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**Ideology and paradox in British Civil Service accounts of Muslim ‘conspiracy’ in
1857-59**

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Introduction

At the conclusion to his essay on representing British authority in Victorian India, Bernard Cohn notes a minor but charged symbolic incident following the successful re-taking of Delhi in late 1857. This was an unofficial ceremony that took place in the palace of the deposed Mughal emperor in which English officers solemnly ate pork and drank wine. Cohn refers to this tableau as the ‘desacralisation’ of the Mughal palace, and therefore Mughal rule, as the locus of a religiously neutral pan-Indian authority.¹

Connected here with the widespread British perception of Muslim ‘conspiracy’ as the guiding hand of the rebellion, the illegitimation of the Mughal figurehead through the taint of religious particularism becomes a means of proclaiming the resumption of a determinedly secular British dispensation. This unofficial ceremony, clothed as it is in the garb of sectarianism, opens up a confusing aspect to the simultaneous official diffusion of Victoria’s declaration of religious tolerance throughout the major towns of North India at this time. It suggests not only that the question of Muslim ‘conspiracy’ had quickly become central to strategies of British self-presentation in India in 1857, but also that this was a form of ideological subjectivity strongly marked by the workings of paradox.

Despite the findings of an urgent report undertaken by the office of the Viceroy in 1859 that found the charge of ‘conspiracy’ to be without sufficient evidential basis, the debate about the extent of co-ordinated Muslim activity during the ‘Mutiny’ has continued to form a staple of historiographical enquiry. The consensus reached broadly follows Canning’s Private Secretary, L. B. Bowring, in his insistence that the perception was out of all proportion to the facts on the ground.² Two connected paradigms largely inform current historiographical analysis of the phenomenon of the British perception. The first is that British officialdom in India was naturally ‘mussulmanophobic’ (a phrase coined by one official to explain this mindset in 1857).³ The second is that the failure of

British informational systems, and the desire for a more comprehensive explanation to resolve the confusion of events, led to a predictable accession to this ‘mussulmanophobia’.⁴ This paper will argue that these paradigms, whilst being more or less relevant in themselves, fail to fully account for the genesis and peculiar features of Muslim ‘conspiracy’ in the official accounts. This is because the historiographical focus that produces them has tended to be largely on the figure of the Muslim himself, both in literal terms of rebellious activity (were ‘his’ actions open to this kind of misperception), and in terms of the irreducible repetition of ‘mussulmanophobic’ features in the reports. Thus, for instance, historians commonly extract the language of Muslim ‘bloodthirstiness’ in the correspondence of the young Civil Service recruit Alfred Lyall and cite it as self-explanatory of a pathological prejudice – but without looking to see the wider context of the archive of letters as a whole, or even the surrounding scaffolding of representation being constructed in a single letter.⁵ Ironically, the ascription of prejudice has held back any further enquiry.

This paper makes a more detailed analysis of the accounts of Civil Service officials in the districts around the Delhi throne, from whom the cry of Muslim ‘conspiracy’ first arose and by whom it was most tenaciously held.⁶ It shifts the focus of attention away from the Muslim ‘fanatic’, initially to the rest of ‘native’ society deployed around him in these narratives, and then in more detail to the self-representation of the Christian Civil Service officer (Civilian) describing him. Rather than a handy accession to transhistorical prejudice, this kind of analysis reveals the extent to which the writing of Muslim ‘conspiracy’ responds to, as much as it produces, what is clearly a crisis in the official ideological identity of the writers. Recent cultural theorists have pointed to the role of irrationality as a structuring element in all state ideologies, the features of which, they argue, invariably at some point appear to irrupt from without to threaten their own destruction. The Civilian accounts give evidence of some of these forms of reciprocity running between the perception of the Muslim ‘fanatic’ and the instability of their own self-identification. This kind of rubric offers a way beyond the impasse of ‘mussulmanophobia’ and brings into question in unexpectedly complex ways the imbrication of secular neutrality and sectarianism in the official mindset, ways that suggest the ceremony in the Red Fort was illustrative of a structural paradox in the

maintenance of the ruling ideology of the Raj.

What is of concern here throughout are the wider narrative strategies in which the scene of Muslim ‘conspiracy’ is produced. To get a sense of the broader context of its perception in 1857, then, it is necessary to begin with a brief reassessment of the place of anti-Muslim sentiment in the previous half-century of British Indian administration.

‘Mussulmanophobia’ and colonialist praxis before 1857

In his groundbreaking study of separatism among Indian Muslims in the United Provinces in the later nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Francis Robinson insists that since the earliest days of colonial rule there existed a perception among British officials of Indian Muslim hostility towards the British Indian state. He states that this was ‘the most important source of British awareness of the Muslims: the threat they presented to the British Raj’.⁷ Under this rubric, the perception of Muslim ‘conspiracy’ in 1857 becomes self-explanatory, as an instinctive reaction to imaginatively incorporate and globalise any rebellious Indo-Muslim activity. Peter Hardy, on the other hand, has offered an opposing explanation in *The Muslims of British India*. He suggests that in 1857 Muslims became incorporated in British eyes as a pan-Indian constituency for the first time. He sees the events of 1857 as precipitating a British perception of disaffection, rather than, as Robinson argues, confirming it.⁸ But there is an underlying rationale shared between the two accounts. Hardy’s evidence for this perception is, in effect, largely a catalogue of uncoordinated rebellious acts performed by Muslims at the time, and from which the suggestion of ‘conspiracy’ might therefore naturally arise.⁹ In other words, he implicitly relies upon a latent British assumption that acts performed by Muslims were acts performed *as* Muslims – and that the natural British inference would be that a pan-Indian Muslim insurrection was at hand.

Against this shared supposition about the Anglo-Indian official’s vulnerability in 1857 to the spectre of a globalised Muslim revolt, it is instructive to note that, across its institutions, colonialist praxis in the first half of the nineteenth century is notable for its prejudice in favour of Muslims over other religious communities and for its comparatively pragmatic responses to the threat of Muslim incorporative activity. Robinson’s own study makes the case in terms of the disproportionate patronage

extended to Muslims employed by the British in subordinate, judicial and executive postings in the North-West Provinces and Awadh.¹⁰ And Michael Fisher has demonstrated that the Muslim elite played the most prominent role in the Residency system, most importantly in the key post of Mir Munshi.¹¹ Nor does the structure of the army in India reflect any disproportionate anxieties about the loyalty of its Muslim sepoys. Although after the Vellore Mutiny in 1806 the question of the hand of Muslim ‘conspiracy’ was raised and investigated, it was played down at the time, rather than encouraged, by British officials on the ground.¹² Significantly, as with the Java ‘Mutiny’ ten years later, there were no urgent moves made to reorganise the structure of the army. This can be contrasted with the wholesale reorganisation in army practice introduced immediately after the Barrackpore Mutiny of 1824, for which insensitivity towards Hindu rituals had been perceived as the prime motivation. Indeed the introduction of ‘Maulvies’ to the North Indian regiments was only effected after the Barrackpore Mutiny (a rebellion exclusive to Hindu regiments), and then only to balance the necessity of appointing ‘Pandits’ to help assimilate the disorders attendant upon the British construction of a new Hindu ‘high-caste’ army.¹³

To consider the charge of pre-1857 ‘mussulmanophobia’ more generally, it is necessary to recall that British interaction with Indo-Muslim socio-political movements in the first half of the century illustrates a markedly localising, circumscriptive tendency. The analyses by Hardy and Harlan Otto Pearson of the Bengal *Fara’izi* and the *Tariqah-i-Muhammadiya* movements demonstrate that the British were never at any point seriously concerned with any supra-local implications, or the dangerous spread of seditious Muslim religious networks. Even when, after the annexation of Punjab in 1849, the *Tariqah* turned their attentions against the British, colonial officials saw their interactions primarily in terms of border skirmishes (in contrast to the pandemic that ‘Wahabism’ came to be seen as in post-1859 British accounts).¹⁴ Indeed, there is a suggestion that they had before allowed the *Wahabi* movement to flourish in order to undermine the Sikh state.¹⁵ The so-called ‘jihadists’ in Awadh on the eve of the ‘Mutiny’ provide another instructive instance of the extent to which local Muslim religious sensibilities were in fact regarded by the British as a useful tool in their larger political struggles. Michael Fisher has pointed out the complicity of the Residency over this

movement in Awadh in 1856, which the British hoped might fuel their case for annexation (the short-lived movement eventually involved over four hundred combatants in open warfare with the state forces of Wajid Ali Shah). And this was a movement that could even claim supra-local support by important North Indian Muslim figures, including the Begum of Bhopal.¹⁶

Criminality and the rhetoric of fanaticism in 1857

This is not to say that there was no discourse of Muslim ‘fanaticism’ present in British official writings in India before 1857. But where this discourse arises – as, for instance, in the case of North Indian Muslim weaver communities, or indeed in the case of the *Fara’izi*, an agrarian movement of revolt – they closely follow the patterns of criminal ‘outcasting’ during this period that have been documented by Gyanendra Pandey and Radhika Singha. In other words, the discourse of ‘fanaticism’, like the discourse on ‘Thuggee’, was aimed primarily at the construction of a lawful Indian society.¹⁷ ‘Fanaticism’ separated out troubling, circumscribed elements from the lawful body of Indian Muslims, facilitating the extension of colonial power into the public civil arena. It displaced socio-economic grievances onto the transhistorical plane of communalism, drawing forth a response from the state purely in terms of ‘law and order’ and reinforcing its role as the descriptive arbiter of Indian society.¹⁸ The correspondence, demi-official and official accounts of Civil Service officers in the North-West Provinces and Awadh between 1857-59 strongly suggest that what had been a localising discourse of circumscription was effectively brought within the perception of lawful Indo-Muslim society. For the first time in colonial discourse, Muslims across specific class, caste and regional considerations were liable to inscription with a potential criminality based on their religious allegiance. As with the process of criminal ‘outcasting’, it set them apart from, and secured the ‘lawful’ re-branding of, the rest of Indian society.

The correspondence of Alfred Lyall, deputy magistrate in Bulandshahr district in the North-West Provinces, vividly illustrates the effects of this process. The first instance of the charge of Muslim ‘conspiracy’ occurs in a letter of 11th July 1857, in which Lyall asserts that ‘[the Mahometans] hate us with a fanatical hate that we never suspected to exist among them, and have everywhere been the leaders in the barbarous murdering and

mangling of the Christians'.¹⁹ Only two months earlier he had been assuring his mother that his sister-in-law, Mary Jane, would be safe in the Indian Hill district since there she would 'have no dealings with the Hindoo'.²⁰ At that point, for Lyall, 'Hindoo' and mutineer appear to have been interchangeable denominations that recurred alongside references to caste (especially 'Goojur') and sepoy outrages. After 11th July these categories became progressively occluded. Initially, references to caste insurrectionary activities became subsumed under the inflated category of 'Hindoo', which more often than not operated in tandem with, and indeed was incited by, the presence of the 'Mahometan'. As early as 30th August, the 'Hindoo' appears to have been cleansed of any complicity with what was by then more exclusively a 'Mahometan conspiracy', prompting Lyall to confide to his mother: 'I do not bear any spite against the Hindoos (excepting the sepoys) and I am always rather sorry to see them killed'. Six months later, in March 1858, he was free to tell his brother-in-law, Mr Holland, that the rebels were 'Mahometans and sepoys' only. By 26th September the discursive realignment was complete, and he informed his mother categorically that even 'Hindoo sepoys' were 'guiltless' of all atrocities. The 'Mahometan' effectively had been exonerated, and separated from, the rest of Indian society. Simultaneous with the proclamation of religious neutrality that ushered in the renewed British Indian state, the parametric logic of criminal 'outcasting' had testified in the mind of the young Civilian to the re-discovery of a lawful domestic Indian body.

The self-identification of the Civil Service officer in 1857

Lyall's correspondence with home during the events of 1857-59 has been used by historians as a typical, if virulent, example of the 'Mussulmanophobia' that overtook British officials at that time. The scrupulous analysis by Eric Stokes of the course of rebellion in his district argues that the mismatch between the absence of Muslim 'conspiracy' in Bulandshahr and Lyall's sincere belief in its guiding rationale may be taken as typical of the British experience in the regions adjacent to Delhi in 1857. Stokes's conclusion, however, that this belief was purely the result of the 'hankering after a simplistic explanation' for the bewildering patchwork of mini-rebellions taking place, stops short of addressing its implication in the wider reconstitution of Indian society that

has been mapped above.²¹ It also, and crucially, misses the problem of self-identification that such an imaginative resolution entails. For if the events of 1857 were to be seen as a Muslim war of ‘extermination’, then the British Civil Service officials at its receiving end were required to identify themselves primarily as its Christian victims.

Christopher Bayly’s characterisation of the immediate pre-‘Mutiny’ British dispensation as a ‘covert confessional state’ places the charged question of religious identity at the heart of colonial governance.²² But the qualifier ‘covert’ belies the extent to which the disjunction between public and private self-identifications among British officials impacted upon their understanding and representation of Indian society. This is nowhere more relevant than in the core administrative cadre of the Civil Service, many members of which (including Alfred Lyall) assented, in forms that range from the reluctant to the fanatical, to the ideology of secular neutrality that underpinned the mature systems of British rule in 1857 and justified the British presence as a necessarily foreign and neutral arbiter of indigenous religious rivalries.²³ At the same time, more than any other branch of British rule in India, the Service was comprised of a remarkably homogenous community of officials drawn predominantly from an Anglican background, frequently with a close male relative serving in the Church (for instance, Lyall’s father was the Rector of Harbledown; his uncle the Dean of Canterbury).²⁴ In other words, for most of the Civil Service, latent private assumptions of a church-state nexus significantly complicated – indeed, rendered paradoxical – the public repudiation of a religious imperative to governance in India. It is here that ‘Mussulmanophobia’ obscures some of the crucial issues at stake in 1857. Distinct from any particular religious imperative to the colonial project in India, the impact of this debilitating paradox of self-identification offers a compelling new route into the genesis and significance of Muslim ‘conspiracy’ in the mind of the Civil Service official in 1857.

It is important to underscore that the ideology of colonial secular neutrality was not merely, or exclusively, a matter of pragmatic considerations. Partha Chatterjee, among others, has convincingly argued that it was upon this ideological structure that the ‘rule of colonial difference’ – that almost religious motif of nineteenth-century colonial discourse in India – was built.²⁵ But until now, critical studies have failed to adequately account for the peculiar effects of the overnight collapse within the Civil Service of this

ideal of ‘difference’. For in 1857, Indian Civil Service (ICS) officers believed themselves to be attacked not simply as functionaries of empire, but as Christians: in other words, they believed themselves to have been pitched into what Pandey has defined as the discursive keystone of the late colonial state: the ‘narrative of the communal riot’.²⁶ On one level, the language of religious retribution accessed by all quarters of Anglo-India must be seen as (predictably) rushing in to fill the ideological vacuum.²⁷ What has not been fully understood, however, is the more complex, ambivalent and debilitating role played in shaping this language in Civilian accounts by the simultaneous exposure of the structural paradox built into the ideological matrix of the ICS officer. The key question raised here concerns what happens to Civilian ideological subjectivity when it can no longer suppress its constitutive irrationality. How can that subjectivity be recuperated?

The intolerable pressures of such a realisation, and the peculiar idioms they give rise to, come to centre most immediately on the paradoxical category of ‘Christian Civilian’ in ICS accounts. It is in the destabilising effects registered here that it is possible to see how Muslim ‘conspiracy’ and the paradox of Civilian self-representation are, from the outset, peculiarly reciprocal and disorienting discursive events.

The semantics of ‘Christian’ victimhood

Few considerations of Christianity intrude in Lyall’s pre-‘Mutiny’ letters, and where they do the young ICS recruit evinces a sceptical attitude not only to his own faith but also towards any possible future for the Anglican church in the subcontinent. It is notable, then, that the point at which the Christian Civilian apparently first becomes a palpable presence in the correspondence is also the moment of the irruption of his perception of Muslim ‘conspiracy’. In that letter of 11th July, Lyall writes:

‘There is always something very laughable to me in the way these Hindoos will walk off with their enemy’s property the moment he is down. Plunder always seems to be their chief object, to obtain which they will perform any villainy, whereas the Mahometans only seem to care about murdering their opponents, and are altogether far more bloody-minded. Those last hate us with a fanatical hate that we never suspected to exist among them, and have everywhere been the leaders in the barbarous murdering and mangling of the Christians.’

The division of Hindu and Muslim between material and spiritual planes clearly serves to separate out and illuminate the particular transgression of the latter in the secularist terms of British Indian rule. It also carries with it further temporal and spatial forms of separatism that will become increasingly important to the representation of Indian Muslims in the correspondence. The Mahometan's secret 'hatred' is marked by an unknown temporal origin (in comparison to the Hindu's rather more immediate material obsession); and it arises beyond the confines of any particular space ('everywhere'). By 24th November 1858, these features have been globalised: Mahometans 'are and always have been the deadly enemies of Christians'; and nothing short of a 'regular crusade against every Mahometan in any country where Christians dwell' will address the problem. The inflation of these features constitutes the rhetorically apocalyptic endpoint of the process of criminal 'outcasting', setting the Indian Muslims down outside of the renewed British Indian state (where crusades are now unthinkable).

It is important to bear in mind that the secret sharer in this process of outcasting is the conflicted location of the Civil Service officer himself. Since, as Steven Goldsmith points out, the accession to apocalyptic rhetoric always marks the attempt to escape intolerable historical pressures, the similarly de-contextualising semantic effects of Lyall's production here, of the figure of the Christian, are worth elaborating on as closely bound up with those pressures.²⁸ For the relative clarity of Lyall's use of the epithet 'us' (Civilian or British) in the letter of 11th July stands in contrast to the definition of 'the Christians': which 'Christians' are being referred to here, native, European or British? In the normal course of Anglo-Indian classification, '*the* Christians' would refer to natives only. Yet here it suggests an expansion of the category through which the Civilian appears to be both smuggling in and simultaneously disavowing a self-referential designation. In other words, the body of a native convert has been hesitantly interposed between Muslim 'fanatic' and Christian Civilian. This lexical ambiguity is further heightened by the fact that in the immediate pre-'Mutiny' discourse 'Christians' had become a firm category, heavily policed and always conscientiously glossed.²⁹ The presence of Lyall's Mahometan thus obscures rather than (as might have been expected) sharpens the classification 'Christian', rendering it instead momentarily irreducible. In

this sense, the rhetorical outcasting of the Indian Muslim appears to be linked to a novel confusion surrounding Lyall's ideological identity.

This might be taken as no more than a product of the haste of the moment of writing, were it not for the curious recurrence of this instability in the terms of self-identification throughout the correspondence. The most vivid instance comes in a letter of 30th August 1857 in which, describing the intensity of the feeling against the British, Lyall makes an uncharacteristic amendment (the correspondence as a whole is remarkably free of such mistakes), deleting 'us' from the phrase 'us Christians' and then, in reference to the opposing 'fury' it has brought forth from the British, he deletes another epithet (most probably 'Christians') and replaces it simply with 'us'. What this pattern of substitution and metonymy effect throughout is the lexical separation of Civilian and Christian. By the time of the letter of 24th November 1858, the dispatch of the Indian Muslims to other countries and other times can be identified as aimed at the similar occlusion of the problematic historical contextualisation of the Civilian:

'the Mohamedans [...] are a set of bloodthirsty fanatics who hate *us* to a man, and who will never be reconciled to *us* [...] perhaps the recent outrages upon *European consuls* may in some degree open the eyes of *the English*. The Mussulmans have always been the deadly enemies of Christians...' ³⁰

The proliferation of nouns and pronouns in such a short space serves every purpose but clarity. The first 'us' appears distinct from the third person opaque category of 'European consuls', which is then opposed to 'the English'; and all are finally translated to the context-free circumstance of 'Christians'. The precise affiliation of the Civil Service officer becomes lost in a thicket of possible identifications until, in apparent exasperation, Lyall reaches for other trans-temporal planes altogether. The excising of the spatio-historical location of the Indian Muslim is thus matched by, and can be seen as partly responsive to, the ambivalent disassociation of the Civilian from his Christian identification within India.

The instability surrounding the self-identification of the Civilian in Lyall's private letters home corresponds to a wider pattern that infects the official record of Muslim 'conspiracy' in the North-West Provinces. As with Lyall's letters, it works towards

creating an irreducible category of ‘Christian’ in which the Civilian can no longer be located with any certainty. This was nowhere more conspicuous than in the accounts by Civil Service officers of the events that took place in Agra in late 1857. In the narrative by the magistrate at Muttra (Meerut district), Mark Thornhill, it is the Muslim ‘fanatic’ who both draws the British within the category of ‘Christian’ and simultaneously begins substantially to destabilise its definition. This became apparent once Thornhill, having fled Muttra, at last reached the fort at Agra, when it was related that out of deference to the apparent prejudice of the mainly ‘Mahommedan police’ the ‘Christians’ of the ‘volunteer corps’ had been disarmed by the misguided Civilian officials.³¹ At this point, the category seems to comprise ‘natives’ only, an interpretation reinforced when the narrator describes the retreat into Agra fort of the ‘English and Christians’.³² When a ‘jihad’ is declared by the ‘Mahommedans’ of the city, however, the category begins to unravel. Thornhill records that the ‘jihad’ was to be prosecuted against ‘Christians only’ (as opposed to, presumably, Hindus). He then clarifies that ‘many of the victims were women, many were children; with one or two exceptions, all were natives’³³. Until now, not only might ‘Christians’ have already been assumed to refer to a purely native denomination, it appeared to have been one that did not even account for the ‘Eurasians’. This group had been earlier brought into the narrative alongside with, but distinct to, the ‘Christians’. Here they served as a counterweight to the delusive ‘trust’ placed in ‘Mohammedans’ by the Agra Civilians, being one of the groups who had been disarmed (‘Christians and Eurasians’).³⁴ Nevertheless, the single example that Thornhill cites to illustrate the massacre of the ‘Christians’ in Agra city turns out to be – though is here not specifically referred to as – a Eurasian (Major Jacobs).³⁵ The category ‘Christian’, which had begun its life in the narrative alongside the potential ‘Mahommedan’ conspirator and had been invested with a meaning distinct from the ‘English’ and ‘Eurasians’, becomes at the outbreak of Muslim ‘conspiracy’ inclusive of both. Thus the potential dangerous clarity that the ‘Mahommedan’ brings to the category, disclosing and enforcing its continual reinterpretation, ultimately works to exclude rather than define the Civilian; as in Lyall’s letters, the result is the effective uncoupling of the Civilian from his visible religious identification. As if to underline this, the narrator later goes on to refer to the ‘entire Christian population’ who had ‘taken refuge within the walls of the fort’ –

bringing the category, at the close of the murderous Muslim-led uprising, to an apparently inclusive, but now largely impenetrable and effectively destabilised, status.³⁶ What happened in Agra cantonment, civil station, and city during the ‘riots’ of 1857 has been established: a sectarian murder-spree. By whom, it could not be more clear: the ‘Mahommedan’ police force, inflaming, leading and directing the citizenry. But against whom, is now, at an immediate linguistic level, all but opaque, for the only category offered, ‘Christians’, has lost most of its social, ethnic and political connotations.

Thornhill’s memoirs, published in London in 1884, would seem to be somewhat removed from the scene of action. But even the most authoritative account of these events, compiled in 1859 by the Magistrate of Agra, A. L. M. Phillips, for the records of the Commissioner, Agra Division, is infected with precisely this kind of categorical confusion. It occurs first with the mention of an official order that all the families of ‘Christians’ return to the fort for safety.³⁷ Since it simultaneously refers to the ‘native garrison’ to be withdrawn from the fort, it might seem that ‘Christians’ begin life in his narrative as a potentially exclusive European category. But at the same time, a note of ambiguity is sounded by the observation that on receiving news of the open rebellion at ‘Allygurh’, ‘great alarm was felt by the Christian population’.³⁸ The description implies a British presence while at the same time disclosing, and interposing, a ‘native’ constituency. That neither the inclusive nor exclusive definitions bespeak a commonly understood mode of Anglo-Indian discourse – and one therefore requiring no qualifications – is signalled by the reference to a separate order made later for ‘the admission of the Native Christians into the fort’.³⁹ Nevertheless, it is this, by now indeterminate, category of ‘Christians’ that is set at the heart of Phillips’s account of the rebellion:

‘From the time of the proclamation [of the reign of the king of Delhi] the property of Christians wherever they could be found in the city was plundered and themselves, both men, women and children ruthlessly murdered.’⁴⁰

Exactly whose property, the reader might ask, and indeed, who was murdered? The narrative consequences of the descriptive deconstruction of this category impinge directly on even the statistical official record: when the magistrate comes to document ‘the

number of Christians who were [...] murdered', the precision with which he divides the figures into 'men', 'women' and 'children' stands in stark contrast to the lack of *any* other identifiable classifications (such as 'English', 'European', 'native' or 'Eurasian'). It would seem, then, that the more Muslim 'conspiracy' is flushed out into the open, the further removed the Christian Civilian becomes from the scene of action. Effectively, in Agra in 1857 he has disappeared from the official account.

The 'elsewhere' of Muslim 'conspiracy'

The destabilisation of the category of 'Christian', losing the Civilian within its shifting borders, points to a more thoroughgoing psychological process of occlusion in the official account of Muslim 'conspiracy' in 1857-59. For what is under erasure here is not merely a pragmatic inconvenience (the Christian official) but the debilitating ideological paradox it contains: the Christian official of a government predicated on secular difference. This process of occlusion does not therefore simply obviate the problematic of laying claim to such an identity. As Lyall's overdetermined, visceral revisions make clear, it works to seclude its subject from the paradox that might otherwise stand revealed. That paradox, as much as prejudice, must be seen as central to the perception of Muslim 'conspiracy', is made even further apparent by the fact that the spectre of 'jihad' or blind belief in Muslim treachery is much less frequently found in the accounts by those few among the service who openly espoused the evangelist case for government-sponsored conversion in India.⁴¹

The consistency of the process of occlusion outlined above suggests that the perception and representation of Muslim 'conspiracy' functions in these narratives in accordance with the paradoxical reasoning essential to the preservation of all social ideologies. Slavoj Žižek has posited that all state ideologies are invariably predicated on the impossible promise of a future transcendent achievement of the truth they embody, a utopian destination that is then inevitably held back by factors that seem to appear by chance or failure.⁴² As Gyanendra Pandey and Peter Van der Veer have demonstrated regarding the role of communalism in ideologies of the state in colonial and postcolonial India, these deleterious elements are in fact structural – necessary to bring the state into visibility but also to keep the illusion of the future fulfilment of the ideology in sight.⁴³

Whether it is Hindu Nationalism or colonial secular neutrality, the fulfilment of that ideology can never be achieved but remains an immanent event preserved from recognising its own irrational foundations by its more or less exclusive focus on the very obstacle that appears to threaten its destruction.⁴⁴

Ensuring the survival of the ideology of British secular neutrality at its most acute moment of crisis, then, ironically entails cocooning the perception of Muslim ‘conspiracy’, that which threatens to destroy it by bringing its Christian administrators within the deadly play of the very communal rivalries they are meant to arbitrate from without. The fundamental irrational premise of an Anglican administration disconnecting itself from the state it administers effectively returns in the deadly guise of an invasive foreign presence marked by a religious imperative. As the structural paradox indispensable to preserving the promise of the secular state’s survival in ICS accounts, that belief is always, as it were, protected from exposure. The destabilisation of the category of ‘Christian’ is only one mode through which this preservation is effected (the semantic seclusion of the Civil Service officer from the ‘narrative of the communal riot’). Another and far more conspicuous aspect of that same occlusive logic is the disappearance of the scene of confrontation itself. For the specific event of Muslim ‘conspiracy’ in these narratives is itself commonly translated into an ‘elsewhere’, so that the one scene that almost never gains representation is the actual meeting of Muslim persecutor and Civil Service victim.

Lyall’s letter of 11th July, inaugurating Muslim ‘conspiracy’ into this correspondence, is again symptomatic of this wider pattern of representation. By taking one step back from the lexis of ‘Mussulmanophobia’, it is possible to see how the historiographical piecemeal treatment of Lyall’s letters has failed to pick up on the implications of their narrative strategies. The scene into which he introduces his avaricious Hindu and murderous Muslim is in fact a staged encounter. The letter as a whole details a punitive expedition against a local fort in which some insurgents who had been ‘plundering’ the countryside had taken refuge. Lyall tells his father that on that day he personally had helped in the killing of about ‘130 men’; but ‘after taking the fort’ the British had ‘let loose a crowd of people who had been plundered and harried by these miscreants and they went to work with a will, stripping bare every house in the most

artistic manner'. It is at this point that the comparative tableau of Hindu and Muslim is introduced. In other words, and analogous to their employment on the day, Lyall deploys his 'native' figures in the narrative in an isolated schema of representation, from which the British have apparently been removed. The senseless greed of the 'Hindoo' is in fact explained by the fact that the British have physically enabled the 'plundering' (which would seem to be no more than the retrieval of their own goods). But the effect of this narrative strategy on the Muslim is even more remarkable, since the only massacre to have taken place is that perpetrated by the British. The barbarous 'mangler' of Christian corpses is therefore himself only a metaphorical presence; the putative scene of Civilian-Muslim interaction that comes to dominate Lyall's description actually takes place in an 'elsewhere', beyond the purview of the narrative. This 'elsewhere' of Muslim 'conspiracy' runs throughout the archive of 88 letters that constitutes Lyall's correspondence during this period, both staging and holding apart the encounter of Christian Civilian and Muslim persecutor. In the eyewitness account of its most infamous expositor, the actual event of Muslim 'conspiracy' never in fact takes place.⁴⁵ Across the official record of the phenomenon in the districts adjacent to Delhi, a bewildering variety of prophylactic strategies emerge to keep the Muslim 'fanatic' and his Christian Civilian victim in separate narrative spheres. This can take relatively banal forms, such as that which occurs in the account published in *The Delhi Gazette* in December 1857 by J. F. Kitchen, Head Assistant to the Collector of Goregaon. Concluding a narrative that includes a testimonial by the author to the (Muslim) Nawab of Jhujjur for his protection of 'Christians' generally and for sheltering the Civilian's family, and which sees 'the green flag' as playing only a minor and decidedly unconvincing part in his district, Kitchen makes the abrupt avowal that, though 'the future is still hidden from us', he trusts that the British will 'defy all the assaults of infidel treachery and rebellion'.⁴⁶ Through the common British synonym for Muslims (as opposed to the term 'pagan' applied by Anglo-Indians to Hindus in this period), Kitchen pledges himself to the larger corporate institution of 'conspiracy' and in the process retrospectively recasts his experience in its light. Crucially, though, he does so once he is safely sequestered from its presence. Muslim 'conspiracy' thus frames but does not directly mingle with the narrative. It holds back and simultaneously promises, through its

surmounting, a future for the British in India.

Filling out this picture of institutional incorporation, a useful comparison can be made with the account published in 1858 by William Edwards, Judge and Collector of Budaon in Rohilkhand. Like that of Kitchen's account, co-ordinated Muslim rebellious activity is not an apparent factor within the Edwards narrative. Indeed, quite the opposite: his tendency is to repudiate its possibility. For instance, he concludes that he is 'full satisfied' that the Muslim 'rural classes [who joined rebellion with the sepoys] could not have been acted upon by any cry of their religion in danger'.⁴⁷ Despite disquieting rumours during 'Ede', he insists that the 'Mahommedans' of Burdaon were easily manipulated by him, 'knowing as I did that a bitter animosity existed between several of them'.⁴⁸ And when the suggestion of Muslim 'conspiracy' itself is broached to him, Edwards contextualises it as potentially misleading information.⁴⁹ Such judicious discriminations point up the lethal uncertainty that otherwise organises and drives his narrative, rarely allowing him to fathom the motives and intentions of most of his native informants. The notable exceptions to this rule are often where individual Muslims figure in the narrative, frequently as faithful guides, 'friends', and protectors.⁵⁰ Nevertheless, when his account was incorporated into the demi-official conspectus of administrative records published in Calcutta in 1859, the editor N. A. Chick summarised Edwards' experience with the comment that 'everywhere [Edwards] found the Mohammedans more hostile to the British than the Hindoos'.⁵¹ Chick's extraordinary editorial intervention effectively acts in the manner of Kitchen's final declaration: it recasts the Civilian's experience from the protected margins beyond the narrative. In doing so, it directs the reader towards the undisclosed 'elsewhere' of Muslim 'conspiracy', while keeping its otherwise ignorant Civilian victim safe from contamination.

The limits of restoring Civilian subjectivity

The division of the narratives of Lyall, Kitchen and Chick/Edwards into contiguous but apparently separated spheres acts as more than a form of containment. It imparts to them a unity of self-perception that is otherwise unavailable. In effect, it enables an account characterised by indecision, obscured vision and fallibility to achieve the omniscience of

a third person narrative; and in so doing it translates the object of these accounts – the bewildered Civilian – into their subject, the restored author of his own story. The ‘elsewhere’ of Muslim ‘conspiracy’ in this way represents a space of agency for the Civilian, through which the fractures of self-identification are ostensibly healed. He is no longer a participant in the ‘narrative of the communal riot’, but once again its neutral, though outraged, reporter.

Mark Thornhill’s later memoir illustrates the degree to which this kind of almost schizophrenic resolution, so jarring in immediate accounts such as those by Chick/Edwards and Kitchen, can come in time to seem naturalised as a narrative strategy. His account is divided equally into two isometric halves. The first half details what amounts to an eyewitness report, comparable in its tropes of doubt and limited vision to those of Chick/Edwards and Kitchen before the irruption of ‘conspiracy’. It recounts his flight to Agra, in which the few signs of Muslim co-ordinated activity that he documents are not related to any broader explanation for the rebellion. As with Edwards, the author describes numerous incidents of the loyalty of individual Muslims, and especially that of his faithful guide, Dilawar Khan. They appear to act as companions and even saviours throughout these episodes.⁵² Once Thornhill reaches and joins the besieged garrison in Agra fort, the process of recasting that experience begins. The physical re-incorporation into the Anglo-Indian community is accompanied now by the narrative attempt to re-interpret and incorporate the experiences of the first half of his own story into the larger ‘Mutiny’ narrative of Muslim ‘conspiracy’. It is as if the physical circumscription of his internment in Agra fort incites a renewed and unfettered narrative vision, one that allows him to transcend time and space. The ‘elsewhere’ of Muslim ‘conspiracy’ here corresponds directly to the extra-narrative region from which this vision derives: that is, Thornhill’s partial singular voice gives way to the polyphonic unity of the Civilian ‘Mutiny’ archive on Muslim ‘conspiracy’, drawing on published sources (some of them from Chick’s compendium) and reports that he could only have accessed long after his flight and using them to bring the two halves of his narrative into alignment. The actions of the fanatical Muslim police, in events that take place before his arrival and continue beyond the fort walls and his immediate narrative competence, provide the compass by which he can retrace and gain authorship over his own rudderless journey. So hegemonic

is this renewed vision that Thornhill the protagonist literally becomes a character operating under the logic of pathetic irony controlled by his other narrating self. The process climaxes in the recapitulation of a hitherto mysterious dash from the house of the ‘Seths’ who had been protecting him, which is now explained through the (belated) revelation of a ‘plot’ by the Seths’ ‘Mohammedan guards’ to ‘murder us all’. This, the omniscient narrator spells out from the security of his confinement in Agra, was the moment of ‘our greatest peril’.⁵³ What his protagonist self did not know, it would seem, could not harm him; what the Christian Civilian could not see, his neutral observer can now safely disclose.

This distanced, and almost novelistic, narrative should not be invested with an ability to control not simply a profound crisis in Civilian self-presentation, but the question of ideological disempowerment that structured it. In his recapitulation of the events of his flight a strain of uncanny, and therefore potentially disempowering, imagery enters Thornhill’s narrative that increasingly evokes this subterranean faultline of identity and power, and its disturbing imbrication with the spectre of Muslim ‘conspiracy’. By ‘uncanny’, it should be understood here in Freud’s usage of the term, as the familiar estranged in a manner that always ‘leads back to what is known’.⁵⁴ This imagery is therefore one of confused transposition where the British can actually be transformed into, or be rendered as the helpless affects of, the very Muslim figures they otherwise seek to circumscribe and isolate. In its minor register in the narrative, the insurgent Muslim police force is inscribed with qualities such as unity of purpose that had in the first half of the narrative been explicitly introduced as precisely the British virtues that originally carved the British Indian empire out of a divided Hindu society.⁵⁵ While at the same time, the author describes how, faced with a Muslim leadership now unifying the cross-communal body of sepoys and citizenry, the besieged British garrison is seen to disintegrate into bickering factions.⁵⁶ A more intense image reveals an encounter with the escaped convicts from the Agra jail as the direct result of the treacherous actions of a ‘Mohammedan official’.⁵⁷ Thornhill comes across these ex-convicts as ‘phantoms from another world’ who mirror the passing British refugees, but also render them ‘invisible’ by their refusal to take note of (or even look at) their former masters as they rattle their broken British chains – an uncanny image of power upturned, further intensified by the

description of British bungalows in the distance as ‘cages of fire’.⁵⁸

Thornhill’s ‘phantoms from another world’ itself gains an unnerving echo in a scene that is replicated in different guises throughout the 1857 official archive and that touches most directly on the British self-representation involved in Muslim ‘conspiracy’. The magistrate describes how, overhearing the conversation of two of his peons shortly before the ‘Mutiny’, he becomes suddenly aware of the depth of their secret attachment to the ‘traditions’ of the Mughal court. Prefacing the narrative of rebellion that follows, he writes of this conversation: ‘There was something weird in the Mogul Empire thus starting into a sort of phantom life after the slumber of a hundred years’.⁵⁹ In the besieged fort at Agra this Mughal ‘phantom’ is again re-vivified, in terms that today appear comic but at the time had clearly made an impression on their author. Thornhill describes how the Emperor Akbar was said to irrupt from the vaults of the fort and confront a sepoy stationed there. When he is told that the building is now a ‘Company Fort’, his response is to scream out: ‘It is false! The house is mine! Mine!! Mine!!!’⁶⁰ Clearly symbolising the dispossession of the British Indian state, the ‘phantom’ of Mughal rule returns as an uncanny manifestation of sectarianism as well, since it coincides in the narrative with, and appears to simulate, the murderous activities of the Muslim Civil Service officials and police just beyond the walls of the fort. The Mughal Emperor, and through him the dispossessed British Indian state, is thus reborn into the narrative under the sign of Muslim ‘conspiracy’. Far from effectively separating Civilian and sectarian, Thornhill has compressed them into a thoroughly disorienting vision of the state simultaneously under attack from without and within.

Conclusion

This last image returns us to the confused ceremony of ‘desacralisation’ in the Red Fort in 1857, in which the repossession of the British Indian state is marked in the rituals of the very sectarianism it claimed to forestall. Paradox, it has been argued, is not incidental to this scene, it is structural to the renewed understanding of ICS ideological subjectivity in India, significantly shaping the peculiar features and appeal of the perception of Muslim ‘conspiracy’ in the mind of the British Civil Service officer in 1857. The recurrence in Civilian accounts of elements of categorical instability and confusion,

narrative strategies that work consistently to hold apart the protagonists and displace the scene of encounter, and the disorienting irruption of uncanny imagery that transposes them, indicate that the contours of Muslim ‘conspiracy’ were partly determined by a crisis over official self-identification. That crisis centred on the sudden exposure in 1857 of a crucial aspect of the state ideology, the founding paradox of their claims to administrate a system predicated on the occlusion of their own religious identity. For Civilians, that paradox was compounded by the latent assumptions of a church-state nexus that their Anglican background still carried. What the language of Muslim ‘conspiracy’ in part constituted, then, was an ambivalent, indeed agonising, crucible for the urgent question of the representation and role of paramountcy in India. The scenes of exhumation and exorcism surrounding the dispossessed Mughal in the Agra and Red Forts are therefore paradigmatic of the larger economy of representation involved in Muslim ‘conspiracy’. For once the impulse towards exorcism is acted upon, the prophylactic strategies are overcome and the conspiracy is actually summoned up, what invariably arrives to confront their authors is never the statement of discursive empowerment that was intended. Instead, the British participants of Muslim ‘conspiracy’ are time and again presented with disturbing spectacles of reversal and self-dispossession, and an ideological subjectivity estranged.

¹ Bernard Cohn, ‘Representing Authority in Victorian India,’ in *An Anthropologist Among the Historians and Other Essays* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, repr. 1994; 1987), p. 679.

² ‘Note by L. Bowring on the causes of the Mutiny and on the part taken in it by the Mahommedans’, No. 362, *Papers on Miscellaneous Subjects, Canning Papers*, India Office Collections, British Library; C. A. Bayly, *Indian Society and the Making of the British Empire* (Hyderabad: Orient Longman, 1990), pp. 184-88; Eric Stokes, *The Peasant and the Raj: Studies in Agrarian Society and Peasant Rebellion in Colonial India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, repr. 1980; 1978), pp. 140-58.

³ Metcalf, *Ideologies of the Raj*, pp. 139-40. The term ‘mussulmanophobia’ was coined by the Civil Service officer, E. A. Reade, to describe the initially hysterical British response to rebellion in Agra. C. A. Bayly, *Empire and Information: Intelligence-gathering and Social Communication in India: 1780-1870* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 326.

⁴ Bayly, *Empire*, pp. 315-38

⁵ Metcalf, *Ideologies of the Raj*, pp. 139-40.

⁶ A fuller discussion of these accounts, as well as of the historiography surrounding Muslim ‘conspiracy’ in 1857, can be found in Part Two of Alex Padamsee, *Representations of Indian Muslims in British Colonial Discourse* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005).

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- ⁷ Robinson, *Separatism Among Indian Muslims: the Politics of the United Provinces' Muslims, 1860-1923* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, repr. 1993; 1974), p. 99.
- ⁸ Peter Hardy, *The Muslims of British India*, p. 62.
- ⁹ Hardy, *Muslims*, pp. 63-66.
- ¹⁰ Robinson, *Separatism*, p. 46.
- ¹¹ Michael H Fisher, *Indirect Rule in India: Residents and the Residency System, 1764-1858* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, repr. 1998; 1991), pp. 318, 321, 323, 364.
- ¹² Susan Bayly, *Saints, Goddesses and Kings: Muslims and Christians in South Indian Society, 1700-1900* (New Delhi: Cambridge University Press, repr. 1992; 1989), pp. 226-28.
- ¹³ Seema Alavi, *The Sepoy and the Company: Tradition and Transition in Northern India, 1770-1830* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, repr. 1998; 1995), pp. 90-94, 282.
- ¹⁴ Hardy, *Muslims*, pp. 54-55
- ¹⁵ Harlan Otto Pearson, 'Islamic Reform and Revival in Nineteenth-century India: the Tariqah-i Muhammadiyah' (PhD thesis, Duke University, 1979), p. 20.
- ¹⁶ Michael H Fisher, *A Clash of Cultures: Awadh, the British and the Mughals* (New Delhi: Manohar, 1987), pp. 228-34; Francis Robinson, *Islam and Muslim History in South Asia* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 145-46.
- ¹⁷ Radhika Singha, 'Providential Circumstances: The Thuggee Campaign of the 1830s and Legal Innovation', *Modern Asian Studies*, 27, 1 (1993), pp. 83-146.
- ¹⁸ Gyanendra Pandey, *The Construction of Communalism in Colonial North India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press repr. 1994; 1990), Chapter 3.
- ¹⁹ *Papers of Alfred Lyall*, British Library MSS Eur F132/3. All references to Lyall's correspondence between 1857-59 are taken from this archive.
- ²⁰ Letter of 18th May 1857
- ²¹ Eric Stokes, 'Nawab Walidad Khan and the 1857 Struggle in the Bulandshahr District', in *The Peasant and the Raj: Studies in Agrarian Society and Peasant Rebellion in Colonial India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, repr. 1980; 1978), p. 150.
- ²² C. A. Bayly, 'Returning the British to South Asian History,' in C. A. Bayly, *The Origins of Nationality in South Asia* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998).
- ²³ D. A. Washbrook, 'Ethnicity and Racialism in Colonial Indian Society,' in Robert Ross (ed.), *Racism and Colonialism: Essays on Ideology and Social Structure* (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1982).
- ²⁴ The most comprehensive statistical study of the social background of the service in the nineteenth century can be found in Clive Dewey, 'The Education of a Ruling Caste: The Indian Civil Service in the Era of Competitive Examination', *The English Historical Review*, 88 (April 1973).
- ²⁵ Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), p. 10.
- ²⁶ Pandey, *Construction*.
- ²⁷ On the need for a 'scriptural framework' in 1857-59, see Lewis D. Wurgraft, *The Imperial Imagination: Magic and Myth in Kipling's India* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1983), pp. 97-98.
- ²⁸ Steven Goldsmith, *Unbuilding Jerusalem: Apocalypse and Romantic Representations* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1993), p. 21.
- ²⁹ Gauri Viswanathan, *Outside the Fold: Conversion, Modernity and Belief* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, repr. 2001; 1998), p. 81; Kenneth W. Jones, 'Religious identity and the Indian Census,' in N. Gerald Barrier (ed.), *The Census in India: New Critical Perspectives* (New Delhi: Manohar, 1981), p. 79.
- ³⁰ Emphasis added.
- ³¹ Mark Thornhill, *Personal Adventures and Experiences of a Magistrate during the Rise, Progress and Suppression of the Mutiny* (London: John Murray, 1884), p. 181
- ³² Thornhill, *Personal Adventures*, p. 198.
- ³³ Thornhill, *Personal Adventures*, p. 201.
- ³⁴ Thornhill, *Personal Adventures*, pp. 179-80.
- ³⁵ Thornhill, *Personal Adventures*, p. 201.
- ³⁶ Thornhill, *Personal Adventures*, p. 201.
- ³⁷ N. A. Chick (ed.), *Annals of the Indian Rebellion containing Narratives of the Outbreaks and Eventful Occurrences, and Stories of Personal Adventures During the Mutiny of 1857-1858* (Calcutta: Sanders, Cones, 1859), p. 757.

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- ³⁸ Chick, *Annals*, p. 757.
- ³⁹ Chick, *Annals*, p. 762.
- ⁴⁰ Chick, *Annals*, p. 767.
- ⁴¹ Compare in this respect, William Edwards, *Reminiscences of a Bengal Civilian* (London: Smith, Elder & Co., 1866). Some of Edwards' experiences and perceptions are discussed in detail below. The comparative clarity of vision from this constituency is made even more forcefully by Avril Powell's account (in this volume) of the shrewd assessment of loyalty in his Muslim subordinates by the evangelist-oriented William Muir during the rebellion.
- ⁴² Slavoj Zizek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London: Verso, repr. 1999; 1989).
- ⁴³ Peter Van der Veer, *Religious Nationalism: Hindus and Muslims in India* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994); Pandey, *Construction*.
- ⁴⁴ Zizek, *Sublime*, p. 78.
- ⁴⁵ For a discussion of the only occasion that Lyall details a personal encounter with hostile Muslims, see Padamsee, *Representations*, pp. 132-36.
- ⁴⁶ 'Narrative of the Outbreak in the Goorgaon District. Letter to the Editor of *The Delhi Gazette* by J. F. Kitchen,' in *Extracts from Indian Journals* (Cheltenham: R. Edwards, 1894), p. 2.
- ⁴⁷ William Edwards, *Personal Adventures during the Indian Rebellion in Rohilcund, Futtehghur, and Oude* (London: Smith, Elder & Co., 1858), p. 7.
- ⁴⁸ Edwards, *Personal*, p. 4.
- ⁴⁹ Edwards, *Personal*, pp. 146-47, 156.
- ⁵⁰ Edwards, *Personal*, pp. 21-24, 53, 57.
- ⁵¹ Chick, *Annals*, p. 348.
- ⁵² Thornhill, *Personal Adventures*, pp. 45, 54, 69, 134, 137, 141, 144, 149, 150, 151, 156, 160, 163.
- ⁵³ Thornhill, *Personal Adventures*, p. 163.
- ⁵⁴ Sigmund Freud, 'The Uncanny', *Art and Literature, Volume XIV* (London: Penguin Freud Library, 1990), p. 340.
- ⁵⁵ Thornhill, *Personal Adventures*, p. 126.
- ⁵⁶ Thornhill, *Personal Adventures*, p. 262.
- ⁵⁷ Thornhill, *Personal Adventures*, pp. 195-96.
- ⁵⁸ Thornhill, *Personal Adventures*, p. 147.
- ⁵⁹ Thornhill, *Personal Adventures*, p. 7.
- ⁶⁰ Thornhill, *Personal Adventures*, p. 236.