

2. Images of an Imperial Family

Henry Prinsep grew up in an England far removed from India, but in an environment dominated by his famous family's Indian background, by tales of heroism and service to the Empire, of fortunes made and lost in the raucous environment of old Calcutta, the 'city of palaces', of family mysteries, early death, illness and tragedy.¹ Most of the adults in his extended family had spent the large part of their lives in India, and his childhood was nurtured by adventures from an earlier era of his grandparents John and Sophia Prinsep (née Auriol, 1760-1850), and the tales of his surviving uncles and aunts, men and women such as Thoby Prinsep and his wife Sara (née Pattle, 1817-1887), William Prinsep, and 'Aunt Jules', Sara's sister Julia Margaret Cameron (née Pattle, 1815-1879). The walls and book shelves of the homes he lived in were adorned with the works of uncles who had died young and whose memories were cherished, the novels, short stories and travel accounts of uncle Augustus, the scholarly articles and diagrams of uncle James, and the vivid and evocative watercolours of William, James and Thomas (1800-1830). In later life, Prinsep would idealise the Indian world of his forebears as a golden age of empire, a period when things were not so 'hard set' as they now seemed, when it was easier to have an impact, to make a fortune, become famous. Their world represented a standard, a reassurance of the greater progress of the British race, an inspiration for 'us young fry' to abide by the standards that had made Britain the greatest power on earth.²

A novelised and memorialised India

By the time Thoby and William Prinsep came to write their memoirs as old men in the 1870s, 40 years had elapsed since the demise of the orientalist system of which they had been a part.³ Thoby and William set out to memorialise and justify a system which seemed in danger of fading into obscurity, and record, at least for their own descendants, the roles they had played. In the process, they mounted a defence of orientalist governance as amenable to Indian requirements as it utilised knowledge that British civil servants had accumulated about India

1 Prinsep family correspondence and diaries often refer to their 'famous' Indian background. See Prinsep, Henry C., 'Diaries 1866-1922', SLWA Acc. 499A, 12 January 1866; Prinsep, James Charles, 'De Principe, A.D. 1574-1930', 2 Volumes, SLWA Acc. 3150 A/1-2.

2 Prinsep, H.C., 'Our Britain', SLWA Acc. 3594A/4; H.C. Prinsep to Annie Prinsep, 23 April 1874, private collection.

3 Prinsep, Sir Henry Thoby, 'Three Generations in India 1771-1904', OIOC MSS Eur. C. 97; Prinsep, William, 'The Memoirs of William Prinsep', 3 Volumes, British Library, OIOC MSS Eur. D. 1160/1. Thoby's memoir is part of a three volume set prepared by his son, Sir Henry Thoby Prinsep, to illustrate the careers of three generations of his family in India: his grandfather John Prinsep, Thoby, and himself.

and Indians, and was based on British respect for Indian cultures, languages and histories. They write of a time when relationships between coloniser and colonised were more permeable, when there was greater interaction between the rulers and the ruled. They gloss over and often glorify the colonial world of their earlier years, emphasising the good times, the family victories and triumphs, explaining what it was like and downplaying the anxieties that accompanied Indian colonial rule. Such is the nature of memoir as historical record: it allows the author to tell a story, express sentiments, create an image, explain and justify, record personal perceptions and memories. It may be a legitimising exercise, but it also locates the self within the larger forces of history and, by doing so, constructs and attempts to resolve tensions between the self and history, providing a way of communicating and informing one's descendants about a past era and filling in silences in the family history.

By contrast, Augustus Prinsep's novel *The Baboo* claims only to be a tale of British life in Calcutta. Set on the same stage as the memoirs of Thoby and William Prinsep, the novel was published by Augustus's widow, Elisabeth (Ommaney), after the author's death in 1830 at the age of 28.⁴ It is set in the Calcutta lived in and known by Augustus Prinsep, populated by characters and caricatures recognisable to those familiar with the environment. By claiming the mantle of fiction, Augustus was able to address the contentious subjects of interracial sex, interracial marriage and mixed race children, to contemplate risky and controversial matters such as British attitudes to Indian populations, Indian attitudes to the British and other Indians, and to portray colonial relationships as complex and ambiguous. He understood the fragilities of the British enterprise in India, as the British characters in his novel struggle to understand their role in India and their relationships with the Indians they were supposed to be ruling, but who were also active protagonists in the British colonial presence.

The Baboo is a story of the loss and recovery of British identity in early-Nineteenth Century India in which the central character Henry Forester, a vigorous and admired British warrior, 'yields a portion of his heart to the thralldom of Oriental beauty', renounces his Britishness and Christianity, and turns 'Moosulman'. He falls in love with the niece of a Persian noble, Yoosuf Ulee Khan, the beautiful Dilafoz, who bears him a son, Moobaruk. From an initial hatred of Forester, Yoosuf comes to regard Forester as a true son-in-law:

Together we have hunted the wild beast in the surrounding ravines, and have listened to the singing of the black-eyed nautch girls, for many a happy day in the halls of my ancestors.⁵

⁴ Prinsep, Augustus 1834, *The Baboo and Other Tales Descriptive of Society in India*, 2 Volumes, Smith, Elder and Co., London, Volume 1, p.iv.

⁵ *Ibid.*, Volume 1, p.146.

Forester falls ill and, believing Dilafoz to be dead, reluctantly returns to England to regain his health, where 'all the feelings of my earliest youth revived; I was an Englishman again'. He proposes to Eva Eldridge, a 'lily-faced girl of his cold country', who plans to join him in India as soon as passage can be arranged.⁶ Returning to India, Forester discovers that reports of the death of Dilafoz are wrong and, wanting to maintain his honour and avoid being cast as a 'false wretch', feigns his own death. Determined to flee with his wife, son and father-in-law to the Persian Gulf and present his 'sword to the King of Eeeran', he adopts the identity of Gholam Housein, Persian prince and devoted son-in-law of Yoosuf. Enter the brooding presence of the Hindu Baboo Brijmohun Bomijee, a 'half submissive, half bustling character', who is secretly plotting to take over Yoosuf's ancestral estates. Many of the Calcutta British establishment, from the lowest soldier to senior civil servants, are in debt to the Baboo through 'small loans in time of need, to be repaid twenty-fold in time of promotion; and by having a constant supply of the best champagne, when it was not to be purchased elsewhere'.⁷ By day, the Baboo is the faithful servant, but by night, fuelled by the 'sweet water of Ganga', he vents his hatred of the 'furingee' and plots their destruction. Forester unmasks the Baboo's duplicity and rapacity and not only retrieves Yoosuf's lands, but restores the reputation of the British as people of honour and justice. Yoosuf comes to understand the values of British law and government, and swears that his people 'will henceforth be true subjects because they have found a ruler worthy of their most devoted love'.⁸ He grows to understand the hitherto mysterious British attitudes to marriage and love. 'Love with us', Forester explains, 'is not as it is with you, a passion, strong indeed, but short-lived; one of amusement rather than of habit ... Our wives are more than this; we have but one, the sole mother of our children, the adviser in all our actions, the mistress, and the hostess of our houses, — she is indeed what has been called in jest, the half of ourselves'.⁹ Dilafoz plays her part in the restoration of Forester's Britishness, coming to appreciate 'the aristocracy of race ... where the white rule, black can never squeeze in', and releasing Forester from his marriage vows to allow him to marry Eva.¹⁰

The complexity and depth of Augustus Prinsep's depiction of Forester's dilemmas portray an intimate appreciation of the traumas a British civil servant might confront in India. T.W. Williamson's *East India Vade Mecum*, published in 1810 and an indispensable semi-official guide for a Briton travelling to India, advised readers that cross-cultural sexual relationships were common and that

6 Ibid., Volume 1, pp.20, 66.

7 Ibid., Volume 1, p.312.

8 Ibid., Volume 2, p.94.

9 Ibid., Volume 2, p.65.

10 Ibid., Volume 1, stanzas ms., title page.

polygamy was 'not unprecedented among Europeans' in India.¹¹ However, the costs 'attendant upon concubinage' were reported as being considerable, noting that a British gentleman should be prepared for the high costs of establishing his zenanah, including clothing, jewellery and scented oils. In Williamson's view, once in India, British men could not be expected to 'act in exact conformity with those excellent doctrines, which teach us to avoid 'fornication', and all other deadly sins'. But while it was acceptable to have an Indian concubine, the Company disapproved the 'transmission of native orphans (those born of native mothers)' and forbade 'any native of India to be taken as a passenger on board any vessel proceeding to England ... lest they become a burthen to the Company'.¹² An Indian wife guaranteed social isolation, and 'no lady, native of India, whatever her rank, is ever invited to those assemblies given by the governor'.¹³ Nonetheless, many children were born of cross-cultural relationships and were recognised by their British fathers. William Dalrymple's history *White Mughals* provides evidence of the high proportions of bequests during the late-Eighteenth and early-Nineteenth centuries that made provision for Indian wives and children.¹⁴ In her 2006 book, *Sex and Family in Colonial India*, Durba Ghosh draws attention to the anxieties of British fathers of mixed-race children 'about the moral upbringing, education, and social status of their children'.¹⁵ Interracial liaisons were 'constitutive parts' of cross-cultural interactions but were 'almost always problematic': 'sexual discipline and moral superiority were as central to maintaining empire as colonial bureaucracies'.¹⁶

Of the illegitimate children fathered by John Prinsep during his 17-year Indian adventure (1770–1788) only one appears in the family record and none of the mothers are identified, a strong indication that they were Indian, their namelessness a code for their racial status and that of their children.¹⁷ Half-sister Charlotte Griffiths, according to William Prinsep, was married to an East India Company army colonel and returned with him to England. Nothing is known of

11 Williamson, Thomas 1810, *The East India Vade Mecum: Or, complete guide to gentlemen intending for the civil, military, or naval service of the Hon. East India Company*, 2 Volumes, Black, Parry, and Kingsbury, London, p.412. Williamson claimed to have known an 'elderly military character who solaced himself with no less than sixteen, of all sorts and sizes! Being interrogated by a friend as to what he did with such a number, "Oh!" replied he, "I give them a little rice, and let them run about!"'

12 Ibid., p.457.

13 Ibid., p.458.

14 Dalrymple, William 2002, *White Mughals: Love and betrayal in Eighteenth-Century India*, Flamingo, London, p.52. Dalrymple found that during the 1780s, about one in three British wills in India made provision for an Indian wife. Between 1805 and 1810 the proportion had decreased to one in four, by 1830 to one in six, and by mid-century the practice had virtually ceased.

15 Ghosh, Durba 2006, *Sex and the Family in Colonial India: The making of empire*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, p.9. Richard Blechynden, an architect whose stay in Calcutta corresponded with the Prinseps, wrote openly about European relationships with Indian women in his extensive diaries, which have been recently published. Robb, Peter 2011, *Sex and Sensibility: The diaries of Richard Blechynden, 1759–1822*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi.

16 Ibid., p.25.

17 Ibid., p.19.

the other children, although all were baptised with the family name in Calcutta between 1778 and 1784.¹⁸ While some of John Prinsep's contemporaries, such as Richard Blechynden, made provision for their Indian born children, others became enmeshed in the system of orphanages established by the East India Company to cater for the children of cross-cultural relationships.¹⁹ According to contemporary Indologist and linguist, John Borthwick Gilchrist, these institutions were 'intimately blended with the military establishments throughout India' and all servicemen were compelled to contribute a portion of their earnings to their upkeep.²⁰ The children were usually removed from their parents and placed in institutions at the age of three, the parents understanding 'that every justice will be done to their offspring', although Gilchrist acknowledged that 'to part from a child, whatever may be its complexion, is a most painful struggle between duty and nature'.²¹

The vulnerability of a young British recruit to the charms and dangers of India was well understood by the East India Company, which over the last decade of the Eighteenth and early-Nineteenth Century, introduced training for 15- and 16-year-old civil service recruits, partly to equip them to withstand the pitfalls of an Indian career, but also to allow them time to mature. Governor-General Wellesley advocated an education that would influence their 'early habits' and 'effectively guard them against those temptations and corruptions with which the nature of the climate and the peculiar depravity of the people of India, will surround and assail them in every station, especially on their first arrival in India'.²² High standards of conduct by East India Company civil servants, Wellesley believed, were not only a guarantee of more effective government, but protected the reputation of the company. By the 1800s, the Company's civil servants were no longer simply 'agents of a commercial concern; they are in fact the ministers and officers of a powerful sovereign'. Inexperienced and poorly trained officers would inevitably lead to appointments in which 'their incapacity or misconduct becomes conspicuous to the natives, disgraceful to themselves, and injurious to the state'.²³

18 The Biographical Indexes of the India Office Records in the British Library list the following illegitimate children of John Prinsep but do not identify the mothers: Elizabeth Scott Prinsep, born 1778 (N/1/50/f.238r), Henrietta Prinsep, born 12/7/1778 (N/1/2/f.150), John Henry Prinsep, born 1778 (N/1/2/f. 289), John Lloyd Prinsep, born 7/12/1784 (N/1/4/f.9).

19 Robb (ed.) 2011, *Sex and Sensibility*, p.213.

20 Gilchrist, John 1825, *The General East India Guide and Vade Mecum: For the public functionary, government officer, private agent, trader or foreign sojourner, in British India, and the adjacent parts of Asia immediately connected with the honourable East India Company*, Kingsbury, Parbury & Allen, London, p.209. This guide was a 'corrected' version of the earlier Williamson *Vade Mecum*, and dispensed with the 1810 version's recommendations regarding relationships with Indian women.

21 Ibid., p.209.

22 Wellesley, Richard 1812, *Letter from the Marquis Wellesley, Governor General of India, to the Court of Directors of the East India Company, On the Trade of India: Dated Fort William, 30 September, 1800*, Richardson and Budd, London, p.15.

23 Ibid., pp.14, 21.

Over the first half of the Nineteenth Century, appointments to the East India Company civil service increasingly came to reflect the interconnected Anglo-Indian community in India and the metropole. Until 1833, nomination by a member of the East India Company Court of Directors as a civil servant, enlistment with the Company army, or employment with a firm contracted to the Company were the only means of entering India; 'not even an Englishman was to reside who was not in the service of the company'.²⁴ The system of patronage allowed a director a certain number of appointments, the Chairman, Deputy Chairman and President of the Parliamentary Board of Control receiving double allocations. Directors were compelled to provide reasons for giving an appointment, including their connections to the nominee, and swear that no payment had been received from or on behalf of the applicant. Of 426 appointments by the Board of Directors between 1809 and 1850, 23 per cent were relatives of a director, and over half were on the basis of 'friendships' likely to have been formed while working in India.²⁵ The East India Company establishment in India steadily became the domain of a relatively defined group, most of whom had a family or kin background in the India colonies. Both Thoby and Augustus Prinsep began their Indian careers through this system of patronage, recommended by their father John and subsequently sponsored by a director.²⁶ The system remained intact throughout the life of the East India Company and during the 1840s and 1850s was to facilitate entry of the next generation of Prinseps to the Company ranks.

After 1806, on acceptance of their nominations by the Board of Directors, recruits were sent to a three-year program at Haileybury Training College in Hertfordshire before transfer to India at around the age of 18.²⁷ A Haileybury education was the first step in a middle-class boy's progression to a 'position of command over the majority'.²⁸ Yet, according to anthropologist Bernard Cohn, it often failed to produce civil servants equipped for a career in India: 'All we knew is that it was "beastly hot" and that there were "niggers" there, and that it would be time enough to bother about it when you got there.'²⁹ Some students

24 'The Memoirs of William Prinsep', Volume 1, p.201.

25 Cohn, Bernard S. 1987, *An Anthropologist Among the Historians and Other Essays*, Oxford University Press, Delhi, pp.520–1.

26 Laurie, Colonel W.F.B. 1887, *Sketches of Some Distinguished Anglo-Indians: With an account of Anglo-Indian periodical literature*, W.H. Allen & Co., London, pp.169, 174; Danvers, Frederick Charles et. al. 1819, *Memorials of Old Haileybury College*, Archibald Constable & Co., Westminster. Once sponsored by a director, an applicant was required to pass an entrance examination before entering Haileybury. Thoby entered the College in 1807, aged 15, and Augustus in 1819, aged 16. Thoby completed one year at Haileybury and finished his training at Fort William College near Calcutta. By the time Augustus joined the Company, training of recruits had been centralised at Haileybury.

27 Thoby Prinsep was one of the first students at Haileybury, and was transferred to Fort William after one year. He was amongst the last group of recruits to attend Fort William.

28 Ambirajan, S. 1978, *Classical Political Economy and British Policy in India*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, p.16.

29 Quoted by Cohn 1987, *An Anthropologist Among the Historians*, p.540.

achieved high academic standards, but many graduated knowing little more about India than when they had entered, or more about Benthamite politics from one of the long-term lecturers, utilitarian William Empson, than about the style of government developed by Hastings, Cornwallis and Wellesley.³⁰ The enduring value of a Haileybury education was not so much the 'training in any direct sense for the job they had to carry out in India', but the formation of 'peer relations with a group with whom they were to spend their lives working' and 'a set of values relating them to their fellow students rather than to India'.³¹ The close ties with fellow civil servants and the resultant group identity were aspects of Haileybury and Fort William College that Thoby Prinsep remembered fondly as 'the bright spot in my life and a source of happiness that made me almost cease to regret the exile from country and family in which I was compelled to pass my days'.³² He was well-established in Calcutta amongst a coterie of similar background and education by the time William Prinsep arrived as a silk merchant in 1817, and Thoby's contacts immediately gave him entrance into 'the very best society'. 'Of course I was taken around to be introduced to all the merchants', William wrote in his memoirs, 'dining at most of their houses and finding here as well as among the Company's servants the same admiration of my brother's character, all which became an additional spur to my own exertions to win an equal regard'.³³ William set up house with Thoby, whose 'chums' from the East India Company, Henry Sargent, Charles Malony, William Fane and Holt Mackenzie, formed a most 'amusing and instructive' network of friends, and helped him establish his business interests in Calcutta.³⁴

By 1825, seven Prinsep brothers were employed in the Bengal Presidency: Charles, Thoby, George, William and Thomas in Calcutta, James in Benares, and Augustus 'up the country'. As well as constituting a network of influence based on family, each of the brothers married into other East India Company families, and thus the interconnectedness of their kin networks widened. Thoby married Sara Pattle in 1832, joining a family associated with both British and French colonialism in India since 1765.³⁵ His father-in-law, James Pattle, was an East India Company judge with wide mercantile interests built up over two periods of residence in Calcutta, and his mother-in-law, Adeline de l'Etang, had been born in the French colony Pondicherry in 1793. The Pattles had eight daughters, most of whom also married men associated with India. Through marriage, Thoby gained a kin group that included men such as Colin McKenzie, a general in the East India Company army, Charles Hay Cameron, a lawyer who worked

30 Stokes, Eric 1959, *The English Utilitarians and India*, Oxford University Press, London, p.52.

31 Cohn 1987, *An Anthropologist Among the Historians*, p.544.

32 Prinsep, 'Three Generations', Part 2, pp.62–3.

33 'The Memoirs of William Prinsep', Volume 1, p.232.

34 Ibid., p.308.

35 Orange, Hugh 2002, 'The Chevalier de l'Etang and his Descendants the Pattles', edited by John Beaumont, Julia Margaret Cameron Research Group, Freshwater, Isle of Wight, pp.1–16.

with Thomas Macaulay as a member of the Governor-General's Law Commission during the 1830s and '40s, Dr John Jackson, a surgeon with the Bengal Medical Service, and Henry Bayley and John Dalrymple, senior Company civil servants.³⁶ In 1837, Charles Prinsep married Louisa White, whose father was a Major General in the East India Company army and whose brother, Henry, was a senior civil servant.³⁷ James Prinsep's wife, Harriet Aubert, also came from an East India Company military family, William and Thomas married two sisters, Mary and Lucy Campbell, and Augustus Elisabeth Ommaney, all of whom had East India Company connections.

William Prinsep's memoirs portray early-Nineteenth Century Calcutta as a British enclave, where a young Briton no longer need be separated from his identity. Family networks such as the Prinseps provided opportunities to work together, and to socialise widely, pursuing cultural activities from painting and amateur drama, to boating and lavish dinner parties. While they were in daily contact with Indians at work and in the home, they related principally with these family networks and other Britons within their clique. In this tight-knit enclave of Britishness, Indians were the governed 'others', with increasingly impermeable institutional and informal barriers against too great a level of familiarity with the rulers. Not only were Indians denied access to even the lowest levels of the civil service, British officers were discouraged from forming personal relationships with Indians. According to James Prinsep, this had the effect of preventing 'the natives from abusing or presuming upon their intimacy, which is in some degree necessary with those who administer the country, but keeps them in ignorance of those they govern'.³⁸ To William Prinsep, Calcutta was a British domain, peopled by civil servants, military officers, and merchants such as himself and his narrow cohort of colleagues. Indians are incidental in the colonising project, always present but background to what is a British story.

The Baboo suggests a more complex array of relationships than those simply between the commanders and the commanded, in which the Indian characters exercise considerable control over their interactions with the British, inhabiting a world little known or understood by the rulers. The Baboo, Brijmohun Bomijee, wields power through financial influence, one that has the potential to destroy the careers of influential members of the colonial establishment. He knows and understands the complexity of the markets and streets, which are beyond the reach of the British rulers. Every day he feigns submission, yet he possesses the power to dominate his British masters and, if he wishes, to destroy them.³⁹

36 Ibid., p.22.

37 Prinsep, 'De Principe', Volume 1, pp.53–5.

38 Prinsep, Amelia Rebecca (Emily), 'Chapter One: John Prinsep and James Prinsep', SLWA Acc. 1972, undated letter, James Prinsep to his sister Emily, SLWA MN 773 Acc. 1972 p.48.

39 Prinsep, *The Baboo*, Volume 1, p.120.

Governing the others

Thoby, William and Augustus Prinsep believed that the colonising venture was bound to an imperative for the British to create an enclave of their own in India, a place predominantly British, bound by familiar social and governmental institutions, whose boundaries were known and understood. Rarely did they question the British right to rule. Its rationale as a vehicle by which Indians might be rescued from the despotism of the Mughals, the rule of law restored to protect Indian masses from the demands of degenerate priests and princes, was justification enough for the British presence. In the words of historian Eric Stokes, they were ‘inheritors rather than innovators ... the revivers of a decayed system and not the vanguard of a new’.⁴⁰ The 1774 *India Act* and subsequent reforms of East India Company government during the administrations of Warren Hastings (1773–1784), Charles Cornwallis (1786–1793) and Richard Wellesley (1797–1805) focussed on regularising and formalising governmental systems in India, the creation of a professional civil service, modelled on a ‘Whig-style’ separation of executive, legislative and judicial functions, and the imposition of the ‘rule of law’ to sanctify private ownership of property and guide the functions of government in India.⁴¹

By the 1820s, the image of the ‘plundering nabob’ appeared well in the past. No longer were East India Company operatives assumed to be avaricious and immoral, ‘rich as Croesus and hungry for power’, a popular imagery associated with the Eighteenth-Century Governors, Robert Clive and Warren Hastings, which reached its zenith during the long trial of the latter after 1788.⁴² As Wellesley had told the Court of Directors in 1812, the East India Company was compelled to dispense ‘wise and well regulated government ... to every class and description of our subjects, the permanent benefits of secure property, protected life, undisturbed order, and inviolate religion’.⁴³ Orientalist notions of government valued the capacity to communicate with Indians and learn about Indian culture, religions, governance and history in order to win over opinion to the benefits of British colonial rule. But within the broad consensus of this orientalist framework, there were contentious issues of policy, particularly around relationships with the elites of the pre-British era. Issues of land tenure and revenue collection had proved intractable since the period of Warren Hastings. The 1793 ‘permanent settlement’ agreement between the Company and Bengali landowners (zamindars) overturned the system of land taxation adopted after the Battle of Plassey in 1757, under which the powers of

40 Stokes 1959, *The English Utilitarians and India*, p.1.

41 Metcalf, Thomas R. 1994, *Ideologies of the Raj*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, p.18.

42 Nechtman, Tillman 2010, *Nabobs: Empire and identity in Eighteenth Century Britain*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, p.11.

43 Wellesley 1812, *Letter from the Marquis Wellesley*, p.28.

zamindars to collect revenue from the peasantry (ryots) had been abandoned in favour of a system of direct land taxation. This system had contributed to the allegedly corrupt extraction of wealth by Company officials and their agents ('rent-farmers'), which had caused much controversy in Britain during Clive's administration. Furthermore, the burden of taxation had led ryots to abandon their lands, which had contributed to severe famines throughout Bengal in 1769 and 1770. Cornwallis's permanent settlement in some ways represented a return to the Mughal system of land ownership by reinstating zamindars as the point of revenue collection, but departed from the older system by instituting a fixed rate of taxation to be collected at pre-determined intervals, from which no remissions were permitted for reasons of drought or flood.⁴⁴

Permanent settlement was a matter which particularly inflamed the passions of John Prinsep. Returning from India in 1788 with a fortune of 40,000 pounds, he sought to promote his political aspirations by publishing a series of pamphlets, one of which attacked Cornwallis's land policies under the pseudonym 'Gurreeb Doss', Hindustani for 'servant of the poor'.⁴⁵ He argued that the Company should restore the 'mocurrery' system of traditional land tenure that he believed had provided protection for the ryots. It was incumbent on the government to find ways of 'meliorating the condition, and establishing the rights of that useful and blameless race of men, the native cultivators of land in India', 'occupiers of the soil from time immemorial'.⁴⁶ By allowing zamindars a 'permanent tenure over the whole country ... a great and formidable barrier will be established between the government and the people; a brazen shield to cover oppression'.⁴⁷ Such views echoed the sentiments of the English Romantic movement by seeking to 'take the peasant in all his simplicity, to secure him in the possession of his land, to rule him with a paternal and simple government, and so avoid all the artificialities of a sophisticated European form of rule'.⁴⁸

The parameters of the debate had changed little in the Calcutta of *The Baboo* 30 years or so after John Prinsep left India. Augustus Prinsep has his British characters debate the respective merits of government through the pre-existing elites of princes, brahmans and zamindars backed by British military might, or by winning the hearts and minds of the people to the liberalism and tolerance of the new regime and abandoning the prior rulers. Lackington, 'a gentleman holding a high station in the government', argues that, 'though the Englishman's policy is cold, his heart [must be] warm'. To him, the British must restore the

44 Islam, Sirajul 1979, *The Permanent Settlement in Bengal: A study of its operation, 1790–1819*, Bangla Academy, Dacca, pp.18–22.

45 Prinsep, John 1792, *Strictures and Observations on the Mocurrery System of Landed Property in Bengal Originally Written for the Morning Chronicle, Under the Signature of Gurreeb Doss, With Replies*, J. Debrett, London.

46 Ibid., pp.vii, 7.

47 Ibid., p.76.

48 Stokes 1959, *The English Utilitarians and India*, p.13.

autonomy of the toiling ryots, the 'original population ... whose very existence seems connected to the soil, from which their race has never been separated'. 'We must of our edifice', he asserts, 'make a place of shelter and acknowledged benefit to the multitude; we must make it their interest to support it; we must bring them not only to admire, but to value it.'⁴⁹ The prospect of accommodating the elites, as Cornwallis and his successors had sought through permanent settlement, was doomed to failure. Already resentful at their loss of power and prestige, it was inevitable that they would grasp any opportunity to overthrow British rule:

They are members, sons, or descendants of the old families who carried arms against us in our wars; who have lost all their glory, and importance, by our triumphs, and whose recollections of the splendours of their former career, will never suffer their passion to be interested in a Furingee dominion. I believe that we cannot make ourselves popular with the shadows of Mohummedan or Hindoo aristocracy, and rather than nurse such serpents in the bosom of our empire, I would bruise their heads.⁵⁰

A few years after Augustus Prinsep's death, the tolerance for 'party opinions' portrayed in the novel descended into open hostility as, to use Thoby Prinsep's words, 'younger men were appointed to fill vacancies who had little pretensions to oriental scholarship'.⁵¹ A product of the Wellesley era reforms to the civil service, Thoby's education and career cast him as an archetypal orientalist Indian civil servant of the early-Nineteenth Century. Emerging from Fort William College fluent in Persian and Arabic, he steadily ascended the senior ranks in Bengal. His first appointment as Assistant Secretary to the Governor-General the Marquess of Hastings allowed him to travel throughout the Presidency, to Nepal, Oudh, the North West Province and Mahratta. By 1820, he was head of the Persian Department, and by 1826 head of the Territorial Department. In 1834 he was appointed by seniority to the post of Chief Secretary. This position placed him in the role of supervising the political and diplomatic operations of the Bengal Government, which extended throughout north-east India and included the principalities of allied Indian states and the neighbouring kingdom of Burma. In his memoirs, he reports good relationships with most of the Governors-General he served. He particularly admired Francis Rawdon-Hastings, with whom he worked closely during his first years of service.⁵² In Thoby's view, the Marquess had presided over

49 Prinsep 1834, *The Baboo*, Volume 1, pp.73, 121.

50 Ibid., Volume 1, p.74.

51 Prinsep, 'Three Generations', Part 2, p.176.

52 Prinsep, Henry T. 1825 (1972) *History of the Political and Military Transactions in India during the Administration of the Marquess of Hastings 1813–1823*, Volume 1, Irish University Press, Shannon, Ireland.

a glorious administration that had nearly doubled the Revenue and the territories of the East India Company ... Everywhere British Residents controlled the local Administration in order to secure a government having for its object the peoples' good.⁵³

When William Bentinck arrived to take up the role of Governor-General in 1828, however, Thoby was ill-prepared for service under one with an entirely different approach from that of his predecessors. Never before had he been required to work with 'a character so deeply imbued with the love of change for change's sake', one who 'showed a desire to go everywhere and see everything with his own eyes ... who had such a love of work, and such an incessant desire to meddle with everything, small or great'.⁵⁴ The new Governor-General began to make long-term civil servants such as Thoby uneasy. 'We acted then on the true conservative principle of providing a remedy for every evil or defect that was shown to exist, but were careful that our remedy should not go beyond the disease', he reflected in his memoirs. With Bentinck, the 'principle now adopted ... was to consider every defect established to be reason for abandoning the entire system and trying a new one'.⁵⁵

The appointment of Thomas Macaulay, one of the foremost voices of 'trenchant, generous empirical liberalism', as Law Member of the Governor-General's Supreme Council in 1834 compounded Thoby's misery and was to bring the 'most trying' period of his Indian career.⁵⁶ As a member of the House of Commons before coming to India, Macaulay had argued, in debates over the renewal of the East India Company's charter in 1833, that the British goal should not only be to train Indians to fill administrative positions, but to 'educate [them] into a capacity for better government, that having become instructed in European knowledge, they may, in some future age, demand European institutions'.⁵⁷ The subsequent *Charter Act* of 1833 owed much to Macaulay, who, in Catherine Hall's words, 'explained why Europeans were suited to representative government, while Indians, effeminate and fit only for conquest, must be subject to benevolent despotism'.⁵⁸ The Act reformed the Governor-General's Supreme Council, allowing the appointment of a Crown nominee to serve in an advisory capacity, and this position was offered to Macaulay at a substantial salary. Arriving in India in 1834, Macaulay was appointed to chair the General Committee on Public Instruction, on which Thoby and James Prinsep also

53 Prinsep, 'Three Generations', Part 2, p.99.

54 Ibid., pp.131–3.

55 Ibid., p.131.

56 Stokes 1959, *The English Utilitarians and India*, p.xiv; Prinsep, 'Three Generations', Part 2, p.189.

57 Macaulay, quoted by Zastoupil, Lynn and Martin Moir (eds) 1999, *The Great Indian Education Debate: Documents relating to the orientalist–Anglicist controversy, 1781–1843*, Curzon Press, Richmond, Surrey, p.25.

58 Hall, Catherine 2005, 'Writing Histories of Difference: New histories of nation and empire', The Allan Martin Lecture, Research School of Social Sciences, The Australian National University, Canberra, p.21.

served, and thus the forum was set for a controversy which manifested the differences between the orientalists and the Anglicists and marked the start of a fundamental reorientation in Indian government.

The Committee's support of the Madrasa in Calcutta and the Sanskrit College in Benares was, Thoby argued, 'designed to promote the knowledge of the law, literature and religion of the Mahommedans and Hindoos'.⁵⁹ The principles governing their operation had long been an article of faith between the East India Company government, dominated by 'men distinguished for their attainments in oriental literature ... [who] naturally maintained the system of education which they found established by the Government', and important Indian elites. But as membership of the Committee changed over time, there arose

acute differences of opinion on the degree of support that should be given to existing Oriental colleges ... One party, known as orientalists, was for retaining the system ... The other party, the Anglicists, held that much of the money so expended would be better applied towards promoting English education.⁶⁰

Macaulay sought to overturn years of orientalist policy on education, contending that public funds, rather than being applied to Indian languages, should instead support the introduction of the English language and a British education system. 'We have to educate a people who cannot at present be educated by means of their mother tongue', he wrote:

We must teach them some foreign language. The claims of our own language it is hardly necessary to recapitulate ... In India, English is the language spoken by the ruling class. It is spoken by the higher class of natives at the seats of Government ... Whether we look at the intrinsic value of our literature or at the particular situation of this country we shall see ... that of all foreign tongues the English tongue is that which would be the most useful to our native subjects.⁶¹

Thoby Prinsep was infuriated, complaining that Macaulay had 'expressed contempt for all oriental literature and scornful intolerance of the religions professed by one hundred millions of our subjects in language that apparently defied contradiction or even criticism'.⁶² There was 'a very hot argument between myself and Mr Macaulay', and a number of the Committee's orientalist members, including James Prinsep, resigned in protest at Bentinck's and Macaulay's determination to bypass its expertise and authority. Bentinck was

59 Prinsep, 'Three Generations', Part 2, p.173.

60 Ibid., pp.175–76.

61 Macaulay, Thomas Babington, 'Minute on Indian Education (1835)', in Barbara Harlow and Mia Carter (eds) 1999, *Imperialism and Orientalism: A documentary sourcebook*, Blackwell Publishers, Oxford, p.58.

62 Prinsep, 'Three Generations', Part 2, p.189.

unmoved and directed the cessation of government subsidies for the publication of orientalist literature and stipends for Indian students at the Madrasa and the Sanskrit College, that vacant teaching posts and secretarial posts at the two colleges not be filled, and that English language schools be established in the major towns of Bengal.

The proposals provoked controversy in Calcutta and Benares. Over the next three years, a series of petitions attracted support amongst Indian elites alleging betrayal by British authorities which had depended heavily on the literate classes since the time of Hastings.⁶³ Many Indians suspected that the British harboured a secret aim to undermine Indian religions and promote Christianity in order to achieve religious domination, a sensitive issue that had been exacerbated by the relaxation of residence requirements by evangelical missionaries in the 1833 charter renewal.⁶⁴ The reforms would also devalue Indian languages, as one of the petitions put it:

Although independent in our natural wants we have become in many respects subservient to the English, and to the productions of their Country, and should we be made to depend on them with regard to our reading and writing also, we shall be rendered still more miserable.⁶⁵

Thoby wrote a minute for Bentinck in which he rebutted each of Macaulay's arguments, but this was rejected by the Governor-General, who forwarded it to Macaulay for comment. It failed to sway him, although he admitted he 'may have committed a slight mistake or two as to details, and I may have occasionally used an epithet which might with advantage have been softened down'.⁶⁶ Thoby argued that funds allocated under the 1813 *Charter Act* were 'permanently and irrevocably appropriated' to 'native languages' and that the Government of India had no legal power to change the education provisions established by Parliament.⁶⁷ He warned of the risks of alienating Muslim opinion if funds were withdrawn from the Madrasa, claiming that the Anglicists had exaggerated the demand for English education and that the government was ill-equipped to implement its promise of providing English language schools throughout Bengal. He contended that the petitions demonstrated majority Indian support for orientalist policies, while Anglicist views were held only by a small number of British officials and very few Indians.⁶⁸ In his arguments, he found support in the metropole from Horace Hayman Wilson, by then back in England in the

63 Zastoupil and Moir 1999, *The Great Indian Education Debate*, p.42.

64 Ibid., p.31.

65 1838 Petition, quoted by Zastoupil and Moir 1999, *The Great Indian Education Debate*, p.42.

66 H.T. Prinsep, 'Note dated 15 February 1835, with comment by Thomas B. Macaulay', in Marriott, John and Bhaskar Mukhopadhyay (eds) 2006, *Britain in India, 1765–1905*, Volume 3: Education and Colonial Knowledge, Pickering and Chatto, London, p.10.

67 Marriott and Mukhopadhyay 2006, *Britain in India*, p.4.

68 Ibid.

position of Boden Professor of Sanskrit at Oxford. Wilson was associated with John Stuart Mill who, by 1836 had taken over the role of his ill father James with the East India Company.⁶⁹ Mill prepared an unsuccessful dispatch to the Board of Directors supporting the orientalist position, which he defended as 'the product of a long and on-going series of intellectual exchanges and cultural negotiations between Indians and British officials'.⁷⁰

Macaulay's reforms stood, despite opposition in India and England. In 1839, Bentinck's successor, Lord Auckland, exasperated by Prinsep's and Macaulay's enmity and complaining that they 'butted at each other like bulls, blind to everything but their own joust of brains', engineered a compromise that restored the system of stipends to the Madrasa and the Sanskrit College.⁷¹ While Thoby Prinsep saw this as a vindication of the orientalist position, the episode exposed the steady changes in Indian aspirations under the British and in British conceptions of their governmental role in India. Both the orientalists and the Anglicists claimed that their views on education reflected Indian aspirations. The former argued that support for Indian languages derived from South Asian traditions, under which governments were expected to make endowments to support social priorities. Continuation of this support was part of a compact between Indian elites and the British government to provide 'special measures to protect intellectual elites, the guardians of the national culture, from the ravages of the market place'.⁷² Macaulay too drew on 'Indian opinion', in the person of influential intellectual Rammohan Roy, whose letters suggested to him that 'Indian public opinion was increasingly receptive to western ideas'.⁷³

The desire by both Anglicists and orientalists to conciliate Indian public opinion shows that the arguments, for all their passions, differed little in their substance. Both sought to reconcile Indians to British domination, the former through manipulation of 'opinion', the latter through more heavy-handed approaches. The episode demonstrates the overriding power of the British in government, that 'while Indians participated in the making of imperial ideas and practices, it was the British who held the very important power of interpretation'.⁷⁴ Auckland's compromise was only the start of the diminution of Macaulay's ideals of English-language education in India. By the 1850s, a form of consensus about the utility of education in vernacular Indian languages, rather than English, had been reached. While the impact of the old orientalist-style notions declined with the retirement from service of officers such as Thoby

69 Zastoupil and Moir 1999, *The Great Indian Education Debate*, pp.45–6.

70 Ibid., p.47.

71 Broughton Papers, 'Letters from Lord Auckland to the President, 9 April 1837', India Office Records, British Library, F213/6, ff. 52 – 53; Prinsep, 'Three Generations', Part 2, p.245.

72 Zastoupil and Moir 1999, *The Great Indian Education Debate*, p.49.

73 Ibid., p.35.

74 Ibid., p.55.

Prinsep, echoes remained in the 'old orientalist dream of a rebirth of India through the merger of the European and Indian heritages ... that west and east might converge in ways beneficial to the people of India'.⁷⁵

Such were the ideological elements of the debate. At another level, the conflict between Thoby Prinsep and Macaulay illustrates the changing complexion of British imperialism consistent both with generational changes in the civil service and in metropolitan attitudes to India and how it should be ruled. While the Indian experiences of new imperialists such as Macaulay confirmed a sense of overwhelming British superiority, men such as Thoby Prinsep claimed to love India, Indian culture and the Indian people, his regard for 'all things Indian' cultivated through his education and years in India driving his sense of the British mission in India.⁷⁶ But he too longed for England and looked forward to 'the time to arrive when I might return and take a permanent place in that society'.⁷⁷ Despite his long experience working and living in close proximity to Indians, by the time he left India in 1843 he was more certain than ever that British 'superiority of intelligence, and ... high-minded, disinterested, and earnest action for the public good' had marked out his country for imperial pre-eminence, just as he believed that innate differences would forever keep them apart.⁷⁸

Scholarliness and saintliness

To his brothers, James Prinsep was a figure of admiration and pride. His brief but shining life was an inspiration to them all. William recalled that James 'carried everything he did to ... perfection, whether in writing, drawing, music or invention of any kind. In fact throughout life he excelled in everything he undertook', and was always more interested in science than the pursuit of money and riches.⁷⁹ His sister, Emily Prinsep, believed that James was unusual in that 'nothing imparted to him had been forgotten, nor had any opportunity of learning been thrown away'.⁸⁰ More recently, he has been placed alongside doyens of orientalist thought, men such as William Jones, H.H. Wilson and H.T. Colebrooke, as one who helped rescue India from 'amnesia' about its past, and who, rather than acting as an agent of British power and domination, was motivated by a love of India and a pure commitment to orientalist research.⁸¹

75 Ibid., p.64.

76 Hall 2005, 'Writing Histories of Difference', p.23.

77 Prinsep, 'Three Generations', Part 2, p.116.

78 Prinsep, Henry T. 1853, *The India Question in 1853*, W.H. Allen & Co., London, p.73.

79 'The Memoirs of William Prinsep', Volume 1, p.126.

80 Prinsep, 'Chapter One', p.20.

81 O.P. Kejariwal (1988, *The Asiatic Society of Bengal and the Discovery of India's Past*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi) and Charles Allen (2002, *The Search for the Buddha: The men who discovered India's lost religion*, Carrol and Graf, New York) have been prominent in seeking to resurrect the reputations of the British Indian orientalists from the generally critical analyses of orientalist discourse.

To Bernard Cohn, James Prinsep was one of a very small number of British men in India prepared to 'break out of the typical mould' who, while living in Benares, was prepared to 'wander daily through the town or mix ex-officially in its affairs'.⁸²

Arriving in India in 1819 as Assistant Assay Master at the Company mint, James's first few months in Calcutta reunited him with brothers Thoby and William, both already well-established in the city. To William, the presence of his younger brother was delightful:

I had the full enjoyment of his sweet fellowship in flute duets, singing, drawing &c &c. He used to give us charming chemical lectures in Thoby's house of an evening to the delight of an admiring audience and to the wild astonishment of the native servants whom he used occasionally to electrify in a string hand to hand, when each man who felt the shock would abuse his neighbour for striking him.⁸³

Transferred to Benares, James Prinsep was introduced to the city by his superior, Horace Hayman Wilson, who was to have a deep influence on his Indian career. Wilson introduced him to 'quite a different set of men, the Pundits, Moonshees, and Baboos of the city, with whom he, being a Sanskrit scholar, had continual intercourse'.⁸⁴ 'I had mazurs (presents) of sugar, country almonds, and fruits, presented ten times a day', he wrote to Emily in England, 'and the Pundits put chaplets of flowers around my neck by dozens':

Aye! And congratulatory odes were rehearsed in Sanskrit in honour of my arrival, calling me a rising son, a blushing rose, and my face broad full moon (insulting this, was it not?) These natives I am glad to find are not kept away by my knowing so little of the language; each man has already paid me half a dozen visits, and they have shamed me into studying the languages forthwith, for which purpose a Moonshee has already been put upon my establishment, and I begin to read the Devanagri fluently.⁸⁵

James became involved in an extraordinary range of activities in addition to his employment. As a member of the Committee on Local Improvement, an affiliation of leading Indian and British citizens of Benares, he organised a census which included a detailed map of every building and dwelling in the city, engaged in massive engineering works such as the draining of the pools and swamps behind the city, built a bazaar for the citizens and a stone bridge over the

82 Cohn 1987, *An Anthropologist Among the Historians*, p.444.

83 'The Memoirs of William Prinsep', Volume 1, p.313.

84 Prinsep, 'Chapter One', p.47.

85 Ibid.

River Karamnasa, and dismantled and rebuilt the mosque of Aurangzeb.⁸⁶ His energy and creativity earned him the respect of the city's population, as William Prinsep recalled:

I heard the native gentlemen of the city speak of him with almost adoration for all he had done and was doing for them, and to their great astonishment (for I dare say it was the only instance known to them of any European gentleman devoting his time and talents for their benefit) all for love! He took no reward, and made not a rupee of profit from any of the large sums they gave him to lay out upon important works.⁸⁷

Transferred to Calcutta in 1830, James again took on major engineering works, and finished the project started by his recently deceased brother Thomas, to construct canals and a series of locks to divert the rivers of the Ganges delta around Calcutta. In 1835, as part of his official duties, he introduced a uniform coinage known as the Company Rupee, designing the die from which the coinage was cast. In 1832, he was elected secretary of the Bengal Asiatic Society (which he reformed into the 'Asiatic Society of Bengal'), and in 1833 he succeeded Wilson as editor of its monthly periodical *Gleanings*, which he later renamed the *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal*. In his position as Secretary of the Society, he focussed his energies on philological and numismatic studies, aimed chiefly at interpreting the ancient Sanskrit and Delhi No. 1 scripts, which eventually unveiled evidence of the existence of the Buddhist emperor, Asoka (a figure previously considered to be semi-mythical).⁸⁸

James Prinsep's tenure as editor of the journal brought a golden period of research activity and international reputé to the Society, attested to by the number and range of contributions over the period, all of which he edited and prepared for publication.⁸⁹ His first edition, in January 1832, recorded the Society's intellectual debt to Sir William Jones:

It will flourish if naturalists, chemists, antiquaries, philologers, and men of science, in different parts of Asia, will commit their observations to writing, and send them to the Asiatic Society at Calcutta; it will languish if such communications shall be long intermitted; and it will die away, if they shall entirely cease.⁹⁰

86 Cohn 1987, *An Anthropologist Among the Historians*, p.444.

87 'The Memoirs of William Prinsep', Volume 2, pp. 83–4.

88 Two volumes of his works were published by Edward Thomas (ed.) 1858, *Essays on Indian Antiquities, Historic, Numismatic, and Palaeographic, of the late James Prinsep, FRS, to Which are Added his Useful Tables*, 2 Volumes, John Murray, London.

89 *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal*, Volume 7, 1838, Part 2, Baptist Mission Press, Circular Road, Calcutta, p.916.

90 *Ibid.*, Volume 1, January 1832, frontispiece.

James Prinsep appealed to members to submit articles on any subject, again invoking Jones' aspirations for the Society: 'the bounds of its investigation will be the geographical limits of Asia; and within these limits its inquiries will be extended to whatever is performed by men or produced by nature'.⁹¹ He paid tribute to British men throughout India whose interests motivated their desire to explore and investigate, reminding them that they were following the examples of those such as Jones, Wilson and Nepal-based Hungarian linguist, Alexander Csoma de Körös: 'All may ... feel sensible of the devotion, zeal, and perseverance which are necessary to lead a man, alone and unpaid, into a distant and wild country, to learn its language and study its people at the fountain head.'⁹² At the same time, he was conscious of the political implications of the Society's role, and recognised that contributions on minerals and mining practices 'must possess value in the eyes of a government'.⁹³ He suggested that governmental support for the work of the Society was justified, not only for the translation and publication of 'oriental' texts, but to help with the costs of preparing and distributing the journal.

Between 1832 and 1838, James Prinsep produced monthly editions of the journal and, as Secretary of the Society, published special editions of the *Asiatick Researches* on Indian geography, geology, zoology and anthropology. An array of topics attracted his attention: translations of classical and vernacular religious tracts, literature and poetry, numismatics, epigraphy, geology, botany, astronomy, climatology, geography, mathematics and trigonometry, ethnography and archaeology.⁹⁴ Contributions came from British men throughout India, including Wilson and amateur ethnographers B.H. Hodgson and J.S. Lushington, his brothers George and Thoby Prinsep, and travel accounts from men such as Lieutenant Alexander Burnes, who, in 1833, entered the city of Bokhára in disguise and later published a serialised account in the journal.⁹⁵

Throughout 1835, James Prinsep corresponded with other societies in Europe to continue the task of translation and, by the beginning of 1836, was confident that alliances with the Society of Paris and the Royal Asiatic Society of London would speed the completion of an unfinished 'Bibliotheca Asiatica' of oriental literature. The status of the journal was enhanced by the excitement surrounding the research Prinsep and his circle was involved in, including his successful efforts to unravel the Brahmi script and interpret the Asokan Edicts, which he reported in a series of articles between 1835 and 1838. Historian Om Prakesh Kejariwal

91 Ibid., p.x.

92 Ibid., p.xi.

93 Ibid., Volume 2, January 1833, p.ix.

94 Ibid., Volume 1, January to December 1834.

95 Ibid., Volume 2, May 1833, p.224. Burnes published his account in 1834 as *Travels into Bokhara: Being an account of a journey from India to Cabool, Tartary and Persia; Also, narrative of a voyage on the Indus from the sea to Lahore*, 3 Volumes, John Murray, London.

has emphasised James Prinsep's achievement in deciphering the Brahmi script, a task demanding 'lightening intuition' and the capacity, as Charles Allen puts it, for 'absorbing, analysing, comparing and matching multiple inputs in the form of groups and symbols—the essential qualifications of a code breaker—as well as an exceptional capacity for sustained concentration'.⁹⁶ These abilities allowed the interpretation of 'one inscription after another', and revealed the wealth of historical material on the previously semi-mythical Asoka.⁹⁷

Unfortunately for James Prinsep, the physical demands of this exacting work exhausted him and, in 1838, he was forced to relinquish his role as Secretary and Editor of the journal. 'It is with great reluctance and regret', he wrote in his resignation letter, 'that I thus separate myself from a body, with whom I have been associated in labours of much interest and utility, whose favour has encouraged my zeal, and through whose credit and reputation in the world, I have obtained the means of making generally known my own humble efforts in the cause of science, and my not unsuccessful endeavours to explore the antiquities of the country, to whose service we are devoted'.⁹⁸ Returning to England, he was diagnosed with 'a bilious affection, but the symptoms increased rapidly and the disease was traced to an affection of the brain'.⁹⁹ At least he was to die 'at home' and not left to lie unforgotten in an Indian graveyard, as he had imagined in a verse to his sister Emily in 1823:

Civil and military feuds here slumber
Doctors and patients, children without number
Here death indulging with no triumphant warning
Kills overnight, for burial next morning!
While memory outlasts grief one hour or half
To fill the fat appointments on the staff
The tomb none knows, the pithless verse none sees
But Chunar Stonecutters and joint trustees!¹⁰⁰

James Prinsep was a talented and capable man with an unusual capacity for work and scholarship. His many writings attest to an enjoyment of research

96 Kejariwal 1988, *The Asiatic Society of Bengal and the Discovery of India's Past*, p.209; Allen 2002, *The Search for the Buddha*, p.150.

97 Kejariwal 1988, *The Asiatic Society of Bengal and the Discovery of India's Past*, p.215.

98 *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal*, Volume 7, Part 2, July 1838, p.916.

99 H. Thoby Prinsep, 'Memoir of the Author' in *Essays on Indian Antiquities*, Volume 1, p.xiv.

100 James Prinsep to Emily Prinsep, Benares, 21 September 1823, Caroline Simpson Library and Research Collection, Historic Homes Trust of New South Wales.

as his principle motivation, of one not overly interested in politics and more engaged in the pursuit of ‘a body of scientific discoveries about Indian reality, a set of “factualised” statements detached epistemologically from colonial politics’.¹⁰¹ Throughout his works, there is a recognition that scientific research would contribute to a consolidation of British interests in India, and that it was due to British knowledge, science and motivation that Indians were to be provided the opportunity to ‘reclaim their heritage’. The producers of this heritage were British men who, by the 1830s, were located and travelled throughout the country and who often had the time and interest to pursue studies into areas of interest.

James Prinsep’s other major pastime as artist and illustrator gave him scope to represent India visually and through various mediums. His *Views of Benares*, published in 1833, comprises an extraordinarily detailed visual map of the city, together with census information on the citizens, while his watercolours present another perspective on the life of the city, as the people go about their religious and family lives and the business of making a living. He was interested particularly in the facial details of his subjects. As he explained in a letter to his sister Emily in 1823, he pursued the desire to ‘make use of real persons and scenes’ and ‘acquire the knack of hitting off a face from memory’: ‘my morning loungers insist on assigning a name to every face I draw; and I lose credit if they don’t guess them right’.¹⁰² This letter records his determination to draw and paint the scenes of life in India with the assistance of his brothers William and Thomas, to record even the trivial details, the embarrassing moments and the ridiculous. James gives Emily a detailed and humorous commentary on each of the images in the now missing album of paintings and drawings he had assembled to illustrate his experiences in India. Without the accompanying images, we can only imagine the scenes he describes, such as the meeting of the Benares Local Improvement Committee, showing all the British and Indian characters ‘so actively zealous in the midst of the hot winds’:

We incorporated ourselves without a charter, I dubbed myself secretary without an election, Presidents and vice Presidents we esteem useless, publicity we do not court, funds we have none, meetings seldom. Yet in Chemistry, Mineralogy, Astronomy, Botany, Sanskrit and Gastronomy, we will yield to no society in India either as to our instruments, collections and exertions.¹⁰³

James Prinsep’s positions with the Benares and Calcutta mints placed him in a different position from the writers, magistrates and collectors in the mainstream

101 Breckenridge, Carol A. and Peter van de Veer (eds) 1993, *Orientalism and the Postcolonial Predicament: Perspectives on South Asia*, University of Philadelphia Press, Philadelphia, p.8.

102 James Prinsep to Sophia Prinsep, Benares, 21 September 1823.

103 Ibid.

civil service administration. He recognised that his official position in the mint permitted relationships with Indians, free from the hauteur he believed kept the civil servant 'in ignorance of those they govern'.¹⁰⁴ Advancement in his career as an assayer was not dependent on proficiency in Indian languages, orientalist studies or political economy, and thus his scholarly interests and community involvement seem to have been a matter of choice. Certainly, his family and peers believed that James Prinsep was unusual amongst the British in his closeness to Indians. For Henry Prinsep, James Prinsep—the uncle he had never known—provided an example of 'selfless' British service to colonised peoples, one of those he believed he should emulate in his own colonial career. Henry's journey to India in 1870 brought him face to face with James Prinsep's legacy: the ghat erected in his honour on the banks of the Hooghly, the bust in the Asiatic Society headquarters, the reverence with which his name was mentioned by those who had known him in Calcutta, his paintings illustrating the vibrancy and colour of Indian street life.¹⁰⁵ To the Prinsep family, James represented a pinnacle of colonial achievement, the epitome of British altruism and imageries of the modernising and civilising imperial mission.

A place to make a fortune

The British characters in *The Baboo* inhabit a world of opulence, their houses the size of palaces, furnished with 'ottomans and couches of light blue satin, heavy chandeliers and girandoles, musical instruments and elegant fancy tables', and attended by armies of servants who look after their employers' every need.¹⁰⁶ William Prinsep's paintings show the luxuries of Prinsep family life in Calcutta. His watercolour of his brother Charles's Calcutta house, Belvedere, depicts a mansion of massive proportions that, in the words of Augustus' daughter Augusta Becher, 'he never ceased adding to'. Another depicts a family gathering at Belvedere and the entertainment of Indian musicians in a cavernous, pillared hall.¹⁰⁷ A drawing, 'Our House, Garden Reach, Looking West', shows a man, probably William, in the act of leaving for work, farewelling his wife as he boards the ferry for his office in Calcutta. In *The Baboo*, Augustus Prinsep's interests do not extend to the entrepreneurial activities of the colonisers. His characters, while living well, are burdened by disastrous levels of debt at the hands of the unscrupulous Baboo and, moreover, are mostly portrayed as engaged in the project of delivering fair and consistent British government to the colonised Indians. Absent in the story are the nabobs of his father's era,

104 Prinsep, 'Chapter One', p.48.

105 Prinsep, 'Diaries', 4–28 May 1870.

106 Prinsep 1834, *The Baboo*, Volume 1, p.19.

107 Becher, Augusta 1930, *Personal Reminiscences of Augusta Becher, 1830–1888*, edited by H.G. Rawlinson, Constable and Co., London, p.112.

the merchants and entrepreneurs such as his brothers William and Charles, but the money-making activities of his contemporaries were familiar to Augustus. Political economy was the heart of the Empire, the colonies 'not coveted just for the love of possession, nor ... desired as an outlet for the surplus population. Their functions were to supply certain goods and receive certain other goods ... [as] subordinate spheres of development for the mother country.'¹⁰⁸ Implicit in the training of civil servants was a struggle between the demands of rampant capitalism and the requirements of a rule of law designed partly to protect native interests 'wherever they seemed to conflict'.¹⁰⁹

Nonetheless, for Eighteenth-Century Britons, a career in India was often characterised as a sure way to a fortune.¹¹⁰ John Prinsep certainly went to India with the firm intention of making as much money as he could. Immediately after his arrival in Calcutta as a cadet in April 1770, he left the army to go into private business as an indigo planter, copper miner and chintz manufacturer. The Company attempted to deport him in 1773 but, by that time, as his daughter Emily recalled, he had accumulated 'sufficient interest with the Council to procure that his Memorial petitioning for leave to remain in India' should be granted and the deportation order 'sent home instead'. He became a 'resident by sufferance' and was able to amass his fortune in the relatively short period of 17 years.¹¹¹ The potential of India for such a man, born into a lowly Midlands family but with considerable energy, imagination and enthusiasm, appealed immensely: 'I thought myself suddenly metamorphosed into a great man', he wrote in his journal, fragments of which are preserved in the memoirs of his grandson, Sir Henry Thoby Prinsep.¹¹² In a short family biography, Om Prakesh Kejariwal found John Prinsep, although possessed of a 'very fertile and innovative mind', an 'unscrupulous businessman who exploited every means to make big money'. His practice was to enter lucrative supply contracts through his networks with influential officers in the government of Warren Hastings, negotiate substantial upfront payments, and then declare his inability to fulfil his commitments, surrender or cancel the contract 'with still more handsome compensation'.¹¹³

John Prinsep's stay in India enabled him to return to England well set up to pursue a metropolitan career in business and with enough capital to seek political office. His return coincided with the start of the Parliamentary trial of Warren Hastings in February 1788, after Hastings' impeachment on charges of poor military judgement, undue patronage and maladministration during his 13

108 Porter, Bernard 1983, *Britain, Empire and the World, 1850–1982: Delusions of grandeur*, George Allen & Unwin, London, p.26.

109 Ibid., p.46.

110 Cohn 1987, *An Anthropologist Among the Historians*, pp.425–34.

111 Prinsep, 'Chapter One', pp.5–9.

112 Prinsep, 'Three Generations', Part 1, p.4.

113 Kejariwal, O.P. 1993, 'The Prinseps of India: A personal quest', in *The Indian Archives*, Volume 42, No. 1–2, January–December, p.12.

years as Governor-General of India, a time when the image of the Indian 'nabob' had never been so tarnished in metropolitan England. In his book *Nabobs*, Tillman Nechtman describes the pervasive trope of the nabob as 'rapacious and power-hungry', men 'who had extorted a criminal fortune from South Asia and hoped to translate it into power and prestige in the metropolitan world'.¹¹⁴ John Prinsep pursued the task of exploiting his wealth and network of contacts in London with his customary energy. His involvement with the East India Company and marriage into another large Calcutta family, the Auriols, provided him the means to continue and expand his involvement with Indian trade and to establish trading ventures in other spheres of empire, such as South Africa, Mauritius and Australia. Through his company, Prinsep, Saunders and Co., he acted as an agent for a variety of commercial concerns with interests throughout the Empire, and maintained an extensive fleet of transport vessels. He invested in other metropolitan and imperial ventures, including the Battersea Bridge, a profitable ship insurance company, the British Fire Office, and, from 1795, as a 'director and contributor' of the Sierra Leone Company with William Wilberforce and Zachary Macaulay.¹¹⁵ His election to the House of Commons as an independent Member for Queensborough in 1802 provided a forum for Prinsep to speak against the East India Company monopoly over Indian and Chinese trade, arguing that 'the interests of trade and government in one body were inconsistent and conflicting and must result in distracting the development of the resources and prosperity of that country'.¹¹⁶ As such, he continued a tradition of opposition to the monopoly that had begun with Edmund Burke in the 1780s, and which eventually brought about the diminution of the Company charter in 1813, well after he had lost his seat in parliament.

John Prinsep took up other issues in a series of pamphlets published in London between 1792 and 1823, mostly related to his contention that government should provide greater support for the development of industry in India. The Jamaican sugar trade, he argued, was entirely underwritten by the 'detestable traffick' in slave labour, whereas the Indian sugar trade could provide a more economical industry if the British were to adopt 'mild and liberal principles of government over the natives, who require only to be left unmolested in their customs and religious prejudices, and at liberty to pursue their hereditary employment, after the manner of their forefathers'.¹¹⁷ Elsewhere he wrote that East India Company ships should be built in India and that company trade should be undertaken

¹¹⁴ Nechtman 2010, *Nabobs*, pp.14, 77.

¹¹⁵ Prinsep, 'Three Generations', Part 1, p.22; Thorne, R.G. 1986, *The House of Commons, 1790–1820*, Secker and Warburg, London, p.892; Prinsep, 'Chapter One', p.9.

¹¹⁶ Thorne 1986, *The House of Commons*, p.892; Prinsep, 'Three Generations', Part 1, p.20.

¹¹⁷ 'The right of the West India merchants to a double monopoly of the sugar market of Great Britain, and the expedience of all monopolies examined', published in Prinsep, John 1800, *Tracts on Various Subjects, Chiefly Relating to East India Affairs*, Volume 1, J. Debrett, London, p.76.

through these Indian-built vessels.¹¹⁸ However, apart from these fragments of his own writings and some memoirs of his children, little is known about his political activities. His business links with the anti-slavery lobby through the Sierra Leone Company hint at a complexity of political alliances and networks, but these are unfathomable from the extant historical portrait of his life. It is unclear, for example, whether he supported Wilberforce's parliamentary campaign to abolish the slave trade. He had in any case lost his seat in the Commons before it passed the Slave Trade Act in 1807. John Prinsep did not appear to have been associated with the church. His son William commented that religious instruction as a boy in the Prinsep household was 'of the most careless description, confined solely to morning prayers and weekly catechism', and thus a lasting association with Clapham sect members appears unlikely.¹¹⁹ While he argued against the slavery-dependent sugar-economies of the West Indies, his principle concern was the economic advantage a slave economy gave West Indian sugar over the Indian product. Similarly, his support for the land rights of Indian peasantry suggests a mistrust of Indian elites and a suspicion that too great a reliance on their intermediary role would erect a 'great and formidable barrier' between the rulers and the peasantry. From the perspective of a merchant, the economic appeal of such simplicity would be obvious, for it opened the possibility of direct negotiations with the labouring colonised without the need for the additional costs and problems associated with the 'middle-men' zamindars.

John Prinsep's interests in commerce, mercantile activity and the opportunities presented by empire to exploit new markets appear to have been his principle motivation for a parliamentary career and his public advocacy. There were sound reasons to argue for a diminution of the East India Company charter from the perspective of governance and accountability, but for a businessman like John Prinsep, the removal of the company monopoly on Indian trade had clear commercial appeal. Similarly, his writing on the slave trade and Indian land tenure suggest a commercial imperative, and suggest that he was happy to utilise moral arguments to strengthen his case. What is clear about John Prinsep is the extent to which he influenced his sons and daughters in their perspectives on the British colonial venture. His was an energetic, assertive colonialism based on commerce and markets, and on direct engagement of the colonised others in the colonial venture. To his sons, their father steered them towards careers in India and imparted his energy and enthusiasm to an education that would equip them for the lucrative world of imperial business and trade.¹²⁰

118 Prinsep, John 1823, *Suggestions on Freedom of Commerce and Navigation More Especially in Reference to the East India Trade*, James Ridgway, London.

119 'The Memoirs of William Prinsep', Volume 1, p.12.

120 Prinsep, 'Three Generations', Part 1, p.43; 'The Memoirs of William Prinsep', Volume 1, pp.111, 256.

William Prinsep went to India in 1817 to work with his brother-in-law George Haldimand's family silk company, carrying instructions to deal directly with 'native merchants' and thus circumvent the East India Company monopoly.¹²¹ Within two years, at the invitation of the 'Prince of Merchants', John Palmer, he became a partner in the agency house Palmer and Company, the main business of which was to provide services normally undertaken by banks, including managing the funds of civil and military services, investing in Bengal markets, and remitting credits to London on behalf of its clients.¹²² Throughout the 1820s, his income expanded rapidly along with his business interests. Although William thought himself a man of modest lifestyle, the size and expense of his household estate also increased. Soon after his arrival, he established his own 'small house', but was 'compelled to have no less than 12 servants, less than which was impossible to a respectable position in life'.¹²³ By 1837, he was able to afford a Garden Reach home, 'adjoining Kyd's dock which ... I had converted into a most pleasant residence with a painting studio commanding the best views up and down the river'.¹²⁴

For an independent merchant such as William Prinsep, the 'fat gains of Mammon' were accompanied by significant hazards. Palmer and Company was the first of the Calcutta agency houses to collapse in January 1830, causing him 'terrible distress' and 'shame' at the 'unwarrantable use we had made of other peoples' deposits with us'.¹²⁵ After a period of bankruptcy, however, his partnership with Dwarkanath Tagore in Carr Tagore and Co. helped him recover his business reputation and much of his wealth. By 1836, he and Tagore were planning new ventures: opium trading with China, tea cultivation in Assam and export to Britain, steam tugs, salt, and steam ferries. Describing William's business ideas as 'bold, grandiose and ingenious', economic historian Blair Kling suggests they sometimes failed because of unforeseen technical problems, and that his particular skills lay in his ability to initiate projects, secure government contracts, and negotiate 'the shoals of official red tape' through his family contacts in the East India Company.¹²⁶ Tagore was a member of 'the most open-minded, free-spirited, and venturesome of the great Calcutta families', a political philosopher who 'envisioned a future India that was westernized and industrialized and whose inhabitants enjoyed without discrimination the rights and liberties of Englishmen' but may have had cause to regret his association with the 'ingenious

121 'The Memoirs of William Prinsep', Volume 1, p.191.

122 Webster, Anthony 2007, *The Richest East India Merchant: The life and business of John Palmer of Calcutta 1767–1836*, The Boydell Press, Woodbridge, pp.44–64; Staples, A. C. 1989, 'Memoirs of William Prinsep: Calcutta years, 1817–1842', in *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, Volume 26, No. 2, p. 66.

123 'The Memoirs of William Prinsep', Volume 1, p.327.

124 Ibid., Volume 2, p.260.

125 Ibid., Volume 2, pp.95–96. See also Webster 2007, *The Richest East India Merchant*, p.111.

126 Kling, Blair B. 1976, *Partner in Empire: Dwarkanath Tagore and the age of enterprise in Eastern India*, University of California Press, London, p.148.

but reckless' William Prinsep.¹²⁷ For his part, William, while admiring Tagore's 'noble' example to 'other wealthy natives', never fully trusted his judgement.¹²⁸ He believed him 'rather a spoilt child in finance, largely supported by rich native friends who had great faith in his judgement and good luck. He was inclined to be free in the support of new adventures ... and I had many serious forebodings'.¹²⁹ At the same time, Tagore's networks in the Bengal business community were of enormous commercial value, enabling the company's ships such as the opium clipper *Water Witch* to be quickly loaded and unloaded by 'his many friends in the Bazar'.¹³⁰

It is through Henry's father, Charles Robert Prinsep, the last of the brothers to arrive in India (in 1824) and the last to leave (in 1855), that images of the Empire as a place to make a fortune find particular prominence in the Prinsep narrative. His commercial aspirations stretched well beyond India. He sought to exploit a web of imperial connections in his endeavours to invest in the economic potential of the Indian Ocean region, with the goal of establishing what he conceived as an Indian sphere of economic power and influence. His successful legal career made him a great deal of money, and he was constantly on the lookout for property investments and commercial ventures.

A barrister in India, according to Charles Prinsep's colleague at the Calcutta Bar, William Ritchie, was able to earn a 'handsome income ... the fees are nearly three times as high as at home'.¹³¹ This was to the detriment of both Briton and Indian according to contemporary commentator J.H. Stocqueler, who believed that British law, the 'dearest and worst of all law', had brought 'great loss and sorrow on the natives': 'No wonder lawyers return from this country rolling in wealth; their fees are enormous: if you ask a single question on any affair, you may lay down your gold mohr ... and if he writes a letter of only three lines, 28 rupees'.¹³² Charles Prinsep's wealth allowed him to develop trade schemes between India and the emerging Indian Ocean and Australian colonies of Singapore, Western Australia and Tasmania. The loss of the East India Company's monopoly in 1833 persuaded investors to diversify their holdings and business interests.¹³³

In Singapore, Charles Prinsep established a nutmeg plantation and planned a harbour and dockyard, and in Western Australia and Tasmania studs to service the demands of the Bengal and Madras Presidencies for horses. In 1837, he

127 Ibid., pp. 5, 16, 82.

128 'The Memoirs of William Prinsep', Volume 2, p.269.

129 Ibid., pp.248–9.

130 Ibid., p.214.

131 Ritchie, Gerald 1920, *The Ritchies in India: Extracts from the correspondence of William Ritchie, 1817–1862; And personal reminiscences of Gerald Ritchie*, John Murray, London, pp.92–3.

132 Stocqueler, J.H. 1983, 'Social Life in Calcutta during the first half of the Nineteenth Century', in Nair, D. Thankappan (ed.), *British Social Life in Ancient Calcutta (1750–1850)*, Sanskrit Pustak Bhandar, Calcutta, p.86.

133 Staples, A.C. 1955, 'The Prinsep Estate in Western Australia', in *Early Days*, Volume 5, Part 1, p.17.

and other British and Indian investors such as Dwarkanath Tagore, shipping magnate and later East India Company chairman Ross Donnelly Mangles, Edward Stirling (brother of the first West Australian Governor Sir James Stirling) and William Prinsep established an 'Australian Association of Bengal' as a vehicle for transferring investments from India to Australia and to 'create local investment in colonial enterprises making use of new technology such as steam power'.¹³⁴ Another of his proposals was to transport poor white and mixed race children from Calcutta to Tasmania as a supply of labour, which he submitted to Governor-General Bentinck in 1828.¹³⁵ The scheme, he argued, would benefit not only the children, but the colonising project in both countries, and the overall strength of the Empire. Removal from India would relieve the children of 'a languid existence commencing in dependence and ending in mendicity' and, at the same time, enhance British prestige in India by removing a population 'destitute alike of intelligence, of energy and of attachment to the land of their forefathers' which weakened 'the power of opinion without a proportionate gain of physical force'. The resultant boost to the labouring population of Australian colonies would furthermore benefit India by creating 'a source of future stability, a new market for its produce, and a bulwark of Military and Political strength', while a 'triple Indian Ocean empire' of India, Australia and South Africa 'would present to the world such a combination of means upon an extended surface as the world has not yet beheld united under one dominion'.¹³⁶

Military might: The limits of violence

Although the family was connected, by marriage and friendship, to those whose role was to enforce the British hold on territory in India and the Indian Ocean region, the Prinseps were not military men. Their writings express the ambiguities of a colonising force which they wanted to believe was brave in war and generous in peace, the protector of the weak, loved and valued by the colonised for the benefits it could bestow, but which all too often seemed to resort to violence in order to enforce British power and prestige.

The Prinseps of early-Nineteenth Century Calcutta were engaged primarily in British cultural formation in India: administration, orientalist research and commercial activity. It was the military that did the fighting to expand British territorial interests and protect British communities in Bengal. Although the

134 Staples, A.C. 1979, *They Made Their Destiny: History of settlement of the Shire of Harvey, 1829–1929*, Shire of Harvey, Bunbury, p.49.

135 India Office Records, 'East India Company Board's Collections, Proposal by C.R. Prinsep for Transferring Children from India to New South Wales and Van Dieman's Land', 1830–1831, Volume 1240, 40599–40767, British Library.

136 Ibid., 11 October 1828.

world the Prinseps sought to construct in Calcutta depended on the security of an armed military presence, their writings hint at ambiguities in their attitudes to the army. Thoby, Charles and Thomas were closely connected to the military through their official positions, as well as by marriage. In his senior posts with the East India Company, Thoby Prinsep worked closely with the army, and he was involved in diplomacy and the logistics of military campaigns in Burma and Afghanistan. His personal papers reveal a person of considerable skill and knowledge of Indian political and military affairs. In his communications with Mr. Benson, the government resident in Rangoon, in the uneasy aftermath of the Burmese War of 1824–6, he dealt with matters as diverse as military logistics for a hypothetical expeditionary force to occupy Rangoon, equipment requirements and livestock needs.¹³⁷ Many of his communications contained diplomatic intelligence, including coded messages in classical Greek and Latin. Others concerned the security of the mail system, instructions that letters be put into the hands of helmsmen for direct delivery to the officer in question. He was suspicious of the King of Burma's supposed duplicity in dealings with the British, advising the resident to be on his guard: 'His Majesty would probably tolerate a lackey like kind of Resident, who would reside at Rangoon and come occasionally on a visit to the Capital, that is if he could tolerate anything English in the shape of a Government functionary.'¹³⁸

Thoby and Augustus Prinsep's knowledge of the army and their appreciation of its functions were mediated through their familiarity with the fighting elite. The army had the role of preserving the security of the colonial venture, of securing new territories, and providing the force behind the diplomatic endeavours of government and the civil service. But while they dealt primarily with officers, and even married into their families, the rank and file were viewed as different, as objects of suspicion that, without the management of officers, might break the rules of British bravery and generosity to become like the barbarians they were supposed to control.¹³⁹ In his account of the suppression of a 'sepoy mutiny' in 1826, William Prinsep lamented that the soldiers, particularly those of Irish background, were little different from the Indian 'others' of the streets and bazaars, their equal as a mystifying, unruly and unpredictable force. Expressing horror at the violence wrought by British soldiers on the Indian population of Calcutta following a refusal by Indian

137 Prinsep, Henry Thoby, 'Private Papers', Oriental and India Office Collection at the British Library (OIOC) MSS Eur. D. 662.

138 Ibid.

139 This is one of the few occasions in the Prinsep narratives in which we are reminded that the British populations of Calcutta included many who were not welcome in the narrow social world inhabited by the family and their social and kin network. Clare Anderson discusses the complexity of the British population, including the presence of escaped convicts from Australia, who lived in Calcutta amongst a community of artisans, tradespeople and itinerant workers. Anderson, Clare 2001, 'Multiple Border Crossings: "Convicts and Other Persons Escaped from Botany Bay and residing in Calcutta"', in *Journal of Australian Colonial History*, Volume 3, No. 2, pp.1–22.

troops to march to Burma without a guarantee of supplies, William reported that 'many women and children were found dead as well as all the men within reach ... A most indescribable gloom seemed to descend upon the whole community of Calcutta, as if a doom of suffering must fall on the place for such an act of cold blooded cruelty.'¹⁴⁰ This was not how the army should behave. It transgressed the ideal of military restraint and fairness that Augustus Prinsep ascribed to the hero of *The Baboo*, Henry Forester, a heroic, almost mythical figure, 'bravest in war, most generous in peace', who leads a British force 'generous and true', who 'do not despoil the conquered'. He is the defender of women, rescuing Dilafroz from 'the unmanly grasp of his own men,' defending 'timid maidens from the approach of further barbarians'.¹⁴¹

The use of British military power was an issue that also occupied Charles Prinsep during the last two years of his long stay in India. In 1854, at the age of 65, Charles Prinsep 'extremely grudgingly' became involved in a controversy over the extent to which the British in South East Asia could legitimately exercise military force to preserve the interests of colonisers and their allies. As Advocate-General, Charles Prinsep was appointed by Lord Clarendon to head a Royal Commission to inquire into allegations against the 'white rajah' of Sarawak Sir James Brooke. Nine years earlier, in 1849, Brooke was alleged to have unilaterally used extreme force to crush the activities of Skrang and Saribas Dyak 'pirates', which resulted in a large number of deaths and the widespread destruction of villages. After a prolonged outcry in London, the Imperial Office established the Royal Commission to decide 'whether the conduct pursued by Sir James Brooke ... and the relations which he holds with the native chiefs, have been such as are becoming a servant of the British Crown'.¹⁴² Arriving in Singapore with his wife Louisa and two daughters in August 1854, Charles Prinsep, and to a lesser extent his fellow Commissioner, East India Company counsel, Humphrey Devereux, attracted criticism over the way they managed proceedings against Brooke. Both seemed uncertain as to the precise matters before them or of the admissibility of the evidence. The *Straits Times* alleged that 'the enquiry has not been conducted in a manner calculated to ascertain or develop the proper objects of investigation ... nothing short of accusatory matter will satisfy the Commissioners, leaving all matters of complaint and enquiry to adjust themselves'.¹⁴³ 'Few Commissions can have been more haphazard and ineffectual', wrote historian Steven Runciman:

Prinsep was highly neurotic, and was, indeed, certified insane a few weeks after his return to India. Devereux was clear-headed but somewhat

¹⁴⁰ 'The Memoirs of William Prinsep', Volume 2, p.44.

¹⁴¹ Prinsep, *The Baboo*, Volume 1, pp.123, 132, 142.

¹⁴² Barley, Nigel 2002, *White Rajah: A biography of Sir James Brooke*, Little, Brown, London, p.82.

¹⁴³ *Straits Times and Singapore Journal of Commerce*, 19 September 1854.

cynical and impatient of the whole affair. The Rajah was hurt and angry and determined to be truculent; he refused to respond to any friendly gesture on the part of the Singapore authorities and forbade his staff to accept any social invitations.¹⁴⁴

Prinsep's behaviour became 'more and more eccentric', and it seemed to observers that he was 'not quite right in the head'. Brooke referred to him as 'a gobbling old donkey without judgement and without dignity', alleging that the inquiry had 'secret instructions' from London, and that its real purpose was to remove him from office.¹⁴⁵ 'Never was there such a farce of an inquiry', he wrote, 'humiliation to me, disgrace to the Government, injury to the natives, ruin to our policy, from a Commission conducted without dignity or propriety, and all about nothing!'¹⁴⁶ The Commissioners could not agree on their findings and submitted separate reports, but both exonerated Brooke on charges of undue violence, and accepted that the Dayaks were engaged in piracy. Qualifying his finding, Prinsep thought it 'unfortunate' that Brooke had associated with savage allies and asked whether it had been necessary to pursue the pirates so fiercely. He held that this association was 'a strong ground against the investing of an individual, holding authority under a half-savage chieftain, with any such official character under the Crown of Great Britain, as that then held by Sir James Brooke'. In his opinion, Brooke had no powers to determine which tribes were piratical or to call for the aid of the Royal Navy. His position was none other than that of a vassal of the Sultan of Brunei, 'though his tenure was admittedly very lax and easy to discard'.¹⁴⁷ Fellow Commissioner Devereux was unsympathetic with what he called 'a race of indiscriminate murderers', while Prinsep was critical of the violence perpetrated by Brooke and wrote that he had exceeded an authority which was, in any case, ill-defined. The Commission therefore failed to reach a verdict on Brooke's actions or to help define the limits or legitimate exercise of British power in the region. Brooke, who had temporarily resigned his position as Governor of Sarawak during the eight years between the episode and the hearing, resumed his duties and remained in the post until his death in 1868.

A period of imperial transformation

This period of transformation in British understandings of India from 'epistemological space' of the late-Eighteenth Century to colonial territory, with

144 Runciman, Steven 1960, *The White Rajahs*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, pp.113–14.

145 Barley 2002, *White Rajah*, p.145.

146 Sir James Brooke, 6 October 1854, quoted by Jacob, Gertrude L. 1876, *The Rajah of Sarawak*, Volume 2, MacMillan and Co., London, pp.159–60.

147 Runciman 1960, *The White Rajahs*, p.116.

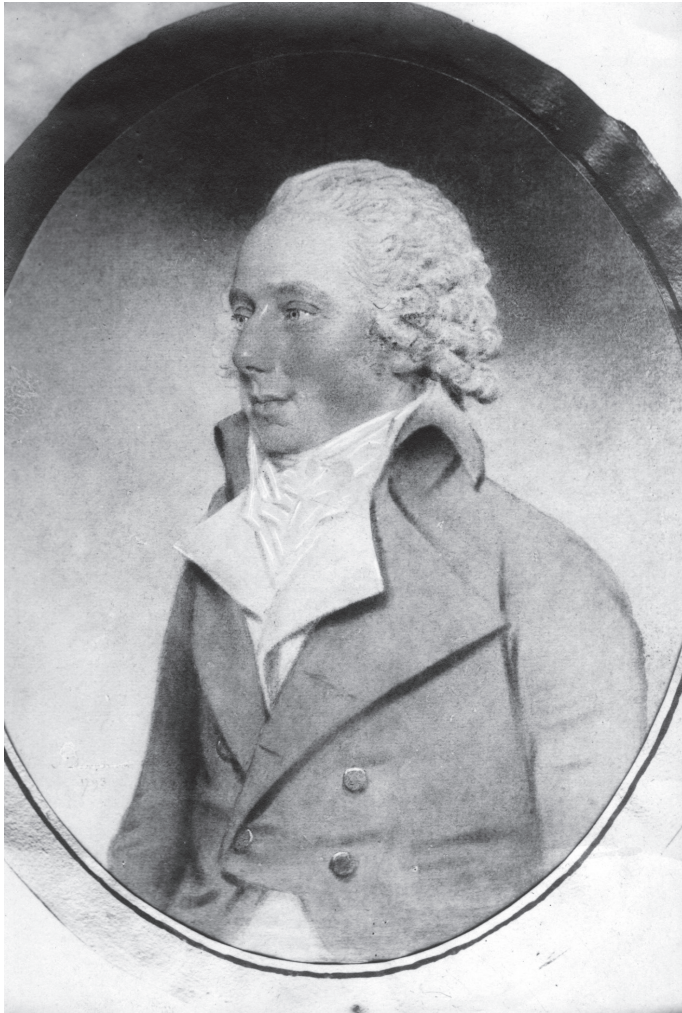
its accompanying demands for operational governmental systems, provides a useful context for examining the role of families such as the Prinseps. It provides an opportunity to envisage the Empire as a complex system of information and connection, to explore continuities and engage with the flow of ideas across colonies. Imperial ideas of India, such as orientalism, did not simply stay there, nor were they tried, discarded and forgotten as new generations brought different notions of Britain's colonising role. The Empire took on and consolidated the cumulative experience of places such as India, which in new colonial spaces were transformed and adapted according to their geographic and temporal contexts. The nabobs of John Prinsep's era might appear to have been superseded by the civil service reforms of Cornwallis and Wellesley, but the Empire remained a place where a Briton could make a fortune throughout the Nineteenth Century. Indeed, this was one of Henry Prinsep's prime motivations in his decision to move to Australia in the 1860s. John Prinsep's sympathy with romantic ideals of Indian society, together with his humanitarian advocacy for property rights of the Indian peasantry, found expression much later in the Australian colonial context, when colonisers such as Henry Prinsep sympathised with ideas that envisaged Aboriginal peoples being trained to become an indigenous peasantry, happy to labour on the land in the service of the colonial project. Similarly, echoes of the professionalism of East India Company civil servants such as Thoby and Augustus Prinsep, with their commitment to a rule of law, their belief that British prestige and power was best served by winning the hearts and minds of the populace, and their articulation of 'high-minded, disinterested, and earnest action for the public good', resonated throughout the world of the Empire, constituting to Henry Prinsep an ideal of colonial service which he aspired to emulate.¹⁴⁸

The demise of orientalist policies in the 1830s marked a disjuncture in the development, not only of Indian government, but of metropolitan thinking on the Empire. Social and political changes in Britain, notably the *Reform Act* of 1832 and the abolition of slavery in British colonies in 1833, together with the increased allure of a colonial career for young men during this troubled decade, were bringing new influences, new ways of visualising the 'others' of the Empire to the colonising venture. As colonial careers became increasingly professionalised, 'respectable English middle-class men' who went to the colonies crossed the philanthropic humanitarianism of the liberal movement with 'the sterner tone of the colonial official'. Thus, when assumptions of British superiority came under threat, 'the seeds of other ways of perceiving these 'natives' were already contained in the interstices of the philanthropic mind'.¹⁴⁹ The next chapter focuses on debates about the Empire in the metropole of the mid-Nineteenth Century and the changing conceptions of Britain's imperial role,

148 Prinsep, 'Three Generations', Volume 2, p.263.

149 Hall 2002, *Civilising Subjects*, p.42.

which were to have a significant impact on the subsequent colonising activities of a new generation, as young men such as Henry Prinsep began to contemplate their own colonial careers.



Henry's grandfather, John Prinsep (1746–1831), after his return from Calcutta in 1788.

Source: Copy of a painting by John Downman, courtesy of Ailsa Smith, Claremont, Western Australia.



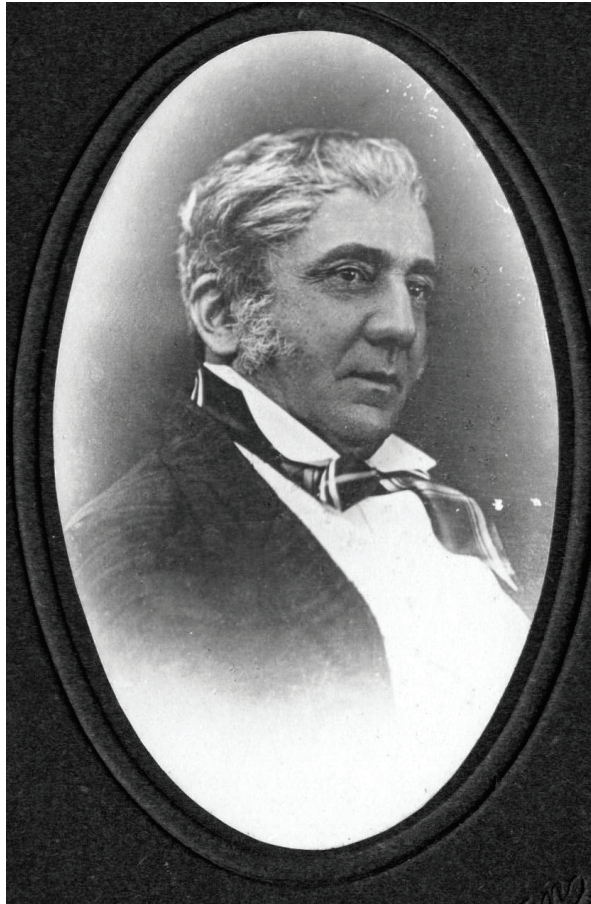
Sophia Prinsep (née Auriol) (1760–1850), copy of a lost portrait by John Downman.

Source: Courtesy of Ailsa Smith, Claremont, Western Australia.



Maintaining Britishness in an oriental setting. John Prinsep, hookah in hand, with his extended family group of Dashwoods and Auriols. Sophia Prinsep (née Auriol) is two places from his left.

Source: Detail from a copy of painting by Johan Zoffany, circa 1780, courtesy of Ailsa Smith, Claremont, Western Australia.



Henry's father, Charles Prinsep (1789–1864), at the height of his extremely lucrative legal career in Calcutta in the position of Advocate-General.

Source: Courtesy of Ailsa Smith, Claremont, Western Australia.



Henry Prinsep's mother, Louisa Prinsep (née White)(1818–1855), daughter of an East India Company officer. Louisa died while Henry was, at the age of 11, at school in England.

Source: Courtesy of Ailsa Smith, Claremont, Western Australia.



John Prinsep, drawn by his daughter, Emily Prinsep, in London in 1822, after the collapse of Prinsep and Saunders and his career as a politician, before taking up the salaried post of Sherriff of Southwark.

Source: Courtesy of anonymously held private collection.



Henry Prinsep's father, Charles Prinsep, as a young man preparing to enter the Bar in London, drawn by his sister, Emily Prinsep.

Source: Prinsep Papers, SLWA MN 773 Acc. 3150A.



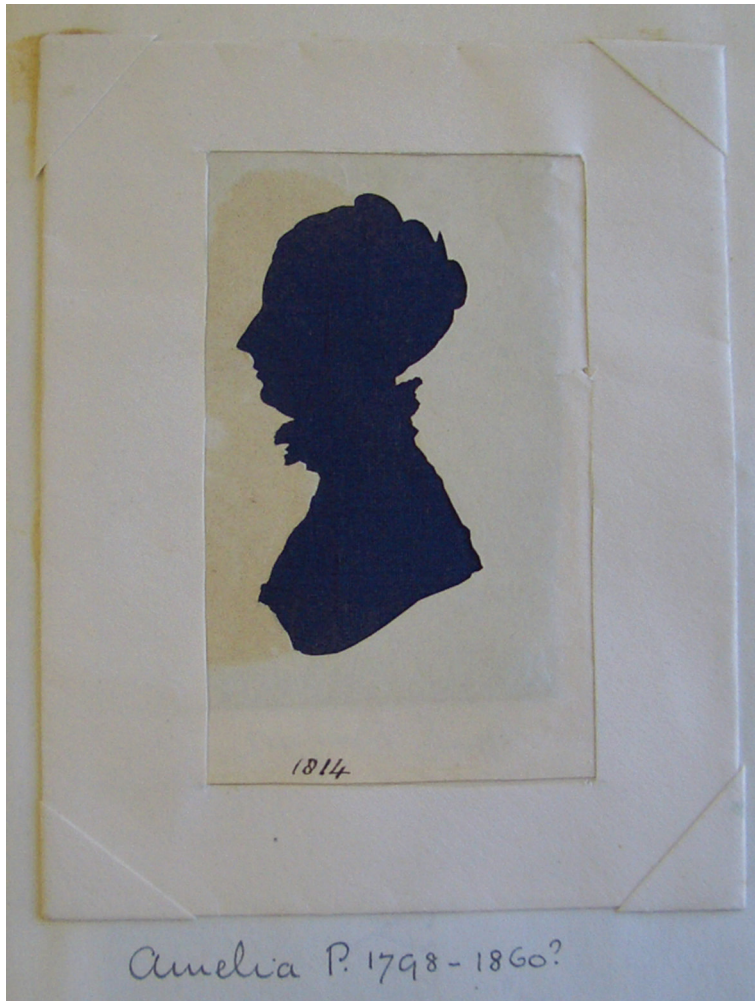
James Prinsep (1799–1840), orientalist scholar, drawn by his sister, Emily Prinsep.

Source: Prinsep Papers, SLWA MN 773 Acc. 1423/171-5.



Augustus Prinsep (1803–1830), drawn by his sister, Emily Prinsep.

Source: Prinsep Papers, SLWA MN 773 Acc. 1423/171-5.



The only known image of Amelia (Emily) Prinsep (1798–1860), who drew images of her father and brothers, and was an enthusiastic painter of English landscapes and scenes of domestic life.

Source: Prinsep Papers, SLWA MN 773 Acc. 3150A.



Henry Thoby Prinsep (1792–1878), East India Company civil servant, linguist and orientalist scholar, who after his return to England, served first as a Director of the East India Company and then as a member of the Council for India.

Source: Prinsep Papers, SLWA MN 773 Acc. 3150A.



William Prinsep (1794–1874) as an old man following his retirement from a 37-year career in Calcutta.

Source: Prinsep Papers, SLWA MN 773 Acc. 3150A.



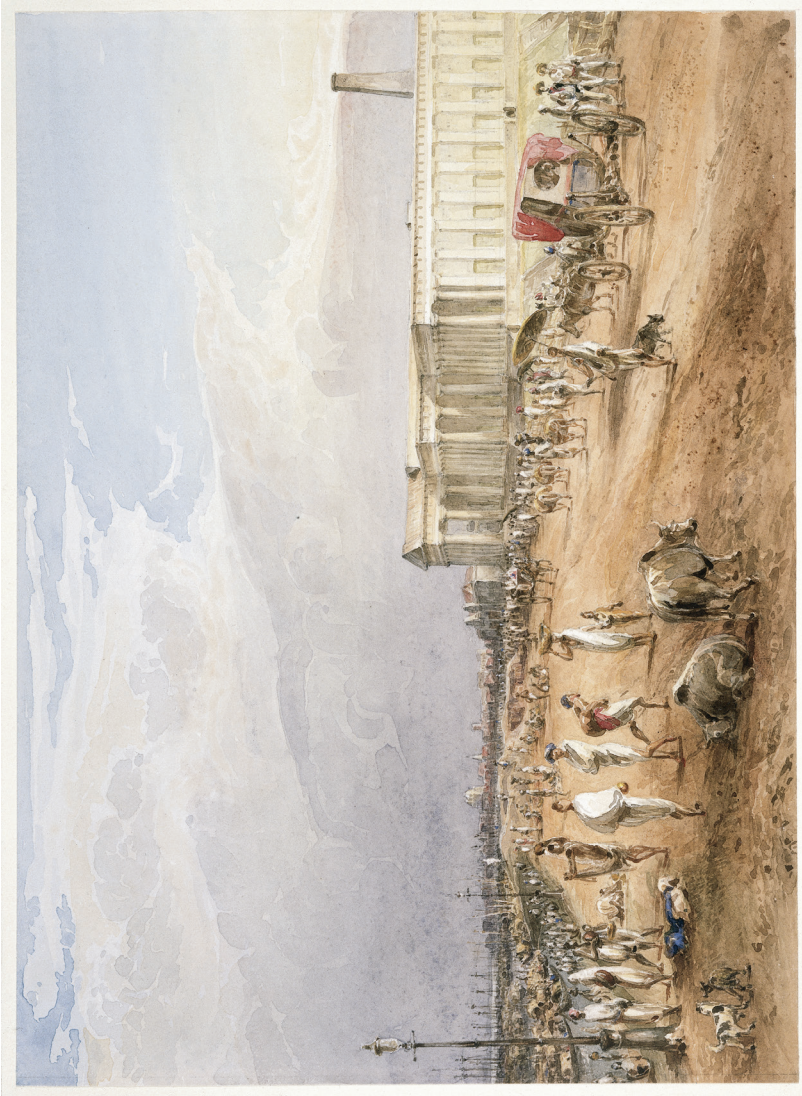
'Europeans being entertained by Indian musicians during Durga puja', by William Prinsep, an enthusiastic 'lover of the brush', who painted and drew prolifically over his long stay in India. The setting may be Belvedere, the home of Charles Prinsep, and could refer to the 'society dinner party' recorded by William in his journal in which he described the music as 'rather plaintive and sad—never brilliant and only fit for their mawkish love songs, but ravishing to Indian ears'.

Source: British Library Collections, W4035.



James Prinsep's oil painting of the mosque on Chowringee Road, Calcutta, 1830–1835.

Source: British Library Collections, G 70069-76.



Thomas Prinsep's watercolour of the new mint on the Strand, Calcutta, circa 1829.

Source: British Library Collections, C 13771-96.



Augustus and Elisabeth Prinsep (née Ommaney) relaxing at home at Shergati in the Mofussil in November 1828, shortly after Augustus became ill with tuberculosis. The drawing is by James Prinsep and was sent home to his mother, Sophia, as shown by the inscription on the rear of the card, 'For Mama, from J.P.'

Source: Courtesy of anonymously held private collection.



Numismatic diagrams by James Prinsep, from the pages of the Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal.

Source: Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal, Baptist Mission Press, Circular Road, Calcutta.



'Where is he? Where is he?' We can only wonder at the incident this scene by James Prinsep depicts. From a reading of Isabella Fane's account of her stay in Calcutta, it is almost certain that it is set on a 'budgerow', a native boat used for river transport before the age of steam tugs.

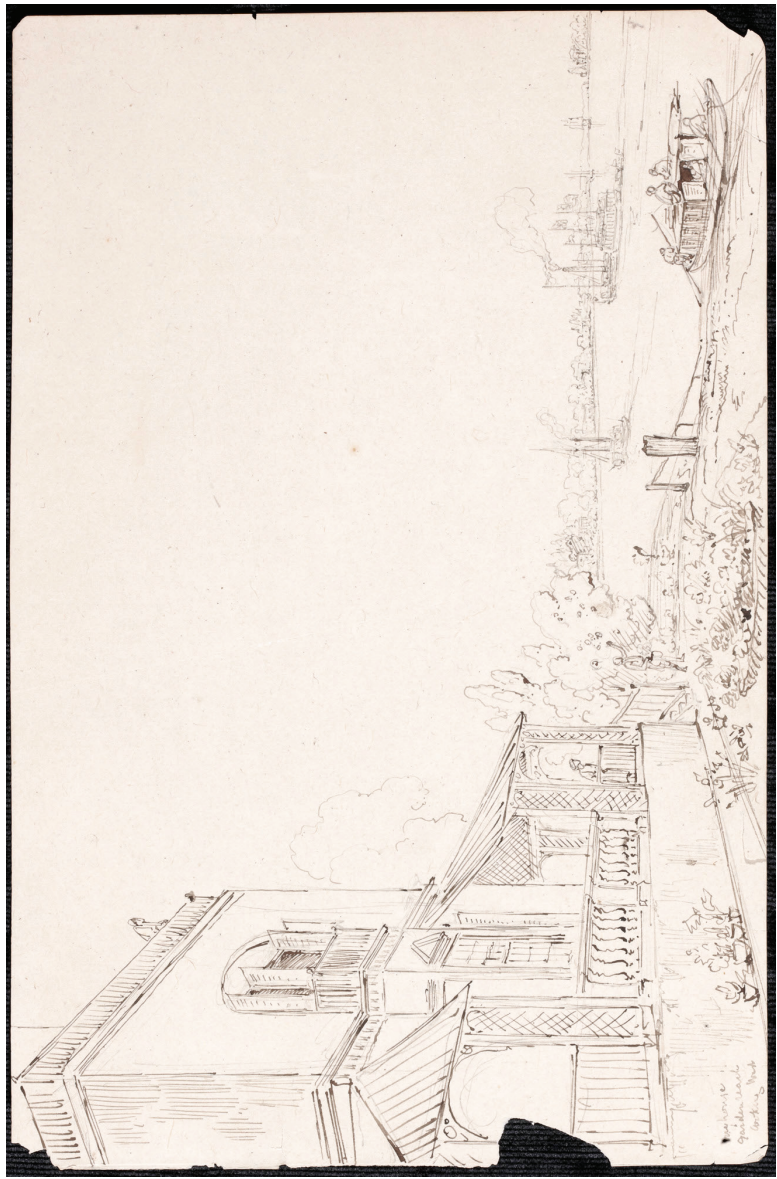
Source: Courtesy of anonymously held private collection.

43



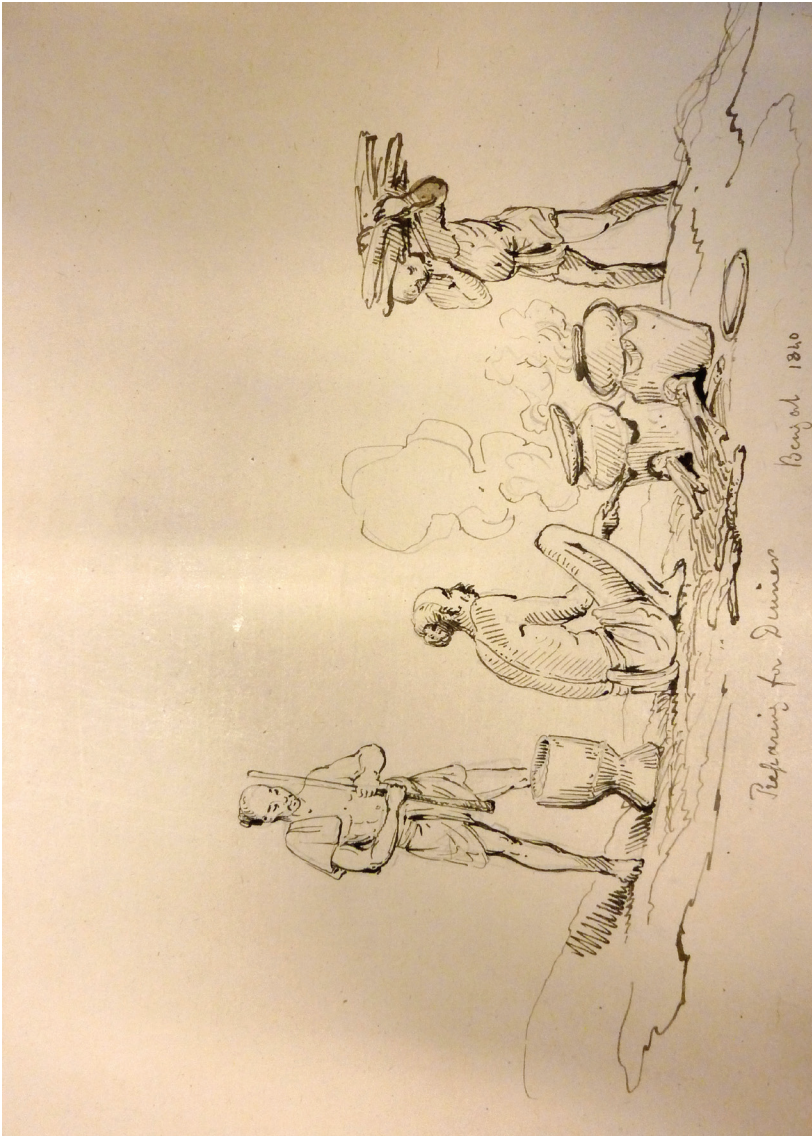
James Prinsep shortly before his retirement due to ill health as Secretary of the Bengal Asiatic Society in 1838, drawn by artist Coleworthy Grant.

Source: Grant, Coleworthy 1849, *Lithographic Sketches of the Public Characters of Calcutta, 1838–1850*, W. Thacker and Co., Calcutta.



'Our home Garden Reach, looking west', William Prinsep's drawing of a man, probably himself, leaving for work, waved off by his wife Mary.

Source: Caroline Simpson Library, Historic Houses Trust of NSW, Sydney.



'Preparing for Dinner, Bengal 1840', pen drawing by William Prinsep.

Source: Caroline Simpson Library, Historic Houses Trust of NSW, Sydney.



Tomb of Raja Rammohan Roy at Arnos Vale Cemetery near Bristol, designed and paid for by William Prinsep.

Source: Author's private collection.

This text taken from *Henry Prinsep's Empire: Framing a distant colony*, by
Malcolm Allbrook, published 2014 by ANU Press,
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