INTRODUCTION: ENGLISH IN INDIA, INDIA IN ENGLAND

By Mary Ellis Gibson

As we planned this special issue of Victorian Literature and Culture, the editors of VLC and I engaged in a lively exchange – what title could capture such a sprawling arena of concern? Victorian India seemed short and sweet. And yet one must ask, which Victorian India? Whose Victorian India? Do we mean India and Indians in the British Isles? British traders, soldiers, and administrators in Britain or Indian subjects across the subcontinent? What about an imagined Britain in India? An imagined India in Britain? The essays collected here represent varied answers to these questions. They also chart the recent parameters of what Albert Pionke calls in his essay “the epistemological problem of British India.” Before returning succinctly to the baker’s dozen articles assembled here – for readers will want to encounter them without unnecessary commentary – I turn to the conjoined issues animating both these essays and much recent work on British imperialism: issues of historiography and epistemology.

Received wisdom about British attempts at cultural as well as political hegemony in India during Victoria’s reign relies on a historiography emphasizing the displacement of earlier Orientalist endeavors by arrogant Anglicist insistence on the overwhelming value of English culture. These two poles are conventionally marked by names of the Orientalist Sir William Jones and the Anglicist Thomas Babington Macaulay. Macaulay’s now ritually invoked “Minute on Indian Education” (1835) often is taken to represent the yoked Evangelical and Utilitarian triumph of a narrow British view of Indian literature, arts and sciences.¹ Macaulay’s claim that a shelf of English literature was more valuable than the collected classical libraries of India has become, not just an indicative truth, but even a truism in the cultural history of empire. It constitutes a turning point in a narrative that moves from Orientalist inquiry, to Anglicist cultural hubris, to the rebellion of 1857, to late Victorian jingoism and racism, to the triumph of Indian nationalism. This historical trajectory has most often been measured within a framework that relies on a dyadic model of metropole and colony.

In recent years, this historiographical narrative has been significantly modified. Historians of literature have been challenged by new global historiographies that emphasize imperial circuits and transperipheral exchanges in addition to dyadic relationships, by narratives that trace historical ruptures rather than teleological trajectories. These historiographical debates at the intersections of literary, cultural, and political histories of empire, moreover, are inflected by debates within postcolonial theory and history. Patrick
Brantlinger has cogently summarized the parameters of the field, with frequent reference to India, in *Victorian Literature and Postcolonial Studies* (2009). His survey, notable in its breadth, suggests both the range of Victorian texts and of twentieth-century theories to which literary historians must respond, from *Dombey and Son* and *Idylls of the King* to now-canonical theoretical texts from Said to Spivak and Bhabha and beyond. Work in the past decade both extends and responds to the state of field Brantlinger surveys. Take, for example, Antoinette Burton’s *Empire in Question: Reading, Writing and Teaching British Imperialism* (2011) which argues that teaching imperial history in a way that recasts Britain itself as a colonial landscape can, both for U. S. and for British students and scholars, put at risk “the certainty of the nation as an analytical category, as a cherished ideal, and as a guarantor of the sovereign Western self as well” (3). She aligns her work with new conceptualizations of imperial history in spatial terms – which decenter the metropole in favor of circuits, networks, or webs – though she also notes that such decentering seldom enters curricula and public discourses. Burton goes further to contend that an imperial historiography of circuits and networks has its own limitation – the presumption of British exceptionalism. A truly global imperial history, however daunting its complexity, would situate the British empire as one among competing global and economic formations and as always contested. Even as British writers made claims for an empire on which the sun never set, Burton argues, the British empire’s “global dimensions were always in the process of becoming, hegemonic by design but the effect, ultimately, of many different historical forces, of stop-and-start political maneuvering, of the ebb and flow, the crisis and rupture of economic pressures and the uneven ground of social relations to such a degree that, again, like the nation’s imperial dimensions, empire’s global character was ever in flux, rarely fully articulated, perpetually in need of reiteration” (279).

A similar insistence on rupture and contingency grounds Partha Chatterjee’s *The Black Hole of Empire: History of a Global Practice of Power* (2012). Chatterjee argues for an analysis of empire as a history of “actual practices” which “calls attention to the irreducible contingency of historical events that can never be fully encompassed by conceptual abstractions, just as it also points toward the significance of historical tendencies that never fructified, or developments that were arrested or suppressed” (xii). These practices of power he describes through a detailed analysis of the city of Calcutta, the actors who created it, the civil society it briefly engendered, and the historical ruptures which constituted and reconstituted it both physically and metaphorically; thus he argues, as Rosinka Chaudhuri also has in her work on the radical Eurasian poet Henry Louis Vivian Derozio, that nineteenth-century India cannot be accounted for via linear and teleological narratives. Rather, the anti-absolutist tendencies in early nineteenth-century Calcutta, for example, were foreclosed – arrested and suppressed – as the metropole developed “the institutions and ideologies for constructing a dual structure of liberalism at home and authoritarian rule in the colony” (Chatterjee 156–57).

If we think, then, about global circuits from a position that questions teleological notions of history, then even the period that Chatterjee rightly characterizes as authoritarian and absolutist, the period we could contentiously think of as Victorian India, might be read as crisscrossed with attenuated elements of earlier formations as well as riven by active resistance to an authoritarian regime, always in the contested process of attempting to consolidate its power. I turn here to three brief examples from the early 1870s, the decade that was to see Victoria crowned Empress of India – arguably the apogee of British
authoritarianism on the subcontinent. These passages comment on the nature of cultural exchange, by arguing about the role and status of classical Sanskrit, of Indian vernaculars, and of Indian English writing. At stake is an argument over the meanings of culture – and who is in charge of those meanings.

I START IN THE METROPOLE with an 1873 London Times leader that reflected on the government’s effort to encourage vernacular education in India after Macaulay’s “Minute” (“It is now”). In a mix of self-congratulation, cultural imperialism, and ruefulness, the Times writer surveyed the newly required government tabulation of books published in India. Having to hand the first complete report on book publishing in all Indian languages, the leader writer struggled to account for and simply to enumerate Indian cultural production. The Times was impressed and pleased. But predictably, what the writer gave with one hand, he took away with the other. Might the British expect, he asked, that English literature would take root in India in the same way the Greek and Latin classics had in Britain? Would there be as a result in India’s literatures “the stirring of a new Renaissance, [and in] her religious controversy the forerunner of a new Reformation?” The Times was unsure:

We have scarcely at present the proper materials to enable us to form a judgment. The attempt to do so needs largely both care and patience. It is very difficult to be tolerant with low types of thought and literary culture, and yet it is quite necessary if we are not to decide at random. They may be much in promise, although they are as yet nothing in performance. The love songs and idolatrous legends which we have in great measure displaced are the material out of which a native popular literature might, in due time, have been evolved. If, therefore, the products of Indian literature have an appearance in some degree forced and artificial, we must remember that India has not been suffered to follow her own course, and the growth of her literature has been set aside as completely as her political development by the overwhelming influence of a new power. We find ample signs of life, of ferment, of activity, but of quite another kind from those which would have followed in the natural order of growth and change. (“It is now” 7)

For the editors of the Times, contempt for Indian culture mingled with the recognition that “India has not been suffered to follow her own course.” Subscribing to the infantilize-the-Indians school of thought, while contradictorily opining that the British should not “set up as teachers” until they are “sure” of their own conclusions, the writer can only assess a century and a quarter of British imperialism in India by gesturing toward a “natural order” his own examples prove to be illusory. He admits that the British have “destroyed a great deal” and that “there has not been enough time for us to test the value of what we have been erecting in its place” (“It is now” 7). And obviously the writer underestimates Indian scientific and mathematical traditions and overestimates the British influence on vernacular popular culture.2

If we contrast the Times commentary with its Indian equivalent, we can see these attenuated threads of earlier cultural formations as well as the development of Indian publishing practices that soon were to enable nationalist resistance. Those “love songs and idolatrous legends” bemoaned by the Times were increasingly available in print in 1870s India, via an expanding print culture in both English and vernacular languages. Along with practical treatises, popular narratives, and schoolbooks, these “love songs” and “idolatrous legends” were part of the very expansion of print culture that British bureaucrats surveyed and hoped to contain in the annual census of publications (Banerjee). Take for example the reviews of vernacular literature which became a feature of the Calcutta Review after
its founding in 1844. Some months prior to the leader writer’s ruminations in the *Times*, a writer for the *Calcutta Review*, which published articles and reviews by both Indian and British authors, engaged in a lively series of reflections on various new works in Bangla print culture. An anonymous reviewer, whom I take to be British, chastised various Bengali writers while praising others. He argued that only for scientific terms need one seek a Sanskritized Bangla vernacular, while for literary texts a refined version of the vernacular was superior. The subject of the review, a Bangla translation from the Sanskrit, served as a model. He compared Madhu Sudan Váchaspati’s Bangla version of the Sanskrit drama *Mrichchhakatika* to the English translations from Sanskrit by earlier British Orientalists Monier Williams and Horace Hayman Wilson. Madhu Sudan’s edition, he argued, was a “chaste and highly polished” work in prose and verse (*Calcutta Review*). Clearly the *Calcutta* reviewer charted a multilingual and multi-literate territory and envisioned an elite but crucial role for vernacular print. The threads from an earlier cultural formation are clearly drawn through this review.

These two brief examples make clear a number of disjunctions between metropole and colony and point to a persistent problematic in the historiography of empire. On the one hand, the *Times* leader writer can serve the purpose such writers generally do serve in the historiography of empire – he exemplifies fully the arrogant construction of the metropole, passing judgment on centuries of history beyond its ken. He is a persevering Macaulay, holding on to an already crumbling and never stable hegemony. And yet of course the paradox of always partial hegemony is implicit in the newspaper’s recognition that India had and yet might have another history. The Calcutta reviewer, better acquainted than the *Times* commentator with the world about which he writes, evidently respectful of at least some parts of it, and supportive of a lively, if implicitly elitist, vernacular print culture, is, likewise, concerned with the nature of cultural exchange. He is evidently interested in the translation of European sciences into Indian vernaculars, but avoids simplistic assertions about Indian historical developments. He furthers a version of both Orientalist respect for Indian learning and a commitment to vernacular language and learning. Between them, these two writers represent variations on what I think of as the median British opinion in the period before the ascendancy of Indian nationalism – they speak neither in the voice of pure racialized jingoism nor in the voices of resistance. Culture, in all its myriad nineteenth-century meanings, is understood as the medium of empire.

But what of other voices? Those tangential to the orbit of the colonizer yet still engaged in what is admittedly elite literary culture? And what of other cultural geographies embracing multiple locations and circuits? Even leaving aside the issue of history from below, or of subaltern historical practices, and focusing on literary culture, one might bring many texts into this conversation. Here, I turn for example to a pair of young writers who, though privileged as to class, were otherwise removed from the centers of power. At first glance they might seem to exemplify Macaulay’s dream, Indians likely to ventriloquize the attitudes of the colonizer, for they were the children of a converted Christian, a Bengali government official whose Anglophilia was never in doubt. In the 1870s Toru and Aru Dutt, only in their teens, were studying French in the south of France and then other subjects in the higher lectures for women at Cambridge; they were both translating from the French and composing original poems in English. For some months they were at the center of British intellectual life (befriended by Anne Clough among others), and yet as Indian Christian women they were also obviously peripheral both to British society and in a different way to Indian Hindu society. Toru Dutt has recently begun to receive the critical attention she deserves, yet I dare
say many readers of Alison Chapman’s essay in this volume will not have encountered many of her poems. Aru’s scant oeuvre has been almost totally neglected.

I turn to a small handful of their poems to mark the ways that global circuits threaded their way through the conventions of Victorian English language verse and to mark the quiet persistence of earlier discourses of “liberty,” which Chatterjee has shown were suppressed by the beginning of the Victorian period. The Dutts were both at the center of and peripheral to imperial literary practices, and Toru Dutt’s poem, “Near Hastings,” reflects the sisters’ liminal position. The Dutt family had moved from Cambridge to Hastings, hoping that the sea air would be healing for Aru, who had contracted tuberculosis. The beach at Hastings constitutes for Toru the very edge of England – an alien and alienating place – and its waters connect to another shore, the coast of France. Toru’s shingle beach evokes a quite different liminality than, say, Matthew Arnold’s. The sisters find themselves alien, but not in Arnold’s characteristic sense of modern European angst. Rather they walk on the edge between England and France, between Europe and Asia, even between life and death. As they wander “slow, sick, weary, faint,” they encounter a kindly woman:

She passed us, – then she came again,
Observing at a glance
That we were strangers; one, in pain, —
Then asked, – Were we from France?
We talked awhile, – some roses red
That seemed as wet with tears,
She gave my sister, and she said,
“God bless you both, my dears!”
Sweet were the roses, – sweet and full,
And large as lotus flowers
That in our own wide tanks we cull
To deck our Indian bowers.

(Gibson, *Anglophone* 298–99)

The poet balances alienation and domestication. The roses, sweet and full (China roses?) are themselves perhaps alien to English soil. As gifts freely and unexpectedly given they are transformed by simile into the image of purity, the Indian lotus – the flower of “our own wide tanks.” Perhaps metonymically representing Aru, the recipient herself, who is not to live a “sweet and full” life, the roses are “wet with tears.” This catachrestic chain of resemblance links woman, rose, and lotus as one.³

On the beach at Hastings, Toru finds tropes she later revisits, possibly after Aru’s death, in “Sonnet – The Lotus,” a poem of nascent Indian nationalism that argues for the lotus’s superiority to the lily and the rose, aspirants in a traditional contest of flowers. In “Sonnet – The Lotus,” personified Love comes to Flora asking for a flower, and the flower-factions create “strife in Psyche’s bower.” The dialogue between Love and Flora concludes:

“But of what colour?” – “Rose-red,” Love first chose,
Then prayed, – “No, lily-white, – or, both provide”;
And Flora gave the lotus, “rose-red” dyed,
And “lily-white,”— the queenliest flower that blows.

(Gibson, Anglophone 302)

Toru Dutt’s flowers are here both cultivated and culturally overdetermined; clearly the poet cannot engage simply in culture or cultivation. Neither horticulture nor poetic culture occurs in what the Times writer called the “natural order of growth and change.” The etymology of the “alien” as of “culture” in this context measures the reality that both plants and people are on the move, along multiple routes. Despite the purity claimed for the lotus, it is dyed red as the roses of Hastings. Cultures and languages, like poetic conventions, reveal themselves as intrinsically mixed. Psyche’s bower – and its products, flowers emblematic of poems – contains its own strife. The Indian poem or lotus grows from the muck of empire.

Even Aru Dutt’s slim output of verse creates space for similar contradictions. By 1873 Aru and Toru had returned to India with trunks full of books, Victorian fashions, and manuscripts of original poetry and translations. Aru’s translations from the French into English were made in a bi-lingual context on its way to becoming a tri-lingual or even polyglot one. Both sisters spoke Bangla and English equally well, and both aspired to excellent French; Toru later began the study of Sanskrit. Their joint publication, A Sheaf Gleaned in French Fields, appeared only after Aru’s death. One of her contributions to their joint volume was a translation of Madame Viot’s “Emigration of Pleasure.” The verses of Madame Viot [Marie-Anne Henriette Payan de l’Estang] must have appealed to a young woman who led a migratory life, from Bengal to Bombay and back, and thence to the south of France, to London and Cambridge and to Hastings. In Madame Viot’s poem, a personified Pleasure is made homeless by war, travelling from France to Germany and Spain, and thence to Russia. Finally reaching England, Pleasure

wandered wild,—
And on the same fool’s-errand bent;
The Lord Mayor, fat, grey and mild,
Conducted him to Parliament.
Pleasure is courteous,— full of grace,
But from the truth he never shrinks,
‘I cannot stay i’ this horrid place,
Where everybody yawns and nobody thinks.’

(Gibson, Anglophone 291)

The stanza makes it point with some wit, despite its unmetrical final line. That last roughness in itself, though, speaks to the poet’s insistence on capturing the recalcitrant powerful who shape the fate of millions – MPs between naps. Although Toru Dutt’s letters indicate that the family longed to live in England, Aru creates via translation a different voice. England may be the land of Wordsworth (their father’s favorite poet), but Britain is equally the land of rulers who remain thoughtless and somnolent. Pleasure returns to France and weeps at the knees of his mother Liberty.

At the end of A Sheaf Gleaned in French Fields, a volume that began with a dedication to their mother, Toru concluded with a sonnet dedicated to her father. “A mon Père” begins
with a line that the rest of the poem both endorses and undercuts. “Flowers look loveliest in their native soil,” the poet writes, referring to her own translations and to the inevitable inadequacy of any translation at all: “Plucked they fade / And lose the colours Nature on them laid” (Gibson, Anglophone 297). If we pursue the equation Toru Dutt developed in “Near Hastings,” the two poets and their work would remain more beautiful among “their kindred branches.” Yet, ironically, roses are best propagated by grafting. In the very last lines of “A mon Père,” the last lines of A Sheaf Gleaned in French Fields, the poet turns to her father and asks him to revive her translated flowers: “Ask Memory. She shall help my stammering Muse” (Gibson, Anglophone 297). Mnemosyne, mother of the muses, is called upon to remember Europe, just as in “Near Hastings” she must remember the flowers of India, the lotus “sweet and full” as a China rose.

My third example, the poems of the Dutts, brings me back to the question with which this excursion began – the epistemological problem of empire. The Times leader, the Calcutta Review essay and these poems suggest, in small, the challenges faced by cultural historians in locating and understanding the discourses of empire and in analyzing the voluminous texts and images generated by Britain’s imperial ventures. Toru Dutt questions the very produce of “native soil” and contests the imagined natural trajectory of Indian culture the Times writer evoked. The Dutts’ poems, which could be read as conventional, sentimental mimicry, on close examination testify to the very kinds of global circuits Antoinette Burton describes. Equally they reveal the threads of earlier civic and anti-absolutist discourses, however attenuated or suppressed in the contested hegemony of empire. Pleasure weeps at the knees of his mother, Liberty.

THE ESSAYS ASSEMBLED IN THIS ISSUE of VLC record the complexity of Victorian cultural encounters and of unequal power relations. Frequently the writers here enact a self-reflexive assessment of their own critical and historical paradigms. They bring global circuits to bear on local texts and locate texts within complex cultural exchanges. On occasion – though less often – they gesture toward historical ruptures and occluded possibilities. A critique of critical paradigms is central to Alison Chapman’s essay on Toru Dutt’s uneasy transnational poetics – for Chapman, as in my own reading, gardens figure other spaces. A critique of paradigms equally grounds Albert Pionke’s argument for the problem of imperial epistemology in Kipling’s “The Man Who Would Be King.” The epistemology of empire, in this case the historiography of education, is also the key problematic in Benjamin D. O’Dell’s essay on caste, gender, and education in India; O’Dell argues forcefully against a Bengal-centric reading of colonial education and provides a broad view of the way education was developed at intersections of class, caste, religion, and gender in different parts of the subcontinent. Michael Hancher studies David Lester Richardson’s Poetical Selections, the first major anthology of poetry to present English poets (and some Indian ones as well) chronologically in one volume – a volume commissioned by Macaulay for use in Indian classrooms. Hancher provides a clear sense of the uses and contexts for the reading of English language poetry in India, a topic addressed from a different perspective by Máire ní Fhlathúín, in “Transformations of Byron.” A very different kind of education was envisioned by Mrs. Sherwood in her famous evangelical missionary tract, Little Henry and His Bearer, which is contextualized here by Kiran Mascarenhas, who shows how Sherwood’s tract, like Richardson’s anthology, virtually created the contours of a genre.
Colonial encounter in nineteenth-century India was created through sometimes mutual and sometimes conflicted appropriations of cultural tropes and genres. Sukanya Banerjee moves into important territory, little known to most scholars of British Victorian literature, the work of Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, an eminent writer of Bengali novels and a key figure in the development of Bangla literature; Bankim’s first novel was written in English, and it, like his other work, should have a place in the study of nineteenth-century fiction. Banerjee locates Bankim’s work “amidst a lateral density of literary concerns and cultural influences” that may broadly be understood as Victorian. This notion of lateral density of influences is inflected by the internal differences not only among the colonized but among the colonizers, as we see in Mary Isbell’s “When Ditchers and Jack Tars Collide.” Isbell examines the contretemps between British elites and common sailors in benefit theatricals staged during the uprising of 1857–59. A very different set of transnational influences, a lateral density of a more global order, forms the background to Molly Engelhardt’s “The Real Bayadère Meets the Ballerina on the Western Stage.” Engelhardt traces the history of Orientalist ballet, highlighting the ways “representations of an imagined India reinforced Orientalist ideologies and called them into question.” This imagined India was confronted by a material, not imagined presence in 1838 when a troupe of devadasis (temple dancers) from Pondicherry toured Europe and Britain; their interactions with European managers and audiences testify to the “heterogeneity of the imperial encounter.”

While many of these essays engage with teaching, learning, and reading as key elements in the imperial enterprise, other essays focus on appropriations of imperial subjects and objects in Britain and on the ways those appropriations reshaped domestic tropes, whether through photography, popular literature, or periodical illustration. Sigrid Anderson Cordell focuses on the domestic and the perilous in Edith Maturin’s imperial adventure stories; Ralph Crane and Lisa Fletcher bring us Indian tigers as the stock in trade of Victorian periodicals, tigers doing the work of empire in reinforcing the complex gendered boundaries of imperial ideology; Kate Lawson examines the rebellion of 1857, gender and governance in Charlotte Yonge’s The Clever Woman of the Family; Melissa Edmundson Makala turns her attention to the vexed issues of racialized identity in at the end of the century in Alice Perrin’s The Stronger Claim; and Gary Simons provides a two-way story of literary transactions in his study of William Makepeace Thackeray’s public and published correspondence with his friend James Hume, editor of the Calcutta Star in the 1840s.

These essays sometimes gesture toward global circuits – the European travels of the devadasi, Samuel Bourne’s photographic figuring of the Himalaya via the alpine sublime, or Toru Dutt’s grafted poetical gardens. At other times they bespeak the ruptures, discontinuities, and occluded possibilities Partha Chatterjee describes – for example, the differential appropriations of Byron by radical poets and by British civil servants in India (Byron the champion of liberty, and Byron the progenitor of Orientalist poetic tropes).

To have received so many fine essays on such a wide variety of topics – from the literary, to the stage, to photography, to education – bespeaks an increasing interest in Victorian India that goes beyond the recycling of canonical texts and takes us into marketplaces, schoolrooms, theatres, and printshops where we find the cultural transactions that, along with commerce and military force, created the circuits of empire.

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NOTES

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1. Viswanathan of course significantly complicated this historiographical trajectory by tracing the Anglicist / Orientalist arguments between the 1813 renewal of the East India Company’s charter and Macaulay’s minute and the formation institutions of English language education in India during that period. Bayley’s, Ghosh’s, Chaudhuri’s and White’s work on periodical and on vernacular print likewise has brought new complexity to this historical narrative, as has Raychaudhuri’s.

2. For a discussion of the growth and nature of popular vernacular publishing see Banerjee.

3. Chapman’s essay in this volume engages Toru Dutt’s metaphorical uses of gardens and flowers in a different context and in much more detail than I can here. See Das, Gibson, and Lokugé for biographical discussion of the Dutts.

WORKS CITED


