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Christopher Herbert: War of No Pity

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Introduction

Jingoism, Warmongering, Racism

Of the many interconnected riddles that the Indian Mutiny of 1857–59 poses to a historian of nineteenth-century culture, the primary one is this: why did contemporaries consider it an event of epochal importance?

Gauged purely in the light of its empirical scale and its practical consequences, the Mutiny might not seem an outstandingly momentous historical event. The two-year campaign waged by the British “Army of Retribution” against the 1857 rebellion of Indian mercenary troops did prove to be a harrowing and sanguinary one, a struggle marked on both sides “by a ferocity for which even the ordinary depravity of human nature cannot account” (Grant and Knollys 1) and which contemporaries sought perplexedly to explain to themselves. Nor should the war be considered a trivial episode, either militarily or in terms of its possible consequences for national and global politics. Undoubtedly, as John Colvin, the lieutenant governor of the North-Western Provinces, said at the time, “the safety of the Empire was imperilled” and “a crisis in our fortunes had arrived, the like of which had not been seen for a hundred years” (qtd. Kaye 3:196–97). “The terrible Mutiny,” said General Hope Grant, “for a time, had shaken the British power in India to its foundation” (Grant and Knollys 334). Had the large, well-trained, and (except for the crucial lack of modern rifles) well-equipped but poorly led rebel armies prevailed, and had the rebels achieved their goal of effecting, in the words of one rebel leader, “the complete extermination of the infidels from India” (Kaye 3:275), the result would have been a catastrophe for Britain. Yet the magnitude of the conflict as measured in terms of numbers of combatants involved or of casualties sustained was, “by comparison to contemporary campaigns like the Crimean War . . . or the American Civil War,” not to mention the military apocalypses of later battlefields like those of the Somme or of Stalingrad, fairly small (Judd 73). The numbers of British victims who perished in the epidemic of massacres that swept through Bengal and appalled the Victorian public in the summer of 1857 were also, by twentieth-century standards, surprisingly small, small enough for the dead to be listed almost individually in contemporary reports.¹ And for all its initial desperate gravity, the uprising was suppressed fairly swiftly in a series of decisive battlefield victories owed in part to the lethality of the new Enfield rifle and celebrated at the time as glorious vindications of British racial

pro prowess and imperial destiny. The government of India and the administration of the Indian army were then vigorously reformed (notably by the abolition of the East India Company), with the result that British control of India emerged stronger than ever in the aftermath of the great upheaval, strong enough not to be relinquished until almost a century later. The geopolitical significance of the Mutiny, in other words, was limited; nor do modern historians tend to treat it as more than a lurid footnote to the tale of nineteenth-century imperialism.²

British people at the time, however, experienced the Indian Mutiny as “[a] great crisis in our national history” (Kaye 3:654) and, despite all efforts to portray it as a magnificent national triumph, as the supreme trauma of the age, “our greatest and most fearful disaster” (H. Kingsley 3:274). Nor did they soon recover from it—if indeed they ever did. In a speech delivered at the end of September 1857, Benjamin Disraeli declared it to be “in fact one of those great events which form epochs in the history of mankind” (qtd. Ball 2:418). Looking back on it in 1891, R. E. Forrest observes in his novel *Eight Days* that the Mutiny “came as a terrible break” in the course of British affairs, one destined “to produce a new era in the history of India—in the history of the world” (3:135, 2:88). Henry Seton Merriman echoes this view in the following year, having the narrator of his novel *Flotsam* evoke the year 1857 as “a year truly of woe and distress and unspeakable horror; a year standing out prominently in great red letters, so long as the world shall remember the English race” (144). Contemporary accounts of the Mutiny portray it similarly, as an event of almost incomprehensible magnitude and historical importance—hence its common figuration as a gigantic natural disaster or national cataclysm. The British public, observes the early historian Charles Ball in the almost hallucinatory stylistic register that pervades Victorian writing about the Mutiny, had in the first days of the insurrection no premonition of “the rivers of blood that were to be waded through, the fields of carnage that were to be traversed” before it could be put down at last (1:605). For another Victorian historian, R. Montgomery Martin, the Mutiny was an “overwhelming tide of disaster,” an “ocean of blood and tears” (2:431). In his memoir the military hero Mowbray Thomson (one of the four among the thousand souls in the Cawnpore³ garrison to survive the massacres there) described the Mutiny as “a torrent which sweeps everything less stable than the mountains before it” (41). For Alexander Duff, a Presbyterian preacher in Calcutta, it was “a tempest of massacre and blood,” a “mighty torrent of evil that is now rolling in fire and blood over the plains of India,” an “awful whirlwind of fire and blood” (13, 93, 135). It is precisely the prevalence of this hyperbolic register in Mutiny discourse, and, in particular, the oft-registered sense that the “Red Year” of 1857 marked “a terrible break” in British experience, a traumatic ex-

pulsion from a known world into a frightening new historical era, that forms in effect the subject of the following book.

I seek not so much to solve the riddle of the Mutiny that I have posed as to delve more deeply into it: I seek, that is, an enriched sense of the experience of the event from some semblance of the Victorian point of view. The premise that has governed my inquiry has been that the epochal impact of the Mutiny on Victorian and post-Victorian consciousness can only be meaningfully studied by considering it not as a geopolitical event but as a literary and in effect a fictive one—as a story recounted over and over, in one stylistic inflection and literary register after another, in various journalistic media, in the voluminous historical accounts that began appearing before the cannon had fairly ceased firing on the battlefields, in a spate of memoirs and biographies, in pictorial imagery, and in the innumerable poems and *fifty or sixty novels* in which the Mutiny was reenacted in the nineteenth century.⁴ The very existence of this vast archive is the clearest possible indication of the significance that the Mutiny took on in the Victorian imaginary. The torrent of blood and tears coursing over the plain of Upper India in 1857–59 was matched, we may say, by the torrent of representations of it, particularly literary representations, that coursed through Britain then and for years afterward. Such scholarly attention as this body of writing has received has been marked by condescension, not to say systematic denigration, for its supposed contamination by obnoxious political and racial sentiments. Among the motives and, I think, the novelties of my own project has been the wish to hold this judgment in abeyance long enough to make possible an attempt to salvage from oblivion a series of remarkable texts. To this extent, the following book, like others I have written, is conceived as a project of historical retrieval—in this case, one that necessitates opening up to possible critique a set of judgments that have hardened in recent times into a carapace of scholarly dogma and have made unprejudiced reading of the materials I survey well-nigh impossible.

I offer here the briefest possible narrative of principal events of the Indian Mutiny, to be amplified at appropriate points in the chapters to come. The rebellion, smoldering for some months previously, broke into flame on May 10, 1857, when Hindu and Muslim sepoy (“soldiers”) of native regiments stationed at Meerut, panicked at being required to bite off the ends of newly issued paper rifle cartridges greased with beef and pork fat (taboo for Hindus and Muslims, respectively), and also by wild rumors that British forces were coming to attack them, murdered their British officers and many of their wives and children. They then galloped off to seize nearby Delhi, where massacres of British residents and native Christians took place the next day. The aged puppet king of Delhi, the

last living representative of the Mughal dynasty, was proclaimed ruler of India. Bloody outbreaks occurred in the following weeks and months at military stations and towns across Bengal (but not in other areas of India, which remained loyal to the British government). Europeans were slaughtered without mercy whenever they fell into the hands of mutineers; many wretched fugitives fled their persecutors into the vast jungles, some reaching safety more dead than alive after weeks of wandering. In some places, notably at Cawnpore and Lucknow, small British garrisons encumbered by the presence of many women and children mounted long defenses against numerically overwhelming rebel forces. After holding out for twenty-two days, General Sir Hugh Wheeler finally surrendered his decimated entrenchments at Cawnpore to the rebel commander known as Nana Sahib under promise of safe passage down the Ganges, but his force was ambushed at the embarkation point and massacred almost to the last man, a number of women and children survivors being taken back to Cawnpore as prisoners. As Henry Havelock's "army of avengers" (Ball 1:193) bore down on the town, laying waste the countryside and putting summarily to death every suspected rebel and rebel sympathizer who fell into its hands, Nana Sahib, his own troops having bridled at this terrible duty, sent a small party of butchers recruited from the bazaar to hack to pieces with swords and axes the more than two hundred British women and children prisoners. The victims' bodies that would fit were stuffed into a well, the others thrown into the Ganges. Arriving the next day, Havelock's troops discovered the scene of the mass killing, still awash in blood and littered with shreds of women's clothing and clumps of hair. The discovery unleashed an "all but national cry for unmitigated vengeance" (Ball 2:168); the "retributive impulses of our people," as the historian Sir John Kaye calls them (2:170), were given even freer rein than before. One primary instrument of these impulses was the sternly pious Colonel (subsequently Brigadier General) James Neill, who already had made a name for himself for the ferocious retribution he had inflicted elsewhere upon mutineers and their suspected sympathizers. Left in command at Cawnpore as Havelock moved on to attempt the relief of Lucknow, Neill invented a form of extra punishment for condemned men thought to have been implicated in the massacre. Before being taken out to the gallows, each was forced to clean up with his own hands or to lick up a small square of dried blood from the courtyard pavement where the prisoners had been slaughtered—an appalling pollution for a high-caste Hindu, as most of the sepoys were. Neill proudly expressed his conviction that God was at work in the "strange law" that he had instituted (Ball 2:400). This was only one of the best publicized of many instances of merciless reprisals visited by British authorities, often on the flimsiest legal

pretexts, upon Indian combatants and civilians in the course of the fierce campaign to restore British supremacy in India.

The successful storming of Delhi in September by British and loyal Indian forces after a long, incredibly arduous siege, and then the lifting of the rebel siege of Lucknow and the reconquering of that city by the forces of Sir Colin Campbell, broke the back of the rebellion. The resistance entered thereafter a prolonged guerrilla phase that petered out after the death in battle of the Joan of Arc of the rebellion, the Rani of Jhansi, and the capture by treachery of the gifted rebel commander Tantia Tope. The archdemon Nana Sahib, prefiguring the career of his latter-day avatar Osama bin Laden (though the former was a Hindu and the latter is a Muslim), eluded massive British efforts to capture him, melted into the mountains of Nepal, and was never heard of again.

The learned literature dealing with this episode over the past several decades affords a glimpse of the intellectual conditions that prevail currently in one broad sector of humanities scholarship. With few exceptions, Mutiny research has set itself for some time under the banner of that critique of imperialism known loosely as postcolonial studies and exemplified in the catalyzing writings of Edward Said. Even in instances (such as Albert Memmi's *The Colonizer and the Colonized*) when it has traced certain self-contradictions said to inhabit the imperialist mentality, writing under the postcolonialist dispensation has taken as its first commandment the premise of the monolithic, always self-consistent nature of imperialism. All the mechanisms of imperialist society, political, cultural, psychological, work in concert to reinforce and to rationalize domination: such is the assumption guiding this scholarly field. To inhabit imperialist society is virtually by definition to be blind to the cruel reality of imperial domination. That an imperialistic society could experience serious ideological instability—that its inner contradictions could be visible to itself and could interfere for that reason with its flow of business; that public media could be channels for resistance to the imperial enterprise—is not a possibility that postcolonial analysis in its usual forms is equipped to entertain.⁵

Nor could this school of scholarly analysis ascribe any other character to any case of imperial dominion than that of malignancy. Imperialism and colonialism are always, in their every aspect, violent usurpation and enslavement, and are always, one again wants to say *by definition*, devoid of redeeming features other than their faculty of arousing emancipatory resistance to their own power. The benevolent humanitarian intentions expressed by many Victorian apologists for British rule in India—their professedly idealistic mission of bringing higher values and improved social institutions to benighted Hindustan, their contention that life would be far worse for the Indian masses were the British to return them to the

mercies of their traditional rulers and to the likelihood of Hindu-Muslim internecine warfare—can only be taken in the postcolonialist perspective to exemplify colonialist bad faith in its pure form, to be nothing but the alibis and instruments of what Said identifies as the “Western . . . will to govern over the Orient” (95). The twofold axiom on which this line of scholarly practice rests is that the will to domination is primordial and unchanging in the Western outlook and that imperialism and racism are one and the same thing. Thus Said, though he bitterly indicts that mode of ideologically saturated learning called “Orientalism” for its impulse to “strip humanity down to . . . ruthless cultural and racial essences” (36), bases his own compelling study of this impulse upon the dictum that “a white middle-class Westerner believes it his human prerogative not only to manage the nonwhite world but also to own it, just because by definition ‘it’ is not quite as human as ‘we’ are” (108). This dogmatic premise, which takes as its implicit corollary the dehumanization of the white Westerner himself and for which so much confirmatory evidence may be cited, has given rise to volumes of enlightening and indeed indispensable scholarly research since *Orientalism* appeared in 1979. If one somehow did not know it before, one certainly knows by now, and for good, that no serious study of imperialism is possible that does not proceed by way of implacably skeptical analysis of imperialists’ professions of high-mindedness and altruism. As the quid pro quo of its invaluable revelations, however, postcolonial critique must at every moment skirt the danger of becoming doctrinaire and absolutistic, and of falling as a result into a compromised condition in which all its findings may come to seem subject to a law of steeply diminishing intellectual returns. Those who value its insights should be, I have come to believe, its most severe critics.

For several generations of scholars, the great Indian uprising of 1857 can only be scripted as a struggle of national liberation against criminal oppressors, and British responses to it can only be portrayed, root and branch, as expressing the morally distorted dehumanizing logic of imperialism itself. Critics have thus asserted, with much vehemence, that Victorian Britons were uniformly hysterical in condemnation of the rebels, were driven by an unrelenting spirit of racial superiority and racial hatred, systematically suppressed evidence of wartime atrocities on the British side while exaggerating and sensationalizing excesses on the side of the mutineers, and invariably glorified British heroism and imperial right. “Not merely the British but the Westerners in general also showed the same racial proclivity and expressed their intense hatred and disgust for everything that was Asiatic or Indian,” declares S. B. Chaudhuri, author of an admirable study of British historians of the Mutiny. “One is tempted to believe that racial arrogance and imperial-colonial pretensions in so far as India was concerned was instinctive in their minds” (260). This

is an unsurpassably succinct statement of the doctrine of postcolonialist scholarship on the Mutiny. There was “almost universal approval in Britain” of the “orgy of vengeance” unleashed upon Indians by the likes of James Neill, declares Denis Judd. “Neill and others were confident that the Almighty was glad to see so righteous and implacable a retribution” (73). “Imperial histories and novels alike were used to justify the extremely violent British military campaign of retaliation following the 1857 uprising and to legitimize more authoritarian, forceful, and racist policies in British colonial strategies of control after these events,” says Nancy L. Paxton. “British and Anglo-Indian writers alike” showed their complicity in these policies, she says, by “[participating] in the project of creating an idealized image of the British Empire” (6, 116). “The whole of Mutiny literature is saturated with . . . vicious cant,” with “Victorian self-righteousness” depicting the struggle as “the war between Darkness and Light,” declares Michael Edwardes, openly evincing the loathing of Victorian imperialism and all its associated sensibility that flows through this body of scholarship (“Mutiny” xvii). The distinguished Victorianist Patrick Brantlinger is no less frank. “Victorian writing about the Mutiny expresses in concentrated form the racist ideology that Edward Said calls Orientalism,” he unequivocally declares. This writing exhibits “the racist pattern of blaming the victim expressed in terms of an absolute polarization of good and evil, . . . civilization and barbarism.” “Innumerable essays, sermons, novels, poems, and plays expressed a general racist and political hysteria about the Mutiny” (*Rule* 199, 200, 202). Ian Baucom (to cite just one more instance) confirms the claim that the British portrayed themselves as wholly blameless for what happened in 1857: “the colonists were able to represent themselves not as India’s oppressors but as its gallant and benign victims, . . . and to derive the secondary advantage of a justification for racial separatism” (112).

Were this now-axiomatic account⁶ of Victorian responses to the Mutiny fully accurate, it would be hard to understand, I think, why the war in India seemed to both contemporaries and subsequent generations to represent, as it manifestly did, a profoundly traumatic cultural crisis. If all it did was to reinforce Britons’ sense of their own merit and of the racially ingrained barbarous wickedness of their adversaries, it ought to have been experienced as an exhilarating episode of national reaffirmation. Not a few polemicists did seek at the time to portray it in precisely these terms (the stridency of their rhetoric suggesting constantly the desperate nature of the attempt). But the standard account proves to be at odds with too much discordant evidence, and to be too detrimental to lucidity in the study of the culture of imperialism, to remain unexamined.

Take, for instance, the issue of the very naming of the conflict. Scholars have taken for granted that the term “mutiny” as applied to the Indian

upheaval is a demeaning one meant to minimize and criminalize what ought properly to be portrayed as a broad-based civil insurrection and a war of national liberation. “The Victorians were . . . insistent that the uprising of 1857 was ‘the Indian Mutiny,’ ” says Judd. “It is only very recently that British historians and writers assessing the event have chosen words other than ‘mutiny’ to describe the uprising,” he declares (67, 68), stating a familiar argument. For books of English history, says Edwardes, the causes of the uprising “would seem to be little more than the affair of the greased cartridges”; these books are vitiated by their failure to acknowledge the deep causes of Indian hatred of foreign domination (“Mutiny” xiii). Nineteenth-century histories “usually” and invidiously portray it as a mere military uprising and “often accept the cliché” that it originated in Hindu and Muslim soldiers’ objections to the greased cartridges, says Paxton (4, 109). Baucom cites as one symptom of the failure of the Victorians to recognize the true nature of the upheaval in India their “memorialization of the Insurrection as a ‘mutiny’ ” (106). Since “to acknowledge that the revolt was . . . widespread would be to admit the unpopularity of British rule, and to cast the subcontinent’s administrators in the role of tyrants,” argues Grace Moore, criticisms of the view that the Indian uprising was strictly a military mutiny were suppressed in the public media and “restricted to private correspondence only” (146). Among the lexicon of more honorific names employed by scholars making such assertions have been, along with the one proposed by Baucom (“the Insurrection”), the Great Revolution, the First War of Independence, the Great Indian Uprising, and so forth. It may only be inertia that accounts for the failure of this more elevated terminology ever to replace the customary designation “mutiny,” though it is worth noting in passing that a number of respected historians, including Surendra Nath Sen and R. C. Majumdar, have questioned the assumption that the 1857 outbreak can properly be called a struggle of national liberation or that any sort of progressive character can be ascribed to it.⁷ With regard merely to the issue of nomenclature, however, the truth is that the debate over the suitability of the term “mutiny” was not initiated by recent scholars, as they like to imagine, but was sharply and searchingly conducted in Britain almost from the moment of the events themselves. To misapprehend this point is to misread the historical conjuncture of 1857 in a crucial way.

“It was of primary importance to know whether it was a military mutiny or a national revolt,” declared Benjamin Disraeli in a stupendous three-hour speech to the House of Commons on July 27, 1857, several weeks after the news of the uprising first reached England. The speech was transcribed verbatim in the *Times* the next day and was prominently highlighted by Charles Ball in his pioneering history that appeared in 1859 or 1860 (1:625–27). Disraeli blames the Indian upheaval not on

military grievances over greased cartridges and other matters, a theory that he treats with disdain, but on widespread Indian resentment, not at all limited to the Army of Bengal, at the whole conduct of British rule: “first, our forcible destruction [i.e., dispossession] of native princes; next, our disturbance of the settlement of property [notably by laws enabling the government to seize property in the absence of natural as opposed to adoptive heirs]; and thirdly, our tampering with the religion of the people” (“State” 6). The whole speech is an extended rebuttal of the attempt of the government to portray the uprising as a “mere military mutiny,” a phrase that Disraeli invokes ever more ironically at least seven times in the course of his polemic. In fact, he declares, what has happened in India is “a national revolt,” “an insurrection favoured by the great mass of the population” (*ibid.*). Manifestly, the expression of such views was not “restricted to private correspondence only.”

Almost by itself alone, Disraeli’s speech would be sufficient to overturn the principal dogmas of recent Mutiny scholarship, but there is a host of similar evidence. Sometimes dismissed as the epitome of the jingoistic imperial historian, Charles Ball himself—more radical in his historiographic politics than Sen or Majumdar—describes the mutinous uprisings as to some degree “an effect of some popular and systematic design to shake off the yoke of foreign domination” and as “a struggle for liberty and independence as a people” (1:402). That there was room in the Victorian public sphere at the time for such a statement may come as a surprise. The eminent Sir John Kaye concludes the first volume of his own Victorian-era history by noting approvingly that Lord Canning, the governor-general of India during the war, “soon ceased to speak of the mutiny, and called it a ‘rebellion’—a ‘revolt,’ ” and attributed it to deep-seated political causes (1:617). Some of those causes detailed by Kaye include the “reign of terror” and of “wholesale confiscation” unleashed by the British in Bengal in 1836–46, policies to which he refers as “the great war of extermination” waged by the British against native landholders (1:170, 177). Kaye continues to reiterate the point in subsequent volumes: this was no mere mutiny in the narrow sense of the word but an expression of profound Indian grievances under the imperial regime, “fears and discontents with which,” he conclusively says, “greased cartridges had no connexion” (3:306). In his 1858 memoir of the siege of Lucknow, L. E. Ruutz Rees observes of the native population of Oudh that “we had done very little to deserve their love and much to merit their detestation” and proceeds to specify the causes of Oudian grievance against the British (33–35). William Brock, in his hagiographic 1860 biography of Sir Henry Havelock, observes almost in passing, as though it were a well-known point, that the British in India “had often perpetrated oppressions of which a civilized Government should have been ashamed” (136). General

