CHAPTER 2

The Sepoy Rebellion and American Global Ambition

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Abstract

In the summer and fall of 1857, American magazines and newspapers began printing details of a widespread rebellion among native Indian soldiers (called sepoys) against British rule. News of the uprising and of British reprisals shocked American readers not just in terms of their staggering violence, but also insofar as supposed inferiors had managed to carry out an elaborate and at least temporarily successful conspiracy against a European power. In their responses, American commentators confronted two downsides of imperial ambition: first, that the colonized could not be so easily dominated as some had assumed; and second, that efforts at reasserting such elusive control could cost an imperial power in moral or reputational terms. US writings on India in 1857–1858, then, represent a crucial if understudied moment of dissent in the nation's own shift toward imperialism, as British blunders and atrocities dimmed Americans' own luminous fantasies of global wealth and power.

Keywords: Sepoy Mutiny, Indian Rebellion of 1857, US imperialism, Christian missionaries, Jessie Brown, Dion Boucicault

Walt Whitman's 1871 poem "Passage to India" celebrates three of the era's signal engineering feats—the laying of the transatlantic telegraph cable ("eloquent gentle wires" in Whitman's rendering) in 1858; the completion of North America's transcontinental railroad in 1869; and the opening of the Suez Canal later in the same year. These infrastructural advances—"our modern wonders," the poet calls them—accelerated the pace of travel and communication, but for Whitman they also subtended an expansive American presence abroad, a rebirth, in his framing, of the Age of Exploration, with North Americans this time figuring as agents rather than objects of inquiry. In a poem that seems willfully to ignore the national catastrophe (the American Civil War, that is) that formed the subject of the poet's collection Drum-Taps, published just six years earlier, Whitman here heralds the United States' international emergence with an exuberance that mirrors his expressed faith in human beings' capacity to control and reshape the earth itself.
As the poem’s title suggests, of the three wonders, the Suez Canal most pressingly commands Whitman’s attention. In his rendering, this newly dug passage to India completes Christopher Columbus’s earlier gambit, which sought readier access to South Asian spices and other commercial ventures in the East but instead eventuated in European empires and genocidal campaigns in the so-called New World. It is not surprising, then, that the poem repeatedly invokes Columbus: the transcontinental railroad, for example, “verifies” the explorer’s dream, while Columbus is later described as “History’s type of courage, action, faith,” one who dominates the pageant of exploration as its “chief histrion.” Further, in an assertion of both circularity and unity, the work of captains and engineers makes way for the work of poets in what Whitman calls a “marriage of continents, climates and oceans!” These paired historical moments—the fifteenth century’s supposed discovery of the Americas and the nineteenth century’s just-completed short-cut to Asia—rely on homologous fantasies: that the distant can be made proximal; that space and time are malleable; and that bold moves on a world stage are inevitably worth their cost, in both human and economic terms. For Whitman and his like-minded contemporaries, such imperial fantasies rely on the deployment of imagined superiorities disguised as or realized by means of engineering feats. But engineering itself is not, for Whitman, the crucial element. Instead, he aligns notions of expansion and dominion with the development or release of the soul—which, in the poem’s last lines, “farther, farther, farther sail[s]” into eastern seas, as Whitman adopts and extends a longstanding western tradition of looking eastward for enlightenment and spiritual repose, even as one simultaneously seeks profit or adventure.

India, meanwhile, serves for Whitman and for many of his American readers as a metaphor for extremity itself (in terms of heat, luxury, poverty, brutality, and so on) and as the site of the western subject’s striving, even as it evokes the past and the exotic—India’s shores, Whitman writes, are “aged fierce enigmas,” mired in a centuries-old resistance to temporal change.

If Whitman’s poem stands as a monument to imperial optimism, a lesser-known American conversation on India, which took place nearly fifteen years earlier, evinced considerably more ambivalence. In the summer and fall of 1857, US magazines and newspapers began printing details of a widespread rebellion among Indian soldiers (called sepoys) against British rule. This influx of news—including accounts of violent reprisals on the part of the British—captivated American audiences. Not only were the events narrated with the kind of sensationalist verve that readers relished, but they represented a bracing challenge to comfortable notions of European superiority, as the sepoys managed to launch a widespread and highly destructive rebellion, including a (re)occupation of significant geographical scope, such that the British empire itself came to seem vulnerable, at least for a time. In their responses, many American commentators uncritically adopted pro-British
perspectives on the crisis. One wrote categorically that “the sympathies of the Christian world must be with the English in this momentous conflict,” while others emphasized native Indian violence—a “furious anarchy” that “glutted itself with the blood of hundreds of brave men, gentle women, and innocent babes.” But some took the rebellion as an opportunity to consider two of the more sobering elements of western ambition: first, that the colonized could not be as easily dominated as some had assumed, whether via ideology or regular employment or threats of violence (the British had used all three); and second, that efforts at reasserting such elusive control could cost a nation dearly in moral or reputational terms.

US authors’ writings on India in the late 1850s, then, represent a crucial if understudied moment of dissent in the nation’s own shift toward imperialism, as British blunders and atrocities dimmed Americans’ luminous fantasies of global wealth and power. In other words, the Sepoy Rebellion—later referred to as India’s First War of Independence—offered a set of events and discourses through which at least some Americans stopped to question emergent ideas about overseas expansion and influence. Much of this conversation was framed as a critique of British strategy and comportment: Americans had a sufficiently vexed relationship to the erstwhile mother country to render such a project appealing. But, as in so much nineteenth-century American commentary on India, there was also an impulse to bring the matter back home—that is, to consider what events on the subcontinent might tell Americans about their own domestic concerns and foreign entanglements, current and projected. Whitman’s optimism would emerge as the dominant American disposition toward expansion and empire in the second half of the nineteenth century, to be sure—but American responses to the Sepoy Rebellion complicate that trajectory, emphasizing, at least for a while, risk over triumph and moral debt over material gain.

Fault Lines

As a number of scholars have shown, the 1850s saw an uptick in Americans’ interest in various kinds of territorial expansion. The ideology of manifest destiny was instrumentalized in the widespread movement of white Americans westward; various commentators and politicians advocated the acquisition or annexation of such disparate North American sites as Cuba and parts of Canada; and, in perhaps the strangest of these gestures, US-born filibusteros—that is, figures who engaged in quasi-military projects abroad without official US government sanction—ventured into Mexico and Central America, seeking dominion over the nation’s southern neighbors. (William Walker, the Nashville-born newspaper editor who invaded Nicaragua in 1855 and ruled as its self-appointed president for nearly a year, is
only the most famous of these crackpot adventurers.) While many of these efforts failed and others remained at the level of ideation—the United States obviously did not overtake all of North America, as some had wished—in some respects the decade’s expansionist ethos was quite abundantly realized, as the Gadsden Purchase in 1854, through which the United States acquired parts of present-day Arizona and New Mexico, and the volume of westward migration attest. Of course, the sometimes-giddy enthusiasm for expansion that we see in the decade after the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in 1848, which annexed much of what had been northern Mexico, was always fraught. Sites in the American West proved to be rife with conflict, as European-Americans fought with indigenous peoples in various places and abolitionists and proslavery forces engaged in guerilla-style warfare in Kansas. Meanwhile, the nation itself faced increasingly pressing threats of fracture or dissolution over the matter of slavery.

Some American media responses to the Sepoy Rebellion emphasized precisely these tensions. Most obviously the sepoys were compared to racial and ethnic others whom white Americans saw as threats, as when a commentator, writing in the New York Observer in September of 1857, opined that “the news from India revives our recollections of the atrocities of our North American Indians.” Others saw in the Indian conflict “the spectre of a large-scale slave revolt by a non-white populace,” as Nikhil Bilwakesh has written, with white slaveholders seeing themselves in the place of assailed British colonizers. Americans’ disposition toward slavery informed their attitudes toward the rebellion in myriad ways. One piece insisted that the British were not unusually cruel in their dealings with Indians, just as “the common sense and Christian feelings of the community would be shocked at the assertion that the slaveholders of our Southern States are more unjust and cruel than the slaveholders of ancient Rome or of modern Africa.” In other words, colonial ventures and slaveholding were analogous activities—but these British and American instantiations were not record-setting in their atrocity. Many proslavery partisans, meanwhile, so resented British abolitionist agitation that they took satisfaction in the latter’s troubles, although fears of a domestic race war tended to overwhelm their schadenfreude. Some abolitionists instead took Great Britain’s side, insisting that colonial rule differed markedly from chattel slavery as practiced in the American South. As a piece in The National Era asserted, “English rule in India gradually enlightens and improves the condition of the subject race.” The Liberator, the movement’s longest-running newspaper, initially took a pro-British position, but as the historian Elizabeth Kelly Gray has shown, by October of 1857 its coverage was much more critical, while Frederick Douglass, ever the astute rhetorician, used news of the Sepoy Rebellion, Gray notes, “to contrast Indian violence with Americans’ peaceful pursuit of abolitionism.” Eventually, as Bilwakesh explains, Americans would extract the term sepoy from its original context, using it to describe such disparate entities as
“Southern white troops and guerillas, the Federal Government, African American soldiers, Mormons, Spanish imperialists in Cuba, or striking character actors at the grand Opera House in San Francisco.” The word, that is, came to signify depravity, violence, or extremity from whatever quarter.

If the 1857 rebellion invited reflection on racial and sectional tensions at home, it also provided Americans with an occasion for thinking through the complications of global ambition. Among the most salient avenues of inquiry was the role of religion in the rebellion—and, by extension, in colonial and imperial ventures more broadly. Those who were invested in the United States’ foreign missionary projects (active since the early 1810s) believed, like their British evangelical counterparts, that the rebellion owed to a missionizing failure. That is, a widespread sense emerged that the British—especially the British East India Company, which controlled much of the subcontinent prior to the rebellion—had emphasized profit over faith, discouraging Christianization initiatives out of fear that any interference with native religious practices might sow unrest and thus interfere with commercial ventures. For many such observers, only Christianity could unify India: as a contributor to the New York-based *Biblical Repertory* put the matter, “there is little affection for the British among their eastern subjects. It seems to be impossible that there should be, until Christianity prevails.” In the absence of such cohesion, the rebellion, this author insisted, derived from “pure heathenism and pure Islamism.”

According to some observers, it was not only a failure to Christianize India that set the subcontinent on this course, but a perceived tendency among the British to cater to native religious practices and biases—and perhaps even to buy into them. Caste, as westerners termed a system of Hindu social hierarchy that they understood only partially, was deemed a key issue. As one piece averred, the British had “pandered to the spirit of caste.” Citing the English love of hierarchy as a contributing factor, some wondered if they were not merely countenancing caste divisions but actively engaging them: “Was not high caste,” the piece cited above asked, “the idol before which English officers loved to bow?” Thus complicity with—and perhaps even a lurking attraction to—Hinduism’s storied commitment to social stratification contributed to the colonizers’ missteps. Others worried that a partial exposure to Christianity had done tremendous harm in India. According to the *Biblical Repertory*, the British “went about India, as men entering a cavern filled with bats and unclean birds, with dark lanterns, for fear of disturbing the inhabitants. Enough of light, however, gleamed through [in the form of missionary activity] to arouse and terrify the spirits of darkness. Had they allowed the light to shine freely, those spirits would have fled or quailed.” Christianity, this author suggests, was introduced to Indians in dangerously low doses—a reversal of the homeopathic medical theories that were gaining in popularity among Americans at the same time.
This supposed excess of religious tolerance on the part of the British was especially worrying for Protestant Americans who looked with suspicion at their own country’s expanding religious diversity. In that light, it is unsurprising that matters related to India were often, through the middle of the nineteenth century, brought into conversations regarding America’s own emergent or immigrant religions—most pressingly, Mormonism and Roman Catholicism, respectively. If a lack of religious uniformity doomed British rule in India, what risks inhered in the United States’ own ostensibly accelerating fragmentation?

Alongside such worries over the inadequate missionizing of India, the Sepoy Rebellion highlighted how poorly those in the West understood the various religious practices and divisions on the subcontinent. Commentators were taken aback, for example, by the fact that the uprising relied on an alliance between Muslims and Hindus serving together in the army. As one commentator noted, “Mohammedans and Hindus, who have nothing in common, except a hatred of the truth, joined in a crusade against Christians”—despite the fact that, according to this account, the Muslims despise “idol-worship” and the “Brahman is, perhaps, the subtlest and at the same time the grossest idol-worshipper that can be found.”

Their cooperation, for this author, warranted a scientific simile: “All that was necessary to produce an outbreak of the hostile elements which everywhere existed in abundance, was combination…. India has long been like a vast galvanic battery, pregnant with latent fires. It was only necessary to bring the poles together to produce an explosion. The moment the Mussulman and the Hindoo joined hands the circuit was completed, and the whole fabric of British power trembled at the shock.”

Another commentator noted, along similar lines, that the sepoys stood “ready, inflammable, and needing but the right torch” to catch fire. The British, most accounts suggested, had been insufficiently attuned to such risks; their “apparently fair prospects” in India were destroyed when “troubles came from a quarter least expected.”

Ferocity

This language of “shock” and “explosion” mirrors coverage of the rebellion that appeared in much of the British press, which emphasized native brutality, particularly toward white women and children living in India. Many accounts that appeared in US newspapers and magazines dwelled on such matters, often reprinting British sources verbatim. But some venues approached that reporting more skeptically—especially the New York Observer and the Saturday Evening Post, which alleged that the London Times in particular had exaggerated and misrepresented the scale and severity of native brutality in the interest of urging excessive retaliatory violence.
More broadly, a number of American commentators criticized the violence with which the British responded to the uprising—sometimes on the basis of its stark moral wrongness, but also on the grounds that such retaliation was impolitic and would only lead to more bloodshed. Many such critiques were prompted by a single account, penned by a British official stationed in northwestern India, which circulated widely in US print sources. It narrates in graphic detail a mass execution method whereby British soldiers tied alleged rebels—ten at a time—to large cannons (“9-pounders”) and then fired them:

It was a horrid sight that then met the eye: a regular shower of human fragments of heads, of arms, of legs appeared in the air through the smoke and when that cleared away, these fragments lying on the ground—fragments of Hindoos, and fragments of Mussulmans all mixed together, were all that remained of those ten mutineers. Three times more was this scene repeated; but so great is the disgust we all feel for the atrocities committed by the rebels, that we had no room in our hearts for any feeling of pity; perfect callousness was depicted on every European’s face; a look of grim satisfaction could even be seen in the countenances of the gunners serving the guns. But far different was the effect on the native portion of the spectators; their black faces grew ghastly pale as they gazed breathlessly at the awful spectacle.

Though this horrific description initially seems calculated to evoke outrage on behalf of the executed rebels, its author soon insists that the sepoys have forfeited all claims on human pity by virtue of their “atrocities.” And yet, the scene invites an emotional response from the reader, who absorbs the narrator’s repressed or evacuated horror and perhaps extends a moment of sympathy to those “ghastly pale” native observers, momentarily whitened by what they have seen. Further, the eyewitness-author of this piece, though he disavows any human connection to the executed Indians, nevertheless admires their stoicism. “Nothing in their lives,” he notes, “became them like the leaving of them. Of the whole forty, only two showed any signs of fear, and they were bitterly reproached by the others.... They certainly died like men.” He attributes this strength to the sepoys’ faith, though he does not differentiate between Muslims and Hindus on this point: “Their religion, bad as it may be and is, in all other points, at least befriends them well at the hour of death.” But if the sepoys’ religious faith enabled them to face such a violent death with equanimity, it also made this execution method especially fearsome insofar as it rendered a proper funeral ritual—in either Muslim or Hindu tradition—impossible. The rebel tied to the cannon, the author notes, “knows that his body will be blown into a thousand pieces, and that it will be altogether impossible for his relatives, however devoted to him, to be sure of picking up all the fragments ... ; and the thought that perhaps a limb of some one of a different religion to himself
might possibly be burned or buried with the reminder of his own body, is agony to him.”

The conspiratorial mixing of Hindus and Muslims—that “galvanic battery” whose explosion shook British India—gives way to a literal mixing of blood, bones, and flesh designed to obliterate sepoy resistance and restore European authority.

As Kim A. Wagner notes, the cannon method, also used by the Marathas and the Mughals in South Asia, was adopted by the British East India Company in the second half of the eighteenth century and was regarded “as the ultimate tool of exemplary deterrence.” But if such a tool was calculated to quell further rebellion, it also disgusted American observers. For some, this mode of execution, among other violent acts reported in the US press, signaled a loss of British moral credibility. The Boston-based magazine *Ballou’s Pictorial* called the sepoys’ “atrocities ... revolting,” but added that the retaliatory measures the British chose “savor of ferocity.” The author cites not just the executions-by-cannon noted above, but also the practice of setting villages on fire and hanging Indian prisoners “by the neck by the light of their burning homes.”

A piece that ran in the *New York Observer* on September 17, 1857, asserted that “religion, humanity and policy demand that England, in her might, should act as a Christian power” by the following summer, the paper was more fundamentally calling into question the veracity of widespread tales of sepoy “barbarity”: “So the Sepoy cruelty vanishes into fiction,” the author notes, “while the vengeance of Britain strikes terror into the heart of the world.”

Antebellum Americans were deeply engaged by the idea of England—that is, by England as a nexus of aspirations, ideals, rivalries, and resentments, as scholars such as Elisa Tamarkin and Christopher Hanlon have shown. Criticizing England’s treatment of Indian rebels, then, entailed a vexed re-examination of long-standing patterns of deference, imitation, and self-differentiation. While American commentators on India typically reserved the term *savage* to describe the rebels, calling out the “ferocity” of the English seems tantamount to questioning their civility and morality. Anglo-Americans had long seen the English colonization of North America—a project they would continue after the Revolution—as benign in comparison with Spain’s interventions in the Americas, the so-called Black Legend of Spanish (and, crucially, Roman Catholic) inhumanity toward native peoples. Reckoning with British (Protestant) cruelty in India would seem to blur those comforting and, by the late 1850s, centuries-old distinctions—which may account for some commentators’ refusal to acknowledge the domestic parallels (i.e., to white Americans’ treatment of indigenous and enslaved people) that others were drawing. It makes sense, then, that even in venues critical of British colonial rule in India, we see a countervailing attempt at recuperation. The *Saturday Evening Post*, for instance, reasserted an alignment with the British despite their conduct in putting down the rebellion by contrasting them with a supposedly greater evil: Russia. Citing a rumor that “Russian agents” were behind the Sepoy Rebellion, the
author avers that, “if the battle in India is to be between Russia and England, our sympathies are with England. For Russia is barbarism—it is tyranny—it is medieval night and the brutal heel. And England is civilization—beautiful, in despite of her evils—glorious, in despite of her shames. With England there is hope, because there is, in some sort, freedom….”

Incompetence and Arrogance

American critiques of the British in India shuttled between the moral outrage detailed above and a disdain for what some saw as the East India Company’s poor management of the colony. An article that ran in the New-York-based monthly *The Knickerbocker*, for example, emphasized the latter, admitting that the people of India were better off in the aftermath of the Company’s dissolution (which occurred in the wake of the rebellion, though British rule would continue well into the next century). Still, in a nod to western/white supremacy, the author notes that it had provided “the best government the Hindoos had ever had.” In other words, even flawed European rule seemed, to this observer, superior to Indian self-government. Nevertheless, charges of mismanagement abounded in the American press, including the claim that the British, in a short-sighted attempt to save money, had understaffed both the army and civil offices, thus leaving too few white men on hand to oversee native workers. Others charged the British with a lack of foresight vis-à-vis the brewing rebellion; a piece in the *Albion*, for example, noted that “There was warning, enough and to spare, of the coming calamity. Were preparations duly made for averting, or meeting it?” The *Saturday Evening Post* was particularly harsh in its criticism of British rule, calling it “a “colossal structure of misrule and oppression” and asserting that “the real cause for the rebellion may be found in that feeling of intense, burning exasperation and hatred which long years of insolent oppression must have engendered in the people of Hindostan.” The British presence in India at midcentury, this author insists, comprised “true snobs” and “supercilious scamps”; these less-than-exemplary emissaries, the author notes, stay in India only briefly or “have oscillated between India and England, and ... have been at great pains to show the natives that they are not at all related to them either in blood, sentiment, or interest, and have also been accustomed to treat them with all manner of insolence and ignominy.” Further, a number of US commentators blamed the rebellion’s notable, if short-lived, success on British alcohol abuse. In the annals of colonial decadence, drunkenness figured prominently, as temperance-minded Americans suggested that this vice had rendered the British unable to hold onto India, not to mention undeserving of what they would presume to claim there.
A May 1859 piece that ran in *The New Englander*, meanwhile, moved from excoriating the British to contemplating how they might recover (and, by extension, what lessons the US might glean from their experiences in India): “How to govern this great people... This is the question which will press upon the public mind, and persistently demand an answer. The soundest judgment and the largest philanthropy have been hitherto baffled.” The fundamental question, for this author, is how an external force might gain sway over the natives in any colonial context: “any people,” he notes, “will cheerfully bear much injustice from a ruler of their own blood and kin, rather than enjoy freedom under a foreign dominion.” And, not only did the British fail to perceive that a conspiracy was afoot (“The phlegmatic self-sufficiency of the English character lulled the sentinels to sleep, until the enemy sprang upon them unprepared.”), but their general unfamiliarity with native languages rendered them incapable of discerning more carefully.

Further, this author asserts, the British in India laid the groundwork for the rebellion by treating the natives badly: their “ill concealed contempt” for Indians “would inevitably produce a rankling hatred... .” The piece ultimately calls into question the benefits of western dominion writ large, something that most American commentators were unwilling to do: “The English seem to have taken for granted what does not by any means appear evident, that the moment a state was brought under their control, the most glaring evils under which the people were suffering, ceased. But not only have we ample written testimony to the contrary, but we have been informed by eye-witnesses, that those natives from the interior, who had not felt the heel of foreign power, were decidedly more manly, smart, and independent, than those who had been under its immediate influence.” So much for taking up the white man’s burden. Self-government, for this author, should be the ultimate goal in India, though it must be preceded by a period of British dominion: “for years to come, India must be controlled by the stern hand of an absolute despotism, supported by a faithful army. The Hindus have always been so governed, and they know of no other form. Conciliation is to them a sign of weakness. And weakness is a fit opportunity for violence. But this does not suppose that the people are to be oppressed. On the contrary, they should be taught those lessons which will prepare them to govern themselves.”

A piece in the *Saturday Evening Post*, meanwhile, dispensed with this gradualist approach, expressing instead the hope that Great Britain would lose India as a result of the rebellion: This “would be a serious pecuniary loss to them; it would be besides a transient commercial injury to other nations, America included, who have interests there. But it might possibly teach them, as well as other nations, that the everlasting law of justice is not to be violated with impunity.” The British subjugation of India, in this author’s view, was an act of “robbery for the low lust of gain.”
Further, such injustices may have stoked the rebellion; the British, that is, must have inflicted “a long series of bitter, burning wrongs” on native Indians in order to “produce such results as this awful mutiny has disclosed.” The Washington-based Advocate of Peace called the rebellion an instance of “divine retribution” for the British treatment of Indians in general and sepoys in particular. Some went so far as to question more fundamentally the legitimacy of British rule, at least in the forms it took: “Who gave the East India Company its power?—who suffered its centurial course of idiot avarice and insane brutality to run unwarned and unrepressed?” The Company was granted a royal charter in 1600, just prior to the establishment of permanent English settlements in North America, so there may be an implicit critique of monarchy here as well as a faint identification with others who have resisted British rule, though most evidence suggests that, for American observers, racial and religious allegiances weighed more heavily.

As I have suggested, American authors framed the Sepoy Rebellion as an object lesson for a Great Britain that had lost its moral compass. But this was also, by implication, a cautionary tale for the United States—one of those “other nations” to which the Saturday Evening Post alluded. One commentator notes, in cataloguing British missteps in India, that the Europeans in India erred in showing (indeed, in feeling) “contempt” toward Indians: “In saying this we remember our own sin... [;] the contemptuous feeling which prevails in this country ... towards the coloured people, is too much the feeling of Europeans towards the natives.” The National Era made a similar case: “For its mistakes of government in India, England must answer—and is paying the just penalty at this moment. But if she deserves it, what do we deserve for our conduct towards the African in this country?” Another piece from the Saturday Evening Post extrapolates more broadly from Great Britain’s troubles: a calamity such as the loss of India should “instruct men that only they who win by justice and gentleness win truly.” As an author remarked in the same venue just a week later, “Let it be remembered that the forcible conquest of a country, the subjugation of a people, involves such consequences as [the rebellion].”

In an era of rapid and often violent westward expansion, and at the onset of even grander global ambitions, the Sepoy Rebellion—as debacle, as come-uppance, as course correction—invited Americans to think about their own expansionist and imperial prospects. The evidence I have cited suggests that some drew bracing and, crucially, generalizable lessons from Britain’s troubles in India, with the implication that the United States would need to pursue its global ambitions rather differently. To judge by the events of the next several decades—especially the military campaigns that the US army waged against indigenous Americans in the West and the bloody American occupation of the Philippines at the turn of the twentieth century—these lessons were both incomplete and short-lived.
Coda: Jessie Brown

Some Americans, I have argued, used the Sepoy Rebellion as an occasion to reflect on the perils of global ambition—but the rebellion also circulated in American culture as source material for popular entertainment, the creators of which treated such weighty geopolitical matters obliquely, if at all. Dion Boucicault’s Jessie Brown, or, the Relief of Lucknow, a melodrama first performed in New York City in February of 1858, serves as an apt example. The play resonated with American audiences, to judge from its wide circulation: Jessie Brown was produced in several cities, including Boston, Philadelphia, and Washington, DC; illustrations of its closing tableau appeared in Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper; and the script went through multiple printings.

Boucicault, an extraordinarily popular Irish-born playwright who had been living in the United States since 1854, capitalized on Americans’ keen interest in the Sepoy Rebellion—much like his counterparts in England, who staged elaborate dramas based on current events in India (some of which featured actual veterans of the conflict on stage). Specifically, Boucicault built on the wide circulation, through purported journalism as well as poems, songs, and lectures, of Jessie Brown’s experience—an almost certainly apocryphal tale of a young working-class Scottish woman trapped in the besieged city of Lucknow in September of 1857. As the story goes, when all appears to be lost, Jessie hears the distant sound of bagpipes from an incoming regiment and urges her fellows to take heart, thus demonstrating not only the resilience of white womanhood but also the importance of music and other cultural markers in retaining a sense of home and heritage in the midst of a colonial crisis. The Jessie Brown story also worked beautifully as a star vehicle for Boucicault’s romantic partner, the Scottish-born actress Agnes Kelly Robertson, some thirteen years his junior, with whom he had eloped in 1853 when she was not quite twenty years old.

Jessie Brown distills a number of the concerns that the Sepoy Rebellion elicited among Americans. Most obviously, the play’s attention to differences of color and status between colonizer and colonized aligns with a broader American tendency to see the Indian situation in terms of domestic racial tensions. One of the lead characters (Geordie McGregor, a newly commissioned officer still acclimating to India) calls the sepoys “black rascals” and, in a locution that echoes the dialogue featured in the decade’s many novels about American slavery, gives a Muslim house servant named Achmet the disparaging moniker “Dusky.” Achmet, meanwhile, voices his frustration with British rule in starkly racialized terms: “For a century,” he says to Geordie, “you have had your foot on our necks; we are to you a thousand to one—a thousand black necks to one white foot.” Later, the play’s arch-villain, Nana Sahib, portrayed on stage by Boucicault himself, refers to the British as having made “us
Further, in sequences that mirror the concerns of white American slaveholders, the play’s European characters nervously debate the trustworthiness of their native attendants. Mrs. Campbell—a widowed mother of two living a mile or so from Lucknow—warns Geordie to beware of Achmet, remarking that she “did not like the expression of his face as you spoke.” But elsewhere, white characters voice their entire confidence in the Indians’ loyalty. The “native regiments” nearby, Geordie avers, “are faithful as dogs” and Mrs. Campbell, though suspicious of Achmet, initially believes that the rest of the “servants are devoted to us.” Randal McGregor, meanwhile—Geordie’s older, more admirable brother—insists that the Indians stand ready to “assassinate” the Europeans.

The play’s attention to racial injustice is difficult to interpret. Projit Bihari Mukharji, one of a handful of scholars who have commented extensively on Jessie Brown, writes that the dialogue noted above, in which Achmet calls out British abuses, entails “an unmistakable critique of race and empire couched in irony.” Similarly, Lawrence D. Smith points out that another moment in which an Indian character critiques British violence (when Nana Sahib compares the colonizers to tigers) “passes conspicuously unchallenged” by the play’s white characters. Further, the most virulently racist language that the play directs at Indians comes from Geordie, who is hardly an exemplar (e.g., he is described as vain and inexperienced early on; later, he struggles to muster the courage to fight; and, when he drunkenly makes a play for the eponymous Jessie, she reminds him of the time back in Scotland when her working-class suitor Sweenie rescued him from a rushing stag). For all his shortcomings, however, Geordie is eventually ensconced as one of the figures that audiences are encouraged to root for, while Achmet, whose villainy is soon confirmed, meets a horrific death by hanging at the end of Act II. (Curiously, his death is represented as accidental, perhaps so that the play’s white heroes and heroine can escape the appearance of vengefulness.) Jessie Brown, in other words, draws attention to the injustice of racism and colonial rule, briefly suggesting that the Indians’ violence against European colonizers might be justified. But once the rebellion directly imperils Boucicault’s white characters, the play retreats into a familiar rendering of European heroism and Indian villainy.

The play, like the larger Jessie Brown myth, also highlights threatened violence against women and children, elements of the conflict that attracted disproportionate media attention in the West. An editorial that appeared in the Lady’s Home Magazine asserts that stories of besieged women such as Jessie turned American public opinion against the rebels, even though initially “nobody felt any especial interest or sympathy with either party; nay, it might have been that what existed of these was partially with the insurgents; for this revolt was felt by many to be the rising up of the oppressed against the oppressors....” The figure of Nana Sahib represents just such a threat: within the play, he is represented as a dark-skinned,
lustful marauder with designs on the sexual purity of a white woman. His intention, made clear early on via an intercepted communication, is to have the Campbell children murdered and to take their mother, as his lover, to his “zenana”—a term that referred to the area of an Indian home reserved for its female inhabitants but that also (like harem) connoted both seclusion and sexual access. Boucicault’s rendering of this foreign, non-Christian menace includes some intriguing twists, however. For instance, Nana Sahib’s obsession with Mrs. Campbell is described as spiritual rather than simply carnal—he professes that, when he noticed her at some point prior to the action of the play, her “soul entered through my eyes into my heart ... I followed you, until like the sun you passed away where I could follow no more ... “; subsequently, he sent away his other wives because they “offended your soul in me.” Despite this insistence on Nana Sahib’s emotional investment in Mrs. Campbell, his actual pursuit of her abounds with the usual melodramatic flourishes: oversized swords are drawn (with obvious phallic references), while the play’s white male characters (plus Jessie) risk all to protect her purity. If Nana Sahib’s avowal of their linked souls seems intended to evoke the audience's sympathy, albeit momentarily, it also underscores, for an American audience notoriously uncomfortable with sexual unions across racial and religious boundaries, the transgressiveness of his desire. Further, one wonders why Boucicault made the target of Nana Sahib’s designs a widow with young children rather than the play’s heroine, who would seem to be more central to the plot. Perhaps he feared audiences would find it too scandalous if the scheming rebel were sexually threatening a woman portrayed by the actor’s own wife.

Jessie Brown also mirrors Americans’ oft-demonstrated confusion with regard to South Asian religions. For instance, a house of worship that figures into the plot of Act II is called both a “mosque” and a “Hindoo Temple” (on the same page in the 1858 Samuel French edition)—though the reference to a “minaret” suggests that the former designation was intended. Further, Boucicault has Nana Sahib invoke Allah repeatedly, despite the fact that the historical figure on which the character was based was Hindu, not Muslim. These inconsistencies may have been unwitting errors, but they fit within a larger nexus of American perceptions. That is, in American discourses on South Asia, Muslim men were represented as more lustful and more violent than Hindus, who were often characterized as passive and gentle (though also as wily and deceptive). The misidentification of the historical Nana Sahib’s religion in the play, then, may have been a strategy meant to reinforce the audience’s religious prejudices and stereotypes.

If Boucicault’s play focalizes Americans’ concerns over race, gender, and religious difference, it also engages in an intriguing deflection. Namely, in a play that dramatizes a key crisis in British India, it seems odd that not one of the principal characters is English. Instead, the assailed white figures here are mostly Scottish.
(some wealthy, some working class), with one good-natured Irishman in the mix. Characters refer to various English figures—most notably the queen and General Havelock, whose rescue of Lucknow they eagerly await—but they do not actually appear on stage; instead, the force that arrives to save Lucknow (modeled on the 78th Highlanders, a Scottish regiment that was crucial to the city’s actual rescue) is described as wearing “the bonnie Highland plaid” and playing “Should Auld Acquaintance be Forgot” on their bagpipes.63 The play, then, enacts a transatlantic performance of the Indian conflict, with an Irish playwright and a Scottish leading lady, living in the US and performing for an American audience, that is largely evacuated of any English presence.

Lawrence Smith has claimed that, in erasing the English, the play removes the “colonisers ... from the picture, leaving the field to a pitched battle between colonial subjects”; “rather than expressing confidence in the British imperial project,” he argues, “Boucicault’s Jessie Brown indicates a widely-felt crisis among lower rank military personnel from working-class and non-English ethnic backgrounds.”64 Smith overstates the case somewhat. Although the British East India Company originated among London merchants and received its charter from an English queen, by the middle of the nineteenth century Scots and other non-English figures played key roles in the colony. Charles Canning, Governor-General of India during the Sepoy Rebellion, was English, but his immediate predecessor, the Earl of Dalhousie, was Scottish, as were many of the colony’s soldiers and civil servants. And Boucicault’s own characters, including a young Scotsman wealthy enough to buy a commission in the army, occupy a range of social strata. While the play’s most admirable figures are working-class Scots—not just Jessie Brown, but her courageous suitor Sweenie—the narrative as a whole minimizes class conflict in order to focus on beating back the rebellion.

Nevertheless, the absence of English characters here is strange. American commentary on the rebellion—and, indeed, on India generally—often used the terms “British” and “English” interchangeably. Americans understood, of course, that Great Britain comprised England, Wales, Scotland, and Ireland, but they tended to conflate British policies and interventions in India with a narrower Englishness. Jessie Brown’s elision of an English presence at Lucknow, then, may have allowed its besieged white characters to appear rather more innocent than otherwise. That is, given the degree to which American commentators were specifically critical of English comportment in India, the play’s Scottish characters may have seemed less directly responsible for creating the South Asian powder keg. In other words, American audiences could bracket their criticism of English tactics in South Asia, at least for an evening, in order to enjoy the show.

Another of the play’s deflections points to larger anxieties about the rebellion and about imperial ventures more broadly conceived. That is, the play ends with
the arrival of military reinforcements, such that the main characters are saved not only from Indian aggressors but also from the child murders and suicides they are frantically plotting toward the end of Act III, when defeat (and the torture, rape, and murder that they anticipate in its aftermath) seems imminent. But Nana Sahib—who had, prior to the events represented here, ordered the slaughter of English women and children at Cawnpore—remains free. Indeed, the historical Nana Sahib escaped the British forces at Lucknow and was never captured—historians believe that he fled into the northern mountains. Further, audiences would have known that the September 1857 “relief of Lucknow” that the play represents was only temporary. The siege continued until November of that year, when a second set of reinforcements arrived and managed to evacuate survivors, though the city itself was abandoned and would remain under the rebels’ control until the following spring. Sir Henry Havelock, the English military leader whose name is invoked within the play, died of dysentery at Lucknow in late November, shortly after the second relief—news that was widely reported in American papers in late January and early February of 1858, just prior to the play’s New York debut on February 22.

The triumph that *Jessie Brown* celebrates, then, is partial and short-lived. In some sense that uncertainty is inevitable, given that Boucicault based his plot on events that were still unfolding. But the contingent nature of the play’s final tableau also fits with the ambivalence that Americans registered in their broader commentary on the Sepoy Rebellion. Boucicault offered them a feel-good ending that celebrates a plucky heroine’s resilience, even as it acknowledges, if tacitly, how complicated the conflict actually was, not just tactically but morally.

Notes

1 Walt Whitman, “Passage to India,” in Michael Moon (ed.), *Leaves of Grass and Other Writings* (New York: Norton, 2002), 345–53, l. 7.
2 Whitman, “Passage to India,” l. 4.
3 Whitman, “Passage to India,” l. 67, l. 155, l. 152.
4 Whitman, “Passage to India,” l. 118.
5 Whitman, “Passage to India,” l. 253, l. 255.
6 Whitman, “Passage to India,” l. 230.
10 I have used “Sepoy Rebellion” rather than “First War of Independence” in referring to the conflict because the latter term was not in circulation until the early twentieth century, long after the cultural moment I analyze here.


Qtd. in Bilwakesh, “‘Their faces,’” 16.


Bilwakesh, “‘Their faces,’” 2.


“Present State of India,” 465.

“Present State of India,” 531.

“Present State of India,” 453.

“Present State of India,” 529.

“Present State of India,” 456.


“Sepoy Mutiny,” 357.


“Scenes, Mutinies, and Executions in India,” 84.

“Scenes, Mutinies, and Executions in India,” 84.


41 “It is absolutely astonishing to see the eagerness with which the mass of European soldiers in India endeavor to procure liquor, no matter of what description, so that it produces insensibility, the sole result sought for” (“Present State of India,” Biblical Repertory, July 1858, 483).


44 “Sepoy Mutiny,” 381.


46 “Divine Retribution,” Advocate of Peace, March/April 1858, 37.


52 In nineteenth-century print sources, the playwright’s surname is often spelled “Bourcicault.”


55 Dion Boucicault, Jessie Brown; or, The Relief of Lucknow (New York: Samuel French, 1858), 4.

56 Boucicault, Jessie Brown, 21.

57 Boucicault, Jessie Brown, 4, 7.

58 Mukharji, “Jessie’s Dream at Lucknow,” 94.

59 “Editor’s Department,” Lady’s Home Magazine, March 1858, 160.

60 Boucicault, Jessie Brown, 8.

61 Boucicault, Jessie Brown, 12.

62 Boucicault, Jessie Brown, 18.

63 Historical accounts of the Siege of Lucknow indicate that many who fought on the British side were Irish or Scottish by birth—and a Black Nova Scotian named William Hall was honored for his service there—but English combatants and city residents were present as well.

64 Smith, “Spectacular Remedies,” 39, 40.