Reviews

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There are two distinctly different formats used by newspapers for ‘reviewing’ recently published books. The ‘weekend focus’ pieces in the broadsheets are usually the most thought provoking. As feature articles they are most likely to employ the traditional methodology, which requires journalists to read the assigned book before writing their copy. The second popular format is known in some circles as the ‘mini review’, but that is something of a misnomer. These frequently appear in categorized clusters under such headings as Bestsellers, Fiction, Non-Fiction, etc., and are a common sight in syndication. While some mini reviews contain accurate capsule distillations and/or critical opinion, most are in reality book announcements written by deadline-driven staff writers. These harried scribes do not have time to read books the size of Dalrymple’s so they fall back on the common trade practise of re-writing the publisher’s press release. Suffice to say that in surveying existing reviews of White Mughals, it became apparent that many of the lesser efforts paralleled the advertisement-like description found on Dalrymple’s informative personal website.

White Mughals is the romantic and ultimately tragic tale of a passionate love affair that crossed and transcended all the cultural, religious and political boundaries of its time. James Achilles Kirkpatrick was the British Resident at the court of the Nizam of Hyderabad when in 1798 he glimpsed Khair un-Nissa—‘Most Excellent among Women’—the great niece of Nizam’s Prime Minister, and a direct descendant of the Prophet. Kirkpatrick had gone out to India as an ambitious soldier in the army of the East India Company, eager to make his name in the conquest and subjection of the subcontinent. Instead, he fell in love with Khair, and overcame many obstacles to marry her—not least of which was the fact that she was locked away in purdah and engaged to a local nobleman. Eventually, while remaining Resident, Kirkpatrick converted to Islam, and according to Indian sources even became a double-agent working for the Hyderabadis against the East India Company.¹

Those craving a proper synopsis, derived from a careful reading of the book—rather than an emotive commercial pitch—would do well to access

¹ See the ‘Synopsis’ for White Mughals that is to be found on www.williamdalrymple.uk.com/Pages/Biog.html.
Francis Robinson’s ‘Review of White Mughals’ that appeared in *The Times Literary Supplement*.2

The dust jacket on the hardcover edition of *White Mughals* featured Johan Zoffany’s painting of ‘General William Palmer and family’ (Calcutta, 1785). William Palmer was the British Resident serving at the Court of the Maratha *Peshwa*, or one might say Kirkpatrick’s ‘opposite number’ in Pune. Like Kirkpatrick, Palmer was married to a South Asian lady of Persian descent, the comely Fyze Baksh (Sahib Begum). But there was more than just an inter-racial parallel to the symmetry of their lives and the couples bonded closely. The women became the best of friends. The men, in effect spiritual brothers in arms, shared interests in a diverse range of fields from linguistics to horticulture. Dalrymple emphasizes the unique cultural perspective held by Kirkpatrick and Palmer, but he also says they were ostracized by the allegedly elitist regime of Governor-General Richard Wellesley (1798–1805).

Charles Allen, in an article entitled ‘Darkness Visible’ for the *Literary Review*, chose to begin his analysis by focusing on Zoffany’s portrait of the Palmer family. Allen appropriately used the painting as a device to address Dalrymple’s extensive written attention to art and architecture. *White Mughals* yields a very sensitively balanced understanding of the artistic sophistication found in the lives of James Kirkpatrick and Khair un-Nissa. Unlike the Italian influenced portraiture of the German-born Zoffany, however, Charles Allen’s review was not all soft light and delicate brush strokes. Allen proved himself to be of the surrealist school of reviewers; using accurate though outlandish imagery to point out that William Dalrymple’s excessive detail and meandering discourse occasionally detract from the book’s ability to hold the reader’s attention. ‘At over 500 tightly packed pages of text, this is not a book for the impatient reader, and, yes, there are moments when Dalrymple’s delight in leading you up some esoteric side-alley and off the straight and narrow makes you want to bite the carpet’.3

Dalrymple’s description proliferates with the enthusiasm of someone who is in love with his research and thrilled with the chance to tell what is largely an unknown story. From the biographical sketch found on Dalrymple’s website we can glimpse how the novel writing prodigy evolved into a formidable practitioner of narrative history. ‘William Dalrymple was born in Scotland and brought up on the shores of the Firth of Forth. He wrote the highly acclaimed bestseller *In Xanadu* when he was twenty-two... In 1989 Dalrymple moved to Delhi where he lived for six years researching his second book, *City of Djinns*, which won the 1994 Thomas Cook Travel Book Award and the Sunday Times Young British Writer of the Year Award’.4

A considerable amount of *White Mughals*’ market appeal has to do with Dalrymple’s effective combination of literary genres and the transferability of readers’ allegiance. In other words, the book’s popularity is not confined

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2 Francis Robinson’s review, dateline of Fri-11-Oct-2002, was located through web links on Dalrymple’s website, see www.williamdalrymple.uk.com/pages/TLS.

3 Charles Allen’s review was located by following the web links on www.williamdalrymple.uk.com.

4 See www.williamdalrymple.uk.com/Pages/Biog.html
to a single literary niche as audiences from various stylistic fields are drawn to the strength of Dalrymple’s writing. It has seduced the readers of love stories, culturally exotic travelogues and detective mysteries. The latter being a reference to Dalrymple’s pursuit of archival sources around the globe in a quest to find out what became of his heroine. It proved to be a self-revealing search that added a further personal note of credibility to Dalrymple’s role as narrator. I had been working in the India Office Library on the papers of Kirkpatrick for several months before members of my own Scottish family started popping up in the story. At first they sounded a remarkably dour and unpromising lot.5 Dalrymple’s willingness to divulge the truth about his family is embodied in his mentioning that Mountstuart Elphinstone dismissed Margret Dalrymple as ‘an affected, sour supercilious woman’.6 But the trail of self-discovery ultimately took on the atmosphere of genealogical déjà vu in relation to the offspring of James Kirkpatrick and Khair un-Nissa. ‘I discovered that I was myself the product of a similar interracial liaison from this period, and that I thus had Indian blood in my veins. No one in my family seemed to know about this’.7

Frank McLynn, writing in the Independent on Sunday, stated that Dalrymple’s achievement in this ‘magnificent book’ could be attributed to his effortless melding of contrasting motifs—love and war. No small achievement in McLynn’s eyes as he saw Tolstoy as the only previous writer to have successfully carried this off.8 Yet Dalrymple does more than merely knit heartbeats and drumbeats. He deserves credit for bringing the ethnic richness of Deccani martial history to a greater Western audience. In the following description of soldiers in the Bazaar at Bidar in 1790, Dalrymple captures the cross-cultural flavour of the Deccani military labour market.

At the best of times the bazaars of the Deccan were filled with a mix of peoples from all over the East; but at this moment Bidar was bursting with a particularly diverse group of mercenary cavalry: Arabs from Hadramaut, bearded Sikhs from the Punjab, knots of turbaned Afghans and Pathans from the frontier and their Rohilla cousins from the Ganges plains. Wandering through the bazaars too were groups of the Nizam’s regular infantry, the red-jacketed sepoys trained by the French commander, Michael Joachim Raymond, with their black tricorn hats, white shirts and short shin-length boots.9

White Mughals explains how a Hindu–Muslim fusion in the Deccan merged into a ‘composite Deccani Mughal Culture’. This was absorbed by

5 See ‘White mischief’ in The Guardian of Mon-09-Dec-02 as listed on http://www.guardian.co.uk.
6 Dalrymple’s White Mughals, p. 122 and p. 397. All page references in this review were taken from the 2002 hardcover edition.
7 Dalrymple’s White Mughals, p. xii.
9 Dalrymple’s, White Mughals, p. 83.
the Nizam ul-Mulk’s Asaf Jahi dynasty, the members of which began to refer to themselves simply as ‘Mughals’. Dalrymple speaks of Indo-Muslim culture beyond the realm of the Delhi Sultanate, or Babur and his Timurid descendants. The message for the modern Western non-specialist reader is one of vibrant Hindu–Muslim societal interaction. To the horror of Khair un-Nissa’s kinsman, the learned Iranian observer Sayyid Abd al-Latif Shushtari, Hindu influences transformed the Hyderabad Shiites’ observance of Muharram into something approaching a co-religious carnival. Dalrymple used Shushtari’s observations, in Kitab Tuhfat al-‘Alam, to provide valuable non-Western Persian perspectives on Indian society.

Largely absent from newspaper reviews of White Mughals is the recognition due Dalrymple for his intelligent and sensitive treatment of female empowerment within this story. Reviewers seem to have been distracted by the betrayal and tragedy that befell Khair un-Nissa. Perhaps they succumbed to an overall assumption of female victimization; arranged marriages, lost children, emotional and economic betrayal; despite the luscious descriptions of marble mahals, it might have sounded too much like the story of downtrodden women held fast in a sexist patriarchal society. They failed to recognize that at several points in the book Dalrymple takes time to explain the power wielded by Hyderabadi women, not just in terms of their sexual power but their political power, economic power, and military power. Dalrymple is not the first writer to have commented on the ‘Zuffur Plutun’ or ‘Mughal Woman’s Regiment’ in the service of the Nizam of Hyderabad. However, he did go further than most in highlighting the story of how these highly disciplined female combat soldiers faced the right wing of the Maratha infantry at the desperate Battle of Khardla. Is there not great irony in the fact that battlefield equality between the sexes existed 200 years ago in what some would have termed a ‘medieval male dominated Muslim society’? That was a century and a half before the sacrifice of Soviet and Israeli female combat troops. This observation is not meant to applaud the deaths of women warriors as if we were indulging in some warped competition to bring about parity in battlefield slaughter. Rather, the point is that some Western observers have mistakenly assumed that male dominance in Islamic societies leads to the construction of sexually exclusive warrior identities.

Dalrymple’s treatment of female participation in Hyderabadi court politics mirrors his admiration for Kirkpatrick’s cultural insight. Kirkpatrick avoided the mistake of his British contemporaries in thinking that harems were just ‘places of pleasure’.

James’s writings show that he correctly understood the very precise and intricate hierarchy in the Nizam’s harem, where elderly post-menopausal

10 AKA Mir Abdul Lateef Sushtari. See the description in Dalrymple’s White Mughals, pp. 290–4.
women, particularly those with adult male princely children, had considerable influence—much more so, perhaps surprisingly, than their younger, more sexually attractive rivals. This knowledge enabled him successfully to predict the outcome of power struggles and succession disputes.\footnote{Dalrymple’s \textit{White Mughals}, pp. 126–127.}

The arrangement of Khair un-Nissa’s marriage, by her mother Sharaf un-Nissa Begum and other female relatives, emerges as a study in balancing the romantic objectives of Western-style love marriages with the pragmatic principles of Asian arranged marriages; a synthesis of contrasting Eastern and Western matrimonial practise. Dalrymple validates Khair’s heart-felt proclamation of undying love for Kirkpatrick. This marriage would satisfy the young noblewoman’s desire for a handsome groom. Her previous intended did not instil feelings of affection or sexual attraction. The greater familial and political implications of this arranged marriage, however, were more complex. Governor General Richard Wellesley had arrived in India with what he considered to be an officially sanctioned mandate for the removal of ‘French influence’ from the durbars of Indian rulers.\footnote{The best source on this remains Edward Ingram’s \textit{Two Views of British India. The Private Correspondence of Mr. Dundas and Lord Wellesley: 1798–1801}, Adams and Dart, Bath, 1970.} The Nizam had been advised that the British might seek to take military action against Hyderabad if he did not disband the French officer cadre that dominated his regular corps of infantry. By the same token of regional security, the Nizam needed the British as allies in a bid to offset the constant pressure from Maratha incursions. The displacement of the French cadre, orchestrated by Kirkpatrick, set the stage for the signing of a Subsidiary Alliance Agreement—a document that could be construed as having influenced Anglo-Hyderabadi relations for nearly 150 years. The betrothal of Khair un-Nissa to British Resident James Kirkpatrick was in the tradition of using a marriage to seal a political alliance.

Underpinning the bonds of this arranged marriage were some rather clever social and political manoeuvres. As a qualifier for marriage into Khair’s Sayyid clan, Kirkpatrick had to have a suitable lineage; this was provided when he became the ‘adopted’ son of the Nizam. Similarly, Khair required someone to stand-in for her deceased father. The Nizam’s trusted chief minister Aristu Jah fulfilled that need in becoming Khair’s ‘uncle’. This meant that Kirkpatrick as British Resident had unprecedented informal access to the Nizam and Aristu Jah as the Head of State and Prime Minister respectively. Was there a conflict of interest? Kirkpatrick—that same British Resident—was also duty and honour bound by marriage to safeguard the Nizam and Aristu Jah, senior male figures in his extended family. Sharaf un-Nissa had secured a loving union for her daughter while arranging a marriage that the Hyderabadi court saw as consummating a special relationship with the British.

The ‘era of the White Mughals’ is defined by Dalrymple as an age in which European men openly loved and lived with South Asian women; a time when
European men ‘went native’ in adopting the speech, clothing, mannerisms and in some cases the popular religions of South Asia. The period was said to have begun during the age of sail in the sixteenth century when large numbers of Europeans first began to arrive annually in India. The end of this 300-year epoch is difficult to define precisely but Dalrymple goes out on a limb by saying, ‘With the deaths of William Palmer [junior] in 1867 and Kitty Kirkpatrick in 1889, an era can truly be said to have come to an end’. However, the crucial turning point at which things started to decline rapidly, according to Dalrymple’s analysis, was during the administration of Governor-General Wellesley.16

Writing for The Telegraph, Philip Ziegler noted, ‘Enthralling though this story is, and well though Dalrymple tells it, it is only a peg on which he hangs the more substantial theme of the cultural and social encounter between Britain and India.’ The review went on to capture the essence of Dalrymple’s argument that the life and times of James Kirkpatrick ‘coincided with a period in which a liberal minded and intellectually curious approach to Indian society went out of fashion and was replaced by an arrogant assumption of European superiority.’ But Ziegler cautioned that any monochromatic depiction of Richard Wellesley runs the risk of looking too simple and the jury is still out on the question of whether one man can be held culpable for the pervasive deterioration in race relations.

Dalrymple places most of the blame for this on Lord Wellesley who, more than anyone else, abandoned the policy of working with the existing Indian apparatus of power and seeking to improve and modify it, in favour of the wholesale imposition of British methods and values. Dalrymple, perhaps, presents the process a little too much in stark black and white: lethargy and corruption were endemic in many of the Indian states and radical reform often seemed the only way to progress. But Wellesley was an odious man, and though he added vast tracts to British India he did so at the price of much future bitterness and hostility. Most readers will find their sympathies lie with the more humane, more sympathetic and far less confrontational approach of Kirkpatrick and his ilk.17

In 1780 and 1785 South Asian spouses and lovers were mentioned in the ‘Bengal Wills’ of British men at the rate of one in three. There then followed a discernable decline. ‘Between 1805 and 1810, bibis appear in only one in every four wills; by 1830 it is one in six; by the middle of the century they have all but disappeared’.18 In defence of Dalrymple it should be noted that he did catalogue other reasons for the demise of the White Mughals. These included; an influx of White women, the rise in evangelical Christian

15 Dalrymple’s White Mughals, p. 500.
16 Dalrymple’s White Mughals, p. 454.
17 The piece appears on the Telegraph’s website (www.telegraph.co.uk) as filed on 28-09-2002 or it can accessed via links on www.williamdalrymple.uk.com.
18 Dalrymple’s White Mughals, p. 52. This data is noted as found in the un-published PhD thesis of Durba Gosh, Colonial Companions: Bibis, Begums, and Concubines of the British in North India 1760–1830, Berkeley, 2000.
activity and society’s increasing scrutiny of the more eccentric Britons who had ‘gone native’ or offended overly sensitive Protestant value systems. David Robinson of the *Scotsman* asked the author why so little is known about this fascinating period. In response to Robinson’s query, Dalrymple is quoted as saying, ‘The Brits in the 19th century were ashamed of this period: they regarded it as immoral and degenerate. To post-colonial Indian historians it doesn’t fit with their ideas of the British as wicked colonialists, so they weren’t particularly interested in bringing it up either. So not only was I excited about discovering a straightforwardly thrilling love story, but I also had the sensation of uncovering an entire period which seems to have been entirely misrepresented’.19

Is there a downside to *White Mughals*? Quite frankly, the tome could stand more rigorous editing. A number of the lengthy footnotes—not the endnotes but specifically the footnotes—such as the description of Hindustan that occurs half way through the book, could have been rolled into a preliminary essay covering the greater geographical and cultural setting of the story.20 Even the most indulgent editor at Cambridge University Press would have demanded that the fifteen-line footnote delineating the origins of the Shiite–Sunni split within Islam either be integrated into the introduction or relegated to the endnotes where it would detract less from the flow of reading.21 The innocuous description may be elementary for an academic audience, but it remains an essential elaboration for the general readership.

Several of the footnotes tend to be redundant or reoccur elsewhere in the book, thereby contributing to its bulk. But *White Mughals* was intended for the general reading public and we must consider the manner in which it is likely to be read. If it sits by the bedside nightstand and read at the rate of 20 pages per night before lights out—one probably needs to be reminded of the significance of Mah Laqa Bai Chanda’s gift of a *divan* to John Malcolm.22

The easy reading style of *White Mughals* would lend itself to undergraduate assignments on Muslim India as well as Deccani history. Or, it might be effectively paired with Linda Colley’s *Captives* if one were urging students to explore the complexity of the relationship between Indian Muslims and Britons 1775–1805.23 However, the value of Dalrymple’s work to South Asian Studies as a whole should not be viewed in strictly academic terms. The perceived importance of South Asian history is just beginning to dawn on the ‘majority White’ populations of Britain, America, Australia and Canada. Only now are they seeing the theory of the cultural mosaic transformed into the practise of Tier One cultural integration. The South Asian diaspora is steadily gaining an increasing presence within the administrative ranks of Western governments and corporations. South Asian cultural heritage

19 David Robinson’s review of *White Mughals* was published in *The Scotsman* Sat-28-Sept-2002 and was accessed through the website http//news.Scotsman.com.
20 Dalrymple’s *White Mughals*, p. 266.
21 Dalrymple’s *White Mughals*, p. 110.
22 Compare the footnote on p. 124 to p. 199’s endnote number 97, which is detailed on p. 528.
and intermarriage are much more relevant to Western society today because South Asians have arrived as a societal force to be reckoned with. *White Mughals* raises a number of timeless cultural issues and makes them accessible to a greater Western audience. And while that may, or may not, translate into increased enrolment in South Asian Studies programmes—this engaging book invites greater cross-cultural dialogue in an informal setting. That Dalrymple realized the power and the promise of this saga is evident in an article he wrote just prior to the 2003 invasion of Iraq. ‘As the story of James Achilles Kirkpatrick and Khair un-Nissa shows, East and West are not irreconcilable, and never have been. Only bigotry, prejudice racism and fear drive them apart. But they have met and mingled in the past; and they will do so again’.24

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Channa Wickremesekera has produced a thought provoking study of sepoy military culture. Traditional Western military historians, meaning those ethnocentric souls dedicated to the ‘drums and trumpets’ genre of their trade, cannot dismiss this work as a mere study of ethnicity in uniform. *Best Black Troops* focuses on the period from 1746 to 1805 and emphasizes combat infantry skills; that is what sets this book apart from the ‘sepoy studies’ produced by Douglas Peers, David Omissi, Lionel Caplan and Seema Alavi. Wickremesekera challenges us to think about how sepoys were deployed in the wars that constituted the critical period of British military ascendancy. The author merges social and racial observations with brief battle narratives to explain his theories. Wickremesekera sees the sepoy in a dual role, serving as both stalwart servant and whipping boy for the British military establishment in India. He repeatedly paints these warriors as soldiering in a supporting military capacity. More controversially, Wickremesekera asserts that it was the sepoy’s secondary placement that enabled White troops to be used in spearheading assaults and storming fortifications.

The Introduction to *Best Black Troops* briefly touches on British attitudes towards Indian civilization with an emphasis on perceived differences and ‘backwardness’. Here the sociological groundwork is laid for the author’s claim that eighteenth-century British military men considered sepoy forces inferior not because of racial attitudes, but rather because of differences in military culture. The label of inferiority is essential to Wickremesekera’s

argument as is the reader’s willingness to accept the premise of British military superiority as portrayed in books dealing with the ‘Military Rise of the West’. His review of sources juxtaposes the writings of biased eighteenth-century British observers and twentieth-century advocates of a European ‘Military Revolution’. Robert Orme is the most prominent among the former and Geoffrey Parker chief architect of the latter. Researchers compiling South Asian military reference lists may wish to sidestep Wickremesekera’s literature survey and dive straight into his bibliography of historically contemporary battle accounts.

Chapter One ‘Europe and India: A Clash of Military Cultures’ introduces us to the twin models of Mughal and Maratha warfare that Wickremesekera uses to exemplify indigenous military culture. The skeletal outline of the models has long been embedded in William Irvine’s *The Army of the Indian Moghuls* and S. N. Sen’s *The Military System of the Marathas*. Both Irvine and Sen are ripe for revision but that is a task for another author, another time. Sub-sections of Chapter One include a discourse on ‘Tactics, Weapons and Training’ as well as ‘The Ethos of Individual Skill and Courage’. Here Wickremesekera borrows the late Burton Stein’s still popular theory of a segmented Indian society as he portrays Indian armies as structurally analogous, rendering them as segmented collections of warrior bands. Halfway through Chapter One, Wickremesekera’s investigation turns one hundred and eighty degrees to explore ‘War in Europe’. Perhaps at one time this fulfilled a PhD requirement for comparative investigation. However, as a rather laudatory rendition of ‘European discipline, drill and firepower’ it is perhaps too long for the purpose of making a comparison here. By way of a more positive side note: this chapter should prove useful for Western military historians exploring the current debate over the relationship between battle and culture, as reflected in the ethnocentric work of Victor Davis Hanson on one hand and his chief critic John Lynn on the other.

Wickremesekera’s second chapter is entitled ‘British Perceptions and the Emergence of the Sepoy Army, 1746–1800’. Here the author is on solid ground in noting that British military men of the eighteenth century looked down their noses at all ‘foreign’ armies—Asian, European and/or American. The previously introduced South Asian models of warfare reappear in this chapter. Stereotypically, we find the Marathas as predatory horsemen and the Mughals as proponents of a processional form of warfare. From this perspective, indigenous armies suffer the diagnosis of having lost the evolutionary


3 *Best Black Troops*, pp. 189–94.

race, their efforts to reform and modernize amounting to little more than shabby imitations of the gold standard presumably set by the Europeans’ creation of sepoy armies. As Anglo-French colonial rivalry grew during the War of the Austrian Succession and Seven Years War, there was a need for the East India Company (EIC) to recruit additional Indian troops. Wickremesekera writes that wide scale sepoy recruiting came into vogue in the mid-eighteenth century; this compels him to discount the sixteenth and seventeenth-century deployment of Indo-Portuguese topasses. He takes a hard line in classifying topasses as distinctly separate from the soldiers generically referred to as sepoys. But some will find Wickremesekera’s rigidly applied definition of sepoy too chronologically restrictive. It tends to thwart those who wish to investigate the EIC’s earlier training of South Asian combat infantry troops.

‘The Sepoy Army in the Making: Recruitment, Command and Discipline, 1746–1800’, the third chapter, calls into question Indian officers’ role in the eighteenth century. It portrays their rank as mere window-dressing in the continuing story of subservience. It was a leadership picture increasingly dominated by White officers detached from their men by issues of culture, race and language. Yet the author believes that as the eighteenth century progressed, the British refined the sepoy’s combat skills with an eye towards upgrading his deployment within the order of battle. Wickremesekera suggests that sepoys were originally trained to serve in a secondary military capacity such as guards for garrison duty and convoy escort. He sees the sepoys of the later eighteenth century as eventually being drilled more intensively to manoeuvre on the battlefield, performing the role of infantry fire support for leading British European units if needed. Chapter three concludes with an examination of the British ‘carrot and stick’ approach to controlling the sepoys. Incentives for sepoy enlistment are presented as religious toleration, regular pay and a pension. The proverbial stick was that of military discipline and its implied threat of corporal punishment. The grey areas—if you will—were said to revolve around difficult to define religious issues such as overseas deployment for high caste Hindus and the issuance of leather boots to Muslims.

Combat is stressed in chapter four ‘The Sepoy at War, 1746–1805’. Wickremesekera’s very specific list of ‘large battles’ is used to once again underpin his theory concerning the significance attached to the role of European troops designated as the primary assault forces. But much of Wickremesekera’s theory concerning a unit’s placement in relationship to its combat ranking, for example on the flank vs. the centre of a formation, was in reality negated by the unpredictability of battles. Ambushes often raised havoc with the theory of deployment found in the presumed order of battle. This was evident in the panic and redistribution of Major-General...

5 The War of the Austrian Succession was carried on in India as the First Karnatak War 1744–1748.
6 For references to weapons training and deployment of regular ‘peons’ in 1687 and 1711 respectively, see D. F. Harding, Smallarms of the East India Company 1600–1856, vol, IV. The Users and Their Smallarms (Foresight Books, London, 1999), pp. 155, 165.
7 Wickremesekera, Best Black Troops, p. 122.
Arthur Wellesley’s troops in 1803 as they were unexpectedly cannonaded by the forces of Raghuji Bhonsle on their approach to the battlefield of Argaum, a battle excluded from Wickremesekera’s analysis.\(^8\) Chapter Four makes good use of simplified modern battle maps that help the reader to see the essential terrain and visualize the approaches made by adversaries. Eyewitness accounts also assist the development of the mental imagery needed to reconstrcut the progression of events in one’s own mind. Those who have tried to write combat narrative will appreciate the author’s efforts as he avoids the trap of creating one of those dreadful battle pieces where regiment X is on the left and battalion Y is on the right. The chapter flows well as it traverses India although it is the battle of the EIC’s Madras and Bengal armies that are the most prominently featured. Wickremesekera speaks of the ‘East India Company’s army’ as if it was a monolithic entity. But each of the three EIC armies—Bombay, Bengal and Madras—had its own drill and its own distinctive military culture.

So it is that despite the merits of Wickremesekera’s battle narratives, the selection criteria underlying his shortlist of battles remains somewhat suspect and the term ‘big battle’ is not clearly defined. That is a problem, in that his specific battle list is used to make the crucial case that sepoys were kept in a secondary combat role. From this writer’s standpoint he has focused too much on combined operations featuring the deployment of His Majesty’s (HM’s) troops in coordination with soldiers of the East India Company. I would argue that in those battles where command did rest with HM’s officers—as opposed to the vast majority of actions fought by the EIC’s troops alone—greater reliance was placed on the King’s White European troops for reasons connected to military hierarchy, the establishment of a leadership example and last but not least, monetary consideration.

The King’s regiments were senior to the whole of the EIC’s service in the inflexible world of military hierarchy. The most elite of the EIC’s White ‘European Regiments’ took second place to the lowliest of HM’s units, which means the sepoys were far from unique in being ranked second to the King’s men. In the action at Laswari, cited by Wickremesekera, Commander-in-Chief General Lake called for HM’s 76th Regiment. Lake had soldiered with the 76th in the trenches of Yorktown before Cornwallis surrendered in 1781, bringing a military end to the war known as the American Revolution. It was critical that the 76th be seen as leading the way in India. The prestige of the unit, as well as the sovereign’s honour, was on the line every time the King’s units went into battle. South Asia was a cultural setting in which the British had to demonstrate they were not asking the sepoys to do anything they would not do themselves by example; namely lay down their lives in pursuit of victory. As for HM’s troops spearheading assaults on fortresses, one should consider that such duty could mean an increased share of Prize Money. Soldiering in India was known to benefit the EIC’s

\(^8\) Buxar 1764, Tiruvannamalai 1767, Porto Novo 1781, Srirangapattanam 1799, Assaye 1803, Laswari 1803.
troops economically, owing to *batta* allowances. Many of HM’s troops were willing to risk attacking fortifications in order that they too might gamble on the lottery of victory and win additional Prize Money that could make them wealthy. The previously mentioned Major-General Arthur Wellesley—the future Duke of Wellington—was but a Colonel posted to the reserve trenches during the storming of Srirangapatnam in May 1799. He did not see action during the battle but, by virtue of belonging to the siege force, Arthur was awarded five thousand pounds sterling from the Prize Fund, a staggering sum in that era.\(^9\)

Having portrayed the British as guilty in creating a two-tiered system of military deployment, Wickremesekera uses chapter five, ‘The Sepoy and British Perceptions’, to try and explain the logic and rationale behind such a Machiavellian approach to military organization. This opens with a discussion of ‘The Recruitment and Management of Sepoys’ but then moves on to a more theoretical examination of command and control issues. Wickremesekera tells us: ‘sepoys who had no strong attachment to the Company beyond their pay’ could not have been expected to fight tenaciously.\(^11\) That dismissive remark fails to consider the *fight or flight* syndrome outlined almost thirty years ago by John Keegan.\(^12\) When presented with the reality of imminent combat, soldiers tend to either run, freeze, or fight for their lives. Even if their pay is in arrears they are subject to a survival instinct that dictates they either disengage or fight their way through the threat. Motivational factors for combat performance often differ from motivational factors for military enlistment.

Wickremesekera contends that ‘the British never expected the sepoys to become as efficient as Europeans at any time during the formation and expansion of the sepoy army.’\(^13\) The book then concludes with a three-page discussion of contrasting military cultures and a suggestion of how this analysis fits into our understanding of events in the nineteenth century. The author believes that eighteenth-century British contempt for sepoy inferiority and a ‘perception of unreliability in a crisis without European officers and soldiers’ became a seedbed for nineteenth-century racial and military bigotry. Wickremesekera wrote: ‘In the heady atmosphere of empire and scientific progress the inferiority of the Indian soldier came to be treated as the product of an innate weakness and the Indian cultural environment itself came to be


\(^11\) *Best Black Troops*, page 175.


seen as the manifestation of that inner weakness, turning simple prejudice into downright contempt and men into specimens.14

There are those of us, however, who categorically reject the theory that the British built a second-rate, as opposed to first-rate, sepoy army. The EIC’s Court of Directors would not tolerate any shoddy military practice that would jeopardise their multi-million pound venture. EIC officers knew their lives and well being depended upon sepoys whose skills were interchangeable with those few European soldiers available. David F. Harding has gone to great lengths to present archival evidence proving that the Madras Army institutionalised the training of specialist sepoy marksmen to serve in leading roles as skirmishers and light infantry.15 That is one of the reasons the Company’s sepoys were issued with the same models of firearms as White troops. If systematically compiled, all the cases of sepoy combat leadership and exemplary service under fire would fill several volumes. During the First Anglo-Mysore War the British were hard pressed to stop the momentum of Haidar Ali’s offensive. At the major battle of Changamah on 2 September 1767, General Joseph Smith selected a Madrassi sepoy unit to lead the army in battle. Later known as the 10th Madras Native infantry, these ‘Coast sepoys’ went on to earn further accolades for single-handedly seizing the forts of Vaniambadi and Ambur. The 10th took a stand at Ambur and held the fort alone against the combined field armies of Mysore and Hyderabad from 10 November to 7 December 1767.16 This proved to be the crucial obstacle that robbed Haider Ali of momentum and it is believed to have saved Madras from capture in 1767. Conspicuously absent from Best Black Troops are examples of sepoy bravery and initiative during major military reversals suffered by White British troops, such as Telegaon in 1779, Baillie’s Disaster in 1780, Monson’s Retreat 1804, or General Lake’s failure to take the fortress of Bharatpur in 1805. Two battalions of sepoy grenadiers successfully assaulted Tipu’s artillery during ‘Baillie’s Disaster’. And sepoy units were the first to charge the Maratha artillery at bayonet point when General Lake was ambushed at the Battle of Delhi.17

Best Black Troops is predisposed to the supposition that the British commanded sepoy troops as military inferiors. But if we step back further from the subject and look at the British Army’s relationship with White colonial troops in a greater imperial context, we can see there are other possible conclusions that can be drawn. The British were defiantly tight-fisted when it came to relinquishing command and the issue was extremely long lived in Britain’s White colonies. The first independent Canadian combat

14 Ibid., p. 183.
16 D. F. Harding, 10th Princess Mary’s Own Gurkha Rifles: A Short History (The Regimental Trust 10th Princess Mary’s Own Gurkha Rifles, 1990), p. 7.
17 National Army Museum, Chelsea, NAM Accession no. 9204–121, Major Charles Stuart’s Diary.
command did not emerge until the First World War (1914–1918). Could it not be more simply said that until the twentieth century Britain’s regular army tended to rank its own military forces above all? Although I may disagree with Wickremesekera’s conclusions concerning sepoy military culture, I feel his work is to be applauded for helping to restore the credibility of combat infantry studies as a legitimate component of South Asian history. It is hoped that his work will form an integral part of the debate that constitutes our contemporary exploration of the ‘culture of battle’.

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In the aftermath of September 11, people have continually asked me: ‘Where are the moderate Muslims? Why are we not hearing from them?’ The question is often put belligerently, in the spirit of the Latin construction that expects the answer ‘no’. The subtext is that there are no moderate Muslims, because Islam is an essentially fanatical and violent religion. In fact, there have been numerous condemnations of the September 11 atrocities from high-ranking Muslim scholars, but these are not always accessible to the Western reader. Akbar Ahmed, Ibn Khaldun Professor at American University in Washington DC, is a moderate Muslim and his balanced and insightful book will be an invaluable introduction to those who sincerely seek to understand what has gone wrong.

Ahmed denies categorically that Islam encourages violence. The Quran warns that killing a single innocent person is like murdering the whole of humanity; it preaches tolerance and respect for all faiths. Bin Laden and others who imply that God wants Muslims to be in perpetual conflict with Jews and Christians are quoting the Quran selectively and out of context. Far from promoting a clash of civilizations, the Quran celebrates sexual, racial and cultural diversity. This pluralist ethos inspires the work of the most important Muslim poets, scholars and philosophers, and made it possible for Jews, Christians and Muslims to live peacefully together under Islamic rule in Spain. Until the 20th century, Islam had a far better reputation for tolerance than Western Christendom.

But Ahmed does not deny the extreme anger simmering in the Muslim world today. Since September 11, thousands of Muslim parents are naming their children Osama. The television images of Muslims being killed with apparent impunity in Palestine, Kashmir or Chechnya have created
widespread impotence and outrage. In the United States, where Muslims had frequently felt more at liberty than in such countries as Iraq, they have been increasingly under physical, verbal, judicial and religious attack.

But Muslims are not alone in feeling surrounded by hostile enemies. After September 11, the United States broadcast its news under the title ‘America Under Siege’. Israelis felt besieged by hostile Muslim Arabs, and Hindus by Muslims in Pakistan, Afghanistan and Iran. The United States, Israel and India, stunned by the murderous onslaught of suicide bombers, have responded to the threat with a violence that can only exacerbate the already perilous situation.

In one of the most illuminating passages in his book, Ahmed refers to Emil Durkheim’s seminal *Suicide: A Study of Sociology*, which informs scholarly discussions. The spate of suicide killings is almost without precedent in Islamic history. It is nonsense to imagine that Muslims are simply impelled by a yearning for paradise or by blind, senseless hatred. Durkheim stressed that the traditional explanations—mental instability, race or climate—could not account for suicide, which was a consequence of a disturbed social order. In times of change and upheaval, old values disappear, no new ones take their place, and the strain leads to suicide and anomie.

Ahmed explores the current social crisis in the Muslim world, which he sees as the result of globalisation, which, as commentators had noted long before 9/11, has been experienced in Africa, Asia (where the majority of Muslims live) and Latin America as an Armageddon, catastrophically disruptive of jobs, lives and traditions. Basic institutions, such as the tribe, the family or the state have been radically undermined. Displaced and lost, individuals respond to the threat by an excessive emphasis on group loyalty, and experience a corroding humiliation. Throughout the Arab and Muslim world, people say repeatedly that they have lost all honour, and America, the leader of the global village, has become the focus of rage and resentment.

Perhaps Ahmed could have analysed the dynamics of globalisation a little more stringently and shown why the effects have been so particularly destructive in the Muslim world. He argues that in what he calls ‘the post-honour world’, there is a widespread retreat from the pluralism of post-modernity and governments are retreating to the revenge politics of more tribal societies, not only in the Muslim world but also in India, Israel and the United States. Ahmed might, therefore, have explored the traditional role of the great world religions, every one of which—Islam included—was originally a conscious attempt to transcend the ethos of revenge and parochial or ethnic loyalties.

Ahmed is, however, merciless in his analysis of the breakdown of Muslim society in the post-honour world. He castigates the lack of leadership in the so-called Muslim countries, the suppression of intellectuals and women, the corruption in public life, and the narrowly sectarian interpretation of Islam, which is so far removed from its traditional, global outreach. If the West must learn to respect the religion of Islam and redress the injustices that oppress Muslims throughout the world, Muslims must also set their house in order. They must cultivate democracy, encourage their intellectuals, liberate their women, and educate their young more comprehensively. Above all, they must
rebuild the idea of Islam, which traditionally has always included justice, integrity, tolerance, and the quest for knowledge. All too often, piety and virtue are judged by political action, which is often equated with violence, rather than to moral integrity or spirituality.

Ahmed paints a frightening picture of a world reverting to a more primitive state. The more global our world becomes, the more tribal our outlook when we feel threatened. The consequences could be fatal to us all. This is an honest attempt to describe the problems Muslims, without absolving them entirely from blame. Western readers should reciprocate in kind. If we expect Muslims to be self-critical, we too should beware of the knee-jerk tendency to project all culpability onto the Islamic world. Like Ahmed, we too should look dispassionately at our own society, examine our past actions and policies, and see how we may have contributed to the peril that threatens us all—Muslim and non-Muslim alike.

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William Gould has written a very fine book about the Congress movement in the United Provinces from the 1920s to independence in 1947. Like all the best new theses, his argument works because it picks up on a prevailing wind. Historians have been circling round the links between a Hindu idiom and Hindu language of politics within the Congress party, for years, without ever exactly swooping down onto their prey. Gould acknowledges that writers such as Gyanendra Pandy and Joya Chatterjee have prepared the ground for his work, by suggesting links between the Hindu Mahasabha, the RSS and the Congress movement. There is also a debt here to authors such as Peter Van der Veer, who have theorized explicitly about the place of religion in the emergence of Indian nationalism. Gould, though, does something slightly different. He challenges the assumption in the historiography that pro-Hindu feeling is a problem solely for institutions and agencies outside the Congress. By tightly focusing his argument purely on the Congress movement itself, from the 1920s to 1940s, and the use of a Hindu idiom in the Congress’ political language, he is able to reflect more closely on the actual nature of nationalism in India.

So we are treated to fascinating accounts of the use of itinerant _sadhus_ and _sanyasis_ as Congress agents in the 1920s and 1930s, the exploitation of particular festivals, such as the Kumbh and Magh _melas_, as political rallying grounds, temples as sites of political organization, and the manipulation of Holi celebrations for political ends. During civil disobedience, at the local level, the language of cow-protection was used as a tool against the beef-loving and cow-killing British, but of course, this was fraught with the risk of causing inter-religious conflict with Muslims. Links between the philosophies of the
Arya Samaj and the Congress movement are also explored, in particular, the close associations and shared beliefs over education, *swadeshi* and the uplift of untouchables, all of which were components in a project of ‘Hindu consolidation’ which was, paradoxically, useful to the Congress.

The complex ideologies of various Congress leaders in UP are also lucidly analyzed, in particular Sampurnanand and Purushottamdas Tandon. Both were major players in the UP Congress, yet both espoused visions of nationalism which drew heavily on Hindu ideologies, and adhered to cultural and educational ideals, grounded in Hindi, Sanskrit and Hindu philosophy. The compatibility of socialism with this cultural outlook, in the ideology of the UP Congress movement, is especially interesting.

As the 1940s wore on, despite more official and formal separation between the Congress and the Mahasabha, RSS and Arya Samaj, at local levels, a feeling of defensiveness in the face of violence acted to draw Hindu groups together with Congress workers and politicians. As partition loomed there were substantial overlaps between the groups and important links between Hindu nationalist bodies and Congress volunteer organizations were forged so that, in places, the boundaries separating them became unclear.

This goes a long way towards explaining the alienation of the heterogeneous Muslim public from the Congress and the increasing success of Jinnah and the League as they attempted to portray the Congress as a Hindu body, intent on imposing ‘Hindu Raj’. League characterizations and simplifications of the Congress policy took root because they echoed some aspects of the Congress movement, as it was professed in the locality. This also helps explain the failure of the Congress mass contact campaigns, which attempted to expand the social basis of the organization, as the public perception was increasingly of Congress as a Hindu body.

One of the most surprising themes in the book, though, is the fact that Congress leaders themselves were never really conscious of the alienating effect of much of their political language on Muslims. According to Gould, they were unaware of the ways in which their language of politics, and exploitation of a religious idiom for democratic ends, repelled Muslims, aided the Muslim League and sometimes nurtured communal violence.

All this is not to say that secularism did not have a place in the Congress, nor to equate the Congress with bodies such as the RSS and the Mahasabha. Congress continued to project an official policy of secularism, but for many this was perceived as a natural extension of Hindu inclusiveness: *sarva-dharma-sambhara*. But this feeling of inclusiveness was deeply felt and attempts to incorporate all Indians within the scope of the Indian nation were quite different to the demonization of Muslims in those other organizations. Gould has less to say about other understandings of secularism at the district level, for instance, interpretations of it as a legal ideal, or one based on a composite shared North Indian heritage, which were professed by some segments of the Congress movement, especially Nationalist Muslims and those on the left. We are left wondering whether this is the whole picture, or whether Nehru was really so isolated and singular in his vision?

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Nature versus Culture: Towards a new Environmental History?


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As an ideal, nature’s pristine but precarious conditions should be left largely intact even as its potentials are harnessed sensitively to minimise ecological disruptions. As a resource, its vast and wild expanses are to be explored, gazetted and systematically exploited. Albeit the advent of ‘green politics’ since the late 1960s, man’s struggle to identify his place with the natural environment has been as old as civilisation itself. From the 19th century, this struggle became defined by the expressions of Western modernity. It took on wider global significance by the accelerated penetration of European colonial, industrial and technological hegemony into the non-Western world. Nature and culture, civilisation and savagery, were again being remoulded by a wide spectrum of bureaucrats, scientists, botanists, ethnographers, anthropologists, philosophers, missionaries and doctors. Many postcolonial governments took the discourses of modernisation further by perceiving their natural environment as raw materials for the purposes of development and modernisation. They were, however, shortly subjected to the scrutiny of Green activists who raised the spectre of impending ecological apocalypse and, at the same time, preaching the need for ‘sustainable development’ as the only panacea to the sickly planet.

The societies of South and Southeast Asia are not alien to these trends, as their terrains have inspired contrasting imaginations and impressions, and been subjected to numerous forms of experimentations and exploitations. The two publications here represent not just growing interests in Asia’s environmental history, but also a more concerted effort to critically frame such discourses and to document their social impacts. Published under the Longman Orient project on the ‘New Perspective in South Asian History’, they are part of the series aiming to ‘cover new areas of research … provide a platform for fresh perspectives on familiar areas and … includes works of an interdisciplinary nature …’. At the heart of the dense undergrowth of issues and themes narrated by the authors lies the focus on contestation over the social ownership of nature or the knowledge of it by its human claimants. The essential question is whether these proponents of the environment history here are engendering a new dialogue on globalisation or are they merely reinforcing and renewing the debates on global inequalities.

The authors pose their intellectual challenges to the ‘naturalised’ impressions of nature as being socially and historically constructed to serve the interests of dominant groups. From the Indian subcontinent to Southeast Asia, Michael Dove, Charles Zerner and Warwick Anderson narrated the
processes in which Western colonialists had conjured the image of the ‘tropics’ as luxuriant and unchanging, but also deleterious for intelligent and progressive human civilisation. Potentially valuable for development, the rich flora and fauna required ‘rational scientific’ management for the extraction of resources by the systematic and optimal levels of cultivation highlighted by Kavita Philip and Ann Grodzins Gold. Underpinning such calculations were the concepts of property and labour which, explained in significant detail by Philip, had served to legalise and rationalise the colonisation process. Hence, the culture of defining ownership of land on more fluid communal lines by especially aboriginal groups gave way to the zoning practices that had neatly delineated private (estate) property from reservations grounds. Like their environments, the same groups were brought under the gaze of the colonial administrators from the municipal police and forestry officials and social scientists eager to study their ‘habits’. Meanwhile, plantation managers and evangelists sought to ‘enlighten’ them from their ‘superstitious’ and ‘primitive’ beliefs and discipline them into useful tools of labour. But, rather than deliver the supposed fruits of modernity to these peoples, Philip elucidated that colonial structures actually strengthened the structures of subjugation by further disenfranchising the local groups from their resources and culturally infantilising their histories and cultures.

Emerging postcolonial governments had also internalised such Eurocentric discourses about nature and applied them with greater vigour in the name of development and modernisation. Such has been reflected in the territorialisation of the Maluku islands in Indonesia during the 1990s into productive and conservation zones based on Dutch colonial impressions in Nancy Lee Peluso’s contribution, and K. Sivaramakrishan’s accounts of the colonial genealogies of scientific forestry and development in Bengal. Perhaps the more striking account was provided by Paul Greenough’s review of Indira Gandhi’s internationally acclaimed but draconian environmental projects of saving tigers and eradicating smallpox that had alienated both peasant and aboriginal groups.

On the whole, the Western notions of environmental protection have however been receiving more substantial and organised resistance from an interesting mix of activists across different social and political spectrums. In spite of the seemingly altruistic motives and commendable efforts of individuals, a celebratory narrative of the environmental movement in the region is not to be expected in these publications. From the Southwest corner of Madhya Pradesh to the rainforests of Borneo, Amita Baviskar and J. Peter Brosius have demonstrated the tensions and complications of the involvement of both privileged middle class Indian activists and European environmentalists within the local context. Like their colonial predecessors, both groups were prone to romanticising the images of the pristine natures of the aboriginal and rural counterparts, while at the same time adopting the similar patterns of paternalism. A search for a more localised movement can be seen in Susan Darlington accounts of Thai Buddhist monks utilising their religious authority to push for conservation of the kingdom’s forest resources.

In general, the collections of chapters and articles in the two volumes have been meticulously and thoroughly researched. Credit should be
given to especially Philip for her painstaking efforts in fine combing the limited archival and scattered materials to decode their ideological undercurrents. While highly critical of the exploitation of the environment and marginalisation of the local groups by international capital, the authors concerned also displayed a keen sensitivity of the problematic conceptual notions of conservationism as well as its practical application. This was perhaps most vividly illustrated by Brosius’ attribution of the limited success of the European-led campaigns against deforestation in their exoticised portrayals of the vulnerable Penan tribes in Malaysia as noble savages locked in a time capsule. Malaysian Public opinion was initially sympathetic towards the Penan. But the rhetoric of the counter-accusations made by the flamboyant former Malaysian Prime Minister Dr Mohammed Mahathir of Eco-Imperialism stifling the development of the Third World and reducing the tribal groups to anthropological and tourist icons for Westerners to gawk at, began to hold sway. As cautioned by the editors of Nature in the Global South, ‘whether sustainable developmentalism or a movement for the local empowerment and environmental survival is yet to be seen’. (p. xi). Nonetheless, the same editors have not been dissuaded by the uncertainties to dream of their works having a place in a future embodied in an imaginary ‘Museum of Human Welfare’. This museum, however, would not display objects, but historical ensembles-recording of archived voices, images and text in many media, with the main themes of the ‘universal declaration of human interconnectedness’.

Despite the ambitious proclamations of a new interconnected Globalism, the tones of the inequalities of the North–South Divide and Core–Periphery politics are still poignant in the two volumes. Rather than a complete re-interpretation, the authors have only extended the debates of international inequality into the realms of other academic disciplines; among them are the areas of the History of Science and Technology, Developmental and Modernisation theories that have influenced the logic of governments in postcolonial states, and, more recently, environmental activism. And, with regards to the latter, the authors have established an understanding of environmental activism and resistance by the subaltern groups in a more pacifist and sanitised light instead of considering the more varied experiences. This ranged from the highly explosive conflicts that had taken place in the postwar period between aboriginal factions and national governments in Southeast Asia to those who had managed to engage in the formal political institutions in South Asia.

Nonetheless, it is certain that given their generally exhaustive efforts, these two publications have not only contributed significantly to the understanding of environmental politics and history in the Asian continent. More importantly, even as it has yet radically to offer a more refreshing alternative to globalism beyond the familiar approaches of hegemony and inequality, it will remain in the near future a crucial template in the appreciation of its dynamics.

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