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Imperial Selves

Negotiating Collectivity in Anglo-Indian Life-Writing

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I. INTRODUCTION

> What varied opinions we constantly hear/ Of our rich Oriental possessions;/ What a jumble of notions, distorted and queer,/ Form an Englishman's 'Indian Impressions'!
>
> George F. Atkinson (1859: n.p.)

1. Anglo-Indian Life-Writing from 1818 to the Present

In the verses introducing his collection of satirical portraits of Anglo-Indian society, *Curry and Rice on Forty Plates* (1859), George F. Atkinson assembles assorted stereotypes of India. Afflictions like the glaring sun, mosquitoes and prickly heat, exotic characters such as thugs, fakirs and nautch-girls, endemic facilities such as punkahs and palanquins, and idiosyncratic concoctions like mulligatawny give the reader a spicy foretaste of what the subtitle promises to portray: "Social Life at 'Our Station' in India". The 'jumble of notions' Atkinson invokes in his funny exposition figures very prominently in most accounts of this country. Recording their 'Indian Impressions' was a favourite pursuit of Anglo-Indians—Britons who spent part of their life on the Indian Subcontinent—[1], and especially of those who belonged to one of the official services, such as the prestigious Indian Civil Service, the Indian Political Service, the Indian Forest Service, the Indian Service of Engineers or the Indian Medical Service. These Anglo-Indian autobiographers, memoirists, letter writers and diarists may have drawn on a range of different recipes of how best to combine the ingredients of life in India; yet each of these recipes would invariably result in a representation not only of India, but also of the writer's self and the British Empire, to whose fate Anglo-Indian lives were inextricably linked. For Anglo-Indians, "the personal truly was political" (Procida 2002a: 130), and vice versa. Anglo-Indian life-writing is therefore marked by an especially close reciprocal relationship between "self and nation, person and place" (ibid.: 131), which offers truly rich ground for the closer engagement with the heritage of the empire called for by leading public figures in Britain today. As journalist and broadcaster Jeremy Paxman insists in *Empire: What Ruling the World Did to the British* (2011): "Without understanding how we looked at the rest of the world, we cannot really understand ourselves." (3)

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1 'Anglo-Indian' was the self-denomination of the British in India; people of mixed British and Indian descent were called 'Eurasians'. Following Government orders, the 1911 Census of India, though, stated that 'Anglo-Indian' should henceforth be used as the official designation for mixed-race people, and the term 'Eurasian' was officially dropped (see Buettner 2004: 12). This study uses the term 'Anglo-Indian' in its original meaning.

1.1   Lives and Life-Writing in British India

The political position of the British in India renders the exceptionally close connection of the private and the political, the individual and the collective in British India even more critical. In India,[2] individual lives were tightly bound up with a potentially very unstable political entity. The foundation of the East India Company by royal charter on 31 December 1600 marks the beginning of a chequered colonial history. Although Britain in effect controlled the major part of the subcontinent from the defeat of the Maratha Empire in 1818 (see David 2003 [2002]: 5f.),[3] British rule in India remained precarious up until its end. Revealing the 'illusion of permanence' (Hutchins 1967) associated with British rule in India, Governor-General Lord Hardinge remarks on its tenuous hold in 1844:

> In India no man can say what a month may produce in a country of 120 millions governed by an army which is officered by aliens, whilst the mass of the force under these foreign officers consents to co-erce [sic!] their own countrymen, merely for the sake of pay and pension—mesmerised as it were by a handful of officers exhibiting in the working of the system the greatest phenomenon that the world ever witnessed. (Hardinge, quoted from James 2008 [1997]: 65f.)

The British found themselves in a position of permanent insecurity in this country, and simultaneously in constant need of justifying their claim to rule. Feared invasions of India by others—the French in the 18th and the Russians in the 19th century— posed an additional threat,[4] as did the imminent Japanese attack in World War II; outside India, too, the British Empire was, as Richard Price (2006: 613) emphasises, caught up in "a process of continual disruption and instability".[5]

The so-called 'Indian Mutiny' of 1857/58 in particular, which began as a revolt of Indian sepoys in Meerut, but quickly spread to most of Northern and Central India, posed a serious challenge to the British position in this country and shaped the British self-image decisively (see V. Nünning 1996b). Known among Indians as the 'First War of Independence' (see Brantlinger 1990 [1988]: 201),[6] the Mutiny rigorously

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2   As a geographical and political denomination, the term 'British India' here refers to any of the territories of the Indian Subcontinent which were directly or indirectly subject to British rule between 1818 and Indian independence in 1947.

3   This study thus follows Washbrook (1999), who also takes 1818 as his starting point. In the following, Indian names and terms are spelt as in James (2008 [1997]). In quotations where authors spell them differently, the original spelling is preserved.

4   For an overview of the "Russian threat to British India" see Matin (1999).

5   Kennedy (2002: 15) suggests that "[w]ith the imperial acquisitions of the late nineteenth century, Britain's position in the world became both more imposing and more fragile".

6   The term 'War of Independence' is as politically motivated as the event's original denomination, which Pionke (2004: 80) explains as follows: "[T]he problem was to acknowledge the presence of rebellious sentiment without allowing that sentiment to become outright rebellion; in other words, to excite public condemnation without simultaneously igniting public fear. The label 'Indian Mutiny' performs this dual task admirably

called into question the righteousness of British rule,[7] which the British themselves understood as a "benign, progressive tutelage" (Armitage 2000: 197).[8] The resulting sea change in British-Indian relations—at least from the British point of view—comes to the fore in a dispatch of Governor-General Lord Canning in June 1857, where he notes that "[w]e must not conceal from ourselves that our Government must henceforth rest much more openly upon military strength" (quoted from David 2003 [2002]: 266).[9] As the basis of British rule had turned out to be insecure, it became even more crucial in the aftermath of the Indian Mutiny to demonstrate the allegedly natural superiority of the British (see Liebregts 1993: 35) as convincingly and consistently as possible. Apart from the military aspect, British rule from then on depended more than before on confident and unanimous demonstrations of British prestige in all spheres of Anglo-Indian life, including the domestic one. Especially from the Indian Mutiny onwards, normative orientations such as collective systems of maxims and codes of conduct, which placed individual lives in an exceptionally tight collective framework, hence played an unusually important role in British India.

This pronounced normative framework of Anglo-Indian society left a distinct mark on Anglo-Indian life-writing. These autobiographical narratives unfold in an intense engagement with the collective dimensions of Anglo-Indian life, which include social groups as well as the more abstract aspect of collective identities. Autobiographies, memoirs, diaries, and letters offered their authors a viable means of positioning themselves within the tight collective framework of life in Anglo-Indian society; it is therefore essential to take into account the socio-political context in which an act of self-positioning took place (see Straub 1999: 93).[10] Whereas letters and diaries were written on site, and immediately influenced by the conditions of life in British India, the perspective of the retrospective genres is often marked by a radical change in the sphere of life. Living in India as part of a privileged ruling élite opened up a lifestyle which few could have afforded at home—especially, but not exclusively for members of the Indian Civil Service (ICS) and of other prestigious services.[11] For those who

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by casting the rebellion in a specific colonial frame of reference primed to interpret any resistance to British rule as a mutinous conspiracy".

7 The term 'British rule' in this context refers to the fact that before the Indian Mutiny, Britain ruled over much of the subcontinent effectively, but not nominally, as India became subject to Crown rule only with the Government of India Act passed by the British Parliament on 2 August 1858 (see Metcalf/Metcalf 2002: 102).

8 For the challenge the Mutiny posed to British self-images see V. Nünning (1996a: 52f.).

9 The letter is addressed to Robert Vernon Smith, the President of the Board of Control.

10 According to Straub (1999: 93), all kinds of linguistic and other behaviour can serve as a medium for such acts, be it the telling of stories, dreaming or the creation of objects.

11 Potter (1986: 66) emphasises that between World War I and World War II only four other services offered a career as rewarding and secure as the ICS: the Indian Police Service, the civil branch of the Indian Medical Service, the irrigation branch of the Indian Service of Engineers and the Indian Forest Service outside Bombay and Burma. None of these, though, were as clearly defined in their collective identity as the ICS.

retired to Britain, however, the situation was reversed. After decades of life on the sub-continent, many had difficulty integrating into British society, where they were essentially degraded "from somebodies to nobodies" (Buettner 2001). Back 'home' in Britain, they found themselves "simultaneously 'insiders' and 'outsiders' […]—'coming home', but also estranged from British society by virtue of long absences and distinct mentalities developed while in India" (ibid.: 222). Besides, instead of helping to administer an empire, men who had held posts of great influence and responsibility in India were left with no tasks to speak of at the age of 55, the fixed retirement age in the ICS (see Buettner 2004: 205).[12] Those who had been part of an 'Anglo-Indian upper class' could not aspire to belonging to the upper class in Britain, which leads Elizabeth Buettner (ibid.: 201) to conclude that "Britain may have been more fraught for colonial élites than for those in less elevated occupational sectors".[13] To make things worse, the early 20th century saw Anglo-Indians face increasing criticism of the British Empire, which effectively called into question the entire *raison d'être* of their working life.

The apparent motivation for many authors to compose or publish autobiographical documents is closely connected to these circumstances. Considering the acute 'sense of displacement' (Collingham 2001: 201) which many Anglo-Indians felt after returning to Britain, the fact that a great number of them wrote an autobiography or memoir, or published their letters or diaries, probably had a very practical incentive: the wish to record the part which the author played in the administration of the British Empire, and to confirm his or her Anglo-Indian identity, to relive and reconstruct the Anglo-Indian past and relate it to their (British) present. As Mary A. Procida (2002a: 130f.) points out, many autobiographers, memoirists, diarists and letter writers—male and female—believed their Anglo-Indian lives to be of public import, as these were linked closely to the fate of the Empire; some even depicted their life and family history as mirrors of British-Indian history. It is not least these features that render Anglo-Indian life-writing especially relevant to the currently intensified engagement with the heritage of the Empire in Great Britain.

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12 Besides, many pensioners had to give up favourite pastimes like horse riding or hunting for financial reasons (see Buettner 2004: 197).

13 Servants were far less readily available in Britain, more expensive and generally more difficult to manage, and in most cases pensions would not stretch to setting up home in one of the more prestigious Anglo-Indian areas of London, South Kensington or Bayswater (see Buettner 2004: 212). Many pensioners hence settled in one of the other, less expensive places favoured by Anglo-Indians, preferably near the coast, such as Cheltenham Spa, Brighton or Eastbourne (see ibid.: 208), or even in other colonial possessions. According to Collingham (2001: 201), the "sense of loss and displacement" felt by those who returned "forcefully demonstrates to what extent Anglo-India was a self-contained world which developed its own norms".