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
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 Cawnpore\(^1\) 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. 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 sepoys (“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.¹

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 account* 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. 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
Hope Grant and Henry Knollys, in their volume of war memoirs of 1873, vent their own scorn for the notion that the uprising was caused by the issue of the greased cartridges, which was, they declare, just “the puff of wind which fanned the smouldering mass of embers—accumulated for ages—into a flame” (2). All the classic Victorian histories of the Mutiny begin, like Kaye’s, with extended discussions of the deep causes of conflict, focusing on such matters as what is invariably represented as the unprincipled annexation of the kingdom of Oudh in early 1856 by Lord Dalhousie, the upsetting of traditional systems of land tenure, the British nonrecognition of the Hindu system of inheritance by adoption, and other matters. They elaborately document what the *Illustrated London News* indicted on July 25, 1857 (two days before Disraeli’s speech on the same theme to the House of Commons), as “our own neglect and misrule in India” (82). The idea that nineteenth-century writers ignored or dissimulated such subjects is a chimera that evaporates almost at the first contact with nineteenth-century texts.

Nor, despite many assertions to this effect by latter-day polemicists, do “the Victorians” insist doggedly on referring to the uprising as a “mutiny.” In his 1858 war memoir, Charles Napier North imagines the writing of the “History of the Great Indian Rebellion of 1857” (165), and the missionary M. A. Sherring titled his book of 1859 *The Indian Church during the Great Rebellion*. Ball, G. B. Malleson (1858), and R. Montgomery Martin (c. 1861) all do designate the conflict in their histories as the “Mutiny,” but even the retributionist Malleson makes clear that the “dark deed” (12) of Dalhousie’s coup in Oudh was the cause of widespread popular loathing of British rule in Bengal. In his history of circa 1859, E. H. Nolan names the conflict “the Sepoy Mutiny” but heavily stresses the point that a strict interpretation of this conventional terminology would be deeply misleading. “The people of England generally persisted in regarding it as a sepoy revolt” and in nourishing the illusion that the Indian people were not in sympathy with it, he says; in truth, it was “a great rebellion of native princes and peoples” (2:712–13). “This is not merely a mutiny in some of our sepoy regiments, but a great political convulsion,” muses R. E. Forrest’s hero in his novel *Eight Days* (3:99–100). Much similar evidence could be cited to make the point that “the Victorians,” less blinded by “racist ideology” than has been said, did not need late twentieth-century scholars to debunk the view of the uprising as a military mutiny unrelated to broad social and political grievances in British India.

At the risk of excessively documenting this important point, let me briefly highlight Alexander Duff’s treatment of it in his work of 1858, *The Indian Rebellion: Its Causes and Results*. Duff, himself a missionary, exemplifies the discourse of the Victorian missionary establishment by
filing his book with ardent calls for evangelizing “idolatrous, superstition-ridden India” (326); “the whole of Hinduism . . . is a huge congeries of falsities and lies,” he declares (355). In many ways, The Indian Rebellion (note the title) can be taken as a particularly extreme instance of cultural intolerance and imperial ideology. Yet Duff inveighs violently throughout his book against the official propaganda of the day, which sought to represent the crisis in Bengal as a “merely military mutiny.” “It is the fact that it is not a mere ‘military revolt,’ but a rebellion—a revolution—which alone can account for the little progress hitherto made [he writes this on December 10, 1857] in extinguishing it” (229). He treats “the oft-reiterated allegation that the revolt was nothing but a military mutiny” (300) with withering contempt. “Verily, the extravagance of official legerdemain, or the credulity of official hallucination, seems to recognize no limits!” he exclaims (303). The debasement of indigenous Indian culture notwithstanding, the rebellion, according to Duff, springs from the profound failings of British government in India. British officials may mean well, but they have no understanding of “the mental, social, and physical condition of the multitudes,” he declares (293). Among other shortcomings, they have failed to check the “cruelty and oppression” (296) visited upon the people by native police and tax collectors, with the result that the British government “appears toward [the population] in the attitude of a severe, unrighteous, and inexorable tyrant” (295). The very existence of an imperial regime guarantees hatred on the part of the native population, he further insists. “The mere fact of a forcible conquest, together with the systematic restraint and all-pervading regularity of our rule, . . . were enough to awaken and perpetuate feelings of exasperation and intensest hate” (202–3). The Bengali population is “proverbially passive” and slow to react to injustice and oppression, he says. “But even with such a people there may be a limit beyond which wrongs may not be tolerated” (293). The book gives another very clear signal that the politics of mid-Victorian imperialism and, in particular, of the interpretation of the “mutiny” were considerably more vexed and conflicted, less driven by unreasoning racism and chauvinism, less committed to idealizing British rule, than scholarship has so often and so dogmatically asserted they were. The purportedly universal Victorian insistence that the rebellion in India was only a mutiny is, to repeat, nothing but a kind of ideological mirage that Victorian writers themselves never cease exorcizing and that seems rarely to have been subjected to even cursory verification by latter-day scholarship. It was a site not of complacent Victorian certitude but of intense ideological strife where the very possibility of a morally defensible imperialism was keenly questioned.9

Nor, as Duff’s book suggests, will the oft-repeated theory of a nearly impenetrable Victorian conspiracy to whitewash the uglier elements of
British rule in India and of British conduct in the war stand up to criticism. No contemporary who read T. Henry Kavanagh’s 1860 memoir _How I Won the Victoria Cross_ would have thought that Mutiny literature uniformly projected “an idealized image of the British Empire.” From the pedestal of his fame as a war hero, Kavanagh denounces the original English colonizers, who “plundered and oppressed [Indians] to retire to sumptuous homes in England,” and he condemns no less pungently “our cruel policy” prior to the rebellion and “atrocities [committed during the war] which the British soldier will disown in the next generation” (ix–x, 161, 17). A similar tone had been struck (to single out just one more text for now) in a compelling text of 1857, _The Sepoy Revolt: Its Causes and Its Consequences_, written by the journalist Henry Mead. No bleeding heart, Mead writes harshly against the rebels, strongly endorses the British mission of reforming endemic abuses in Indian civilization, and ridicules the utopianism of the Peace Society. But he is no more blind to the dark side of the empire than are the other writers I have mentioned, for he issues at the same time a ferocious denunciation of “the cruelty, the oppression, and the measureless folly of our rule” in India, a rule based, he declares, on “torture and lawlessness, and the perpetual suffering of millions” (iv, iii). He traces in excruciating detail the system of torture employed by tax collectors of the raj (207–8) and asserts that “under Christian sway,” the peasant population of India has been reduced almost to a state of “ultimate wretchedness” (222). The British have imposed on India, he concludes, “a system of rule which is wholly destructive” (335). All that can be said on its behalf, according to Mead, is that it is slightly less horrific than the rule of the traditional despots of India. “Our government and laws have been, and continue to be, full of evil,” he states; “but they will certainly sustain a comparison with those of the native sovereigns to whose annals we can point with any degree of historic certainty” (244). It is more than possible to quarrel with the reasoning that leads Mead to this almost fatally equivocal judgment on behalf of British rule, but not to claim in the face of such a book that Mutiny literature takes a uniformly idealized view of the empire or that it imagines the war as a polarized struggle of good against evil. Mead is unusual among contemporary commentators for the harshness of his anti-imperialistic rhetoric, but, as we shall see at length in this book, his critique of the British government was far from unique and issued from every point on the Victorian political spectrum.

One comes to a similar conclusion with regard to the frequent claim that Victorian chroniclers failed to acknowledge atrocities committed by the British in the two-year war. Michael Edwardes, an especially vehement promoter of this claim, asserts, for example, that the somber role played by Neill in the Cawnpore reprisals is glossed over in Mutiny writing to
preserve the myth of a “war between Darkness and Light”—and then rectifies the supposed omission by quoting at considerable length incriminating material against Neill from the dean of Victorian Mutiny historians, Sir John Kaye (“Mutiny” xv–xvii). Patrick Brantlinger subsequently repeats the charge that the facts of Neill’s reign of terror “have remained suppressed” (Rule 201), keeping alive a habit of interpreting the history of Mutiny commentary according to a conspiracy theory that turns out to have its own fairly long history, one that predates by many decades the official advent of the postcolonialist school of scholarship. Already in 1926, Edward Thompson set it forth in his polemical tract The Other Side of the Medal. His own book, the stated goal of which is to debunk “the accepted ‘histories’ of the Mutiny,” has been “long suppressed,” he tells us, but without providing details (vi, ix). He promises in any case to address the “unsolved problem” of to what extent the uprising was “a real war for independence” or “merely the military mutiny it is always represented in our histories” (34). (We have seen that this perennial claim is contradicted by virtually every Victorian history.) In addition, a veil has been “drawn over the excesses of our own infuriated forces” in English histories, says Thompson, but not over misdeeds of the mutineers (39). The damning evidence of British misconduct has been “hidden from ourselves” (40). But in drawing up his indictment of various atrocities committed by the British, Thompson, like Edwardes three decades later, refutes his own central argument about Victorian historians’ supposed concealment of reprehensible British actions by quoting evidence constantly from widely read Victorian sources: Kaye, V. D. Majendie, Martin, W. H. Russell, and others, all of whom vividly publicized these matters, making them a conspicuous part of mid-Victorian debates and, thanks to them, of the permanent historical record. Even so, Thompson asserts to the bitter end, despite the abundant evidence to the contrary furnished by his own references, that the Mutiny “has been chronicled from one side only, and from one set of documents; or from no documents at all, but mere stereotyped hearsay” (135).

One recent work crystallizes this set of historiographic issues in an especially distinct way and deserves special comment: Gautam Chakravarty’s The Indian Mutiny and the British Imagination (2005). This ambitious study makes a point of announcing its guiding principles at the outset, where the author declares that nineteenth-century imperial expansion, like the “US-led neo-colonial globalisation of the twentieth century,” “justified multiform violence through self-serving, self-congratulatory high talk about civilising and racial missions”; Victorian professions of philanthropic intent toward India were only so much “humbug” designed to justify plunder, he asserts (2). It would be fair to ask how he knows this to be true. Clearly, in any case, there can be no dispassionate or noninvidious
analysis of a people whose moral system is known in advance to be “humbug,” and Chakravarty—though at one point he scornfully denounces those who believe in “the possibility of judging other societies” (55)—makes only a half-hearted pretense of it in his study of Victorian Britain. British imperialism in India was propelled by general belief in “an inevitable national and racial urge” to foreign domination, he declares (1). On the outbreak of the Mutiny, he writes, echoing a series of other recent commentators, there was in Britain an “almost immediate manufacture of a language combining patriotic fervour with xenophobia,” a language anticipating the “jingoism and warmongering of later, high imperial, decades” (25). On more than one occasion (2, 34, 41, 181), he introduces a potentially dramatic new note into modern Mutiny scholarship by acknowledging that the Victorian imperial idea had in fact its internal critics and that there were dissenters at the time who objected to the conduct of the war. It looks like an opening to an enriched exploration of Mutiny history emancipated from the ideological straitjacket worn proudly by so much recent scholarship. But Chakravarty raises this tantalizing prospect only to marshal all his rhetorical resources in a single-minded way for the project of erasing evidence of dissent from the historical record after all, in order to leave fully intact the image of a Victorian society monolithically devoted to the sinister, racially “inevitable” purposes of imperialism. For one thing, though he refers vaguely to the existence of dissent, he almost never specifies any of it and generally simply sets the subject aside without further comment. He insists that such dissent was at most “muted” (34); the Indian rebellion, he declares, closing the subject, “was not the occasion for serious dissent” (35).

As should be clear even from the scattering of texts cited above, however, cleansing the historical record of “serious dissent” proves to be a challenging task once one ventures even slightly afield in the literature of the day. It leads Chakravarty into many an awkward place where his account must be approached with skepticism. I will confine myself here to a couple of illustrative instances. There is the matter of the tales of mutineers’ atrocities that were widely circulated in the Victorian media and that in many respects have long been judged to be apocryphal. The sole contemporary publication to challenge the authenticity of these tales, according to Chakravarty, was Edward Leckey’s *Fictions Connected with the Indian Outbreak of 1857 Exposed* (1859). The existence of this piece of blazing sardonic dissent only goes to confirm Chakravarty’s broad thesis, though, since “Leckey’s scepticism was largely ignored then and in subsequent years, and it is a forgotten and obscure volume” (181). As we will see in detail in later chapters, the debunking of the atrocity stories was in fact pursued by a long string of high-profile writers during the war and afterward, and not at all in “muted” terms, either. The falsity of the
Atrocities tales was perfectly well known by the time that Sir George Trevelyan, in his 1865 study of Cawnpore that is probably the most widely read of all Mutiny texts (though it goes uncited by Chakravarty), denounced these “prurient and ghastly fictions” which, he declared, “it is our misfortune that we once believed, and our shame if we ever stoop to repeat” (194, 233). Chakravarty’s erasure of this major preoccupation of Victorian Mutiny writers counts as a serious blow to his credibility.

Another would be his presentation of the historian R. Montgomery Martin, whose Mutiny of the Bengal Army (c. 1861) figures by any standard as one of the most remarkable texts of the period. Chakravarty, who argues that Victorian historians of the Mutiny zealously propagandized on behalf of British imperialism and glorified the war in India, refers to Martin several times as one of the group of historians who “drew up a version of events that was to dominate the imperial imaginary for a long time to come” (16). Martin’s long preamble to the history of the Mutiny “obliquely” justifies the domination of India by Britain, he declares (26). This representation of Martin as an apologist for what Chakravarty has termed “the megalomania of empire” (39) and as a jingoistic war enthusiast would certainly have surprised Martin himself, as it will surprise anyone who has had the experience of reading The Mutiny of the Bengal Army. Martin’s book is in fact an almost Swiftian screed of outrage and nausea directed at every possible element of British conduct in India. British imperial rule has resulted in almost genocidal catastrophe for the natives of the country, Martin asserts; British war heroes in the Mutiny are commonly pathological mass murderers; the mutineers for the most part are victims, not villains. I will offer a detailed consideration of Martin’s astonishing book, so incomprehensibly misrepresented by Chakravarty, in chapter 4.

In a very curious epilogue, Chakravarty qualifies his argument. What he has been describing, he now says, was “the dominant interpretation” of the Mutiny among British writers at the time. Yes, there were, after all, “a few dissident voices that questioned the dominant interpretation” (181)—though whose they were remains a mystery, since the first example of dissent mentioned specifically here is a 1922 essay by F. W. Buckler. But previous instances would not count in any case, since the dominant interpretation, Chakravarty declares, is by its nature strictly unified and consistent—a remarkably distinct formulation of the totalizing principle that underlies, as I have noted, much “postcolonial” critique. Chakravarty appears to be stating that he has simply excluded evidence of whatever contrary views about the Mutiny may have appeared in Victorian times, views not describable as “jingoism [or] warmongering,” since by definition they contradict the “dominant interpretation.” How we can be sure in that event that the jingoism was as dominant as he claims, he does
not say. What he does explicitly declare is that under his scholarly doc-
trine, no recognition of significant complexities or ambivalence in the Vic-
torian public sphere with regard to imperial ideology is permitted.

In fact, the Mutiny called forth from writers of the day a voluminous
discourse of dissent that often evoked, as the following pages seek to show,
what can only be called a profound anguish of conscience and a profound
disaffection from the war and from its sustaining ideology. Doctrinaire
scholarship that ignores or suppresses such material or that excuses itself
from the fairly modest research required to discover it does so at great cost
to historical understanding. It is perfectly true that some contemporary
publications (though not Disraeli’s celebrated speech of July 27 or the
books of Nolan, Duff, Mead, Russell, Martin, Leckey, and so on) do strive
to promote, as critics censoriously point out, “an idealized view of the
British Empire” and of course do vilify the enemy: popular opinion in
Victorian Britain at the outbreak of the Mutiny, we may say, took much
the form that popular opinion takes in any nation in wartime. This fact
in itself tells us little about Victorian racism or the Western racial instinct
of domination, and it can distort judgment if we implicitly and uncritically
take as our standard of historical comparison a utopian imaginary nation
whose popular opinion would be free of xenophobia and such vices, if
only it existed. (It ought to be the first rule of rigorous scientific historiog-
raphy always to ask, relative to what?) What is altogether at odds with
historical normalcy and thus laden with significance, on the other hand,
is the critique of jingoistic patriotism, racism, and the retribution fever
of the times that very swiftly manifested itself in the Victorian public media
of 1857 and 1858 and afterward. It is this extraordinary countercurrent,
not at all scanty or “muted,” not confined to private correspondence only,
but tremendously robust and public, that expresses distinctive potentials
of Victorian culture: such is the thesis my book sets forth.

The numerous works on which I focus do not bear witness to a society
and a literary culture in thrall to “racist ideology,” vengefulness, “vicious
cant,” “humbug,” and “Victorian self-righteousness,” and they certainly
do not constitute a uniform apologia for imperialism. Rather, they take
us into the heart of a multiplex culture exercising a faculty of searching
self-scrutiny and finding that in certain crucial respects its system of value,
being fatally at odds with itself, was prone to shocking perversions. A
culture in which racism was widely regarded as repugnant had fostered
an imperial society drenched in an especially virulent and violent form of
racism: such was one of the startling discoveries prompted by the Mutiny
and driven powerfully, explicitly home, as we shall see, by a series of
writers. Here, I believe, is the fundamental sense in which the Mutiny
marked a “terrible break” in Victorian history: it was a moment when
educated Britons suddenly were afforded a deeply disillusioning view into
the national soul and found that they could never return afterward to their prelapsarian state of unawareness. The shock of finding that they were despised by their supposedly grateful imperial subjects in India was in part the shock of finding that their national idealism and national self-esteem were self-deluding and morally corrupting. The moment of this discovery coincides with the beginning of the rapid unraveling of the mid-Victorian fabric of values that forms the main story of British cultural history over the next several decades.

The postcolonialist assault on “the Victorians” has its own significant history. That it can summon so much rhetorical force as to seem almost self-evident and unquestionable even when sharply at odds with masses of evidence is in a part a testimony to its roots in the anti-Victorianism that formed, as one may say, the fundamental institution of the modernist movement. Beginning in the 1870s and continuing well into the twentieth century, the modernist crusade against the supposed deformities of Victorian middle-class thought and culture served as the catalyst of a great project of cultural and intellectual renewal. Yet an essentially reactionary motive insinuates itself into the anti-Victorian revival that has been staged in academic cultural criticism of the past several decades. This new phase of anti-Victorian polemics has taught us much and has much still to teach. One recoils from it only because in its dogmatic form, at least, it functions as so evident a mode of self-aggrandizement and of intellectual complacency, fostering invective posing disingenuously as scholarly inquiry and thus mutating readily into forms subversive of historical understanding.

The key characteristic of Victorian Mutiny literature, so I argue, is that it is not monolithic and cannot properly be read as anything like a confident allegory of British virtue and racial entitlement to rule. It seethes with its own self-diagnosed inner contradictions, which are those of nineteenth-century culture itself, and it is the evidence of these lacerating, sometimes paralyzing contradictions in British attitudes that I stress.10

I seek in my book, then, as Margery Sabin does in Dissenters and Mavericks, to undo some of what I see as the deleterious effects of a longish course of doctrinaire anti-imperialist scholarship on the subject at hand. In a discursive field as rife as Mutiny literature proves to be with ambivalence, self-contradiction, rhetorical ruses and pitfalls, cognitive and textual dissonance, and unconscious displacements, doctrinaire analysis is sure to lead one astray. The sovereign remedy for such a state of affairs is that of intensive close reading and thick description of texts, shorn of as many presuppositions as possible. This at all events is the method I follow, starting with close readings and working outward from there. I adopt this approach at the risk of seeming sometimes to devote more space and more respectful attention to the analysis of certain works than they deserve, in view of either their questionable literary value or their
blameworthy politics. If, however, we start with the proposition that the value of historical inquiry lies finally in its power to disturb received ideas and ideological complacencies, and in so doing to complicate rather than homogenize and flatter our vision of things, adopting some such vantage as I propose to take up on the history of imperialism and on the Victorian legacy more generally would seem to hold much potential value at present. Bracketing for the time being the preoccupation with Victorian culpabilities affords us a new view of the Indian Mutiny as marking among other things the spot of a disillusionment, a psychological and spiritual wound, “a terrible break” in the Victorian world, that could never be set right again. The Mutiny appears in this perspective as a crucial episode in the history of racial ideology and feeling, of nineteenth-century religion, of imperialism, and of the formation of modern British national identity. It is precisely the fusion of these different elements into a single pathological complex that gives the Mutiny its distinctiveness as a cultural phenomenon and its extraordinary capacity to galvanize the Victorian imagination long afterward: so, at least, I shall argue.

In the following chapter, I lay out the network of key tropes that I see as articulating Mutiny literature, focusing on the concept of trauma and on the idea of a fatal split at the center of Victorian moral being. Chapter 2 centers on William Howard Russell’s journalistic witnessing of the Mutiny as exemplary of the disillusionment produced at home by the shock of events in India. Chapter 3 traces important lines of the nineteenth-century debate in Britain over Punishment and its supposedly primitive predecessor, Vengeance, and illustrates these themes as they are developed in a pair of Mutiny novels, Maurice Dering; or, the Quadrilateral (1864), by George Alfred Lawrence, and Flotsam: The Study of a Life, by Henry Seton Merriman (1892). The book’s long and central fourth chapter studies a series of Victorian historians of the war. Chapter 5 discusses Dickens’s Tale of Two Cities (1859) as an allegory of the Mutiny centered on the conception of a vast annihilation of moral value. Chapter 6 focuses on another novel pervaded by echoes of recent events in India, Mary Elizabeth Braddon’s famous “sensation” novel Lady Audley’s Secret (1861–62), which, I argue, depicts the postwar moment as one dominated by a condition for which no name yet existed, posttraumatic stress syndrome. In an epilogue, I survey a cluster of Mutiny novels from later years to trace the long-term reverberations of the great uprising in Victorian memory.