Detecting the Nation

Reitz, Caroline

Published by The Ohio State University Press

Reitz, Caroline.
Detecting the Nation: Fictions of Detection and the Imperial Venture.
Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/28314.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/28314

For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=1177478
THUGGEE AND THE “DISCOVERY” OF THE ENGLISH DETECTIVE

The first fully-imagined English detective is not found in Bleak House or on Baker Street, but rather in India. William Sleeman, the first superintendent of the Thug Police, an intelligence operation developed in the 1820s and 1830s, is this New Man. How could the Thug Police—in the space of a single decade—become the type of “enlightened inquirers” called for by Godwin, Mill, and the propolice reformers influenced by them? While the phenomenon of Thuggee seemed to provide a new story about a mysterious India, it in fact enabled a new story to be told about the emergent yet already embattled English police.

The story of Sleeman and his small band of men in the Thuggee and Dacoity Department is told in the many narratives about the crime of Thuggee and its suppression, widely read at the dawn of Victoria’s reign: works by Sleeman himself, Edward Thornton’s Illustrations of the History and Practices of the Thugs (1837), Caleb Wright’s Lectures on India (1849), Henry H. Spry’s Modern India (1837), Fanny Parks’s The Wanderings of a Pilgrim in Search of the Picturesque (1850), Charles Hervey’s Some Records of Crime (1892), articles in the Edinburgh Review and Blackwood’s Magazine, and most famously Captain Philip Meadows Taylor’s best selling novel, Confessions of a Thug (1839), a particular favorite of the young Queen. These narratives detail in a suggestively uniform manner the habits, customs, superstitions, and peculiar vocabulary of the Thugs, centuries-old Indian gangs whose “special service” to the goddess Kali, “one of the dark divinities of the Hindoo creed” (Wright 141), allegedly led them to roam the country strangling and robbing Indian travelers. The narratives’ wealth of detail, culled from Thug confessions, was organized into maps of Thug travel patterns, Thug family trees, an extensive glossary of the Thug vocabulary, “Ramasi,” and studies of Thug
phrenology. The phenomenon of Thuggee represents a crucial moment in the evolution of intelligence-based police work and in the English understanding and representation of their role in India.

Treatments of detective fiction, invested in the detective novel as a home-grown genre and in Englishness as a stable identity, have traditionally ignored the important work done in police history by Mike Brogden and others to write in the "critical imperial context of police origins." An "insular historiography" results in such oversights as the importance of Thuggee in the development of the English police and is complemented by its seeming opposite: totalizing readings of the extension of British authority in the colonies. Recent readings of Thuggee, in the context not of detective fiction but of imperial writing as a whole, see in the Thuggee narratives evidence of an unproblematic extension of imperial panopticism and as a result the neat production of English cops and Indian robbers, a compartmentalization that seems perfectly to accord with our contemporary understanding of crime and punishment in British India, informed as it is by the stark midcentury brutality of the Mutiny and its suppression.

However, the narratives of the detection and suppression of Thuggee challenge both these accounts of English authority (entirely local and effortlessly global) and afford a reexamination of the emergence of the detective, the detective narrative, and the production of colonial policy in an age less of retribution than reform. Unlike the gradual diffusion of English values from the metropolis outward represented in the Whiggish histories of the police and the detective genre, the colonial context of the rapid detection of Thuggee and, crucially, the Thuggee narratives' organization of this detective work into popular, readable accounts, enabled the bad turn-of-the-century cop to become good, to become English, and therefore to come home to a more receptive public. Even as the Thuggee narratives invalidate a strictly home-grown police history, they equally complicate readings of an always already confident imperial power. In other words, efforts against Thuggee might seem to provide a platform for an unprecedented and public display of the new detective at work against rampant Indian criminality. However, far from the sure-footed panopticism argued in both older and recent readings of Thug policing, the Thug Police gingerly enter a stage set not by British jingoism but by the contested liberalism evident in contemporary police debates, in which the fear of excessive police authority taints the case then being made for them as emanations of the true liberal spirit of the English constitution.

Some of these critics are not ultimately incorrect. Representations of Thuggee do participate in shaping the new stories of English justice and
Indian criminality and leave the old story of English judicial criminality in its wake. Accepting the Thug Police as English, however, also requires accepting a new story of English culture, one that registers the imbrication rather than the clear distinction between two identities, liberal and authoritarian, and two worlds, Metropolitan England and the colonial periphery. For if in the Thuggee narratives the detective emerges as a necessary figure who through his “local knowledge” interprets the data and solves the mysteries of the Empire for an English reading public, he is necessarily an imperial rather than an insularly English invention.

This chapter will examine what stories the Thuggee narratives tell about India and the English police. I am especially interested in how the detective narrative emerges as a new form to organize these often contesting cultural stories. The first section shows how representations of Thuggee criminalize Indian culture and establish a crucial identification between the English reading public and the work of the police. The second section documents the challenge of the Thug Police in making this new story of police authority credible. The third section explains how both the character of the detective and the genre of detective fiction attempt to confront the question of credibility haunting applications of state power and, in addressing this problem, cast the narrative mission for the Victorian detective novel.

The Story of the Thugs

Accounts of Thuggee routinely conflate Thuggee and India. Such a slippage is evident in the comments of traveler and writer Fanny Parks, a friend and visitor of William Sleeman at Jubbulpore, the location of the largest Thug prison. Parks writes that Thuggee is

no sooner suppressed than a new system of secret assassination and robbery is discovered, proving the truth of Colonel [William] Sleeman’s remark that “India is a strange land; and live in it as long as we may, and mix with its people as much as we please, we shall to the last be constantly liable to stumble upon new moral phenomena to excite our special wonder”. (James Sleeman 194)

Here, in the space of one sentence, the story of mysterious criminal practices has become the story of the “strange land” of India. Caleb Wright continually makes this equation between Thuggee and Indian culture as a whole by emphasizing how the “occupation” of “the cold-blooded miscreants who, in
India, make a trade of assassination” is “sanctioned by the national religion” (141). The Thuggee texts recount multiple stories of Indians who are both Thugs and successful members of the mainstream community, such as the infamous master Thug who was by day a respectable and quite accomplished linen draper. The “ramifications” of Thuggee, Thornton cries, “are so widely-extended, and reach so far into the very heart of Indian society” that it is “almost inconceivable.” But in case his readers were actually to find it inconceivable, Thornton continues, “It would strike us as extraordinary, if tradesmen in Cheapside or Bond Street united with their respective occupations that of murder: yet this state of things exists in India” (468).

According to these texts, Thuggee is able to be so “widely-extended” throughout Indian culture because of its relation to the dominant religion, Hinduism.4 This association with religion gives Thuggee its fearful eternal character as well. The central precept of this “religion of murder,” as it is often called, is that once a Thug, always a Thug. Ameer Ali, the hero of Taylor’s novel Confessions of a Thug, describes the “goor,” the coarse sugar used in Thug rituals, as symbolizing a point of no return. “I have eaten the Goor,” he says, “and cannot change” (14). Thornton quotes a Thug, who confesses to Sleeman that while “we all feel pity sometimes . . . the goor of the Tuponee changes our nature; it would change the nature of a horse. Let any man once taste of that goor and he will be a Thug, though he . . . [has] all the wealth in the world” (66).

Though everywhere and eternal, Thuggee is by definition deceptive and thus maddeningly hidden from imperial eyes. Even the Thug method for killing has developed with an aim toward greater concealment, moving from a lasso to a sash, which can be better concealed on the body. These accounts dwell on the great pains taken by Thugs to avoid discovery. Thugs kill all members of the traveling party to insure that no one survives who could testify against them. In a detail sure to inflame the English reading public, the dogs of the victims are also killed. To prevent the bodies from swelling and being discovered in their shallow graves, the already strangled corpses are stabbed in the stomach and the armpits.5 Once again, the narratives represent this deception as indicative of Indian rather than exclusively Thug culture. Trevelyan looks to a Hindu proverb, “there is darkness under the lamp,” for an explanation as to how “a whole family with their servants could be murdered . . . without any discovery taking place” (360). Thuggee, a “habitual system of deception” that justifies itself as a religious practice, is represented as an accepted part of secular culture as well. Exasperated colonial administrators complain that without the widespread protection offered by paid-off princes and native officials Thuggee could not exist. “This tolerance of professional thieves and
murderers,” Thornton suggests, “is a remarkable feature in the phenomena of Indian society” (433). And a feature, Parks suggests, which will only become more widespread in the absence of English authority: “In the territories of the native chiefs of Bundelcund, and those of Scindia and Holcar, a Thug feels just as independent and free as an Englishman in a tavern, and they will probably begin to feel themselves just as much so in those of Nagpore, now that European superintendency has been withdrawn” (1:157).

It becomes clear throughout these narratives that in discovering these widely extended truths about the fundamental and furtive lawlessness of Indian culture, certain aspects of English culture, more essential even than a fondness for taverns, are simultaneously revealed. The English perceive themselves as essentially law abiding. Trelivyan explains, “If any practice at all approaching in atrocity to that of Thuggee were to be discovered in England, it would be immediately put down by an united effort of the whole people” (393). One of the contemporary arguments against an organized police force in England was that an official force was unnecessary because there was a little natural policeman in all Englishmen. But in the colonial context of widespread indigenous crime, it easily becomes an argument for the necessary association of policing with Englishness, an association Parks makes above.7

Given this association, it follows that one of the most consistent features of these Thuggee narratives is a progress report on the British efforts against Thuggee, illustrated here in the title of Thornton’s Illustrations of the History and Practices of the Thugs: And Notices of Some of the Proceedings of the Government of India, for the Suppression of the Crime of Thuggee. Captain Taylor explains in the introduction to Confessions of a Thug that “the Confessions I have recorded are not published to gratify a morbid taste in any one for tales of horror and of crime; they were written... to awaken public vigilance in the suppression of Thuggee” (xxiii). As the frequent final chapter of these Thuggee narratives, police work ultimately becomes a model for organizing the often bewildering imperial experience for English readers and creates a link between detective work and the readers’ work based on a shared curiosity. Indeed, it seems the reader is almost deputized in the writer’s call for participation. Practically all the Thuggee narratives open with a call for “public vigilance in the suppression of Thuggee” (Philip Taylor xxiii).8 Frederick Holme, writing in Blackwood’s about Thuggee, echoes Godwin’s argument concerning the importance of English curiosity about Indian affairs:

the astounding disclosures relative to the system of secret murder in India, called Thuggee, which have been brought to light during the last ten years, have so far penetrated the veil of apathy through which every detail regard-
ing our Indian empire is too generally contemplated in this country, as to excite a considerable degree of curiosity in the listless minds of general readers. (229)

The emphasis on curiosity as an essentially English characteristic is central to reversing the stigma attached to detective work. Most histories of the police in the nineteenth century argue that intelligence does not emerge as a policing technique, due to an English distaste for spying, until the creation of the Criminal Investigation Department (CID) at the end of the 1880s. Public hatred of spying did shape the representation of the police. But rather than delay the use of intelligence in policing, such public antipathy simply mandated that intelligence be represented as a visible extension of individual curiosity, rather than a hidden tool of the state. William Sleeman's curiosity is shown to be exhaustive, as he explains in the preface to Ramaseeana that

I have entered in this Vocabulary every thing to which Thugs in any part of India have thought it necessary to assign a peculiar term. . . . I am satisfied that there is no term, no rite, no ceremony, no opinion, no omen or usage that they have intentionally concealed from me. (75)

Sleeman used his research to construct family trees for the Thugs, and according to his biographer and grandson, “with these genealogical trees to work upon, [operated] the machinery for its suppression. . . . [and the] equally arduous task of obtaining the necessary evidence, since . . . even the most notorious Thug had to have a fair trial” (James Sleeman 194). This description not only demonstrates the innovation and ardor of Sleeman’s curiosity but also his ability to reconcile this new police work with the traditional demands of British fair play. Both colonial administrators and English readers can relate to Sleeman’s work.

The Thuggee narratives’ emphasis on curiosity introduces the Thug Police’s method—detection as organized curiosity—as one already acceptable by English readers because it is what the English readers are in fact doing in reading about the Thugs. This connection between police and readers underscores how important widespread public interest in the police was in the replacement of the old story of secretive rogue justice with the new one of modern inquiry. As the curious reader faces the mysteries faced by the curious Thug Police, these narratives introduce readers not only to the detective’s motivation but involve them in his method by giving them a massive amount of “evidence” in the form of miscellaneous “facts” about the Thugs, and then leading them to the whole system each piece of evidence partially suggests.
The colonial context of Thuggee, a systematic and hidden crime, enables the activity formerly feared as spying to become modern detection, the embodiment of English curiosity and common sense. The activity formerly feared as a threat to local autonomy, centralization of police, here, too, becomes a uniquely English skill. Sleeman’s “general principle” was “to keep under every officer’s hand the latest and most completely detailed information,” which the Government would print and distribute and the prolific Sleeman would publish for public consumption several times in subsequent years (Tucker 61). Trevelyan describes the aptitude of England, the “supreme power” in India, for “collect[ing] for one common effort the resources of the whole of India, and direct[ing] that effort by European intelligence, energy and perseverance” (368). This is the same argument being made at home for an increasingly centralized police system, indeed one increasingly based on the Thug Police’s model of police “intelligence.” In fact John Ward makes this argument just one year later than Trevelyan did in the same journal, the *Edinburgh Review*. In his progress report on the “Police of the Metropolis,” Ward argues that no police system “can be perfect until a regular chain of communication, under one central authority, is kept up throughout the whole kingdom” (370).

The ideal end result of detection and centralization in India would be the apprehension and swift execution of the Thugs. Upon conviction, Thugs would be hanged unless they turned King’s evidence and participated in a host of new policing strategies: giving detailed confessions, naming names, working on stakeouts and lineups, and leading authorities to the grave sites. The reward for full confession was life in a Thug prison, like the one at Jubbulpore, where, due to the hereditary and absolute nature of Thuggee, mandatory celibacy was enforced (even of Thug descendants who had themselves never “tasted the goor”) (James Sleeman 175–76). Thug crimes are represented as a hidden, widespread, and permanent part of the culture so that what was previously unacceptable as methods of English criminal justice—detection, centralization, and even arguably capital punishment—could be consistent with English national character and seen not as hidden measures but rather as an extension of public vigilance.

That the Thug Police became a model for future policing as well as a benchmark of good government in India is seen both in the subsequent success of “intelligence” work and in twentieth-century representations of the Thuggee and Dacoity Department. Subsequent campaigns against dacoity (gang robbery) and the criminal tribes legislation, for example, extended the Thug Police’s ethnographic policing. Sir Percival Griffiths, in his history of the Indian police, suggests that “India can fairly claim to have been ahead of Britain in realizing the need for specialist organizations for the investigations
of certain forms of crime”; all “modern organizations” of police intelligence, such as the Special Branch of the CID, “were a natural development from the new and expanded functions of the Thagi and Dakaiti Department” (342). Indeed, an initially resisted detective arm of the Metropolitan Police was developed a few years after the victory over Thuggee, the same branch celebrated by Dickens (who was familiar with the work of Captain Taylor) as a delightful sign of the times. Many twentieth-century historians also remember the Thug Police as a sign of proud imperial accomplishment. According to Brigadier General Horwood, a commissioner of the Police of the Metropolis, “of all the benefits which British Rule has brought to India the suppression of Thuggee must, to the Indian, constitute one of the most outstanding” (v). Griffiths’s equally misty-eyed portrayal of the long-lived reputation of the Thug Police illustrates the endurance of this representation: “in the forties of the present century, the office of the Intelligence Bureau in Simla was known to rickshaw wallahs as the Thagi Daftar [office] and the memory of a great British success in suppressing an odious crime was thus kept alive in the speech of humble folk” (121).

Here, then, are the ideal English police as they emerge in accounts aimed to satisfy English curiosity newly engaged by a mysterious India. In the story that the Thuggee narratives attempt to tell, the police seize the opportunity of Indian criminality to restore a shaken faith in Empire, criminal justice, and England’s character, while earning the trust of previously skeptical readers. And yet such strenuously urged “public vigilance” about a crime that took not even a single European life (with the notably arguable exception of Edwin Drood) suggests something else is going on. The real interest here is English acceptance of what was then far from acceptable at home (policing) and what was far from certain abroad (the British government’s public image as a benevolent authority). The opportunity Thuggee provided reformers for addressing the identity crisis of the emergent police force suggests why this crime—which could be traced back to the reign of Akbar, was documented by the French traveler Thevenot as early as the seventeenth century, and was officially recognized by the British Army in 1810 (after it had lost a couple of sepoys to the practice)—was not “discovered” until this moment of reckoning for English law and order.

The Thug Police

James Mill’s instructions to Thomas Babington Macaulay, whom he selected as legal member of the Supreme Counsel, were to establish “a general system of justice and police, and a code of laws common (as far as may be) to
the whole people of India” (Stokes 1959, 193). Macaulay, aware of his uphill climb, writes in “Notes on the Indian Penal Code,” “It is clear that we find the law in a state of utter uncertainty. It is equally clear that we cannot leave it in that state” (265). Not only must there be better government, Macaulay explains, but it must come to be associated with Englishness: “It is natural and inevitable that in the minds of a people accustomed to be governed by Englishmen, the idea of an Englishman should be associated with the idea of government” (227). William Sleeman, in advocating changes in the Indian police system, is concerned with a potential gap between “our power in India” and “the justification of that power” (1844, 2:454). In an 1841 letter to his cousin, Taylor expresses a similar concern: “Crime in many places increases rather than diminishes and in no case is the Police effectual for the prevention of offences, many of them committed under their very noses (1986, 31).

While the problems with the justice system were widely acknowledged, Sleeman’s cousin Henry H. Spry, explains that there are no easy answers: “How far the civilized notions of English legislators have contributed to the moral improvement of our benighted brethren in the East, although a question of great importance, and easily asked, is by no means so readily answered” (1844, 2:150). Both the desirability and instability of this equation between Englishness and law and order is evident as these Thuggee narratives work to close that gap. As narratives that work to introduce the detective and his story to a more receptive public, they represent difficulties inherent in the production of authority. It is necessary to emphasize the crisis of English authority from which the Thug Police emerge, as recent readings of Thuggee narratives emphasize instead a sure-footed Benthamite confidence at work in the Thug Police’s methods.

As often as not, these Thuggee narratives do not demonstrate confidence but rather “confess” the instability inherent in the production of confidence. Such instability marks the police reformers’ deliberate transition away from force and toward the moral authority necessary for public acceptance of the police. As Philip Smith suggests about Victorian policing, “controlling police violence and substituting moral force for physical force were necessary to win public support” (116). The General Instructions issued to the new Metropolitan Police in 1829 put restraint at the top of the list, “There is no qualification more indispensable to a Police Officer, than a perfect command of temper, never suffering himself to be moved in the slightest degree, by any language or threats that may be used” (Stead 41). This was the climate abroad as well. Both Sleeman and Macaulay were aware, as Trevelyan suggests here about the suppression of Thuggee, that “the application of force can only be
a temporary and partial remedy” (394). The duties of the Thug Police, Hervey explains, “were of no ordinary character, and had to be persevered in and still carried on amid many difficulties, requiring both tact and temper to be contended with” (1:63).

The public relations challenges faced by the New Police are most apparent in the two policing strategies that brought down the Thugs: the death penalty and the use of confessions. The death penalty was given swiftly to any Thug whose confession did not yield subsequent and significant convictions of other Thugs. Midcentury estimates of the number of Thugs executed place the number at well over a thousand. However, for a country attempting to eliminate widespread use of the death penalty at home in order to embody a less “bloody” justice, this final solution for the Thugs presents an image problem. The swift use of the death penalty as well as the relaxation of the rules of evidence, discussed below, write British practices into a story of cultural violence that Thuggee seemed to tell only about Indian culture. As suppressing Thuggee was something the British claimed to be doing exclusively for India, it was also done entirely to India (no British perpetrators or victims), underscoring rather than exorcising the uncomfortable balance between coercion and consent that marked contemporary concerns about policing and imperial administration.

The most criticized aspect of the Thug Police’s methods was its reliance on confession, a strategy that illustrates not only the police’s credibility problem but the site of its potential resolution as well. Thug confessions challenged British standards of evidence. Sleeman addresses this issue directly, acknowledging that “the evidence of men whose preliminary step must be to confess themselves the most ruthless villains in existence, is naturally received with distrust” (1839, 61). W. O’Brien’s article on the police system of London, admitting that “almost all [of the policeman’s evidence]. . . . is obtained from the criminal population” (12), suggests that such tainted evidence is similarly the chief obstacle to the acceptance of investigative measures in England. The Thug Police’s concern about the reliance on native confessions illustrates an uncertainty about British authority that is not often attributed to colonialist texts. Mary Louise Pratt suggests that the “conventions of travel and exploration writing constitute the European subject as a self-sufficient, monadic source of knowledge” who bears only traces of devalued non-European representation (136). But Sleeman and the other Thuggee chroniclers, far from self-sufficient as they are dependent on both dubious informants and doubting administrators, feel the need to clarify a process based almost entirely on at once highly valued and devalued “non-European representation.” Sleeman is aware that “a prejudice has gone forth against the mode of conducting . . . the investigations” and thus provides the following meticulous explanation:
The mode of proceeding is, to take the deposition of those who turn approvers, where this may happen to be. These men are then required to give . . . as full account of every expedition on which they have been, mentioning the dates of every one, and the detail of every murder; together with the names of those who had formed the gangs, their residence, caste, etc. etc. All this is registered in the office of the general-superintendent, and lists of those to be apprehended are sent to the different subordinate officers, who are all provided with approvers and guards. These officers also take the depositions in full of all whom they may apprehend, copies of which are sent to the general-superintendent. It is obvious that when depositions, thus taken almost simultaneously from different people hundreds of miles apart, who have had no means of collusion, and none of them expecting to be apprehended, agree in describing the same scenes and the same actors, it is obviously next to impossible to refuse belief. (1839, 69–70)

This elaborate demonstration of the Thug Police’s system reveals how doubts about British justice help produce a need for the figure of the detective. While Sleeman argues that this system stabilizes both potential native treachery within the testimony and individual carelessness on the part of the British authorities, it is still fallible (it is only “next to impossible to refuse belief”). Since there will always be doubt, the information itself is less important than the interpreter himself. As Sleeman senses, the reader ultimately has only his word for it. But this is precisely the point. If the Thug Police’s use of confession seems unstable because of native credibility problems and a loose application of British law, its legitimacy depends solely on the credibility of the interrogator, the English detective.

**The Detective and His Genre**

We have seen how Sleeman, as a writer, publicizes his system of information gathering and thus diffuses fears of both spying and centralized policing—sites of public alienation from past policing. We have also seen how Sleeman, as an administrator, is adept at recognizing other potential sites of alienation from his work, such as the reliance on confessions. But it is as a character, as the literal hero of these Thuggee detective stories, that Sleeman answers the questions he himself and the other Thuggee texts raise about the nature of British authority. It becomes increasingly clear in midcentury accounts of police work, such as Dickens’s celebration of Inspector Field, that the often precarious connection between “Englishness” and “law and order” is best fig-
ured not in abstract invocations of Law, but in an embodiment of the law. Sleeman was such a character.

While Sleeman did not work alone (he had a staff and was not even superintendent for his first years of Thug policing), he is represented everywhere as singular, as “that one man [who] rose from our midst” to fight crime (Hervey 74). He is the hero of almost every Thuggee text, always thanked in introductions, footnotes, and conclusions. Thornton writes of Sleeman in his introduction that it is “to the researches of that Gentleman, all writers on the subject, in common with the author of this volume, must be deeply indebted” (1). Sleeman is such a palpable figure in these narratives that he is always quoted rather than paraphrased. He is represented as the embodiment of the English virtues the reformers desired for the New Police, the first among which was sympathy.

Recognizing that the hardest battle to win in the post-Peterloo era was an association of the police with nonviolence, propolice reformers emphasized the police’s capacity for sympathy, rather than for efficiency or order. An association between the New Police and the quality of sympathy was key not only to public acceptance of the police but to its new kind of police work, one based on centrally organized local knowledge. A sympathetic understanding of the men being interrogated could yield a much more useful type of local knowledge. This is evident in the writings of Sleeman, who has a sympathetic familiarity with native custom and language, which only makes him a more proficient policeman.

In order to address public distaste for spying, it is also crucial that Sleeman be visible. Reading these texts produces an uncanny sensation that Sleeman, like the mysterious crime he pursued, was everywhere. Far from embodying a kind of Foucauldian invisibility, Sleeman, instead of spying on criminals, is spied on by criminals. This reversal is evident in a representative anecdote recounted by Sleeman’s daughter. Sleeman, sitting in an armchair in his study,

suddenly had a premonition of evil, drew aside a curtain concealing an alcove, and disclosed an Indian standing there armed with a dagger. Unarmed as he was and not expecting such an attack, Sleeman had spent too much of his life in the midst of danger to be perturbed by anything like this, and, pointing a finger at the man, he said, “You are a Thug.” The man promptly dropped the dagger and said, salaaming profoundly, “Yes, Sahib.” The power of the human eye is said to be great, and many Thugs testify that Sleeman’s had such a compelling force that they were obliged to tell the truth when under his cross-examination. (1933, 125–26)
While only an anecdote, many texts use the compelling glare as a synecdoche for Sleeman. Ameer Ali, the hero of Taylor’s novel, describes a superintendent, who is believed to be modeled on Sleeman, as a “tall, noble-looking person he was, and from the severe glance he cast on me I thought my hour was come” (330). The unarmed but unshaken detective, whose “compelling force” is not a gun or a baton but the power of his eye and his wagging, knowing finger, is, to any reader of detective fiction, a familiar narrative type. In fact, how clearly he casts the mold for this type is evident in two of the most popular later benevolent authorities—Sherlock Holmes and Dickens’s Inspector Bucket. Biographer Sir Francis Tuker describes Sleeman’s face: “We notice . . . the large . . . omnivorous eyes, observant in seeking to understand, because wanting to act out a purpose. His intelligence . . . is brought alive by compassion” (2). If Sleeman has the sympathetic intelligence of a Bucket, he is the thinking, reasoning machine we associate with Holmes. According to Griffiths, “Sleeman’s reports on the depredations of the Thugs are a model of objective reporting—calm, unemotional, factual accounts of episodes which were in reality highly dramatic. They typify the cold logical analysis which underlay his methods and which led to a remarkable degree of success within a decade” (132). James Sleeman describes his grandfather’s work as “scientific deduction” (114). That Sleeman’s method and character met the criteria for popular acceptance is evident in O’Brien’s mid-century description of the detective’s “art” in the *Edinburgh Review*:

> In this art, success depends much upon individual qualifications, sagacity in drawing inference from slight things, fertility of resource, a blood-hound tenacity of pursuit, intimate acquaintance with the habits of thieves, and of their mode of acting in particular circumstances, and in the knack (and here genius displays itself) of making a cast in the right direction in search of a clue. (11–12)

Sleeman so embodied the good cop and his story was so “widely-extend- ed” into the very heart of British imperial culture that even though he died in 1856 he played a role in the law-and-order crisis of British India: the Mutiny. Sleeman was clearly a symbol for the type of order obviously lacking when the Residency at Lucknow was besieged. A portrait of the by then Major General Sleeman, K.C.B. hung on the wall at the Residency, from which the weary British residents escaped after five months; after he was safely out, Colonel Ouvrey of the 9th Lancers remembered the portrait and stole back into the residency, cut the canvas from the frame, rolled it around a soldier’s musket, and carried it home to England. Real-life stories like this are a
hard act for fiction to follow. And yet this anecdote, which begins Tuker’s biography of Sleeman, illustrates how “real” events literally retrieve the story of the ideal English police invented in the representations of Thuggee. Philip Meadows Taylor’s *Confessions of a Thug* traverses this space between representation and invention and in so doing carves out of the diverse textual spaces of the other Thuggee narratives a new type of story. Taylor claims that this story of Ameer Ali, who killed almost seven hundred people (his name means “nobleman” and suggests his place as prince among Thugs), is “alas! Almost all true.” In this “almost” we recognize that something is happening to facts that by themselves could not tell the whole story. Like Sleeman’s information being “next to impossible” to disbelieve, thus making it absolutely necessary to believe in Sleeman himself, it is clear that a faith in the storyteller is the crucial question of Taylor’s work. This is not always an easy question to resolve, as the novel is written by a British official and model administrator but told mostly from the perspective of an Indian criminal.

Nevertheless, Taylor was uniquely positioned to navigate this narrative terrain from detective work to detective story. “It was not until Philip Meadows Taylor’s arrival on the English literary scene in the late 1830s,” James Simmons writes, “that we find a man fully qualified by personal experience, an intimate knowledge of Indian customs and history, and a sympathetic rapport with the Indian people to write intelligently and accurately of the rich experience offered by the vast Indian subcontinent” (154). Taylor explains the origins of *Confessions* in his autobiography: “I wrote and sent home to my father an article on Thuggee, which was shown to Sir Edward Bulwer, who sent me word that had he possessed any local knowledge of India or its people, he would write a romance on the subject; why did I not do so? I pondered over this advice, and hence my novel ‘Confessions of a Thug’” (73). While he embraced Bulwer’s idea, Taylor had strict rules for his romance. What there is of fiction in Taylor’s “almost all true” tale “has been supplied,” he explains in his introduction, “only to connect the events, and make the adventures of Ameer Ali as interesting as the nature of his horrible profession” (vii).

In “connecting these events” with an eye to awakening a potentially reluctant readership, Taylor provides the “one connected statement” of Thuggee that Trevelyan and others suggest is lacking in Sleeman’s bulky account and, even more important, shows that the popular acceptance of the detective requires not propolice reformers’ philosophical arguments but a story. Much as Sleeman was the “one central authority” for information about the Thugs, Taylor, as novelist, was able to give shape to the “hybrid textual activity” produced by the Thug Police’s ethnographic methods and the diverse textual
accounts of their operations.22 As Sleeman made sense of a criminally chaotic India through his maps and glossaries, Taylor made sense of Sleeman’s narrative chaos.23 Taylor initially feared that he would always be in Sleeman’s enormous shadow, but even during their lifetimes, Taylor’s work was by far the more widely read. In a look at “the Secret Societies of Asia—the Assassins and Thugs,” Frederick Holme uses Taylor’s novel rather than Sleeman’s Ramaseeana as the factual source for his claims.24 Histories of the Indian Police tend to cite Taylor’s novel, rather than Sleeman’s tomes, as the reference work of choice on Thuggee.

Holme and the historians are by no means wrong to use the novel as a Thuggee compendium, in that the novel provides almost exactly the same account of the superstitions, omens, rituals, and practices of the Thugs as the work of Sleeman. As Ameer Ali tells of learning the craft from his adoptive Thug father, Taylor uses Thuggee as a map for exploring a wider range of Indian practices and beliefs. By following Ameer Ali’s account of his life as a Thug, the reader is treated to a colorful picture of India, unrivaled until Kipling’s Kimball O’Hara traveled the Grand Trunk road. Mixed in with accounts of such widespread Indian crime as homicidal tigers, torture, nefarious activities of the Dacoits and sundry criminal tribes are attentive descriptions of native festivals as well as a tour of the sites of numerous India cities, from the tombs of the kings of Goldonda to Hyderabad’s Char Minar. Indeed, a contemporary reviewer writing in the Literary Gazette suggests that the authentic portrayal of India contained in this crime novel is its selling point: “the sketches of Oriental manners, customs, and society are alone a high recommendation to this publication. We know not when we have seen them better depicted” (468).

As Taylor’s crime story, like the other Thuggee texts, is inseparable from a story about Indian culture as a whole, his work would seem to be part and parcel of the ethnographic ordering of India, described by David as a “pattern of incremental acquisition of knowledge” that reveals “a determined ambition to conquer (and thus control entirely) the colonized subject through acquiring complete knowledge of that subject” (135). Indeed, Taylor does represent India as a mystery investigated by an observant Englishman. However, the main narrator is the master Thug himself, Ameer Ali. The choice of the criminal as the main narrator, surprising as it is to any reader of late-century detective fiction, is a logical extension of the convention of the other Thuggee narratives to include firsthand testimony in their accounts. However, as Ameer Ali’s testimony takes over practically the entire story, it is less contained and more open to interpretation than Sleeman’s more overtly mastering narratives. Nevertheless, it has been argued that, far from demonstrating Indian agency, Ameer Ali’s status as storyteller demonstrates total contain-
ment. Brantlinger describes Ameer Ali as a perfect subject of imperial panopticism (88). As Ameer Ali politely, indeed effusively, submits his story before the discreetly managerial presence of the Sahib, he is demonstrating the latter’s complete and effortless control—a clear-cut case of the panopticism both Brantlinger and David describe. This is a case other critics have made, as well. “Taylor’s novel,” Robert Grant Williams argues, “hyperbolically anticipates later anthropological studies insofar as it allocates the respective roles of colonized and colonizer according to the hierarchical relationship between confessor and silent, omnipotent interlocutor” (487). Ameer Ali does spontaneously puff British criminal justice, as in this plea to his Sleemanesque arresting officer: “you English are praised for your justice, and long as that list of crimes I never before heard of, you will not deny me a fair hearing and the justice you give to thousands” (330). It is true that Ameer Ali’s status as storyteller does not necessarily render the Sahib less powerful and that the coercion of arresting and imprisoning (not to mention hanging) the Thugs is effaced by the consensual scene of confession—Ameer Ali can come and go as he pleases, often taking as much as a week off between installments. Still, panopticism does not satisfactorily explain this text. Not only have the English been equally criticized as praised for their “justice,” as we saw earlier in this chapter, but Ameer Ali’s sycophantic plea to the officer is accompanied by his unrepentant denial of any crime “I never before heard of,” suggesting the presence of at least one other story.

What is clear in Taylor’s novel, as the Thuggee narratives’ convention of first-person accounts becomes the monologue of a three-dimensional character, is the risk of shaping policing developments to a newly discovered crime while defining justice as the distinction between them. In Confessions of a Thug, Ameer Ali’s in-depth look in the mirror of his criminality contains another reflection: the systematic methods of Thuggee and the methods for suppressing Thuggee are by design the same (i.e., it takes one to know one), while also needing to show—literally—a world of difference.

From the very beginning of the novel, Ameer Ali is conscious of recounting his story not as unthinkable, but as fundamentally intelligible to the British reader. Discussing the practice of Thuggee as a sport, he tells the Sahib, “How many of you English are passionately devoted to sporting. . . . you even risk your lives in its pursuit. How much higher game is a Thug’s!” (2). Thugs claim a divine mandate for their actions. Ameer Ali laughingly tells the unenlightened Sahib, “Ah! . . . I can never persuade you that I was fully authorized to commit them, and only a humble instrument in the hands of Allah” (178). The British, too, represent themselves as instruments of God, an analogy Sleeman makes, perhaps unwittingly, when he explains that
because Thuggee was “founded in the faith of religious ordinance and dispensation . . . nothing but the interposition, under Providence, of the supreme government . . . could possibly extirpate it” (1839, 108). The lifeblood of Thuggee, as for the Thug Police, is information. Thuggee requires information specialists, “sothas” or “inveiglers,” who “skilled in the arts of deception . . . enter into conversation, and insinuate themselves by obsequious attentions into the confidence of travellers” (Wright 132). Ameer Ali considers his own work as an inveigler as one of the Fine Arts. “To my perception,” he announces, “the whole art consists in having a smooth tongue in one’s head” (258). However, his aesthetic distinctions are not limited to his own actions. He is a vibrant critic of the whole spectrum of violence India provides. During a lull in Thuggee activity, Ameer Ali travels with some Pindaris but is ultimately disgusted at their “thick-headed” penchant for violence rather than the Thug practice of “a little management and a few soft words” (235). With the Pindaris’s method of reckless pillaging “order . . . was completely at an end” and Ameer Ali and his Thugs “had no inclination to join in the excesses,” he explains, “for a Thug is not savage” (237).

While his account confirms the rampant criminality of India, his position as critic, as an almost scientific observer of local cultural practices, again holds a mirror up to the work the Thug Police and by extension English readers do. As the English relocate the story of their own violence onto the Thugs, Ameer Ali reinvents his own violence as necessary, indeed beneficial, in the context of widespread savagery. Ameer Ali describes a particular killing where his victims were not innocent travelers, but rather a bunch of bloodthirsty criminals, and suggests that the townspeople, upon finding the victims, “all agreed that a great benefit had been done by unknown agents” (135). Just as the English claim to do, Thugs here see themselves as doing something for rather than to India—and the Sahib does not contradict Ameer Ali’s representation of events. Such native discrimination about murder complicates the necessary criteria being put into place by Macaulay, Sleeman, and ostensibly Taylor for evaluating when murder is a crime and when it is a punishment, when it introduces a better way of life (the Sahib’s perspective) and when it preserves one (Ameer Ali’s). The advice given to Ameer Ali by his Thug father is the same as that being given to those new officers of the Metropolitan Police: “Be firm, be courageous, be subtle, be faithful; more you need not” (17). The similarity between the methods of thieves and thief takers, to use turn-of-the-century terms, was a chief obstacle to public acceptance of the police in the early-nineteenth century, and Ameer Ali’s story, in its invested compartmentalization of cultural violence, is too close for comfort. If the relatively silent Sahib were to speak, he might protest too much.
For a book dedicated to individuals “vigorously prosecuting those admirable measures for the suppression of Thuggee,” then, Taylor demonstrates a strange sympathy for his creation, a tone commented on by the Literary Gazette reviewer: “[Thuggee] has been described to us so vividly as to impart a fearful sympathy and ardour even to our breasts in listening to the tale” (466). Taylor is not simply an unusually soft-hearted administrator. As we saw earlier, Sleeman’s own strange sympathy for the Thugs enabled him to understand and ultimately master their system. Even Parks, upon witnessing the indifferent way in which executed Thugs met their death, suggests that the stoicism of “these wretches . . . had it been in a better cause . . . would have excited universal sympathy” (1:201). Like Mary Shelley’s Romantic monster, Ameer Ali’s freedom to tell his whole story rather than just the criminal highlights demonstrates his family values. While “these monsters,” the Literary Gazette reviewer explains, “are influenced by a religious principle in the deliberate strangling of every victim they can inveigle within their snares . . . in the natural affections for their own parents, wives, brothers, sisters, children, and friends, they seem to feel the opposite emotions with equal strength and intensity” (466). “Have I not ever been a kind husband and a faithful friend?” Ameer Ali asks the Sahib:

Did I not love my children and wife. . . . Where is the man existing who can say a word against Ameer Ali’s honour? . . . Have I ever broken a social tie? . . . Even failed in my duty or my trust?” When the Thug defends himself, the Sahib does not attack the veracity of his claims, but rather reminds him that “seven hundred murder. . . . make a fearful balance against you. (178)

Ameer Ali is shown to have full entries on both sides of the balance sheet, and his almost childlike faith in the righteousness of his actions is not lost on the Sahib, who confesses:

Although the mind would ordinarily reject sympathy with the joys or sorrows of a murderer like Ameer Ali, one so deeply stained with crime of the most revolting nature, yet for the moment I was moved to see, that after the lapse of nearly twenty years, by his account, the simple mention of the death of his favourite child could so much effect him, even to tears, and they were genuine. (214)

Taylor again pulls his punches about Ameer Ali’s criminality as he has him commit the most horrid crime, killing his sister, while presenting it as an Oedipus-like tragedy: He does not know the victim is his sister until he sees an amulet identical to his around her lifeless neck.
Taylor’s problematic prostration before the narrative powers and strange humanity of Ameer Ali illustrates the contemporary problem that motivated a new story about the police: When it comes down to two stories, that of the criminal and that of the detective, which can be trusted? Can the Sahib’s relative silence in *Confessions of a Thug* be read as a tacit confession of a bad cop? In conclusion, I will suggest why Taylor, who as an administrator was entirely aware of the precarious police mission and their uphill climb toward acceptance, might have given center stage to the master Thug.

If the precarious position of this text stems from the inevitable sympathy the Sahib, as well as readers, feel for such a fully drawn character, it is a necessary risk. Taylor recognizes, as Sleeman and Macaulay did, that sympathy, rather than force, must be the battleground because it is the *only* battle that the militarily and economically superior British still need to win abroad—and indeed at home, as demonstrated by the public relations disaster of Peterloo. All of the writers of the Thuggee texts are aware of both the necessity for and the elusiveness of a benevolent authority, and this is precisely why the figure of the detective, passively engaged in the acquisition and ordering of knowledge, is so attractive. Indicating that English readers and writers are aware of the old story that the new, more sympathetic story of British justice replaces, Holme represents the suppression of Thuggee as the making of amends for the Bloody Code of earlier British “justice”; if under the vigilance of the British Government in India... this monstrous hybrid of superstition and cruelty is destined to be finally eradicated, a title will thus be earned to the gratitude of the natives of India, which alone will make the benefits of our later administration more than atone for the injustice and rapacity which marked our early acquisitions of Indian territory. (244)

So important is this principle to Taylor’s idea of Empire, it forms his last word in his autobiography:

One word, one last reflection in regard to India, may not be out of place. It is to advise all who go there in whatever capacity, or whatever position they may hold,—use true courtesy to natives of all degrees. My experience has taught me that large masses of men are more easily led than driven, and that courtesy and kindness and firmness will gain many a point which, under a hard and haughty bearing, would prove unattainable. (464)

Spoken like the propolice reformers’ ideal officer.

If the Sahib’s sympathetic ear enables the Thug to justify himself, it simul-
taneously justifies the Sahib as someone given to sympathy rather than force. When the Sahib does interrupt Ameer Ali, it is to provide a moral, not a juridical clarity. For example, when Ameer Ali describes how he killed a man who offered him food, the Sahib exclaims, “And so you murdered the first man who had shown you any kindness after your misfortunes. Oh, Ameer Ali, you are indeed a villain” (303). When the Sahib hears Ameer Ali confess to a crime considered taboo even by Thugs, the killing of a woman, the Sahib cries “Wretch! . . . hadst thou no pity, no remorse, for one so young and so lovely?” Ameer Ali, confined, unlike the Sahib, by his immutable nature, simply responds, “I might have felt it Sahib, but . . . had I not eaten the goor of the Tuponee?” (201). Unlike the unrepentant Ameer Ali, the Sahib here employs the Thug’s strategy of “a little management and a few soft words,” as he represents a changed policing.

If this powerful English sympathy is the work of the New Police, then the work of the new detective story, represented by Confessions of a Thug, is to popularize this very story of moral ascendance over both criminals and criminal policing. This new narrative economy is driven by curiosity, not by force. The long-winded Ameer Ali fears that the Sahib has grown “tired of my minuteness” (197). The Sahib, who has earlier suggested that he grows “more and more interested in it,” replies not with the command of a captor but with the weary encouragement of a captive audience, “No . . . I suppose you have some object in it, therefore go on” (197). Ameer Ali understands this new narrative strategy of using mystery to engage and detection to educate a distant and perhaps too-sluggish readership:

I fear that I have often wearied you by the minute relation of my history; but I have told all, nor concealed from you one thought, one feeling, much less any act which at this distance of time I can remember. Possibly you may have recorded what may prove fearfully interesting to your friends. If it be so, your end is answered. (338)

Whatever concerns about the “Englishness” of the police that the Thuggee narratives assuaged for the Victorian reader, these narratives again unsettle for the critic. While the phenomenon of Thuggee afforded a reimagination of the English police, the imperial context of this invention requires that we reexamine both those histories of the gradual expansion of British police from the metropolitan center and accounts of British power abroad. The popular accounts of the Thug Police give a form both to an uncertain organization and to a genre here beginning to do what nineteenth-century detective fiction will continue to do: narrativize (not always confidently) the necessity of detection
in an imperial world. But while former Police Commissioner Horwood rec-
ognized this as a story that would be at home with detective fiction readers,
writing that “this true record [of Thuggee] is of overwhelming interest . . . to
others who, judging by the display of Detective Novels on Railway
Bookstalls, are thrilled by works upon crime” (v–vi), not everyone has made
the connection because of Thuggee’s colonial context. These Thuggee narra-
tives also require, then, that we reexamine the history of the detective narra-
tive, seeing crucial developments in this emerging genre as originating in an
imperial world, from darkest London to darkest Africa, understanding detec-
tive narratives not as insular, ratiocinative puzzles, but as a genre that inter-
prets many different, but all imperial, forms of writing for a British reading
public.

The detective story aims to make the formerly foreign police into embod-
iments of English values; in so doing, it must “discover” the detective and his
story as a domestic product, a gradual and natural extension of English
curiosity and characteristic vigilance, rather than the creation of an imperial
culture. Hence, Inspector Field, Dickens’s real-life symbol of the homegrown
vigilance of the New Police and, as the model for Bucket, the figure largely
taken to cast the mold for the English detective.25 But when we imagine Field
patrolling, as he would have, the exhibitions of the 1850s, perhaps passing the
booth of Thugs from Jubbulpore prison that so delighted Victoria’s son Bertie
during an 1857 visit, we must recognize that the Indian murderers taken in
by Field’s compassionately omnivorous eyes are not the only imports.