

“That solitary Englishman”: W.H. Sleeman and the biography of British India

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W.H. Sleeman was an “eminent Victorian” whose name was widely recognized throughout the nineteenth century. He was celebrated by association with the sensational cult of thuggee¹ (religiously-motivated murder accompanied by robbery) in India, which he was credited with discovering and with eradicating during a campaign spanning the 1830s and 1840s. The campaign against the thugs quickly acquired a significance wider than its immediate effects: it figures alongside the abolition of *sati* as one of the reforms characterising Lord William Bentinck’s governor-generalship (1828-35), part of the establishment of order and justice in colonial India.² The techniques used by the Thuggee and Dacoity Department - notably their reliance on the testimony of “approvers”, or informers, to secure convictions in the absence of other evidence – were adopted by the regular police.³ Its activities, publicised by writers such as Sleeman and Philip Meadows Taylor, made the word “thug” part of the language (though it now signifies any violent criminal rather than the religiously-inspired robber and strangler of British Indian demonology). The element of narrative and textuality involved in the production of and reliance upon the statements of informers has also been the focus of critical attention: Parama Roy uses an analysis of the writings on thuggee as the occasion for a discussion of the broader issues of representation, mimicry and the formation of identity in the colonial encounter. In this way, the texts produced during and about the campaign against thuggee have consistently been incorporated into a series of larger (and often competing) narratives of British India.

One of these larger narratives, more prevalent up to the mid-twentieth century than it is today, tends to describe the British role in India in terms of the benevolent, powerful rule of individual men, a style characterised by the “Punjab School” of government as practised

¹ Transliteration and spelling here present the usual difficulties; I have chosen to use “thug” and “thuggee” rather than *thag* and *thagi*, as in the texts that form the main topic of my study; “old” versions of placenames such as Saugor (rather than Sagar) are also retained.

² More recently, scholarship in India and elsewhere has identified the campaign against thuggee as part of the East India Company’s drive to assert and maintain its moral and bureaucratic authority across India. See works by Freitag, Gordon, Gupta, Singha, van Woerkens.

³ The Thuggee Department was instituted in 1835, and became the Thuggee and Dacoity Department in 1839. It remained in place (though with its functions limited to the gathering of intelligence on criminal activities) until 1904, when it was replaced by a Criminal Investigation Department (Freitag, “Collective Crime” 150-52).

by the Lawrence brothers (Metcalf 24-5, 38). The story of the thugs and their defeat is cast in this mould by a series of twentieth-century biographies of W.H. Sleeman: the main focus of this paper. The first is a biography of Sleeman by his grandson, J.L. Sleeman: *Thug: or, A Million Murders* (1933); there follows A.J. Wightman, *No Friend for Travellers* (1959), Francis Toker, *The Yellow Scarf* (1961), and George Bruce, *The Stranglers* (1968). These biographies are, to varying degrees, popular rather than scholarly works, but several features make their study an essential part of any work dealing with the history of thuggee. Their writers frequently reproduce or paraphrase unpublished and inaccessible manuscript records, making them important sources for later scholarship. At the same time, the biographers' organisation and presentation of material imposes a consistent pattern on the original content, most notably by constructing the edifice of thuggee around the central figure of Sleeman himself. As Parama Roy points out, the history of thuggee, in these biographies, is presented as "coextensive" with Sleeman's life; and he becomes "an almost Saidean figure of knowledge," establishing, recording and de-coding the texts of thuggee (56). This paper examines the creation of this omniscient figure, focusing on the process of selection and amendment of historical detail engaged in by all Sleeman's biographers. Three elements of this process become apparent: Sleeman is credited with the authorship of texts created by others; he is cast as the judge in trials held by others; the records of the Thuggee Department's dealings with certain prisoners are misrepresented to conform to a notion of Sleeman as a "detective" figure. The biographical narrative within which his portrait is constructed can thus be elucidated, and the appeal of this narrative to his biographers explained, tentatively, by reference to the role of the "thuggee" phenomenon in the myth of imperial power in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

This biographical narrative originates with J.L. Sleeman, who locates his grandfather within a *literary* genre which evolved almost in tandem with Sleeman's own life. This is the genre that became known as the detective story, although the term "detective" did not become current until the mid-nineteenth century (Ousby 29). The detective, in this genre, is the figure who serves both a judicial and an investigatory function: "reading" clues, synthesizing information, but ultimately using this intellectual inquiry to restore order within the society which has been disrupted by the actions of the criminal. Ian Ousby aptly describes his role as equivalent to that of the Duke in Shakespearean comedy (21). The nineteenth-century accounts of thuggee often stressed this aspect of the British work against it in phraseology like John Kaye's: "We obtained a clue and we followed it up, until the hideous mystery was brought out into the clear light of day" (1). J.L. Sleeman's biography directs the

reader's mind towards the parallel from the beginning, as the Foreword, by the "Late Commissioner of the Police of the Metropolis," recommends the book to those "who, judging by the display of Detective Novels on Railway Bookstalls, are thrilled by works upon crime" (v-vi).

The essential element of the detective story is the defeat of crime, as the detective successfully works towards a solution of the problem constituted by the crime, and the criminal. The narratives of Sleeman's biography cast him as an omniscient and omnipotent detective figure, and achieve this by attributing to him, and to him alone, all three of the detective's powers described above. He becomes, in these works, the "solitary Englishman" alone responsible for "exposing" thuggee and for its "suppression" (J.L. Sleeman 2). The texts which represent knowledge (and therefore power) over crime - maps and records of interrogation - are ascribed to him; the role of judge is transferred to him; and the account of his career is recast so that his "discovery" of thuggee acquires the inexorable certainty of the fictional detective's pursuit of the criminal. Each of these processes involves, in the biographies, a rewriting of history.

While Sleeman appears in the primary texts on thuggee as a figure of knowledge and power, he is only one among several such figures. The biographies establish his pre-eminence by a series of amendments to the records whereby the agency and authority shared among different officials is transferred to him alone. A particularly striking example of this concerns a map, one of the instruments of the thug campaign. C.A. Bayly argues that "thuggee" first arose from an "information panic" due to the colonial administration's awareness of its own lack of knowledge of India (174-6). Many of the activities of the Thuggee and Dacoity Department, as well as Sleeman's indefatigable publishing, were directed towards the discovery and dissemination of information to fill this vacuum. Sleeman's first act as Superintendent was to solicit permission to order maps of various sectors of India, with the intention of marking on them, using his approvers' information, the location of thug burial places, their principal routes, and their home territories. Together with his lists and charted "family trees" of thug genealogies, the maps record – or create, depending on your point of view – the massive network of criminal activity in India which the thug campaign was meant to eradicate. The marked maps served as instruments by which the Department could demonstrate their grasp of information on their enemies as well as their ability to correlate and cross-check different approvers' stories, thus providing an element of corroboration to justify the wholesale conviction of prisoners on the testimony of informers.

The map that figures most prominently in the biographies is not of Sleeman's making. It was compiled by James Paton, who ran the operation against thugs in the Kingdom of Oudh, and is included in his manuscript papers. This work was never published in full (though Paton's revisions suggest that he intended it to be), but sections, including a reproduction of the map, appear in Sleeman's compilation volume of *Depredations Committed by the Thug Gangs*, part of the chapter of narratives of Oudh gangs contributed by Paton. It is laboriously titled "A Map of that portion of the Kingdom of Oude most infested by Gangs of Thug's [*sic*] or professional Assassins who range the High Roads and under the guise of Friendship win the confidence of unsuspecting Travellers and after accompanying them for a Stage or two on reaching the first selected & retired spot or Bail, Murder them by Strangulation, and plunder their property," and bears also his name and station: "James Paton, 1st Asst. Resident, Lucknow Residency 1838." Two of the three sets of inscriptions under the map give details of "the number of Murders perpetrated" by the thugs consulted in its construction (xvi-xvii).

The same map appears in J.L. Sleeman's *Thug, or a Million Murders*, in much reduced form (the inscriptions are no longer legible); the original heading and Paton's name are omitted, and the map is now called "A Thuggee Map of the Kingdom of Oudh." The caption states that the map "was prepared by Sir William Sleeman in 1838," and concludes with a list of thugs and their murders, taken from Paton's inscriptions (88). The map appears again in Toker's *Yellow Scarf*, with the original inscriptions removed or illegible as before. The caption in this case calls it "A typical map of Thug depredations prepared by 'Thuggee' Sleeman and his staff"; the cautious addition of 'and his staff' may represent an attempt to reconcile J.L. Sleeman's work with the clear evidence of the map itself (Toker 49). In one sense, the re-authorizing of the map is insignificant: it is certainly "a thuggee map," and the role played by it, and its like, in the campaign against thugs is not affected by its authorship. But the deletion of Paton's name, and his part in the history of the thug campaign, marks one of the most important changes apparent in the series of narrative re-interpretations: the ascription of a central and solitary role to Sleeman. As the emblematic representative of the campaign against crime, he is given authorship of the visible token of authority and control: the map.

Others of Paton's documents are similarly treated in the biographies. J.L. Sleeman, for example, quotes a prisoner named "Bhoosee" telling the story of his becoming an approver and "being sent out by you (Sleeman)" to search for his old associates (129). This man (whose name was in fact Dhoosoo) made his deposition to Paton, not Sleeman, so that J.L. Sleeman's interpolated naming of his grandfather as the official in question is again an act of appropriation

which elides Paton from the history.⁴ (In contrast, J.L. Sleeman's misspelling of prisoners' names, and misattribution of their statements, is due to carelessness rather than deliberate action; but it represents a tendency to view Sleeman as the true "author" of prisoners' depositions, whose presentation of their words creates their meaning.⁵) Either independently, or following J.L. Sleeman, both Tucker and Bruce re-appropriate Paton's work in the same way – sometimes unexpectedly so, as when Bruce, in *The Stranglers*, reproduces extracts from Paton's papers, and some of his illustrations, but still describes a deposition recorded by him as "given to Sleeman" (177-83, 97). Alongside these acts of re-naming are many acts of omission: the reader of these biographies is given little indication that the recording and use of approver narratives (i.e. the transcribed depositions of informers) was carried out by anyone other than Sleeman.⁶

This representation of the entire judicial and political system by the confrontation of a prisoner who confesses and an official who hears his confession is all-pervasive in the texts of the campaign against thugs, both in the official depositions (as discussed above) and in such fictional representations as Philip Meadows Taylor's *Confessions of a Thug*. The effect is to produce the representative of authority as a detached and impersonal observer – the judge who weighs the evidence of victims, relatives and prisoners alike. It is the same effect created by the figure of the listening official in *Confessions*, though there is a case to be made for seeing this detachment compromised by the official's (and the reader's) interest in the list of crimes being told over (Majeed 98-100). Sleeman was clearly aware of this possible reading of his interest in thugs, and often tries to pre-empt it in his work, stressing the utility and the moral value of the collection of details of thug lives and the recording of the thoughts of criminals "to illustrate the habits and feelings of these common enemies of mankind."⁷ The figure of the judge – the observer who has a legitimate motive for dealing with crime, and

⁴ See Paton 169-70; Sleeman, *Depredations* 154.

⁵ For example, Buhram's grandstanding statement on the occasion of his capture ("*I am a Thug! my father and grandfather were Thugs, and I have thugged with many, let the Government employ me and I will do its work*"), is attributed to "Buhras" by J.L. Sleeman (130), and to "Bukhtawar" by Roy (60).

⁶ As well as Paton, many others are overlooked in these biographies, most notably Captain Borthwick, who led operations against thugs within the jurisdiction of the Resident at Indore during the same period as Sleeman's operations began in Saugor; Captain P.A. Reynolds, who headed the Thuggee Department in 1836-37; and F.C. Smith, Sleeman's immediate superior in the Saugor and Nerbudda territories.

⁷ Bengal Political Consultations (hereafter cited in parentheses as BPC) 18 March 1831, no. 11, BL.

who has the ultimate power of punishment – allowed him to reconcile inquisitiveness with moral rectitude.⁸

This is the background to J.L. Sleeman’s literal “reconstruction” of the confrontation between Sleeman and Buhram, the scene which forms the opening to his biography. As before, he turns to James Paton’s texts for his information; and, as before, he suppresses any hint of Paton’s presence or his part in the campaign. On Paton’s map, Buhram is given first place on the ranked list of notable thugs, and ascribed the figure of “931 Murders in 40 years of actual Thuggee,” an average of “about two murders monthly.” There is no more information given there, so that J.L. Sleeman had to engage in a certain amount of invention to furnish the opening paragraph of his book:

“Nine hundred and thirty-one murders!” repeated the judge in incredulous tones.

“Surely you can never have been guilty of such a number?”

“Sahib,” replied the benevolent-looking native standing before him, in a quiet voice tinged with pride, “there were many more, but I was so intrigued in luring them to destruction that I ceased counting when certain of my thousand victims!” [...]

The judge was Sleeman, the celebrated Thug-hunter, and the native on trial before him was the infamous Buhram, whose forty years of killing had left a record of nearly two victims a month throughout the period (1).

Though J.L. Sleeman explicitly claims this as “fact,” the scene is entirely fictitious. Buhram’s name heads the list of those tried before Colonel Low, Resident at Lucknow, in 1837, when he was sentenced by Low to imprisonment in irons for life.⁹ Sleeman, at this point, had never been a judge at a thug trial,¹⁰ and had nothing to do with the interrogation or trial of Buhram. The replacement of Low (and, by extension, the other judges who conducted thug trials) by Sleeman leaves him as the one figure of judicial authority in J.L. Sleeman’s work, just as the suppression of Paton’s name has the effect of giving Sleeman sole textual authority. The scene itself, a product of J.L. Sleeman’s imagination, acquires something of a life of its own in the later biographies: George Bruce includes a shortened version of it in his chapter of extracts from *Ramaseeana*, presenting it, uncredited, as if it were a quotation from Sleeman’s own records (Bruce 166-67; cf. J.L. Sleeman 1, 3-4.)

⁸ This striving for judicial effect is clear in Sleeman’s account of a later episode in his life, when he portrays himself listening to the story of a man who has lost his son to poisoners “with all the coldness of a magistrate who wanted...nothing whatever to do with feelings” (Sleeman, *Rambles* 82).

⁹ India Political Consultations (hereafter in parentheses as IPC), 12 September 1838, no. 81, BL.

¹⁰ See the abstract of Thug trials included in Sleeman, *Depredations* at 185.

Elsewhere, J.L. Sleeman quotes the account which probably served as the impetus for this flight of fancy: the description by H.H. Spry, a doctor stationed in Saugor, of Sleeman holding a trial and pronouncing sentence of death on a group of thugs. This is followed by Spry's eyewitness account of the execution of these criminals. Spry's descriptions are vivid and compelling; it is not surprising, therefore, that they are frequently quoted or used as the basis for later accounts. The description of Sleeman pronouncing sentence places him, as usual, at literal and metaphorical centre-stage:

Sentence of death was pronounced in a very impressive manner, by Captain Sleeman, on different parties of Thugs, executed during my residence in Saugor. The criminals, drawn up in a semicircle round the bench on which the judge was seated, were surrounded by a strong guard of musketeers and dismounted cavalry. The warrants were placed before them [...] . Captain Sleeman addressed them in the Hindústanee language [...]: "You have all been convicted in the crime of blood; the order from the Calcutta Council therefore is, that, at to-morrow's dawn, you are all to be hung" (*Modern India* 2: 164).¹¹

This glosses over several of the judicial procedures of thug trials. At Saugor, those were held before F.C. Smith, Agent to the Governor-General, who sometimes lamented "the awful duty I have performed of sentencing so many human beings to suffer the extreme penalty of the law."¹² (Sleeman, as Principal Assistant to the AGG, could not act as judge in these cases, and never did so until he became AGG at Jubbulpore, in 1843 [Sleeman, *Budhuk Decoits* 366].) The sentences determined by Smith had to be referred back to Government for scrutiny and revision before warrants could be issued for their execution (IPC 23 Mar 1835, no. 56). These warrants, once received at Saugor, were explained to the prisoners by Sleeman, Smith having by that time moved on to other stations in his capacity as sessions judge.

While Spry's account has Sleeman rather ambiguously occupying the judge's seat, and reading the judge's sentence, this ambiguity is decisively resolved in the biographies. J.L. Sleeman amends, without comment, his reproduction of Spry's account, so that the quotation describes the criminals "in a semicircle round the bench *on which he* [ie, Sleeman], *as Judge, was seated*." Tucker follows J.L. Sleeman exactly, using the same wording, and Wightman

¹¹ Spry was Sleeman's cousin (possibly suggesting that his underlining of Sleeman's role could be ascribed to a kind of family pride), and made his own contribution to the publicising of thuggee in a contribution on thug skulls to the *Phrenological Journal*.

¹² See Sleeman, *Depredations* insert at 185; BPC 4 August 1830, no 11; BPC 25 Feb 1831, no 29; F.C. Smith to the chief secretary to government, Fort William, 20 June 1832, in Philips 2:845.

also presents Sleeman unequivocally as the judge in the case.¹³ In all these biographies, the creation of Sleeman as a judge – not merely the judicial figure of his self-presentations – is built on one instance of confusion or ambiguity: Spry’s account of the incident in Saugor. Their significance lies in the obvious wish to accept this portrayal – a wish strong enough to override the absence of other evidence, and the straightforward contradiction of Sleeman’s own records. Down the series of narrative transmissions, the figure of Sleeman as judge grows more real and believable, bolstered by J.L. Sleeman’s use of Paton’s map to add realistic circumstantial details, and by his casual claim of “fact” for his scenario. In the process, the original ambiguity is silently transformed into a definite statement of equally unreliable “fact,” and the different officials, with their separate authorities, are replaced by the figure of Sleeman, the representative of them all.

The purely investigative functions of a detective are also ascribed to Sleeman, most notably by Bruce and Toker, both of whom present Sleeman following “clues leading to thugs” and shreds of information that eventually lead him to his triumph over thuggee (Bruce 33). One of the features of Toker’s biography is his insistence on the idea of Sleeman as literary detective, gradually amassing knowledge from academic inquiry which is then confirmed by practical field-work and leads to the final triumph of the narratives, maps and genealogies which allow him to take control over and eradicate the thug associations. Sleeman, according to Toker, read Thévenot’s *Travels* early in his career, and found there what might be construed as an account of thug criminals (Thévenot 3: 41). Next followed his discovery around 1819 of a report on thuggee by Richard Sherwood “among some old books in the Collector’s Office” in Allahabad; this report contained much thug lore, including some words of their jargon.¹⁴ Later, Sleeman is presented among a gang he suspects of being thugs, confirming his suspicions when he recognizes words from this report. The arc of the detective story is complete, in Toker’s account, when Sleeman in 1836 prints Sherwood’s report – including the vital quotation from Thévenot – along with his own depositions taken from thug prisoners, in *Ramaseeana*, “a book he had printed for all his officers to read and to learn” (Toker 14, 18, 29, 41, 44). The sequence of events follows the classic detective pattern: the

¹³ J.L. Sleeman 186; Toker, 86 (my italics). Wightman 127 has slight variations in wording, and does not credit Spry, but is clearly his work, once again amended to make Sleeman the judge.

¹⁴ Sherwood’s article appeared first in the *Madras Literary Gazette*, in 1816, and was reprinted in *Asiatick Researches* in 1820. Bruce also presents the reading of this article as a key point in Sleeman’s career, and implies a date of 1816 or 1817 for his encounter with it (27-28).

acquisition of each piece of knowledge forms another link in the deductive chain which eventually leads to the detective's revelation of his knowledge to others in the denouement.

Tuker's account thus makes literary sense, but its historical accuracy is doubtful. There is no indication in Sleeman's writings that he had encountered Sherwood's work until December 1830, when George Swinton, Chief Secretary to Government in Bengal, ordered 30 copies circulated to various authorities for their information; this was done at the suggestion of H.S. Graeme, Resident at Nagpoor, who apparently remembered reading the article when it first appeared (BPC 21 Jan 1831, nos 29-35). There are, on the contrary, some clear indications that this was Sleeman's first encounter with the report. The order for publication specifies that the article to be circulated should be incomplete: "omitting pages 278 and 279 from A to B"; these paragraphs, relating the practice of killing with a noose to accounts given in texts such as the *Ramayana*, are omitted also in the version printed by Sleeman in *Ramaseeana* (2: 327-62). Furthermore, there is no mention of Thévenot's encounter with thugs in Sleeman's writings until this point – not even in the long letter on thugs and their customs he published in the *Calcutta Literary Gazette* in October 1830 (BPC 8 Oct 1830, no. 27) – which suggests that the Thévenot account, also, was a late addition to Sleeman's knowledge, gained from the Sherwood article, rather than the vital trigger proposed by Tuker. The detective pattern imposed on this sequence of events implies purposeful action and causality, concealing the less impressive reality in which Sleeman is the beneficiary of another man's sharp memory.

The implied use of the detective genre also allows J.L. Sleeman (and Tuker and Bruce) to revisit the scene of the metaphorical confrontation of authority and crime, Sleeman and a representative thug prisoner. This is done in the guise of the detective story's central conflict (and sometimes its most important relationship), between the master detective and the master criminal. In two of his reports, Sleeman mentions a prisoner named Feringeea (the spelling varies), whose capture provided him with a publicity coup in 1830, when his evidence was used by Sleeman and F.C. Smith to argue for an increase in the resources allocated to their campaign (BPC 18 Mar 1831, nos. 11-19; 25 Feb 1831, no. 27). In the biographies, this episode is magnified in importance, and presented as the highlight of Sleeman's career. Feringeea becomes the "one most sinister actor who stalks across the stage," the "keystone which, once removed, caused the arch of Thuggee to totter until, stone by stone, it fell and the hideous faith it spanned ceased to exist" (J.L. Sleeman 143). Tuker describes him as "Prince of Thugs," the "centre of the whole wickedness"; and the high point of their interaction

in his narrative is the (imagined) confrontation between them where Sleeman talks at Feringeea for half an hour “using his own Ramasi slang,” while Feringeea listens in submissive silence.¹⁵

George Bruce, like Tucker, Wightman and J.L. Sleeman, spotlights the taking of Feringeea; but he, as well as stressing its importance to Sleeman, makes his capture the high point of a sequential narrative of detective work. Like Tucker’s narrative of the accumulation of knowledge, Sleeman’s search for Feringeea is built up in a series of logical steps. The first of these is the capture of a thug named Sheikh Inaent early in 1830; this is followed by Inaent, now turned approver, taking Rumzan, along with 13 others. Rumzan in his turn captures Buhram, and Rumzan and Buhram give information to Sleeman: their depositions show the existence of Feringeea and his status as a key figure among thugs. Sleeman circulates a note to his officers with this information, and Feringeea is duly taken (Bruce 92-9). Sleeman, in this story, acts again with the logic and perseverance characteristic of the detective, and his success is presented as inevitable, the chain of prisoners and the information they supply leading inexorably to Feringeea’s downfall.

As with Tucker’s narrative, Bruce’s account fits none of the available evidence. Sheikh Inaent was indeed captured early in 1830, and did give evidence against thug prisoners at Saugor. While he was doing so, however, Rumzan and Buhram were still at large, carrying out expeditions in Oudh up to 1832 (Paton 145-8). Inaent had nothing to do with the capture of Rumzan, who was taken straight to Lucknow, and sent out as an approver by Paton; this is corroborated by Paton’s letter reporting the taking of 11 thug Jemadars, Rumzan among them, in 1835 (Board’s Coll. F/4/1568 64220, 321). Rumzan mentions no contact with Sleeman; in any case, no information he could have given to him or to anyone else at this point could have contributed to the taking of Feringeea, in custody since December 1830. In the thug narratives, however, the master criminal demands a master-narrative to trap him, and Rumzan and Buhram, already figuring in Paton’s texts as colourful, bragging criminals, are employed as secondary figures to gild Feringeea’s (and Sleeman’s) light.

This episode of Feringeea’s capture is, in many ways, a supremely representative example of the intersecting narratives of history, biography and the detective story that make up all four of the works in question. Even the gratuitous interpolation of Rumzan and Buhram into the story is a response to a narrative charge, the earlier accounts of Sleeman’s confrontations with emblematic prisoners now made secondary components of the taking of

¹⁵ Tucker 84, 72, 83. The phrase “Prince of Thugs” is taken up by Bruce, who uses it as the title of his chapter on Feringeea (100).

the greatest criminal of all. This last incident, as well, exemplifies the trend outlined throughout this essay: the history of thuggee is modified to fit the episodes described into the over-arching narrative of Sleeman's detective career.

These modifications to the records on thuggee are small in themselves. If Sleeman did not create Paton's map, he created others; he recorded the depositions of prisoners, if not all those ascribed to him; he did not sit in judgement upon Buhram, but he was later a judge; Feringeea was captured by his orders, even if not with the Holmesian intelligence described by his biographers. The transmission of unreliable material down a series of biographies is not unprecedented. Where primary sources are rare or unpublished (as those on thuggee are), the incidence of error in secondary sources is a snare for later scholarship; this, however, is to some degree unavoidable, and a matter of concern for the field of history in general rather than biography in particular. The significance of this series of "errors" lies in its unvarying persistence, as the same "verbal fiction" (to borrow Hayden White's term) of the narrative of the restoration of order by a single heroic figure underlies all the misrepresentations of fact detailed above. The appeal of this narrative is clearly related to a nostalgia for Britain's imperial past, manifested throughout these biographies in a thread of lament for the days when colonial administrators engaged in good work, often unrewarded, without being hampered by too much bureaucracy or the mistaken concerns of liberals or the unreasonable demands of Indian nationalists.¹⁶ (Both J.L. Sleeman and Francis Tukur had military careers, and include their rank on the title page of their books; perhaps a more-or-less deliberate identification with the establishment represented by Sleeman himself.) The defeat of thuggee figures large in this version of empire.

Even as the later of these biographies were being written, a different kind of scholarship was presenting a different picture, offering materialist and social analyses of the phenomenon of thuggee and the British response to it. In this view, the British presence may be cited as a factor in the birth of "thuggee," rather than the cause of its demise, attributed to the economic and social instability produced by the British defeat of the Marathas in the early nineteenth century (Gordon 429; Gupta 169-73). The spectacular rout of thuggee might itself be an illusion, as Freitag points out: "thugs [were] after 1840 relabeled as dacoits – just as dacoits after 1870 were frequently recast as criminal tribes" ("Collective Crime" 186). The biographical narratives succeed in avoiding these aspects of the history of thuggee, by casting it as a detective story. The oppositional and symbiotic relationship between thousands of

¹⁶ See J.L. Sleeman 108; Wightman 106; Tukur 129.

“thug” criminals and many British civil and military officials is recast as the symbolic confrontation of a representative criminal and a detective who contains by synecdoche in his own person all the powers and all the achievements of the British presence in India. In this way, his personal victory implies the triumph of British control, and his departure from the Thuggee and Dacoity Department is a tacit guarantee that order has been re-established. As the Commissioner of the Jubbulpore province assures J.L. Sleeman, in the letter which closes his narrative, Sleeman’s work was “so thorough that there is practically nothing left in the way of memories of the Thugs” (231).

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