuate the Memory of Departed Worth*.¹ A tome of over four hundred pages with records of over five thousand burials, the *Obituary* was not the first of its kind although it was the most comprehensive attempt in print yet at remembering the dead in the colony. It was also the first to articulate in its preface an agenda that was implicit even in previous attempts: the creation of a historical archive with a view to narrativizing the lives and work of early British colonizers in Bengal. In a sense, it constitutes an early attempt at writing a collective biography that defines the contours of colonial society through acts of remembrance. The *Obituary* marks a significant moment not simply in the history Calcutta's documentary history but in the

¹ *The Bengal Obituary: Or, a Record to Perpetuate the Memory of Departed Worth* (Calcutta: Holmes & Co., 1851).

strategic crystallization of personal affect into a political argument that led to what David Arnold has termed a “sentimental annexation” of India.²

At the most basic level, the collection was a bulwark against natural, generational forgetting. The burial grounds in and around Calcutta had fallen into disrepair, as noted by John Hawkesworth or “Asiaticus” as early as in 1802.³ The antiquarian compilers of these volumes were aware of their historic value as archives: at a time before records maintained by the state were easily accessible to the common citizen, the monumental inscriptions across the many burial grounds offered the best shot at remembering an individual along with their basic biographical information. In some cases, where family, friends or colleagues had opted to write epitaphs, the headstones also contained affective histories surrounding the dead. The publishers of the *Obituary* also recognized the death of loved ones in the colonies was likely to cause anxiety in people back in England. So, its primary purpose was declared in the preface:

Nor will it be deemed a work of supererogation to convey, by the medium of this work, to sorrowing connections in Europe, or elsewhere, the pure and consolatory satisfaction, that the last mark of respect and duty to departed worth, has not been omitted by their sorrowing friends and that the sacred deposits still remain with us, –are still kept in view, and as piously cared for, as on the day of their first interment.⁴

² David Arnold, “Deathscapes: India in an Age of Romanticism and Empire, 1800-1856,” *Nineteenth-Century Contexts* 26, no. 4 (2004): 339-353, 345.

³ Asiaticus [John Hawkesworth], *Asiaticus: Part the Second: The Epitaphs in the Different Burial Grounds in and about Calcutta* (Calcutta: Telegraph Press, 1803).

⁴ *Bengal Obituary*, v.

Preserving the memory of the deceased was considered intrinsically valuable but in this case, the publishers claimed, it was “doubly dear.” These were the most distinguished men, willed by providence to rule over India in Indian history, who had:

through the sacrifice of their lives, gradually raised the British Indian Empire to its present state of stability and eminence, by consolidating its Government, ameliorating the condition of its subjects, and embracing their temporal and spiritual happiness through the education of its people, and the protection of their rights and liberties from encroachments of invading and cruel enemies.⁵

Interspersed with the monumental inscriptions, the *Obituary* contained detailed biographical notes on eminent citizens.⁶ Incidentally, this might also constitute the first attempt at prioritizing specific narratives (the focus being on English East India Company officials and members of the clergy) over others in the writing of colonial Calcutta’s social and political history. By the merit of their lives and deeds these “great men,” and by the sheer strength of numbers the many thousands of individuals who lay buried in Bengal, were expected to “influence the conduct of succeeding rulers, (in whose hands may be placed the future destinies of this vast empire), exciting in them an honest spirit of emulation.”⁷ Such noble actions would win these future statesmen not just a niche in the hearts of the readers of the volume but also grant them a “claim to the like tribute to their own memory.” Thus, the *Obituary* was not simply projecting itself as an “attempt to perpetuate the memory of departed worth.” It was claiming, rather boldly, that a place in a similar volume would be incentive for future rulers to act like their predecessors –

⁵ Ibid, v.

⁶ Trev Lynn Broughton notes that Urquhart’s *Oriental Obituary* was the first to do so. See Trev Lynn Broughton, “The Bengal Obituary: Reading and Writing Calcutta Graves in the Mid Nineteenth Century,” *Journal of Victorian Culture* 15, no. 1 (2010): 39-59, 46. DOI: 10.1080/13555501003607677.

⁷ *Bengal Obituary*, v.

and by extension, presenting itself as a reward to the “departed worth” for their noble deeds.

1.1.2 Literature Review

Although the *Obituary* seems very sure of its own purpose, it resists easy scholarly categorization. In her article “*The Bengal Obituary: Reading and Writing Calcutta Graves in the Mid Nineteenth Century*,” Trev Lynn Broughton recognizes it as “enacting a parallel encounter between writing and material culture, the literary and lapidary” with an emphasis “on custodianship rather than abandonment,”⁸ but her essay constantly reveals the frustration of failing to decipher it with the help of any one set of disciplinary tools. It cannot be trusted as an archive for socio-historical studies of late eighteenth and early nineteenth century colonial Calcutta since it concerns itself with at best a partial sample of the population. By its very definition, a collection of epitaphs presupposes a monumental headstone, which many could not afford at the time. Those that were buried in unmarked graves are therefore the first casualties of its archival limitations. Even in terms of representing the cemetery spaces, which constitute “ideologies in stone,” the *Obituary* obliterates many of the nuances in terms of the organization, form and clustering of graves in a colonial cemetery, which can reveal “affiliations, kinship structures, relative wealth and hence social hierarchies, aspirations.”⁹

The materiality of the graves, Broughton notes, is also lost as the *Obituary* does not record any of the details of “mass, height, ornateness, extravagance of materials, sculptural beauty or boldness that might indicate status.”¹⁰ The messiness of colonial

⁸ Broughton, 40-41.

⁹ Ibid, 42.

¹⁰ Ibid, 42.

society in Calcutta is glossed over in favour of smooth, well-rounded narratives of lives that would be considered worthy of remembrance and emulation. The mixed-race parentage of Thomas Kyd or the multiple Eurasian children fathered by Lord Metcalfe are absent from their biographical records, Broughton points out. She reads in this an attempt on the part of the compilers to “mask the social and sexual connections between European and Indian communities that were taken for granted for much of the period chronicled, though actively suppressed as the nineteenth century progressed.”¹¹ These narratives, unlike the material details of the headstones, are also absent from the spaces the *Obituary* tries to represent. As such, they do not constitute absences within the text but can be seen as deliberate attempts at narrativization.

Broughton’s attempt to place it among the “plethora of directories, reference guides, registers, almanacs and maps of Calcutta”¹² does not succeed either. These attempts at mapping the city predate the late nineteenth century anxiety to make the increasingly unmanageable territory more “legible,” to use James Scott’s phrase,¹³ and, as such, provided easy reference guides to inhabitants and institutions buyers of the volumes were most likely to look for. The *Obituary* can hardly be blamed for not fitting into this category. Next, Broughton notes its resistance to textual analysis from a literary point of view. Although there are a few exceptions, the inscriptions that appear on the tablets, including the verse epitaphs, are neither original compositions nor of any remarkable literary merit. Rather, they are marked by “conformity, piety, and – overwhelmingly – repetition.”¹⁴ Broughton notes that “far from shoring up the individuality of the departed worthy, several of the poetic epitaphs are shared by many

¹¹ Ibid, 43.

¹² Ibid, 43.

¹³ See James Scott, *Seeing Like a State How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 54-55.

¹⁴ Broughton, 44.

graves and sometimes—as chance would have it – appear twice on the same page.”¹⁵ The resulting effect, she argues, is one of “de-individualizing” the subjects in an apparent contradiction of the stated purpose of recording individual and collective achievements in the colonies.

After noting these challenges, Broughton provides a useful set of strategies for approaching the work. She delineates the major discourses which can productively inform our reading and situation of the *Obituary*. John Strang’s *Necropolis Glasguensis* (1831), Blachard’s “A Visit to the General Cemetery at Kensal Green” (1842) and J.C. Loudon’s *On the Laying Out, Planting and Managing of Cemeteries* (1843) serve as points of reference in tracing a history of virtual (textual) guided tours of burial grounds, which included arguments about the location of cemeteries vis-à-vis urban centres, clues to appropriate conduct (influenced by Romantic poetry) in burial grounds, and pronouncements on epitaphic poetry. Moving from a reading of reading of funerary cultures to a “cult” of mourning following Esther Schor,¹⁶ Broughton offers a more discourse-oriented analytic strategy, founded upon Adam Smith’s theory of sentimentality. We return to this point later.

Despite the article’s effective situation of the *Obituary* at the intersection of these discourses, it seems to stop short of reflecting on the specific implications of the work’s misfitted nature. For instance, why does it resist being neatly categorized? Or, what does the repetitive and unremarkable nature of the epitaphic verses tell us about the cultures of affect within which they were circulating? And perhaps most importantly, what does the volume have to do with the geography whose partial absence it attempts to fill in?

¹⁵ Ibid, 45.

¹⁶ Esther Schor, *Bearing the Dead: The British Culture of Mourning from the Enlightenment to Victoria* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1994), 11.

The scholarship on Calcutta's Christian burial grounds (largely focused on South Park Street Cemetery) and funerary inscriptions is not extensive but it encompasses different approaches to these peculiar remnants of a bygone world order. Robert Travers and, more recently, Peter Robb read these burial grounds largely in their temporal context. In his illuminating essay, "Death and the Nabob: Imperialism and Commemoration in Eighteenth-Century India," Travers teases out the ideological implications of eighteenth century colonial architecture, which "consciously deployed local styles to attract Indian as well as British audiences."¹⁷ The Christian (mostly Anglican) colonizers, who were anticipating and actively working towards establishing political hegemony in Bengal, saw themselves as being in dialogue with the existing political order, at the head of which sat Muslim rulers. The two "were not only people of the book, but also people of the tomb," suggests Travers, "and it is not surprising that British supplicants of the Mughals cultivate this common bond."¹⁸ As an example, he points to the mausoleum of Job Charnock, whose octagonal form according to Travers, refers back to Islamic architecture, which frequently used eight chambers to reflect the divisions in paradise. (The European cemetery in Surat is another spectacular example of a similar cultural synthesis.) He goes on then, to offer a literary analysis of the discourse around unnatural deaths – murders and massacres – and the British attempts at commemorating them through funerary monuments (e.g. the memorial in Patna, which was topped by a Grecian urn). Travers also touches upon writings on the notion of "sacrificial death" and private death which gave memorialists an opportunity to highlight the virtues of the colonizers in India in life and in death.¹⁹

¹⁷ Robert Travers, "Death and the Nabob: Imperialism and Commemoration in Eighteenth-Century India," *Past and Present*, 196 (August 2007): 83-124, 93.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, 93.

¹⁹ *Ibid*, 108-109.

In “Memory, Place and British Memorials in Early Calcutta” Peter Robb studies the relationship between space, memory and ideology with reference to Pierre Nora’s celebrated but much critiqued idea of the increasing prominence of *lieux de mémoire* (isolated places with memory associations) over *milieu de mémoire* (collective, organic memory), and Simon Schama’s theory of reading landscapes. He sees memorials not simply as individual articulations of grief but as agents in making history and as an important part of the project of laying the groundwork for a community’s future identity. Robb argues that the inscriptions serve a collective purpose, which goes beyond honouring the dead. It is “to reinforce a set of desirable traits: some intrinsic (virtue), others outward facing (charity, honesty, reputation),” which constituted for the British “versions of the past interpreted in their own terms.”²⁰

He looks at a variety of physical landmarks to illustrate his point about the relationship between space and memory in a colonized landscape, starting with the mythical tree at “Boitacannah” (Baithakkhana), which was cut down in 1800 during the construction of Circular Road. The tree, which has not been identified with any degree of certainty (it could either be a tamarind or a banyan), took Richard Blechynden’s men eight days to cut down. Its symbolic or sentimental meaning was also contested: some warned Governor-General Wellesley that it was the tree under which Job Charnock had first sat when he started doling unequal laws, while others claimed that the tree had sheltered Siraj-ud-Daulah as he directed the siege from its shade. From natural landmarks imbued with affect, Robb moves on to the meanings inscribed in individual funerary monuments, and finally on to the discourse that is generated by the large burial grounds and collections like the *Obituary*. He suggests that it is through these inscriptions upon

²⁰ Peter Robb, Memory, “Place and British Memorials in Early Calcutta: Transcript of a Lecture by Peter Robb,” in *Memory, Identity and the Colonial Encounter in India: Essays in Honour of Peter Robb*, ed. Ezra Rashkow, Sanjukta Ghosh and Upal Chakrabarti (Abingdon: Routledge, 2019), 31-53, 40-43.

physical space that a race occupies a foreign land: “Cemeteries thus made a claim to place, not in the obvious sense...but by reflecting a set of virtues, achievements and relationships that were being more generally expressed or imposed.”²¹

Moving away from the historical contexts of the Calcutta burial grounds, scholars such as Elizabeth Buettner and Ashish Chadha have turned their attention to the afterlives of the cemeteries. The two essays, “Cemeteries, Public Memory and Raj Nostalgia in Postcolonial Britain and India” and “Ambivalent Heritage: Between Affect and Ideology in a Colonial Cemetery,”²² both published in 2006, look at the peculiar status of these burial grounds in the post-colonial city. They are of indubitable historic value but as part of the urban heritage, they struggle to find meaning. Buettner’s focus is more on the efforts of English Raj “nostalgists,” who have actively organized for the preservation of these colonial monuments, particularly the British Association for Cemeteries in South Asia (BACSA). In several articles which appeared in their institutional mouthpiece, *Chowkidar*, Buettner notes a sense of great frustration at the callousness with which remnants of this culture of commemoration are repurposed by Indians. “How many early inscriptions,” one writer laments, “have been lost by India’s sturdy dhobis?”²³

Buettner resists the temptation to read postcolonial intent into such acts of re-appropriation. She finds historical parallels in the English re-appropriation of building materials that took place during the construction of colonial edifices, such as St. John’s Church in Calcutta. The church, which at the time served as a cathedral, was commonly known as the *Pathure Girja* (or Stone Church) because of the remarkable stones it had cannibalized from the ruins of Gaur. The comparison does not stand up to scrutiny: the

²¹ Ibid, 44.

²² Ashish Chadha, “Ambivalent Heritage: Between Affect and Ideology in a Colonial Cemetery,” *Journal of Material Culture* 11, no. 3 (2006): 339-63.

²³ Elizabeth Buettner, “Cemeteries, Public Memory and Raj Nostalgia in Postcolonial Britain and India,” *History and Memory* 18, no. 1 (Spring/Summer 2006): 5-42, 22.

instances of appropriation she cites in the context of post-colonial India constitute repurposing for everyday use, while for the British the purpose was to impose upon a landscape symbols of their power and aspirations of a lasting legacy. Buettner observes correctly that these actions cannot be seen as “transgressive ‘subaltern’ acts against symbols of colonialism,” but that they suggest “apathy or indifference to the colonial heritage more strongly than focused resentment.”²⁴ She concludes by saying:

As such, European funerary architecture and cemeteries demand to be viewed as sites of struggle over which the meanings and value of South Asia’s colonial legacy for different parties are contemplated or contested – or, alternatively forgotten altogether, retaining ‘no meaning at all.’²⁵

Like Buettner, Chadha also resists analyzing the present condition of cemeteries in the light of deliberate post-colonial responses. He rightly situates the meaning of these monuments (the South Park Street cemetery) at “an intersection between the funerary monuments as cultural product of a colonial ideology, and as a memorial artefact of personal bereavement.”²⁶ His article considers legislative debates in the United Kingdom and India surrounding cemeteries in the decades following India’s independence, concluding that the “cemetery in the postcolony is located in the irony of its previous glory, its past power, and its present powerlessness.”²⁷ Chadha rehearses the distinction between “dissonant heritage” (discordance and lack of consistency in the historical narratives surrounding an event represented by a monument) and “negative heritage” (sites that commemorate trauma and conflict), and introduces in his article a helpful third term, “ambivalent heritage.” The Park Street cemetery, for Chadha, comprises an

²⁴ Ibid, 23.

²⁵ Ibid, 30.

²⁶ Chadha, 341.

²⁷ Ibid, 347.

example of ambivalent heritage, where it can “neither be appropriated in the nationalistic imagination nor...completely negated – it can at best be forgotten.”²⁸

The preceding review of existing literature on the *Obituary* and its relationship to space and memory reveals certain gaps in scholarship. Broughton studies it principally as a stand-alone work, although she places it between literary and material cultures. Her article suggests useful strategies for decoding the work: through historical generic traditions, and in terms of its ideological claims. Travers and Robb read burial spaces and commemorative monuments in the light of their historical contexts and their assertions of power. Chadha and Buettner, on the other hand, turn their attention to the afterlives of the burial grounds and their value in terms of heritage through reception in India and in the United Kingdom. I suggest that in order to historically and critically understand the relationship between these “deathscapes,” memory and power, it is useful to adopt an interdisciplinary approach that reads space, material culture, and text in conjunction. It is not sufficient to claim that a relationship between place and power founded on memory exists in the colonized landscape and imagination. A reading of the cemeteries in colonial Calcutta and their afterlives as part of *The Bengal Obituary* should be able to illustrate this point. Furthermore, rather than simply locating these commemorative practices within broader discourses of funerary practices and power which scholars situate primarily in the colonial centres, these traditions could be considered as a significant part of the affective history of Europe given the large numbers who lost their lives in the subcontinent as civilians and military personnel.

The articles by Buettner and Chadha, which study these spaces in terms of their meaning in the present day cityscape, tend to ignore two important aspects of these burial

²⁸ Ibid, 348.

grounds. Firstly, they lack a sensitive reading of urban geography – in terms of colonial Calcutta and the post-colonial city – which enables us to appreciate the fate of these spaces better. Secondly, the articles underplay the influence of the *Obituary* in preserving and activating the narrative potency latent in these colonial spaces. To a certain extent, the latter is true also of the approach adopted by Travers and Robb, whose studies of funerary cultures focus on reading these practices in the context of their times.

What often passes unnoticed is the question of reception: the ideology – in stone or in poetic verse – that was articulated in these tombstones as, in all likelihood, read by very few in their time. The cemeteries were located at a distance from the main urban centres and among the total number of people in Calcutta at the time, only a fraction was English or English-educated. Even in the early 1800s we find reports lamenting the condition of funerary monuments, which is not a sign of a space that is used and cared for. The travellers' accounts of the "deathscapes," as David Arnold's essay shows, are impressionistic rather than being imbued with historical curiosity. Could it be argued, then, that *The Bengal Obituary*, along with its predecessors in the field of epitaph collections, ensured a deferred readership for these epitaphs in an ideologically fraught form, which did not exist at the time of their articulation?

1.1.3. Theoretical Framework

In his essay on "deathscapes" in colonial India, David Arnold has drawn attention to the cultural production of a landscape, largely through travel writing that is dominated by ruins and "jungles." These narratives frequently resorted to ways of seeing that had their ideological foundations in the Romantic movement, using tropes most frequently

associated with picturesque and gothic modes of representation. Up until the mid-nineteenth century, Arnold writes:

before the landscape of India became transformed by canals, railways, and land reclamation, the remains of tombs, forts, and walled gardens were among the most visible and remarked upon features in the Indian landscape.²⁹

The images of decay that were frequently rehearsed in these travelogues were intended to inspire a sense of greater purpose – that of nursing a civilization back to life, but with new potential that could make it a part of something bigger than it had ever been – the British empire itself. At its most generalized form, this idea of landscape draws upon the work of scholars like W.J.T. Mitchell,³⁰ Simon Schama,³¹ Don Mitchell,³² and others who have redefined the idea of ‘landscape,’ emphasizing its inextricably link with ideology and power. They have shown that in culturally produced landscapes – that is to say all “landscape” – disguise the markers of the process through which they come into existence are disguised, thereby invisibilizing the operations of capitalism and imperialism.

In order to read the “deathscape” in Calcutta of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, however, it does not suffice to frame the construction of burial grounds in the light of this theory alone. A specific understanding of the conditions existing in Calcutta can help achieve a more nuanced understanding about the production of space – literally (i.e. geographically) and culturally (through visual and literary representations). Archival documents reveal the concerns and discourses around urban

²⁹ Arnold, 348.

³⁰ W.J.T. Mitchell, “Imperial Landscape,” in *Landscape and Power*, ed. W.J.T. Mitchell (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 5-34.

³¹ Simon Schama, *Landscape and Memory* (London: Harper Perennial, 1995).

³² Don Mitchell, “Landscape,” in *Cultural Geography: A Critical Dictionary of Key Concepts*, ed. David Atkinson, Peter Jackson, David Siley, Neil Washbourne (London: I.B. Tauris, 2005), 49-56.

sanitation and health that informed these decisions, and what the “place of burial” within the context of the city’s map meant for the public nature of deaths and memorial practices in colonial Calcutta. The stories behind the burial grounds are suggestive as well. They reveal an interesting dynamic that was gradually taking shape between the English East India Company, wealthy private individuals, and the city itself. The role of religion in this drama is often underplayed by scholars, but as this chapter hopes to illustrate, it had a significant impact on early efforts at documenting an urban history in Calcutta. The landscape of death that is culturally produced is as much a result of travelogues (as Arnold has argued) as of *The Bengal Obituary*. Even with its erasure of the materiality of acts of commemoration, the *Obituary* allows for the circulation of affect that the spaces in themselves may never have achieved. Broughton suggests that the volume resists easy categorization either as text, open to textual analysis, or as a socio-historical document,³³ but that, precisely, is what makes the *Obituary* a valuable document.

In the third section of this chapter I suggest that rather than any attempt at a close reading of the inscriptions, a loose interpretation of Franco Moretti’s idea of “distant reading”³⁴ of epitaphs and biographical notes together might prove more effective. On the one hand, this takes away the burden of asserting the inscriptions’ critical importance based on literary merit. On the other hand, it allows us to focus on the circulation of textual excerpts through print and manuscript cultures, which allow epitaphic verses to reappear on headstones across the empire in the unlikeliest of places as re-citations, to use Scot Newstock’s productive wordplay.³⁵ Once again, to resort to digital humanities

³³ Broughton, 45.

³⁴ Franco Moretti, “Conjectures on World Literature,” *New Left Review* 1 (January-February 2000): 54-68, 56-58.

³⁵ Scott L. Newstock, *Quoting Death in Early Modern England: The Poetics of Epitaphs Beyond the Tomb* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 5.

methodologies, one might metaphorically call this a hypertext of affect panning the Empire.

In his study of Early Modern funerary inscriptions Newstok illustrates the fluid definition of “epitaphs,”³⁶ which led to different ways of structuring grief and mourning. He also points out that a corpus of essays on epitaphic poetry that were produced by the antiquarian societies starting in the 1590s constitute “some of the first collective practical criticism of English poetry.”³⁷ Joshua Scodel’s *The English Poetic Epitaph*³⁸ is a valuable study of the conventions of poetic craft and taste that informed this remarkable genre of writing, starting with Ben Jonson and ending with William Wordsworth. (The tradition, of course, continues beyond Wordsworth.) Esther Schor’s *Bearing the Dead* overlaps partly with Scodel’s canon, beginning with the Enlightenment and continuing into Victorian cultures of mourning. Her focus is less on the poetics of death and more on the history of affect. Interestingly, the empire and the colonies do not seem to play a major role in either of these works.

Taking into consideration the specific geographic context of burial and commemorative practices, this chapter will attempt to place the politics of landscape, memory and textual circulation within these existing discourses with a view to altering the broad, Eurocentric narratives. Theories of emotion and performance posited by Sara Ahmed and Judith Butler offer useful methods for linking a history of affect with ideology and narratives of community or nation building. The following sections will attempt to explain in these terms the moment of transition when an unread landscape of private grief enters into textual circulation, and, therefore, political significance.

³⁶ Ibid, 9.

³⁷ Ibid, 2.

³⁸ Joshua Scodel, *The English Poetic Epitaph: Commemoration and Conflict from Jonson to Wordsworth* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1991).

II. THE PLACE AND SPACE OF BURIAL

Historians are supposed to reach the past always through texts, occasionally through images; things that are safely caught in the bell jar of academic convention; look but don't touch. But one of my best-loved teachers...had always insisted on directly experiencing 'a sense of place,' of using 'the archive of the feet.'³⁹

Simon Schama, *Landscape and Memory* (1996)

1.2.1 Boundaries

At the end of the eighteenth century, defining the boundaries of Calcutta became a matter of great concern to the board of directors of the English East India Company, and, therefore, the Governor General at Fort William. It was the Company's most important holding in India at the time and its governance was under scrutiny back in England. By the act of 1794, the Company was allowed to continue trading in India but it was given the task of ensuring justice and peace within the city limits. The first, most obvious step towards efficient governance was to define the territory of their jurisdiction, and so the Governor General in Council at Fort William demanded an unambiguous definition of the boundaries of Calcutta. The Governors in Council at Fort St. George in Madras and in Bombay, likewise, called for similar demarcations to their city limits. This was to be an absolute definition. A monopoly to define the civic boundaries was claimed by the Governors in Council and these newly defined boundaries would not be open to

³⁹ Schama, 25.

interpretation through everyday negotiations. The Act was unequivocal in dismissing “any custom or usage to the contrary.”⁴⁰

Unlike Bombay or Madras, Calcutta’s boundaries in the late eighteenth century were relatively easy to draw. Bound by the Hughli River to the west, the city had a semi-natural border on the other three sides in the form of the Maratha Ditch that had been dug at the expense of the settlement’s “native” population in the mid-1700s who feared the possibility of a Maratha invasion. The attack never came and the projected seven miles of the ditch, which was to form a semi-circle along three sides of the settlement, was left incomplete.⁴¹ The ditch and the “Circular Canal,” which subsequently took its place, share a murky history, appearing and disappearing in the urban geography, in maps and in the archive. The “Plan for the intelligence of the Military Operations at Calcutta when attacked and taken by Seerajah Dowlet [sic]”⁴² (1756) shows a clear eastern boundary for the city but the ditch does not appear as anything more than fragments, marked as “Ditches and slight-works made in 1742.”⁴³ Lieutenant Colonel Mark Wood’s *Plan of Calcutta* drawn between 1784 and 1785, however, offers a much clearer definition of the ditch. By 1792, Mark Wood’s map, published by William Baillie,⁴⁴ was already in circulation.

⁴⁰ “Proclamation Fixing the Limits of Calcutta Issued by the Governor General in Council on the 10th September 1794,” in F.W. Simms, *Report on the Survey of Calcutta* (Calcutta: Military Orphan Press, 1851), Appendix A, i.

⁴¹ See for example “Orme’s Account of the Maratha Ditch,” in *Old Fort William in Bengal: A Selection of Official Documents Dealing with Its History*, ed. C.R. Wilson (London: John Murray, 1906), 1:146-147.

⁴² John Cheever, *Plan for the Intelligence of Military Operations at Calcutta when Attacked and Taken by Seerajah Dowlet 1756* (London, 1756). URL: <https://www.raremaps.com/gallery/detail/53273/plan-for-the-intelligence-of-military-operations-at-calcutta-call-cheever>

⁴³ “Slight-works,” as defined by a treatise on defence from 1833 dedicated to East India Company’s administration, was a type of fortification which was of a temporary nature. See Hector Straith, definition of “Fortifications” in *A Treatise on Fortification Deduced from Established Principles with Observations on the Increased Effects of Artillery* (Croydon: William Annan, 1833), 1.

⁴⁴ Mark Wood, *Plan of Calcutta...in the Years 1784 & 1785* (published by William Baillie, 1792), NL.

The proclamation of 10 September relied heavily on the existence of the ditch and its offshoots to define not only the eastern but also the northern and southern boundaries of Calcutta. The northern boundary commenced at the Post or Mete No. 22 near Colonel Robertson's garden, opposite the Chitpur Nala, and continued via the foot of the Chitpur Bridge down to the Post or Mete No. 5, where the Dum-dum Bridge began. The eastern boundary, traced along the Maratha Ditch, began at the bridge and continued down the eastern side of the Baithakkhana Road, "leaving the Portuguese Burying-ground to the east,"⁴⁵ until it reached the famous Baithakkhana tree. Then, leaving Dhee Sreerampore on the east and south-east, it included "Protestant Burying Ground" at Chowringhee within its folds, and continued down to Dhee Birjee. In its southward extension, the boundary continued past Russa-pagla Road, excluding the Hospital for the Insane and its burying ground, Major Kyd's garden and Shibpur, and met the river at the Post or Mete No. 18. Excepting a few *ghat*-s, the western boundary followed the river Hughli, joining itself at Colonel Robertson's garden in the north.⁴⁶

The boundary of the city was defined along the inner edge of the Maratha Ditch, leaving out the ditch itself. The soil dug up in the process was used to elevate its inner, town-side curve, which was subsequently lined by a row of trees. By one account, this strip became "the most frequented and fashionable part about town."⁴⁷ Defining the boundary in this fashion also meant that apart from the South Park Street cemetery (or the Chowringhee burying ground as it is referred to in most contemporary documents) the burial grounds attached to Christian places of worship (St. John's, Kiernander's "Mission" Church), and the military and hospital grounds, no other burial ground would

⁴⁵ "Proclamation" (1794), ii.

⁴⁶ Ibid, iii.

⁴⁷ W.H. Carey, *The Good Old Days of Honourable John Company: Being Curious Reminiscences during the Rule of the East India Company from 1600 to 1858* (1882; Calcutta: Quins Book Company, 1964), 36.

have fallen within the limits of the city. By the beginning of the nineteenth century, Calcutta had sizeable representation of religious communities from across the world and this was visible in the cemeteries that had mushroomed just along the city's eastern edge.

The Greek cemetery, probably the earliest of the minority Christian burial grounds, was opened in 1777. Eduardo Tiretta established his private burial ground, known also as the French burial ground, in late 1797⁴⁸ just opposite South Park Street cemetery; a stone's throw from the latter but divided by the Circular Road, the Scottish cemetery in Karaya was opened in 1826.⁴⁹ In January 1812, the death of the first notable Jewish migrant to Calcutta, Hacham Moses de Pas Shaliah of Safad, had occasioned the legendary founder of the community in Calcutta, Shalom ha-Cohen, to acquire a plot of land at Narkeldanga to set up the Jewish burial ground.⁵⁰ In 1822 Nowroji Sorabji Umrigar constructed the Parsi tower of silence in the vicinity.⁵¹ Others, such as the Chinese, Hindu and Muslim burial grounds followed and, by the late 1800s, the eastern border of the Ditch, rolling down towards the Salt Lakes was turned into a veritable necropolis. The belt immediately beyond this semi-natural boundary was also the designated zone for tanneries and butcheries. The river that marks the city's western limit, on the other hand, constituted the contested site of commerce, social life and Hindu funerary rituals. Binaya Krishna Deb's unattributed quote is not far from the truth in asserting that, defined by its watery borders, "Calcutta formed an island,"⁵² one that tried

⁴⁸ See Gianni Dubbini, "Una Vita Globale: Il Nobile Edoardo Tiretta di Treviso (1731-1809), Dall'Europa all'India Britannica," *Ateneo Veneto* 14 no. 2 (2015): 9-42

⁴⁹ "Scottish Cemetery," https://standrewschurchkolkata.in/scottish_cemetery.php.

⁵⁰ Deepanjan Ghosh, "Jewish Cemetery, Narkeldanga," Recalling Jewish Calcutta, Jael Silliman. URL: <http://www.jewishcalcutta.in/exhibits/show/cemeteries/jewish-cemetery--narkeldanga-m>.

⁵¹ Jesse Palsetia, "Parsi Communities in Calcutta," *Encyclopaedia Iranica*. URL: <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/parsi-communities-ii-in-calcutta>

⁵² Binaya Krishna Deb, *The Early History and Growth of Calcutta* (Calcutta: Romesh Chandra Ghose, 1905), 23.

to maintain its precarious position within the physical boundaries by relegating the abject beyond the limit.⁵³

In his essay on “Ambivalent Heritage” Ashish Chadha describes the South Park Street cemetery as being “situated in the centre of Calcutta’s commercial and residential district surrounded by upper-middle class apartment buildings and business establishments,”⁵⁴ before going on to discuss its apparently anomalous position both geographically and symbolically in the post-colonial imagination of the city’s history. One of the problems of taking one particular cemetery as subject of study is precisely this: the geographical context, which subsequently forms part of the analytical conclusions, can be misread. While it is true that the area is among Kolkata’s more expensive real estate zones, the South Park Street cemetery stands at its edge, intersecting with another area of town which is dominated by the minority Muslim community and is not financially very secure. In fact, this is the belt mentioned earlier which stretches through the heart of the city from Park Street right up to Beliaghata, containing most of the Christian and non-Christian places of the dead from the late eighteenth century. This geographical mis-location could be a result of approaching the study of a specific site from the direction of the textual archive rather than reading the archive through space, or even considering the two as equally significant as points of entry into the research.

1.2.2 The Final Journey down Burying Ground Road

The task of disposing of the dead was a rather grisly affair in eighteenth century Calcutta, which explains why this relegation to a space beyond the city limits was a municipal

⁵³ Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 2.

⁵⁴ Chadha, 339-340.

necessity. Considering the infamously high mortality rate among the English in Calcutta (in India, generally), room for burial was inadequate at best. The Portuguese burial ground, connected with the Portuguese Church, could not apparently allow more than five to six months for a corpse to decompose. The padre had confessed that semi-decomposed remains were exhumed and thrown into a pit in the corner.⁵⁵ By one estimate, the old burial ground (later replaced by St. John's Church) had recorded over twelve thousand burials by September 1766.⁵⁶

After Siraj-ud-Daulah's siege of Calcutta in 1756, the ground on which Fort William previously stood was used partially for the construction of a Custom House. To the east of the Custom House, and surrounding the fort, was a ditch, where the victims of the controversial "Black Hole" of Calcutta had been buried. Further south stood the Military Hospital, once part of the old fort, "destitute of proper accommodations."⁵⁷ The old burial ground shared a boundary with the hospital. The unsanitary conditions that resulted from the overabundance of corpses and the shortage of space did not make it a pleasant neighbourhood for those who entered the hospital with hopes of recovery. On 29 September 1766 the Board of Directors at Fort William directed the Civil Architect to find a suitable locations for a new hospital and a new burying ground, as the existing one "being situated in the middle of the Town" was "too much confined" and unhealthy. By 25 August 1767, the Board was bracing itself once again for the monsoons: "The President acquainted the Board that, the New Burying Ground near Henry Vansittart's garden being now ready, they desired the clergyman to consecrate it, as the sickly season

⁵⁵ Richard Blechynden, "Diaries," 14 July 1796, 48-49, Add MS 45598, BL.

⁵⁶ "A New Hospital, and Burial Ground, Proceedings," 29 September 1766, *Selections from Unpublished Records of Government for the Years 1748 to 1767 Inclusive*, ed. James Long (London: N. Trubner, 1869), 1:456.

⁵⁷ *Ibid*, 1:456.

is approaching.”⁵⁸ That same day the first burial took place at the new burial ground: that of one John Wood, a writer in the Council House. The grave was subsequently removed.

The great Chowringhee burying ground, which came to be known as Park Street cemetery much later, gave the street its former name, “Burying Ground Road.” This was probably the result of frequent journeys down the road which the British inhabitants had to take to reach the burying ground from more densely inhabited parts of town. Funerals were public events. Even though word spread quickly in the settlement through the *Calcutta Gazette*’s announcements or at church ceremonies, the procession would inevitably function as a public proclamation of someone’s death. For persons acquainted with the deceased, undertakers would provide “circular printed notices of funerals,” “black-edged ominous missive[s].”⁵⁹ Undertakers, who were employed presumably only by the wealthier citizens, would place the corpse in the coffin and then prepare the hearse.

A few individuals were able to foretell their deaths, which they seemed to regard with unintentionally comical detachment. Robert McClintock had arrived in India in 1796 and had begun his career as a merchant and agent with Alexander & Co. Subsequently, after a brief return to England, he co-founded McClintock, Morton & Co., which met with uneven success. In his obituary note he is described as a “model of the Christian gentleman,” embodying all the virtues that the Company sought in its men: meek, liberal, “generous, yet methodical and shrewd.”⁶⁰ Shortly before he died, he reportedly visited the Park Street cemetery, chose a spot for his burial, ordered a “Pukkah Brick Vault” to be built, and requested his personal “molly” (gardener) to plant flowers around it. He proceeded to borrow a copy of the funeral card of his friend, W.F. Clark,

⁵⁸ Kathleen Blechynden, *Calcutta Past and Present* (London: W. Thacker & Co., 1905), 76.

⁵⁹ Emma Roberts, *Scenes and Characteristics of Hindostan with Sketches of Anglo-Indian Society* (London: W.H. Allen & Co., 1837), 1:284.

⁶⁰ *Bengal Obituary*, 196.

who had died a few months earlier, and correcting it in his own hand, handed it over to the undertaker for use the following day. McClintock died in his Chowringhee house and his funeral obsequies were followed as per his last instructions.

Close friends and relatives served as pall-bearers, as the funerary procession proceeded on its slow and melancholy journey to the burial ground. Emma Roberts noted that the processions that “almost every evening wend their way to the burial-ground of Calcutta” rendered people “unwilling to live in Park Street” even though it was situated between the “fashionable suburb” of Chowringhee and the recently developed areas along the Maratha Ditch. Roberts’s description paints a dreary picture, drawing heavily on Gothic tropes.⁶¹

Beyond it, the waste jungly space, partially covered with native huts, and intersected by pools of stagnant water, adds to the desolate air of the enclosure, with its tasteless and ill-kept monuments. The scene is calculated to inspire the most gloomy emotions, and it is saying a great deal for the fortitude displayed by females that no instance is recorded of their sinking under the combination of depressing circumstances which must weight upon their imaginations, when they are compelled to appear in person as mourners.⁶²

Some, like the undertaker T. Maudesely, capitalized on the undesirability of this painfully slow, “gloomy scene” that was enacted on Park Street every other day. Coffins, “covered with a rich black velvet Pall, were carried on men’s shoulders,” as processions took one hour or more to cover the distance from Chowringhee to the burying ground. Maudesely, “having regularly followed that profession in England,” advertised in the *India Gazette*

⁶¹ Arnold, 343.

⁶² Roberts, 1:285.

(1788) that he had expedited the process considerably by building a hearse and “fitting up a mourning-coach.”⁶³

The rich and famous had their deaths announced by “minute guns” that would be fired from the ramparts of Fort William to alert citizens to the funeral. Whether or not all funerals were, to quote Sophia Goldborne, “solemn and affecting things in Calcutta,” is debatable, considering the prevalence of the Romantic trope of lamentation which runs through much of literature of the time, including the entirety of *Hartly House*. Phebe Gibbes’s fictional correspondent writes:

The departed one, of whatever rank, is carried on men’s shoulders (like your walking funerals in England), and a procession of gentlemen, equally numerous and respectable from the extent of genteel connections, following – the well-situated and the worthy being universally esteemed and caressed while living, and lamented when dead.⁶⁴

It is difficult to claim with certainty if all deaths were met with similar spontaneous mourning, but funerals of those who held important positions with the East India Company or religious institutions were well-attended. William Jones, one of the Judges of the Supreme Court of Judicature and founder of the Asiatic Society, died on 27 April 1794 at his garden house. His body was transferred to a house in Chowringhee formerly occupied by Justice John Hyde, and placed in a hearse.

the procession advanced towards the burial-ground, accompanied by a very numerous attendance of the gentlemen of the Settlement in their carriages and palanquins, and preceded by all the European Troops in garrison, with

⁶³ James Long, *Calcutta and Its Neighbourhood: History of People and Localities from 1690 to 1857*, ed. Sankar Sen Gupta (Calcutta: Indian Publications, 1974), 171.

⁶⁴ [Phebe Gibbes], *Hartly House* (London: Printed for J. Dodsley, 1789), 2:74.

arms reversed, drums muffled, and the Artillery band playing sacred music, while minute guns were fired from the ramparts of Fort William.⁶⁵

On reaching the gate of the burying ground, the procession paused, waiting for the corpse to be taken out of the hearse and placed upon the shoulders of the pall bearers. It was carried to the place of interment on foot. Justice Hyde and Sir William Dunkin were chief mourners. Barristers and other members of the legal fraternity served as pall bearers as Mr. Blanchard, who had consecrated the burial ground three years earlier, performed the service. “The solemn ceremony was concluded by the troops firing three vollies of musquetry over the grave.”⁶⁶

James Achilles Kirkpatrick’s death on 15 October 1805 drew a large crowd too. The son of Colonel William Kirkpatrick, James Achilles had started his military career at Fort St. George in Madras before being appointed the Resident at the Court of the Nizam. In October 1800 he had helped broker an agreement between the British Government and the state of Hyderabad which brought the two closer diplomatically, ousting the imminent threat of French influence in the Deccan. Kirkpatrick had reached Calcutta only in 1804 having been promoted to the rank of Lieutenant-Colonel. Upon his death, *The Bengal Obituary* noted:

In addition to public honors, the general respect entertained for his character was strongly testified by a numerous attendance of the principal European inhabitants of Calcutta at his funeral; a respect which is greatly enhanced by the circumstance of his being in some measure a stranger in this settlement,

⁶⁵ W.S. Seton-Karr ed., *Selections from Calcutta Gazettes of the Years 1789-1797* (Calcutta: Military Orphan Press, 1865), 2:381.

⁶⁶ *Ibid*, 2:381.

and which therefore serves to shew the high estimation in which he was universally held.⁶⁷

The funeral procession for William Carey in Serampore, some miles up the river, witnessed unusual scenes. A letter from Mr. Leechman to Mr. Hope on 19 June 1834, quoted by Christopher Anderson in *A Discourse Occasioned by the Death of the Rev. William Carey*, recalled the sights in vivid detail. The funeral took place early in the morning. The turnout was “large and respectable,” even though many attendees were discouraged because of inclement weather and the “prevalence of sickness.” The Reverend M. Hill, who was later associated with the Union Chapel in Calcutta, was in charge of conducting the ceremony. Before setting out from his house, he said a prayer for the departed soul.

The procession then slowly moved to the burying-ground. As we passed along, the road was lined by the poor natives, for whom our aged brother laboured so long and so successfully; amongst them were many of our native brethren and sisters, who joined the procession and accompanied their pastor and friend to his long home.⁶⁸

Although the public practices surrounding someone’s death – the numbers that showed up, the words that were said at the funeral or afterwards at church – were markers of their popularity and esteem in colonial society, these did not guarantee that the person would be remembered in the years to come. The burden of ensuring remembrance fell on material and textual cultures. Most Christians in Calcutta would have found a plot of land for their burial but, given the high rate of mortality and the limited availability of land,

⁶⁷ *Bengal Obituary*, 33.

⁶⁸ Letter from Leechman to Hope, 19 June 1834, quoted in Christopher Anderson, *A Discourse Occasioned by the Death of the Rev. William Carey, D.D., of Sereampore, Bengal*, 2nd edition (London: Parbury Allen & Co., 1835), 56.

not all of them would be able to afford to hold on to their graves. Fewer still would have the resources to procure headstones or funerary monuments to commemorate them. These would come in various shapes and sizes, ranging from giant pyramidal mausoleums to the plainest sarcophagus, bearing a headstone which, at the very least would contain the name of the deceased and their time spent on earth. Some headstones contained verses in rhyming couplets, usually taken from widely circulating collections of epitaphic poetry, and some extolled the virtues of the dead. The following section (1.3) deals with the inscriptions at length. Before going into that, it is worth taking a closer look at the process through which the burial grounds came to be understood as representative of a community's memory of the dead.

1.2.3 Space and Memory

Apart from burial grounds attached to the hospital, the fort and a few of the churches in the centre of town, there was one which was associated with an individual. It came about as a direct consequence of his desire to commemorate his wife and the Portuguese Church's refusal to accommodate his request.

Eduardo Tiretta is probably best remembered for constructing a well-known covered market in Calcutta. He had reached Calcutta sometime in the late 1770s or early 1780s, a bankrupt man, harbouring hopes of making a fresh start. The Treviso-born Tiretta found unlikely success and would be later appointed Calcutta's Civil Architect and Surveyor of Roads. The archives do not shed much light on his early life, although his family is currently in the process of compiling a comprehensive biography. The first mention of Tiretta is found in a somewhat sensationalized account in the autobiography of Giacomo Casanova, Italian adventurer and infamous libertine. Thanks to the good

offices of Casanova, Tiretta had been able to find a foothold among the Parisian aristocracy for a while, getting involved in misadventures with his landlady, who ran a cardsharping scam. His stay in Paris came to an end with the death of his mistress, who left him with a few jewels and two hundred louis. His patron approved of his plan to “try his fortune in India,” and sent him off with an introduction with one M. d’O— of Amsterdam. Tiretta was put on board a company vessel (presumably the French East India Company) headed for Batavia. He got involved in some duplicitous deal once again and had to flee.⁶⁹

It remains unclear how Edward Tiretta landed on his feet in Calcutta. Much of what is known of his later life is derived from the diaries of Richard Blechynden, who, apart from being Tiretta’s assistant, had become a close friend and confidant. The diaries have been the source for and subject of Peter Robb’s *Sex and Sensibility* (2011), *Sentiment and Self* (2011) and *Useful Friendships* (2014), a series that reflects on informal power structures within European households as well as the exercise of social capital vis-à-vis the public arena. Tiretta was given to financial speculations and, like many of his time, he saw a lucrative opportunity in the establishment of a “purpose-built” market.⁷⁰ In 1788 the market was auctioned off, perhaps because of yet another change in fortune. It continues to be known as the “Teriti Bazar,” a phonetic corruption of his name.⁷¹

⁶⁹ Giacomo Casanova, *Memoirs of Jacques Casanova de Seigalt, 1725-1798*, trans. Arthur Machen (London), 2a: Chapter 1. URL: <http://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/2961/pg2961-images.html>. After his second exile from Venice, Casanova occasionally signed his authorship as Jacques Casanova.

⁷⁰ Peter Robb, *Sex and Sensibility: Richard Blechynden’s Calcutta Diaries, 1791-1822* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2011), 4. See Peter Robb, *Sentiment and Self: Richard Blechynden’s Calcutta Diaries, 1791-1822* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2011), and Peter Robb, *Useful Friendship: Europeans and Indians in Early Calcutta* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2014).

⁷¹ Advertisement for Lottery, 11 December 1788, *Selections from Calcutta Gazettes of the Years 1784-1788*, ed. W.S. Seton-Karr (Calcutta: Military Orphan Press, 1864), 292-293.

In his late 60s, Edward Tiretta was introduced to Angelique de Carrion, daughter of a French army officer, residing in the Danish settlement of Serampore. She was then a girl of only 14. She rejected the prospect immediately but the following year, her mother's imminent death prompted her to consider marrying Tiretta. Peter Robb remarks that "when reduced to its bare outlines, Mrs Tiretta's is a simple tale of sacrifice and poverty of choice."⁷² It would appear that she was a vivacious woman, more full of life in her teens, despite this unfortunate marriage, than her seemingly jaded husband. Some suspected her of having extra-marital affairs with Tiretta's younger colleagues. In November 1795, Blechynden began to suspect that Angelique was pregnant. He was afraid that rumours would spread the moment it became public knowledge, being aware that people were "so infamously censoriously they will say it is not Tiretta's doing."⁷³ A daughter was born to the Tirettas in June 1796. On 15 June, shortly after delivering the child, Angelique died. Dr. Hare, who was in attendance, suspected it was more a result of suffocation than "puerperal fever," brought on by the fact that the domestic helps had refused to keep the windows of her room open.

In attendance were two doctors, Hare and Williamson, a friend de l'Etang (who had previously worked at the royal stables in Versailles but had been banished after the French Revolution),⁷⁴ and Blechynden. The diarist took recourse to the usual deflection of pathos by appealing to the melancholy beauty of the scene:

Her eyes were only half shut...she was changed into one of the most beautiful
Creatures I ever beheld! What with her laying in—and the sickness of which

⁷² Robb, *Sex and Sensibility*, 16.

⁷³ Blechynden, 13 November 1795. Robb, *Sex and Sensibility*, 24.

⁷⁴ Robb, *Sex and Sensibility*, endnote, 233.

she died – [s]he was of course thinner in the face – and fairer – but I never thought it possible for her to appear so beautiful.⁷⁵

The funeral arrangements were made and the coffin, as per custom, was taken first to the Portuguese Church (the only notable Catholic Church in Calcutta at the time) accompanied by “a Mob, and a very ragged one too, of Black Portuguese” and the domestic helps “who made a furious theatrical lamentation.”⁷⁶ After the religious rites were performed, it was taken to the Portuguese burying ground, past Tiretta’s house. It rained that day and the assembled crowds dispersed not long after the coffin was finally laid to rest.

The Portuguese Burial Ground, like most other non-Anglican/Protestant burial grounds, was located beyond the city’s boundaries, on the eastern side of the Circular Road, possibly adjoining the plot of land where St. John’s Church stands today, behind Sealdah Station. The same year as Angelique’s death, the Portuguese community in Calcutta had decided on replacing their old Church with a more modern edifice. A large part of the total budget, Rs. 90,000, was met by public subscriptions of the Portuguese Church’s revenue. The rest was funded by two brothers who had arrived from Bombay, Joseph and Luis Barretto.⁷⁷ According to Portuguese lore, the Barrettos had been in India since the early sixteenth century with the fleet of Admiral Lopez Suarez. They had held powerful posts in Goa and their fortunes had only increased through trade. In 1785, for a sum of Rs. 8000, Joseph Barretto had purchased the plot of land that was to be consecrated as the Portuguese burying ground.

⁷⁵ Blechynden quoted in Peter Robb, *Sex and Sensibility*, 25.

⁷⁶ Robb, *Sex and Sensibility*, 25.

⁷⁷ Asiaticus, 1:50-51.

On 14 July 1796 Blechynden went to Tiretta's house and found him engaged in conversation with a Catholic padre. Tiretta had just been informed that it was "in the Custom at the Portuguese burying ground to open the Graves every 5 or 6 months and throw what remains of the Bodies into a hole in the Corner."⁷⁸ He had sought permission to build a monument over his wife's grave, which was denied on the grounds that space was limited in the burying ground. He threatened to complain to the Government and to have a man posted day and night to watch over the sanctity of his wife's grave. Blechynden asked him to "tranquilize" himself, and to apply for a written permission hinting that Tiretta would be willing to pay extra for permanent occupation of the plot. If this did not put the matter to rest, he suggested railing in just the plot where Angelique had been buried and alerting the Government authorities to the indecencies that were being carried on at the burying ground.

Blechynden came to know that Tiretta's dialogue with Joseph Barretto had come to naught. He planned to either purchase a land near the Portuguese burying ground for his wife – which one Padre Giovanna had promised to consecrate – or to purchase a private burial ground, where his wife could be re-interred. The latter came to pass in March 1797.⁷⁹ Robb notes Blechynden's suspicion that the coffin that was relocated may or may not have been Angelique Tiretta's, given that a few details did not seem to match. Perhaps wisely, Blechynden decided to let the matter rest. The burial ground became yet another responsibility for Blechynden, adding to the series of errands he ran on behalf of Tiretta on a daily basis.

Tiretta erected a monument in honour of his wife's memory. It was in the form of an obelisk placed on a plinth. Shortly after the re-interment, on 2 August 1797, Mark

⁷⁸ Blechynden, 14 July 1796, 48-49, Add MS 45598, BL.

⁷⁹ Robb, *Sex and Sensibility*, 27.

Mutti, a Venetian was also buried in Tiretta's burying ground. Most of the names found in the burial register for the burying ground were French: Hippolytus Poignand (watch-maker, silversmith and jeweller), Frederic Servan Hervichon, Jean Michel de Dombal, Maria Louisa Heberlet, Leon Jame, to name a few. Others were Italian or British-sounding – probably Catholics.⁸⁰ The reason why many French and Italian settlers in Calcutta preferred to be interred in Tiretta's burial ground is unclear. Tiretta had learnt functional French during his Paris stint and Angelique hailed from a French line.⁸¹ It is possible that they had more friends among the French and Italian population in Calcutta. Besides, the Portuguese in Bengal had a longer history of intimacy than the French or the Italians.

In his will, Tiretta he expressed his desire to be buried:

buried in India in Bengal on my Burial Ground in the Vault of the Monument
near by the Remains of the [indecipherable] my Dearly beloved Wife
Angelica Carrion Tiretta the Door of which is a little under Ground to the
East side and in a decent Christian Funeral at the Discretion of my
Executors...⁸²

A basic inscription in Latin was to be added. Tiretta left Calcutta sometime after 1804 (that is when the will is signed), and drew up another will which is preserved in the National Archives (UK) in Kew. He did not specify in the later will where he wanted to

⁸⁰ Asiaticus, 2:57-60. Some inscriptions survive in an enclosure inside the South Park Street Cemetery, to which the headstones were relocated after the destruction of Tiretta's burial ground.

⁸¹ William Hickey, *Memoirs of William Hickey*, ed. Alfred Spencer, 7th ed. (1782; London: Hurst & Blackett) 2:175-176. He writes, "By birth he was an Italian, but had spent considerable portion of his life in France and Germany. ...he had made no great proficiency in the English language...it being perfectly ridiculous to hear the strange mélange had made when speaking...a compound of English, French, Portuguese and Hindustani, interlarded with the most uncouth and *outré* oaths in each language."

⁸² Last Will and Testament of Edward Tiretta, 18 March 1812, British India Office Wills and Probates, BL. Identifier on FindMyPast: BL-BLIND-L-AG-3-4-29-24-00048-52.

be buried, mentioning only that he wanted it to be “in a devout and Christian manner.”⁸³ In the late-1970s Tiretta’s burial ground along with the north South Park Street cemetery were taken over by real estate developers. They are known today as the Apeejay School and Assembly of God Church School and Hospital.⁸⁴ The headstone of Angelique de Carrion was rescued and placed inside South Park Street cemetery in a small enclosure that has a few other headstones from Tiretta’s burial ground.

These monuments were material symbols of the desire to commemorate loved ones. They could be built by family members, colleagues, in one particular case, by students of the deceased. Up until their collective historical significance was suggested by the compilations of “Asiaticus,” Urquhart, Derozario, and *The Bengal Obituary*, the burial grounds could be seen as meaningful in three principal ways: firstly, since they occupied space and required management, they were a municipal concern; secondly, they were expressions of personal loss and mourning; and thirdly, for travellers who wrote in Romantic modes, they were symbols of the sacrifices made by early settlers in Calcutta.

As a municipal concern, the burial grounds along the south-eastern stretch of the city were a far cry from their associated symbolic value in travel accounts. The First Report of the Special Committee for considering the Nuisances which exist through the Town of Calcutta, which was set up following Lord Wellesley’s minute of 1803, suggested that the “English Burial Ground be shut up and that a site for a new place of interment be selected somewhere between Boitaconnah and the Portuguese Burying Ground in the East side of the Circular Road.” It complained about the repository being located on the south east quarter – perhaps because the southern side was likely to be

⁸³ Will of Edward Tiretta, Public Record Office, The National Archives, United Kingdom, catalogue reference: prob/11/1535, image reference: 452, 341.

⁸⁴ Deepanjan Ghosh, “The Invisible Cemeteries of Calcutta,” *Quartz India*, 20 January 2017. URL: <https://qz.com/india/883891/the-invisible-cemeteries-of-kolkata/>.

claimed and gentrified in the foreseeable future. A little further south, the Hospital Burial Ground was described as a “one entire Mass of bones.” One Reverend Mr. Brown had admitted that one quarter of it had been “filled four times over...within the period of his remembrances.” In the vicinity, the “Burying Ground of the Mussalmans” (possibly referring to what is now Gobra) was “a perfect Marsh” during the rains with bodies “interred in a negligent manner, sometimes within two feet of the surface” inviting jackals to constantly prowl.⁸⁵

The basic question that this chapter tries to address is how this physical *place*, which is a bother for the Justices of the Peace, and the affective *space* (Michel de Certeau defines “space” as “practiced place”)⁸⁶ that is generated through individual articulations, is transformed into cultural capital or “deathscape,” which, in turn, becomes an ideological justification of Empire. W.J.T. Mitchell in *Landscape and Power* distinguishes between three analytic categories: place, space, and landscape. He writes:

The landscape imperative is a kind of mandate to withdraw, to draw out by drawing back from a site. If a landscape, as we say, ‘draws us in’ with its seductive beauty, this movement is inseparable from a retreat to a broader, safer perspective, an aestheticizing distance, a kind of resistance to whatever practical or moral claim the scene might make on us.⁸⁷

In his attempt to redefine “landscape” in terms of a verb (rather than a noun), which reveals “a process by which social and subjective identities are formed,” Mitchell makes an important point about the formation of this discursive space. The withdrawal or the

⁸⁵ All quotations are from the “First Report of the Special Committee for considering the Nuisances which exist through the Town of Calcutta,” Judicial (Criminal), 25 July 1805, Cons. no. 23, WBSA.

⁸⁶ See Michel de Certeau, “Part III: Spatial Practices,” in *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 91-130.

⁸⁷ W.J.T. Mitchell, Preface to 2nd ed., viii.

drawing back from a particular site – the retreat to an aestheticizing distance – is also a retreat from lived memory of a useable space to a cordoning off of something as historical. Perhaps the fallacy in Chadha’s imagination of the space mentioned earlier is analogous to what Pierre Nora describes as the change from “*milieu de mémoire*” and “*lieu de mémoire*”⁸⁸ – to reading a site in isolation because it was historically marked off as significant rather than reading it in the geographical context, where, admittedly, it has special significance, but to a much lesser degree in comparison to the other places. This withdrawal is aesthetic, as Mitchell writes, and in that aestheticization there is a blurring of the discrete practices that constitute its apparent wholeness. It is no surprise, then, that the “deathscape” David Arnold describes is generated by travelogues, a genre that by its very definition is founded on alienation (perceived or real) of the writing or painting subject from the geographical space described. This withdrawal is performed by the epitaph collections, which narrativize the space and offer a historical distance from which to observe the glorious early days of the British settlement in Calcutta.

⁸⁸ Pierre Nora, “Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire,” *Representations*, no. 26, Special Issue: Memory and Counter-Memory (Spring, 1989): 7-24, 7. URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2928520>.

III. 'LABOURER'S ONLY LIBRARY'

[W]e know how to read texts, now let's learn how not to read them.
Distant reading: where distance, let me repeat it, is a condition of knowledge: it allows you to focus on units that are much smaller or much larger than the text: devices, themes, tropes—or genres and systems.⁸⁹

Franco Moretti, "Conjectures on World Literature" (2000)

1.3.1 "Distant Reading"

Franco Moretti's attempts at radicalizing the notion of close reading met with uneven success, as admits in *Distant Reading* (2013).⁹⁰ Earlier, in *Graphs, Maps, Trees* Moretti had provided an exciting new model for addressing and understanding changes in literary traditions – both in terms of content and generic mutations – by taking a step back from "close reading" and representing large bodies of encoded text as data. Moretti wrote about "distant reading" first in "Conjectures in World Literature" (2000), where he started out with the problem of finding a suitable methodology for studying "world literature," a notion so vast that it seems impossible to even comprehend. How could scholars who were struggling to bring anything outside of the canon (1% of literature produced in a particular age) within the folds of their analysis, speak of "world literature" with its infinite variations and possible definitions? Following Max Weber, Moretti suggested that rather than seeing "world literature" as an object of study, it should be regarded as a "problem," which could not be solved merely by "reading more." It called for a "new critical method." For Moretti, it could only be achieved by retreating and

⁸⁹ Moretti, 56-58.

⁹⁰ Franco Moretti, *Distant Reading* (London, New York: Verso, 2013), 43-44.

developing a methodology for visualizing large patterns. In the initial stages he refers to these in terms of “trees” and “waves,” the former derived from the Darwinian phylogenetic tree used in the study of languages. The “wave,” meant to “observe uniformity engulfing an initial diversity” was its opposite. Both, he conceded, were metaphors, as was his later terminology of “graphs” and “maps.”⁹¹

Although Moretti’s methodology differs in terms of the primary question which it seeks to address, metaphorically, it offers a valuable tool for studying the text we encounter in the inscriptions of the Calcutta burial grounds. In fact, it can be argued, that an adaptation of Moretti’s method expands the scope far wider than can be expected, and can be used to place it within a network of affect and ideology that spans across the Empire. Scholarly attempts to analyze these inscriptions have taken two trajectories: Trev Lynn Broughton and Ashish Chadha have read them primarily as affective texts which later take on political connotations, and Peter Robb, on the other hand, has tried to understand them in terms of the virtues and qualities they express. Both Broughton and Robb are alert to the implications they have in terms of ideology and empire building, but as the former notes, they are resistant to analysis “as text.” Broughton observes that “far from shoring up the individuality of the departed worthy, several of the poetic epitaphs are shared by many graves and sometimes – as chance would have it – appear twice on the same page.”⁹² She cites an 1845 essay on epitaphic verses which appeared in *The Ecclesiologist*, and draws attention to the uncanny accuracy with which it describes the average *Bengal Obituary* entry:

⁹¹ Franco Moretti, *Graphs, Maps, Trees: Abstract Models for a Literary Theory* (London: Verso, 2005), 1-2.

⁹² Broughton, 45.

at the top a ‘SACRED TO THE MEMORY’, in immense black letters of fanciful device; below it the name and date, next after that the accustomed eulogy of the departed; then some hackneyed verses, often of the most wretched, vulgar and unmeaning if not heretical description; lastly, perhaps, a text.⁹³

What I try to demonstrate is that the ideological reading of the inscriptions cannot only be restricted to the afterlife of the burial grounds as manifest in the collections, but can be read in the light of friendships and other social bonds that extend across the Empire from the eighteenth century onwards.

Distant reading, or the present adaptation of Moretti’s method, offers a useful strategy for reading these seemingly repetitive inscriptions by placing them within a network of textual production and circulation in the late eighteenth century. Understanding these contexts help us discern the socio-cultural framework that produced these texts: some of which are noteworthy for their uniqueness, while others are interesting precisely because of their repetitive quality.

1.3.2 The Currency of Affect

In the past few decades epitaphic poetry has been recognized by literary scholars as an important area of investigation. These verses which serve both affective and functional purposes often reflect most transparently the class politics and social hierarchies of each age, as Joshua Scodel has shown in *The English Poetic Epitaph*. Efforts to regulate funerary inscriptions came principally from two camps, which often intermingled: the

⁹³ [Anon], “Cemeteries and Cemetery Chapels,” *The Ecclesiologist*, n.s.l., 4.1 (January 1845): 9-22, 15. Quoted in Broughton, 53.

literary and the ecclesiastical. For the literary-minded reformists – their ranks included Alexander Pope, Samuel Johnson, William Wordsworth – epitaphic poetry opened up a space for practical criticism, besides constituting a genre which allowed them to re-imagine the boundaries between life and death. Scodel identifies Thomas Gray’s “Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard” as an early example of the poetry of death, which sets the tone for much of the literature around graveyards for decades to come. He argues that Gray reworked the value assigned to the “voice of nature” in mourning the dead, which is found most famously in Cicero in correlation with the death of men of high station – or, the highest forms of nature. In rehearsing and reversing this trend, Gray inaugurated the evolution of a vocabulary that celebrated the humbler sections of society: a trend that would continue through the Romantic period, reflected in the decreasing hyperboles about a person’s achievements or status.⁹⁴

Scodel refers to Johnson’s “An Essay on Epitaphs” (1740) as an “early example of the interest in commemoration of the socially humble.”⁹⁵ For most poets, composing epitaphs did not necessarily mean inscriptions on stone. Despite the opening line in Wordsworth’s 1810 essay, “An Epitaph presupposes a Monument,” the poet saw this mode as a means to explore the coexistence of life and death. The “Lucy” poems are evidence of that.⁹⁶ Epitaphic verses would be composed as poetic exercises even without a specific person in mind, or, contrarily, could be composed about specific persons who had no plans of dying in the foreseeable future. The religious criticism of epitaphs in the

⁹⁴ Scodel, 355-356.

⁹⁵ Ibid, 365.

⁹⁶ William Wordsworth, *The Prose Works of William Wordsworth*, ed. W.J.B. Owen and Jane Worthington Smyser (London: Clarendon, 1974), 2:49. For discussions of Wordsworth’s epitaphic poetry, see Cynthia Chase, “Monument and Inscription: Wordsworth’s ‘Lines,’” *Diacritics* 17, no. 4, (Winter, 1987): 66-77. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.2307/465013>, and Karen Sanchez-Eppler, “Decomposing: Wordsworth’s Poetry of Epitaph and English Burial Reform,” *Nineteenth-Century Literature* 42, no. 4 (May 1988): 415-431. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.2307/3045247>.

Romantic period shared the poets' fondness for highlighting humility, but it also saw epitaphic verses as a means of educating the poor who had no access to libraries and books. We shall return later to this point to see how far this was true and what it implies for the belated circulation of affect through monumental inscriptions. Paul Vita quotes on Rev. Thomas Barker, who went so far as to claim that he "should like to place in the office of every stone mason a book of epitaphs in keeping with modern views of thought and feeling."⁹⁷ Both Scodel and Vita have a Eurocentric bias in their approaches to the cultural history of affect. They seem to discount the importance of the expanding Empire in this history, although Vita makes one cursory reference to epitaph collections published in Crimea, the British West Indies and in the Punjab.⁹⁸ I would like to argue that apart from explaining the culture of epitaphic inscriptions in the colonial cemeteries, a study of this complex network of affect also sheds light on an important aspect of this cultural history, not least by extending its sphere of influence to the colonies.

The poetry inscribed on funerary monuments can broadly be classified into three categories: poems that were in circulation in epitaph collections (these are generic verses, often re-cited with minor changes to fit the specific situation); poems that were written at the time either in Great Britain or in India for the deceased; poems that may or may not have been meant for epitaphs but were repurposed by friends, family or stone-masons for an individuals' death. Most of the verses in the cemeteries are of the first kind. They are, as Broughton writes, formulaic, repetitive in nature and without poetic merit.⁹⁹ These verses were usually borrowed from collections that attempted to standardize expressions of grief, much like what Rev. Barker had in mind. This prescriptive spirit was founded

⁹⁷ Paul Vita, "In Keeping with Modern Views: Publishing Epitaphs in the Nineteenth Century," *Victorian Review* 25, no. 1 (Summer 1999): 14-34, 14.

⁹⁸ Vita, 19.

⁹⁹ Broughton, 44.

on the premise that burial grounds served as “the labourer’s only library,”¹⁰⁰ an idea that was possibly fallacious and had little real world significance. There were two sides to the fallacy; on the one hand it assumed that the “swains” and peasants were a naïve lot, not given to philosophical complexity; and on the other, it assumed that when they were resting by the wayside they looked to optimize their time undertaking a crash course in Christian morality by reading and internalizing the inscriptions on funeral monuments.

The earliest attempts to preserve epitaphs in Great Britain came out of antiquarian impulses. Most notable among these is John Weever’s *Ancient Funerall Monuments* (1631), which set the tone for subsequent collections. Inspired by continental collections, Weever recognized the historical importance of funerary inscriptions in terms of national history. He travelled to most parts of England and some parts of Scotland, noting down the textual remains on headstones. With the help of benevolent friends, who lent him the use of their libraries – Robert Cotton being foremost among them – Weever included some notes and annotations.¹⁰¹ As precedent, he looked back to William Camden’s *Remains Concerning Britain* (published in 1604), which had contained several epitaphs. Camden’s collection and the rise of historical interest in epitaphs became the subject of several meetings of the Society of Antiquaries,¹⁰² which, in turn, was instrumental in the creation of a national identity for Britain.¹⁰³

Collections proceeded to replicate much of what had been previously published, occasionally adding a few from first-hand surveys. Vita writes that some of these

¹⁰⁰ “The Conductor” [probably John Claudius Loudon], “The Principles of Landscape-Gardening and of Landscape-Architecture Applied to the Laying out of Public Cemeteries and the Improvement of Churchyards,” *The Gardener’s Magazine* (March 1843):93-105, 105.

¹⁰¹ John Weever, ‘Epistle to the Reader,’ *Antient Funeral Monuments of Great-Britain, Ireland, and the Islands Adjacent* (London: W. Tooke, 1767).

¹⁰² Jennifer Summit, *Memory’s Library: Medieval Books in Early Modern England* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 181.

¹⁰³ Vita, 16.

included commentary on poetic craft, and over time, this publishing genre (as opposed to a literary genre) bifurcated to give rise to prescriptive collections. The verses had moved from stone to the printed page – the reproducibility of the printed page made them more resilient to the ravages of time than even stone – and then back to stones. Thus gleanings from cemeteries in one part of the world would enter into common currency through these collections and be transmitted to various far-off locales.

For example, the inscription on Thomas Andrews's grave bore the following lines:

With Boreas blasts and stormy winds,
I was toss'd to and fro;
By God's decree from danger free,
I'm harbour'd here below;
Where at an anchor I do ride
With numbers of the fleet,
Until again I do set sail,
My admiral Christ to meet.¹⁰⁴

Andrews was a Post-Master of Diamond Harbour, who had passed away on 3 July 1809. The author of the original verse is unknown but it had appeared in a Great Yarmouth Churchyard in Norfolk.¹⁰⁵ Minor variations had been made for Andrews. "By God's decree, you plainly see" was changed to "from danger free," and "Where I must at anchor lie" had been changed to "Where at an anchor I do ride." The first person plural of the Norfolk inscription, "Our admiral Christ" was rendered in the singular, "My admiral Christ."

¹⁰⁴ *Bengal Obituary*, 94.

¹⁰⁵ 'A Sailor's Epitaph in the Church-yard of Great Yarmouth, Norfolk,' *The London Magazine or Gentleman's Monthly Intelligence* 40 (1771), 655.

Similarly, the grave of David Philips (d. 24 September 1823) bore an adaptation lines written by William Crowe's "Lines written at the tomb of William Wykeham."¹⁰⁶ Edward Young, Samuel Taylor Coleridge and Thomas Gray recur more frequently than others, and Alexander Pope's epitaph for his wife is also quoted on a few graves. While these quotations of deeply personal expressions by other poets may seem like infringements from our historical vantage point, within the context of late eighteenth and early nineteenth century textual circulation, these acts constitute an adherence to convention when it comes to mourning. The manner in which epitaphic verses were circulated in the collections also hints at a culture of authorial anonymity – either because everyone was expected to spot a line by Alexander Pope at a hundred removes, or more likely, because the idea of authorial identity as we understand it today was still in its formative stages.

Verses were often being shared in manuscript form through letters even before they were published, and some of these, inexplicably find their ways on to the headstones in India. Sometime in April 1767 Lawrence Sterne had "met with a loss of near fifty pounds...in an extraordinary manner."¹⁰⁷ This occasioned a letter to his daughter Lydia, where he sounded devastated to be separated her and her mother, Elizabeth. Given that he was writing an impassioned missive to his daughter extolling her mother's virtues it seems there was some coldness between the two at the time. This would not be surprising considering that Sterne was in passionate pursuit of one Eliza Draper, whose family was based in India. Sterne writes, "she talks to me of quitting this world, with more composure than others think of living in it – I have wrote an epitaph of which I send thee

¹⁰⁶ *Bengal Obituary*, 108. Original in William Crowe, *Leweson Hill with Other Poems* (John Murray: London, 1827), 111.

¹⁰⁷ Letter from Lawrence Sterne to Lydia, Letter 91, *Letters of the Late Lawrence Sterne to His Most Intimate Friends with a Fragment in the Manner of Rabelais* (London: Printed for A. Millar, W. Lay, and R. Gates, 1794), 188.

a copy – 'Tis expressive of her modest worth – but may Heaven restore her! and may she live to write mine."¹⁰⁸ The epitaph that results from this bizarre fantasy reappears in 1782, years before any recorded publication of the letter, on the grave of Captain John Grant:

The sweet companion and the friend sincere
Need no Mechanic help to force the tear;
In heartfelt numbers never meant to shine
'Twill flow eternal o'er a hearse like thine.
'Twill flow whilst gentle goodness has one friend,
Or kindred tempers have a tear to lend.¹⁰⁹

It is impossible to tell for certain how these verses find their way on to a Calcutta headstone in 1782, but it is clear that we are looking at circuits of textual transmission that are impossible to track through published works.

One final example of the networks of affective circulation before moving on to an analysis of the ideological and political implications of the verses. Hannah More (1745-1833), who became a member of the Bluestockings, had started a boarding house with her sister on Park Street, Bristol. Living close by was one Rev. Sir James Stonhouse, a man of considerable influence at the time. Stonhouse's biographer, William Alexander Greenhill, credits him with the discovery of More's talents, when the reverend "discerned the promise of great things, and was unbounded in his admiration of the freshness of her powers in conversation."¹¹⁰ Their acquaintance blossomed into a friendship that was to last through to his last days and was sustained by frequent exchange of letters. The patronage More received from him – Stonhouse in his letters recommends her poetry to her friends quite frequently – was repaid in verses she composed for him, "the only means

¹⁰⁸ Ibid, 189.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid, 189. Quoted in *Bengal Obituary*, 71.

¹¹⁰ William Alexander Greenhill, *Life of the Rev. Sir James Stonhouse, Bart, M.D., with Extracts from His Tracts and Correspondence* (London: John Henry Parker, 1844), 75.

of shewing her gratitude which she then possessed.”¹¹¹ Stonhouse had sent her a copy of the newly published *Tracts and Meditations* (1774), which was commemorated on 13 June that year by a poem titled “To the Rev. Dr. Stonhouse on receiving a Volume of his Tracts and Meditations.” More went to the extent of recording an incident surrounding the reverend’s upending a globe with his feet, which she compared with Alexander’s fabled response on hearing of the existence of other planets.¹¹²

In 1772 Stonhope lost his eldest son and the following year, his second daughter, Lucia passed away. Both of them were residing in India at the time. Lucia had married Robert Palk, 1st Baronet of Haldon House in Kenn, Devon, who later became subordinate to the Governor-General in Calcutta. On her death, aged only 25, Hannah More wrote her epitaph, which was inscribed on her grave in Calcutta:

What needs the emblem; what the plaintive strain;
What all the art that Sculpture e’er express’d,
To tell the treasure that these walls contain.
Let those declare it most who knew it best;
The tender pity she would oft betray
Shall be with interest at her shrine return’d;
Connubial love, connubial tears repay,
And Lucia lov’d shall still be Lucia mourn’d!
Tho’ grief will weep and friendship heave the sigh;
Tho’ wounded memory the fond tear shall shed;
Yet let not fruitless sorrow dim the eye
To teach the living, die the sacred dead
Tho’ closed the lips tho’ stopp’d the tuneful breath,
The silent clay cold monotress shall teach,
In all th’ alarming eloquence of death,
With double pathos to the heart shall preach,

¹¹¹ Ibid, 76.

¹¹² Ibid, 76.

Shall tell the virtuous maid, the faithful wife
If young and fair, that young and fair was she.
Then close the useful lesson of her life.
And tell them what she is they soon must be.¹¹³

The purpose of writing epitaphs, as these lines demonstrate, was not to experiment with poetics. It is worth remembering that even John Milton experimented with verse in “Lycidas” which commemorates Edward King, who was not as close to Milton as early accounts suggested. Instead, when his close associate, Charles Diodati died, Milton opted for a Latin epitaph, “*Epitaphium Damonis*” (1639), which is unremarkable and conventional by all accounts.¹¹⁴

Hannah More’s commemoration, which follows the traditional form of quatrains in iambic pentameter, begins with a classic self-negation. The treasure that the walls of the tomb contain needs no outward expression of remembrance or celebration. Lucia (it is unknown if More ever even met her) is remembered for her qualities. Pity for the general and connubial love for her husband shall be returned and repaid at her grave. This is the language of commerce – a point to which we shall return later. In the final quatrain, however, the usual celebration of a woman’s virtues is withheld. She is not the “virtuous maid” or the “faithful wife” in the epitaph. They are visitors to her grave, who learn about her youth and fairness through “th’ alarming eloquence of her death.” Later, when Stonhouse’s wife passed away, More was again called into action. Stonhouse wrote to his friend, Rev. Thomas Stedman on 20 December 1788: “I have ordered a plain but elegant monument to be erected in memory of my very dear wife, in the Wells Chapel;

¹¹³ *Bengal Obituary*, 69.

¹¹⁴ For an analysis of Milton’s use of classical elegiac tropes see Stella P. Revard, “Milton’s *Epitaphium Damonis*: The Debt to Neo-Latin Poets,” *The European Legacy: Towards New Paradigms* 17, no. 3, part 2 (2012): 309-316. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/10848770.2012.672183>.

and Miss Hannah More has promised to write the epitaph.”¹¹⁵ Her grave was constructed in a way such that he too could rest in it after his death.

Of greater consequence to the affective geography of Empire was her “Epitaph on General Lawrence, Memorable for his conquests in India, and for his clemency to the vanquished. On a Monument erected by Sir Robert Palk.” Major-General Stringer Lawrence had died in 1775 at Haldon House, the seat of his friend, Sir Robert Palk in Devonshire and Palk had erected a monument to his memory in the parish church of Dunchideock in Devonshire. Nowhere is the connection between personal grief commemorated by a friend, and the “sentimental annexation” more transparent than in these lines:

...Here Lawrence rests in death; while living fame
From Thames to Ganges wafts his honored name.
To him this frail memorial Friendship rears,
Whose noblest monument’s a nation’s tears;
Whose deeds on fairer columns stand engraved
In provinces preserved and cities saved.¹¹⁶

1.3.3 Sympathy and Empire

The verses accumulated in the space of burial grounds awaited a readership. Apart from travellers like Emma Roberts or Phebe Gibbs’s narrator who made trips down to the cemeteries and wrote about them, and mourners who went to bury their dead, the Calcutta burial grounds must not have had too many readers who were using it for moral instruction. The travelogues too tend to see this as a deathscape, usually lamenting the

¹¹⁵ Greenhill, 201.

¹¹⁶ Hannah More, “On General Lawrence,” in *The Complete Works of Hannah More* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1836), 6:414.

many rather than the individual. The inscription on each headstone does not seem to matter much. It is only much later that Rudyard Kipling turns Lucia Palk into a protagonist of his final chapter in *City of Dreadful Night*.¹¹⁷ I would like to argue that there is a deferral in the expressions of grief and the reading of the cemetery as a space of textual production, be it in the light of a history of affect or ideology.

The earliest published attempt at documenting the funerary inscriptions came from “Asiaticus,” which had a distinctly antiquarian character. He states that it is not his “intention to give a history of the English East-India Company,” but “only to collect a few ecclesiastical notices respecting Bengal.”¹¹⁸ Unlike the *Bengal Obituary*, Asiaticus does not make the imperialist agenda explicit and is satisfied with the apparently innocent act of chronicling the establishment of Calcutta as a social, religious and military centre for Britain in the east. He laments the destruction of the earliest records of Calcutta, owing to “two unfortunate circumstances,” “the only source from whence we could hope to derive true information” about the factory of Charnock.¹¹⁹ The first philosophical note he strikes is that of the *ubi sunt* motif, not one which rouses affection in future rulers.

Charnock! May your name and your city be immortal, and may Calcutta,
the sister of England, last till Time itself expires...such are my fond
wishes! But I breath a manly sigh when I pensively sit down, and in
imagination soar over the ruins of Gour...of Kanouge, and the expiring
remains of Delhi.¹²⁰

¹¹⁷ Rudyard Kipling, “Concerning Lucia,” *The City of Dreadful Night* (New York: Alex. Grosset & Co., 1899), 82-92.

¹¹⁸ Asiaticus, 3.

¹¹⁹ Asiaticus, 4.

¹²⁰ Asiaticus, 2-3.

While “Asiaticus” wished for Calcutta’s long life, he was also aware of the fall that comes with pride. The editors of the *Obituary* were very clear on this account:

Who will deny that the sight of a mere Monument has not repeatedly inspired martial enthusiasm, the flame of patriotism or the emulation of genius in the youthful breast. ‘*Siste viator, heroem calcas,*’ has awakened ardour in the minds of all who have perused the tablet.¹²¹

The purpose of the book was to inspire martial patriotism, which was to be founded on sympathy with the dead – the ones who had lain the foundations of Empire in the east.

In her study of the British attitudes towards death between Enlightenment and the Victorian age, Esther Schor notes a shift from a culture of mourning to a cult of mourning.¹²² She contextualizes readings of expressions of grief – poetic or otherwise – which rely on the Freudian lens to understand mourning, within a “calm commerce of condolence,” which unburdens such articulations of the “exquisite pain of bereavement.”¹²³ In speaking of the “commerce” of condolence, Schor notes the predominance of an economic vocabulary in such texts: “indebted,” “worthiness,” “tribute,” and the much more common “paid,” are cited as examples. Broughton connects this with the epitaphs in *The Bengal Obituary*:

The ‘commerce of condolence’ finds clear echoes in the language of the Obituary, with its lexicon of ‘departed worth’, ‘satisfaction’ and ‘sacred deposits’. As a model of mourning as transaction, it also makes sense of

¹²¹ *Bengal Obituary*, v.

¹²² Schor, 11.

¹²³ Schor, 3.

the quiet mediating agency of Holmes and Company, and of the more impersonal modes of reading that collective epitaphy permits.¹²⁴

Adam Smith in his *Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759) pointed out the importance of emotions in shaping Britain's political economy. In his imagination of this affective economy, sympathy, extended to fellow beings as well as to the dead, played a crucial role.

We sympathize even with the dead, and overlooking what is of real importance in their situation, that awful futurity which awaits them, we are chiefly affected by those circumstances which strike our senses, but can have no influence upon their happiness...The *tribute* of our fellow-feeling seems *doubly due* to them now, when they are in danger of being forgot by every body; and, by the vain honours which we *pay* to their memory, we endeavour, for our own misery, artificially to keep alive our melancholy remembrance of their misfortune. [Italics mine]¹²⁵

Esthey Schor points out that by the turn of century, political thinkers had started to acknowledge that Smith's theory had practical applicability.¹²⁶

In order for us to understand how a particular space which is constituted by individual articulations of grief and mourning is instrumentalized in political terms, it is important to factor in the role played by sympathy. An "empty" space thus transforms first into a culturally produced space, and then, through textual circulation generates an

¹²⁴ Broughton, 55.

¹²⁵ Adam Smith, "Section 1: Of the Sense of Propriety," in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759), e-text. URL: <https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/smith-adam/works/moral/part01/part1a.htm#1.1>. See also Section 3.1.

¹²⁶ Schor, 75. She suggests that for Burke, on the other hand, the imagination and vocabulary of the spread of Empire was not Christian, but familial.

ideological legitimization of Empire. This chapter, then, is an attempt to re-read *The Bengal Obituary* not principally as a text – efforts of this kind are invariably met with frustration – but to resituate it in a matrix, where it emerges as a product of the currency of affect that circulates through the Empire before being crystallized in stone and, simultaneously, it assumes significance as a point of origin which collects individual articulations, narrativizes them, and perpetuates a sentimental argument for colonialism.

Chapter 2

The Empire's Mythography: The Curious Case of the Black Hole of Calcutta

I. INTRODUCTION

2.1.1 Sentimental Geography

Over twenty years after pressure from nationalist groups led by Subhas Chandra Bose had ensured that the Black Hole memorial no longer stood in a prominent public location in Calcutta, the British novelist and journalist, Noel Barber wrote a dramatized retelling of the controversial incident, titled *The Black Hole of Calcutta: A Reconstruction* (1965). The book serves no historical or literary purpose. It does not claim to bring new information to the table, nor does it offer a fresh analytic lens through which one can revisit the incident. If it marks a departure from the evolving scholarship, it is only through its profoundly colonialist conservatism, which sets the debate back by several decades. Barber acknowledges that “every schoolboy knows about the Black Hole of Calcutta, or believes he does, for it appears in the history curriculum as regularly as the Battle of Hastings...”¹ but it is not enough for it to be remembered. Only an imaginative re-enactment of the tragedy could adequately activate the affective potential of the myth, although it is unclear what the purpose of this nationalist rekindling could be. *The Black*

¹ Noel Barber, *The Black Hole of Calcutta: a Reconstruction* (London: Collins, 1965), 17.

Hole of Calcutta begins with a *dramatis personae*. Barber is quick to warn his readers that “this is no sense a ‘romantic novel based on the incident of the Black Hole.’ It is a true story, and its characters live and die as they lived and died two hundred years ago.”²

The narrative that interweaves historical research and a dramatic imagination, leads to the fateful event before bringing the reader back to the present day where they are taken on a virtual walking tour of the location. Barber laments the disappearance of the original monument which Howell had constructed using his private funds, and the subsequent removal of the replica built by Curzon.

With the coming of the Republic of India, this in turn has vanished. How many people today, crossing the busy streets and crowded squares of the commonwealth’s second largest city, realize how often they are treading the same ground that Holwell and his exhausted garrisons fought so hard to defend two centuries ago; how often, each time they post a letter, they are standing on, or close to, the very spot where Gervas and John Bellamy died in the Black Hole...Hardly a visiting English man can pause to think on such things these days.³

Barber employs a technique here that had been rehearsed and perfected by H.E.A. Cotton in his classic *Calcutta Old and New* (1907),⁴ written under the intellectual patronage of George Nathaniel Curzon (Viceroy of India between 1898 and 1905). The walking tour had been used even earlier by H.E. Busted in his *Echoes from Old Calcutta* (1882),

² Ibid, 18-19.

³ Ibid, 248-249.

⁴ H.E.A. Cotton, *Calcutta Old and New: A Historical and Descriptive Handbook to the City* (Calcutta: W. Newman & Co., 1907).

effectively constructing a sentimental geography in a colonized city that could be virtually or physically traversed by the reader or tourist.⁵

While there are precedents in Romantic poetry where the act of walking and recollection are intertwined – William Wordsworth’s “Lines Written a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey” (1798), for instance – most of these instances deal with personal memory, where the re-enactment of the journey occasions an affective contrast, marking a change in the writer’s emotional transformation. The re-enactment of an event purportedly historical is a politically motivated strategy, which attempts to form a sense of continuity or community between the original actors of history and those who see themselves as stakeholders of that legacy. The structure is that of the pilgrimage: such as the Via Dolorosa in the Old City of Jerusalem, which is believed by the faithful be the path trod by Jesus Christ on his journey to the cross. In his comparative study of religious pilgrimages, Victor Turner refers to “pilgrimage systems,” which tend to formalize “pilgrimage processes.” Alluding to the affective category of *communitas* – a sense of communion with fellow travellers that is felt by the pilgrim in an apparent state of dissolution of individual identities – Turner draws distinctions between three different kinds: existential or spontaneous *communitas*, normative *communitas*, and ideological *communitas*.⁶ Unlike the first category, i.e. existential *communitas*, which functions at an individual and unmediated level, the normative *communitas* according to Turner, is prompted “under the influence of time,” by “the need to mobilize and organize resources to keep the members of a group alive and thriving,” thereby creating a “perduring social system.”⁷

⁵ H.E. Busteed, *Echoes from Old Calcutta: Being Chiefly Reminiscences of the Days of Warren Hastings, Francis, and Impey* (Calcutta: Thacker, Spink & Co., 1882).

⁶ Victor Turner, “The Center out There: Pilgrim’s Goal,” *History of Religions* 12, no. 3 (February 1973): 191-230, 193-194. URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1062024>.

⁷ *Ibid*, 194.

The community formation in the case of the Black Hole rehearsals are not organized in the same way, nor is it open to participation from as many people. Yet, during most instances when, across decades, writers have attempted to revive the myth, its structure has been similar and in a sense of more politically fraught owing to the ideologically contentious nature of the geography. The walking tour, more than other modes of narrating history, is an effective reminder of the link between the ground beneath our feet and events of the past. The affective engagement of the tourist is structurally different from that of one who encounters history through the written word sitting in a library or at their desks because it carries with it the sense of re-enactment: a diachronic version of Roland Barthes's "having-been-there-ness."⁸ Considering the significant body of literature around the Black Hole that has emerged since Holwell's narrative first appeared in print, it would be futile to attempt a historical revision of the incident. Instead, this chapter is an attempt to re-asses the process through which the Black Hole legend becomes arguably the most potent myth of the English colonization project in India by looking at the interplay between a textual narrative with historiographic claims, the curious lives and afterlives of the two commemorative monuments, and its visual representations.

2.1.2 Origins of the Mythography

Without adding to the many accounts of events leading up to the Siraj-ud-Daulah's siege of Calcutta in June 1756, we begin from the first public articulation of the events of that fateful night, i.e. with John Zephaniah Holwell's *A Genuine Narrative of the Deplorable Deaths of the English Gentlemen and others who suffocated in the Black Hole* (1758).

⁸ Roland Barthes, "Rhetoric of the Image," in *Image Music Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (London: Fontana Press, 1977), 44.

This account, written by Holwell on 27 February 1757 as a letter to one William Davis while on board the *Syren-Sloop* on his way back to England, was successful in setting up its author as a protagonist of an event that would retrospectively be regarded as foundational for the British empire in India.⁹ As Kate Teltscher puts it, Holwell not only wrote but also “built his way into history books”¹⁰ by constructing at his own expense an obelisk dedicated to the many who had perished in the Black Hole at his side. Not satisfied with a literary record and an obelisk in the heart of the British part of Calcutta, he had himself painted alongside a local mason, directing the construction of the monument with a sketch in his hand.

The textual afterlife of the event passed into imperial historiography most notably through the work of James Mill who in Volume 3 of his *History of British India* (1858), made reference to the Black Hole incident.¹¹ Although the siege of Calcutta is recounted in some detail, the Black Hole incident in particular received little more than a passing reference in the narrative. Mill dedicates lengthy footnotes to critically examine the first-person accounts that were available at the time and – possibly following Jeremy Bentham’s earlier critique of the British habit of transposing punitive practices to other parts of the world – comments on the inhumanity of a prison of that nature in the first place, while also remarking on dismal state of the gaols in Calcutta.

Arguably the most potent retelling of the incident was the work of Thomas Babington Macaulay, who in his essay on Robert Clive published in the *Edinburgh*

⁹ J.Z. Holwell, *A Genuine Narrative of the Deplorable Deaths of the English Gentlemen, and Others Who Were Suffocated in the Black Hole in Fort-William, at Calcutta...in a Letter to a Friend* (London: Printed for A. Millar, 1758).

¹⁰ Kate Teltscher, “‘The fearful name of the Black Hole’: fashioning an imperial myth,” in *Writing India, 1757-1990: The Literature of British India*, ed. Bart Moore-Gilbert (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1996), 40.

¹¹ James Mill, *The History of British India*, 5th ed., ed. H.H. Wilson (London: James Madden, 1863) 3: 117-118.

Review in January 1840 lamented that the uninspiring nature of Mill's prose style and set out to write an account that would be "animated and picturesque."¹² Macaulay's retelling made a critical intervention in the historiography of the Black Hole incident by framing it as a justification for the consolidation of the British empire – in a similar way that eight years after the article on Clive, *The Bengal Obituary* would re-frame the practice of collecting epitaphs into as an overtly political, imperial act. Macaulay introduced a causality, which, on the one hand, explained the tragedy in terms of Orientalist ideas of the "Moor's" despotism, and on the other, constructed a justice-through-revenge narrative around Clive and Watson's victory over Siraj-ud-Daulah at the Battle of Plassey (1757).

2.1.3 The Spatial Turn and Resurrection

Moving away from linear historiography, the 1850s saw the rise of what can be described as city biographies – historical accounts of Calcutta's urban geography, as far as could be mapped and catalogued by the colonial gaze. These recollections were necessary for the continued and spatially associated memory of the incident because in 1821 the Black Hole monument had been dismantled by the municipal authorities. Nothing appeals more to a historian than the urge to remind their readers of their collective amnesia, and so, subsequent historiography was rife with references to this relatively new absence in the cityscape. In *Calcutta in the Olden Time: Its Localities* (1852), James Long mentioned the Black Hole, but again in passing.¹³ Rangalal Bandyopadhyay's mid-nineteenth

¹² Thomas Babington Macaulay, "Lord Clive," in *Critical and Historical Essays: Contributed to the Edinburgh Review* (London: Longmans, Green, Reader and Dyer, 1872), 502. Originally published in January 1840.

¹³ James Long, "Calcutta in the Olden Time: Its Localities," in *Calcutta and Its Neighbourhood: History of People and Localities from 1690 to 1857*, ed. Sankar Sen Gupta (Calcutta: Indian Publications, 1974), 159-160.

century *Kalikata Kalpalata*, the earliest known history of Calcutta in Bangla, included similar references: hardly surprising, since it was based loosely on Long's account.¹⁴ Towards the end of the nineteenth century, H.E. Busteed published his monumental *Echoes from Old Calcutta* (1882), which, besides exploring the incident in great detail, also established the individual importance of Holwell. Over multiple editions, Busteed was able to fine-tune the narrative, having access to the most committed group of urban enthusiasts of that age.¹⁵ Letters in the India Office Records of the British Library reveal the rigour with which amateur historians set about uncovering the "true history" of the Black Hole. That same year, while excavations in Fairlie Place (around Dalhousie Square) were being undertaken by the East India Railway Company, parts of the old Fort William were discovered, giving rise to a new wave of enthusiasm, which saw the possibility of establishing through archaeological evidence the authenticity of Holwell's narrative once and for all. Roskell Bayne's findings along with his sketches of the bastions and the speculative layout were published in the *Journal of the Bengal Asiatic Society*.¹⁶

Dissenting voices as well began to be heard from the late nineteenth century, particularly in the work of nationalist historians like Akshay Kumar Matireya, who set out to revise Siraj-ud-Daulah's villainous characterisation by Macaulay. As Partha Chatterjee has shown, this body of research enabled public articulations of a counter-narrative that sought to reclaim Siraj-ud-Daulah on the theatre stage, where Girish

¹⁴ Rangalal Bandyopadhyay, *Kalikata Kalpalata* (Kolkata: Doshar, 2019), 38-40. Original year of publication unknown.

¹⁵ The account of the event in Busteed's 1882 edition and 1908 edition are worth comparing. Apart from historical information coming to the fore, they also reflect Curzon's efforts at resuscitating its memory, and therefore, the tone is less of lament.

¹⁶ Richard Roskell Bayne, "Notes on the remains of Old Fort William discovered during the erection of the East Indian Railway Company's Offices," *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal* 52, nos. 1-4 (1883): 105-119.

Chandra Ghosh directed a biographical production with Surendranath Ghosh in the title role.¹⁷ Chatterjee's work leaves little more to add to the contested history of Siraj-ud-Daulah's characterization in the popular imagination at the turn of the century and it does not pertain strictly to the scope of the present chapter, which focuses on the spatial politics primarily, and looks at historical discourses only insofar as they influence perceptions, appropriations and re-appropriations of that space. In the mid-1910s, debates raged on in the pages of the Calcutta Historical Society's journal, *Bengal Past and Present*, which published a set of articles by one J.H. Little who had set out to demolish the myth of the Black Hole.¹⁸ This upset George Curzon in no small measure, causing him to retaliate in the pages of the same journal with a scathing attack on Little, dismissing his claims as far-fetched.

By this time, a public history writing project had already been set in motion, the tangible result of which was the re-erection of Holwell monument at the corner of Dalhousie Square, where it once stood. During the idle hours on board the ship by which Curzon came to Calcutta, he had for a companion Busteed's *Echoes*. This book had convinced him that this foundational event that consolidated British political supremacy in India, had been all but erased from public memory. Curzon described the replica as his "personal gift to the city of Calcutta in memory of a never-to-be-forgotten episode in her history and in honour of the brave men whose life-blood had cemented the foundations of the British Empire in India"¹⁹ With great attention to detail, Curzon galvanized efforts

¹⁷ Partha Chatterjee, *The Black Hole of Empire: History of a Global Practice of Power* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2012), 248-251.

¹⁸ James H. Little, "The Black Hole: The Question of Holwell's Veracity," *Bengal Past and Present* 11 (July-December 1915): 75-105; "The Black Hole Debate," *Bengal Past and Present* 12 (January-June 1916), 136-149; "The Holwell Monument," *Bengal Past and Present* 14 (January-June 1917), 270-290.

¹⁹ George Curzon, "Unveiling the Holwell Monument," in *Speeches by Lord Curzon of Kedleston, Viceroy and Governor General of India, 1902-1904* (Calcutta: Office of the Superintendent of Government Printing, 1904), 3: 81.

that had been underway among amateur historians, in an unprecedented attempt to create a government monopoly over public history. It laid claim to two important aspects of any historiographic exercise that lay beyond the reach of amateur historians, particularly those of Indian birth. Firstly, it had exclusive control over and access to colonial archives, which contained government records, personal papers of previous employees of the East India Company and correspondence with the Board of Directors. The availability of these documents lent credibility to their research, despite the fact that there was no scope for alternative interpretations or verification. Secondly, and as importantly, with cold disregard for contesting sentiments and beliefs the colonial government could impose on public spaces their own version of imperial history through the construction of monuments and statues.

In terms of visual representations, although a few woodcuts and engravings depicting the Gothic horror of the incident accompanied accounts in popular journals, the most enduring images were produced by travelling painters, Thomas and William Daniell²⁰ and James Baillie Fraser²¹ (“A View of the Writers’ Building from the Monument at the West End”), whose views of Calcutta featured the monument prominently. The Daniells did not draw any particular attention to the obelisk, placing it rather matter-of-factly on the left half of his canvas in a painting that is evidently intended as a documentary representation of the Writers’ Building. Fraser’s depiction, however, in-keeping with picturesque traditions of landscape painting, gave it greater symbolic

²⁰ Fig 2.1 Thomas Daniell, “The Writer’s Buildings, Calcutta,” aquatint, Plate 4 from the second set of Thomas and William Daniell’s *Oriental Scenery* (1798), shelfmark: P939, Asia, Pacific and Africa Collections, BL.

²¹ Fig 2.2 James Baillie Fraser, “A View of Writers Buildings from the Monument at the West End,” aquatint, Plate 6 from *Views of Calcutta and Its Environs* (1824-1826), shelfmark: X644(6), Asia, Pacific and Africa Collections, BL.

prominence. Swati Chattopadhyay²² and Amanda Sciampacone²³ have written about the politics of framing the city space in these paintings by looking at the configuration of human figures and the built environment, to which we shall return later. These engravings travelled widely and were influential in producing for its British readership a powerful and sentimental visual imagination of the territory that was being colonized. The images were reproduced alongside other tourist attractions in maps of Calcutta that were published even in the mid nineteenth century in the form of visual insets, and were supposed to be one of the first sights a visitor to the city saw after landing at Chandpaul Ghat.

2.1.4 Scope and Existing Literature

The different sections of this chapter each contains their relevant literature review. Section 2.2 deals with the origin of the mythography in the account of Holwell. It is an attempt to read his narrative primarily as a self-conscious literary exercise rather than as historical evidence. Kate Teltscher in her essay, “The fearful name of the Black Hole,” has offered a similar reading, where, instead of trying to “peel away the fictive elements”²⁴ in the text, she gives them central importance in her analysis. In my view, it is not sufficient to simply account for the fictive elements and understand them through comparative studies of first person accounts: it is important to recognize – especially in the current geo-political context – that no historical narrative could have wielded as much power in the myth-making of Empire, and to study the critical importance of creating

²² Swati Chattopadhyay, *Representing Calcutta: Modernity, nationalism and the colonial uncanny* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2005), 38.

²³ Amanda Sciampacone, “Urban Ruin: James Baillie Fraser’s Representation of the Black Hole Memorial of Calcutta,” *Third Text* 25, issue 6 (November 2011): 751-762.

²⁴ Teltscher, 31.

identifiable individuals and recognizable narrative structures. Section 2.3 looks at visual representations of the memorial monument, starting with the depiction of Holwell himself directing its construction. The paintings by the Daniells and Fraser are similarly studied in the light of contemporary aesthetic theory, following Swati Chattopadhyay. Additionally, it attempts to inform the reading with archival material, which might suggest a spatial practice surrounding it that was less deliberate and more accidental. The final section of the chapter considers the rise of scholarship on the city of Calcutta particularly in the late nineteenth century with the rise of amateur historians, and the politics of claiming spatial hegemony for imperial historiography.

Although very few historians of Bengal have omitted mention of the Black Hole altogether, there is a theoretical gap when it comes to understanding how, not as discrete cultural traditions, but through inter-textuality, the space, its visual representations, its textual records, and indeed its “merchandising” led to the creation of the myth. Partha Chatterjee in his recent work, covering a wide range of texts and materials, adopts a multi-disciplinary approach to understand the historical event and its social life. His focus, however, is not spatial, in the sense that *The Black Hole of Empire* does not try to explain the connection between spatiality and ideology. Still more recently, William Dalrymple has offered his take on the Black Hole tragedy.²⁵ Owing to the urgency of the Curzon circle of historians to prove the validity of the imperial narrative, a large number of documents pertaining to the event had been made public under the editorship of S.C. Hill.²⁶ This has led to a host of popular historians weighing in with different market and historiographic agendas. While this makes the task of the spatial historian more difficult,

²⁵ William Dalrymple, *The Anarchy: The Relentless Rise of the East India Company* (London: Bloomsbury, 2020), e-book, 106.

²⁶ S.C. Hill ed., *Bengal in 1756-1757, Indian Records Series*, 3 vols. (London, 1905).

it also provides a more multi-disciplinary set of tools through which one can understand the social lives and afterlives of the event and its cultural representations.

II. SELF-FASHIONING OF A WITNESS

2.2.1 The Foundation Myth

In her essay titled “The Imperialist Character” Hannah Arendt remarks that the growth of national bodies in the modern age is nowhere accompanied by a legend. A “legend,” for Arendt, is a belated interpretation of past events in a nation’s history, whose factual accuracy may be impossible to establish, such that it creates a sense of continuous identity and agency across time. They are configured in a manner that allows for the projection of “general and political aspirations” of the present (i.e. the time of legend creation) making the ruling race or community appear as masters of events from the distant past over which, in fact, they had no control.²⁷ She points to an apparent contradiction in the intertwined histories of legend construction and nation building in the modern age:

It seems rather significant that the growth of national bodies was nowhere accomplished by a foundation legend, and that a first unique attempt in modern times was made precisely when the decline of the national body had become obvious and imperialism seemed to take the place of old-fashioned nationalism.

The author of imperialist legend for Arendt, which in turn gives birth to what she describes as the “imperialist character,” is Rudyard Kipling. She analyses the careers and strategies of three imperialist politicians (“British dragonslayers”) Evelyn Baring (Lord

²⁷ Hannah Arendt, “The Imperialist Character,” *The Review of Politics* 12, no. 3 (July 1950): 303-320, 304. URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1404663>.

Cromer), Cecil Rhodes, and George Curzon, who embody this character in the most unabashed way, albeit through contrasting approaches to power.

Although the narratives around the Black Hole do not adhere strictly to Arendt's description of a legend – “the spiritual foundations of every ancient city, empire, people, promising safe guidance through the limitless spaces of the future”²⁸ – the omission of this extremely potent and oft-revisited event in her analysis is striking. This oversight could be related to the premise of Arendt's article, which seeks to explain the creation of legends as attempts to imbue the accidental history of a people with agency. She refers to John Seeley's remark, later turned into an aphorism, that the British empire was acquired in a fit of absentmindedness – a notion dismissed (even in popular publications) by historians such as Tapan Raychaudhuri.²⁹ Partha Chatterjee too rejects this convenient mode of abnegating colonial responsibility and guilt in *The Black Hole of Empire*.³⁰

Arendt suggests that the generation and flourishing of historical and political legends “came to a rather abrupt end with the birth of Christianity,”³¹ but it is worth remembering that her essay does not speak of colonial empires, where the process and indeed very definitions of “national formation” differ radically from the ancient civilizations and cities that she has in mind. Ideas of historical continuity and discontinuity are configured uniquely in the case of the Indian subcontinent. Historical time was re-conceptualized during the Enlightenment by European philosophers, who leaned more towards a teleological perspective than an overtly Christian interpretation. Giambattista Vico, for one, believed in the theory of parallel but diachronic trajectories of civilizational and political evolution – “Ideal Eternal History” – that could be applied

²⁸ Ibid, 303-304.

²⁹ Tapan Raychaudhuri, “British Rule in India: An Assessment,” in *The Cambridge Illustrated History of the British Empire*, ed. P.J. Marshall (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 358.

³⁰ Chatterjee, 33.

³¹ Arendt, 304.

universally.³² For the present purpose, a direct application of this principle proves futile and simplistic. It may be argued, however, that long before Curzon took up the task of re-interpreting the Black Hole and giving birth to a legend – couched as historical research – and even before Macaulay, as Teltscher and Chatterjee have argued, saw the potential mythic quality in this contentious event, Holwell himself had realized the power of mythography.

The elements that were developed later into a resilient narrative of empire building were present in their rudimentary forms in the original iteration. Above all, Holwell astutely recognized the importance construction of a persona in building a successful mythography, which in his case was Christian and suffering, yet alive to tell the tale. An individual who can be named appears to be at the core of most founding myths, particularly when they pertain to the establishment of cities or the expansion of empires. This allows the retrospective narratographers to crystalize a long process of socio-political and geographical negotiations and give it, as it were, “local habitation and a name.”³³ As Arendt argues, on the one hand, it retrospectively implies agency and deliberate action, and on the other, permits a projection of ethical and moral values.³⁴ Narratives around these figures form in sedimentary fashion, often at odds with each other, revealing to later-day historians marks of abrasion between the layers. It is possible to think of many such examples: Romulus and Remus, Brute of Troy, the Founding Fathers of the American nation, Job Charnock, and even Jebediah Springfield – fictional founding father of the American suburb named after him and subject of countless biographical essays by students of the local school.

³² Robert J. Tristram, “Explanation in the New Science: On Vico’s Contribution to Scientific Sociohistorical Thought,” *History and Theory* 22, no. 2 (May 1983): 146-177, 157. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.2307/2504932>.

³³ William Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* (1595/96), 5.1.1847.

³⁴ Arendt, 303-304.

Before venturing into the narrative provided by Holwell, it may be instructive to clarify the distinction between what Arendt calls a “legend” and what Teltscher and Chatterjee call a “myth.” Arendt is clear in her definition:

Legends were the spiritual foundations of every ancient city, empire, people, promising safe guidance through the limitless spaces of the future. Without ever relating facts reliably – mostly alluding to them – they offered a truth beyond realities, a remembrance beyond memories.³⁵

Although apparently restrictive, Arendt’s subsequent discussion of the legend of imperialism through Rudyard Kipling’s work opens the definition up for interpretation. Her reading of Kipling’s “The First Sailor” (1891) and “The Tomb of His Ancestor” (1898) identifies a series of traits of the “imperialist character,” which includes a desire to move out of England for fear of having to outgrow their boyish learning, a firm belief in their racial superiority and, consequently, their duty to civilize the Other, and as a corollary, a “quixotic” dragon-slayer self-perception.³⁶ The “myth,” which Teltscher and Chatterjee refer to, is less precisely defined – perhaps because the word is applied in a more general sense. Roland Barthes in his classic, *Mythologies*, had defined “myths” not in terms of their substance but from a linguistic point of view, in terms of the way in which the message is uttered.³⁷ It presupposes a signifying consciousness and enables the signifier not to defer to a pre-existing, socially accepted signified, but to generate a new signified – thereby creating a “new sign.” He clarifies:

...it is human history which converts reality into speech, and it alone rules the life and death of mythical language. Ancient or not, mythology can only have

³⁵ Ibid, 303-4.

³⁶ Ibid, 307.

³⁷ Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* (1957), trans. Annette Lavers (New York: Noonday Press, 1972), 109-126.

an historical foundation, for myth is a type of speech chosen by history: it cannot possibly evolve from the nature of things.³⁸

In the absence of a historic past that could be instrumentalized to justify the colonial enterprise, Holwell was quick to appreciate that a regime change could be on the cards, and an event of such magnitude required a new set of political and moral ideals to facilitate a break from the past. His mythography, unlike that of Charnock's, was not propelled by others who looked back to a "founding father." It was generated by him, not as a historical exegesis – as Macaulay would later claim his essay to be – but as a personal letter to a friend. It is worth clarifying at this point, that by referring to his narrative as "myth" or to Holwell as "mythographer," the intention is not enter into a historical argument about the veracity of his claims. Recent historians agree that it is difficult – and pointless – to dismiss the core details of Holwell's narrative, even if the numbers are debatable. It is also clear by now that the numbers or facts of the matter are not the most enduring features of Holwell's narrative: its ability to trigger the political and sentimental imaginations of the colonizer is the reason for its endurance and continued popularity whether in acceptance or denial. In the following sections we will look at two primary concerns of the narrative: the self-fashioning of a Christian sufferer and the construction of the "Oriental Despot," both of which are associated with the presence of the monument and spatial politics of the imagined Empire.

2.2.2 The Witness

Giorgio Agamben explains in *Remnants of Auschwitz* that there are two words for "witness" in Latin: *testis*, from which we derive testimony, refers to a third-party who is

³⁸ Ibid, 110.

aware of the contested issue; and *superstes*, which “designates a person who has lived through something, who has experienced an event from beginning to end and can therefore bear witness to it.”³⁹ Unlike Primo Levi, to whom judgement matters little, Holwell was deeply aware of the political potential of his survivor narrative and he spared no effort to create the narrative groundwork for legitimizing the Empire.

The narrative was published in the form of a letter written to his friend, William Davis, while he was returning to England on-board the *Syren-Sloop* on 28 February 1757. It was published the following year by A. Millar – there appears to be no compelling external reason as to why it was published as an epistle rather than creating a more objective historical document. The choice, therefore, must be a deliberate one: Holwell and his publisher understood that the form of the letter alone offered the kind of affective reach that the narrative was supposed to have. Re-writing it as a historical narrative may have created a more substantial document for posterity but it was unlikely to create a stir at all levels of the hierarchical society in Britain, all of whom – from the governor to the subaltern – could be made to see that they have a stake in it. It is important to recognize that in choosing to publish an epistle – and it is amply evident from the text that the author has a public readership in mind – Holwell opted for an emerging form of fiction writing that could bear the burden of both the subjective and the objective or factual.

The anonymous preface claims that the letter has been allowed to go into print owing to “train of unforeseen accidents” despite an uneven narrative style: “what might have been considered as imperfections, if it had been intended for public view.”⁴⁰ The impression we get is that of authorial vulnerability: Holwell expresses himself as he

³⁹ Giorgio Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (New York: Zone Books, 1999), 17.

⁴⁰ Holwell, Preface, iv.

would with a close friend, taking no greater care to make his prose publicly readable. Both in emotions and in expression, it remains a work of intimate naivete, in Friedrich Schiller's sense of the term. While distinguishing between the "naïve" and "sentimental" poet, Friedrich Schiller had observed in the former category a propensity to be "bashful" but not "decent," "clever" not "cunning," naturally truthful, "modest" but not "anxious." The naïve poet, who alone could embody genius, is "guided only by nature or instinct," away from the trap of false taste that can ensnare the "non-genius" into using ornamentation to distort natural truths.⁴¹ Holwell's *Genuine Narrative* was published nearly forty years before "On Naïve and Sentimental Poetry" came out and it can be read as part of the formative critical discourse on naivete rather than a derivative one.

same natural, and undisguised dress, in which they had seen it; for truth, and more especially so affecting a truth, stands little in need of ornament, and appears to more advantage, the less it is assisted by the arts of writing, to which the author being a stranger, he trusted to his feeling, and endeavoured to express by his pen the emotions of his heart.⁴²

Instead of asserting narrative or historiographic objectivity, Holwell claimed natural, unadorned subjective truth, which foregrounded his individuality above anything else. If, as a reader, we believe him, as author, then (it is assumed) we are compelled to believe the narrative; conversely, if we believe the narrative, we are compelled to believe what it tells us of its author.

Interestingly, one of the literary genres Teltscher categorizes the *Genuine Narrative* under is "sentimental literature," which evolved during the eighteenth century

⁴¹ Friedrich Schiller, "On Naïve and Sentimental Poetry" (1795), trans. William F. Wertz, Jr. URL: https://archive.schillerinstitute.com/transl/Schiller_essays/naive_sentimental-1.html.

⁴² Holwell, Preface, v-vi.

in the hands of Samuel Richardson, Oliver Goldsmith, Laurence Sterne and others, who sought to elicit an emotional response in their readers. Teltscher describes it as:

This literary fashion took as its central tenet the idea of the natural goodness of humanity. Sentimental literature characteristically focuses on helpless and unfortunate victims to provoke a compassionate response in the reader, such humanitarian concern itself providing evidence of innate benevolence.⁴³

The two perspectives are not contradictory. An author or his publisher may wish their readers to think that they are reading a work of poetic naivete – that if they feel an emotional upheaval, it is not owing to the author’s craft or manipulations but a result of his un-mediation. The authorial persona is constructed as naïve but the manner in which the text operates, by strategically subsuming the naïve persona, remains sentimental. Teltscher is quick to point out that Holwell “grafts” this sentimental form onto a genre of literature, identified by Marie Louise Pratt as “survival literature” that had existed since “Europe’s first wave of expansion in the late fifteenth century.” Pratt describes it as “first-person stories of shipwrecks, castaways, mutinies, abandonments, and (the special inland version) captivities,” which espoused lowbrow sensationalism and, through their publication and popularity, often helped the “survivors” finance their re-entry into the world of commerce and trade.⁴⁴ Teltscher observes that while “survival literature,” presupposes the survival of the author, opens up a safe space for sensational adventure, taboo or misery, the Narrative “is not made wholly safe for the simple reason that most of the British prisoners do perish.”⁴⁵ As a corollary, this implies an even stronger

⁴³ Teltscher, 32.

⁴⁴ Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (Routledge, 2003), e-book 86. See Teltscher, 32.

⁴⁵ Teltscher, 36.

emphasis on Holwell's individuality as survivor, author and as the single representative mourner of a historical event – manifest in terms of his monument.

The narrative begins at a time when Calcutta is under siege. Siraj-ud-Daulah's forces have captured the fort. The governor, Roger Drake, had escaped and John Holwell, the protagonist of the English narrative, had stepped in. They had been assured by the Suba that no harm would befall them, but as the evening grew dark, one of the guards asked to them to collect in one body and make their way to a piazza or veranda to the west of where the Black Hole prison was situated. The factories were soon set ablaze and the English captives felt there was a distinct possibility that they would be made to suffocate between the flames from the factories and the apartments. They considered the possibility of charging down one of the guards and attacking him with their scimitars, but when they realized that the apartments had not in fact been set on fire, they still had a chance of survival. The guards were only looking for a place to hold them for the night.

As we have seen before (1.3.3), political philosophers had started to appreciate the importance of emotions in the mapping and shaping of Empire – Adam Smith's *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759) being a case in point. Commemoration of the dead was seen as a duty, and even more so if there is a chance of forgetting them: "The tribute of our fellow-feeling seems doubly due to them now, when they are in danger of being forgot by every body."⁴⁶ Tantalizing his readers before the entry into the Black Hole itself is described, Holwell pauses briefly to remember a fellow sufferer and friend by the name of Leech, who was the "company's smith as well as a clerk of the parish."⁴⁷ It is a literary rehearsal of the *siste viator* trope frequently found in funerary inscriptions, meant to arrest

⁴⁶ Adam Smith, "Section 1: Of the Sense of Propriety," in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759). URL: <https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/smith-adam/works/moral/part01/part1a.htm#1.1>.

⁴⁷ Holwell, 6.

the attention of a passing traveller. As narrator Holwell casts himself in the role of a guide, who is taking his readers on a spatio-memorial journey through the incident: he begins by saying, “Before I conduct you into the Black Hole...,” and later offers to take the reader through his miserable trek through Murshidabad. By requesting the visitor to pause on his way (the addressee is evidently male), Holwell performs the role of a memorial monument, foreshadowing his self-appointed role as the individual mourner for a collective tragedy.

Strangely, what starts out as a conventional tribute to the memory of the dead turns into an anecdote about the narrator’s moral code. Leech, who showed “sensibility” “in a degree worthy of a much higher rank,” had discovered an escape route by boat that was unguarded by the “Moors.” He offered to guide Holwell’s escape from the fort. Holwell refused, saying that he had to repay the loyalty “gentlemen and the garrison” had shown to him.⁴⁸ On hearing this, Leech, who could have escaped on his own, decided also to stay and meet the same fate as his fellow men. Other passages in the Narrative also serve to illustrate the adherence to societal and professional discipline in the form of hierarchies. By virtue of being de facto governor, Holwell assumes a position of command within the Black Hole: he even gets a window, which allows him some fresh air. From time to time he shouts instructions to the incarcerated. As Teltscher writes:

Holwell shows restraint, and...keeps his head while all around are losing theirs...The narrator is removed from the general atmosphere of hysteria and panic, paying little regard to his own needs.⁴⁹

⁴⁸ Ibid, 7.

⁴⁹ Teltscher, 33.

As the “seeing” and “hearing” narrator,⁵⁰ Holwell plays up his helplessness in the midst of a crowd that was in utter despair – despite best efforts, his instructions go unheeded as the panic-induced self-destructive streak continues to claim more victims. At first he implores them to not drink the water that was brought in by one of the guards (portrayed, curiously, as a sadist), because a limited supply of water can create an even stronger desire for more. Later, when Holwell himself gives into his urges and shouts for more water, the other prisoners carry his call to the guards: “‘GIVE HIM WATER, GIVE HIM WATER!’ nor would one of them at the window attempt to touch it until I had drank.”⁵¹

The terrible thirst that claims many lives and reduces even Holwell to experiment with drinking urine and his own sweat, becomes the point on which the civilizational values come closest to being destroyed. As Teltscher points out, symbols of genteel English society – the hat and the tea-cup – are used in a perverse manner to illustrate this point.⁵² The water is passed through the bars of the window through tin hats but the cruel irony is that by the time it reaches the parched lips of the prisoners, there is no more than a cupful remaining. Holwell is careful at first but later when he too becomes overcome with thirst, he experiments with squeezing sweat from his shirt sleeves. This quenches not only his own thirst but also saves the life of another young man, Mr. Lushington, who succeeds in stealing a part of Holwell’s “store.” Holwell would meet “this worthy young gentleman” again some months later, then enrolled “in the service.”⁵³ The unprecedented adversity elicits some dark humour in the narrator, who recalls:

⁵⁰ Ibid, 34.

⁵¹ Holwell, 23.

⁵² Teltscher, 35-36.

⁵³ Holwell, 24.

Here my poor friend Mr. Edward Eyre came staggering over the dead to me, and with his usual coolness and good nature, asked me how I did? but fell and expired before I had time to make him a reply.⁵⁴

Apart from his authorial position vis-à-vis the event and other survivors, Holwell constructs his individuality also along the lines of religion and his rank. There is an interplay between this need to assert his individuality and this desire to communicate the persistence of a consciousness of British civility, that makes him part of his imagined readership. It serves as a parallel to the writing and publishing process as well, where a letter apparently meant for intimate, private readership, becomes a public document across space and time. What sets him apart from the other prisoners, however, is his fortitude and faith in divinity, although his modesty prevents him from taking any credit for this – after all, according to Schiller that is one of the naïve writer’s qualities. This faith is not without trials: after several hours of enduring the torture of having to watch many dying around him, Holwell feels his religion give way.

Some infernal spirit, taking the advantage of this period, brought to my remembrance my having small clasp penknife in my pocket, with which I determined instantly to open my arteries, and finish a system no longer to be born. I had got it out, when heaven interposed and restored me to fresh spirits and resolution, with an abhorrence of the act of cowardice I was just going to commit.⁵⁵

Holwell does survive to tell the tale but his desire to monopolize the narrative as well as the authority to pay tribute to the dead (“indeed, tears, (a tribute I believe I shall ever pay to the remembrance of this scene, and to the memory of those brave and valuable

⁵⁴ Ibid, 21.

⁵⁵ Ibid, 28.

men) stop my pen”)⁵⁶ leads him to discredit every other version of it in anticipation: “the particulars mentioned by some of the gentlemen who survived...were so excessively absurd and contradictory, as to convince me, very of them retained their senses.”⁵⁷ It also remains a mystery as to why the English East India Company did not take on the responsibility of commemorating the incident. Speculatively, it could have been one of three reasons: (a) they were invested too heavily in trading and empire building at that time to generate a self-consciously historical narrative – as many corporates do today; (b) they did not wish to commemorate what was, after all, a defeat in the hands of an Indian Nawab; (c) as suggested by some non-believers, the incident may not have been of the magnitude that Holwell described it to be. In any case, the myth itself benefited from this individualized origin: it retained the flexible relationship with truth that Holwell allowed himself by opting for the epistolary form, and remained a symbol of subjective memory – made public through sympathy – of a public tragedy.

2.2.3 A Folio to Sit on: Construction of the Oriental Despot

The construct of the “Oriental Despot”⁵⁸ and accompanying “Islamic cruelty,” as Teltscher notes, was available in European literary and visual discourses since the time of the Crusades.⁵⁹ As the geo-political nature of these encounters between Christianity and Islam changed through the centuries, the shades and subtleties of this orientalist discourse also shifted, to the point where European philosophers of the Enlightenment – who were otherwise adept at recognizing the value of empirical methods of observation

⁵⁶ Ibid, 31.

⁵⁷ Ibid, 31.

⁵⁸ The classic study of similar tropes is in Edward Said, “Knowing the Oriental,” in *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient* (1978; New Delhi: Penguin, 1995).

⁵⁹ Teltscher, 36.

– started believing the travel narratives that had been circulating at the time. Of these, the most authoritative were Francois Tavernier (1620-1688) and Jean Chardin (1643-1713), whose works inspired treatises on politics in India and Persia. The eighteenth century culmination of the theory of despotism, which had its roots in Aristotle, was to be found in Montesquieu's *De l'esprit des lois* [The spirit of the laws] (1748). He concluded that the despotic temperament and its complimentary characteristic – the slavish and lazy subject population – both arose out of climatic conditions prevalent in Asia and Africa, where the nature of governance had not changed in recent memory.⁶⁰

Chen Tzoref-Ashkenazi has shown that other Continental philosophers, such as the German historian, August Ludwig Schlozer, German historian, and French political-philosophers, Nicolas Antoine Boulanger and Claude-Adrien Helvetius, shared similar views, which were then used to justify colonial expansion in terms of spreading a more humane and rational form of government.⁶¹ The main problem with this rapidly crystalizing discourse was that it was colouring the encounter of actual travellers and traders, who began to read the new landscape and people in terms of pre-formed impressions, which, in turn, had been produced through mis-readings of older travelogues. Ironically, as Frederick J. Whelan suggests, many of these thinkers only occasionally had Asia as a geo-political reality in mind, thinking more typically of the internal political troubles of Europe in essentialized metaphors.⁶² Irrespective of intent,

⁶⁰ Montesquieu, Chapters 8-10, *The Spirit of the Laws* Book 3, in *The Complete Works* (1748) Vol. 3. URL: <https://oll.libertyfund.org/titles/montesquieu-complete-works-vol-1-the-spirit-of-laws>. For a detailed discussion of the construction of the Oriental Despot, see Chen Tzoref-Ashkenazi, "Romantic Attitudes toward Oriental Despotism," *The Journal of Modern History* 85, no. 2 (June 2013): 280-320. URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/669734>.

⁶¹ Tzoref-Ashkenazi, 287.

⁶² Frederick G. Whelan, "Oriental Despotism, Anquetil-Duperron's Response to Montesquieu," *History of Political Thought* 22, no. 4 (2001): 619-647, cited in Tzoref-Ashkenazi, 289.

this process of snowballing brought into play a triad of space, text and ideology – unquestionably racist – within a vicious cycle.

There were voices on the other side as well, although far fewer in number. The most powerful counter-argument to the determinist theories of Oriental Despotism came from the French Orientalist Abraham Hyacinthe Anquetil-Duperron, who read the same authors but arrived at the opposite conclusions. His primary opposition were Alexander Dow (1735-1779), who believed that Mughal rule was enlightened and therefore ought to be colonized, and Robert Orme (1728-1801), whose influence in the East India Company was considerably in the aftermath of 1756.⁶³ Orme later became historiographer to the East India Company and published several volumes on Indian politics and culture, including *A History of the Military Transactions of the British Nation in Indostan from the year 1745*. Orme shared the traditional view: that Mughal rule was despotic and therefore it was the duty of the English to colonize the land to rectify this wrong. Anquetil-Duperron, on the other hand, was clear-sighted about the motivations behind colonialism. As Whelan puts it, Anquetil-Duperron knew that the “dragon slayer” identity was nothing but a disguise: “The real motive however, as Anquetil saw it, was to extract wealth in order to pay off the English national debt.”⁶⁴

Holwell himself was an apologist for the colonial enterprise, convinced that the Hindu population were labouring under Muslim rule, “but fated, I hope, soon to feel the blessings of a mild British government.”⁶⁵ Apart from the many lives that were lost on the fateful night, Holwell lost a few other treasures too that directly tie in with his hatred for Muslim rulers and affinity to the Hindus:

⁶³ Tzoref-Ashkenazi, 288-289.

⁶⁴ Frederick G. Whelan, 645.

⁶⁵ J.Z. Holwell, *Interesting Historical Events, Relative to the Province of Bengal and the Empire of Indostan* (London: T. Becket & P.A. De Hondt, 1766), 5.

It is well known that at the capture of Calcutta, AD 1756, I lost many curious Gentoo manuscripts, and among them two very correct and valuable copies of the Gentoo Shastah...but the most irreparable damage I suffered under this head of grievances, was a translation I made of a considerable part of the Shastah, which had cost me eighteen months of hard labour.⁶⁶

The truthfulness of this claim notwithstanding, it stands to reason that Holwell was particularly struck by Siraj-ud-Daulah's apparent indifference to objects of cultural value. After granting release, the Nawab had Holwell brought into his presence: "he soon observed the wretched plight I was in, and ordered a large folio volume, which lay on a heap of plunder to be brought for me sit on." Holwell tried to speak a few times but after spending the night inside the Black Hole, he could not utter a single word. To make matters worse, without waiting to hear of their plight, the Siraj-ud-Daulah "stopt me short, with telling me, he was well informed of great treasure being buried, or secreted, in the fort, and that I was privy to it; and if I expected favour, must discover it."⁶⁷

Holwell knew of no hidden treasure and therefore would win no special favour. Teltscher is right in pointing out that the narrator does not hold Siraj-ud-Daulah personally responsible for the extent of the cruelty meted out to the English although he is portrayed as being unmoved by its magnitude. The vilification of the Nawab is completed much later by Macaulay, who in his account expands a matter-of-fact, albeit potent, remark by Holwell – the doors of the cell "could only be done by the Suba's orders and no one dared awake him" – and turns it into a scene of Oriental debauchery: "But the answer was that nothing could be done without the Nabob's orders, that the Nabob was asleep, and that he would be angry if anybody woke him." Respite came the following

⁶⁶ Holwell (1766), 3.

⁶⁷ Holwell (1758), 34-35.

day when the “Nabob had slept of his debauch,” which finds no mention in Holwell’s narrative. The ignorance and narrow-mindedness of the Oriental Despot is also amplified in Macaulay’s narrative, this time with fatal consequence for Siraj-ud-Daulah.

The Nabob was revelling in fancied security in Moorshedabad. He was so profoundly ignorant of the state of foreign countries that he often used to say that there were not ten thousand men in all Europe.⁶⁸

This is an echo of Jahangir’s alleged ignorance of the world map beyond his empire. Edward Terry claimed that in order to rid the Emperor of his delusions about the size of his territory, his Ambassador to the Mughal court had presented Mercator’s great cosmography. Allegedly upset by the apparent size of the empire – Terry seems to ignore the distortions that result from the Mercator projection – Jahangir had returned the map saying he did not wish to rob the English of such a jewel.⁶⁹

The *Genuine Narrative*, therefore, can be seen as much more than historical raw material lying in wait till mythographers arrive and exploit its potential. Holwell was keenly, even if only intuitively, aware of the importance of constructing myths which helped forge a new identity and recognize new aspirations at the moment of a regime change. The construction of an individual, who draws in public sympathy, without having to answer for possible factual slippages, and the subsequent construction – at his own expense – of a public memorial close to the site of the incident constitutes the first of the foundation myths. The second one, which pertains to the myth of the “oriental despot,” asserts its narratological importance between travelogues and political philosophies. The following section will further explore the question of space and cultural circulation by

⁶⁸ Thomas Babington Macaulay, *Critical and Historical Essays Contributed to the Edinburgh Review* (London: Longman, Green, Reader & Dyer, 1872), 520.

⁶⁹ Edward Terry, *A Voyage to East-India* (London: J. Wilkie, W. Cater & E. Easton, 1777), 351.

looking at visual and textual descriptions of the monument in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

III. THE MONUMENT AND ITS TRAVELS

2.3.1 Holwell's Portrait

The earliest known visual depiction of the Black Hole memorial was in fact a fragmentary one. Completed in 1760, the painting depicted Holwell at the centre of the canvas, looking left, wearing a “purple-red coat” and a wig, pointing with a stern finger at a sheet of paper which he holds in his left hand. Closer inspection reveals that the page contains an architectural sketch of the memorial monument.⁷⁰ The left one-thirds of the painting is occupied by the base of the monument, supported by a bamboo framework and a ladder on the far side. Without Holwell's reference, it would be impossible to identify. A mason, with his face turned towards the instructor – “a mass of blackness, the color and gesture denoting his race and degenerate condition”⁷¹ – bends over a wicker basket presumably containing building material. Between the ladder and the monument, remnants of the old fort can be seen with a flag on top. In the background we see a couple of figures, both in Indian attire. One of them, who appears to be with the team of masons, points at the monument and explains something to the other, who wears a turban and an expensive cloak. The painting appears to reflect a phenomenon not uncommon among commemorative efforts: the commemorator gets precedence over the event or person being remembered. It serves to perpetuate his memory. Despite Holwell's efforts to

⁷⁰ The print is copyright National Portrait Gallery, London. Henry Dixon & Son, probably after Robert Edge Pine, “John Zephaniah Holwell,” platinum print (1887-1894), NPG D35936. See below: Fig 2.3, “John Zephaniah Holwell,” enlarged photograph, R1777-C1693, VMH. By kind permission of the Victoria Memorial Hall, Kolkata, India.

⁷¹ Chattopadhyay, 38.

record names of those who had died that night, the monument came to be remembered as the “Holwell” or “Black Hole” monument, anonymizing the others.

There is confusion regarding the painting’s origins: Swati Chattopadhyay attributes it to Joshua Reynolds, following Jeremy Losty’s source.⁷² The National Portrait Gallery, United Kingdom, which holds an engraving of the painting by Henry Dixon and Son, attributes it tentatively to Robert Edge Pine (1730-1758). It is likely that Losty and Chattopadhyay refer to this version of the painting but it is also possible that it has been confused with another painting, again tentatively attributed to Reynolds, that is in the Victoria Memorial Hall collection (R3120-C199), which is only a “bust” or headshot portrait.⁷³ This painting “Holwell dressed in a purple-red coat and wearing a wig,” was recovered by Lady Minto during an exhibition at the Chicago Art Institute in May 1896, when it was put on display by Elizabeth H.F. Holwell (a descendant of John). Here “it was recognized as the work of Sir Joshua on the strength of certain entries in Holwell’s diary recording his sittings to the artist.”⁷⁴ The two cannot be unrelated because the expression on Holwell’s face – a figure of authority who can only be described as bored and melancholy – and the angle at which his torso is turned from the viewer are exactly the same. Given that this is the only known extant portrait of Holwell, the artist who painted him supervising the construction of his monument, in all probability derived his facial features from the (speculative) Reynold’s portrait. The other way is also possible – if at all we assume that the two paintings are by different people – that a headshot was prepared based on an original which contained the building as well.

⁷² Chattopadhyay, 38.

⁷³ See Fig 2.4, “John Zephaniah Holwell,” oil on canvas, R3120-C199, VMH. By kind permission of the Victoria Memorial Hall, Kolkata, India.

⁷⁴ Wilmot Corfield, “A Review and Some Remarks,” *Bengal Past and Present* 2, no. 2 (April 1908): 161-187, 183.



Figure 2.1 Thomas Daniell, "The Writers' Buildings, Calcutta" (1798)⁷⁵



Figure 2.2 James Baillie Fraser, "A View of Writers Buildings from the Monument at the West End" (1824-26)

⁷⁵ Both are from the BL collection, cited above.

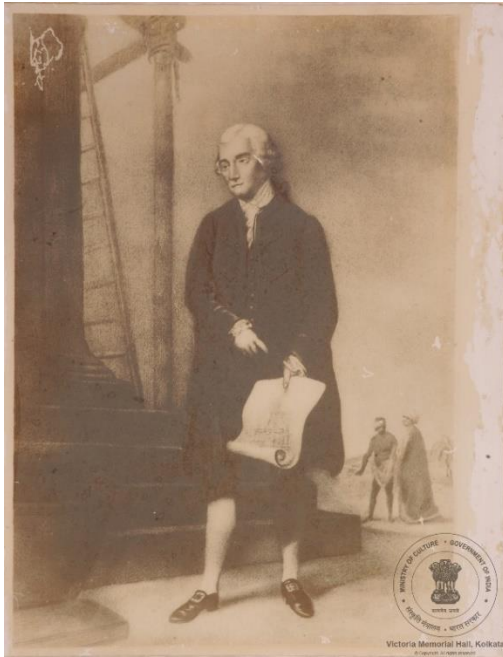


Figure 2.3 John Zephaniah Holwell



Figure 2.4 John Zephaniah Holwell



Figure 2.5 Thomas Daniell, Old Fort, "Playhouse and Holwell's Monument"

2.3.2 Early Visual Representations

The most well-travelled images of the Holwell monument were produced a few decades after its construction: by Thomas and William Daniell in the late 1780s and by James Baillie Fraser in the 1820s. Recent historians have drawn attention to the political dimensions of representing landscape, as in the work of W.J.T. Mitchell (see 1.2.3), and more specifically, Swati Chattopadhyay, Amanda Sciampacone⁷⁶ and Patrick D. Rasico⁷⁷ have written about the attempts of these early European travelling painters to document city spaces using available aesthetic modes. This section focuses on the process of translating of a physical monument, geographically anchored to its location, built by an individual to the memory of a public tragedy into a visual signifier or set of signifiers that circulate across the Empire in the form of engravings. As Tapati Guha-Thakurta writes:

The process of the transformation of objects into images nevertheless involved various layers of aesthetic mediations, for the aim was also to give buildings better perspectives, to play up their magnitude and their contrasted tones, to achieve pictures that were both authentic and pleasurable.⁷⁸

The “aesthetic mediations” were accompanied by their own political baggage: the evolution of the Picturesque in Europe and its application in India was not, as Chattopadhyay argues, an innocent process of content meeting form or genre: the individual painter had to negotiate the elements at the disposal of his canvas with these

⁷⁶ Sciampacone, 751-762.

⁷⁷ Patrick D. Rasico, “Calcutta ‘In These Degenerate Days’: The Daniells’ Visions of Life, Death and Nabobery in Late Eighteenth-Century British India,” *Journal for Eighteenth-Century Studies* 42, no. 1 (2019): 27-47.

⁷⁸ Tapati Guha-Thakurta, *Monuments, Objects, Histories: Institutions of Art in Colonial and Postcolonial India* (Delhi: Permanent Black, 2004), 11.

aesthetic principles, resulting in (perhaps unintended) betrayals of their ideologically coloured gaze.

This subjective bias – and by that is implied the historically and politically formed subjectivity of the painter – manifests itself not only in the framing and composition of these paintings but also in the inclusion or exclusion of certain parts of the city. In recent years scholars have questioned the construction of the “white town” “black town” binary based on the presence of Indians within the “white” spaces, the interiors of buildings, and records of property ownership.⁷⁹ However, it could be argued that although (as these paintings reveal) the racial-geographical boundaries were blurred in 18th century Calcutta, the erasure of the Indian parts of the city gave rise to (instead of being representative of) a culturally produced perception of space that was divided not necessarily along the lines of race but in terms of representational visibility and invisibility.

2.3.3 Calcutta According to the Daniells

Thomas and William Daniell set sail from England in April 1785. Over the next eight or nine years that they spent in India, they experimented with the forms they were trained in, exposing their skills to new challenges in landscape painting as they encountered and documented previously unrecorded topographies and a natural and social ecology. They stayed in “recession-hit Calcutta” for two years, “painting, etching and working at odd jobs,”⁸⁰ before amassing enough money to make their trip up the Ganges to paint scenes from the “interiors.” In those two years they produced a number of street scenes, being possibly the earliest European painters to attempt a systematic documentation of the

⁷⁹ Chattopadhyay, 11.

⁸⁰ Rasico, 27.

European neighbourhoods of Calcutta. Only a couple of engravings showed non-British residential areas: the Chitpur market area, Govindram Mitter's "Black Pagoda," and one which accidentally featured "Gentoo Buildings." The rest of the engravings can be mapped on to the city within a six-kilometre radius, except for one of Garden Reach, where a number of wealthy inhabitants had built their suburban retreats.

The stated purpose of the Daniells was to convey "an accurate topographical description of the city."⁸¹ As Chattopadhyay observes, this was in-keeping with the view that the visual arts could document the historical processes unfolding in a different part of the British empire with claims of recording objective detail. William Hodges, who had served as draftsman in the crew of Captain James Cook, served as inspiration and articulated his idea of creating a visual history and geography that would document the parallel knowledge systems that were being encountered by European colonizers. The use of the camera obscura for painting landscape, for instance, was an example of this pseudo-scientific spirit of documentation. It became "the metaphor for the most rational possibilities of a perceiver within the increasingly dynamic disorder of the world."⁸² However, while the device could enable an accurate projection of a three-dimensional reality onto a two-dimensional surface, it provided only a rudimentary framework for geometric perspectival accuracy. The representation of the social dynamics of any scene or an event depended entirely on the painter and their individual decisions regarding populating the canvas.

The Holwell monument features in three of the paintings by the Daniells. In an engraving titled "Old Fort, Playhouse and Holwell's Monument," we see its incidental

⁸¹ Chattopadhyay, 34.

⁸² Ibid, 41.

presence around the right edge of the frame.⁸³ A portion of the Writers' Building is visible behind it. On the left stands a remnant of the old fort, evidently in disrepair. The road that stretches out ahead towards the north has many more Indians than Europeans. Most of them are engaged in their daily chores – a group of four share a load, which they carry on their heads, another group walks onto the page from the right with a palanquin, a bullock cart appears to be on its way out. There are two Europeans on the left, in conversation with each other. Both have their hands extended in the direction of the street, as if to explain to the other what they are seeing. The Holwell monument does not draw any attention to itself. The obelisk is evidently not well maintained, with cracks and patches of discoloration. The obelisk appears in another engraving, which looks at it from the eastern end of the Tank Square.⁸⁴ The Old Court House is featured on the right, followed by a grand and elongated view of the Writers' Building. The street is buzzing with activity. People gesturing to others, trying to manage pet animals, carrying palanquins and hurriedly making their way to the court of law. At the far end, just about more legible than the ship masts on the river, stands the Holwell monument.

The monument is featured most prominently in an engraving titled "The Writers' Buildings, Calcutta," where a long stretch of the road, running alongside the Tank Square extends into the horizon. The quiet grandeur of the Writers' Building dominates this image with a number of people dotting the open space. As with the other images, they are going about their daily business. The Holwell monument towers to the left of the page. Discoloured in parts, it is protected by a metal railing and raised on a low mound. A few articles of clothing appear to be hung from these railings, below which two locals sit.

⁸³ See Fig 2.5, Thomas Daniell, "Old Fort, Playhouse and Holwell's Monument," aquatint (1786), shelfmark: P88, Asia, Pacific and Africa Collections, BL.

⁸⁴ Thomas Daniell, "Old Court House and Writers Building," aquatint (1786), shelfmark: P95, Asia, Pacific and Africa Collections, BL.

Swati Chattopadhyay has argued that art historians err in simplistically analysing the Daniells' paintings through the lens of the Picturesque.⁸⁵ In her view, it is the adjustments they had to make in the Indian context, which reveals most about the racial and social politics of the engravings. The rise of the Picturesque aesthetic in the eighteenth century was marked by an appreciation for the uneven and irregular. Inspired initially by paintings of rugged landscapes or Gothic cathedrals, this aesthetic medium, was born out of depictions of similar landscapes or architecture in ruin. According to Chattopadhyay, this was ill-suited to the depiction of the fragments of European modernity that were visible in India – which the Daniells sought to document for consumption back home. She argues that the figures drawn by the Daniells show life in its different rhythms but in fact their

purpose was to supply the picturesque that could be expressed through architecture...By using native elements as the part constituting the picturesque, they could sharply express the fine regularity of the buildings through the element of contrast.⁸⁶

While this reorients our way of viewing the racial politics of the Daniells' portrayals, it also begs the question as to whether their Calcutta drawings can even be categorized as Picturesque in the same way that the term is applied to the paintings from other parts of India. The lines are very well-defined in the Calcutta drawings, the play of light and shade is relatively subtle. The architecture is less dramatic than it could have been and apart from a few of the paintings of the "black town," there is no revelling in the irregular. The depiction of Indians, even if they are undertaking subservient activities, their depictions are not overtly racist. Rasico does not share Chattopadhyay's view and offers a more specific explanation of the style that was adopted by the Daniells in

⁸⁵ Chattopadhyay, 34.

⁸⁶ Ibid, 48.

Calcutta. He argues that the Daniells recognized a market for idealized images of Calcutta life. Stylistically they drew attention to the similarities between “Calcutta and urban Britain”⁸⁷ and created a “visage of Calcutta devoid of indicators of recession, pestilence or overcrowded cemeteries.”⁸⁸ The economic recession had reduced the English in Calcutta to a state of despondence, following the “golden age” of Warren Hastings. Patronage for artists were at a low ebb and cheap copies of European paintings flooded the market. Under these circumstances,

the only signs of European demise visible in the Daniells’ white town were ornate mausoleums and public memorials placed alongside monumental architecture celebrating Company power and prosperity.⁸⁹

The Daniells’ albums still sold a number of copies for the princely sum of “twelve gold mohurs” and, as Rasico notes, were among the possessions that Hastings was most reluctant to part with after he acquired a large debt following his trial. The Holwell monument, without being the dramatic focal point of either of the paintings, circulated nonetheless as a reminder of the troubled road that had been travelled by early colonizers in order to pave the way for modern administration, as reflected by the Greco-Roman architecture of the Tank Square.

2.3.4 Fraser’s Holwell Monument

Between 1824 and ’26, James Baillie Fraser painted arguably the most dramatic representation of the Holwell monument. The viewer’s position is similar to that in Daniells’ view of the Writers' Buildings, but the frame is fuller in Fraser. The Holwell

⁸⁷ Rasico, 28.

⁸⁸ Ibid, 41.

⁸⁹ Ibid, 41.

monument is in the foreground, on the left, not visible in its entirety. The long expanse of the Writers' Buildings, designed by Thomas Leon in 1777, stretches out on the left, leading the viewer's eye to the newly constructed St. Andrew's Church. The columns on the front portico of the church catch the rays of the morning sun, which also lights up the eastern faces of the buildings beyond. Evidently, the city is only just waking up. Indians are going about their everyday chores, as a solitary horse trots across the main thoroughfare. In the shadow of the Holwell monument, several Indians throng. The relative dimensions of the monument and the people, in all likelihood, are skewed. A barber has set up a temporary shade using bamboo poles and a sheet of cloth. A bullock cart stands in the foreground, possibly preparing for the first journey of the day. The monument, though showing signs of disrepair, remains by far the strongest visual presence in the frame, creating a visual parallel to the steeple of the Church in the distance. The Scottish Church would have held special significance for Fraser, who was born in Edinburgh.

James Baillie Fraser had arrived in Madras in 1813. His grandfather, also James, had spent seventeen years in India, during which time he had learnt Persian, collected manuscripts and written *The History of Nadir Shah*.⁹⁰ Fraser's father, Edward Satchwell Fraser, was an officer in the Grenadier Guards in the American War of Independence. The family owned property in Berbice (present-day Guyana), where they traded in sugar and cotton. At 16, James Fraser had tried his hand at this family business, but failing to do so, had travelled to India under the patronage of Charles Grant, a family friend and long-standing director of the East India Company. In 1813 he landed in Madras, before moving to Calcutta, "where he entered into a short-lived and unsatisfactory business

⁹⁰ Denis Wright, "James Baillie Fraser: Traveller, Writer and Artist 1783-1856," *Iran* 32 (1994): 125-134, 125-126. URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4299911>.

partnership with a Mr. Beecher.”⁹¹ Fraser would leave Calcutta for Delhi after another failure, only to return two years later.

A dramatic shift takes place between the Daniells’ representation of the monument – imposing but staid – and Fraser’s painting of a similar view: the most obvious difference being the dynamics between a colonial structure and Indians who interact with it. The boundary around the monument is gone and the dignified distance which it was allowed to maintain from all living humans has been erased entirely. Hermione de Almeida and George H. Gilpin have seen the repurposing of the space by local inhabitants as a “careless and uncivil desecration of the memorial.” In their view it serves as:

a reminder of the invidious connection between the savagery of Siraj-ud-daula and the contemporary Indians inhabiting the peripheries of British Calcutta. They are pictured as docile and in awe of British might, but their dark history bodes ill and requires ominous reminders like the Holwell monument.⁹²

This rather perplexing view and apparent contradiction – can someone be careless and uncivil towards a monument and yet be in awe of it? – is echoed in a different form by Amanda Sciampacone, who suggests that “Fraser’s representation of the monument appears to impinge on its very status as a memorial.”⁹³ She continues:

the image also locates the memorial to the Black Hole...squarely in a Bengali space. During a period when the boundary between the native ‘black’ town

⁹¹ Ibid, 125.

⁹² Hermione de Almeida and George H. Gilpin, *Indian Renaissance: British Romantic Art and the Prospect of India* (Abingdon: Ashgate, 2005; Routledge 2016), 237.

⁹³ Sciampacone, 752.

and the European ‘white’ town of the city was being secured, Fraser’s positioning of native figures around the memorial reveals the porous nature of this boundary.⁹⁴

While she is right in asserting the porous nature of the boundary, it seems naïve to suggest that this was a strategic and deliberate recuperation of the space on Fraser’s part. The fact that the symbol does not appear to be treated exceptionally by the locals, but is taken as part of the city’s infrastructure, is perhaps also not to Fraser’s credit. There is no question of “re-appropriation” of the structure, as Sciampacone suggests, because the structure never belonged to the local population to begin with.

Reading it from an art history perspective, which explains the difference in mood between the Daniells’ engraving and Fraser’s work through its own logic, appears to ignore the historical reasons for its removal. Around the time when Fraser painted the view, this personal mark of commemoration was simply not as valuable to the magistrates of the city, who understood space in terms of pragmatic urban necessities. Construction of the New Customs House had just been completed and the Council Chamber had instructed the magistrates, upon orders from the Governor General in Council, that the monument was to be removed. W.H. Bayley wrote:

In its present position it materially contracts the road-way and interferes with the free and open approach which it [sic] is so essential to maintenance of the Custom House Premises...From the Enquiries which have been made, it does not appear that the Monument in question was erected over the remains of those individuals, who perished on the occasion of the Capture of Calcutta by

⁹⁴ Ibid, 755.

Surajud Dawlah, nor does the inscription now upon it record the names of any of those individuals.⁹⁵

It was felt that the removal of the monument, on which the Company was not eager to spend money, “will undoubtedly add to the embellishment of that part of the City, and will be of essential convenience to the mercantile community and to the public at large.” The monument and its replicas were to have interesting afterlives of their own, and visual depictions that kept appearing in print – in various media – carried the memory of these two iconic engravings, as we shall see in the following section.

⁹⁵ Letter from W.B. Bayley to H. Shakespeare, Judicial (Criminal), 16 March 1821, Cons. 10, WBSA.

IV. IMPERIAL HISTORIOGRAPHY

2.4.1 The Other Replica

Henry Elmsley Busteed, former surgeon of the English East India Company and historian of Calcutta, wrote a letter to George Curzon on 9 August 1908, six years after the replica of the Black Hole monument had been resurrected, informing him of yet another model that he had discovered. Some years before the date of the letter, Busteed had received a set of letters from John Zephaniah Holwell's grandson, who was at the time stationed in Quebec. He had placed them in a wooden desk, which had subsequently gotten mislaid at a furniture depository after a fire had destroyed a large portion of its contents. Busteed's letter was prompted by the recovery of this desk and his surprise at finding many of the letters still inside it. The author of the letters, a Major Holwell had been offered a replica of the Holwell monument that was in the possession of a cousin, Mrs. Atkins, who stayed at Halstead Place near Seven Oaks in Kent. The house had come into the possession of the Atkins in 1820, when John Atkins had bought it with the profits of their trade in the West Indies.⁹⁶ Major Holwell was unable to transport it to Quebec because the model was three or four feet tall. He asked Busteed sometime after his original discovery to find out about the replica.⁹⁷

Busteed set about trying to locate the family and realized that they had moved out of Halstead Place and were now known as the Burnaby-Atkins (presumably John

⁹⁶ "233 - Burnaby-Atkins of Halstead Place," 11 October 2016, "Landed Families of Britain and Ireland," <https://landedfamilies.blogspot.com/2016/10/233-burnaby-atkins-of-halstead-place.html>.

⁹⁷ Letter from H.E. Busteed to Curzon, 9 August 1908, Folio, MSS Eur F111, British Library.

Burnaby Atkins). They had leased out the property but had wisely taken the model with them. This Burnaby-Atkins, according to Holwell, knew no more or less of developments in India than the average “stay-at-home Englishman” but was vaguely familiar with Curzon’s on-going efforts to revive the memory of the incident. Busteed provided him with a copy of Curzon’s speech at the inauguration of the replica, to which Burnaby-Atkins responded by sending Busteed a photograph of the replica. Busteed noted disappointedly that “the model does not possess the historical interest which I had hoped for it.”⁹⁸ Through the letters, however, Busteed was able to gather that following his retirement, Holwell had applied for a new grant of Arms, setting forth in his petition details of “his services during the attack on Calcutta and its lamentable consequences.”⁹⁹ The Arms were granted as per his request.¹⁰⁰



Figure 1.6 Holwell Coat of Arms

Contrary to what Busteed had initially believed, the replica was not built by John Zephaniah Holwell but by his son, James Holwell and “inscribed affectionately” in his father’s memory. Almost a decade after Busteed’s letter, Curzon would use the replica as illustration to substantiate his argument in the pages of *Bengal Past and Present*. The

⁹⁸ Letter from Busteed to Curzon, 9 August 1908, MSS Eur F111/482, 8, BL.

⁹⁹ Ibid, 10.

¹⁰⁰ Fig 2.6 “Coat of Arms granted to Holwell,” photograph, R4164, VMH. By kind permission of the Victoria Memorial Hall, Kolkata, India.

whereabouts of the model are unknowable even from Curzon's writing. It is clear, however, that the monument and what it stood for was important enough for John Zephaniah Holwell's son to prompt the construction of the replica, which would then travel as a commodity through the Empire. It served both as a symbol of a foundational event in the history of the British empire in India and as a catalyst in the upward mobility of the Holwell family line. Credit was due to Holwell not only for his services "during the attack on Calcutta" but also for his ability to narrativize it productively for family and Empire.

During his journey to India in December 1898, Curzon read Busteed's *Echoes from Old Calcutta*, where he found a "full account of the tragic circumstances."¹⁰¹ Busteed's narrative called Curzon's "attention to the spot" and induced him to "make a careful personal study of the entire question of the site and surroundings of Fort William."¹⁰² Although Macaulay's essay on Clive made a more powerful case than Busteed in asserting the importance of the Black Hole incident and its aftermath as a founding event of the British Empire in India, it was Busteed who pointed to the physical absence of the monument in Calcutta and lamented the amnesia of the citizens. He argued that while in the sixty years following the event, "Calcutta had preserved the memory of these unhappy victims," the next eighty years had to answer for neglect of their memory, when no monument or stone slab inscribed this event into public history.

Curzon claimed that his own perspective had shifted dramatically upon reading Busteed's account: as he passed by the Old Fort and the surrounding areas, before they faded from his view he would begin to see in their place, "the walls and bastions of the

¹⁰¹ George Nathaniel Curzon, "Unveiling the Holwell Monument," 9 December 1902, *Speeches by Lord Curzon of Kedleston* (Calcutta: Office of the Superintendent of Government Press, 1905), 3:78.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 79.

old Fort exactly behind the spot where I now stand.”¹⁰³ The personification of “Calcutta” is a strategy worth noting, because Curzon – as with Busteed before him – failed consistently to observe any distinction between the historical subjectivity of the British colonizers and that of the rest of the city. It was an appropriation of the public consciousness, which claimed a monopoly over monumental articulations of narratives that suited the colonizing process. Curzon decided to reconstruct the memorial monument, adjusting its dimensions to match the increasing heights of surrounding buildings, and present it as his “personal gift to the city of Calcutta in memory of a never to be forgotten episode in her history.”¹⁰⁴ This section traces the historiographic foundations of Curzon’s act of re-asserting the Imperial narrative on the physical space, the attempts to find archeological evidence to authentically support the claims, and tangentially, and glance at a body of counter-arguments that were eventually discredited by a nexus of historians and administrators.

2.4.2 “Aeacus” and *Echoes from Old Calcutta*

Between the first edition of Busteed’s *Echoes from Old Calcutta* (1882) and the fourth (1908), we notice a significant shift in his tone. The first edition began with an epigraph from Macaulay’s essay on Clive, denouncing Englishmen for their ignorance of the history of the British Empire in India, which they found it “not only insipid, but positively distasteful.”¹⁰⁵ Busteed echoed Macaulay’s lament but when it came to justifying why the “stay-at-home” Englishman or even one travelling to the colonies should take an active interest, he came up with little more than subjective reasons: “it would be a relief

¹⁰³ Ibid, 79.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid, 81.

¹⁰⁵ Busteed (1882), 1.

to occasionally try and seek refuge in a by-gone world..." or "such a retrospect far from being pointless or dull, would, at least, enable us to take an intelligent interest in the many sites and scenes in our midst."¹⁰⁶ By the time his fourth edition was published, Curzon had started his programme of historical revivalism in Calcutta, and some of Busteed's anxieties had been addressed. Curzon went so far as to write an introductory letter to Busteed's new edition, congratulating him on persevering through his scholarship and for recovering "from oblivion and [breathing] new life into a crowd of images that seem almost to belong to another world."¹⁰⁷ Busteed acknowledged in a far more self-assured and toned down opening:

There has been a marked impetus given within recent years to the issue of literature about India. It is still going on...Of guide-books and handbooks, memoirs and letters, there is no stint. And last, not least, the solid material brought to the surface by capable and laborious burrowers in the official records of the past.¹⁰⁸

A significant part of the public discourse that was taking shape was centered on Curzon, who had taken it upon himself to establish the imperial narrative about the Black Hole as the only authentic public version. Other initiatives too were underway, but we return to this later.

Busteed's earliest forays into the history of Calcutta – essays on Nuncoomar, the Black Hole, and on Rose Aylmer – were published in the *Englishman* under the pseudonym "Aeacus."¹⁰⁹ Aeacus, the mythological king of Aegina, was appointed one

¹⁰⁶ Ibid, 2.

¹⁰⁷ Curzon, "Introductory Letter," in *Echoes* (1908), iv.

¹⁰⁸ Busteed (1908), 1.

¹⁰⁹ J.J. Cotton, "Reminiscences of a Delightful Writer," February 1912, *The Empress*, 36. Clipping inside Busteed, *Echoes* (1908), MSS EUR B 197, BL. Biographical details of Busteed are otherwise rare.

of the three judges at the gate of Hades after his death according to Ovid and Plato. Charged with the task of deciding a soul's fate in the afterlife, Aeacus was put in charge of the dead who came from Europe, while Rhadamanthus decided for the Asians. The final judgement, however, lay with Minos.¹¹⁰ Born in 1832 at Muskerry between Cork and Kerry (Ireland), Busteed had undertaken a more convoluted journey to Calcutta than most. He had appeared for the Indian Medical Examination after giving up hopes of joining the Queen's Service – there were too many candidates after the Crimean War – and reached India in 1855. He joined the Madras Fusiliers at Fort St. George before travelling to Bangalore with a troop of Horse Artillery. From there he went to Mercara and on to Vellore, where he was entrusted with the task of conveying a troop to safety during a Cholera outbreak. With two assistants (one of whom was a drunkard), he succeeded in doing so and was congratulated by the Commander-in-Chief, Patrick Grant, who “got him sent to the front” ahead of several others who were in line. He received a recommendation from Lord Harris in Madras, which allowed him access to Lord Canning. He travelled through Kanpur, Tranquebar and Cuddalore, before finding himself employed at the Madras Mint. After a brief stint at Bombay, he was appointed Assay Master to the mint at Calcutta in 1870. In his obituary, Cotton wrote:

Let us hope that like Ulysses in the Nekyia the dear old Doctor is at last able in the Elysian Fields to meet the ghost of the heroes and heroines he has brought to life again with his kind gentle pen.¹¹¹

Busteed's significant addition to the existing literature on the Black Hole was localizing it and creating a narrative of space rather than of teleological political history.

¹¹⁰ Plato, 524a, Gorgias, *Plato in Twelve Volumes*, Vol. 3, trans. W.R.M. Lamb (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press; London: William Heinemann Ltd., 1967). Available at www.perseus.tufts.edu.

¹¹¹ J.J. Cotton (1912).

He conceded that the Black Hole prison owed its existence to the English: “A close and darkened cell of some kind was at the time an appendage of every British barrack.”¹¹² In doing so, he was recalling Jeremy Bentham’s essay from the 1780s, where Bentham had condemned the uncritical transposition of punitive measures from one climate and society to another. The example that Bentham had used was of the Black Hole:

A night’s confinement in the prison called the Black Hole, in the hot climate of Calcutta, after producing the most excruciating torments, proved fatal to nearly all the prisoners confined in it.¹¹³

It was, Busteed agreed, “an offshoot of the ignorantly inhuman prison arrangements prevalent in England prior to the great jail reform.”¹¹⁴ He went on to attempt a reconstruction of the physical space and suggested the possible coordinates where the prison may have been located, and where, subsequently, the bodies of the dead had been “promiscuously” disposed of by Siraj-ud-Daulah’s men.

According to tradition, Busteed reported, the Marquis of Hastings had felt that the symbol of English defeat was likely to “lower our prestige” among Indians:

That we have got so few victories and conquests in India to point to that we must carefully obliterate, in our own interest, all evidence of a casual reverse, and to effect this we must even put out of sight what is due to the memory of the brave and the dead.¹¹⁵

He compared this attitude of vain negligence (admittedly unverified) to the Government’s position with regard to the Patna massacre of 1764, where a request was

¹¹² Busteed (1882), 25.

¹¹³ Jeremy Bentham, “Essay on the Influence and Time and Place in Matters of Legislation,” in *The Works of Jeremy Bentham*, Vol 1, ed. John Bowring (Edinburgh: William Tait, 1843), 173.

¹¹⁴ Busteed (1882), 25.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid*, 42.

made to the Nawab via the Resident at the Durbar, to make over to the English “the house where the massacre was perpetrated, and the ground thereunto belonging,” so that the house could be entirely demolished. The plot would then be railed in a square to create a space to construct the memorial monument.¹¹⁶ “Our predecessors neglected the memory of the defenders of Calcutta,” Busted laments, “we dishonor it.”¹¹⁷ For previous writers of the city’s history it was sufficient to contain their affective relationship with the past within the scope of the printed word. Nostalgia, even recuperative histories, did not mourn the absences within the physical space, and the ghosts that haunted the city did not impose a sense of guilt upon its present. For Busted, however, a sense of the past was an essential means to understand the present – but subtextually, it carried a strong hegemonic impulse that sought to address the increasing insecurity felt by the English on Indian soil. Curzon, supported by historians on the one hand and executive powers on the other, would emerge as the ideal instrument to convert these urges into practicalities.

2.4.3 Excavations

On 2 January 1880, while preparing the foundations of the Eastern Railway Headquarters at Fairlie Place, the architect, Richard Roskell Bayne came upon a stretch of wall (four feet thick) below the curb level at the junction of Clive Street and Fairlie Place. Bayne was aware that they were working on the site of the Old Fort. He decided to dig in three or four places along the wall to uncover how deep it went and what the building was like. Finding that it went two feet below the level where the new walls and concrete were to go, and that it was a “good straight solid wall with a fair base,” Bayne’s men decided to build on it rather than replace the foundation. He was able to recognize the subterranean

¹¹⁶ Ibid, 43.

¹¹⁷ Ibid, 43.

structures as part of the old Fort owing to his familiarity with Orme's *History of the Military Transactions of the British Nation in Indostan* (1778), and thus, realizing the value of his discovery, Bayne "narrowly watched the excavation following it and began to keep a careful record of the walls as they were exposed."¹¹⁸

Colonial archaeology had been systematized over the course of the late nineteenth century, Tapati Guha-Thakurta writes, "as part of a broad, composite field of antiquarian studies."¹¹⁹ As it tried to disengage itself from local forms of knowledge, the true disciplinary meaning of the edifices was wrested away by "a new community of scholars and administrators"¹²⁰ who possessed the necessary expertise. More importantly, perhaps, in the case of the Black Hole narrative, they possessed the means to make this knowledge publicly accepted through the printed word and through monuments that articulated their view in public spaces. Although the essay does not speak of these non-professional findings, Guha-Thakurta's observation that nineteenth century archaeology came to "revolve centrally around this theme of the testimony of stone – around the solidity and infallibility of this testimony"¹²¹ offers an explanation as to why Bayne's discovery offered one of the decisive arguments in favour of the imperial narrative.

Richard Roskell Bayne, a relatively under-studied name in the history of architecture of the British Empire, was born in 1836 in Warwick. After completing his primary education, he worked in Charles Barry's office for a while and studied under Digby Wyatt, leading architects of national eminence. Bayne joined the South Kensington School of Design, where he was probably colleague of John Lockwood Kipling. Bayne became an associate of the Royal Institute of British Architects in 1866,

¹¹⁸ Bayne, 108.

¹¹⁹ Tapati Guha-Thakurta, 17.

¹²⁰ Ibid, 18.

¹²¹ Ibid, 22.

having recently “accepted a four-year contract with the East India Railway Company as a draughtsman under the authority of the Chief Engineer.”¹²² Starting in 1866, up until 1890, Bayne worked in India as an employee of the East India Railway offices based in Calcutta. His work in India, however, spanned several cities, including Allahabad, Lucknow, Mussoorie, Darbunga and Madras.

Bayne’s careful examination of the archaeological remains of the old Fort William revealed the length and position of the north curtain wall – a defensive construction between two towers – and the north eastern bastion of the fort, “which were entirely uncovered and partly destroyed in putting in the foundations of these new offices for the East India Railway.”¹²³ His report of the excavations is interspersed with quotations from Orme and Holwell’s *Genuine Narrative* as the historical record informs his perception of the buildings and, at the same time, serves as a reminder to the reader of the importance of the discoveries, legitimizing the project he has undertaken quite by chance. They were able to uncover the walls of the carpenter’s shop inside the old Fort, a building ninety feet by forty feet, with a row of columns at the centre. Old drains, surface and underground, were revealed in many places, and along the west curtain “was found a small gateway alluded to by Orme as the small gateway by which Suraja Dowleah entered the fort after its capitulation.”¹²⁴ Three different levels of floor were also discovered by Bayne and his men in addition to the original level from 1756, revealing like a palimpsest the different purposes the grounds had served over the years. Bayne’s studies also confirmed that the river had shifted westward by a considerable

¹²² Anthony Welch, Martin Segger and Nicholas DeCaro, “Building for the Raj: Richard Roskell Bayne,” *Canadian Art Review* 34, no. 2 (2009): 74-86, 76. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/42630806>. All biographical details are from the cited article.

¹²³ Abstract, “On the excavation made in the erection of the Offices of the East Indian Railway and the remains of Old Fort William found at the time,” *Proceedings of the Asiatic Society of Bengal*, January to December 1883 (Calcutta: Baptist Mission Press, 1884): 6-107, 6.

¹²⁴ Abstract, 7.

distance. A part of the shift, owing perhaps to accretion, was dated to the end of the eighteenth century or beginning of the nineteenth, while reclamation had caused another shift during 1847-1882. Compared to 1756, when the river was 75 feet west of the first curtain of the Fort, in 1847 it had shifted to a distance of 625 feet, and currently stood at 800 feet.¹²⁵

The two most important claims were the discoveries of the Black Hole prison itself and of the earthwork ravelin into which the dead bodies had been thrown. Quoting a long passage from Holwell, which appeals as much to the sentiments of the English reader as it serves to substantiate a historical point, Bayne calculates from the few known coordinates the location of the Black Hole prison and asserts with finality: “I do not think there is any room to doubt now the exact locality of the Black Hole.”¹²⁶ The following month (February 1882), Bayne made the other significant discovery: while digging longitudinally for a pipeline, they noticed on either side “undisturbed natural soil sloping either way.” Above this, the ground was packed with loose debris and the bricks that lay on top had cavities. The looseness of the filling gave Bayne the impression that it may have been caused by “the decay of bodies laid in first.” He remarked, however: “There was not a vestige of a bone, but 125 years would, I presume, destroy all traces of even bones in a soil saturated with water.”¹²⁷ In the discussion following his paper, Bayne recalled Busteed’s *Echoes*:

In the first article of which was an account of this, to all Englishmen, most interesting spot, and the writer alluded to the great difficulty of now pointing

¹²⁵ Ibid, 8.

¹²⁶ Bayne, 116.

¹²⁷ Note on the Excavations on site of Old Fort William, *Proceedings of the Asiatic Society of Bengal*, January to December 1883 (Calcutta: Baptist Mission Press, 1884): 42-45, 43.

out the place and the necessity of putting up some tablet to mark where it was supposed to be.¹²⁸

The Chairman of the Asiatic Society was convinced of the need to record such historical details. He put the duration of official memory “from six to eight years,” and requested His Excellency, the Commander-in-Chief to facilitate the laying of marble tablets to show where the original bastions were.

A few years later, in 1889 one T.R. Munro discovered in the King’s library of the British Museum an accurate map of the old fort prepared by “Lieutenant Wells” in 1753. This map was on a scale of 100 feet to an inch and was supposed “to show a project of a new fort by Colonel Scott, the Engineer at the time,” but it also gave an accurate description of the old fort.¹²⁹ This proved to be an important discovery from the archaeological point of view and it served as the principle reference for C.R. Wilson’s excavations in 1892-95. Based on Bayne’s efforts and aided by the new, accurate map, Wilson undertook to reconstruct parts of the old fort. He was able to ascertain accurately where the Fort’s walls stood, the “topography of the east gate and the structures south of it, including the Black Hole,” the location of the Long Row, where the writers were lodged, the Factory or Government House in the centre, and the curtain walls.¹³⁰ And so, once again, “It was perceived that at last sufficient evidence was now forthcoming to *fix beyond all doubt* the sites of the Black Hole and the Holwell monument and to determine the rest of the topography of the fort”¹³¹ [Italics mine]. Curzon held a meeting with experts in the yard of the General Post Office on 28 February 1900, where he surveyed

¹²⁸ Abstract, 8.

¹²⁹ C.R. Wilson, *Old Fort William and the Black Hole: a Note* (Calcutta: Office of the Superintendent of Government Printing, 1904), 14.

¹³⁰ Ibid, 15.

¹³¹ Ibid, 15.

the locality and started drawing up a plan of the measures needed to be taken to establish its history.

One year prior to that, he had written to Wilson asking him for all the extant material on the Black Hole that he had at his disposal. Wilson had provided him with: “certain papers relating to the Black Hole made over to me by the late Archdeacon,” five original plans of Fort William, four photographs of the excavation made by him, “certain views of old Calcutta by Daniell belonging to the Asiatic Society,” three of which showed the old fort, and four plans of Old Calcutta and of “old Madras to compare with those of Calcutta.”¹³² He had also provided Curzon with plans that had been drawn up earlier to commemorate the Black Hole incident, which included the proposal by W. Martin, Chief Engineer and Secretary to the Government of Bengal’s Public Works Department to construct an elaborate gateway at the side of the Post Office, a more modest proposal to erect a monument over the site of the Black Hole, and the proposal to the Archdeacon to erect a monument at St. John’s Church. In the letter Wilson asserted with conviction: “I submit that I have determined the site of the Black Hole,” and suggested that removal of the statue of Sir Ashley Eden, which stood on the site of the old Holwell monument, would allow another excavation to determine its exact site.

The colonial anxiety to assert a single narrative of a historical event did not rest with ascertaining “beyond all doubt” the exact location of the Black Hole prison or the monument – nor did it stop at planting several tablets and plaques of varying shapes and sizes around Dalhousie Square around the time of Curzon’s unveiling of the replica. Wilson went on to direct carpenters to produce replicas of the known parts of the fort,

¹³² Letter from C.R. Wilson to Mr. Lawrence (Private Secretary to the Viceroy), 13 February 1899, Correspondence about Black Hole & Holwell’s Monument, 1899 - MSS Eur F111/482, British Library.

the prison and the church. (A similar architectural model prepared by H.E. Busteed (F1041) was made available to me by the Prints Room of the British Library in May 2018.) Wilson remarked in conclusion:

It is hoped that the reader of this note after studying the model of the fort and retaining its main features in the mind's eye will as soon as possible pay a visit to the actual site on the west side of Dalhousie Square.¹³³

Holwell had commemorated the incident in terms of the printed text and a memorial monument made with brick and plaster. When the latter disappeared, the former, accompanied by visual representations lingered on and circulated widely. The discourses became localized geographically once again toward the end of the nineteenth century – possibly betraying some sense of anxiety in the colonial mind about the alternative voices that were staking claims to the public discourse, in public spaces – and were finally revisited in terms of a spatial assertion by Curzon and allied historians, who sought to monopolize the public memory of the incident by re-erecting the monument in marble.

¹³³ Wilson, 24.

Chapter 3

Monuments and Statues: Colonial Memory in Open Spaces and Their Afterlives

I. INTRODUCTION

3.1.1 Public Spaces and Urban Memory

The long-standing binary view of Calcutta/Kolkata, which saw a clear division between the “Black Town” and “White Town,” has been called into question by recent scholarship.¹ As textual and visual documents from the nineteenth century reveal, there was indeed considerable porosity between the European quarters and the “native” neighbourhoods both in terms of human mobility and property or land ownership. However, if we were to browse through a street directory of the city or take a walk through one of central Kolkata’s neighbourhoods, we would encounter remarkable diversity in the nomenclature of street or locality names. One could go so far as to posit an onomatological distinction between colonial practices of naming and local practices, although that is not the focal argument of the present chapter. Broadly speaking, names of localities or streets have two parts: an associative (usually proper) noun and a

¹ See Swati Chattopadhyay, *Representing Calcutta: Modernity, nationalism and the colonial uncanny* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2005), 76-92.

descriptor: Dalhousie Square, Chalta-bagan, Kumar-tuli, Beadon Street, and so on. There are exceptions, of course, such as Dum Dum.²

Apart from descriptive names (such as Burying Ground Road), a fundamental difference between the onomastics of “local” and “colonial” spatial nomenclature is that while the former tends to rely upon geological, botanical, zoological or social nouns (Sealdah, Karaya, Bansberia), the latter gravitates towards private individuals (Short Street, Camac Street) who may or may not have a geographical tie to the place. It is worth clarifying, however, that the colonial practice is not restricted to European citizens alone but is more a function of urban modernity that was embraced by wealthy Indians as well. Although it is tempting to theorize this transition in terms of an increasing urban anthropocentrism, a more accurate understanding of it – keeping in mind that in local nomenclature there are places named after communities (Paikpara, Dompara, Baidyabati) – would be as a new conceptualization of the public spatiality along the lines of private presences. The verbal identifiers of the urban space become references to individuals. In the early years of the city, maps reflect the direct spatial association with possessive forms of proper nouns: e.g. Fancy’s Lane, Tiretta’s Bazar, Barretto’s Lane,³ many of which were accepted as proper nouns (rather than possessives) for the localities or streets in later years as the memory of the personal association faded. This is seen in names not just of streets but of other urban infrastructures as well, such as ghats, bazars, town squares and water bodies. The verbal colonization of the city is more insidious than a simple renaming of a territory: it signals a paradigmatic change in the affective and memorial relationships shared between people and their habitations by prioritizing

² See P. Thankappan Nair, *A History of Calcutta’s Streets* (Calcutta: Firma KLM, 1987), 3-24.

³ “Map of Calcutta and Its Environs, from an Accurate Survey Taken in the Years 1792 and 1793 by A. Upjohn,” Plate 2, in *Atlas of the City of Calcutta and Its Environs* (Kolkata: National Atlas and Thematic Mapping Organisation), 18.

influential individuals over an identification with communities or the natural environment.

Beyond this logocentric colonization, however, the landscape was visually colonized as well over the course of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Arguably the most significant urban transformation came in the wake of Siraj-ud-Daulah's siege of Calcutta in 1756, when the East India Company decided to relocate the Fort William further south along the river to a place that was considered strategically superior from a defence point of view. It led to an enormous operation which involved the migration of a large community of traders who had settled in the village of Gobindapur to northern parts of the city, literally paving the way for what came to be known as the Maidan. Section 2 of this chapter is concerned with the production of the Maidan as a space: firstly, as a stable topographic entity through management of drainage and spatial management, and secondly, as a cultural space of heterotopoic possibilities, where it served the military's purpose as an imperial memory park. Two commemorative monuments, the Ochterlony Monument (Shahid Minar) and the equestrian statue of James Outram have been selected for case studies. The former as a representative of a functional structure that serves a multiplicity of purposes, facilitating as much as inviting spectatorship, and the latter as an epitome of the tradition of naturalistic statuary that flourished in nineteenth century Britain.

Section 3 attempts a methodological shift from the conventional tools used to analyse nineteenth century sculpture and statuary by proposing urban visibility and memory as a more flexible lens through which these practices can be viewed rather than art historical perspectives that focus on the poetics of the objects as well as their mobility across the Empire and subsequently the Commonwealth. It takes off from the work of art

historians like Tapati Guha-Thakurta, Barbara Groseclose, and Jason Edwards.⁴ Edwards suggests reading “the period between 1757 and 1947” as “a long sculptural *durée*, marked in equal measure by continuities and continuous innovation.” I attempt to analyse the sculptural practices from the vantage point of my own subjective engagement with them at the present historic moment, shaped by deliberations and debates that emerge out of the Black Lives Matter movement. In short, it takes a street-view of the statues as ideological utterances of a regime within the urban space, their disappearances, reappearances as well as the fractious political identities who redefine their meaning in the postcolonial city.

⁴ Jason Edwards, “Introduction: From the East India Company to the West Indies and Beyond: The World of British Sculpture, c. 1757-1947,” *Visual Culture in Britain* 11, no. 2 (2010): 147-172, 164. DOI: 10.1080/14714781003784280.

II. THE MAIDAN: CULTURAL PRODUCTION OF SPACE⁵

3.2.1 Pre-Colonial Memories of Land

Traditionally, urban historians have narrated the birth of the city as a seemingly paradoxical combination of adverse geological conditions and prescient human will – represented by the Job Charnock’s unlikely decision – which arose from a perception of the city’s situational advantage along the Hughli’s banks. Pradip Sinha’s *Calcutta in Urban History* begins with the description of the land as a “relatively ‘empty’ region,” with “straggling hamlets in the neighbourhood of or within jungles or marshes.”⁶ Like many other cities before it, the territory of what was to become Calcutta, was “pestilential region,” with a few commercial settlements, such as Sutanuti – a periodic market for cotton and yarn – and the trading community of Gobindapur. Sandwiched between the river and the salt water lakes, which spanned beyond the city’s eastern limits existed this “narrow, thin slice of territory, ideal for seasonal business and barter transactions, or at some places suitable for amphibian barter transactions.”⁷ The territory soon came to bear unmistakable architectural signs of the process of colonization. These narratives, that have been rehearsed by urban historians through the last few centuries, have focused on the political, social and cultural aspects of the colonial encounter, even when they have accounted for the spatial dimensions of the process.

⁵ I refer to the idea as defined by Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991).

⁶ Pradip Sinha, *Calcutta in Urban History* (Calcutta: Firma KLM, 1978), 2.

⁷ Ibid, 3.

Alternatively, and perhaps more pertinently, Debjani Bhattacharya has offered an unusual take on the city's birth. Moving away from the colonial construction of the Job Charnock myth, and even the local responses to it – the claims of the Savarna Roychowdhury families, or the Kalighat origin story – she delves into narratives that are by far more relevant to the city's future. It is a geo-mythical explanation, associated with the ocean's churning. Kurma, the giant tortoise, is supposed to have "gasp[ed] out a deep breath while being pressed by the Mandar Mountains on one side and by Ananta (the infinite) on the other."⁸ The country known as Kilkila was born from his breath, forming the "lower stretches of the Bengal Delta." As a counter-response, Bhattacharya looks at colonial geology: "The city...was born as the eastern part of the delta started dying in the sixteenth century." Rivers that flowed north of the city that was to be, dried up leaving vast alluvial plains, giving birth to "new spaces of habitation." She shows that more recent findings "are more in tune with the oceanic origins of the Kurma legend," which suggests that the Bengal plains may have been a "remnant oceanic basin."⁹ But, as she points out, these geological mutations and movements "have left very few traditional records for historians."¹⁰

Apart from being an important contribution to urban literature, Bhattacharyya's eco-critical methodology opens up possibilities of a topographical reorientation of urban history, which does not necessarily rely on comparative readings of spaces on the basis of their human engagements. As her work shows, the management of the governed territory begins with attempts to control or at least negotiate with the natural topographical features, such as the river and the riverbanks, the marshes along the eastern

⁸ Debjani Bhattacharyya, *Empire and Ecology in the Bengal Delta: The Making of Calcutta* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 3.

⁹ Ibid, 3.

¹⁰ Ibid, 4.

edge of the city, and forested areas in and around the city. In the initial phase, these efforts were not primarily directed towards urban development but tactics to conserve the small but powerful settlement built by the English. The landmass – or to use a more inclusive albeit conceptual term – the “territory,” as Bhattacharyya argues, was an unstable entity, constantly in a state of flux. Even before the colonizer’s gaze could turn towards taxonomies and categories (as Michel Foucault and James C. Scott have argued), in the case of Calcutta, the land itself had to be defined. “Fixities of cartography, ownership and territorial sovereignty” depended on the colonizer’s ability to cope with their territory.¹¹ What had initially started out as a trading outpost represented by the physical presence of the Factory, defended by an artillery against possible attacks, grew to assume administrative and judicial powers, with the strengths of the colonial settlement depending on the valuation and exchanges of property. Probably the earliest attempt to deploy natural resources in the interest of colonial defence – as opposed to prior efforts that focused on internal ordering – came with the threat of Maratha attacks in the 1740s, when the Maratha Ditch was constructed to offer the settlement protection from attacks coming from the east.

By far the largest project of this nature was undertaken in the wake of Siraj-ud-Daula’s siege of Calcutta in 1756, an event we have discussed in the previous chapter. The old Fort William, which stood on the site of the present site of the General Post Office on the banks of the Hooghly, had been severely damaged. The church which stood inside it could no longer be used for service. The English, who had had to rebuild London after the Great Fire of 1666, were not unfamiliar with the collateral benefits of large-scale destructions. In the decades that followed, the area around the old Fort was transformed into the administrative district of the colonial city, with the great Tank at its centre. The

¹¹ Bhattacharyya, 4.

old Court House, which later gave its name to the street, was constructed in 1762, followed by Writers' Buildings, which spanned the entire northern side of the Tank. In 1799, the Marquis of Wellesley decided to convert the residence of the Governor-General into a permanent seat of authority, modelled on Kedleston Hall in Derbyshire (the Curzon family home), which became the Governor's House. Meanwhile, under Robert Clive work on the new Fort William began in 1758, south of where the older fort's ruins stood. Alongside urbanization efforts that accompanied the construction of the administrative district around the great Tank, one of the first major interventions in reordering the city came with the need to fortify the new fort, which, in turn, was tasked with the defence of the entire settlement. The village of Gobindapore, built by the trading families of the Seths and Bysacks, was uprooted from this region and, with adequate compensation (the records never fail to mention this), was allowed to settle further north. This led to the creation of the Maidan, or the green open space, which would take on different meanings through time – a space of contestation, leisure, and one of the most important sites of imperial memory-making.

3.2.2 A Memory Park

Partho Datta traces the beginnings of urban planning in Calcutta to the early decades of the nineteenth century, when, according to him, the primary concern was health. These efforts, however, were more localized and focused on solving problems of communication to enable efficient circulation of commodities and people that were necessary for trade. The Lottery Committee, which was funded through the sale of lotteries, took a broader perspective of the matter and some of Calcutta's arterial roads were constructed due to its efforts. Datta notices a shift in the trend following 1857, when

the “cohesive character of old towns such as Delhi or Lucknow” were destroyed and restructured, and the focus was firmly on making cities more secure for the East India Company’s governance. Towards the end of the nineteenth century, sanitation and health came to dominate the rhetoric of urban planning:¹² there was an expansion in terms of the city’s territory as the new Municipal Corporation’s jurisdictional limits expanded, and there was a noticeable increase in the attention to comprehensive management of a wider range of urban activities.

The empty space that was produced in the aftermath of the massive rehabilitation project during the rebuilding of the Fort, had to be tamed through human effort. Landscaping, as W.J.T. Mitchell reminds us, is the process of effacing this artificial process through which a territory is given usable form;¹³ “usable” here being defined in the broadest sense, encompassing all aspects of materially productive use as well as recreationally valuable. As Bhattacharya argues, in topological terms, the space that was (un)produced by the clearing of the human settlement was a marshland, flooded through the best part of the year. While the Maidan enabled the Fort to command a clear view of both the city which stood beyond it and of the river, it was mostly an unmanaged, often unusable space, punctuated by water channels that zigzagged their ways across the land.

Around the mid-nineteenth century, as Bhattacharya notes, consorted efforts were initiated to produce space that could be better managed but also commodified in terms of land value. She sees in this production of space an attempt at “maintaining and institutionalizing a productive disjuncture between the political and economic structures that produced imperial spaces as part of and yet differently connected to Great Britain as

¹² Partho Datta, “How modern planning came to Calcutta,” *Planning Perspectives* 28:1 (2013): 139-147, 140. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/02665433.2012.737247>

¹³ W.J.T. Mitchell, “Introduction,” in *Landscape and Power*, ed. W.J.T. Mitchell, 2nd edition (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2002), 2.

a global economic power.”¹⁴ In 1843 the Chief Magistrate of Calcutta started planning a systematic approach to draining the Maidan, to produce a usable space. The Company realized that their hydraulic or civic engineers lacked the skillset necessary to negotiate marshland. Amsterdam was seen as another “swampy city with a speculative land market,”¹⁵ and plans were made to send a team of English engineers to learn from the Dutch. A comprehensive plan was drawn up in 1847. To start with, the territory had to be codified and made comprehensible in different sections, rather than as an unmanageable whole. The plan proposed six culverts placed strategically so that the water that was soaked up by the Maidan particularly during the rainy season could be channelled out. It was divided into distinct sections, which drained into each other with the help of an intricate system of sluice gates.¹⁶

The condition of the Maidan was perhaps not perennially as dire as it is made out to be in the preceding passage. After all, by 1828 the Ochterlony monument had come up in the south eastern corner and visual artists and surveyors were using it to depict panoramic views of the city. Swati Chattopadhyay has argued that a particular genre of colonial paintings fuelled urban planning projects in the nineteenth century, as the landscapes that were painted had to be translated into reality through the draining of the Maidan.¹⁷ It gave the city a new vantage point, which was exploited by photographers and artists like Frederick Fiebig¹⁸ and later Johnston and Hoffman to create a series of panoramas of the city. Alongside its military and agricultural use, the Maidan was also a space for myriad recreational activities: cricket, hot-air ballooning, theatres, and of

¹⁴ Bhattacharya, 156.

¹⁵ Ibid, 157. Judicial [Judicial], 9 January 1843, no. 8, WBSA, Kolkata.

¹⁶ Ibid, 159.

¹⁷ Chattopadhyay, 43-49.

¹⁸ Frederic Fiebig, “Panoramic Views of Calcutta,” R460-6-C1771-C1776, VMH. Fig 3.1 Frederick Fiebig, “Panoramic View of Calcutta,” Lithography, R460-5-C1775, VMH. By kind permission of the Victoria Memorial Hall, Kolkata, India.

course, that grand festival of the Empire, the Great Exhibition of 1883-1884, which was a crystallization of the heterotopic tendencies the Maidan had displayed through the nineteenth century. Sarmistha De and Bidisha Chakrabarty have explored these diverse purposes of the Maidan in great detail, backed by strong archival evidence. Therefore, a repetition of the narrative is unwarranted here.¹⁹



Figure 3.2 Panoramic View of Chowringhee

What has gone relatively unexplored is the conscious development of the Maidan as an imperial memory park. Even though in its time, the impulse appears to have arisen more out of desire to chart the Empire's progress across continents and to celebrate the masculinist qualities that drove the project, the impact these statues would have on the city's imaginary landscape would not have been lost on the colonial administrators.

¹⁹ See Sarmistha De and Bidisha Chakrabarty, "Maidan: The Open Space in History," *Social Scientist* 38, no. 1/2 (January-February 2010): 3-22. URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/25621953>.

According to Tapati Guha-Thakurta, these statues which came up around the mid-19th century, marked a break from the tradition of “neoclassical and allegorical” sculpture and inaugurated the era of realist commemorative statuary. The journeys of these statues – paradoxical as it sounds, for objects that are notoriously static – across the empire and within the city pre- and post- independence leads Guha-Thakurta to argue that one “cannot understand the history of empire without understanding the trade and importance of statues.”²⁰ Barbara Groseclose and Guha-Thakurta have studied these statues using the methodology of art history, but even then, the statues and their strategic positioning on the Maidan have not been fully explored in connection with the conscious project of establishing an imperial memorial identity for the colonial city.

Apart from serving a memorial purpose, the statues also became an easy way for surveyors and indeed motorists to find their way around the Maidan in the late-19th century. Roads were paved with reference to these statues, keeping in mind the importance of creating optimal vantage points for viewing them on an evening drive. In 1863, Lt-Col. Thuillier had written to the Commissioner of Police urging major improvements around the Maidan, which could be implemented “at a small cost.” He claimed that no significant work had been done in an “attempt to make it picturesque, or to advance on jot beyond what the Lottery Committee” had done twenty-five years previously. He proposed a road that circled round the Fort, which would “add to the site for the Outram Statue, and give a very fine approach to that new object, and also connect the important circle round the Band Stand with the old Course...”²¹ A debate ensued, and even if these specific recommendations were never implemented, the strategic

²⁰ Tapati Guha-Thakurta, “Why Statues Matter: The Changing Landscape of Calcutta’s Colonial and Postcolonial Statuary,” lecture delivered at Victoria Memorial Hall, Kolkata, on 3 August 2018. URL: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Se6dfaThGxQ>

²¹ Judicial [Judicial], Prog. 142, May 1863, 70-71, WBSA.

positioning of the statues at important traffic junctures were meant to create a spectacle of the Empire's glorious achievements while punctuating the landscape with notable and identifiable landmarks. And yet, it failed to impress urban planners.

In 1914, when E.P. Richards prepared his plan for the improvement of Calcutta, he was dismissive of these attempts at public statuary. "The arrangement of statuary on the Maidan well might make an artistic or town planning angel weep,"²² he wrote. It was amply clear to him that "the public no longer want statues of politicians or good elderly men, cased in sloppy frock coats, their legs in dreadful marble or bronze trousers that can never be re-creased," in "Lord some-one's stone trousers and General what's-his-name's horse." However, historians like H.E.A. Cotton, who focused more on material articulations of commemorative gestures than the public response to them – historians who worked with the colonial administration in an uncritical capacity – glorified the efforts undertaken:

Calcutta is proud of her statues and her monuments. Whatever may be the faults imputed to her inhabitants by their critics, it cannot, at any rate, be laid to their charge that they have neglected to do honour to those to whom honour is due. There is probably no city in the Empire so plentifully adorned with statues of public men erected by subscription.²³

The distinction between the two evidently lies in what is understood by the seemingly homogenous collective, "Calcutta." While as a surveyor coming from a technical discipline, E.P. Richards takes a relatively disinterested view of the city's historical

²² E.P. Richards, *Report, by request of the trust, on the condition, improvement and town planning of the city of Calcutta and contiguous areas* (Ware, Hertfordshire: Jennings and Bewley, 1914), 393. URL: <http://hdl.handle.net/2027/umn.31951p00656192k>.

²³ H.E.A. Cotton, *Calcutta Old and New: a Historical and Descriptive Handbook to the City* (Calcutta: W. Newman & Co., 1907), 367.

reflection in public spaces, amenities, planning and demography, Cotton is eager to create a unified identity, fusing all other sections with the upper classes and beneficiaries of the colonial project, who contribute financially to the building of these memorial monuments. A detailed study of each statue does not offer much by way of theoretical understanding for the present purpose. Consequently, the following sections will be looking at two case-studies: the Ochterlony Monument and the Outram Statue, in order to understand the correlation between memory, space and power, as it played out in the open green space of the Calcutta Maidan.

3.2.3 The Ochterlony Monument / Shahid Minar

In one particular scene of Satyajit Ray's film *Pratidwandi* (1970),²⁴ Siddhartha, the male protagonist climbs to the top of the Tata Centre – Calcutta's first eighteen-storey building – with Keya, his girlfriend, and looks down to see the city from that high vantage point. They witness “a great rally gathered below, at the foot of the Monument.”²⁵ Recalling her experience of watching the film in those troubled years, Supriya Chaudhuri writes:

For those of us who were young then, it was a time of intense frustration and anger, of an urban despair that could produce radical violence as well as middle-class fear, anxiety and degradation. It is this complex of emotions that fills the screen in *Pratidwandi*.²⁶

Chaudhuri notes the suggestive potential of Ray's use of the crowd to point out that it may well refer to – or in fact be footage of – the historic meeting held at the foot of the

²⁴ Satyajit Ray, *Pratidwandi* (Calcutta: Priya Films, 1970), Bengali.

²⁵ Supriya Chaudhuri, “In the City,” in *Apu and After: Re-visiting Ray's Cinema*, ed. Moinak Biswas (Calcutta: Seagull Books, 2006), 251-276, 262.

²⁶ *Ibid*, 251.

Ochterlony Monument on 1 May 1969, “when Kanu Sanyal announced the formation of a new party, the Maoist CPI (ML).”²⁷ Looking at Siddhartha’s biographical details, she notes that there is every possibility that Ray is alluding to the formal rise of a new ideology that would question the political hegemony of Congress government. In that same year, India stood at the brink of insolvency, Indira Gandhi nationalised fourteen Indian banks, and the Rajdhani Express made its maiden journey.

Interestingly, if, as Chaudhuri suggests, the timeline of the film can be placed around April 1969, the Ochterlony Monument was yet to be renamed as the Shahid Minar as a memorial to the martyrs of India’s freedom movement. For over a century before the Tata Centre came into existence and gave the city and its visual imagination a new vantage point, the Ochterlony monument (constructed in 1828) had served that purpose, standing at the north eastern limit of the Maidan. Chaudhuri cites Michel de Certeau’s oft-quoted passage from *The Practice of Everyday Life*, where, speaking of looking down from the 110th floor of the World Trade Centre (New York), he writes: “His altitude transforms him into a voyeur. It places him at a distance. It changes an enchanting world into a text. It allows him to read it; to become a solar Eye, a god’s regard...Just to be this seeing point creates the fiction of knowledge.”²⁸ The elevated vantage point of the Tata Centre, constructed in 1957, serves as a post-colonial counter-point to the colonial views from the top of the Ochterlony monument that became the standard perspective of Victorian Calcutta panoramas.

Yet, as Chaudhuri points out, the desire to cut himself free from the realities of everyday situations and people is frustrated: the knowledge that the colonial artists could

²⁷ Ibid, 274.

²⁸ Michel de Certeau, “Walking in the City,” in *The Certeau Reader*, ed. Graham Ward (Oxford, 2000), 101-102. Cited in Chaudhuri.

present from the high vantage point is no longer available in those simplistic, empirical terms, to the protagonist who is unable to break out of his experiential relationship with the city. But at the end of the day, Siddhartha is not among those who become part of that historical moment – he does not, to put in de Certeau’s terms – share in the history of people who inscribe their text on the city through pedestrian engagement. Those who forego the luxury of “totalizing” the human text and choose to participate in the meeting – not just in *Pratidwandi* but across many decades of political activism – have accumulated over time layers of memories through affective engagement with the landscape and the monument in particular. But it is next to impossible to reconstruct all the layers of the palimpsest and the many different communities, identities and ideologies that have added to this “*lieu de mémoire*.” Perhaps this is where poetry must assume the representative burden rather than history.

Unlike statues that share an obvious connection with the person whose memory they are meant to perpetuate, the physical structure of the Ochterlony monument bore only a tangential symbolic association with the memory of David Ochterlony (1758-1825). Contrary to Dhriti Kanta Lahiri Choudhury’s view that during the colonial period the Ochterlony monument gathered “the centripetal forces that turned the White Town’s organized growth inward upon itself, reinforcing the ‘White Ghetto’ mentality,” Barbara Groseclose argues:

Ochterlony’s monument contributed to White Town/Black Town estrangement, I would argue that his column, like his own actions in India, stands for early attempts at amalgamation, commemoratively and socially,

efforts that held little attraction for the entrenched and expanded Company of the nineteenth century.²⁹

She reads it in line with Richard Westmacott's sculpture of Warren Hastings, flanked by Hindu and Muslim figures, which was exhibited at the Royal Academy in London before being shipped to Calcutta in 1830 and placed under the Town Hall portico.

However, the symbolic expression of the memorialized person's biographical attributes may have been quickly lost – or at least sidelined – in the popular imagination, leaving primarily their name as a verbal but non-symbolic link. Following the renaming, even that may have faded even if not been altogether erased. Through the mid nineteenth century, it remained the most popular vantage point for representing panoramas of Calcutta. For Daniel White, the lithographic drawings of Frederick Fiebig, probably based on photographic impressions,³⁰ for instance, offer an example of what Michael Charlesworth describes as the “panoramic impulse” that is “closely complicit with the colonizing process.”³¹ He argues that the panoramas encouraged viewers to “look at them from a position of identification with the point of view of the rulers...” and excludes by “distancing and superiority of station, the possibility of identification with the subjugated.”³² Consequently, despite not being direct reminders of the individual who they stand to represent, such monuments through their symbolic power and their function as built structures, can be even more potent instruments of asserting the imperial ideology. It is perhaps no coincidence that shortly before its completion, according to Cotton, a self-

²⁹ Barbara Groseclose, *British Sculpture and the Company Raj: Church Monuments and Public Statuary in Madras, Calcutta, and Bombay to 1858* (London: Associated University Presses, 1995), 13.

³⁰ Daniel E. White, “Imperial Spectacles, Imperial Publics: Panoramas in and of Calcutta,” *The Wordsworth Circle* 41, no. 2 (Spring 2010): 71-81, 75. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24043598>.

³¹ Michael Charlesworth, “Subverting the Command of Place: Panorama and the Romantics,” in *Placing and Displacing Romanticism*, ed. Peter J. Kitson (Ashgate, 2001): 129-45, 142. Quoted in White, “Imperial Spectacles.”

³² *Ibid*, 134.

congratulatory “dinner party was held on the top of the shaft which was then 3 feet above the floor of the second gallery, at an elevation of 145 feet above the plain.” It was described as a “unique and hilarious” incident, which ran until “the unusual hour” of 9 p.m.³³

3.2.4 The Outram Statue on the Maidan

Many of the questions related to the formal, semiotic, spatial and social elements of colonial statuary that I have discussed in the previous sections become observable in the case of the memorial statue of James Outram that was unveiled on 23 May 1874 on the eastern edge of the Calcutta Maidan, not far from the Asiatic Society, at the juncture of what is now Outram Street. The plan to construct the statue had been drawn up in 1861 by a committee headed by Lord Napier, prior to Outram’s death (1863) and apparently against his wishes to be remembered through public statuary.³⁴ The equestrian statue in Calcutta by John Foley, had a pedestrian counterpart in London sculpted by Matthew Noble and located on the Victoria Embankment Gardens. Yet another bust, more symbolic in its function than the twin statues, could also be seen inside Westminster Abbey. I use this example to argue that a reading of only the formal or symbolic aspects of the sculpture overlooks the purpose it serves within a trans-geographic attempt at commemoration of one of the Raj’s heroes. On the other hand, it is also limiting to consider the space it inhabits in the city only in terms of its specific geographic context. The physical space can be contextualized in terms of how other ontologically similar spaces were produced within the city by the colonizers. By considering the monument at the intersection of these two sets of cultural and spatial practices, I hope to arrive at an

³³ Cotton, 404.

³⁴ Groseclose, 17.

understanding of statuary that addresses the motivations at the moment of its construction as well as its social existence within the urban landscape and visibility.

The memorialization of Outram, who was given the epithet “Bayard of the East” in 1857, far surpassed his individual significance in terms of being politically meaningful to the Empire, although the qualities that he embodied were held in high regard. “The study of the character of Outram,” wrote *The Sydney Morning Herald* “has great interest and it has an intrinsic value. He was a brave and gallant soldier...a man of refined and generous mind and feelings, winning the hearts of all around him.”³⁵ He possessed a tender conscience and did not lack in valour, as was evident in his “daring gallop in open day” to the walls of Ghuznee to verify a report of a gate that had not been built up. His memory is inextricably linked with that of “the Mutiny,” where heroes arose to save the “Indian diadem” at a moment of extreme peril. “Whatever man has been man may be,” declared the report, “...a hero of Plutarch may exist amidst all the pettiness of modern civilization.”³⁶

The imperial parallel with Rome is a recurring motif in the symbolism of Victorian statuary: twelve marble busts of the twelve Caesars of Rome were on display inside the Governor’s House, supposedly seized from a French Man-of-War in the Indian Ocean.³⁷ The regalia of Wellesley and Hastings, as discussed above, had direct allusions to ancient Roman costume, and the earliest graves in Calcutta – including that of Job Charnock – had inscriptions in Latin. As the *Herald*’s report claimed, in relation to Outram’s memorial, the history of “the Mutiny” itself was at stake: it had been seventeen

³⁵ “The Outram Statue at Calcutta,” 1 August, 1874, *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 8. URL: trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article13342582#.

³⁶ Ibid, 8.

³⁷ Public Works Department, *List of Statues, Monuments and Busts in Calcutta of Historical Interest* (Calcutta: Bengal Secretariat Press, 1902), 1.

years since 1857 and already one was likely to “meet with young men to whom Alma and Inkerman, and Delhi and Lucknow, are but history.”³⁸ The erection of the monument, therefore, is not just an attempt to create a public memorial for an important imperialist but a safeguard against the public memory of 1857. As a corollary, it was also a memorial to the army of the English East India Company, which had helped in building up and holding the Indian empire together. Strangely, however, the implicit assumption in the article appears to be that the monument will serve the purpose of retaining for public recall these interconnected histories. Alternatively, as Kirk Savage argues, monuments need not be seen as replacements of “the ‘true’ memory within people’s hearts,” but as “tangible proof of that inner memory”³⁹ that exists within a nation’s historical consciousness. This apparent expectation, however, offers an interesting entry point into the debate about the relevance and use of monumentality that has been on-going for decades: the visibility and, in a sense, legibility of monuments.

Although art historians have repeatedly gone back to Robert Musil’s proclamation that there is nothing as invisible as a monument⁴⁰ to keep the debate about the uses of statuary open, it would be a mistake to assume that even in the moment of creation this popular amnesia was unaccounted for. F.J. Goldsmid, who wrote a two-volume biography of Outram in 1880 – within six years of the unveiling of the statues – was aware that the monuments had already been reduced to empty signifiers. He left out from his target readership “the multitude who contemplate his bust in Westminster Abbey, or sit under his statue on the Thames Embankment,”⁴¹ before going on to explain

³⁸ *Herald*, 8.

³⁹ Kirk Savage, “The Past in the Present,” *Construction of Memory: On Monuments Old and New*, *Harvard Design Magazine*, no. 9. URL: <http://www.harvarddesignmagazine.org/issues/9/the-past-in-the-present>.

⁴⁰ Robert Musil, “Monuments,” *Posthumous Papers of a Living Author*, trans. Peter Wortsman (New York: Archipelago Books, 2006), 64.

⁴¹ F.J. Goldsmid, *James Outram: A Biography* (London: Smith, Elder & Co., 1880), 1:ix.

the purpose a biography was meant to serve. It was not meant to stand only as an object produced to indulge “family wishes, or compliance with friendly opinion.” He concedes that “the lives of illustrious men are comparatively useless records to after generations, unless they contain plain lessons which those who run may read,” and that it “may convey a trite moral, but is an ever fresh, wholesome, and practical text of sermons.”⁴²

The biography that limits its ambition only to detailing the facts of the subject’s life is no more relevant to future generations – who carry no personal memory of the person – than the statue which serves only a literal, mimetic purpose. As Guha-Thakurta observes, in the case of the statues, this additional symbolic presence is often indicated by the bulk of the drapery that is added to the subject’s basic clothing to indicate something more than a momentary representation of their physical presence. In the case of Outram, however, this responsibility is shared by the horse and its flamboyant, floating tail. Although the biography is still a tedious read, its memorial function does not end there. The compilers resist an easy slip from memory to impersonal history by including in the closing chapter a number of testimonies to Outram written by people who were acquainted with him as well as an account of his burial. Lionel J. Trotter’s *The Bayard of India* (1903) – the epithet was suggested by one Dean Stanley – even incorporated obituary notices in newspapers. *The Times of India*, for example, typifies the attempts at narrativizing his life in projecting him as one who had “neither rank nor fortune,” but “stood in that press of self-reliant men from which the hand of patron or politician could pluck no favourite.”⁴³ The Westminster Abbey bust was reproduced in both volumes. A bas-relief below the bust shows “the scene at the Residency where Lord Clyde...relieved

⁴² Ibid, ix.

⁴³ Lionel J. Trotter, *The Bayard of India: a Life of General Sir James Outram* (London: William Blackwood & Sons, 1903), 297.

Lucknow after a siege,”⁴⁴ with General Havelock standing between Outram and Clyde. And on either side of him are shown in mourning postures a “Scindian chief” and a “Bheel chief” – two of the “wild races” whose hearts Outram was said to have won in early manhood.⁴⁵

The Outram statue in Calcutta was unveiled amid great fanfare.⁴⁶ Hundreds of men in uniforms lined the Maidan, creating the perfect vantage point for dignitaries who were to honour the event with their presence. Most extant photographs were taken by Bourne and Shepherd. The one that shows the entire vista of the Maidan may have been shot from the Asiatic Society Building or the Indian Museum. And yet, E.P. Richards’s criticism of colonial statuary included among a host of sardonic comments noted above, a specific dismissal of the position of Outram’s statue:

The exceedingly fine equestrian statue of Outram – the best bronze in Calcutta – stands off the side of Chowringhee, on a far too low pediment, and in a waste of tram-lines, tuppenny-hapenny posts and chains, idiotic little flank walls, and park drainage ditches often full of vagrant paper. It cannot be seen from Chowringhee (as a fine visual object) because of the side-tracked position of the site.⁴⁷

At present the statue stands inside the Victoria Memorial Hall, still invisible, after being removed from its original site, its place currently occupied by a pedestrian statue of Jawaharlal Nehru. Inside the Victoria Memorial gardens it has served much the same purpose as the London pedestrian counterpart did in the 1880s when Goldsmid wrote his

⁴⁴ “Sir James Outram,” Westminster Abbey official website. URL: <https://www.westminster-abbey.org/abbey-commemorations/commemorations/sir-james-outram>.

⁴⁵ Trotter, 225. Phrase used by Henry Yule in the draft of Outram’s epitaph for the Calcutta statue.

⁴⁶ Fig 3.2 Bourne & Shepherd, “Unveiling the Outram Statue at Calcutta,” in *The Queen’s Empire* (London: Cassell & Co, 1899). Wikimedia Commons.

⁴⁷ Richards, 393.

biography: people sit at its base, somewhat shielded from the direct gaze of passers-by. It is very unlikely that anything more than a fraction of the users of this seemingly empty signifier know of the statue or indeed the individual's history.

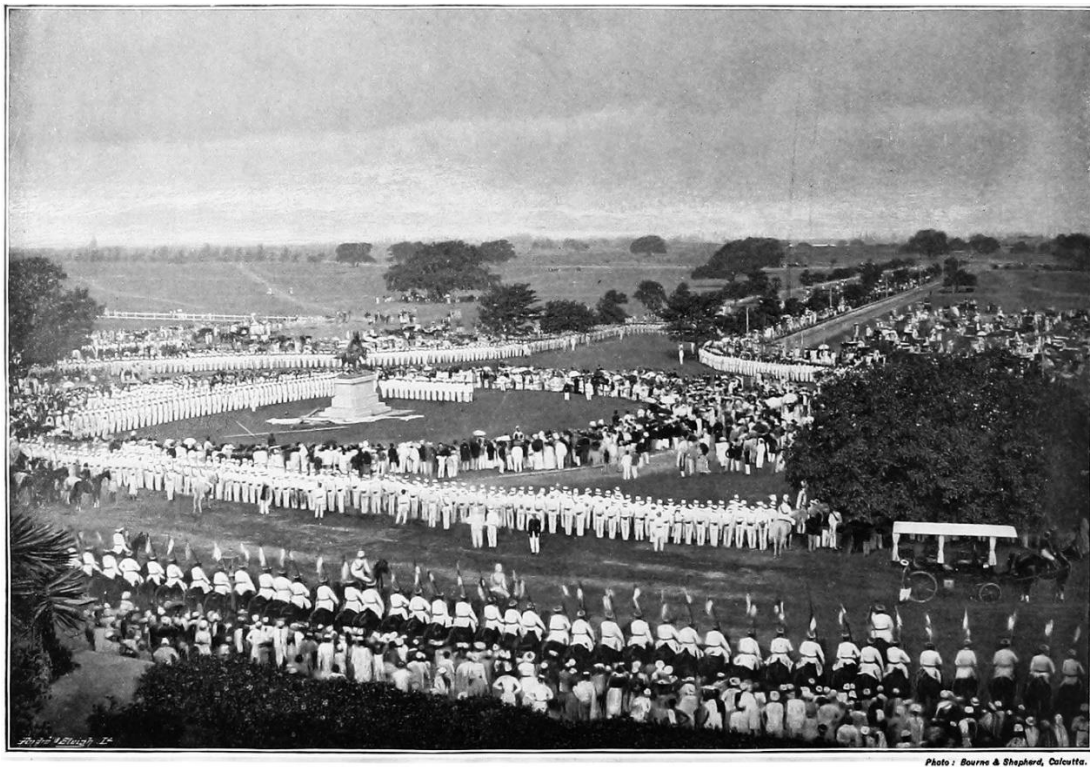


Figure 3.2 “Unveiling the Outram Statue at Calcutta”

III. AFTERLIVES OF STATUES

3.3.1 The Invisibility of Statues

Mrinal Sen's 1971 film *Interview* opens with a montage of shots showing colonial statues in Calcutta being bodily lifted off their pedestals and towed away in trucks in various postures of indignity.⁴⁸ Almost black due to oxidation, the bronze statues in all their bulk and elaborate accoutrement appear more inanimate and passive than usual. In one of the shots we see the equestrian statue of Field Marshall Lord Roberts of Kandahar, incapacitated by a mere web of ropes, rolling out of the Kolkata Maidan in reverse – as though with the statue's retreat, the history of English imperialism itself rolls back. Later, these statues would be resurrected and preserved in the grounds of the Flagstaff House in Barrackpore, close to Kolkata, which serves as the governor's retreat, or in the Victoria Memorial Hall premises, but Sen does not allude to these afterlives. He uses the montage as an ironic commentary on the film's plot, which involves a young man's hunt for a suit of Western clothes to wear to an interview that can potentially change his family fortunes. At the same time, Sen allows a degree of interpretive freedom to the footage beyond the film's scope by resisting an overt explication of this act of exorcising colonized urban spaces. Was he aware of the liberating power of the visibility of statue removals, irrespective of their immediate contextual meaning? Or does a retrospective desire to read the visuals optimistically betray political naïveté?

⁴⁸ Mrinal Sen, *Interview* (Calcutta: Mrinal Sen Productions, 1970), Bengali.

“There is nothing in this world as invisible as a monument,” Robert Musil had declared. “They are no doubt erected to be seen – indeed to attract attention. But at the same time, they are impregnated with something that repels attention, causing the glance to roll right off, like water droplets off an oilcloth, without even pausing for a moment.”⁴⁹ The slipperiness of statues as corporeal entities makes them resistant not only to the gaze but also to interpretation. Art historians have tried different approaches to study “civic statuary.”⁵⁰ They have moved beyond analysing their postures, their clothing and esoteric allegorical symbols, to study the processes of their production, the networks of power and patronage, and even their unlikely movements not just within cities but across the Commonwealth.

These very productive studies maintain focus on the slippery material objects themselves, which, in my view, makes it difficult to read their meaning within the context of commemorative practices in urban spaces, including seemingly anti-commemorative acts of iconoclasm. The most popular forms of statuary that we see at present – busts that sprout in every other neighbourhood in urban and peri-urban India, recognizable only as kitsch – also fall out of the scope of these studies, as they offer very little material for scholarly annotation. I suggest an alternative methodology that studies monuments and statues from the perspective of urban landscape, memory, and visibility, locating their meaning – in addition to art history readings, not instead – in the textual, historical and visual discourses that produce them and facilitate the circulation of the ideologies they represent. In short, it proposes an interdisciplinary reading of statues by trying to understand how they perform their roles as agents of memorialisation beyond the sculptor’s or their patron’s intentions.

⁴⁹ Musil, 64.

⁵⁰ Guha-Thakurta, “Why Statues Matter” (2018).

In this section I study two disparate sets of events involving civic statuary that took place in Kolkata in 1969-70 through the lens of urban visibility, which enables a comparative analysis despite their divergent ideological foundations and implications. The first, documented in Sen's film, involves a wave of statue removals undertaken by the United Front government in West Bengal in 1969 in the lead up to Independence Day celebrations. The import of the visuals of this process notwithstanding – photographs appeared frequently in newspapers – the removals were conducted by the municipal authorities with forethought and surgical precision. It was not a people's movement, so to speak, even though it can be read as an articulation of latent popular desires to decolonize city spaces. (We shall return to this point later.) This constitutes the second section of this chapter. In the third section, I explore the later spate of confrontations, which carried a more radical edge as Calcutta's public statues of the pantheon of Bengal's "re-awakening" – both socio-cultural and political – were attacked and mutilated. Although the young Naxalite activists who performed these acts were apparently not operating under instruction from the Maoist wing of the Communist Party of India, their iconoclasm was defended by some of the most prominent ideologues of the newly constituted CPI(ML).

But before we proceed any further, it is worth clarifying what the term "urban visibility" means in the present context. Let us start with "visibility." The noun, which originated in the writings of Thomas Carlyle in the 1830s, has undergone shifts in meaning over the years. A succinct, updated definition is offered by Hal Foster, who describes it as "a difference within the visual – between the mechanism of sight and its historical techniques, between the datum of vision and its discursive determinations."⁵¹

⁵¹ Hal Foster, ed., *Vision and Visibility*, Discussions in Contemporary Culture 2 (Seattle: Bay Press, 1988), ix. See Alexa Sand, *Studies in Iconography*, Vol. 33, Special Issue Medieval Art History Today - Critical Terms (2012): 89-95. URL: jstor.org/stable/23924275.

This helps us complicate the point Musil makes about statues being “invisible.” If visibility is indeed contingent upon “discursive determinations,” it implies an enmeshed subjectivity that is constituted by the discourse. Therefore, we can ask of Musil, who is a statue invisible to? Perhaps a more nuanced question would be, is a statue equally invisible to all? The answer is an obvious “no.” The statue of Atlantic slave trader, Edward Colston, which was recently dismantled and shoved into the Bristol Harbour by Black Lives Matter protestors, was evidently more visible to those on the other (relative to Colston) side of history. Thus, we can think of the statue as a site which splits up different ideologically informed gazes that perceive it. Far from being “invisible,” it can perhaps be better described as “poly-visual.”

When we think of visibility as contingent upon historical subject-formation, its association with the question of civic identity also comes to the fore. As objects that commemorate particular individuals or narratives of events, statues offer governing ideologies a space in the urban landscape for self-expression and legitimization in the guise of memorializing the departed. Similar to the ancient Roman idea of a *genius loci* or the protective spirit of a place, these embodiments of power (particularly in the colonial context) come to dominate the identity of hitherto relatively neutral spaces in cities. Little by little, with the addition of a new imperialist’s figure every few decades, the dominant ideology stamps its presence on the urban landscape by monopolizing its public memory. Although a far cry from the materialist concerns of Henri Lefebvre’s theorisation of the late-capitalist city as an exclusionist space, I feel that a case can be made for extending the “right to the city” to the realm of public memory. Statues, monuments and their discontents, therefore, can be read within a discourse of the right to civic memorialization, creating space for different co-existing identities, their memories

and narratives. But the position of the city itself becomes precarious when we come to the wave of attacks launched by Naxalites in the early 70s, to which we return later.

3.3.2 De-colonizing the City

Apart from the physical acts of disfiguring, re-captioning, and altogether dislodging statues that became part of the George Floyd protests, digital media took to its own forms of subversion. In June 2020 a meme appeared on social media showing a Photoshopped image of Andrew Jackson's statue near the White House.⁵² (Protestors had tried to pull down the statue in June but had been prevented from doing so by the police.) The image edited with deliberate crudeness, had erased the former US president from the saddle, ridding the horse of its human burden. Where protestors had written "Racist" and other such allegations on the plinth, the image editor had simply labelled it "HORSE," not critiquing his actions but altogether denying his existence.

While this particular manifestation of the popular subversive spirit is unique to the contemporary digital condition, similar acts of verbal or visual symbolic resistance – with an amusing preoccupation with horses – surfaced earlier as well. One thinks of the equestrian statue of Edward VII in Mumbai, which, through an almost poetic act of erasure, came to be known simply as the "Kala Ghoda" or "The Black Horse," giving its name to the neighbourhood. The sculpture executed by Joseph Boehm, commissioned by Sir Albert Sassoon, and unveiled in 1879, was removed in 1965 along with several other

⁵² Posted on 25 June 2020 by "Inhumans of late capitalism" Facebook page. URL: <https://www.facebook.com/inhumansoflatecapital/photos/a.2301460886799746/2697092913903206/>

colonial statues and placed in Byculla Zoo – yet again finding stronger resonance with the animal over the rider. A cartoon by journalist Kamal Sarkar also hinges on a similar joke. A politician in a Nehru cap and coat explains to a somewhat confused reporter why only the human figure was removed from an equestrian statue: “They found the horse was Indian and not British and so let it be.”⁵³ But the question that arises is if the state or municipal authorities can act on popular impulses or whether their decision-making must answer to a different historiographical logic.

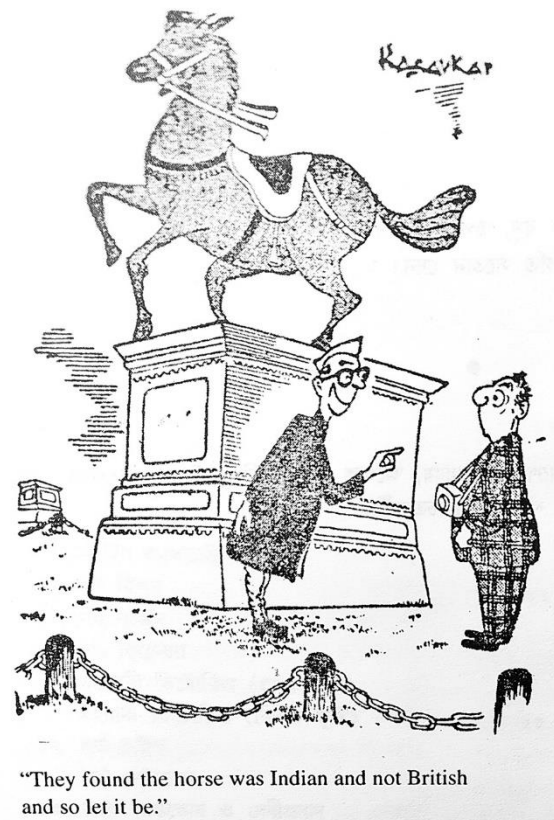


Figure 3.3 Cartoon from the time of statue-removals

In a 1953 essay, a dismayed Jadunath Sarkar recounted an example of what he considered a kind of inane patriotism. One of his relatives had told him of a bizarre scene that he had witnessed from his bus window, as they waited at the Park Street traffic signal. A “Bengali babu” was “encouraging some Muslim street boys to fling their shoes at the statue of [James] Outram.”⁵⁴ Each time there was a hit, the babu clapped his hands and rewarded the boys with a small price. (It is telling that the *bhadralok* keeps his hands clean and pays others so that he can derive some joy from the carnivalesque spectacle.) The incident brought back for the historian another memory from his school days, when

⁵³ Fig 3.3 Kamal Sarkar, *Kolkata-r Statue* (Kolkata: Pustak Bipani, 1990; 2017), front matter.

⁵⁴ Jadunath Sarkar, “Statues of Foreigners,” *The Modern Review* 88, nos. 1-6 (January - June 1953): 124.

an elderly Shia man from Lucknow had climbed Outram's horse and "was hitting the bronze image with his tattered slippers and shouting, 'You took away our Oudh from Wajid Ali Shah!'" Sarkar sardonically remarks: "He had succeeded in twisting the sword in the General's hand and thus undone the annexation of Oudh in 1856."

Such expressions of patriotism appeared ludicrous to Sarkar even when they were performed by individuals; for a state government to take a blanket decision regarding the removal of colonial statues baffled him entirely. Every generation, in Sarkar's view, "is the cumulative product of the lives of the generations that had come before it" and, as such, it is the duty of civilized nations to preserve the sense of historical continuity through monuments and memorials. Therefore, only an incompetent state would buckle because of its inability to protect its history from individuals, who may be prone to deriving pleasure from acts of desecration. Labelling these impulses as "xenophobic," Sarkar points out how even in East Pakistan (present-day Bangladesh) portraits of Hindu presidents of the Dhaka Bar Library and memorial tablets of eminent Hindus at the Barisal burning *ghat* had been removed and destroyed. (Interestingly, on both sides of the border all the actors mentioned by him are Muslim.)

It would be simplistic, however, to conclude that Sarkar advocated the preservation of statues irrespective of the historical assessment of the people they represent. "One can understand the Indian people's anger," he wrote, "when gazing at statues with provoking inscriptions, like John Lawrence's standing with a sword in one hand and a pen in the other and asking the Panjabis 'Will you be governed by this or by that?'" He makes a similar concession for the statue of Col. James Neill of the 1st Madras European Fusiliers, who, during a journey from Allahabad to Kanpur, had "ordered that

every native found on the way...be hanged.”⁵⁵ But leave Outram alone. Sarkar asks us to think of Outram’s contributions in India, such as protesting Charles Napier’s annexation of Sindh by refusing to claim his share of the prize money, or his work among the Bhil tribes, who believed him to be a “god sent” figure after he taught them agriculture and the benefits of settled residence. For civilized nations, he writes, the statue of a man like Outram would be preserved carefully as a role model for children to “contemplate and imitate.”⁵⁶

Despite his nuanced opinion and reading of history, Sarkar’s analysis does not touch upon one seemingly obvious consideration. Assuming that we agree with his Enlightenment view of history – where Outram’s outreach programmes are unambivalently beneficial to all concerned – how is anyone without access to historical knowledge supposed to distinguish between the good statues and the bad statues? Is it ultimately the state’s duty, as a kind of *parens patriae*, to draw up a list of the damned and the saved, as it were, and to defend that decision against potential popular protests? There is more than a hint of humanism in his defence that betrays a conviction in grand civilization values sans subjectivities or identities.

A few years later, with the centenary celebrations of 1857 coming up, the issue of statue removals regained momentum in the Lok Sabha. Like Sarkar, Nehru too was unwilling to pass a blanket verdict on their fate. When pressed by some Socialist leaders like P.V.G. Raju and G.N. Saxena, he offered a categorization, which distinguished between statues of historical importance, statues of artistic importance, and statues that were provocative or offensive to Indians. Even the ones that counted in the last category – such as the statue of General John Nicholson, known as the “Conqueror of Delhi”

⁵⁵ Ibid, 124.

⁵⁶ Ibid, 125.

because of his role in quelling the uprising of 1857 – were to be removed with minimum fuss, so as to not “raise ill-will between the countries.”⁵⁷ The ones that had historical or artistic value could be removed to museums. Nehru joked that he was willing to present the statues that had neither historical nor aesthetic value to anyone who might have use for them.

Interestingly, the removals were welcomed by some newspapers in England, such as the *Manchester Guardian*, who opined that it was good riddance. “Nobody got any benefit from the presence of the statues,” they declared, and their removal was likely to rob “anti-British agitators” of “some of their material” for opposing India’s place in the commonwealth. The older generation, they reasoned, were fading and “the new generation has no emotional reason for liking the commonwealth.” The article ended with a fairly audacious question: “Is it not very natural – and proper – that young India should demand that a public hall should be named after the romantic and patriotic Rani of Jhansi rather than after Queen Victoria?”⁵⁸

Ironically the Australian newspaper, *West Australian* was disappointed with Nehru’s alleged lack of discrimination. They were confident that the British would not care much for this re-ordering of the nation’s history, because their reputation was secure. “The decision ill becomes a nation which owes its new-found status to the encouragement of the very people whose memorials will be banished to the oblivion of the museums,”

⁵⁷ “Removal of British Rulers’ Statues,” *The Civic Affairs* (July, 1957): 70. See also Sushmita Pati, “A Nation Set in Stone: Insight into the Politics of Statuary in Delhi (1950-65),” *Economic and Political Weekly* 47, no. 30 (July 2012): 232-238.

⁵⁸ “Removal of British Rulers’ Statues,” 71.

⁵⁹ In January 2020, Subramanian Swami tweeted, suggesting that the Prime Minister should rename the Victoria Memorial Hall as Rani Jhansi Smarak Mahal to flag-off his project of reviewing the history of India as it is known today. “After Kolkata Port, BJP wants renaming of Victoria Memorial 12 January” *Outlook*, 12 January 2020. URL: <https://www.outlookindia.com/newsscroll/after-kolkata-port-bjp-wants-renaming-of-victoria-memorial/1706436>

the article said.⁶⁰ It is a curious bargain that they seem to desire: visibility in public spaces, without historical legibility, as opposed to museification, which was almost sure to ensure better care for them and possibly better curation. The occupation of public space simply as unidentified memorial markers of colonial rule appears to be top priority in this case.

That is the fate that awaited most colonial statues in Kolkata. Images of their removal were featured frequently in English and Bengali newspapers and magazines, as all that had seemed solid to the generation who grew up with them seemed to melt into air. Looking at the half-tone photographic records, it is easy to imagine how, to the reading public, the removals must have represented a moment of destabilization of things that appeared to be the very definition of fixity in the urban landscape. Buildings could rise and fall, the city limits could be re-drawn, but how could the statues move? These were objects that had been strategically positioned by the English across the Maidan to codify the open space through figures who represented their military dominance. They are exemplars of the power of “landscaping” in W.J.T. Mitchell’s sense of the term, implying an erasure of the processes through which any given topography transforms into legible signifiers.⁶¹ Despite their historical illegibility to a wider public, these statues were the definitive focal points in their immediate visual surroundings, carving up the territory of the military grounds among themselves into clean, geometric forms demarcated by streets that were also often named after them. At the moment of their removal, the statues had suddenly become “visible,” that too in an unprecedented manner. The moment of their installation, when they had first become “visible” in the city, occasionally marked by thousands of military men gathering to pay their tributes to

⁶⁰ “Removal of British Rulers’ Statues,” 71.

⁶¹ See Introduction in W.J.T. Mitchell, *Landscape and Power*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002).

their heroes, were now long forgotten except in old hand-drawn postcards and the occasional engraved illustration.

The pedestals on which they stood contained various allegorical symbols alluding to the life and work of their former inhabitants. The statue of Curzon by W.H. Thornycroft that stood in front of the Victoria Memorial Hall, for instance, was surrounded by bronze figures representing commerce, agriculture and famine relief. Once the main statues were removed, their pedestals remained empty for some time. The allegories operated autonomously, devoid of the central signifier that originally tied them together. As Tapati Guha-Thakurta puts it, a game of “musical chairs”⁶² began, as a pantheon of nationalist leaders began to occupy the seats left empty by the colonial rulers. Curzon’s place was randomly assigned to Aurobindo Ghosh, revolutionary nationalist turned philosopher, whose statue continues to look perplexed surrounded by feathers from someone else’s cap. Even in their absences the colonial statues seem to generate more discussion than the ones that replaced them.

The statues that stand inside the Victoria Memorial Hall mainly serve as visual shields for lovers who play hide and seek with security guards and families out for a day in the sun. The occasional blogger or historian can be seen trying to frame the statues cleverly through their lenses, so as to capture the inscription on the pedestal while avoiding accidental voyeurism. Some members of nobility, such as Edward VII, refuse to come down from their perch atop marble gates, and even the grand seated sculpture of Queen Victoria by George Frampton unapologetically dominates the main entrance to the memorial hall. By popular consensus it serves as one of the major selfie spots in the premises. Even in the central hall, a marble statue of the Queen in her younger days

⁶² Guha-Thakurta, “Why Statues Matter” (2018).

occupies central position, which goes to show that even if the city spaces had been ‘decolonized,’ the narrative that is constructed around the figure of the Queen within the museum remains unquestioned. In the two quadrangles, Cornwallis and Hastings continue to preside over literary festivals, music concerts and public lectures, almost invariably drawing an ironic comment from colonial historians.

In the Flagstaff House in Barrackpore, their situation is somewhat different. The premises are not open to the public although the Governor does allow select groups of visitors with special permission. Most of the statues are placed near the cenotaph, which had been built by Lord Minto to commemorate twenty-four officers who had died during the conquest of Java and Mauritius in 1810 and 1811.⁶³ By and large, they have avoided the public gaze, occupying an enigmatic position – a bit like Schrodinger’s cat – both dead and living but unperceived. In a strange but rather lyrical piece of writing, former Governor of Bengal, Gopal Krishna Gandhi appears to have engaged in a dialogue with what he calls “really speaking, the house’s only true ‘residents.’”⁶⁴

The relocation of “Raj” statues to the Victoria Memorial Hall and the apparent resilience of the colonial narrative that is reflected in the architecture and spatial configuration of these figures within raises interesting questions about what constitutes the idea of “public space” and how history operates within it. The Victoria Memorial Hall, with a footfall of several thousand per day and tickets priced at Rs. 20 and 30, is very much a public space. Yet, while the city – which is presumably understood to be a living entity – must be rid of its colonial statues, the museum – whose very purpose it is to offer narratives of the past – is regarded as a static vessel for the past, where the

⁶³ Gopal Krishna Gandhi, “Jottings from the Governor's Diary on Flagstaff House’s ‘Raj’ Statues,” *Occasional Paper 4* (Revised) (Kolkata: Raj Bhavan Library, 2007), 5.

⁶⁴ *Ibid*, 5.

reverberations of contemporary historiography cannot sound. The statues are not re-contextualized within the museum, either spatially or curatorially, which leads me to wonder if the engagement it is supposed to create is seen as entirely ineffective and static, and therefore can afford to be largely colonial in its orientation.

3.3.3 “Creative Destruction”

In Satyajit Ray’s *Jana Aranya* [The Middleman] (1976), two young men looking for a job find themselves in the living room of a particularly oily political leader, Jagabandhu-da, presumably a member of the Indian National Congress. He tells Somnath (the protagonist) and his friend that times are hard but his party is doing all it can to rectify the errors of the previous government. They ask him if he is saying that their struggle is inevitable. “It’s not as if you’re the only ones who are struggling,” Jagabandhu-da reminds them. “Every generation has had to struggle. Think of all the *manishi*-s of yesteryears – read their biographies. Think of...” (he sticks a finger deep into his ear) “Vidyasagar. Think of...what’s his name.”⁶⁵

On 14 August 1970, a group of academicians and writers had assembled in College Square (the very heart of colonial Calcutta’s higher education) to condemn a spate of Naxalite attacks on the statues and busts of Indian luminaries. The “Manishi Smriti-puja Committee” (literally, committee for the *worship* of memories of great men) unanimously expressed its disappointment in these disrespectful acts, although some teachers were patronizingly willing to admit to their failure at teaching the younger lot

⁶⁵ Satyajit Ray, *Jana Aranya* (Calcutta: Indus Films, 1976), Bengali. Based on a novel by the same name by “Shankar.”

about the lives and deeds of *manishi*-s.⁶⁶ Their advice to the young – watching educational biographies and documentaries about Bengal’s great men – as well as their vocabulary, echo eerily in the scene from *Jana Aranya*. And while Ray does not take an overt political stand in the film, the interview with the politician significantly cuts to a frame showing street graffiti by the CPI(ML) – a subtle but powerful reminder of the iconoclastic acts of the early 70s. Both the Manishi Smriti-puja Committee and Jagabandhu-da miss the point, however. Although the streets of the city were being exorcised of colonial ghosts, these women and men were discontents of the new nation, which was spinning a dream of progress at the time. And as such they were opposed even to figures – the Bengal Renaissance’s finest – who were rapidly emerging as its new pantheon.

But were the student activists aware of the historical implications of their actions? One of the foremost ideologues of the Naxalite movement, Saroj Dutta argued in an essay he wrote on 20 August 1970, that this question, though inevitable, was irrelevant. The revolutionary spirit manifest in groups of activists is not always historically informed in the traditional sense of the term. Yet, they are, in themselves, expressions of dialectical forces beyond their own agency, who intuitively attack institutions that try to maintain the status quo. He clarified in no uncertain terms, that these actions had not been at the party’s instruction but was a “manifestation of the spirit of revolution that has been infused among students in villages and towns.”⁶⁷ It was a moment of great solidarity, for Dutta, who saw in it a sympathetic uprising by the petit bourgeois students who attended urban colleges and universities in response to students in the villages. The smashing of

⁶⁶ [Staff reporter], “*Manishider abamanana korey deshke chhoto kora hochchhe*” [By insulting the memory of great men, the country is being humiliated], 16 August 1970, *Jugantar*, 5.

⁶⁷ Saroj Dutta, “*Murti bhangar samarthane*” [In support of statue-smashing], in *Prometheus-er agun* [The fire of Prometheus], ed. Alok Mitra (Calcutta: Ubudosh, 1999), 214. Translations are mine.

statues and busts, he argued, was not simply a matter of contending idols – it was about divergent ideas of politics as well as a reflection of class conflict.

The trigger for his article titled “*Murti bhangar samarthane*” [In defence of breaking statues] was the Independence Day celebration that took place at the Gandhi Ghat in Barrackpore, presided over by the Governor, Santi Swarup Dhawan. The Governor had thrown in his lot with the chorus of voices who were criticizing the acts of “vandalism” and, according to Dutta, his phrasing and arguments had echoed the propaganda of the Communist Party’s Marxist wing, CPI(M). But apart from the Governor’s political leanings, Dutta was also eager to point out why it was imperative for the young activists to question the historical valuation of Gandhi: the Ghat had been built in Barrackpore at secret insistence from Lord Mountbatten, he argued, who felt it was important to overwrite the history of the armed uprising of 1857. This was, of course, the place where the first spark of the War of Independence in 1857 was supposed to have been lit – and it was also the place where Mangal Pandey was hanged. (In his dialogue with the old Governors, Gopal Krishna Gandhi would allude to the great banyan tree in Barrackpore, where the hanging was supposed to have taken place.)

But why was this politically significant? Dutta argued that the official national narrative that was being constructed at the time under the sign of the new socialist, secular, democratic republic, was upholding certain values that would help maintain hegemonic class structures, while deliberately repressing histories of peasant and working class uprisings. Nowhere was this nationalized historiography clearer in his view than in the narrativization of the First War of Independence. “They break the idols of Gandhi so they can replace it with statues of Mangal Pandey,” Dutta reasoned. The specter of the armed uprising of 1857, in his view, posed a threat to the fragile constitution of democracy. The fires that had burnt in Telengana had only recently been

doused, but there was nothing to prevent another conflagration inspired by the memory of 1857 and the inspiration of Mao's revolution.

Nehru wasted no time in pulling the reigns. He set up a committee with the likes of Jadu Sarkar [Jadunath Sarkar] and Romesh Majumdar - the veritable aristocracy of British historians - who would re-assess the nature of the so-called 'Sepoy Mutiny.' Their sabres of erudition flashing, the historians convinced the simpletons, such as you or I that it was not, in fact, a 'National War of Independence.' It was a reactionary rebellion against progressive foreign rule.⁶⁸

But the state was not the only stakeholder in painting 1857 as a trivial and reactionary uprising. The journalist and theoretician, Rajani Palme Dutt, who was part of the Communist Party of Great Britain, had also repeatedly made the same assertion in multiple editions of *India Today*. The irony of this was not lost on Saroj Dutta, who reminded his readers that when Karl Marx himself had described it as the "first war of independence against British rule in India," Marxist historians in India saw "in its failure the shattering of the last vestiges of feudal power."⁶⁹

The Naxalite attack on statues, therefore, cannot be read as anti-commemorative in its essence and was certainly not stemming from a lack of historical awareness. Dutta anticipated the question that the acts had naturally opened themselves up to: why do they insist on breaking and not on creating monuments and statues of their own? Quoting Mao, Dutta answers that there is no creation without first breaking down what exists, but he adds that the destruction being carried out is of a creative nature. The view of

⁶⁸ Ibid, 212.

⁶⁹ Biswamoy Pati, "Historians and Historiography: Situating 1857," *Economic and Political Weekly* 42, no. 19 (May 12-18 2007): 1686-1691, 1686.

nationalist history where the freedom struggle is led by “enlightened” men (mostly) and women is fundamentally incompatible with their view of subaltern histories of armed struggle. When his fellow countrymen were dying in armed combat against the oppressors, writes Dutta, Vidyasagar was writing his history of Bengal sitting in the comfort of the Sanskrit College in Calcutta. He argued that people demanded an equestrian statue of the Rani of Jhansi to replace the statue of Sir James Outram (who was instrumental in quelling the uprising of 1857) on the Park Street-Chowringhee crossing. As such, the urban memorial landscape could only opt for one of the two available narratives, and to the Naxalites the answer was clear. Today, a statue of Jawaharlal Nehru lost in deep contemplation stands in place of Outram’s equestrian statue. The irony would have been too cruel for Dutta.

Saroj Dutta would probably not count himself among historians in the academic sense of the term. Even so, it is disappointing to see the erasure of traces of his ideological critique of Marxism although the Subaltern School is cited frequently. There is irony in failing to read history in non-academic spaces while speaking about subaltern historiography. The statues and busts of Indian luminaries such as Vidyasagar, Rabindranath Tagore, Gandhi, and Ram Mohun Roy had an affective grip over the Bengali imagination that was considerably stronger than that of the colonial statues. “Civil society” in post-independence Bengal was partly built on a shared assessment and idolization of these individuals – many of whom were associated with the Bengal Renaissance – and, as such, they were part of the emerging post-colonial identity. An attack on these figures, therefore, constituted an attack on the values and ideals they represented. The movement did not always demand a replacement of “bourgeois” idols with their own, unlike with the colonial statues – a fact that can be understood in two ways. Firstly, for the Naxal iconoclasts, the point was to shock. Given that they were not

empowered to replace the existing ones with a fresh cast of characters, they probably believed that the next best thing was not to topple statues but to create the shock that is associated with the visual of a mutilated body. And secondly, while in the case of colonial statues the question of the right to public commemorative monuments within the city comes into play, for the Naxals, the city itself was part of the problem. I argue, therefore, that their attack was initially aimed not at the urban practices of commemoration but rather at the discursive field where the nationalist narrative was propagated. The city and its statues simply happened to be the most visible manifestation of these ideas, which also implied that the effects of the resulting shock would be maximized.

3.3.4 Displaced and Fragmented Inanimate Bodies

So far we have encountered two modes of confronting statues: the strategic and surgical removal undertaken by the state in order to re-narrativize the public memory of a city, and the iconoclastic statue-smashing, which questions the homogenized notion of the nation state reflected in the city, that is built on and protected by constitutional values. In the case of the Naxalite iconoclasm, statue-smashing became a way of drawing attention to their broader ideological argument, which was to do with land right being transferred from land-owners to farmers and peasants. It was primarily directed at the complacency and collusions of a bourgeois society, which seemed reluctant to listen to their demands. There is a third mode of confrontation, which is undertaken neither by the state nor a group of discontents who identify themselves as opposed to the societal mainstream, but by a large group of stakeholders who feel relatively confident that their ideas are acceptable to a reasonable percentage of the imagined constituency. The act of coming together to dislodge a statue under the circumstances, then, takes on carnivalesque

overtones, as it either celebrates a moment of solidarity and/or it serves to amplify a critical point in the broader discourse. With new technologies, however, it has become possible even to find replacements – however temporary – for non-state actors.

A case in point was the removal of the Edward Colston's statue in the Bristol city centre by Black Lives Matter activists in Britain, who were expressing solidarity with the George Floyd protests. The statue of the Atlantic slave trader, designed by John Cassidy and erected in 1895, spent a few days at the bottom of the Bristol Harbour, before being retrieved by a City Council team.⁷⁰ The Portland stone plinth on which it stood remained empty for about a week. In the early hours of the 15th a black resin statue of BLM protestor Jen Reid, made by artist Marc Quinn, was installed surreptitiously in its place. It showed Reid with her right fist raised in power and defiance – just as she had stood on the plinth the day the Colston statue fell.

A Surge of Power (Jen Reid) 2020, officially credited jointly to Quinn and Reid,⁷¹ was removed the following morning. The conversations it opened up, however, pulled in different directions. There could be little doubt about the potency of the optics of this reclamation, as the image of Reid's raised fist flashed across news channels and social media. But it begged the question: by simply looking at the visual as a symbol of empowerment, are we naively perceiving its metonymic relationship with Reid's gesture, ignoring the racial politics of its production? Kadish Morris is not the only one to warn against this danger: "It's easy to be enchanted by visibility," she writes in *ArtReview*, "but quick-fix reactionary gestures are flimsy grounds to fight antiblackness upon." Reading this as a white artist's appropriation of hard-fought public space, she alleges that

⁷⁰ "Jen Reid: Statue of Black Lives Matter protester appears on Colston plinth," *BBC*, 15 July 2020. URL: <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-england-bristol-53414463>

⁷¹ "A joint statement from Marc Quinn and Jen Reid," 15 July 2020. URL: <http://marcquinn.com/studio/news/a-joint-statement-from-marc-quinn-and-jen-reid>

the sculpture cannot be read outside of the “history of rich white artists capitalising on experiences far beyond their reality.”⁷²

But how do we understand these different modes of confronting inanimate bodies? In her recent book, Sanjukta Sunderason offers a reading of the Naxalite statue-smashing, using Nicholas Mirzoeff’s idea of visibility.⁷³ Mirzoeff points to the contradiction at the heart of hegemonic public visual cultures that are hegemonic and reliant on icons, but also have inscribed within them the potential for subversion, using to equal negative effect their original, intended meanings. This (potentially) subverted visibility is termed as “Visibility 2” by Mirzoeff.⁷⁴ While it does offer a useful tool for analysis, the idea of a sequence runs the risk of assuming that the visual state to which a “counter-culture” responds is the original and authentic visibility. The pre-condition, as it were, runs the risk of erasing the cultural practices through which that previous visibility itself was produced. It falls into the trap that Mitchell describes as the fundamental property of the “landscape” – a blurring of the processual nature of land as we perceive it. Perhaps a more flexible approach can be adopted, where we seek to understand the defining moment of intervention with respect to a statue – which could result in its peaceful disappearance, carnivalesque dislodging, or iconoclastic defacing. This moment, I would argue, may not even be restricted to the physical object at all, but can reside in a photographic reproduction, a visual of the empty pedestal before it is repopulated, or indeed in an autonomous work of art that responds to its disappearance.

⁷² Kadish Morris, “Marc Quinn’s Black Lives Matter Statue is not Solidarity,” *ArtReview*, 21 July 2020.

⁷³ Sanjukta Sunderason, *Partisan Aesthetics: Modern Art and India’s Long Decolonization* (California: Stanford University Press, 2020), chapter titled ‘Arts.’ E-book.

⁷⁴ Nicholas Mirzoeff, *The Right to Look: A Counterhistory of Visibility* (Duke University Press, 2011), 23-24.

Returning to Mrinal Sen's *Interview*, the meaning – or rather meaninglessness – of the removal of Raj statues is revealed through Ranjit's failure to impress his interviewers by appearing in traditional *Punjabi* and *dhoti*. After he overhears a self-important acquaintance of his father, who comes to their flat to inform his mother of her son's inadequate turn-out at the interview, he confronts not the statues but a mannequin in a shop window which looks at him jeeringly. Interspersed with images of an armed uprising in the city, we see Ranjit smashing the glass pane before going on to strip the mannequin of its hat and suit. This imagined encounter takes place not on the streets but in an abstract, dark space where the protagonist enters into a conversation with us, his viewers, who had been following his journey all through. The pessimistic reading is that Mrinal Sen is implying the unlikelihood of such protests finding meaning in material realities and remaining carnivalesque in the Bakhtinian sense of the term – a temporary subversion of hierarchies that, after a short while, inevitably returns to the earlier power relations.⁷⁵

⁷⁵ More recently Debaloy Bhattacharya's *Dracula Sir* (Kolkata: Shree Venkatesh Films, 2020) attempts a diachronic reading of memories of Naxalbari and contemporary Gothic in Kolkata tied together with, among other things, a smashed bust of Vidyasagar.

Chapter 4

The Naming of Nature and Gendered Memory

I. INTRODUCTION

4.1.1 Colonial Botany and the Gendering of Memory

The public statuary in Calcutta, as in other parts of the world in the nineteenth century, was dominated – if not monopolized – by the male body. Monuments too were, for the most part, dedicated to men who contributed in some way towards the spread or consolidation of the Empire, or held important public offices. This was perhaps a consequence of how public spaces were conceptualized and what was considered worthy of commemoration and emulation. The values that were propagated through these monuments and statues – bravery, leadership, honesty – were meant for emulation particularly by men holding public office. Additionally, and as significantly, it stemmed from a patriarchal anxiety about women's bodies (particularly those that could be identified as real-life figures) being visible in public, open to the male gaze not just of fellow countrymen but, in places like India, of colonized races as well. Therefore, while there are memorials to women who died in the colony within the more intimate and religious space of the burying ground, public commemorations are rare. Following the death of Queen Victoria, memorial monuments and statues mushroomed across the Empire, and India was no exception. She was, as we shall see in Chapter 5, hailed as

Bharateswhari, and her blessings had been sought by those who believed British rule to be benevolent – usually from a Hindu perspective – as a deliverer from Muslim dominance. The figure of the Queen perhaps remains the only exception to this general rule, which invisibilised women’s bodies in public spaces.

There were other spheres of cultural or knowledge production, however, where women did find a space, albeit not in the form of material commemorative objects. One such was in the fields of botany and zoology, which rapidly evolved as a colonial science across the Empire through the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The western knowledge systems were encountering kinds of flora and fauna for the first time, which required taxonomic categorization and naming. While there were women botanists aplenty in the global north, professional botanists who roamed the far reaches of the colonies were mostly men, like Nathaniel Wallich or John Crawford. Perhaps out of genuine fondness or as marks of loyalty to their patrons and facilitators, they often chose to name “new” species after states-women and men. Besides, the physical spaces that served to develop these sciences, such as botanical or zoological gardens, themselves became sites of memory for key personages like William Roxborough or Robert Kyd. Thus, a regional form of knowledge that would establish itself as the closest approximation of an “objective”, “universal” understanding of the natural world, would forever carry the names of women and men who ensured the political ends that, in turn, ensured the unquestionable (for a while) hegemony of Western science. The current chapter does retain focus on publicly accessible (even if only visually) places in the city, occasionally turning to non-urban open, and green spaces, as well as discursive spaces.

Although the Botanical Gardens served as laboratories for knowledge production, there were other gardens too that were primarily regarded as spaces of pleasure. A closer look at the gardens of the Government House reveals unpredictable turns in its fortune,

as it changed hands from the Amhersts, to the Bentincks, and to the Edens. Apart from being spaces of pleasure, the gardens that were almost entirely the domain of women, were also spaces of encounter between different botanical cultures with which scientists of the time experimented. They offer a distinctly different counterpart to the displays of Empire that can be read into the far-flung achievements of bronze men that adorned the Maidan. Finally, we close with a comparative analyses of the lives of two commemorative gestures for Charlotte, Lady Canning, which included a floral, Gothic funerary monument, and an album of memories put together by her friends and associates, which contains, among other things, dried flowers that mourners had left on her grave. For access to the latter, I am grateful to the British Library's manuscript collection.

II. COLONIAL BOTANY AND THE NAMING OF THINGS

4.2.1 Botanical Gardens: Space and Memory

The late 1700s witnessed several famines that tore into the fabric of Bengal, as the East India Company's administration continued to levy taxes with little regard for the falling production of grains. The system of taxation had been "rationalized" by the British, and their relentless taxing resulted in a particularly devastating famine in 1770, another on the borders of Bengal in 1784, and in the Northern Sircars in 1789-90. In 1793 the Permanent Settlement Act was passed and its implementation was overseen by Lord Cornwallis. The Act, which was another step in the direction of "rationalization," meant that *zamindars* could own arable land, while the farmers and peasants were reduced to "tenanted cultivators with no rights."¹

In the meantime, Robert Kyd, who was an amateur botany enthusiast, had been writing to the Bengal Government proposing the establishment of a Botanical Gardens, which would enable experimentation with food crops and help in the prevention of famines in years to come. He was successful in his efforts, which were backed by Joseph Banks, the unofficial advisor to the East India Company, and one of the most influential men in Britain at the time. The first letter by Lt. Colonel Kyd, written on 15 April 1786, advocated setting up public granaries to meet the shortage of food during famines. He also proposed the introduction of the sago palm from Malay (Sumatra, specifically) to

¹ Zaheer Baber, "The Plants of Empire: Botanic Garden, Colonial Power and Botanical Knowledge," *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, 46, no. 4 (2016): 659-679, 665. DOI: 10.1080/00472336.2016.1185796.

Bengal. In a follow-up letter, he put a nationalist twist to his argument, claiming that it would “enable us to outstrip our Rivals in every valuable production which nature has confined to this part of the globe”² and requested patronage for establishing the Botanical Gardens:

But I take this opportunity of suggesting...a Botanical Garden, not for the purpose of collecting rare plants (although they also have their use) as things of mere curiosity or furnishing articles for the gratification of luxury, but for establishing a stock of disseminating such articles as may prove beneficial to the inhabitants, as well of the natives of Great Britain, and which ultimately may tend to the extension of the national commerce and riches.³

Whether or not Kyd intended it, he had handed the Government on a platter a scheme for ruthless commercial gain disguised as an exercise in benevolence towards the “natives.” It ensured that his proposal was endorsed by Banks, and it cannot be denied that Kyd and his successors were influential in establishing a strong foundation for botany in India. Banks, on the other hand, was very clear in his letters to George Yonge, Secretary for War, and Henry Dundas of the Board of Control about his reasons for supporting the venture:

Laborers are abundant there: labor excessive cheap; raw materials of many sorts, dying drugs, medicines, spices, etc sure of a ready and advantageous market and of producing a most beneficial influence upon the commerce of the mother country: why then should not raw materials of every kind which

² Letter from Joseph Banks, 1 June 1786, in *The Original Correspondence of Sir Joseph Banks Relating to the Foundation of the Royal Botanic Garden, Calcutta* (Calcutta: Royal Asiatic Society, 1950), 8. Cited in Baber, 9.

³ Ibid, 7. Cited in Baber, 9.

the intertropical countries furnish, except perhaps sugar, be sent to us from the East Indies cheaper than they can from the West?⁴

Governor-General John Macpherson had “long had at heart” the desire to establish a Botanical Garden as “nursery for rearing and propagating for the public benefit the productions of other countries and climates,” and agreed readily to look for a “spot in a proper situation where a garden may be formed.” He warned, however, that it “will be necessary to prevent much expense in either establishing or carrying through this institution.”⁵ The Governor-General and Council announced in a letter to the Court of Directors dated 27 July 1787 that a proper spot had been selected, and that the different Presidencies had been asked to send different varieties of plants to Colonel Kyd, and facilitate the conveyance of samples from distant places. Kyd could create wish lists, which the Governor General and Council were then supposed to try and acquire.⁶ The cost of maintaining the garden proved to be considerably higher than initially suggested, but realizing the potential it had to transform the agricultural economy of Bengal, the Company directors persisted.⁷

Within ten years of founding the Botanical Gardens, Kyd died in 1793. By his last will and testament, Robert Kyd left a ring each to three of his friends as tokens of his affection and respect, and the rest of the fortune to Major Alexander Kyd. To Rajemahl Missah, his “native servant,” he bequeathed a monthly sum of eight rupees during his life, “in retribution for the unsuitable education given to him, entailing separation from his

⁴ Letter from Joseph Banks to George Yonge, 15 May 1787. Quoted in Adrian P. Thomas, *The Establishment of Calcutta Botanic Garden: Plant Transfer, Science and the East India Company, 1786-1806*, *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 16, no. 2 (July 2006): 165-177, 169. URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/25188624>.

⁵ Letter from John Macpherson, 16 June 1786, quoted in George King, “A Short Account of Colonel Kid,” *Annals of the Royal Botanic Garden, Calcutta* (Calcutta: Bengal Secretariat Press, 1893), vii-viii.

⁶ *Ibid.*, viii.

⁷ Thomas, 171.

native soil and kindred.” To another “native” by the name of George, who had been alienated from his tribe by his former master through forcible conversion to Christianity, he left the monthly sum of six rupees during his life. They were both to continue serving Alexander Kyd. The importance of the garden to Kyd’s life is obvious from the closing paragraph where he wrote, somewhat scandalously: “It is my further desire that I may be buried in my own garden without the attendance or offices of any priest whatever.”⁸ His wish was not honoured, however, and Kyd was buried in the South Park Street cemetery. An elegant marble urn on a pedestal, sculpted by the British sculptor Thomas Banks, was privately commissioned and placed centrally in the premises of the Botanical Gardens.

Kyd’s successor, William Roxburgh, was by training a surgeon (as many colonial scientific explorers tended to be at the time) and had been in charge of a small botanical garden in Samalkot in the Madras Presidency. Initially he was not very impressed by the work Kyd had done until then and wrote to Banks saying as much. He brought botanical expertise with him and improved on the work of Kyd, “introducing coffee, cinnamon, nutmeg, arnotto, sappanwood, breadfruit, mulberry and pepper vines.”⁹ Thomas reads this as a display of intent on the part of the Company to expand on what was promising to be a commercially lucrative venture: Roxburgh was paid Rs. 1500 per month. Unlike Kyd, Roxburgh lived in a bungalow inside the Botanical Gardens, overlooking the river, where he based most of his researches that were published in the pages of the *Journal of the Asiatic Society*. He also left behind a series of 2542 life-size colour drawings with botanical descriptions, comprising nearly all the species described in his *Flora Indica*.¹⁰

⁸ King, x.

⁹ Thomas, 171.

¹⁰ Preface, William Roxburgh, *Flora Indica: or, Descriptions of Indian Plants* (Calcutta: Thacker, Sprink and Co, 1874), v. Reprinted from Carey's edition (1832).

After his death in 1822 a monument in his memory was erected by his friends with a Latin memorial inscription by Bishop Heber, which reads: “Whoever you be/ If this place soothes the mind with its sweetness/ Or teaches you to think of God with reverence/ You must hold in high honour/ Roxburgh.” It reminds the passer-by that his remains are preserved in his country but “here *lives* his genius” [my italics].¹¹ In a curious departure from traditional epitaphs, the inscription does not draw attention to the death of the individual – the remains *do not* lie here. Instead, his relationship to the spatial context within which the memorial is placed is described in terms of a living bond. The life that he has given to the place, Heber suggests, should serve to remind visitors of Roxburgh. He is, quite literally, transformed into the *genius loci*. This ancient Roman idea is described by Volker M. Welter in terms that helps us understand the relationship between person, space, genius and memory:

A genius was for the Romans a tutelary spirit that existed outside the human being...Most importantly, the genius existed outside the object of its tutelage and acted as a generator and preservator of this object, its life and characteristics. In return, the genius demanded attention from its tutee in the form, for example, of sacrifice or prayer.¹²

The Botanical Garden has at least three other memorials: a relatively humble obelisk to the memory of Nathaniel Wallich (1786-1854) and one for William Jack (1795-1822) and William Griffith (1810-1845). The Garden, as Thomas notes, has become “among other things, a memorialised landscape and a shrine to distinguished botanists.”¹³

¹¹ Inscription on translated plaque installed on Roxburgh monument in Acharya Jagadish Chandra Bose Indian Botanic Garden, Sibpur, West Bengal.

¹² Volker M. Welter, “From locus genii to heart of the city: Embracing the spirit of the city,” in *Modernism and the Spirit of the City*, ed. Iain Boyd Whyte (Abingdon: Routledge, 2003), 38.

¹³ Adrian Peter Thomas, “Calcutta Botanic Garden: Knowledge Formation and the Expectations of Botany in a Colonial Context, 1833-1914” (PhD dissertation awarded by King’s College London) 257. E-thesis available at <https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/83947777.pdf>.

He notes that in the 1890s, a guidebook written by George King was responsible for the naming of the Garden's territory, without which it was impossible to create a comprehensible map. He chose to honour the memory of the colonial botanists, and "named the avenues after the superintendents he felt had contributed most": Kyd, Roxburgh, Wallich and Joseph Hooker (1817-1911). Less important avenues were named after superintendents who had served for shorter periods, important curators and other people who had contributed to the project. Romita Ray has argued that "wandering through the garden meant engaging in a de facto history lesson about Britain's botanical heroes...their names embedded in the Garden's avenues and monuments situated them as the rightful keepers of this natural paradise."¹⁴ The other fascinating memorial inside the Botanic Garden is not to any human entity, but a stone slab on a marble base that was erected not many years ago: it marks the site where the original trunk of the great banyan tree was located. Its death in 1925 is commemorated by the monument.¹⁵

4.2.2 The Naming of Nature and Botanical Annexation

On 31 March 1927, during his travels, Rabindranath Tagore composed a poem on a flower he had been gifted by his friend, W.W. Pearson (1881-1923), which he had left behind in his house in Santiniketan's Uttarayan. The flower known as the "Purple Wreath" (Lt. *Petrea volubilis*) was not native to India and did not have a name in Bengali. Tagore writes, "I found profound joy in the colour blue, and every time I passed by it, this flower would call out to me, making me pause in my tracks. The poet in me wanted to say something in response. But how does one address the anonymous?" He called the

¹⁴ Romita Ray, *Under the Banyan Tree: Relocating the Picturesque in British India* (New Haven, 2013), 149. 257

¹⁵ Memorial monument inside the Botanic Gardens. I thank Marine Bellégo for pointing it out and for photographic documentation. Personal email, 15 February 2016.

flower *Nilmonilata* and wrote a poem to ritually commemorate this act of naming. “When the flower was there in front of me, it did not demand a name. But being away from it on that spring day, my memory of its beauty wanted a name.”¹⁶ There are many flowers besides the Purple Wreath whose Bengali names are attributed to Tagore. The names are not too far-fetched in terms of the poet’s imagination. They are primarily descriptive: in the absence of a direct correlative of “purple” or “lilac,” Tagore renders the colour as “blue.” Literally, the name describes a creeper that bears blue jewels. For many Bengalis or Tagore enthusiasts who are aware of the nomenclature, the names of the flowers recall the poet and his love of nature. Although the names have mostly been assimilated into the language and do not necessarily recall the poet with each utterance.

In an essay titled “The Naming of Things,” environmental activist and founder of the Old Growth Forest Network, Joan Maloof describes the way in which she verbally processes the experience of walking past plants.

My hand glides across smooth bark and my lips proclaim *hornbeam*. The smaller voice in my head rehearses the Latin: *Carpinus caroliniana*...I tear a leaf from another shrub, crush it, and hold it to my nose: *spicebush*. And the small voice again: *Lindera benzoin*.¹⁷

Maloof’s essay is a contemplative response to a question she had been asked by an environmental philosopher during a backpacking trip through Rocky Mountain: why can we not know plants as individuals, like we do human individuals? Broadly, Maloof’s answers are twofold: the first reason is that naming granted her “access to a wealth of

¹⁶ Rabindranath Tagore, “Nilmonilata,” in *Banabani, Rabindra-rachanabali* Vol. 15 (Calcutta: Visva-bharati Publications, 1349). Accessed on Bichitra: Online Tagore Variorum, by School of Cultural Texts and Records, Jadavpur University. Translated by the author.

¹⁷ Joan Maloof, “The Naming of Things,” *Environmental Philosophy* 5, no. 2, *Species of Thought: In the Approach of a More-Than-Human World* (Fall 2008): 17-20, 17.

information about” a flower. By identifying a little yellow flower as *Erythronium grandiflorum*, she could learn that it was edible and that the colour of its pollen varied. The other use of naming a species is that she could recognize them across different parts of the world and “greet” them. She concedes later that while the naming of things has advantages for her, it is entirely possible that by first observing and understanding different aspects of a flower or a plant genus – i.e. before learning its name and fixing its identity – one could engage more meaningfully with its uniqueness. The naming could come later, enforced with more significance, as a crystallization of that which is already known.

However, when Maloof speaks of naming as something that enables “access to a wealth of information” about a plant or flower, she is speaking from a post-Enlightenment historical vantage point when the natural world has been named, categorized and subjected to a long and continuing process of research. For European powers in the Indian subcontinent, the engagement with botany had started in the sixteenth century. It matured as an essential part of the Enlightenment project – alongside advances in mathematics, physics, chemistry and astronomy – with important implications for the competing colonizing powers, who saw in botany a key steppingstone for agriculture-driven economic expansion. The production of this knowledge was enabled by the colonizing projects which allowed for an unprecedented mobility of people, objects of study, ideas and methods. These “open air sciences” (geographical and revenue surveys, botany, forestry, agriculture and anthropology), Kapil Raj argues, “at once fed on and reinforced the colonial order,”¹⁸ creating a discursive space where colonial powers competed for supremacy. He suggests that although these new colonial institutions grew out of pre-

¹⁸ Kapil Raj, “Colonial Encounters and the Forging of New Knowledge and National Identities: Great Britain and India, 1760-1850,” *Osiris* 15 (2000): 119-134, 120.

existing, local administrative regimes, “they were transformed by the new situation through mechanisms of accommodation and negotiation, producing novel forms of knowledge that were not simply linear developments of past practices and traditions.”¹⁹

Nearly fifty years ago George Basalla wrote his provocative but pathbreaking essay on the spread of colonial science, where he delineated three phases of this process.²⁰ According to Basalla, the first phase was marked by the initial encounter between the European student of science and the territory which the colonial project has taken him (mostly male) to. It begins with gathering of data: botany, zoology and geology dominate the first phase, although topography, meteorology, hydrography and cartography are also practised. The information, carried back to Europe, is organized and analyzed before it enters the scientific discourse in Europe. The second phase involves a large number of “colonial scientists,” who are trained in Europe but conduct the bulk of their work within the newly established institutions. Natural history continues to dominate. The third phase is marked by a rise of nationalistic urgency, where the colonized nation and its scientists try to break free from its European origins and establish a new field of research. In recent years, this model has come under fire from sociologists and historians of science who have argued for reading these encounters through the lens of network theory (Simon Schaffer, Kapil Raj, et al)²¹ inspired by Bruno Latour, or have discarded monolithic models altogether, which engage with the problem from the perspective of Western (European) history, suggesting, instead a “multitude of explanations for the family resemblance of science around the world.”²²

¹⁹ Ibid, 120.

²⁰ See George Basalla, “The Spread of Western Science,” in *Comparative Studies in Science and Society*, ed. Sal P. Restivo and Christopher K. Vanderpool (Columbus, Ohio: Charles Merrill, 1974), 359-381.

²¹ See for instance Simon Schaffer, Lissa Roberts, Kapil Raj & James Delburgo, eds., *The Brokered World: Go-betweenes and Global Intelligence, 1770-1820* (Indiana: Purdue University Press, 2009).

²² Warwick Anderson, “Remembering the Spread of Western Science,” *Historical Records of Australian Science* (April 2018), F. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1071/HR17027>.

The “spread of western science,” irrespective of the model we use to analyze it, took place through a number of encounters with local knowledge systems at various levels of epistemological praxis. Contrary to the view held by early historians of science, such as Basalla, recent theorists have rejected any objective claim that cites the “rationality” of Western science as the reason for its spread. Undoubtedly, there were important and undeniable factors that led to its hegemonic hold over local knowledge systems, but none of these can be studied without seeing them as enmeshed within the deeply problematic political and racial encounters that took place in the colonies. Is there a way to acknowledge the advantages that enabled this dominance of the Western scientific model with it without celebrating it – or for that matter, without outright condemnation – that is not, at the same time, politically disinterested?

Two of the most important aspects of Western science, which set it apart from local knowledge systems, are the continuously evolving body of knowledge that spanned across continents and allowed for rigorous contextualizing of individual species. The second aspect is the codified nature of this project, which ensured that it evolved in the western teleological sense of the term. The first stage of this process of codifying – which occasionally anticipated but mostly coincided with the process of categorization – was the naming of the new entrants to the existing system. This process, in tandem with the political expansion of European powers, is what I would call a botanical annexation of the colonies, along the lines of David Arnold’s “sentimental annexation.”²³ This process of adding to an increasing corpus of systematized information – which borrowed from and engulfed local knowledge systems – was aided by the geographical annexation of territories around the world.

²³ David Arnold, “Deathscapes: India in an Age of Romanticism and Empire, 1800-1856,” *Nineteenth-Century Contexts* 26, no. 4 (2004): 339-353, 345.

4.2.3 Botanical Naming as Commemoration

Carl Linnaeus (1707-1778) was not the first to formulate a system of naming plants. David Gledhill lists several botanists starting from early sixteenth century who offered different solutions to the problem. A system that was both rigorous in its clarity of definition and flexible in terms of expanding with the colonial expansion of European knowledge systems was essential to the discipline of botany. It would have to accommodate new entrants into the order yet remain comprehensible as a global language. Among these botanists, Gledhill mentions Otto Brunfels (1488-1534), who suggested an accurate and objective method in his *Herbarium* (1530), Valerius Cordus (1515-1544), whose work was cut off by his untimely death, Conrad Gesner (1516-1565) and many others. Closer to Linnaeus's time, he cites the work of Joseph Pitton de Tournefort (1656-1708) and Herman Boerhaave (1668-1738), who made valuable modifications to the existing methods. Following Michel Adanson, an eighteenth century botanist, Gledhill notes that "some sixty systems of classification had been proposed by the middle of the eighteenth century and none had been free from narrow conceptual restraints."²⁴

Linnaeus had spent a year in theological college before becoming an assistant gardener in Olof Rudbeck's botanic garden at Uppsala. As his ability to collect and classify became recognized, he went on tours through Lapland, and published his works on botany. According to Gledhill, the success of his system stemmed from his cross-pollination of "Bauhin's and Belleval's use of binomials with Tournefort's and Boerhaave's concepts of the genus."²⁵ He had defined twenty-three classes of flowers based on the number, structure and disposition of their stamen, subdividing each class

²⁴ David Gledhill, *The Names of Plants* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 8-10.

²⁵ *Ibid*, 10.

into orders based on the number of parts of its pistil. A twenty-fourth class was created for plants which had invisible reproductive organs. By the time he published his monumental *Systema Naturae* in 1735, Linnaeus had created an order of things that seemed nearly perfect: species were grouped into genera, genera into orders, orders into classes, on the basis of structural similarities, and in 1753, in *Species Plantarum*, he suggested the binomial naming system. Usually, each species would come with a two-part name, the first of which was the name of the genus to which it belonged and the second was a descriptive “or specific epithet.”²⁶ With the scientist community’s acceptance of the Linnaean system, botany, as Gledhill writes, “could now contend with the rapidly increasing number of species of plants being collected for scientific enquiry, rather than for medicine or exotic gardening, as in the seventeenth century.”²⁷

In the colonies the naming of plants by their species or genus was used frequently for a commemorative purpose. While Roxburgh had two plants named after him posthumously – the *Pinus roxburghii* and the *Rosa roxburghii* – his colleague, Wallich lent his name to no less than forty different species. Nathaniel Wallich had been posted in the Danish colony of Serampore (known as Frederiksnagore then) as a surgeon.²⁸ Despite antagonism between the English and the Franco-Danish alliance, Wallich was released captivity and he began his career with the English East India Company in 1814 as assistant surgeon. He served as honorary curator and superintendent of the Oriental Museum of the Asiatic Society, as professor of Botany at the Calcutta Medical College and was appointed as assistant to Roxburgh at the Botanic Gardens. In 1818 Wallich became a Fellow of the Linnaean Society – post-retirement, he was appointed as vice-

²⁶ Ibid, 10.

²⁷ Ibid, 11.

²⁸ For details of Wallich’s career see David Arnold, “Plant Capitalism and Company Science: The Indian Career of Nathaniel Wallich,” *Modern Asians Studies* 42, no. 5 (September 2008): 899-928.

president of the Society. As integral node in the network of colonial scientific knowledge that was evolving in Calcutta in the second quarter of the nineteenth century, Wallich collaborated with scientists from different fields of knowledge, including William Brooke O'Shaughnessy, besides maintaining cordial relations with the Governor-Generals. He was also instrumental in the naming of one of the most famous flowers in modern English history, the *Amherstia nobilis*.

In John Crawford's field-notes from Martaban (Burma) written in 1826 learn about the discovery of this most celebrated of flowers. The Scottish physician and diplomat had been sent on a mission by Lord Amherst, during which he encountered in front of a Buddhist cave a flower "too beautiful...to be passed unobserved."²⁹ Like a true colonialist, Crawford believed that he had "discovered" a new genus. He sent it to Wallich for confirmation of the novelty of his discovery, and it was thus included in a list of two thousand new species of plants that had been found in Burma following Dalhousie's territorial wars. "The flower of this splendid tree," Wallich said in an address to the Linnean Society, "are disposed in pyramidal pendulous clusters, two feet long, and ten inches broad at the base."³⁰ The only known member of the genus was named *Amherstia nobilis* by Wallich after Lady Sarah Amherst. The flower, however, is not the only object of colonial scientific interest to be named after Amherst. *Chrysolophus amherstiae* or the Lady Amherst Pheasant was also named after her – but the association was more direct in the latter instance, because it was she who was responsible for sending the first specimen back to England in 1828.

²⁹ John Crawford, *Journal of an Embassy from the Governor-General of India to the Court of Ava in the Year 1827* (London: Henry Colburn, 1829), 362.

³⁰ Nathaniel Wallich, "Proceedings of the Learned Societies – Linnaean Society," 5 February 1828, *The Philosophical Magazine: or Annals of Chemistry, Mathematics, Astronomy, Natural History, and General Science*, by Richard Taylor & Richard Phillips (January - June 1828), 3: 223.

The *Amherstia* became an important part of the colonial traveler's Calcutta itinerary. "We went to see the *Amherstia*," Emily Eden would write in a letter on 23 March 1837, "a new plant and quite magnificent."³¹ The Duke of Devonshire made a trip that same year to Calcutta "to collect plants, and to procure the *Amherstia nobilis*, a plant native of Martaban, 'unequalled in the flora of the East Indies, and perhaps not surpassed in magnificence and elegance in any part of the world.'"³² Beyond its botanical fame, the *Amherstia* also found itself an unlikely place in the labour history of England, as it was supposed to have blossomed in a humble pot on the auspicious day when William Gladstone brought forward his Reform Bill proposing voting rights for male labourers in the cities of England and Wales.³³

³¹ Letter from Emily Eden, 23 March 1830, in Emily Eden, *Letters from India*, ed. Eleanor Eden (London: Richard Bentley & Son, 1872), Vol. 1. Electronic edition. URL: <https://digital.library.upenn.edu/women/eden/letters/letters.html>.

³² See Sue Shephard, *Seeds of Fortune: A Gardening Dynasty* (e-book, Bloomsbury, 2012), Chapter 5.

³³ For a detailed account see Sujaan Mukherjee, "How Britain's love affair with 'the world's most beautiful tree' blossomed in Calcutta," *Scroll*, 16 June 2017. URL: <https://scroll.in/magazine/839486/how-britains-love-affair-with-the-worlds-most-beautiful-tree-blossomed-in-calcutta>.

III. GENDERED SPACE AND MEMORY

4.3.1 Monuments and Gendering of Public Spaces

Out of the hundred and fifty names listed in the *List of Statues, Monuments and Busts in Calcutta of Historical Interest* (1910), published by the Public Works Department, there is mention of only five women apart from Queen Victoria.³⁴ None of these are public statues. A white marble tablet erected inside St. John's Church by Captain R.P. Anderson of the 25th Regiment, Bengal Native Infantry, remembers his wife and daughter, Henrietta Anderson and Hilda Mary Anderson, who died during the siege of Lucknow in August 1857. The other three memorials – Frances Johnson, Eleanor Winwood, Elizabeth Reed – are inside the yard of St. John's Church. The survival of Winwood and Reed's monuments probably indicates their political or social importance to the colony, given that they survived the replacement of the old burial ground with the church in 1787.

Although Winwood's epitaph does not reveal much about her, the inscription on Reed's describes her as the typical embodiment of female qualities, which are also to be found on most headstones in the South Park Street cemetery: "adorn'd the amiable virtues of a dutiful child," "a sincere and loving wife," "a tender and affectionate parent," "a kind relation and true friend," "Humane Mistress and real well-wisher to all her fellow creatures."³⁵ She is, in a word, the counterpoint to the more public and active male virtues

³⁴ Public Works Department, *List of Statues, Monuments and Busts in Calcutta of Historical Interest* (Calcutta: Bengal Secretariat Press, 1902).

³⁵ *The Bengal Obituary: Or, a Record to Perpetuate the Memory of Departed Worth* (Calcutta: Holmes & Co., 1851), 5. See also Peter Robb, "Memory, Place and British Memorials in Early Calcutta: Transcript of a Lecture by Peter Robb," in *Memory, Identity and the Colonial Encounter in India: Essays in Honour of*

which enabled the Empire to spread its civilizational ideals: honour, duty and patriotism. Although the latter, imbued with greater agency, create and extend the frontiers of Britain, the former, more passive, “humane” virtues were no less important in ensuring that the civilizing mission did not lose its more inward-looking qualities of compassion, mercy and benevolence.

Frances Johnson (1725-1812) stands out, being regarded at the time of her death as “the oldest British resident in Bengal, universally beloved, respected and revered,”³⁶ witness to crucial years in the history of Calcutta and the Empire in India. She was buried after the ground had officially been closed for interments, by special permission obtained from the Marquis of Wellesley. In an age when surviving two monsoons was considered an achievement for the English, Begum Johnson lived till the age of 87 and died in her house just north of the old Fort William. Considered an enigmatic embodiment of the ebbs and flows of British fortune in late eighteenth century Calcutta, Johnson became an iconic figure, portrayed by Kathleen Blechynden as:

reclining among great cushions, waited on by attentive slave girls, enjoying the fragrant hookah, and telling over the oft-told tale of her experiences and adventures when under the protection of her friend the begum, whose title, so often on her lips, was turned by her friends in kindly jest into a soubriquet for herself.³⁷

Perhaps the reason why the *List of Statues, Monuments and Busts* makes an exception for these names is because they are interred or commemorated outside spaces that continued to function as burial grounds. The only exception to the general rule against

Peter Robb, ed. Ezra Rashkow, Sanjukta Ghosh and Upal Chakrabarti (Abingdon: Routledge, 2019), 31-53, 37.

³⁶ “Mrs. Frances Johnson,” *The Bengal Obituary*, 6.

³⁷ Kathleen Blechynden, *Calcutta Past and Present* (London: W. Thacker & Co., 1905), 149.

public statues of women is Queen Victoria: a statue erected to commemorate her coronation by Mahtab Chand Bahadur, Maharajadhiraj of Burdwan in 1877,³⁸ was kept in the Indian Museum, and another one by George Frampton depicting the seated queen was added in 1901.³⁹ Later the halls of the Victoria Memorial would host another posthumous statue of the Queen in a standing position, holding the orb and sceptre, sculpted by Thomas Brock. Understandably, the Queen as the definitive icon of imperial power, represented an image that transcended her physical being.

Remembering the work of Ernst Kantorowicz's, who explored the legal implications of the medieval notion of the King's two bodies, representations of the Queen can be seen more as a symbol of her "body politic" as opposed to her "body natural."⁴⁰ There are very few representations of "body natural" of a woman in Victorian public statuary in general: on occasion a female form can even stand in metaphorically for ideas or values. This absence of physical representation from public view is hardly a surprise, given the Victorian gender norms of segregating spheres of the home and the world along lines of sexual identity. However, to read "gender in relation to commemoration", as Tracy Anderson says in an article on memorials to Charlotte, Lady Canning:

Does more than widen the aperture of the imperial lens to include women as well as men...it explores memory and memorial using sexual difference as a key tool, not with the intention of revealing an alternative historical 'truth,'

³⁸ *List of Statues*, 3.

³⁹ *Ibid*, 10.

⁴⁰ See Ernst Kantorowicz, *The King's Two Bodies: A Study in Medieval Political Theology* (1957; New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2016).

but as a strategy to deepen an understanding of the politics of imperial commemoration.⁴¹

Anderson draws a distinction between masculine and feminine memorial art along the lines of permanence and ephemerality, and between public viewership and private spaces of mourning. In her reading, however, the latter appears to be a lack compared to public, permanent cultures of mourning the male. While this rigid gendering of spaces of representation is undeniable, I suggest an alternative reading, which also contextualizes the ephemerality and private nature of female commemoration within spatial practices that were the domain of women, namely gardening.

4.3.2 The Government House Garden and the Edens

As with many other aspects of civic life in Calcutta, Curzon saw himself as embodying the apogee of the tradition of gardening in the Government House. Before going into a descriptive history of the garden, Curzon recounts in the other prominent feature of the Government House grounds: a collection of souvenirs from different wars fought since the late eighteenth century. Brass cannons were placed by Lord Wellesley “outside the curving corridors of the house,” which were mounted on wooden carriages, with “muzzles and hubs in the shape of a tigers head,”⁴² and the spokes of each wheel in the shape of tiger’s paws. On it was inscribed “Seringapatam, 4th May 1799.” From the first Anglo-Sikh War, there was a large brass cannon contributed by Sir Henry, later Viscount Hardinge. Apart from symbolizing British dominion over Indian kingdoms, a pair of

⁴¹ Tracy Anderson, “The Lives and Afterlives of Charlotte, Lady Canning (1817-1861): Gender, Commemoration, and Narrative of Loss,” *South Asian Studies* 29, no. 1 (2013): 31-49, 31. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/02660030.2013.772813>.

⁴² George Curzon, *British Government in India: The Story of the Viceroys and Government Houses* (London, New York, Toronto & Melbourne: Gassell & Co., 1925), 1: 82.

trophies on the edge of the grass lawns served as a reminder of British victories over other European forces. The first was a spoil from Lord Roberts' campaign – a small brass gun with the inscription “Dutch Gun at Cabul 1879” with the representation of a man-of-war in full sail and the emblem of the Dutch East India Company. The other was a brass canon, captured at Seringapatam in 1789, of French origin. To this collection Curzon proudly inserted his own contribution: a Boer gun brought back from the South African War in 1904.⁴³

When he wrote his *British Government in India* in 1925, the southern garden was more beautiful than it had ever been: “now so pretty with its great expanse of *dhoub* grass, backed by leafy walks and winding ponds,” the project had started under the “fostering care of Lady Mayo.”⁴⁴ The landscaping of the garden and the collection of various kinds of plants and flowers, were largely the domain of the women, more specifically of the wives of Governor Generals and Viceroys. There is no conclusive way of determining who began gardening inside the Government House. Herbert argues, based on an engraving in Maria Graham's *Journal of a Residence in India* (1809-11), that there were “no trees, no gardens, no leafy paths in the twenty-six acres of grounds.”⁴⁵ In 1823, William Pitt Amherst became Governor-General of India and with him, Sarah Amherst, an amateur naturalist and botanist of note, arrived in India. Lady Amherst's daughter, Sarah Elizabeth, who shared her mother's love for gardening and botany, drew a series of sketches depicting the gardens of the Government House.

Looking out from her mother's veranda towards Chandpaul Ghat (in the east), where they first landed, she could see the sun setting behind the Fort. Closest to the

⁴³ Ibid, 84.

⁴⁴ Ibid, 84-85.

⁴⁵ Eugenia W. Herbert, *Flora's Empire: British Gardens in India* (e-book, Penguin, 2013), 77.

Government House, she could see the old Treasury, where “in the little garden which surrounds it, are some wide-leaved plants, the Banana or Plantain tree.”⁴⁶ A little further down stood the Town Hall, where public dinners and balls used to take place, and further still was the house of Sir Francis Macnaghten, acting Chief Justice. The view reminded Sarah Elizabeth of Claude Lorrain’s paintings. Lorrain glasses were used by painters in the 17th and 18th centuries, to help envision their landscapes in the water-colour tones and sepia tints of the pioneering Frenchman. As Gilpin remarked, “they give the object of nature a soft, mellow tinge like the colouring of that Master.”⁴⁷ On the south-west side of the Government House, stone posts and chains had been put up after their arrival, prior to which there were only “old decayed wooden ones.” The balustrade around the compound too was added later. In a rare act of racial inclusion, Sarah Elizabeth inserted into the foreground of a sketch of the south-west side a number of “grass cutters,” who were kept busy “this season of the year, when the grass sprouts faster than they can mow it.” Keen as they were on botany, she notes that: “We ourselves never walk even in the garden, both because it is so public and there is no time for walking, nor is it the custom.”⁴⁸

Just as the administration of the colony changed hands, so too the gardens adjoining the Government House. Writing in 1841, Emily Eden, who loved gardens and put in efforts to beautify both the Government House garden as well as the Barrackpore one, lamented its changing fortunes. In 1840 she had started “restoring” the garden, but these efforts were economically restrained to start with:

⁴⁶ Notes by Sarah Amherst to “South-west gateway of Government House, Calcutta” (1824), shelfmark: WD4131, BL. URL:

<http://www.bl.uk/onlinegallery/onlineex/apac/other/019wdz000004131u00000000.html>.

⁴⁷ Quoted in Anthea Callen, *The Work of Art: Plein-air Painting and Artistic Identity in Nineteenth-century France* (London: Reaktion Books, 2015), 39. See also “The Claude Glass,” at: <http://www.vam.ac.uk/content/articles/d/drawing-techniques/>.

⁴⁸ Amherst (1824), BL.

Lady Amherst made a magnificent garden round the house, which stands in the centre of what we call a huge compound. Lady William Bentinck said flowers were very unwholesome, and had everything rooted out the first week.⁴⁹

The Edens had arrived in Calcutta in 1836, when George Eden, Lord Auckland, brother of Emily and Fanny was appointed Governor General. The garden is supposed to have been laid out two years before their arrival, but they received attention and care from the sisters when it became part of the Viceroy's estate. The garden was opened to the public in 1841 and came to be known initially as the Auckland Circus Gardens. It remains a mystery, however, as to why the gardens were named in memory of the sisters, breaking the usual tradition of naming gardens and public spaces after men holding public office.

Cotton speculates that the memory of his tenure may have been marred by his controversial decision to side with Shah Shujah against Dost Mahommed, which “brought on the first Afghan Expedition (1839-42)” and resulted in the “fatal retreat from Cabul which added little glory to the British arms.”⁵⁰ Nonetheless, while the gardens were named after the sisters, George Eden was honoured with a statue inside the Eden Gardens, sculpted by Henry Weekes (1807-1877). The inscription at the base claimed that the some of the men who erected the statue “were the instruments of his government,” many “knew that government only by its benign effects,” (hinting at the existence of a different narrative), but all of whom “agreed in the affectionate desire to perpetuate the memory of the six years during which he ruled the destinies of British India.”⁵¹ Like the rest of the Maidan, the Eden Gardens also commemorated the Empire at large. The other statue,

⁴⁹ Emily Eden, 14 April 1841, quoted in Curzon, 84.

⁵⁰ H.E.A. Cotton, *Calcutta Old and New: A Historical and Descriptive Handbook to the City* (Calcutta: W. Newman & Co., 1907), 375.

⁵¹ *Ibid*, 374.

which kept Lord Auckland company, was that of William Peel (1824-1858), a captain of the Royal Navy and recipient of the Victoria Cross. Peel had distinguished himself in the eyes of the British during the uprising of 1857 and had been injured during the Relief of Lucknow.

For Emily Eden, the selection of plants was related to her cultural identity. While Fanny was delighted with the Barrackpore grounds – “the park is a thorough English one,” she wrote, “with plenty of light and shade”⁵² – Emily was busy planning the additions she could make to improve and diversify the garden. They had already visited Lady Ryan’s house in Garden Reach, where they had been impressed with her love for her garden: “She is a nice person and fond of her garden, and has contrived to rear some violets and sweetbriar.” Emily then generalizes, “therefore [she] has probably many other good qualities.”⁵³ About a month later, she resolves to “have a little garden” of her own “made close by the house,” since there were “no flowers near it now.”⁵⁴ Nathaniel Wallich kept up a consistent supply of different plant varieties to the Eden sisters, and on some days, Emily would be “up at five planting it, and in bed again at half-past six.”⁵⁵ In a letter to the Countess of Buckinghamshire, she was particularly effusive about her new garden. “It is turning out very pretty,” she reported, “though the plants do not grow up in a night, as I thought they would.” She lamented that cowslips and daisies were not to be seen anywhere – either in Barrackpore or in Calcutta – although the perennial bloom of roses came as “some compensation.” Like practising still-life paintings, sketching gardens appears to have been a pastime for several English women at the time: it appears to be more than a mere act of conveying the visual beauty of the gardens. With Indian local

⁵² Fanny Eden, 12 March 1837. All references are to the 1872 edition at <https://digital.library.upenn.edu/women/eden/letters/letters.html>.

⁵³ 7 March 1837.

⁵⁴ 10 April 1837.

⁵⁵ 18 June 1837.

gardeners doing most of the physical labour that went into planting and tending the plants, the European amateur botanists and painters, saw sketching as a fundamental means of engaging with nature. It was a way of apprehending, of appreciation, and of communicating to distant friends and relatives the diversity of nature.

While statues were the main vehicles of celebrating and commemorating the Empire in the Maidan and its extended, enclosed gardens, the imperial ideology was implanted in other ways as well. The Eden sisters had travelled across many of the important kingdoms in India following their arrival in 1836. The letters and journals of Emily Eden, with occasional entries by Fanny, document their interactions with the different cultures, but a common feature of most of these encounters is their enduring love for gardens. The 1830s were an important decade for the Empire's cultural encounter with the Arabian Nights. Antoine Galland's early 18th century translation of the stories into French had been augmented Hanna Diyab, a guest from Aleppo, who had introduced the two of the best recognized tales – Aladdin and Ali Baba – into the Arabian Nights canon.⁵⁶ But it was not until the late 1830s that complete English translations began to appear. Henry Torrens, a former student of Fort William College and member of the Asiatic Society began translating the most comprehensive manuscript of the Nights, known as "Calcutta II" or the "Macnaghten Manuscript."⁵⁷ Around the same time, Edward Lane began his own translation project in London, recasting the stories in an Egyptian setting – which the author of *Manners of Customs of Modern Egyptians* (1836) was most familiar with.⁵⁸ Cultural influences spread even without the mediation of the printed book and it should come as no surprise that in 1838 Eden was comparing a "bunch of grapes made

⁵⁶ Paolo Lemos Horta, *Marvellous Thieves: Secret Authors of the Arabian Nights* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017), 55.

⁵⁷ Ibid, Chapter 3, "The Empire of English," 88-131.

⁵⁸ Ibid, 11-12.

up of twenty-seven emeralds,” which a Lucknow merchant had brought to their home in Simla with “the fruit in Aladdin’s garden.”⁵⁹ In December 1837, she had been to the palace of the “Prince of Lucknow,” where she found the only residence in India that she ever coveted. “Don’t you remember where in the ‘Arabian Nights,’ Zobeide bets her ‘garden of delights’ against the Caliph’s ‘palace of pictures?’ I am sure this was the ‘garden of delights!’” she remarks, ecstatically.⁶⁰

By incorporating flowers, plants, animals and even architecture from across the world, these gardens became testimonials to the cultural and natural diversity of the Empire. While Greco-Roman architecture and mock ruins were common features of European gardens, the 18th century saw the recognition of Chinese and Japanese landscape art. Gardeners and garden-designers started incorporating these features, creating a new fusion style which came to be known as *le jardin Anglo-Chinois* in French. William Chambers, among others, started advocating the incorporation of triumphal arches, pagodas, fountains or “some other considerable monument” in the manner of imperial forests and gardens to counter the “boredom” or “dullness” of English gardens.⁶¹ During the second Anglo-Burmese War, which was spearheaded by George Lambert, the British inflicted much greater damage on the kingdom of Burma than they had initially set out to do. During his tour of the newly annexed provinces, Dalhousie is supposed to have fallen in love with a pagoda which he saw in the city of Prome. It was dismantled and brought to Calcutta in September 1854 and, after initial debates, it was erected in the Eden Gardens in 1856, with the help of Burmese craftsmen.⁶² In a notoriously literal

⁵⁹ Emily Eden, 24 October 1838.

⁶⁰ Eden, 28 December 1837, Kanpur.

⁶¹ William Chambers, *A Dissertation on Oriental Gardening* (London: W. Griffin, 1772), 57. See Patricia Laurence, *Lily Briscoe’s Chinese Eyes: Bloomsbury, Modernism, and China* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2003), 313.

⁶² G.E.L. Cotton, *Memoir of George Edward Lynch Cotton, D.D., Bishop of Calcutta, and Metropolitan*, ed. Sophia Anne Cotton (London: Longmans, Green, & Co., 1871), 228.

realization of the trope of *le jardin Anglo-Chinois*, the Empire had moved from cultural appropriation to physically re-siting a pagoda in order to give the Eden Gardens an Oriental flavour. It was, unmistakably, an act of commemorating military victory over another kingdom through an absolute appropriation of their cultural heritage, establishing thereby within the space of the garden a narrative of the Company's growing power in the East.

4.3.3 Ways of Remembering: The Death of Charlotte, Lady Canning

In Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide*, Kanai tells Piya the remarkable story of Canning's tryst with the unruly river, Matla. The brief exegesis touches upon several critical aspects of the gendered politics of naming, commemoration and memorial permanence, and works as a parable of human arrogance in the face of natural forces. "Like so many other places in the tide country," says Kanai, "Canning was named by an *Ingrej*. And in this case it was no ordinary Englishman who gave it his name – not only was he a lord, he was a *laat*, nothing less than a viceroy, Lord Canning."⁶³ With the Hooghly River silting up and choking its docks, Canning and his team of town planners, decided that a port on the river Matla was a viable option. "But those *Ingrej* town planners were busy men who had little time for words and names," remarks Kanai. Perhaps unintentionally, this statement contradicts his earlier remark about the English peppering their names on geographies which they "discovered" or produced. The contradiction is a productive one as it points to the inability of the colonial planners to read or listen to the local in their urgency to inscribe or write their narratives on it.

⁶³ All quotes are from "A Post Office on Sunday," Amitav Ghosh, *The Hungry Tide* (Ontario: Penguin, 2004), Epub.

Work began and progressed at great pace, unhindered even by the Uprising of 1857, as thousands of *mistris* and *mahajans* fulfilled the terms of the contracts handed out by the English. There was one dissenting voice, notes Kanai, and that was Henry Piddington's. Piddington, who had spent time in the Caribbean knew the full extent of damage that hurricanes could cause, and tried to warn surveyors and planners, even to the Viceroy. His warnings went unheeded. Finally, when the project reached completion, "its streets and strand were laid out, its hotels and houses were painted and made ready, and everything went exactly as planned...the viceroy planted his feet on the Matla's flanks and gave the town its new name, Port Canning." Piddington had given it fifteen years before the Matla would rise up and reclaim the land as its own. But the river had other ideas. Just as the township had entered its fifth year, in 1867, "it rose as if to challenge and hurled itself upon Canning. In a matter of hours the town was all but gone; only the bleached skeleton remained."

The port was formally abandoned in 1871. Although the town or the port did not survive, the name "Canning" has become permanently associated with the place, travelling on the lips of daily commuters on local trains. Few people would off-hand make the association with Lord Canning, and even then, it would be one that remembers a failed, hubris-driven enterprise, rather than governmental success. The popular memory of Lady Canning, however, was ensured by a Calcutta sweet maker, who "took it into his head to name a new confection after her." The "black, round and sugary" sweet was, as Kanai observes, the very opposite of the "tall, thin and peppery" Lady Canning. This name was shortened to "*ledigeni*," an abbreviation, which is currently in use, but once again, is associated with the memory of Charlotte only occasionally

Anderson in her essay, "The Lives and Afterlives of Charlotte, Lady Canning," focuses on two commemorative acts following Lady Canning's death, and argues that her

memory was “perpetuated...primarily through her association with the land, predominantly the garden at Barrackpore.”⁶⁴ The first was a tomb sculpted by George Gilbert Scott (1811-1878) and John Brinie Philip (1824-1875) and placed initially in the Flagship House in Barackpore, where Lady Canning spent considerable amount of time, tending to the garden and perfecting the landscape to match her tastes, while the uprising of 1857 raged on. The second was an album to preserve her memory, which was prepared probably “Colonel Hon. John Constantine Stanley (1837-78) of the Grenadier Guards, who served as one of Charles Canning’s aides-de-camp while he was Governor-General.”⁶⁵ This album (MSS Eur D661), which is currently in the holdings of the British Library (London), was earlier in the possession of Emily Anne Theophilia Bayley (1830-1911), who made additions to it and later proposed the creation of the Lady Canning Memorial Fund, which would support the training of British nurses in Calcutta, following the model of the European Nurses Fund at Calcutta. The rules to be followed by the beneficiaries were to be framed similar to the “rules which Miss Nightingale found it desirable to adopt.”⁶⁶

Lady Canning had contracted malaria during her travels in Darjeeling and shortly after her return to Calcutta died suddenly at the Government House on 18 November 1861. The funeral took place at daybreak in the grounds of the Barrackpore Government House, where a temporary brick vault was constructed, enclosed by a wrought-iron railing attributed to Henry Yule, the design being a stylized monogram of her initials.⁶⁷ It was conducted with the greatest privacy, with only Charles Canning and Yule in attendance, partly because, as Canning later reasoned, if all who wished to attend were allowed, “all

⁶⁴ Tracy Anderson, “The Lives and Afterlives of Charlotte, Lady Canning (1817-1861): Gender, Commemoration, and Narratives of Loss,” *South Asian Studies* 29, no. 1 (2013): 31-49, 35.

⁶⁵ *Ibid*, 35.

⁶⁶ *Ibid*, 44.

⁶⁷ *Ibid*, 33.

quietness would have been destroyed.” In a letter to Queen Victoria on 22 November 1861, Canning wrote

The funeral is over. It took place quite privately at sunrise on the 19th. There is no burial-place for the Governor General or his family, and the cemeteries in Calcutta are odious in many ways: Lord Canning has therefore set a portion of the garden at Barrackpore (fifteen miles from Calcutta) apart for the purpose.⁶⁸

It was a beautiful spot, the letter continued, “looking upon that reach of the grand river which she was so fond of drawing...amongst the bright shrubs and flowers in which she had so much pleasure.”

Lady Canning’s first encounter with the Barrackpore house and gardens had not been a very pleasant one. Herbert writes that she had complained that it “struck her as ‘poisonously green,’ offering ‘a notion of unwholesome damp.’”⁶⁹ She had found it lacking in distinctive tropical character that she had seen around the Governor’s House in Parell in Bombay: the grounds here were “too English for me to appreciate properly, being quite a matter-of-course-looking place...short grass well-mown and smelling of hay, and not a cocoa-nut in sight.”⁷⁰ Herbert speculates that her plans for the Barrackpore garden may have been inspired by Highcliffe, “her family home overlooking Christchurch Bay atop a bluff on the Hampshire coast.”⁷¹ Lady Canning’s project was aimed at re-landscaping the space whose planning had in the past been envisioned only in sections.

⁶⁸ Letter Earl Canning to Queen Victoria, 22 November 1861, *The Letters of Queen Victoria: A Selection from Her Majesty’s Correspondence between the Years 1837 and 1861*, ed. Arthur Christopher Benson and Viscount Esher (London: John Murray, 1911), 3: 475.

⁶⁹ Herbert, “Lady Canning’s Jungle,” e-book.

⁷⁰ Charlotte Canning, Journal Letter, 19 March 1856, in Augustus J.C. Hare, *The Story of Two Noble Lives, Being Memorials of Charlotte, Countess Canning, and Louisa, Marchioness of Waterford* (London: George Allen, 1893), 60.

⁷¹ Herbert, 89.

She had a vision for the entire plot of land and its different parts were all meant to serve a purpose that added to the experience of the whole space. She modified the terrace walk along the riverbank: “a stone bench where I can go and sit and breathe fresh air in the evening.” The visual appreciation of the surroundings was also informed by aesthetic categories: the native boats were “picturesque,” just as she was disturbed by the sights of Hindu funerals taking place when the river receded during low tide. She “opened up” an enormous banyan tree, which had previously been obscured by weeds and shrubbery: “I can sit out nearly all day under the great Banyan and its creepers,” she wrote.⁷²

Charles Canning, therefore, was not far off the mark when he decided that a burial in a naturally enclosed spot of the Barrackpore grounds would have pleased Charlotte. But before the tomb could be transported to India and placed in his desired spot, he died suddenly in 1862. The completed tomb was brought from England only in 1865, but by 1869 the Sicilian marble inlay on the upper top table of the tomb started showing signs of erosion. After much debate and delay in decision-making (painstakingly reconstructed through private correspondence by Anderson), it was at Lord Northbrook’s suggestion that the original tomb was moved from the Barrackpore grounds to the southern transept of St. Paul’s Cathedral in Calcutta in 1873. Anderson writes that “a full-size copy of the original was made to mark the grave in the garden”: a simple, uncovered marble tomb without the intricate inlay work that had eroded in the original. She adds further that in 1913, Lady Canning’s tomb was “moved again, from the cathedral to the north portico outside St. John’s Church where it stands today.”⁷³

Turning to the album dedicated to the memory of Charlotte Canning, Anderson traces a brief history of the genre as a commemorative cultural practice since the late

⁷² Ibid, 90-91.

⁷³ Anderson, 40-41.

eighteenth century, when it was deployed as a space for different kinds of material objects as well as text and images. It served as a miscellaneous collection of personal relics that could be fit into a manageable container, carving out a space of commemoration more private than the epitaph. In the early part of the century, Anderson argues, there was no organizing structure, but a semblance of form began to appear in the mid-1800s. “By the 1860s,” she writes, “the album had developed into a structured visual document organized into sections.”⁷⁴ What is perhaps more important, I argue, and especially so in the case of Lady Canning where access to the funeral itself was severely restricted, is that by positioning it between an individual act of mourning and the entirely public tomb, the album created a space where an exclusive, affective community could be formed by those contributors who had direct, tangible access to the life of the departed.

The album contains several photographs by Edward Saché and other anonymous photographs, which consciously or unconsciously co-create a montage representing a journey through the gardens Charlotte Canning had landscaped with great care. They lead up to the inevitable absence of the author of the landscape – a space that is represented by her grave, a quiet but poignant signifier, which adds to the gardens’ architectural beauty. The photographs of the grave, as Anderson argues, can be seen as performing an act of “mediated visibility,”⁷⁵ which ensures the privacy of the grave (as Charles Canning had desired), while making it accessible to a larger community of aggrieved family and friends: the imagined community of mourners. Anderson recalls Roland Barthes’s idea of the *noème*, that which gives a photograph the affective power – its claim of bearing a “physical trace of the subject’s presence.” But, as she argues, the relationship between the photograph, the subject, and the viewer is a complex one, not easily reducible to the

⁷⁴ Ibid, 43.

⁷⁵ Ibid, 40.

photograph's claim of being an object of memory preservation. It has the potential to "inhibit the involuntary and physically immediate aspects of memory and replace them with the ordered historical information contained in the image itself." Following Geoffrey Batchen, Anderson claims that the emotional power of the photograph can be triggered by augmenting it with "writing, flowers, and ephemera,"⁷⁶ which have the power to "pull it (and us) out of the past and into the present."⁷⁷

The photographs of the grave and the tomb of Charlotte Canning frame it within an unpeopled setting, surrounded only by the "natural" landscape. The few photographs of the humble human efforts to protect the grave (building temporary structures) from the natural elements emphasize even more strongly the presence of nature, by highlighting the futility of these attempts. The protection, it becomes evident, can at best be offered to the human act of commemorating her life and death – it is beyond the power of human society to mediate between the dead and the natural any longer. The most poignant memorabilia are to be found on page 89 of this commemorative album: it contains the dried flowers and leaves that were offered at the grave by close friends and relations in the weeks immediately following her death. Anderson attempts to draw a metaphorical relation between the flowers and their tendency to fade with time, "becoming pale shadows of their former selves," and the ebb and flow of human lives, before adding more pertinently, that "they are also a reminder of Charlotte Canning's own love of flowers, her love of gardening, and her botanical art."⁷⁸

Surely, they are more than that. The dried flowers allow time to operate within the space of the album in a way that even the photographs cannot: they encapsulate through

⁷⁶ Ibid, 43.

⁷⁷ Geoffrey Batchen, *Forget-Me-Not: Photography and Remembrance* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2004), 94. Quoted in Anderson, 43.

⁷⁸ Ibid, 44.

symbolic reference Charlotte Canning's tender care of plants, the act of mourning where close relations offer flowers on her grave, the album-creator's act of collecting these flowers after they had served their intended purpose and drying them so that they could be preserved for posterity. Finally, as objects that share equal status on the album as photographs, letters and poems, they become transcendental signifiers of elegiac pastoral mourning, where along with human subjects, catalogues of flowers, birds and animals, were supposed to pay their tributes of sorrow to the dead. One recalls John Milton's catalogue of flowers, who not only facilitate the human act of mourning but, in fact, perform it:

Bring the rathe primrose that forsaken dies,
The tufted crow-toe, and pale jessamine,
The white pink, and the pansy freak'd with jet,
The glowing violet,
The musk-rose, and the well attir'd woodbine,
With cowslips wan that hang the pensive head,
And every flower that sad embroidery wears...⁷⁹

The banyan tree, which Charlotte Canning had "opened up" had turned into one of her favourite spots in the Barrackpore gardens. A few of the photographs feature this tree but they are remarkable precisely because of the absence of the person associated with them. Similarly, the river-facing seat which she had constructed. The memory of the deceased is carried forward not through association with Mitchell's idea of the landscape but through their perception and even participation in these spaces. The banyan tree would become a favourite spot both for the Dufferins (Viceroy, 1884-1888) and for Lady Curzon. Edward Lear, who painted landscape scenes in India, similarly produced a sizeable set of paintings of "Indian Glade and Forest Scenery" in the hill-station of Ooty.

⁷⁹ John Milton, "Lycidas" (1636), in *John Milton: Complete Shorter Poems*, ed. Stella P. Revard (Sussex: Wiley Blackwell, 2009), 79, ll. 142-148.

“The extent of plain hence, and all along the mountainside, is I think the very finest of all such scenes I have seen,” he wrote, in a rare self-congratulatory moment.⁸⁰ These views were achievable only from a rock, which to this day is known as “Lady Canning’s Seat.” It becomes, in a sense, the very opposite of what Mitchell refers to by the process of landscaping, i.e. an erasure of the human forces of production that shape the apparently natural configuration of land. In these cases, the imperial commemorative association is one of remembering through shared experience through time, recalling and co-creating a community with the dead.

⁸⁰ Quoted in Vidya Dehejia, *Impossible Picturesqueness: Edward Lear's Indian Watercolours, 1873-1875* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989), 47.

Chapter 5

The “Unified Memorial”: Curzon, Victoria Memorial Hall, and the Historiography of Calcutta

I. INTRODUCTION

5.1.1 Victoria Memorial Hall and Public History

I spent the latter half of 2019 working as a social media assistant at Victoria Memorial Hall. The SYLFF doctoral fellowship that had seen me through the first three years of research had run out (as it was supposed to), and I was looking for employment that would allow me sufficient time to work on the present dissertation while staying in touch with the subject of my research. I started my brief tenure not knowing what to expect: my childhood memories of the Victoria Memorial Hall were filled with awe at the grandeur of the architecture and the audacity of its marble-whiteness. I remembered being fascinated by the swords and armoury inside, which were always kept at a height that makes it difficult for children to look closely. This history, therefore, seems distanced and awe-inspiring – something not meant to be viewed at eye-level. As I grew older and reached a relatively nuanced understanding of the purpose of the Memorial – the absurdity of the towering statues of British colonizers, the imperialistic framing of a historical narrative – I began to look upon it with a degree of suspicion. Whose history was it articulating and where was my place in it?

Therefore, when the opportunity of getting a glimpse from the inside presented itself, it seemed like the ideal place to test out my theoretical understanding of museums and history against ground realities of the day-to-day operation of the museum as well as engaging with a diverse groups of visitors. A seemingly obvious realization dawned on me: Curzon's project, despite the partial post-independence appropriation by the Government of India, was on the whole a success, although perhaps not in the way he imagined it. Ticket sales for entry to the gardens far surpasses those for the museum. For many who enter the museum, the objects seem too distant and unrelatable, and without help from the tour guides, difficult to appreciate unless there is existing familiarity with the context. Among objects that draw immediate attention are an eighteenth century cannon from Maharaja Krishnachandra's (1710-1783) artillery or Thomas Brock's marble statue of Queen Victoria, although, despite best efforts, tour guides struggle to hold the attention of groups who are not actively seeking their help. Even on the outside, the statues of English war-mongers and colonial administrators, seem to hold little interest for the casual visitor. Evidently uncomfortable with the precarity of their place in the post-independence cityscape, they justify their lingering presence by offering lovers of various age groups protection from inquisitive stares. In a sense, they also help create an imagined boundary between the "family spaces" in the garden and the illicit. Yet, for most visitors, as I learnt while accompanying visitors on several guided walks, what is not lost is the sense of awe surrounding British rule. Few will question Victoria Memorial Hall's claim of being the most iconic symbol of the city of Calcutta/Kolkata, carrying all implications of the purported "colonial hangover."

In its conception, the Victoria Memorial stood for something more ambitious than any commemorative monument built under Curzon or before him. While statues, such as the ones on the Maidan, and monuments, such as the Holwell or Ochterlony monuments,

were symbolic markers of an imperialist ideology in the colonial city, they were not spaces that invited prolonged engagement and participation. Besides serving its commemorative purpose, the Victoria Memorial offered a pleasurable experience that was not founded simply on the imitative prowess of sculptors or the formal beauty of architecture. It held out the allure of the landscaped open space and, in principle, made it possible to enjoy from close quarters the peculiar beauty of William Emerson's design. As such, even in its intended use it far surpassed the monosemantic structures that were constructed by the British in Calcutta before or since. In addition to being one of the boldest declarations of British power and authority (see section 5.2.2), it was an articulation of a monopolistic narrative of colonial history within a space intended for the public. Repeated performance and quiet acceptance, Curzon hoped, would authorize the narratives he helped construct.

5.1.2 Halls of Memory before VMH

Before Curzon conceived of the Victoria Memorial, in 1865 Cecil Beadon, Lieutenant-Governor of Bengal, had laid the foundation stone of the Dalhousie Institute in its original premises along the southern side of Tank Square.¹ Many of the statues that later adorned the Queen's Hall at Victoria Memorial, including those of James Prinsep, Lord Metcalf, James Rennell, Charles Marquess Cornwallis, William Wilson Hunter, Claude Martin, James Outram, Henry Havlock, and the "four memorials of Mutiny heroes" were presented by the Council of the Dalhousie Institute to the Trustees of the Victoria Memorial Hall.² The Institute, in turn, had sourced a few of them from the Governor's

¹ H.E.A. Cotton, *Calcutta Old and New: A Historical and Descriptive Handbook to the City* (Calcutta: W. Newman & Co., 1907), 909.

² *Ibid*, 808-810.

House, which marked their journey from a seat of power, to restricted access and then finally to full public view.

The Institute's building, which had "no pretensions to architectural beauty," boasted of a "handsome hall, 90 feet by 45 feet," the walls of which were "lined with marble, with a semi-circular roof, richly decorated."³ The stated purpose of this "monumental edifice" was to "contain within its walls statues and busts of great men."⁴ Built with funds from the Dalhousie Testimonial Fund, the Havelock, Neill and Nicholson Fund, and the Venables's Fund, which were raised to commemorate their efforts during 1857, the Institute was a private undertaking, and not meant as a public hall of memories. Instead, it served the English-speaking youth of the city, offering a space for exclusive socialization with facilities such as a library, reading-rooms and a billiard table, and hosting lectures and concerts.⁵

Initially the Dalhousie Institute committee had planned to construct the memorial on the Maidan, facing the eastern gate of Government House, at the north-west corner of Esplanade Row (East). R. Turnbull, Secretary to the Municipal Corporation, caught this ill-advised development in an early stages and wrote to the Government of Bengal, alerting them to the risk of compromising the ventilation of the city if another large building were to be erected in an unplanned manner.⁶ The Lieutenant-Governor opined that it would set a bad precedent of encroachment and, after much deliberation an alternative was suggested: it could be constructed facing the northern gate of Government House, on the Tank Square itself,⁷ currently occupied by the offices of Bharat Sanchar

³ Ibid, 909.

⁴ Ibid, 804.

⁵ Ibid, 909.

⁶ Judicial (Judicial), April 1860, Progs., 109, 1. WBSA.

⁷ 20 December 1864, Judicial (Judicial), February 1865, Progs., 18-21, 17. WBSA.

Nigam Limited. In an interesting amalgamation of memorial monuments, the new Dalhousie Institute building, to be designed by Walter Granville, was to attach itself to the Warren Hastings monument by Richard Westmacott. Despite some opposition from the Justices of Peace, the plan to construct the “Dalhousie Memorial Hall” on Tank Square was executed⁸ and, it would appear, gave its name to the neighbourhood.

5.1.3 Chapter Outline

This chapter is an attempt to situate the Victoria Memorial Hall within the larger politics of Curzon’s imperial will to power as Viceroy and the colonial city’s history of memorial monuments. It begins by looking at Curzon’s notion of Calcutta’s history through his attempts to control the ghosts of the city’s past that roamed its old buildings, and by an overview of his positioning the present vis-à-vis the past. His idea of deriving authority in the present from an imagined set of rituals that connect it to the past, I argue, can be read in the light of Eric Hobsbawm and Terrence Ranger’s theorisation of “the invention of tradition.”⁹ It is reflected not only in his Delhi Durbar of 1903 but in his view of history itself, his idea of Indian architecture, and in his construction of the Victoria Memorial Hall – a monument that was supposed to look both backwards and forward in time. The second section delves into the memorial purpose that the Hall was meant to serve and Curzon’s notion of building a unified monument, which would be a permanent showcase for the loyalty of wealthy Indians – princes, Rajas and zamindars – to the deceased Queen, and metonymically to the finest hour of the Empire itself. The physical existence of the building and the space it occupies in the city’s geography and imagination is placed

⁸ Judicial (Judicial), February 1865, Progs., 86, WBSA.

⁹ Eric Hobsbawm and Terrence Ranger, *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 1.

within the context of the ideological debates that surrounded every aspect of its conception and construction. In the final section, we take up a common accusation of the times – articulated best by the *Hindi Punch*¹⁰ – that the memorial was, in fact, meant more for Curzon than for the Queen. Finally, this point is substantiated by looking at archival documents that reveal the Curzon’s careful self-fashioning through his own statues and the narratives they represented.

¹⁰ “The Two-fold Memorial,” in *Cartoons from the Hindi Punch* (Bombay: Hindi Punch Office, 1904), 51.

II. CURZON AND THE GHOSTS OF CALCUTTA

“Thou art a scholar, speak to it Horatio.”¹¹

– William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*

5.2.1 The Old Black Wood Bureau of Warren Hastings

In a letter Warren Hastings wrote to his friend and private secretary, Nesbitt Thompson, on 21 July 1785, he said, “It pains me to recur to the subject of my bureau. I have not yet received any intelligence from you or Larkins about it. You cannot conceive my anxiety about it.”¹² Evidently, the “Black Wood Bureau” of Hastings, whose loss weighed heavy on his heart, had not turned up a couple of months from then, as we see an advertisement in the Calcutta Gazette on 6 September 1787, offering a reward of 2000 *sicca* rupees for its discovery. We learn of its contents from the advertisement:

Whereas an old Black Wood Bureau, the property of Warren Hastings Esqr., containing, amongst other things, two small miniature pictures and some private papers, was about the time of his departure from Bengal either stolen from his house on the Esplanade, or by mistake sold at the auction of his effects.¹³

Hastings House was purchased by Lord Curzon in 1901, with the intention of converting it into a State Guest House for the Government of India. H.E.A. Cotton, a competent historian in his own right and close ally of Curzon, tells us that the estate’s gates were

¹¹ William Shakespeare, *Hamlet* (1599-1601), 1.1.54.

¹² Cotton, 894.

¹³ *Ibid*, 894.

closed to the public, and that both the inscription installed by Curzon to commemorate the building's history and the reported restoration work had to be taken on hearsay. He does, however, connect Hastings House with one of the most frequently rehearsed ghost stories of colonial Calcutta.

"It is said," Cotton begins in the manner of most ghost story-tellers, that the great Governor General rides up the avenue leading to the house in a carriage with four horses, alights and wastes no time in commencing his search for something by which he evidently lay great store.¹⁴ In 1909, an article on "Anglo-Indian Ghost Stories" in *Bengal Past and Present* refers to it as an "accepted story," which finds corroboration in George Gleig's biography of Hastings.¹⁵ The common understanding of ghosts seems to suggest that the return is motivated by some unfinished business, defined in the broadest possible terms. It could refer to unrequited love, to set right an injustice that had occurred in its lifetime possibly leading to its death, or, as in the case of Hastings, the loss of some important documents and miniature portraits. But what happens when a rationalist enters into the fray?

After becoming Governor-General and Viceroy of India, Curzon undertook several projects to re-fashion Calcutta's urban identity in terms of its history. One such project involved cataloguing the various houses Warren Hastings had resided in or built in Calcutta and its environs. Hastings had married Marian Imhoff in August 1777, and according to Curzon, because a "married man would require a different class of residence from a widower,"¹⁶ he had felt the need for a new house. In the early days of their marriage, Warren Hastings would stay in Buckingham House (located where the

¹⁴ Ibid, 894.

¹⁵ "E.W.M." and "K.N.D.," "Anglo-Indian Ghost Stories," *Bengal Past and Present* 3, no. 1 (1909):1-6, 1.

¹⁶ George N. Curzon, *British Government in India: The Story of the Viceroys and Government Houses* (London, New York, Toronto, Melbourne: Cassell & Co. 1925) 1:139.

Governor's House or Raj Bhavan stands today), and Marian Hastings stayed in close by on 7 Hastings Street. (Hastings preferred his own house but occasionally had to take refuge in his wife's accommodation because of the lions in the garden that used to roar at night.¹⁷) The newly constructed Hastings House won praises from several visitors who stayed with the Hastings, including Mrs. Elizabeth Fay, who described it as "a perfect bijou; most superbly fitted up with all that unbounded affluence can display." The grounds, in particular, were tastefully laid out according to her.¹⁸

Soon after he arrived in India, Curzon visited this old house. He recalls:

The house, so full of wonderful remembrances, was untenanted; the grounds were bedraggled and unkempt. But the place was alive with memories; and it seemed to me a scandal that a building with such traditions should be allowed to fall into ruin or be made the victim of successive speculations¹⁹

He was undoubtedly aware of painting by Johann Zoffany of Warren and Marian Hastings standing on the grounds of their Alipore property, which bore a striking similarity to the landscape painting by Thomas Gainsborough titled *Mr. and Mrs. Andrews* (1750). The painting, which showed the "bijou" mansion in the background, reflected the relationship of power Hastings shared with the territory that he was in charge of, a "colonized domain," accentuated by picturesque details, and the not uncommon presence of a "native" servant.²⁰ Visual tropes of the picturesque tradition had been frequently deployed by painters in India, such as the Daniells, Hodges and Fraser, to highlight the ruined state

¹⁷ Ibid, 136.

¹⁸ Ibid, 139.

¹⁹ Ibid, 144.

²⁰ See Swati Chattopadhyay, *Representing Calcutta: Modernity, nationalism and the colonial uncanny* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2005), 40.

of India's past – a condition from which the British could salvage a people and civilization that had forgotten or neglected its own history.

In the case of Hastings House, however, although the factual details describing its state of ruin echo the representational strategies of picturesque painters, Curzon offered a different interpretation. Being a part of Britain's colonial legacy in India, the building had to keep alive the history of its glorious past, rather than be relegated to an aestheticized state of ruin. This was recent and familiar history. Curzon's imagination looked past the neglected grounds and the creepers that appeared between the cracks; he saw through the weathered windows of this old house a "storm-tost and harassed man" spending his happiest hours "with the woman he loved." "There," Curzon dreams, "he must often have discussed with her the persecution of his colleagues, the vindictive jealousy of Francis, the clumsy hostility of Clavering, the hesitating support of Barwell, the vagaries of the Judges."²¹ (This critical transformation was noticeable also in the work undertaken by the Calcutta Historical Society to conduct accurate research on the burial grounds and headstones, followed by physical restoration of several graves.) Curzon purchased the house, landscaped the gardens afresh, cleaned the tank and refurnished the house. He converted one wing into a "fine durbar room" anticipating royal visits and provided "a billiard room for those who had modern tastes." In the ten years between its purchase and the "evil hour" which saw the shift of the colonial capital from Calcutta to Delhi, the repurposed Hastings House had several eminent visitors: the Nizam of Hyderabad, the Maharajas of Nepal, Gwalior, Kashmir, Jaipur, Bikaner, the King of Afghanistan, Inayatullah Khan and his father, Habibullah Khan, and even the Dalai Lama of Tibet, who

²¹ Curzon (1925), 140.

had fled from Lhasa seeking British protection against an invading Chinese army.²² But what of the ghosts?

Curzon conducted interviews to establish the veracity of the legend and the results were far from convincing:

One person who had lived in the house for many years told me that he had never either heard or seen these phantom visitations. Another couple declared that they had constantly heard the ghostly equipage at night.²³

Even though the ghost was supposed to have been looking for the missing bureau, Curzon drily remarks it “was never here at all.” His researches had shown that it had gone missing from Hastings’s “house on the Esplanade,” by which he the letter in the *Calcutta Gazette* referred to the Government or Buckingham House, mentioned earlier.²⁴

For good measure, most legends about the Hastings House threw into the mix two other ghosts: before his death, Warren Hastings had given a part of his Alipore property to his stepson, Julius Imhoff. He had had two sons with an Indian woman, “one of whom was shot dead by a native in the compound, while the other, a child, fell into a well in the garden and was drowned, along with his *ayah*...who fell in after him.”²⁵ Curzon was told that he was gazing at the fatal site, which had been sealed off shortly after this tragedy. Once again, his researches had shown that the property that had been handed down to the Imhoffs were “assuredly not Hastings House,” so he declined to believe that he was “gazing upon the scene of the double tragedy.”²⁶ Curzon’s prose is marked throughout by precise attention to detail without lacking its own sense of drama. With almost

²² Ibid, 144-145.

²³ Ibid, 145.

²⁴ Ibid, 137.

²⁵ Ibid, 146.

²⁶ Ibid, 146.

monopolistic access to a wealth of colonial archives and a keen interest in the minutiae of history, he was unmoved by the picturesque lens through which most historians of Calcutta viewed the past. Just as, by his own admission, he had read Busteed's *Echoes from Old Calcutta* before he reached India's shores, Curzon preferred to approach new territory – physical or discursive – equipped with prior knowledge, thereby largely dispelling a Romantic sentimentalism that was easily available in visual depictions of the land.

Taking off from Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, where Marcellus asks Horatio, a scholar, to speak to the ghost, Jacques Derrida concludes in *Specters of Marx*:

There has never been a scholar who really, and as a scholar, deals with ghosts...There has never been a scholar who, as such, does not believe in the sharp distinction between the real and the unreal, the actual and the inactual, the living and the non-living...²⁷

In this case, driven by motivations that are not restricted to scholarship alone, Curzon does not allow himself the indulgence of a romanticized and imprecise past. For him, it is important to put the past in its appropriate place – to define the “distinctions between the actual and the inactual, the living and the non-living”²⁸ – before it can be utilized to narrativize the present and shape the future of the territory. Unlike Horatio, Curzon does not see these spectres that appear of their own volition. They represent an uncontrolled interface between the past and the present, which was simply not productive considering the projects Curzon had in mind. This does not mean, however, that he did not see ghosts at all.

²⁷ Jacques Derrida, *Spectres of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (New York: Routledge, 2006), 12.

²⁸ Ibid, 12.

Curzon's view of history was not shared by amateur historians of his time. As noted above, Cotton fell easy prey to the eerie suggestions of informal urban traditions, which were later corroborated by the authors of "Anglo-Indian Ghost Stories" in *Bengal Past and Present*. These narratives, as Anuparna Mukherjee claims, that "are written into the urban spaces belie a definite moment of closure. When they perpetuate themselves in their spectral incarnations, time recurs in endless loops and rounds."²⁹ She speaks of the post-empire city as a "spectropolis," which she defines as "a ghost city in the crannies of the modern that is both real and imaginary, living and long buried."³⁰ The "colonial uncanny" has continued to fascinate citizens of Calcutta/Kolkata and tourists. The popularity of the tourist walks that focus on haunted buildings in the present day and an unceasing rehearsal of these nineteenth century myths ensure that these spatio-temporal ruptures remain open. Just as these ghost stories question the strict divide between the present and the past, they also disturb any strict distinction between belief and (wilful) disbelief.

British ghosts mostly preferred houses ("the greatest haven of safety for the modern bourgeois self") as Tithi Bhattacharya argues,³¹ as opposed to the pre-colonial ghosts of Bengal who distributed themselves around more natural landscapes. The specific relationship between the house and the spectre, however, is difficult to define in precise terms because, if we regard the spectre as a figment of memory that is intrinsically associated with the physical space, the question arises: whose memory? If at all we are to regard it as memory, as Mukherjee does with reference to Gaston Bachelard's *Poetics of*

²⁹ Anuparna Mukherjee, "After the Empire: Narratives of Haunting in the Postcolonial Spectropolis," *South Asian Review* 40, no. 4 (2019): 271-289, 272. DOI: 10.1080/02759527.2019.1604061.

³⁰ Ibid, 273.

³¹ Tithi Bhattacharya, "Deadly Spaces: Ghosts, Histories and Colonial Anxieties in Nineteenth Century Bengal," in *Postcolonial Ghosts, Les Carnets du Cerpac* no. 8, ed. M. Joseph Vilain and J. Misrahi-Barac (Montpellier: Presses universitaires de la Mediterranee, 2009), 145.

Space, it can be associated with one or more in the triad comprising the departed person, the observer and the building. By process of elimination – since the spirit potentially appears even to newcomers, and it cannot be the memory of someone who is dead – it appears that the most logical answer to the question is that it is the building’s memory. This would be in-keeping with Gothic traditions where buildings were frequently accorded partial sentience. The word, “haunted” with its 12th century meaning of visiting regularly³² implies that this memory, which is stuck in space is also stuck in time in the sense that it keeps repeating its action. What is of critical importance in this understanding of spectres as a property of the physical space, and not of a human being, is that it allows an inanimate agency to make and preserve meaning.

As such, for those who hoped to impose their ideology upon the present or the future, it is more efficient strategically to invent new ghosts and project them upon existing spaces. Unlike Busteed’s *Echoes from Old Calcutta*, Cotton’s project in *Calcutta Old and New*, written as a guide to the city, had a different purpose. “A new Calcutta,” Cotton proclaimed, “is rising in our midst” as he urged fellow citizens to be “proud of her [Calcutta’s] past and prouder still of the present.”³³ Prepared during and published shortly after Curzon’s departure from India, the new circle of urban historians to which Cotton belonged (also including the Calcutta Historical Society), were beginning to focus more on the city of the present as an entry point into the past. It is not surprising, then, to find that Cotton’s narrative is not structured temporally, unlike Busteed’s, but spatially, as though he is leading readers on an imagined walk through the city. And from the spatial markers that they explore, arise spectres of the past.

³² “Haunted,” Etymonline, URL: https://www.etymonline.com/word/haunt#etymonline_v_41677.

³³ Cotton, iv.

Yet, Cotton adopts a nostalgic tone, which laments the passing of an “Augustan Age of John Company” – a telling lineage drawn from the Augustan Empire (approximately 43 BCE to 18 CE) via the Augustan age of English literature and culture. It was also during the reign of Augustus that Livy began his *Ab Urbe Condita*, the monumental history of ancient Rome and Pollio his history of contemporary events (now lost). What he longs for, it would appear, is a time when historical narratives could be better defined along hierarchical social lines: “Then sahibs were sahibs, veritable lords of creation...There are so many sahibs nowadays they have ceased to be venerable or wonderful: and the *baboo* has been to England and back again.”³⁴ He shuts his eyes and sees in front of him “a procession of heroes and heroines” filing before him.

There goes Hicky, the ‘true-born Englishman,’ father of the Calcutta Press, hurrying to the coffee house to catch the latest scandal for tomorrow’s Gazette...In Bhowanipore the Barwells sit at dinner with the whole house of Chambers...Zoffany is at his easel finishing his canvas of the Last Supper...while his brother artist Hodges is off to ‘eat the air’ in his country-built chariot... A hundred other shadows beckon to us across the dim veil of years.³⁵

Staying true to Curzon’s vision, however, Cotton sees the dawn of a new era in every electric fan and every electric tram that turns a corner. The love of the city that he hopes to instil among his readers, must be extended to the past as well as to the present before he can “summon up the ghosts of the succeeding generations.”³⁶

³⁴ Ibid, ii.

³⁵ Ibid, ii-iii.

³⁶ Ibid, iv.

The ability to call up spectres at random to legitimize a vision of the past, which, in turn, authorizes the present, is something Cotton had in common with Curzon. But there is a critical point of difference between the two. Unwilled ghosts never appeared in front of Curzon and even the willed ones did not merely flit by as though in a pageant of old Calcutta. They hovered more purposefully in spaces that carried the traces of imperial power and could come in handy to legitimize English rule in India, particularly in Calcutta. In his speech during the inauguration of the replica of the Black Hole monument Curzon returned, as he so often did, to the subject of historical preservation. He lamented that very few people “who tread the streets of Calcutta from day to day ever turn a thought to the Calcutta past,” and yet, Calcutta for him, “is one great graveyard of memories.”³⁷ This assertion is somewhat confusing – does he mean that Calcutta is full of living memories of the dead or does he mean that Calcutta is full of dead or dying memories that need fixity?

While serving his office in India, Curzon was keenly aware of the presence of the colony’s history looming behind every decision that he made. The builders of the British Empire seemed to be haunting the buildings and squares of Calcutta that were most familiar to them.

Shades of departed Governors-General hover about the marble halls and corridors of Government House, where I do my daily work. Forgotten worthies in ancient costumes haunt the precincts of this historic square. Strange figures, in guise of peace or war, pass in and out of the vanished gateways of the vanished fort.³⁸

³⁷ George N. Curzon, “Unveiling the Holwell Monument” (19 December 1902), in *Speeches by Lord Curzon of Kedleston, Viceroy and Governor-General of India, 1902-1904* (Calcutta: Office of the Superintendent of Government Printing, 1904), 3:83.

³⁸ Curzon (1904), 83-84.

Perhaps Curzon believed that monuments possessed the power to contain the unruly movements of this spectres, fixing them in a matrix of spatiality, time, and meaning. Memory, which is fickle and more individualized than history, had to be managed. So, when Curzon speaks of a “graveyard of memories,” he have be playing on both meanings. He was keenly aware of the importance of creating a single, stable and usable historical narrative. This was a nearly impossible task, undoubtedly, but Curzon rose to the challenge to give these memories “a local habitation and a name,”³⁹ by constructing tangible, permanent markers of history in public view.

Two years before the Victoria Memorial Hall was completed, Rabindranath Tagore wrote an essay titled “*Kartar bhooth*” (“The master’s ghost”), which reflects on the uses of the past and its insidious way of imposing upon the present and the future. He imagines a moment when the old master (possibly foreshadowing the end of colonial rule) is about to die.

Seeing the old master on his deathbed, all the citizens lamented, “Who do we turn to if you die?”

On hearing this, he felt sorry for them. “Who’s going to keep them on track once I’m gone?” he wondered.

But there’s no escape from death and so the Almighty took pity and said, “Don’t worry. The old master will look after them as a ghost. Human beings die but ghosts do not.”⁴⁰

Playing on the double-meaning of *bhooth*, both ‘ghost’ and the ‘past,’ Tagore wryly remarks that if one acts with relation to the future, *bhobishyot*, there is a great deal to worry about. But if we leave it to the past, *bhooth*, we can afford not to worry. All the headache is passed on to the *bhooth*, which, being a ghost, has no head to start with. But

³⁹ William Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* (1595/96), 5.1.1847.

⁴⁰ Rabindranath Tagore, “Kartar bhooth” [The master’s ghost] (July 1919), in *Rabindra Rachanabali* (Kolkata: Visvabharati, 2003), 13: 346. Translation mine.

after the old master has died, a few ask if he will not set them free, to which the master replies that it is, in fact, up to them to set him free. But his subjects fail to muster up the courage to do so.

The past, after all, is known. It is something for which the present cannot be held accountable. In the context of Tagore's story and Curzon's efforts, the distinction between the history of the colonized and of the colonizer becomes stark. While historical narratives can be empowering, the insidious imposition of a dominating political power's history can delegitimize not just the past but the present and future of a colonized people. Despite his seemingly egalitarian view of historical preservation, Curzon must also have sensed the importance of asserting the past in the public discourse – through statues, monuments and plaques – to the larger project of not simply building an Empire but sustaining one by making the colonized internalize the colonizer's history.

At the banquet of the Chamber of Commerce in 1903, Curzon proclaimed that he was always alert to the use of the future along with his use of the past: "But in remembering the past I have also had one eye fixed on the present, and another on the future."⁴¹ The projects undertaken by (the seemingly three-eyed) Curzon seem to reflect most bluntly a state monopoly over history, where the state had the documentary evidence to position itself at a distance from the present moment and narrativize history in terms of a much longer period. By associating specific interpretations of the past with spaces and buildings that were to carry these ordered memories into the future, Curzon could exert his influence in a more potent way than through literary histories. The buildings

⁴¹ George N. Curzon, Speech at the Banquet of Bengal Chamber of Commerce, Calcutta (12 February 1903), *Lord Curzon in India: Being a Selection from His Speeches as Viceroy and Governor-General of India, 1898-1905* (London: Macmillan, 1906), 1:293.

themselves, I argue, were converted into spaces where time past and time future were both perhaps present.

5.2.2 “The Invention of Tradition”

“Authority, once achieved, must have a secure and usable past.”⁴²

- J.H. Plumb, *The Death of the Past* (1969)

Curzon took up the project of formulating an official, authoritative (and authoritarian) history of Calcutta with a strategy in place. The past had to be re-ordered by removing the over-reliance on memory or urban lore and a new, archivally verifiable history was to be written from a single vantage point, which, naturally, was that of the colonizer. While it can be argued that there was no overt attempt to undermine pre-colonial histories, the only methodology that was known to the historians in Curzon’s circle, such as Cotton, Walter Firminger, C.R. Wilson, et al, exclusively recognized records produced by the state and the corporatized governance of the East India Company, and as such excluded all other forms of knowledge of the past. In *The Death of the Past*, J.H. Plumb writes, “Warring authorities mean warring pasts.”⁴³ Conversely, it could be argued that asserting a monolithic idea of the past could go a long way in the symbolic assertion of a monolithic political authority. Traditionally, the derivation of authority from the past relied on the careful compilation of genealogies, which helped legitimize the current authority by tracing a lineage back to a commonly agreed upon founding figure. But writing in the late 1960s, Plumb notes the obsolescence of this methodology in most contemporary historians (barring a few nostalgists), who recognize its lack of social validity. He writes,

⁴² J.H. Plumb, *The Death of the Past* (London & Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1969), 41.

⁴³ Ibid, 40.

“It cannot provide a framework to their authority or a justification for it, as it did not only to Macaulay in India, but also to scores of minor civil servants there.”⁴⁴ Even if the method proved useful to Macaulay, by the time Curzon started writing his version of history, the strategy had to be revised.

Bernard Cohn has pointed out that colonial historiography had long been in vogue in India,⁴⁵ facilitated by the implementation of school syllabi as well as imitative histories such as Rangalal Bandyopadhyay’s *Kalikata Kalpalata* (1870). The method that was adopted by Curzon differed from these efforts in the way it interlinked the histories of Calcutta and the growth of the British Empire in India, narrativizing it in terms of a foundation myth (which already existed), a moral justification (the Black Hole tragedy), a “Golden Age” (the age of Warren Hastings and Philip Francis), a period of forgetfulness and relative decline (leading up to 1857), and a gradual reassertion of imperial right to authority through benevolent governance. At the civilizational scale of history, the overarching justification for colonial rule remained what the arch-imperialist, Rudyard Kipling called “the white man’s burden.”⁴⁶ Finally, through an act of periodization – and the coincidental death of Queen Victoria – Curzon could project his own age as marking a break with the past, accompanied by a new valuation of history.

But it was not sufficient to simply re-order the historical narrative or to create what Plumb calls a “usable past.” Curzon understood that in order for official history to become popular history (and therefore self-replicating), it had to draw on existing traditions, or what one might call the *historiographical capital* of monarchic sovereignty

⁴⁴ Ibid, 42.

⁴⁵ Bernard S. Cohn, “Representing Authority in Victorian India,” in *The Invention of Tradition*, ed. Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983):163-209, 177.

⁴⁶ Rudyard Kipling, “The White Man’s Burden,” *McClure’s Magazine* 12 (1899), 290-1. For a discussion of Kolkata’s present attempts to emulate Britain and Kipling’s lingering shadow, see Sandeep Banerjee, “Why This Is (Not Quite) London!: The Spectre of Kipling in Contemporary Kolkata,” *Critical Imprints* (2015): 1-20.

in India. The colonizer's glorious narrative had to be internalized by the colonized in order for the ghost to maintain an easy and seemingly unforced grip on the imagination of the subjugated, as Rabindranath Tagore had warned. I argue that Curzon achieved this by turning to a strategic implementation of what Eric Hobsbawm and Terrence Ranger call the "invention of tradition," described thus:

The term 'invented tradition' is used in a broad, but not imprecise sense. It includes both 'traditions' actually invented, constructed and formally instituted and those emerging in in a less easily traceable manner within a brief and datable period.⁴⁷

Hobsbawm and Ranger argue that "nothing appears more ancient, and linked to an immemorial past, than the pageantry which surrounds British monarchy in its public ceremonial manifestations." In the same volume, Bernard S. Cohn successfully situates the Imperial Durbar of 1877, where Queen Victoria was officially proclaimed as Empress of India, within this theoretical framework, and even looks ahead to Curzon's revival of the Durbar. Pushing Cohn's argument further, Curzon's engagement with imperial history deserves closer attention for three reasons: firstly, his reiteration of the Durbar in 1903 is supposed to have surpassed the 1877 Durbar in magnitude, while drawing on similar symbols of authority. And secondly, two strands of the imperial strategy – accumulating tributes from stakeholders to legitimize British rule, and a use of traditions to establish through lineage the right or duty to rule – are manifest in other projects he undertook as well, such as the construction of the Victoria Memorial Hall. Finally, one significant difference between Lytton's Durbar of 1877 and Curzon's Durbar of 1903 was the latter's claim of being a "public" event, rather than an "official" one.

⁴⁷ Hobsbawm and Ranger, 1.

Although William Bentinck had identified a shift in the character of British rule, from being “the inconsistent one of merchant and sovereign” to that of an imperial power as early as 1834,⁴⁸ it was not before the official transfer of power from East India Company to the British crown that this was officially recognized. In the next two decades, the colonizers were showing intent through appropriation and reinvention of the most powerful symbols of Mughal rule in India, culminating in the Durbar of 1877, whose “central ritual,” as Cohn writes, “was an act of incorporation.” People and objects were placed relative to the position of the rulers, who occupied central position, and “the spatial order of a durbar fixed, created and represented [their] relationships between with the rulers.”⁴⁹ Cohn argues that the Durbar presented

two divergent or even contradictory theories of rule...one which sought to maintain India as a feudal order, and the other leaning towards changes which would inevitably lead to the destruction of this feudal order.⁵⁰

Whether or not the twin vision held any political truth is debatable – it may well be a rhetorical ploy only to appease both the Princely States and the emerging spirit of proto-nationalism, but it made itself out to be an all-encompassing vision for the Indian polity. Even the Princes were symbolically subjugated and the governor-general and viceroy became “was unequivocally the locus of authority in India.”⁵¹ The political position of all others was defined in relation to his office.

In the lead up to the 1903 Durbar, Curzon “spent almost six months planning ‘his’ durbar, and was always at pains to follow the forms which Lytton had laid down.”⁵² But

⁴⁸ William Bentinck, Minute on 2 January 1834, IOLR, Board’s Collection, 1551/62/256, p. 83.

⁴⁹ Cohn, 168-169.

⁵⁰ Ibid, 166.

⁵¹ Ibid, 180.

⁵² Ibid, 208.

there was a change observable in Curzon's positioning of British power in the Indian context: as Cohn points out, unlike Lytton's Durbar, which was "Victorian Feudal" in its tone, Curzon opted for an "Indo-Saracenic" blend. The British were no longer outsiders. While the Indian feudal order was incorporated within the broader scope of the British Empire, the Empire, in turn, inserted itself into the historic and symbolic capital of India through an act of assimilation. It is curious that Cohn does not draw the link between Curzon's appropriation of the Indo-Saracenic Durbar with his vision for the architecture of the Victoria Memorial in Calcutta – a monument that carried several direct allusions to the Durbar. Perhaps more insidious was Curzon's claim of speaking for the public. In a speech regarding his preparations for the Durbar, he clarified:

The Assemblage of 1877 was an almost exclusively Official Assemblage. I have tried to gather, at the impending Durbar, representatives of all the leading classes of the community from every part of India. I want to make it a celebration, not of officials alone, but of the public.⁵³

In addition to this claim and his historic positioning ("To the East, there is nothing strange, but something familiar and even sacred, in the practice that brings sovereigns into communion with their people in a ceremony of public solemnity and rejoicing, after they have succeeded to their high estate. Every sovereign of India, or of parts of India, did it in the old days"⁵⁴), Curzon also asserted its importance in offering a symbolic geographical unity to the notion of India. According to him the country had a "water-tight compartment system," whereby people in the south were uninformed about political changes in the northern parts and vice versa. The Durbar had the unifying potential to

⁵³ George N. Curzon, "Delhi Coronation Durbar" (5 September 1902), *Speeches by Lord Curzon of Kedleston, Viceroy and Governor-General of India, 1902-1904* (Calcutta: Office of the Superintendent of Government Printing, 1904), 3:26.

⁵⁴ 18-19.

bring these two seemingly disparate nations into direct contact, forging a geographical unification. (This was before his decision to divide Bengal.) In the following section, I will try to connect these impulses in Curzon's re-visioning of history with the creation of Calcutta's single most important memorial monument, the Victoria Memorial Hall, and analyze the implications of his claim to represent the public opinion.

III. “A SORT OF VALHALLA OF (BRITISH) INDIAN HEROES”

“Though guiltless, you will continue to pay for the sins of your forefathers,
Roman, until you repair the crumbling temples and shrines of the gods.”⁵⁵

– Horace, Ode III

5.3.1 The Death of an Empress and the Search for a Memorial

It was no secret that Lord Curzon was one for grand gestures. He was equally enamoured of the idea of a unified British-Indian subjecthood, where the symbols of colonial rule would be so deeply impressed upon Indian minds that they would weep as profusely as Britain itself upon the death of the Empress. Indians, who understood the value of keeping themselves in Curzon’s good books, knew that a prominent and public display of grief could go a long way with the man who was both Governor-General and Viceroy. When the fateful day arrived, as Miles Taylor puts it, “India ground to a halt. The Government of India declared three days of mourning and stipulated that all government employees wear black crepe.”⁵⁶ Curzon led a service at St. Paul’s Cathedral, while a large procession of Hindus on the Maidan, is supposed to have draped a white saree over a portrait of the Queen, hailing her as a benevolent mother figure. Although it is unclear from Taylor’s descriptions which factions of Hindu society were hosting these gatherings, a tellingly disturbing account can be found Nagendranath Gupta’s *Reminiscences and Reflections*.

⁵⁵ DOI: 10.4159/DLCL.horace-odes.2004.

⁵⁶ Miles Taylor, “The Last Years of the Qaisara,” in *Empress: Queen Victoria and India* (Yale University Press), 259. URL: <http://www.jstor.com/stable/j.ctv6hp2v7.21>.

The Sangit Samaj (“which has nothing to do with politics”) decided to host a “monster open-air meeting” on this tragic occasion, where many poor women and men would be fed and handed small sums of money. “Most of the wealthy people of Calcutta were members of the Samaj,” writes Gupta, and it fell upon Maharaja Narendra Krishna of Shobhabajar to preside over this solemn ceremony, modelled after the traditional *shraddh* rites. “Lord Curzon quietly came out of Government House, followed by an aide-de-camp in civilian clothes, and mingled with the crowd,”⁵⁷ and was recognized by very few. The beneficiaries of this ceremony were lined up on Cornwallis Street, but there were other groups who held similar gatherings on the Maidan. While Curzon was walking past a camp where a large group of Muslim women and men, who had nothing on their plates, they cried out to him, complaining their plates were empty. The “obsequious group of organizers,” as Gupta calls them – distancing his variety of generosity from the others – swooped in to explain that the men were “thanking the Lat Saheb for the sumptuous feast on which they had regaled themselves.”⁵⁸ Perhaps losing sight of the tragic irony of this event, Gupta indulges his spirit of rivalry and calls it a “humorous incident.” It was important that the Viceroy noticed groups of Indians tripping over themselves to impress him, because if the death of the Empress herself did not occasion a show of royalty to the crown, what would?

The use of the white saree – a symbol of both widowhood and mourning – to drape on the portrait of Queen Victoria was significant but nothing new. As Tanika Sarkar observes, “imperialism had produced its own Mother Goddess,”⁵⁹ who frequently inspired Bengali poets to compose songs in the manner of traditional *Shyama-sangeet* or

⁵⁷ Nagendranath Gupta, *Reminiscences and Reflections* (Bombay: Hind Kitabs, 1947), 215.

⁵⁸ *Ibid*, 216.

⁵⁹ Tanika Sarkar, *Hindu Wife, Hindu Nation: Community, Religion and Cultural Nationalism* (Delhi: Permanent Black, 2001), 251.

songs written to the Goddess Kali. They carried the same “typically slightly reproachful tone of the hurt yet loving child,” for example: “Where are you, Mother Victoria, I touch your feet/ Mother, what kind of a mother are you, why have you forgotten your child.”⁶⁰ At the same time, as Sarkar points out, Queen Victoria was fashioned as the ideal model of the “chaste Hindu widow,” as in Pratapchandra Majumdar’s nineteenth century, *Stri Charitra*.⁶¹ These two identities did not run contrary to one another – and in fact, positioned Queen Victoria beyond the scope of sexual, even physical identity. As someone who fed the patriarchal upper-caste Hindu’s self-image as neglected child of a benign mother, and a potential role model that helped validate the roles ascribed for women in colonial Bengal, the Empress offered a potent and multi-purpose symbol to dominant social groups. And this was by no means limited only to Bengal.

In his address at the seventeenth session of the Indian National Congress held in Calcutta, Dinshaw Wacha encapsulated this complex positioning both as sovereign and as mother:

Thus it is that in the death of Good Queen Victoria, Indians mourn not only the loss of a unique Sovereign, of great benignity and greater grace, but of an affectionate mother and the type of the highest and most exalted womanhood.⁶²

In his view, the bond that Indians felt with the Empire were not simply formal and definable in political terms alone, but because of Queen Victoria’s benevolence, they had taken on a distinctly familial quality. Spontaneous memorials to her were apparently rising across Indian cities, and “like those ancient monoliths of the great Ashoka of happy

⁶⁰ Ibid, 252.

⁶¹ Ibid, 42.

⁶² Dinshaw Wacha, *Speeches and Writings* (Madras: G.A. Natesan & Co., 1920), 3.

memory,” they would “perpetuate her name so long as the sun and moon endure.”⁶³ Additionally, as Taylor observes, Queen Victoria was deified. She came to be regarded as *Bharateshwari*, or the Goddess of Bharat, as evident from writings of several socially privileged Hindu writers of the time, who dominated contemporary conservative periodicals such as *Bangabasi* or *Nabyabharat*.

Following the Queen’s death, Curzon initiated discussions about a suitable memorial gesture and almost immediately this was split into multiple schools of thought. There were those who preferred separate memorial monuments in different provinces, and those who saw the unifying value of a single, centralized monument. There was others who argued against monumentality altogether and preferred intangible modes of commemoration, such as setting up of welfare funds. While these debates raged on the pages of newspapers and periodicals, the conservative section, epitomized perhaps by Thakurdas Mukhopadhyay (1851-1903), were adamant that Curzon be allowed to have his way. Just as the Queen was *Bharatishwari* to them – the reason behind India’s efflorescence in the late-nineteenth century – they saw Curzon as a representative of the people, as the most competent person to decide on the method of commemoration. Mukhopadhyay. He wrote two substantial articles in *Nabyabharat* defending the idea of what was to be the Victoria Memorial Hall, mounting a caustic defence of Curzon against his more nationalistic-minded contemporary writers. This was, perhaps, Curzon’s – and indeed colonialism’s – greatest achievement. The “nation” (this word occurs frequently in the debates) had already been fragmented, with a politically and financially powerful section believing that it was their responsibility to ensure Curzon’s dream came true.

⁶³ Ibid., 4.

In Mukhopadhyay's view there could be absolutely no doubt that the Empress deserved a singular memorial monument. According to him Curzon was a worthy leader because, in addition to being the first to conceive of the form of the memorial, he was a Viceroy unlike any other before him. Mukhopadhyay praised him for not being a mere representative of the crown, but for taking on the responsibility of representing the people:

He is a representative of Indian subjects and citizens, a leader and advisor, a constant companion in grief and joy, a champion of their dignity and pride, but above all, the same Lord Curzon desires the support, appreciation and consensus from his Indian subjects and citizens for his decisions.⁶⁴

He further praises Curzon for marking a critical break with his predecessors in his administrative method, relying more on his personal attention to matters of state rather than hiding behind his bureaucracy.⁶⁵ Perhaps, Mukhopadhyay failed to diagnose the totalitarian tendencies of this variety of politics, where an individual assumes power without answerability, excused because of his apparent efficiency. As such, he argued, the presses run by nationalists owed Curzon a more considerate response, given that no one else had succeeded in arriving at a general consensus – essentially advocating for suspension of criticism in the face of Curzon's megalomaniacal plans. The unsustainability of this form of efficiency would come to light in the years to come. As Taylor points out, it took “four viceroys, two king-emperors and one world war to see through the Victoria memorial project from start to finish.”⁶⁶

⁶⁴ Thakurdas Mukhopadhyay, “Bharateswarir smarak” [Memorial to Her Highness], *Nabyabharat* (June-July 1901):113-126, 118.

⁶⁵ *Ibid*, 125.

⁶⁶ Taylor, 266.

The most obvious objection to Curzon's grand plan was against the enormous expenditure that would be incurred in building a memorial monument. With famines wreaking havoc in Bengal's countryside every two decades, and numerous other problems that needed redress, many of his critics felt that the money could be better spent in setting up a memorial trust. For Curzon, however, this was an imperialist memory project, one that had its face turned towards the crown and not, contrary to what Mukhopadhyay believed, towards the people. Curzon had to issue three rounds of clarification: at the Calcutta Town Hall, at the Dalhousie Institute and at the Asiatic Society. In a bizarre conclusion to his apologia, Mukhopadhyay wrote that Curzon felt it unnecessary to defend himself against one of the most popular opinions that was doing the rounds following his initial proposal:

The Maharani's memorial should be utilitarian rather than an aesthetic object.

That is to say it is not important for it to be beautiful but only has to have utility. This seems to imply that beauty has no utility - it has no purpose at all. As if something can have utility without being beautiful...This is most unscientific. There can be no beauty without utility...that is the verdict of psychological and aesthetic sciences.⁶⁷

Curzon, however, conceded that after constructing the memorial hall, the surplus could be set aside for famine relief, augmenting the Indian People's Famine Trust, which had been inaugurated by a rather generous donation from the Maharaja of Jaipur the previous year.⁶⁸ The other alternative that had been proposed – investing in “Technical Education” for Indian students – was summarily discarded by Curzon because it bore “no definite

⁶⁷ Mukhopadhyay, 126.

⁶⁸ George N. Curzon, *Speeches by Lord Curzon of Kedleston, Viceroy and Governor-General of India, 1900-1902* (Calcutta: Office of the Superintendent of Government Printing, 1902), 2:211.

association with her [the Queen's] memory," and was, rather, a project fit for what in today's parlance is known as a private-public partnership: "the duty of the Government and of the community in combination."⁶⁹ Although Charlotte Canning's friends had deemed it appropriate to set up a fund for training nurses as part of her legacy, the death of a Queen was too precious an opportunity to let slip without milking its symbolic potential. Interestingly, Curzon's project ran out of funds at various points, forcing him and subsequent Viceroy to appeal to wealthy collaborators, leaving nothing for either of the welfare projects.

But Mukhopadhyay does not stop at defending Curzon. He glorifies the broader implications of the memorial project by expanding on the implications of a *unified* monument for all of India. The "Victoria Hall," which was to showcase the most valuable fragments of India's colonial and pre-colonial history, was not the unified monument only from a logistical perspective: according to Mukhopadhyay, it would also be the first project undertaken by the "thirty two crore" Indians together, symbolizing a coming together of India's history, geography and demography. Transcending its symbolic role as a marker of India's unity, it could potentially be an agent in unification:

The physical presence of the memorial would enable many subsequent generations of Indians to hold this as a testimony to their unity, and thereby emerge themselves as a unified people or Nation.⁷⁰

For Curzon too, this was a moment of unification because he envisioned a moment in time when in the wake of the Queen's death he had been handed the authority to encapsulate the history of a nation, to define and narrativize it from his imperialist point

⁶⁹ Ibid, 211.

⁷⁰ Mukhopadhyay, 122.

of view, and hand it down to the future. He complained that previous generations had failed to provide them with:

[a] standing record of our wonderful history, a visible monument of Indian glories, and an illustration, more eloquent than any spoken address or printed page, of the lessons of public patriotism and civic duty.⁷¹

As the capital of the British empire in India, Calcutta was the obvious choice of location for the memorial monument, and Curzon knew that he would never find a better opportunity to summon the ghosts of Calcutta's past and make them speak of Britain's (self-deluding) role in delivering India from chaos and misrule.

5.3.2 Search for a Location

Recalling his first impressions on moving to Calcutta in 1910, Nirad C. Chaudhuri describes the uneven house-tops of Calcutta, which “seemed in their crowded and untidy rows to bid the most solid and ugliest imaginable defiance to the sky.” Looking down (as Chaudhuri inevitably does, in a metaphorical sense) from the Ochterlony Monument or “even from the roof of a high private house,” he could only spot any semblance of “architecture” in the European parts of town, i.e. around Dalhousie Square and the Esplanade.⁷² But the “top face” of Calcutta offered three remarkable features, which stuck in his imagination: the first were “chimneys and church spires,” which could be seen from nearly any roof-top, and the third as the ubiquitous “bamboo mast bearing on its head a bird-table consisting only of a trellised frame,” for pigeons to land on. The second, and

⁷¹ Curzon (1902), 2:214.

⁷² Nirad C. Chaudhuri, *The Autobiography of an Unknown Indian* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1968), 260. I thank Dr. Jayanta Sengupta, Secretary and Curator, Victoria Memorial Hall for this reference.

“one of the most vivid and poetic associations” for Chaudhuri’s early years in the city were the five towering cranes that were a fixture of the Calcutta skyline in the years leading to the completion of the Victoria Memorial Hall:

These impressive architectural ancillaries were not less decorative and monumental than architecture itself, and for many years these magnificently arranged objects, imprinted as they were on the southern sky of Calcutta, created the illusion of a vast Brangwyn etching overhanging the city or some colossal ghost ship working its derricks in the upper air.⁷³

The allusion to the Anglo-Welsh artist, Frank Brangwyn (1857-1956) is significant because it gives us an aesthetic reference with which Chaudhuri views the Calcutta landscape and, unsurprisingly, it is not a grandiose one. Brangwyn’s etchings are some of the most poignant visual documents of Victorian England (and contemporary Europe) as an architectural process, rather than a finished product, being birthed painfully through manual labour of the working classes. Amusingly, Chaudhuri seems disappointed at the completion of the Victoria Memorial Hall, which removed these memorable intrusions into the skyline from public view. The terms on which the discussion regarding the construction of the Victoria Memorial Hall usually unfolds – owing to the nature of extant archives – makes it appear as smooth, albeit difficult process. Literary impressions from the time help us interrogate this version through the eyes of contemporaries, who seem less enamoured of the project than the official archives suggest.

Before the plans could be drawn up and construction could begin, Curzon and his allies faced the task choosing an appropriate location for the Hall. A number of suggestions were floated by the Building Committee and rejected on various grounds.

⁷³ Ibid, 261.

Most of these were in and around the Maidan and, interestingly, came into dialogue or conflict with an existing memorial monument. Alternatively, it could compromise tracts of the Maidan, which were used for sporting activities. A triangular plot of land between the statues of Outram and Mayo was considered and rejected on the grounds that it served as the “playground of Calcutta, every part of it being constantly occupied by some form of sport”⁷⁴ and, likewise, a proposed spot near the Eden Gardens was deemed unsuitable since it would have to replace the cricket grounds. Similarly, the “Parade Ground site” was proposed and rejected because “it was not dreamed for a moment that the public would authorise any encroachment upon this, the largest open space of the entire Maidan.” For Curzon, the priorities were clear:

[N]ot to make it askew with the principal neighbouring structures or roads, that it shall have a fine approach, that its main front shall face in a direction where it can be seen from afar, and that if it is to contain, as has been suggested, a great public hall, this shall be on a side where it will easily accessible from the town without interfering with the remaining galleries of the building. A careful correlation of all these points results in the conclusion that the four sides of the main building should face the four points of the compass...⁷⁵

In 1902, when these deliberations were underway, the most likely candidate seemed to be a spot on the north-east corner of the Maidan. Curzon’s proposed orientation for the building would have made it accessible from the Chowringhee, the main thoroughfare that ran north-south along the eastern edge of the Maidan, and “confront the visitor

⁷⁴ Note by the Building Committee on the Site of the Victoria Memorial Hall, MSS.Eur F111.457B, 3-7, BL.

⁷⁵ Ibid, 3.

approaching from the river with the full line of its main facade.” The plan, however, had one major drawback. The new Hall would be positioned much too close to the Ochterlony Monument (see section 3.2.2), rendering “the juxtaposition of the two objects impossible and absurd.” With Curzon it is difficult to gauge whether his subjective opinion on any topic was formed independently or if it was subservient to his will to execute his immediate vision with least resistance. He dismissed the Monument, which had assumed iconic status in city, was “the reverse of beautiful.” “[I]n my opinion,” Curzon argued, “a bronze statue of that brave and distinguished Commander would provide a more fitting commemoration of his illustrious service and career than the present peculiar structure.”⁷⁶

But he recognized that others might not see it the same way since it had become “dear, as a landmark of Calcutta.” Following his rationale regarding commemorative monuments, onlookers were likelier to learn of the man’s achievements by “gazing upon his features in bronze, than by climbing up the interior stair case of a brick and plaster pillar.” He insisted that if popular opinion demanded that the memorial be preserved in its current form, it could be removed to a different part of the Maidan, but this would run the risk of future generations remembering them for “the narrow range of the artistic perceptions of the present Viceroy and his advisers.”⁷⁷

Eventually, a combination of two proposed sites presented itself as the most viable option: the old Presidency Jail, which was an “eye-sore to the neighbourhood,” was billed for demolition. Combining it space that was available on Cathedral Avenue (which meets Chowringhee at an acute angle near present-day Planetarium):

The space between the front of the Hall, which would look northwards, right down the Maidan, and the grass ride leading across the Maidan from Theatre

⁷⁶ Ibid, 3.

⁷⁷ Ibid, 5.

Road to the Race Course, would then be enclosed, and would provide a wide open approach to the Hall.⁷⁸

A new Central Jail was planned “on the banks of Tolly’s Nullah close to the iron Kalighat bridge at Alipore,” to make way for the Victoria Memorial Hall, and the new complex included a printing workshop, where 800 convicts were engaged in printing and binding forms and registers for the governments of Bengal and Assam.⁷⁹ At a right angle to the Chowringhee, the “Queen’s Way” was constructed, offering a clear prospect of the Hall.

Even at the time, Curzon was aware that the monument would have a transformative effect on the urban fringes, such as it was at time. The Hall was to be erected between the two lakes to the west of St. Paul’s Cathedral, to the north of the old jail. With the removal of the jail, the whole grounds that were within its premises were to be made available to the Victoria Memorial Hall, thus allowing it some breathing space. This suggested the possibility of planning sprawling gardens, which were placed under the care and supervision of Sir David Prain (Director of the Botanical Survey of India, the Royal Botanic Garden at Calcutta, and later the Royal Botanic Gardens at Kew) and the 1st Earl Redesdale, who was an accomplished amateur horticulturist. Clearly moved by the imminent possibility of his dream being translated into a marmoreal reality, Curzon waxed poetical:

that corner of the Maidan will be converted from an eyesore...into a beautiful and spacious park in the middle of which will rise the glittering marble structure, standing upon a terrace of white marble and facing northwards across the Parade Ground, with its central dome of white marble soaring into

⁷⁸ Ibid, 6.

⁷⁹ L.S.S. O'Malley, *Bengal District Gazetteers: 24 Parganas* (facsimile reprint; New Delhi: Logos Press, 2009), 192.

the air to a height of 160 feet, and visible from every part of the river and the Maidan.⁸⁰

Curzon's fears that the location was "too far removed from the more populous quarters of the town" would have been allayed had he lived to witness the daily footfall at Victoria Memorial Hall one hundred years on.

5.3.3 "Indo-Saracenic": Architecture, History, and Power

Inside the Taj Mahal, directly above the sarcophagus of Mumtaz, hangs an ornate lamp bearing the name of Curzon. During his project to restore aspects of the historic monument, Curzon had taken note of the chain that was still hanging without the original lamp. After failing to procure a suitable specimen through Lord Cromer, who was second-secretary in Cairo, he took a detour on his way back to England and placed an order among his preferred lamp-makers in the Egyptian capital.⁸¹ While this is symptomatic of his constant desire to be remembered for his acts of generosity, his fascination with the Taj was shared by other administrators and architects as well. One such was the British architect, William Emerson (1843-1924), who was commissioned to design the Victoria Memorial Hall. Its architectural abundance and the sheer beauty of the gardens surrounding it, perfected by Mughals through generations of practice, prompted Emerson to compare it with being in heaven itself. To his colleagues at the Royal Institute of British Architects, he waxed poetical about his experience of witnessing the Taj in person and, it was perhaps owing to this, that he became one of the most vocal proponents of using the "Indo-Saracenic" style in architecture during the late-19th century.⁸² However, he was not

⁸⁰ Curzon (1904) 3:323.

⁸¹ Giles Tillotson, *Taj Mahal* (London: Profile Books, 2008), 155-156.

⁸² W. Emerson, "On the Taj Mahal at Agra," *TRIBA*, 1st Series, vol. 20 (1869-70): 195-203

particularly enamoured of the idea of stylistic purity, preferring to experiment with hybridity in his own projects. Using a biological metaphor, he argued: “Indeed are not many of the most lovely flowers and plants hybrids, and has not the intermingling of different families of the human race produced some of the noblest types of men?”⁸³ Yet, passionate admirers of the “Indo-Saracenic” as both these men were, when it came to designing the Victoria Memorial Hall, they seem to have agreed to go in a different direction. This takes us to the heart of an apparent lack of unanimity when it comes to defining the architectural style of the Victoria Memorial (popularly described as “Indo-Saracenic”) and what symbolic purpose it was meant to serve.

In the decades following the Proclamation of 1858, when the Crown took over from the English East India Company, different schools of thought began to emerge surrounding the appropriate architectural style to be deployed in India. While some cultural theorists sided with the neo-Gothic revival, influenced by John Ruskin and manifest most distinctly in the work of George Gilbert Scott in India, others spoke in favour of the dubiously named “Indo-Saracenic.” Thomas Metcalf points to the debate that took place between T. Roger Smith and William Emerson, following the former’s lecture at Society of Arts in London in 1873. Smith believed in the notion of British cultural supremacy – it was their mission to uphold through their buildings “a high standard of European art,” and ensure that the best of civilizational values reached the farthest corners of the Empire. William Emerson, who had recently drawn up designs for the Muir College in Allahabad, argued that instead, the British should “follow the example of those whom they had supplanted as rulers, the Muslims,” and be flexible and

⁸³ Cited in Philip Davies, *Splendours of the Raj: British Architecture in India, 1660-1947* (New Delhi: Penguin Books, 1987), 187-188. See Ian Baucom, *Out of Place: Englishness, Empire, and the Locations of Identity* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1999), 234-235.

adaptable so as to assimilate.⁸⁴ In this debate he was echoing the views of Lord Napier, who had been asking the Government of India to adopt the “Indo-Saracenic” as the official architectural style. Impressed particularly by the economy and interpretation of the arch and the dome, Napier had insisted that the style was suitable not only for its traditional uses – in mosques and tombs – but also for public buildings such as “railway stations, theatres, galleries, and lecture halls.”⁸⁵ The colonial appropriation of the style would have fit perfectly with Curzon’s desire to project the British as unifiers of India, for, as Metcalf sums up:

The Indo-Saracenic style by contrast ideally suited the needs of British colonialism. In it not only could the distinct “Hindu” and “Saracenic” forms be melded, but the British, self-proclaimed masters of India's culture, could in the process shape a harmony the Indians themselves, communally divided, could not achieve.⁸⁶

In 1902, while plans for the Victoria Memorial proceeded apace, Curzon visited the project site of his 1903 Durbar. He had insisted on the use of the Saracenic style and personally ensured that every detailed adhered to his assimilative vision of power. Swinton Jacob’s drawings had “provided for an Amphitheatre to be covered with a light canopy of blue and white canvas in stripes, with emblematic banners on the roof.”⁸⁷ Upon Curzon’s insistence it was substituted for a “fabric of exclusively Saracenic design, every

⁸⁴ Thomas R. Metcalf, “Architecture and the Representation of Empire: India, 1860-1910,” *Representations*, no. 6 (Spring, 1984):37-65, 37. URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2928537>. Metcalf’s definition is useful: “the buildings of the Muslim dynasties that ruled between 1200 and 1800 A.D. were classed together as “Saracenic,” a term for Islam derived from the European encounter with the Arabs of the early conquests” (41). He notes that the term itself has been jettisoned in recent scholarship but remains useful when studying it within the colonial framework.

⁸⁵ *Ibid*, 42.

⁸⁶ *Ibid*, 49-50.

⁸⁷ Stephen Wheeler, *History of the Delhi Coronation Durbar* (London: John Murray, 1904), 103. See also Julie Codell, “n the Delhi Coronation Durbars, 1877, 1903, 1911,” *BRANCH: Britain, Representation and Nineteenth-Century History*, ed. Dino Franco Felluga. Web. Accessed on 16 June 2020.

feature of which should be copied from one of the Moghul buildings at Delhi or Agra.” They were constructed of wood and iron but were to “simulate the appearance of white marble.” Two architects of Indian origin, who “designed or carried out all these works with equal zeal and fidelity,” were asked to substitute a model of a pavilion--which, apparently had too many pillars--with a “four-sided pavilion copied from one of Akbar’s buildings at Agra.”⁸⁸

Both Bhai Ram Singh (1858-1916) and Gunga Ram (1851-1927) were accomplished architects, associated with the design and construction of several buildings in Lahore in the “Indo-Saracenic” style, one of the most celebrated example of their work being the Lahore Museum, which opened in its new location in 1894.⁸⁹ A year prior to its inauguration, John Lockwood Kipling’s influential tenure as curator of the museum had ended; and in 1901 Rudyard Kipling would go on to publish *Kim* in which “the crystallized image of the comprehensive knowledge upon which English hegemony rests is the museum.” As Thomas Richards notes, however:

[T]he Lahore museum must not be mistaken for its metropole, the British Museum. Though certainly a member of the loose confederation of knowledge-producing state apparatuses that has been called the imperial archive, the Lahore museum contains only local knowledge pertaining to a limited zone of empire.⁹⁰

Thus, the design of the Lahore Museum was in-keeping with the architectural achievements in the region – such as the Aitchinson College, the University of Punjab or

⁸⁸ Ibid, 104.

⁸⁹ “Background,” Lahore Museum, accessed on 16 June 2020 at <https://web.archive.org/web/20190505050020/https://lahoremuseum.punjab.gov.pk/background>.

⁹⁰ Thomas Richards, *The Imperial Archive: Knowledge and the Fantasy of Empire* (London: Verso, 1993), 29.

the National College of Arts – and the architects could respond to the contemporary fascination with the Saracenic style perhaps because they were unencumbered by the need to represent under one unifying roof the history of the Empire in India.

When considering possible architectural styles for the Victoria Memorial Hall, Curzon conceded that “a building erected with Indian money on Indian soil” should ideally be in the “Indian style.” However, he was aware that there was no such thing as a unified “Indian style,” but different schools of architecture that characterize different periods in history such as Brahminical, Jain, later-Hindu or Islamic. Then there were hybrid styles such as Hindu-Saracenic, but none of these could be said to represent India as a whole – especially when, as we have seen, the point was to build a unifying monument – being non-native to Calcutta or even Bengal. The logic that governed his adoption of the Saracenic style for the Durbar could not be transposed to Calcutta, keeping in mind the specific requirements of an exhibition space. Besides, Curzon knew that to attempt another memorial in the style would inevitably invite comparison with the Taj, whose splendour could never be matched. He reasoned that:

None of the other styles admit of the large and spacious and well-lighted halls that are required for the display of sculpture or paintings or trophies of whatsoever description. It results from this examination that the only style that is indisputably suited to the object is the classical style (whether it be termed Greek, Italian, or Palladian) in which, I believe, has been built every, or as nearly as possible every, art-gallery and museum in the world – a consensus that cannot be attributed to mere accident, but is admittedly due to the unequalled merits and capacities of the style.⁹¹

⁹¹ Note by H.E. the Viceroy on the Present State of Affairs with Regard to the Victoria Memorial Hall, MSS.Eur F111.457B, 2, BL.

The initial choice can be read in the light of Calcutta's existing architectural landscape: as Curzon said, most of the buildings in the city were constructed in the classical European mode – mostly Palladian – and, as such, while the style “was not particularly good,” it seemed unsafe to attempt a radical departure from it.

Apart from the uniformity argument, the fact that Calcutta's architecture differed from most other colonial cities because it was, so to speak, the original seat of British power in India, could also have influenced Curzon's decision. While on the one hand, it referred back to the city's past – Calcutta was, after all, his favourite – by standing outside of contemporary trends in architecture, the Victoria Memorial Hall could also lay claim to a grander notion of temporality, where it self-consciously would be likened with museums in the metropole (to return to Richards's distinction with regard to *Kim*). As Metcalf points out, many museums that came up in the late-19th or early-20th century were “Indo-Saracenic” in their design, including the Albert Hall in Jaipur, the Prince of Wales Museum in Bombay, and the Victoria Memorial Hall in Madras.⁹² But the unified Memorial to the queen was to serve a somewhat different purpose: in a sense it not only claimed a different sense of history, it also represented a wider geography. However, citing Curzon's initial plan, Metcalf concludes that the Victoria Memorial Hall in Calcutta marked the first triumph of the “classical revival” in India.⁹³

In an address to a meeting at the Indian Museum on 3 March 1904, which appears to frequently escape scholarly attention, William Emerson clarified this point. Although the Viceroy had been clear initially about his preference for a classical style, practical considerations had to be taken into account. Given the scale of Curzon's design, a “severe

⁹² Metcalf, 50.

⁹³ Ibid, 61. A happy exception to this oversight is Gavin Stamp's article, “British Architecture in India 1857-1947,” *Journal of the Royal Society of Arts* 129, no. 5298 (May 1981): 357-379. URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41373304>.

Classic type” would require “such large stones that the funds would be insufficient.”⁹⁴ Additionally, owing to the climatic conditions in Calcutta, large projecting cornices would have to be added to shade the walls, which would inevitably draw criticism for being “unscholarly architecture.” Emerson ruled out Gothic architecture, which he felt in its details was “somewhat destructive of repose and breadth” for a monument as grand. He agreed with Curzon that no Western architect could match the Oriental feeling by imitating the style, which would, in any case, be unsuited “for a Memorial to a Western Queen.” He concluded:

It seemed that a style, Occidental in character, which, however, might admit freedom of treatment, and have blended with a suggestion of Oriental feeling in some details, would best express the sentiment of a Western Monarch reigning over this splendid country, the most brilliant jewel in the British Crown.

Emerson’s solution was an Italian Renaissance building, with a “suggestion of orientalism” manifest in the domes and smaller features such as cantilevers under the cornices. According to Gavin Stamp, that the memorial was eventually “magnificently built and finished” was largely owing to the able supervision of Vincent Esch, who was also responsible for designing the large cast-iron ornamental gates for the main entrance and exit.⁹⁵

Despite best attempts, however, the Victoria Memorial Hall drew sardonic criticism from a few contemporaries who did not entirely share the official ideological view of architecture. Perhaps the government’s attempts to symbolically assimilate the Indian-ness of the British Empire through architecture was deemed paternalistic. In a

⁹⁴ William Emerson speech printed in Curzon (1904), 3:328-329.

⁹⁵ Stamp, 371.

dismissive aside, the “Eurasian” eugenicist and writer, Cedric Dover recalled in his memoirs their “voyages of discovery to the Zoo,” and referred to the unfinished Victoria Memorial, as a building that was “already beginning to look like a pretentious wedding cake.”⁹⁶ But more pertinent to the question of architectural ideology was the opposition articulated by E.B. Havell, who called it “an archaeological essay on Kedleston Hall and the Radcliffe Library at Oxford.”⁹⁷ This was part of a larger argument against the appropriation of Indian architectural styles by British architects, and in support of allowing Indian architects more significant roles.

Although the Viceroy and the architect appear to have agreed on the point of style, a difference of opinion emerged between Emerson and the Victoria Memorial Board of Trustees regarding the supply of marble. Curzon had expressed his desire to see the monument built entirely out of marble on the ground of “its intrinsic purity and beauty” and because of the view it promised amid the garden.⁹⁸ There were pragmatic concerns too such as durability, given the climate of Calcutta. Drawing on his experience of ordering stone for the Holwell monument, Curzon felt that stone transported across India on rail was likely to be costlier than importing the same quantity from Italy by ship. He had a preference for the marble from Carrara and Sicilian quarries in Italy or the Parian and Pentelican in Greece. The Pentelican marble had been used in the construction of the Parthenon, a monument, which according to Curzon, was “unquestionably the most beautiful white edifice in the world, always with the exception of the Taj.” He was open,

⁹⁶ Cedric Dover, *East Indian*, MS, 1. I thank Zack Schlachter for granting access to this manuscript.

⁹⁷ E.B. Havell, *Indian Architecture: Its Psychology, Structure, and History from the First Muhammadan Invasion to the Present Day*, 2nd ed. (London: John Murray, 1927), 235. See also Metcalf, 60.

⁹⁸ Letter from George N. Curzon to Viscount Esher, 6 February 1902, no. 1, *Papers Relating to the Supply of Makrana Marble for the Victoria Memorial Hall, Calcutta* (Simla: Press of the Private Secretary to His Excellency the Viceroy, 1905), 1.

however, to the possibility of sourcing a part of the marble from quarries in Rajputana, which had supplied the stone for the Taj and the “Pearl Mosques of Agra and Delhi.”⁹⁹

Curzon made no secret of his desire to emulate the Taj and suppliers, like W.C.G. Renton, “the largest exporter of Makrana marble, in all shapes and forms, to all parts of India,”¹⁰⁰ preserved no subtlety in their attempts to woo his custom. He wrote to the construction company, Messrs. Bird & Co., “You want to know of what marble the Taj was built. No one can deny that it was built from Makrana marble, and that the marble was taken all the way along to Agra when the rail-roads were unknown...” He asserted that although it was dearer, there could be no doubt that Makrana marble was of a higher grade compared to Italian and Grecian marbles, which “are really eclipsed before Makrana.” He went so far as to suggest that the Viceroy exercise his influence and propose to Colonel Jennings, Resident of the Western States of Rajputana, to reduce the state tax on Markrana marble intended for the Victoria Memorial.¹⁰¹

Emerson consistently showed a preference for Pentelic marbles. He argued that the sand-storms in Greece pose a greater challenge to the endurance of marbles than the Calcutta monsoons, and that to obtain the quantity of marble required for Victoria Memorial, new quarries would have to be opened at great expense.¹⁰² Eventually, however, Emerson’s estimates about the comparative price of Makrana and European sources of marble were called into question by the Board of Trustees and by Curzon himself. With allowances made by the Indian Railways, it seemed that both in terms of the possibility of maintaining close scrutiny of the quality of stone, and the overall price, Makrana marbles were the wiser choice. In the meantime Curzon wrote to Emerson of his

⁹⁹ Ibid, 1.

¹⁰⁰ Letter from W.C.G. Renton to E. Cable, 4 April 1903, letter 4, Ibid, 3.

¹⁰¹ Letter from W.A. Dring to W. Lawrence, 18 April 1903, letter 7, Ibid, 6.

¹⁰² Letter from W. Emerson, 2 October 1902, letter 24, Ibid 13.

latest visit to the Taj, which had convinced him that it was built not of pure white marble but of a streaked and bluish variety, which “presents so soft, mellow, and restful an appearance, instead of dazzling the eyes.”¹⁰³ Given the position and power that the Viceroy wielded – and the fact that this monument was his brainchild – his subjective preference was not simply an addition to the pragmatic concerns regarding the choice of marble. The reason put forth by him was almost certain to put an end to the prolonged exchanges and debates, simply through a reminder of his personal, affective involvement.

¹⁰³ Letter from Curzon to W. Emerson, 27 April 1905, letter 99, *Ibid* 75.

IV. “THE TWO-FOLD MEMORIAL”

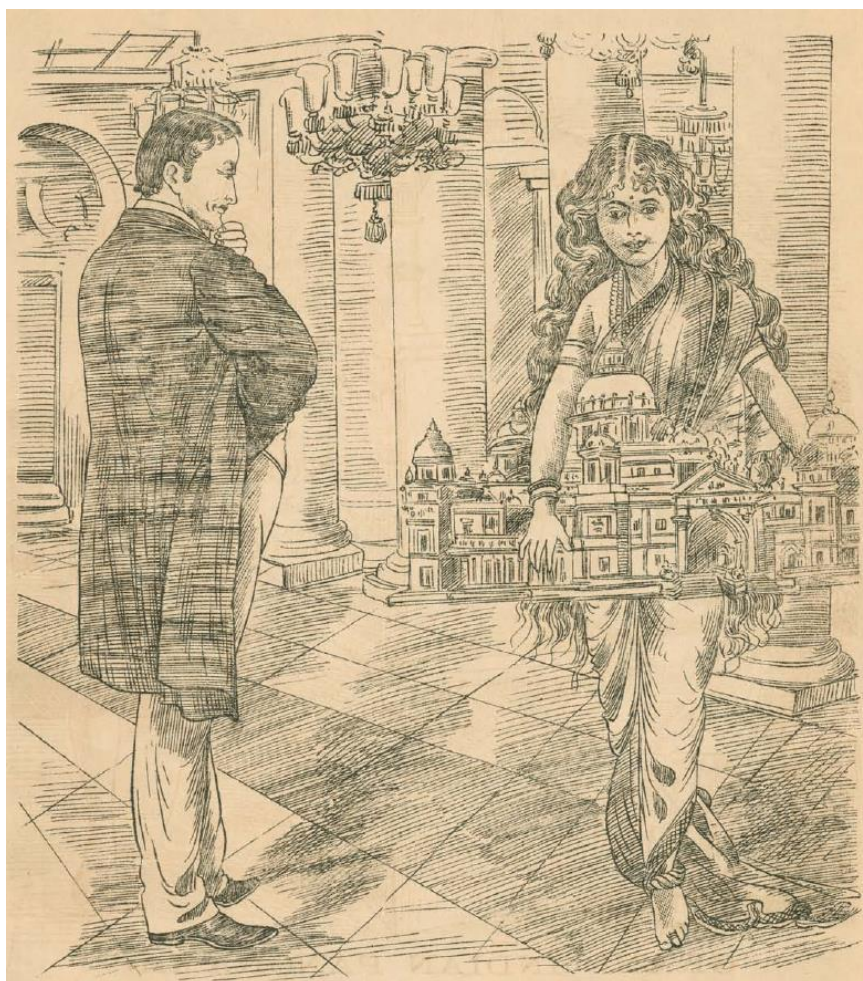


Figure 5. 3 “The Two-fold Memorial,” *Hindi Punch* (1904)

5.4.1 Curzon’s Memorial

In its April 1904 issue the *Hindi Punch* published a satirical sketch showing a self-satisfied Curzon looking at a replica of the Victoria Memorial Hall, held by a woman in a saree. Captioned “The Two-fold Memorial,” the text accompanying the sketch suggests

that the Victoria Memorial was not simply going to serve as a memorial to the Queen but also a memorial to its prime mover, Curzon:

Lord Curzon – Ah! Splendid! What a model! It will do credit to your house,
I'm sure, and will be a worthy Memorial of Victoria the Good.

Hind–And–er–er–er–of my Lord Curzon!¹⁰⁴

The sketch was published in response to the exhibition that had opened in Calcutta on 3 March 1903, showcasing the artefacts that were to form the core of the museum's collection. This was, however, far from the only jibe directed at Curzon in pages of the magazine.

The *Hindi Punch* was a “bilingual weekly published in English and Gujarati from 1878 to 1930 in Mumbai by Burjorji Nowroji Apakhtyar,”¹⁰⁵ with a circulation of about 800.¹⁰⁶ It was not the only Punch that was doing the rounds, amid a growing market for satirical comics in popular print. The *Hindi Punch* (like its Marathi counterpart) was narrated by one “Panchoba,” who put himself in “the position of a holy, sacred persona that is worshiped by others.”¹⁰⁷ The publication in question was a collection of cartoons that had appeared during the previous year (1903), and it came with a prefatory collection of responses that had appeared in the local press. (Interestingly, when it was reviewed in the British *Punch*, Mr. Punch expressed his delight at the popularity of his Brahmin counterpart, Panchoba,¹⁰⁸ thereby gesturing towards the formation of a self-conscious

¹⁰⁴ Fig 5.1 “The Two-fold Memorial,” in *Cartoons from the Hindi Punch* (Bombay: Hindi Punch Office, 1904), 51.

¹⁰⁵ Swarali Paranjape, “Crossing Boundaries: *Punch* and the Marathi Weekly *Hindu Panca* (1870-1909),” in *Asian Punches: A Transcultural Affair*, ed. Hans Harder and Barbara Mittler (Heidelberg: Springer, 2013), 162.

¹⁰⁶ Notes in Ritu Gairola Khanduri, *Caricaturing Culture in India: Cartoons and History in the Modern World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 312.

¹⁰⁷ Paranjape, 162.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid*, 162.

print genre that was gradually making its presence felt among the wealthy members of the Anglo-Gujarati community.) *The Englishman* (Calcutta) expressed its delight at finding a series of satirical sketches representing Lord Curzon, particularly with reference to the landmark event from the previous year, the Delhi Durbar.

We have His Excellency as a *bhistie*, as a coal miner, as a mahout, as a tom-tom player, as an elephant, as a ryot, as a weight-lifter, and, last but not least, as a juggler pulling yards of tape labelled “speeches” out of his mouth.¹⁰⁹

The Englishman went on to acknowledge that from the cartoons alone made it difficult to detect the *Hindi Punch*’s opinion on the Durbar, because there were inconsistencies within the cartoon. It could be argued that the *Punch*, which characteristically took pot-shots at specific events irrespective of who was at the receiving end, did not usually mount consistent attacks on any one person or group. With Curzon, however, the case was different, because he is continuously satirized by the cartoonists. In 1905, D.B. Taraporevala of Bombay published an anthology of cartoons from various publications that exclusively caricatured Curzon, edited by H.A. Talcherkar.¹¹⁰ Most of the cartoons were reprinted from the *Hindi Punch*, and they mercilessly and hilariously ridiculed incidents from nearly every aspect of the Viceroy’s governance. One such cartoon, titled “The Puzzled Milkmaid” (*Hindi Punch*, July 1902), parodied the commonly held impression that the handing out of titles at the Durbar of 1903 was going to be influenced based on the donations made by the princely states to Curzon’s Victoria Memorial Fund.¹¹¹ This forms a stark contrast with the approval that Curzon received

¹⁰⁹ “Opinions of the Press,” *Cartoons from the Hindi Punch*.

¹¹⁰ H.A. Talcherkar (ed.), *Lord Curzon in Indian Caricature* (Bombay: D.P. Taraporevala Sons & Co., 1905).

¹¹¹ *Ibid*, 43-44.

from editors in Bengal such as Thakurdas Mukhopadhyay – but we should be careful not to mistake this merely as a factor of regional difference.

A comparative study of symbolic acts of asserting political power during the Durbar of 1903 and the process of collecting money and artefacts for the Victoria Memorial Hall reveals striking similarities. In both, Curzon assumes greater importance as surrogate royalty than any Viceroy had done in the recent past. They were displays of the loyalty that the princes were supposed to feel towards the crown – the crown that, in turn, would acknowledge and help maintain their power over their subjects. The excesses that were performed, whether in the construction of an elaborate Durbar (“invented tradition”) or a monolithic narrative of the British Empire in India as narrated through the Victoria Memorial, were essentially outrageous “fictions” that were spun to test how far the princes would go to support Curzon’s narratives. The point Stephen Greenblatt makes about power in his discussion of Thomas More is a telling one, even if his broader interpretation of history is questionable: the quintessential mark of power “is the ability to impose one’s fictions upon the world: the more outrageous the fiction, the more impressive the manifestation of power.”¹¹²

In 1901 Curzon had arranged for many ruling princes of India to visit London to “participate in the Coronation ceremony of the King-Emperor”¹¹³ and is supposed to have personally visited forty princely states during his time. The Durbar of 1903 was to be the ultimate display of allegiance – although, interestingly, if we are to believe the *Hindi Punch*, acknowledgement at the Durbar itself was dependent on the show of allegiance

¹¹² Stephen Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1980), 13.

¹¹³ Anju Suri, “Curzon and British Paramountcy in the Princely States: Some Significant Aspects,” *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress* 63 (2002): 532-545, 532. URL: <http://www.jstor.com/stable/44158121>.

via the Curzon fund. The King-Emperor of the British Empire was scheduled to grace Indian soil for the first time at the Durbar, and the Viceroy was clear that it was to be different from the 1877 edition, where the Indian princes had been “mere spectators” rather than active participants. When the King-Emperor had to excuse himself due to poor health and sent the Duke of Connaught in his stead, Curzon did not yield the supreme place upon the stage to him.

The Viceroy represents the Sovereign. He is treated everywhere in India exactly as if he were the Sovereign; and this is not by Europeans only but by all nobles, chiefs and princes of India.¹¹⁴

As Anju Suri argues, “no Governor-General ever had more commanding influence over the princes and chiefs than Lord Curzon enjoyed in the closing years of his residence in India.”¹¹⁵ While the 1903 Durbar was the symbolic representation of this allegiance, the Victoria Memorial funds were its material reflection. The Maharajas of Gwalior and Kashmir offered to donate sums of 66,000 and 1,00,000 respectively. “The monument,” as Suri puts it, could be “construed as verily a living tribute of the Native Princes to their illustrious deceased ‘Sovereign.’”¹¹⁶ While other princely states and zamindaris made significant donations, I will focus on two more obvious manifestations of Curzon’s centrality to the memorial project, one of which involves significant contributions from the Dewan of Bhavnagar.

¹¹⁴ Curzon to Hamilton, 9 January 1902, CP, Vol. 161, cited in Nayana Goradia, *Lord Curzon: The Last of the British Moghuls* (2nd impression, New Delhi, 1999), 157, 279n.

¹¹⁵ Ibid, 542.

¹¹⁶ Ibid, 533.

5.4.2 Curzon's Statues

Curzon was supposed to have two statues built in his image and in his honour: one inside the grounds of the Victoria Memorial and one in front of the main entrance. In 1910, while work on the construction and collection were well underway, the Trustees came to an agreement with sculptor Frederick William Pomeroy of Kensington Square, London.¹¹⁷ The initial sketches submitted by Pomeroy showed a marble figure of Lord Curzon, 8 feet 6 inches in height, in court dress and robes, placed on a pedestal with cornice and base. The die on each side of the pedestal was to have “bas-reliefs emblematic of subjects to be selected by his lordships,” representing his key achievements as Viceroy. He was to be shown wearing the “robes of a Grand Master of the Star of India,” with the insignia and decorations that were conferred upon him by Her late Majesty. This statue was proposed as a gift by P.D. Pattani, C.I.E., Diwan of Bhavnagar, who pledged an initial sum of Rs. 50,000 towards its construction, with the promise of augmenting the initial fund as required. Probably with a view to maintaining propriety, Pattani had been asked to delay the formal approach to the Board and Curzon until the latter departed from India. After initial mutual agreements, Sir Patrick Playfair entered negotiations with sculptors in England and the final selection was left to Pattani.¹¹⁸

Pomeroy requested photographs and reference images from Curzon for the construction of the bas-reliefs, which would consolidate the narrative propagated by the Viceroy literally in stone. As David Gilmour notes, 1902 was “the apogee and watershed of Curzon’s viceroyalty,” including such achievements as the “settlement of the Berar

¹¹⁷ Minutes of the Meeting of the Board of Trustees of Victoria Memorial Hall, in MSS.EUR.F.111/459 A, 53, BL.

¹¹⁸ Letter from C.B. Bayly, Secretary, The Trustees of the Victoria Memorial, to Lord Curzon, 8 June 1910, in MSS.EUR.F.111/459 A, BL.

question” and peace on the North Western Frontier.¹¹⁹ Interestingly, these events that were to be visually represented around the statues, had virtually nothing to do with the Queen’s death, thereby making it quite transparent the meaning of the alleged “Two-fold memorial.” The most significant achievements selected by Curzon and his Board went a long way in establishing the Viceroy’s reputation as bringing to the British government a fairer interpretation of the law than his predecessors. The Berar area, for instance, had been a thorny issue between the Nizam and the British since the eighteenth century, when the East India Company had stationed a military force in the region. Gradually eroding the Nizam’s autonomy, the British began to claim the increased revenue from the Berar districts without allowing the Nizam a proportionate share of it. Curzon travelled to Hyderabad, against the advice of the India Office, and offered an annual rent for permanent lease on Berar, at a rate thrice that of the previous arrangement. In Curzon’s view, although the British could claim the letter of the law was on their side, their policy had not been “in strict accordance with the most scrupulous standards of British honour.”¹²⁰ Although part of the initial plan, this achievement had to go unrepresented in Pomeroy’s bas-reliefs because there was apprehension that the Nizam might not look kindly upon representation in sculpture, as it went against his religious dicta.¹²¹

Curzon’s solution to the recurring problems at the North Western Frontier, however, did find a place in the panels, represented by the offering a sheep by one of the chiefs to the Viceroy as a symbolic promise of maintaining peaceful relationship. On 26 April 1902, at a Durbar held in Shahi Bagh at Peshawar, Curzon had occasion to address the “Chiefs, Native gentlemen, and representatives of the North-West Frontier Province

¹¹⁹ David Gilmour, “Proconsular Zenith,” in *Curzon: Imperial Statesman* (Penguin, 2019), ebook, Chapter 16.

¹²⁰ *Ibid*, Chapter 16.

¹²¹ Letter from Playfair to Curzon, 3 May 1911, in MSS.EUR.F.111/459 A, BL.

and adjoining trans-border tracts.”¹²² Curzon claimed familiarity not just with the British side of the narrative about repeated political skirmishes but also the Afghan side. Recognizing it as a three-way debate, sought to understand the Pathan side even better, in the interest of maintaining harmonious relationships. In his speech, he assured them that the British had no intention of interfering with the autonomy – political or religious – of the region. There were “dangerous spirits” on the Frontier, who were eager to “stir up religious strife” and he declared that he had no tolerance for religious sentiments when facing the prospect of war. In no uncertain terms, he articulated the Government’s policy:

We have no wish to seize your territory or interfere with your independence.

If you go on worrying and raiding and attacking, there comes a time when we say, This thing must be put an end to: and if the tribes will not help us to do it, then we must do it ourselves.¹²³

Curzon proved a difficult subject for Pomeroy. He allowed only three sittings by 1912, and his long absences – Pomeroy had to wait for his occasional approvals – started to make the clay model crack. After Pomeroy had it displayed at the Royal Academy in 1912, Curzon appears to have communicated his criticism to the sculptor. Pomeroy responded humbly but firmly, pointing out Curzon’s apparent detachment had made conditions difficult for his work.¹²⁴ However, after several rounds of correspondence, the statue finally made it to Calcutta in the steamship *Ozarda* in February 1915, carrying handfuls of salt water and mud in the “trough-shaped” long fold of Curzon’s cloak. It was

¹²² Curzon (1906), 2:146.

¹²³ George N. Curzon, Speech at the Durbar at Peshawar, 26 April 1902, in *Lord Curzon in India: Being a Selection from His Speeches as Viceroy and Governor-General of India 1898-1905* (London: Macmillan & Co., 1906), 2:147.

¹²⁴ Letter from Pomeroy to Curzon, in MSS.EUR.F.111/459 A, BL.

unboxed and kept at Belvedere temporarily, before a place for it could be determined in the grounds of the Victoria Memorial.^{125 126}



Figure 5.4 Panel of the pedestal of Lord Curzon statue

The original monument to Curzon, however, appears to have left no record of similar complexities. It was commissioned to Hamo Thornycroft, who in 1905 had sculpted a memorial to W.E. Gladstone, which stood on the Strand in East Aldwych, London. It was Curzon's wish that Thornycroft provide "four panels or bas-reliefs on the pedestal and four groups of bronze figures on the platform." The pedestals were to represent, once again, his major achievements: the Delhi Durbar, the Victoria Memorial, the restoration of the Taj and the Imperial Cadets. The four groups of bronze figures were

¹²⁵ Letter B.A. Gupte to Playfair, 18 February 1915, in in MSS.EUR.F.111/459 A, BL.

¹²⁶ Figure 5.2, Panel of the pedestal of Lord Curzon statue, photograph, PVC6710, VMH. By kind permission of the Victoria Memorial Hall, Kolkata, India.

to represent the relief of famine (“handing food to Native Women and Children”), industry and commerce, “Frontier pacification” (“Pathan holding out a sword”), education, reduction of taxes, and finally, justice between European and native. The podium was to stand on a platform approached by steps on two sides, made of the finest Portland Stone. Curzon was particular about its appearance: he wanted to guard against “a possible tendency to make the whole thing too small,” and the “inclination to put up the subsidiary groups too close to the main pedestal.”¹²⁷ Post-independence, however, this statue was replaced by one of freedom-fighter and philosopher, Aurobindo Ghosh (1872-1950), while Curzon found a place in the Barrackpore Flagstaff House alongside many colonial statues. His allegorical companions – from whom he had wished to maintain a distance – remained in their original position, suggestive of a somewhat absurd relationship with the statue of Aurobindo Ghosh.

¹²⁷ Undated newspaper clipping inside H.E.A. Cotton’s copy of *Calcutta Old and New* (Calcutta: W. Newman & Co., 1907), IOR MSS Eur F295/17, Asia and African Collections, BL. See “The Curzon Memorial in Calcutta (1915) by Sir W. Hamo Thornycroft,” Victorian Web, URL: <http://www.victorianweb.org/sculpture/thornycroft/42.html>.

Conclusion

I. TOWARDS DECOLONIZING URBAN HISTORY

6.1.1 Reimagining the Archival Past

– Charnock was a great man. If it weren't for him, where would Calcutta be today? Would you have those horse-drawn trams rolling out to celebrate the tercentenary? So many journals and magazines with their special issues, so many seminars – none of it would have happened. How would I have graced so many events with my august presence, eh? Sometimes as chairman, sometimes as president – I didn't know I had it in me to be so many different types of guests. Would I have met all these important ministers? [a former curator of Victoria Memorial Hall] ¹

– Charnock was little more than a fine piece of crap. That idiot came and shat here and voila, Calcutta was born! If it weren't for scumbags like you, why would people mistake that useless philanderer for our city's father?... [the old raven]

¹ Nabarun Bhattacharya, *Kangal Malshat* [War-cry of the have-nots], in *Upanyas Samagra* [Complete novels] (Kolkata: Dey's Publishing, 2010), 295.

– Say what you want, Charnock’s greatness remains undiminished. I merely uphold that which is the truth.

– Shut up! No one needs to uphold the truth. Truth is no broomstick that it would need holding up. Truth my foot. Ever heard of Joseph Townsend?

This provocative exchange in Nabarun Bhattacharya’s *Kangal Malshat* [War-cry of the have-nots] (2003), takes place between the curator of Victoria Memorial Hall (upholder of official history) and a wizened old raven, mastermind of the carnivalesque revolution that unfolds in the novel. Apart from the flying humans, known as *Fyataru*, the raven is aided in his efforts by the ghost of Begum Johnson, “the oldest British resident in Bengal, universally beloved, respected and revered,”² who embodies a personal and memorial (rather than historical) knowledge of the city’s past. The conversation is prompted by a set of remarks the curator makes about the history of the city to a group of foreign visitors to the VMH, punctuated by the occasional “Thank god for Job Charnock,” which irks the irreverent raven greatly. He recites for the curator a set of verses found on the grave of Joseph Townsend (who happened to share a cemetery with Frances Johnson), that present a contradictory account of the oft-repeated fable of Charnock’s rescue of a woman about to die as *sati*.

Shoulder to shoulder, Joe my boy, – into the crowd like a wedge!

Out with your hangers, messmates, but do not strike the edge!

Cries Charnock – ‘Scatter the faggots! Double that Brahman in two!

The tall pale widow is mine, Joe – the little brown girl’s for you.’³

² “Mrs. Frances Johnson,” *The Bengal Obituary: Or, a Record to Perpetuate the Memory of Departed Worth* (Calcutta: Holmes & Co., 1851), 6.

³ Anonymous, “The Police of Calcutta: A Retrospect,” *The Calcutta Review* 174, ed. H.A.D. Phillips (October 1888): 308.

The curator, who had asked for documentary evidence of the raven's tirades against Charnock, is left red-faced. "Astounding," he says, as he realizes his mistake. Incidentally, at the other end of the Empire's ideological spectrum, the same poem had been discovered in the pages of the *Calcutta Review* by Rudyard Kipling in 1935, who had had a distinctly different response: "Nonsense? Yes. But it seems to me rather mysterious and attractive nonsense."⁴

Although Nabarun actively resisted the categorization of his works as post-modern fiction,⁵ the conflict between formal versions of events or spaces and subterranean (perhaps even subaltern) perspectives runs through many of his works. The "formal versions" are mediated by bourgeois culture and norms, acceptable for the maintenance of status quo. Histories, such as those espoused (in Nabarun's view) by institutions of knowledge preservation, protection and circulation, appeared unanchored to the micro-events that constitute them, and are seen as narratives that inevitably glorify the authors of the master discourse at the cost of marginalizing other voices. Through the figures of Frances Johnson and the ancient raven, Nabarun presents alternative versions of history that survive as personal memories of the everyday lives of the past, desacralized. Rather than signalling the death of history, the strategy adopted by Nabarun constitutes, therefore, a liberation of our understanding of the past from static, intangible narratives and a movement towards egalitarianism that represents a bottom-up view of events mediated by individual memories.

While the ability to fly enables the socially, politically and economically disenfranchised Fyataru to subvert power hierarchies by rising to a higher altitude than

⁴ Letter from Rudyard Kipling to Arthur Hornblow, 27 May 1935, *The Letters of Rudyard Kipling*, 1931-36, ed. Thomas Pinney (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2004), 6:357.

⁵ Nabarun Bhattacharya, *Katha-barta* [Conversations] (Kolkata: Bhashabandhan, 2015), 11.

the street where they routinely compose their “texts,”⁶ Nabarun’s view of history suggests a radical revision and diffusion of the authority of historical narratives by positing it in human subjectivities. It tries to destabilize historiography that assumes seemingly higher, disinterested altitudes (with respect to micro-events) by deploying a range of archival documentation to establish their objectivity, and opens it up to the same vulnerabilities associated with personal memories.⁷ Even when colonial or imperial historiography does not actively discredit localized forms of knowledge of the past, the encounter between the two is inevitably marked by a power imbalance that stems from the factual superiority claimed by the documentary archive of the state itself. The point, I feel, is not to discard the colonial archive but to offer re-contextualized readings of the past that do not allow the archive to dictate the terms of the discussion. The question that lingers uncomfortably, however, is: what methodology do we adopt to destabilize the dominant narratives without compromising on the historical fidelity of the alternative? Can it only be recuperated through a post-modernist recourse to creative readings of the past, or perhaps through fictional re-imaginings?

Since Jean-François Lyotard called into question the validity of the “grand narrative”⁸ within the postmodern condition of knowledge production, philosophers of history have increasingly given credence to the importance of narrative analysis in the study of the past. Following Paul Ricoeur, historian Alun Munslow has argued, for instance, that “history is first and foremost a literary enterprise.”⁹ A strong proponent of

⁶ I use it in Michel de Certeau’s sense of the term. Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 91-92.

⁷ I have discussed the relationship between altitude and history at length in the following article. Sujaan Mukherjee, “Cities from Above in Literature: Moscow, Kolkata,” *Sanglap* 3, no. 2 (2017): 286-320. URL: <https://sanglap-journal.in/index.php/sanglap/article/view/106>.

⁸ Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi, *Theory and Literature* Vol. 10 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 37-41.

⁹ Alun Munslow, *Deconstructing History*, 2nd ed. (Abingdon: Routledge, 1997), 127.

“deconstructionist history” (not to be confused with “deconstructionism” in Derrida’s sense of the term), Munslow describes historiography as “emplotment,” which he defines thus: “To emplot means to turn a chronicle of chaotic events into a narrative whereby the events are explained and made meaningful.”¹⁰ In Munslow’s tripartite categorization of historiography rejects “constructionism” and “reconstructionism” since the former tries to “propose rather than discover relationships between events in the past,”¹¹ and the latter relies too heavily on empiricism as a means of knowledge acquisition.¹²

There are a few gaps in his categorization, however, that pertain to my project of re-imagining urban historiography. László Vörös draws attention to Munslow’s failure to explain why, despite its alleged methodological fallacies, reconstructionism remains popular. He argues that the answer lies “in the extra-disciplinary domain of the social functions of history.” He writes:

I argue that the social purpose of the knowledge produced by historians and the interaction between historians and the public have a decisive formative influence on both the theory and practice of the discipline...reconstructionist and constructionist-improper historians can serve these societal functions

¹⁰ Ibid, 109.

¹¹ Ibid, 193.

¹² Munslow’s definitions are worth quoting here at length:

Constructionism: “The requirement of historians to propose rather than discover relationships between events in the past” (Glossary, 193).

Deconstructionist history: “In history, a model of study that questions the traditional assumptions of empiricism couched as factualism, disinterested analysis, objectivity, truth, and the continuing division between history, ideology, fiction and perspective. Instead, deconstructionist history accepts that language constitutes history’s content as well as the concepts and categories deployed to order and explain historical evidence through our linguistic power of figuration” (Glossary, 194).

Reconstructionist history: “Reconstructionist historians range from conservative empiricists to practical realists dependent primarily upon their attitude towards the validity and practice of commonsense empiricism as the fundamental historical method” (Glossary, 203).

because their accounts are based on realist-empiricist epistemologies congruent with naïve perceptions of the ‘past.’¹³

Connected to this, and more specifically relevant to my analyses of the contributions of Holwell and Curzon, is an assumption implicit in Munslow’s proposition. He writes:

While historians as conventionally understood required truthful, factual statements, the issue is never what are the facts (because unless a historian tells lies, they are generally agreed) but how the facts are arranged – emplotted.¹⁴

Now, while deconstructionist historians like Munslow have repeatedly acknowledged the importance of narrative and literary analysis of history, there seems to be an oversight regarding the possibility of historical subjects being historians themselves, and the public function of history through contested narratives.

As we see with the editors of the *Bengal Obituary*, or Holwell, and Curzon seemingly innocuous documents – collections of epitaphs, letters to friends, events organized – can also be self-consciously historiographical, and require greater vigilance when considered as historical record. The historical truth is constructed on each occasion by the strategic coming together of different narrative media, spheres of knowledge circulation, and public utterance, and it stands to reason, therefore, that their deconstruction also requires a multidisciplinary approach that can study these linkages of power. Rather than simply positing that Kolkata’s colonial/imperial history was constructed through literary narratives, my attempt has been to study various kinds of

¹³ László Vörös, “Social Demand and the Social Purpose of History: What is Missing from Alun Munslow’s Classification of Historiography?,” *The Hungarian Historical Review* 6, no. 4 *Boundaries of Contemporary History* (2017): 776-803, 776-777.

¹⁴ Munslow, 109.

narrative formation and their mutual legitimization – a step in the direction of un-colonizing urban history. While it is unlikely that mechanisms of knowledge propagation that are as comprehensive as the ones that established this historiography will combine in our postmodern age (given the present right wing tendencies of global politics, this is probably something to be grateful for), there is hope that self-reflexive historians who operate within the social domains mentioned by Vörös will consciously gravitate in that direction.

6.1.2 Alternative Histories

In the late nineteenth century, as we have noted, a specific narrative and causality of Calcutta's colonial past was established through the efforts of amateur antiquarians, historians and administrators. In my dissertation I have focused on these “emplotments” with the hope of understanding the complex networks of knowledge, landscape and power that combined to produce a colonial historiography but that is not to say alternative narratives did not exist at the time. Deonnie Moodie's recent work, *The Making of a Modern Temple and a Hindu City* (2019) contradicts Swati Chattopadhyay's claim that “the body of knowledge we have inherited and dub the ‘urban history of Calcutta’ is an imperial history”¹⁵ by pointing to the works of Surjyakumar Chattopadhyay, Gaur Das Bysack, Prankrishna Datta and Atun Krishna Ray that posit Kalighat as the centre around which Calcutta's urban development takes place in the nineteenth century.¹⁶ In their works, Moodie traces a history that starts with geological claims of land formation rather the culturally produced space of colonial Calcutta – or *Kalikshetra*, “a triangular region

¹⁵ Swati Chattopadhyay, *Representing Calcutta: Modernity, nationalism and the colonial uncanny* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2005), 7.

¹⁶ Deonnie Moodie, *The Making of a Modern Temple and a Hindu City: Kalighat and Kolkata* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2019), 49.

stretching from Bahula [Behala, presumably] to Daksinesvar and extending two miles from the Ganges.”¹⁷ In terms of foundational narratives, this is arguably the only significant contender to the alluring construction of a “City Father” in the shape of Job Charnock.

The sacred geography described by Ray was supposed to be bound by the Hindu trinity, Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva at the three angles, “with the goddess Kali at its centre.”¹⁸ While Moodie’s rebuttal to Chattopadhyay’s claim about “urban history” of Calcutta is amply substantiated, I would argue that the landscape in secular parts of the city was dominated – perhaps monopolized – by a colonial monuments. Local knowledge of the city’s origins often acknowledges the centrality of Kalighat in its evolutionary history but faced with the public history imposed by colonial writers and architects, they tend to lose their conviction. The physical presence of memorial monuments, even if their meanings are not often understood historically, tend to exert a wider influence when it comes to citizens internalizing narratives of their past. We shall return to this point later.

6.1.3 Alternative Historiography

In 1914, Scottish biologist and urban planner, Patrick Geddes arrived in India on invitation from Lord Pentland, the Governor of Madras, to display his Cities and Town Planning Exhibition in India.¹⁹ The exhibition itself fell prey to naval rivalries in the Bay of Bengal, when, close to Madras, the *SMS Emden* sunk the ship carrying it. Geddes’s stay in India saw him participate as consultant in a number of cities, including Calcutta

¹⁷ A.K. Ray, *A Short History of Calcutta* [1902], ed. Nishith R. Ray (Calcutta: Riddhi, 1982), 11. Quoted in Moodie, 50.

¹⁸ Ibid, 11. Quoted in Moodie, 50-51.

¹⁹ Partho Datta, *Planning the City: Urbanization and Reform in Calcutta c. 1800-c. 1940* (New Delhi: Tulika Books, 2012), 353.

and Indore, suggesting alternatives to the established modes of urban planning. His ideologically motivated efforts met with uneven success during his travels in South Asia but the reports he prepared, such as the *Barra Bazar Improvement* report,²⁰ are evidence of his broader historical thinking about cities. When called on to study the Calcutta Improvement Trust's (CIT) plans of re-imagining the congested Barra Bazar area, Geddes suggested that they adopt a significantly less drastic policy towards urban planning and opt instead for "conservative surgery."²¹ This was directly opposed to the motivations that lay behind the founding of the CIT, a body that could circumvent representational politics and act unilaterally (subject to availability of funds). The CIT's plan had little regard for the existing architecture of the neighbourhood or for spatial practices prevalent there, which constituted the seemingly inexplicable pulse of all life and commerce in the area.²²

In the urban planning discourse of late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries Calcutta, we notice a palpable sense of frustration with the city's seemingly unplanned growth. The arch imperialist, Rudyard Kipling felt there was ample "reason...to turn several Haussmanns loose in the city,"²³ and Curzon's close collaborator H.E.A. Cotton remarked on "the talk...of an Anglo-Indian Haussmann who is to transform the teeming Indian quarter."²⁴ Curzon himself took part in the Utopianism, going so far as to claim once that after his term as Viceroy he would "like to become Chairman of the Calcutta

²⁰ Patrick Geddes, *Barra Bazar Improvement: A Report to the Corporation of Calcutta* (Calcutta: Corporation Press, 1919). I thank Prof. Partho Datta for helping me access a facsimile of this elusive document.

²¹ Ibid, 25.

²² For a detailed discussion see Sujaan Mukherjee, "Contested Imaginations of an Urban Utopia: Calcutta in the 1910s," in *Urban Utopias: Memory, Rights, and Speculation*, ed. Barnita Bagchi (Kolkata: Jadavpur University Press, 2020) 42-71. Open access URL: <https://jadunivpress.com/2020/08/20/urban-utopias/>.

²³ Rudyard Kipling, *The City of Dreadful Night* (New York: Alex. Grosset & Co., 1899), 65.

²⁴ H.E.A. Cotton, *Calcutta Old and New: A Historical and Descriptive Handbook to the City* (Calcutta: W. Newman & Co., 1907), iv.

Corporation,” but on condition that he is allowed “ten years of office, sufficient cash, and a free hand.”²⁵ He was quick to remind his audience at the Bengal Chamber of Commerce, however, that no civilization could afford to look to the future without regard for their past.²⁶ Somewhere between the vision of the past and the future, there was a fissure in the present, marking a break between the two and keeping the past firmly in its place, as we have seen in Chapter 5.

For Geddes, history was not divided into clear segments but a continuity that was embodied in social lives of cities. His view is summed up neatly in an address to the Utopian Society at Chelsea:

Though to historians and their readers the past may too often seem dead, or at best a record to be enshrined in libraries for the learned, it is of the very essence of our growing sociological re-interpretation of the past to see its essential life as continuous into the present, and even beyond, and so maintain the perennation of culture, the immortality of the social soul.²⁷

Central to Geddes’s understanding of localized history was the notion of *locus genii*, or a space that would invoke the nascent tutelary spirit of a place, namely its *genius loci*.²⁸ Apart from his critique of the CIT’s Barra Bazar plan, during his stay in Calcutta, Geddes also drew up a plan to repurpose the old government mint, whose demolition was on the cards. He suggested that the old building, “one of the fine architectural monuments of

²⁵ George Curzon, *Speeches by Lord Curzon of Kedleston, 1902-1905* (Calcutta: Office of the Superintendent of Government Printing, 1905), 3:131.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 128.

²⁷ Patrick Geddes, “Chelsea Past and Possible,” in *Utopian Papers: Being Addresses to ‘The Utopians,’* ed. Dorothea Hollins (London: Masters & Co., 1908), 14.

²⁸ For a detailed discussion see Volker M. Welter, *Biopolis: Patrick Geddes and the City of Life* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002), 83-99.

Calcutta” could be put to social use, perhaps as a school.²⁹ His position, albeit abstractly defined, addresses a critical gap that existed in Curzon’s understanding of the city’s past and present as disconnected temporally from one another. By shifting the focus of urban cultures from the “great men” or “watershed events,” Geddes’s ideas are potentially crucial to our valuation of sites of memory and their role in shaping an uninterrupted identity for a particular community. It is hardly surprising, therefore, when we hear his student and urban historian, Lewis Mumford proclaim in 1937 that the monument – inherently anti-modern – is dead.³⁰ After all, with Curzon’s limited imagination of public monuments and statues (meant to deliver a message, rather than being artistic creations), a conceptualization of spatial memory as subtle as Geddes’s simply could not have been expressed.

²⁹ Geddes (1919), 17-18.

³⁰ Lewis Mumford, “The Death of the Monument,” in *Circle: International Survey of Constructive Art* (London: Faber & Faber, 1937), 263-270.

II. LOCAL COMMEMORATIVE CULTURES

6.2.1 Post-independence Urban Memorial Cultures

Growing up in Selimpur (south Kolkata) in the 1990s, I spent most of my evenings between ages eight and twelve playing *para* (neighbourhood) cricket with contemporaries at the intersection of two lanes. As anyone familiar with this form of the game knows, each *para* has to design a fresh and unique set of rules, keeping in mind the precise configuration of residential buildings, lamp posts and open drains in that specific neighbourhood. One winter, we were told out of the blue by a *para* elder that our game would have to be put on hold for a few days because a memorial tablet was being erected in front of the Basu house. For us, that translated to a new obstruction around square leg, relative to the batting side of the street intersection. With much fanfare, a concrete “Panu *smriti stambha*” (memorial to a local luminary, known as Panu) was constructed, replete with a marble tablet bearing details of his life. After our infantile sense of humour got used to the name, an honour code was established that no batsman would run after the ball disappeared between the new tablet and the building’s wall because it was difficult to extract it from there. By the next Durga Puja (autumn), the lettering had already begun to fade, and on my last visit a couple of weeks back, I saw that it had lost the plaque entirely. Only a concrete slab stood inexplicably at the corner of the Basu house, serving no memorial purpose whatsoever. Perhaps the neighbourhood kids today interpret its position on their field of play differently, oblivious to the honour code that governed our games.

If we were to create a typology of material commemorative gestures visible on the streets of Kolkata (of India too), one could start with: i. Busts of nationalist leaders placed on pedestals with varying degrees of facial detail, ii. Memorial monuments constructed as miniature versions of Christian and pre-Christian funerary architecture (obelisks, three-level pedestals, etc.), iii. Memorial tablets set on outer walls of buildings, iv. Tablets noting donation of public amenities, such as drinking water taps, v. Marble tablets in temples, and vi. Marble tablets on apartment buildings recalling the name of the previous owner of the property. These practices present a fascinating field of study for any urban anthropologist but I have not been able to dedicate myself to their cause in this dissertation. They can be read as markers of significant transitions within society (the replacement of family-owned properties with apartment buildings), betraying an internalized urgency to associate memories of a person with physical spaces. The individuals commemorated by busts or memorial tablets embody values that the neighbourhoods themselves aspire to (often these are *para* patriarchs, who stand for the community spirit) and sometimes in the “colony *para*-s” around and south of Jadavpur, they can even celebrate individuals who were instrumental in holding the community together in the aftermath of partition or the refugee crises post-independence.

6.2.2 Public Memory and Forgetting

Returning to Robert Musil’s declaration that there is nothing as invisible as a monument,³¹ it makes us wonder if this is doubly so in Hindu-majority Indian cities, where there is no direct linkage between an individual and the physical spaces associated with their life or death. In most cases, they perform their commemorative function only

³¹ Robert Musil, “Monuments,” *Posthumous Papers of a Living Author*, trans. Peter Wortsman (New York: Archipelago Books, 2006), 64.

once – during their consecration – or, at best twice and for the final time, during its first anniversary. The flowers that are garlanded around them start to dry and before long the eye of the passer by learns not to notice it as anything more than an inarticulate part of the urban landscape. When such memorials happen to be constructed in sacred spaces associated with the individual's death, they stand a better chance of being maintained but that depends on the municipal authority's political leanings at any given point. For example, in Nabarun Bhattacharya's *Kangal Malshat*, Borilal laments the miserable state in which Ashutosh Mukherjee's (1864-1924) memorial inside the Keoratala cremation grounds lay at the time.³² But let us close with some thoughts related to ideas of the "public," memory, forgetting and mourning, which allow us to reflect the possibility of evolving a methodology to study urban memorial cultures using inter-disciplinary tools.

Describing one of his many walking tours with the American poet, Allen Ginsberg, Shakti Chattopadhyay recalled an encounter with a "mad man" near the memorial plaque of Rabindranath Tagore at Nimtollah ghat.³³ This man, who claimed to have been present the day Tagore was cremated there on the 22nd of Sraban or 7 August 1941, had witnessed the poet's final journey. Since then he had dedicated his life to guarding Tagore's memorial night and day from callous passers-by who might desecrate it. The man had whispered something into Ginsberg's ear, which Chattopadhyay failed to catch, before exhorting the young poets to do something in order to preserve Tagore's memorial with some dignity. The commemorative performance for Tagore, as Partha Chatterjee notes, is held rather at his birthplace annually. These are "not religious

³² Bhattacharya, 236.

³³ Shakti Chattopadhyay, "Rupkathar Kolkata" [Kolkata, a fairytale], *Gadyasangraha* [Collected prose] (Kolkata: Dey's Publishing, 1997), 314-315.

festivals in their specific ceremonial practices, and yet not dissimilar in spirit,”³⁴ Chatterjee notes, before remarking on how Nabinchandra Sen (1847-1909) would have been amused at Tagore’s posthumous predicament in the light of their argument over public mourning. The debate had been triggered by an event organized in the wake of the novelist, Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay’s (1838-1894) death.

Three weeks after his death, the Chaitanya Library and the Beadon Square Literary Club had organized a condolence meeting, to which Rabindranath Tagore had been invited to speak. Nabinchandra Sen, a senior poet, was supposed to preside. He declined the invitation on the grounds that he could not agree with the “artifice” involved in public mourning. Grief was a personal matter and this new-fangled social ritual did not impress Sen. Rabindranath not only appeared and spoke, but came out later with an explanation of his position on public gatherings of this nature in the pages of *Sadhana*.³⁵ In the essay, he analysed the emergence of a new sphere of subjective performance and articulation in Bengal’s modernity, referred to as the “public.”³⁶ This “public,” for Rabindranath, was not a fully formed entity at the time but in the process of becoming and, as such, it was important for poets and writers to engage with it and shape its progress.³⁷

If a mature public sphere³⁸ has to be imagined, it needs to factor in textual as well as spatial practices. The scope for the latter in public spaces, of course, is heavily

³⁴ Partha Chatterjee, “Two Poets and Death: On Civil and Political Society in the Non-Christian World,” in *Questions of Modernity*, ed. Timothy Mitchell (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 35-48, 48.

³⁵ Reprinted as Rabindranath Tagore, “Shoksabha” (May-June 1894), in *Rabindra-rachanabali* (Calcutta: Government of West Bengal, 1989), 10: 291-99.

³⁶ Ibid, 293. Cited in Chatterjee, 37.

³⁷ Ibid, 293-294. Cited in Chatterjee, 37-38.

³⁸ Chatterjee offers an adaptive reading of the Habermasian model. See Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, trans. Thomas Burger (Cambridge (MA): MIT Press, 1989).

dependent upon access and rights to the city granted by the colonizers, as the memorial landscape remains under monopoly of their agenda. There are, undoubtedly, overlaps between the formation of a Bengali “civil society” at the turn of the century and my studies, I hope, will have shown how the two interacted (e.g. Subhas Chandra Bose’s campaign against the Black Hole) on rare occasions. What I hope to research as a follow-up to the current dissertation, is the formation of this localized public in the postcolonial city and understand it through commemorative practices articulated in the urban space. In order to truly decolonize the historiography of the city, it is important to not just analyse and reveal the insidious processes that shaped it but also suggest alternative methodologies that go beyond reactive strategies and enable the study of regional urban memorial practices on their own diverse and often uncategorizable terms.

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