Fanny Parkes (1794–1875)

Female collecting and curiosity in India and Britain

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On 9 December 1834 an exuberant, rather plump, Englishwoman who had celebrated her fortieth birthday the day before set off up the Jumna river from Allahabad in the Northern Provinces in India in a two-masted pinnace (sailing boat), the Seagull, her only companions the 22-strong Indian male crew. Her husband, the Collector of Customs in Allahabad, would join her for a few days if he could get leave from his employer, the East India Company (EIC). Following the Seagull was the cook boat containing goods for the voyage: live sheep, goats and chickens; wine and other provisions; servants included a dhobi (washer-man); and the crew of nine. They travelled from six o’clock in the morning to seven in the evening, anchoring at night and with armed watchmen on shore. The frequent storms, the contrary current, the treacherous rocks in the river, the uncharted sandbanks, the risk of being plundered by robbers – all combined to make this a hazardous but thrilling journey for a woman who craved excitement to counter the boredom of life for a childless Englishwoman in the Indian mofussil (countryside). Who cared what colonial society thought of this enterprise? Certainly not the indefatigable wanderer: Fanny Parkes.

Following Fanny’s death in 1875, on 17 February 1876, Fanny’s first cousin, Clement Robert Archer Esq, presented a copy of Fanny’s account of her travels in India, entitled Wanderings of a Pilgrim in Search of the Picturesque (see Figure 6.1), to the India Museum in London. One month later another relative, J. Coutts Antrobus Esq of Eaton Hall,
Figure 6.1 Frontispiece *Wanderings of a Pilgrim in Search of the Picturesque*, vol. 1 British Library digital copy p.13; print copy facing i and i. © The British Library Board, 1947. b 170 vol.1 frontispiece.
Congleton, presented three sculptures to the same museum: two pieces of carved dark grey sandstone, now in the British Museum collection, which Fanny had obtained from a fisherman living on the banks of the Ganges, and a piece of white carved stone acquired by Fanny in Pooree (now Puri) in 1844. These three sculptures, together with a large and disparate collection of other artefacts gathered together by Fanny and Charles Parkes during their 23 years’ residence in India, were brought back to England in the Essex, which left Calcutta in September 1845, and arrived at Folkestone in January 1846.

The collection and Fanny Parkes’ published recollections of her travels in India appear to have given her a public legitimacy and authority lacking before she went to the subcontinent. As a young woman she was a typical product of her background and upbringing in a military family, ‘eminent in beauty as in talent … wounding many a heart’, before finding a role for herself: that of traveller, collector and ethnographer. India and her experiences there changed her and enabled her to construct a new identity for herself. ‘Whatever the wandering traveller says, he does so from having seen that of which he speaks’ was the oriental proverb she quoted in the opening pages of Wanderings of a Pilgrim, emphasizing the veracity of her enterprise. ‘Knowing India first-hand’ was a claim frequently made by travel writers of the period when attempting to add authority and authenticity to this literary aspect of the imperial project. Fanny’s sense of ‘knowing’ was enhanced by gathering objects from the subcontinent and by sharing her acquired knowledge with a public eager to see the ‘curiosities, the monsters and the idols’ that she took with her when she left India forever.

Historian Maya Jasanoff argues that collectors ‘shared one crucial characteristic: all of them used objects to advertise, hone or shape their social personae. Collecting was a means of self-fashioning’. Fanny’s enthusiasms appear in her own account so unfeignedly artless as she gathers people, customs and curiosities on her travels through India, that it is hard to see a conscious self-fashioning in her actions, certainly while she was living in India. Yet in writing of her collecting as artless enthusiasm, Wanderings suggests that Fanny distinctly wished to be understood as someone who had formed knowledge and expertise through ‘authentic’ experience. With little means of corroborating the events that Parkes described in Wanderings, it is difficult to ascertain the exact nature of her experiences in India and the gaps between those experiences and the stories she told about them. Rather than work towards ascertaining such knowledge, this chapter instead focuses on analyzing the stories Parkes did tell and seeks
to understand their meanings and effect. This chapter principally uses Fanny Parkes’ published work *Wanderings of a Pilgrim*, to analyze the ways in which she sought to present herself to the public on her return to Britain. Alongside *Wanderings*, it looks to the objects she collected and how she in turn curated these for audiences in Britain in the mid-nineteenth century. When she returned to the metropole, this chapter argues, her writings and collection lent her authority in an almost exclusively masculine society of Indian ‘experts’. She gained entrée to a social world to which she might not otherwise have been admitted and formed ‘a life independent of her own life’. On returning to Britain then, she publicly utilized her collection to validate and enhance her experiences. In analyzing these writings and practices of exhibition, this chapter seeks to show how a woman linked to the EIC was able to use her experiences of the subcontinent to effect on her return. While other chapters in this volume are largely concerned with the material and social gains (or losses) derived by male service to the EIC, this chapter underlines the particular advantages that women could garner.

Alongside contributing to studies of EIC officials and imperial service, this chapter also seeks to engage with histories of collecting. Building on the work of other scholars, it underlines the importance of female practice of collecting in particular. The chapter finds that previous studies of collecting as a phenomenon, from the age of the ‘cabinet of curiosity’ to the present, have focussed overwhelmingly on male collectors – men whose professional lives and wealth often gave them privileged access to exotic plants, animals, artwork and objects. In consequence, we have a much more detailed understanding of the Company men whose collecting helped to furnish the British country house and later many British museums. This chapter, however, illustrates the way in which one Company woman took advantage of her colonial experiences to collect, describe and display Indian material culture. At the same time, it demonstrates how her collections, their display and description, generated a perception of ‘expertise’, which gave her legitimacy in the male-dominated world of collecting, as well as status and independence in metropolitan society.

**Who was Fanny Parkes?**

Frances Susanna Archer was born on 8 December 1794 in Conwy, North Wales, and baptized there on 22 January 1795. Her father was
Captain William Archer, formerly of the 16th Lancers, her mother Ann Archer, née Goodhew. She had an older sister, Anne Augustine, who, like Fanny, lived in India. On 25 March 1822, Fanny, 27 years old, talented and beautiful, married 23-year-old Charles Crawford Parkes (1798–1854), a Writer in the East India Company.11 Arriving in Calcutta later that same year, Fanny and Charles rented a house in Chowringhee. Charles attended Fort William College and worked as assistant to the Collector of Sea Customs, Calcutta while waiting for a more permanent and better-paid position up country. Fanny learnt how to run a house with a multitude of servants, enjoyed riding her Arab horse on the Maidan at dusk after the heat of the day, took lessons in Hindi and Sanskrit, and started to explore the intricacies of Indian culture. In particular, she also became ‘very anxious to visit a zenâna [harem]’, and to witness the lives of the high-class Indian women kept in seclusion behind its closed doors.12

Fanny was 35 years old in 1830 when she and Charles moved to Cawnpore, where Charles had the post of Acting Collector of Customs. Childless, with servants aplenty (in 1831 Fanny calculated that they had 57, and needed an additional 14 in the hot months), there was little to occupy such a spirited and adventurous woman in Cawnpore’s limited social setting.13 Restless and underemployed, Fanny looked for and found a temporary cure in travel, preferably on horseback: ‘Roaming about with a good tent and a good Arab [horse], one might be happy for ever in India,’ she wrote in her journal in 1838. ‘Oh! the pleasure of vagabondizing over India!’14 Fanny Eden, sister of Governor General Lord Auckland, commented acidly that ‘[Mrs Parkes] has a husband who always goes mad in the cold season, so she says it is due to herself to leave him and travel about … she informed us she was an independent woman and was going to travel to Simla by herself – which sounded very independent indeed.’15 Fanny herself never mentioned Charles’s reaction to the weather, hot or cold; from remarks in her journal, it is clear that it was Fanny who suffered most from the heat – and boredom.16

Finally, in September 1832, Charles was appointed Collector of Customs at Allahabad, a permanent posting. Fanny, temporarily back from her travels, enthused about the place which was an enormous improvement on Cawnpore. There were ‘dinner-parties more than enough; balls occasionally; a book society; some five or six billiard-tables, a pack of dogs … and (how could I have forgotten!) fourteen spinsters!’17 What’s more, there were officers aplenty to ride with, even if she and her horse ended up in quicksand or she was inadvertently dunked
in the river, adventures she related with great gusto in her journal. She was clearly a woman whose company young officers sought, in spite of Fanny Eden’s barbed opinion that she had ‘once been a beauty’ but was now ‘abundantly fat and lively’. Despite such excitements, however, the dinner parties of Allahabad were not enough for Fanny and for the rest of her time in India she travelled frequently and extensively.

In August 1835 she went to Fatighar where she met – the Baiza Bai, ex-Queen of Gwalior. She returned to Allahabad in October. By July 1836 once again she was finding life ‘weary and heavy … one’s mind and body feel equally enervated’. In September 1836 she was invited to accompany Sir Henry Fane’s party and to act as interpreter for the Baiza Bai in Benares, then carried on to Calcutta and did not return to Allahabad until March 1837. By August 1837 she was bored again (‘nothing to relate in the monotony of an Indian life at home … I … must go to the hills to recruit my weary frame’) and in September she started preparing for a march ‘up the country’, leaving in December 1837. Lord Auckland and his sisters, Emily and Fanny Eden, were en route up country too, stopping in Allahabad in early December. Fanny was introduced to the sisters, then became something of a camp follower, shadowing the Auckland camp wherever it went on its leisurely progress, her presence irritating the Edens and prompting a satirical account by (the very thin) Fanny Eden in one of her letters home:

How odd of me not to have told you that the very first person I saw at the very first ball at Meerut was Mrs Parkes. How she got there nobody knows and nobody will ever know. The day after we got here they got up a morning review for us – blew up mines and took a fort, and not only a fort but Mrs Parkes, for as the smoke blew off she was discovered riding. If she were not so fat I should say she was something supernatural. My spirit is broke about her. I dare say we shall find her settled in our home at Simla and shall not have strength to turn her out.

Fanny Eden’s comments may have been underpinned by a certain amount of envy of her namesake’s apparent freedom from the claustrophobic demands that were her lot as the Governor General’s sister as well as the frustrations of the provincialism of the British in India with whom she was obliged to socialize. Her sister Emily Eden’s sharp comment that up-country Europeans had had their civilized manners ‘jungled out of them’, echoed Fanny’s opinions. Clearly Fanny Parkes was perceived to
have gone beyond the bounds of respectability. As David Arnold argues, the jungle, with its dangerous wild animals and bandits, symbolized the ruination of India in many contemporary travel writers’ accounts. Fanny Parkes was, by association, herself ruined.

In September 1838, while Fanny was travelling in the Himalayan foothills, she received word from Charles that her father had died the previous May. She returned to Allahabad immediately and sailed by the next available ship from Calcutta, arriving in England in May 1839. England, to Fanny, ‘looked so wretchedly mean, especially the houses’, while Fanny, to her mother – who had not seen her daughter for 17 years – had changed completely: ‘My child, I should never have known you, – you look so anxious, so careworn.’ Another sign of how different England was from India – and how much India had changed Fanny – was revealed to her when she visited a horticultural show in Plymouth: ‘I went to the place alone, and the people expressed their surprise at my having done so – how absurd! as if I were to be a prisoner unless some lady should accompany me – wah! wah! I shall never be tamed, I trust, to the ideas of propriety of civilized Lady Log.’ It is ironic that it was precisely by travelling to India, where Britons believed women to enjoy few rights, that Fanny was to enjoy exceptional freedom of movement.

Her mother died in December 1841 and Fanny remained in Europe until early 1843 when she heard that Charles was ill in Cape Town and went to look after him; they had been apart for four years. They returned to India, and finally to Allahabad, in December 1844. As Charles’ health did not improve, he applied to go to England on furlough and they left India nine months later, in September 1845. They would never return. Charles did not recover from the illness that brought him back to England. He died in 1854 while Fanny lived on for another 20 years. She died, aged 81, in 1875 of ‘shingles and exhaustion’ at her home in Cornwall Terrace, Regent’s Park. She was buried in Kensal Green cemetery where she shares a grave with her husband (see Figure 6.2).

**Wanderings of a Pilgrim in Search of the Picturesque**

Fanny and Charles settled first in St Leonards-on-Sea in Sussex on their return from India in 1846. In the 1820s, James Burton had developed the town into a seaside resort and it seems that Fanny and Charles were living in a seaside villa. Fanny constructed her account of her travels...
in India by using her journals and the long letters she had written to her mother, finishing her tale with a revealing ‘Farewell’:

And now the pilgrim resigns her staff and plucks the scallop-shell from her hat, – her wanderings are ended – she has quitted the East, perhaps for ever: – surrounded... by the curiosities, the monsters, and the idols that accompanied her from India... the pleasure she derives from her sketches, and the sad sea waves, her constant companions, form for her a life independent of her own life.32
Fanny had ‘collected an empire’ for herself that liberated her from the constraints of life in the metropole and through the exotic objects she had acquired she gained an independence – ‘a life independent of her own life’ – that opened a new world for her. Her detailed and valuable knowledge of another culture and her understanding of its social world – particularly that of the zenana, a world closed to men – gave her status in a metropolitan, masculine society. Her collection, initially a jumble of ‘the curiosities, the monsters, and the idols’ as she described it, had been acquired haphazardly, as the fancy took her. It now assumed an importance as a discrete entity, allowing those British men and women who saw it to visualize their empire.

Wanderings of a Pilgrim was published in a handsome two-volume edition in 1850, priced £2 12s 6d and illustrated throughout with Fanny’s own sketches and paintings (see Figure 6.3). Many of the contemporary reviews of the book were generous, indeed waxed ecstatic: ‘Fresh, intelligent, and minutely interesting’ (The Court Journal); ‘This … is a very splendid, very attractive work’ (The Asiatic and Colonial Quarterly Journal); ‘The tone of bold and careless frankness in which this interesting and instructive work is...
written, is singularly attractive’ (The English Review) and finally, ‘… one of the most beautiful monuments of genius, taste, feeling … without parade, ostentation, or intrusive aims at vulgar popularity … ’ (Blackwood’s Lady’s Magazine). Others, however, were violently critical: ‘The flippancy and levity … with which she refers to her own faith, savour more of the cock-pit than the boudoir…in future editions…we trust to see every thing undeniable indecent or profane carefully expunged from the work’ (Calcutta Review). The extreme reactions to Fanny Parkes’ ‘authentic’ depiction of life in the colonies expressed in these reviews is interesting and point to a fracture in attitude by writers in two very different locations, towards what was acceptable in the metropole and in an outpost of Empire.

Just as critics in the 1850s proved both generously receptive and unstintingly appalled by Parkes’ writings, her work today continues to attract a range of responses. Often understood as deeply problematic by historians and literary scholars for its homogenizing depictions of colonial subjects, Wanderings of a Pilgrim in Search of the Picturesque continues to fuel debate. Nevertheless, focusing on Fanny Parkes as an avid collector of Indian material culture allows us to see how men and women within the Company’s ambit often engaged with multiple aspects of Indian society, seeking out meaningful ways of communicating with indigenous peoples and entering with enthusiasm into the Indian Ocean World. While created for public audiences, her writings and collection also served private purposes. The objects she purchased and returned with served to act as ‘traces of authentic experience’, incorporating memories of a more adventurous and independent life in India, unimaginable had she stayed in England. Fanny shared her love for India with others through the journals and letters, which were published as Wanderings of a Pilgrim; she painted and drew vivid scenes, which were reproduced in her book; and she created a visual journey for the public with her ‘Grand Moving Diorama of Hindostan’. In publishing her writings and making them available to a wider audience and in creating exhibitions from her writings and collection, Parkes self-consciously sought to use her experiences to greater effect. They provided a space in which her experiences of India and the stories she wished to tell of them could shape a broader conception of who she was and what she had achieved.

The ‘Grand Moving Diorama of Hindostan’

In 1851, the year of The Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of All Nations, Fanny instigated and funded the construction of a ‘Grand
Moving Diorama of Hindostan’, which was staged at the Asiatic Gallery in the Baker Street Bazaar.\(^42\) India, Britain’s ‘jewel in the crown’, featured centre-stage at the Great Exhibition, the EIC itself having been one of the most enthusiastic supporters of the enterprise from its inception. The Company’s Directors saw the Exhibition as an opportunity to astonish visitors with exquisitely crafted riches from Britain’s Eastern Empire.\(^43\) They also saw it as a way of promoting a new self-image through the display of objects from the subcontinent.\(^44\) The Exhibition constituted an important means of recreating India as spectacle and justifying further imperial endeavours on the subcontinent.

In contrast, the Grand Moving Diorama of Hindostan offered not objects but vistas, visual evocations of the landscapes of India, specifically those seen from India’s most sacred river, the Ganges. As such, it provided an important source of context to the Great Exhibition’s display of astonishing objects made in India. In fact, the description that survives makes it clear that Fanny’s diorama was no run-of-the-mill affair and was modelled on the moving dioramas invented by Daguerre. Panoramas and dioramas were a popular attraction in the first half of the nineteenth century. While panoramas were essentially very large, realistic, paintings of a scene, dioramas, which also used painted backdrops, introduced a three-dimensional element to the viewing experience.

Daguerre’s diorama, first shown in Paris in 1822, was brought to London in 1823 and erected in a special building constructed in Regent’s Park at a cost of £10,000.\(^45\) The Daguerre diorama depended on clever lighting effects and a revolving auditorium that moved the sizeable audience (the Regent’s Park diorama accommodated 200 people; the original diorama in Paris could hold an audience of 350) from one scene to another. The enormous painted scenes (22 metres wide by 14 metres high), ingeniously lit with a system of screens and shutters and worked with pulleys and counterweights, were so convincing that few in the audience thought they were looking at a painting. Some dioramas had sound effects and songs, some a piano accompaniment, but the strongest impression was that of brilliant illusion caused by the subtly changing lighting.\(^46\) Much was made of the fact that this was a form of armchair travel, the *Journal de Paris* of 22 July 1822 urging Parisians ‘who like pleasure without fatigue to make the journey to Switzerland and to England without leaving the capital’.\(^47\)

The success of Daguerre’s diorama led to a mass of imitators and variations on the original idea (amongst them inventions with names such as Hydrorama and Uranorama\(^48\)), but even as late as 1851 a
London guide book was still of the opinion that the original diorama was ‘decidedly superior, both to the Panorama and the Cosmorama, in the fidelity with which the objects are depicted, and in the completeness of the illusion ... and it is difficult for the spectator to persuade himself that he is only contemplating a work of art’.49 Constructed in 1851, Fanny’s ‘Grand Moving Diorama’ came in on the tail end of the craze caused by Daguerre, but was nevertheless a success, in part due to astute marketing and publicity by Fanny and her collaborators. In a move that would endear her to philanthropic societies and educational reformers, Blackwood’s Lady’s Magazine reported that ‘In the spirit of true liberality, Mrs. Parkes admits daily fifty or sixty children (gratis) from the National and Parochial schools of London; for the enlightenment of these young students in religion and useful learning’.50 This largesse by Fanny may account for the florid prose of the same magazine’s appreciation of Fanny’s diorama:

The DIORAMA OF HINDOSTAN (where its immortalised origina- tor is herself a frequent visitor), constructed in the splendid gal- leries recently annexed, at her own proper cost, to the Baker Street Bazaar, is confessedly the most extraordinary exhibition that has appeared in the present century... The painting is in the highest finish of body colour, realising the most exquisite atmospheri- cal effects, and frequently affecting the senses by its sublime and almost incomprehensible truthfulness... In the course of less than two delightful hours, the spectator traces the river Ganges from Fort William, Calcutta, through Barrackpore, Benares, Mirzapur, Allahabad, and Hurdwar, to its source in the Himalaya mountains... There, at length... the mystical fount is seen to flow; the spirit of solitude fills the dread eminence, and a mysterious, unaccountable dread steals over the mind of the audience, in the presence of night descending on a scene, whose awful features may best be conceived from their effect on the nerves, as the curtain terminates the exhibi- tion, and the breathless silence of intense and gazing admiration.... The spectacle, now within reach of even the humbler classes, is, in fact, a boon to our population... we may now set foot on the banks of the Hooghly... through the instrumentality of one single, high-born, highly-gifted, persevering, and amiable woman, whose labours, 'non sibi sed alitis,' have provided one of the more purely intellectual and heart-touching gratifications ever yet offered for the enlightenment, the entertainment, and, we might add, the honour of her nation.51
The ‘Grand Moving Diorama of Hindostan’ was sufficiently popular for it to be exhibited in Hull in 1853, although the transport of the equipment from London to Hull would have been a challenging exercise. If able to catch the Diorama before its move north, London visitors would have enjoyed the additional attraction of being ‘allowed to inspect THE MUSEUM’ – in other words, Fanny’s cabinet of curiosities.\textsuperscript{52}

The cabinet of curiosities

The cabinet of curiosities first appeared in continental Europe in the mid-sixteenth century, largely collected by the nobility. Frances Bacon wrote that they were ‘in a small compass, a model of universal nature made private’.\textsuperscript{53} They were essentially collections of artefacts, of anything that took the collector’s fancy, in what Tony Bennett has described as the ‘jumbled incongruity’ that was in time supplanted and surpassed by the museum.\textsuperscript{54} In Germany they were called \textit{wunderkammer}, in Italy \textit{stanzino}, and there were collections in Russia. Britain was ‘notably absent’ from early lists of universal cabinets, although the royal gardeners, father and son John and John Tradescant, gathered together a collection of objects in the first half of the seventeenth century that was to become the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford.\textsuperscript{55} The first cabinets were literally that – a cabinet, in which small objects could be displayed. Later, as collections grew, the display space was a specially designed room, until a collection became so big that it was impossible to show it in a single space. Sir Hans Sloane (1660–1753), for instance, collected over 100,000 objects, which were to eventually form the basis of the British Museum collection.\textsuperscript{56}

Tony Bennett extends Michel Foucault’s exploration of power and knowledge relations seen in the spaces of the asylum, the clinic and the prison to include the cabinets of curiosity that were essentially under private ownership and had restricted access to the privileged few. With public displays such as that of the Great Exhibition of 1851, collections of objects were opened up to the public and created spaces in which people were increasingly taught how to act and be, creating self-regulating citizens in their wake.\textsuperscript{57} Similarly, Fanny’s own ‘Cabinet of Curiosities’ (or her ‘Museum’ as she now termed it) was made available to visitors to the Grand Moving Diorama of Hindostan and seen by many. It thereby became part of a metropolitan process of education in empire and imperial culture, providing a space in which Britons living far from imperial dominions learned to look and engage with others through imperial eyes.
In writing about her collecting practices in *Wanderings of a Pilgrim*, Fanny Parks’s approach to collecting curiosities can be seen as distinctly unsystematic and driven more by an eclectic inquisitiveness, an enthusiastic grasping of the moment, than by the wish to build a well-organized group of objects illustrating defined aspects of Indian culture. In marking out her collecting practices as eclectic and curious, Fanny connected them to earlier (often male) traditions. Gavin Lucas has noted that, ‘One of the most striking aspects of much early collecting is the lack of distinction among objects; curiosities formed a generic group, where items such as fossils, butterflies, tribal weapons, and antiquities might all jostle side by side in a collector’s cabinet’ but adds that, ‘In a sense, the “fieldwork”, if one can use the term, of early modern collectors largely involved visiting other collections and dealers, rather than travelling to the source of such curiosities’, which was not true of Fanny who was usually to be found ‘travelling to the source’.58

These souvenirs of her time in India became more important to Fanny on her return to England. They represented a lived experience and could be organized for her private satisfaction or public view. Susan Stewart, in exploring the meaning of the souvenir, points to the way in which it ‘speaks to a context of origin through a language of longing … it is not an object arising out of need or use value; [but] … out of the necessarily insatiable demands of nostalgia’.59 Fanny’s nostalgic needs were met not only by her curiosities, but by her writing about them, by sharing her longing through the medium of her published journals, and reliving the events through her ‘Grand Moving Diorama of Hindostan’. In addition, these actions gave her agency in a society where once she would have been largely invisible, enabling her to construct a new identity for herself from the experiences of a life lived to the full in India, notwithstanding her exclusion (as a woman) from formal Company employment.

Fanny Parkes appears to have begun collecting her curiosities in 1830, eight years after her arrival in India. She and Charles were by then living in the mofussil, in Cawnpore, a large station ‘on a bleak, dreary, sandy, dusty, treeless plain, cut into ravines by torrents of rain’ and unbearably hot.60 The first item she acquired was a lathi, a large, heavy weapon made from bamboo and banded with iron, which had been confiscated from a man who had killed two others with it. Fanny reported that she took it ‘as a curiosity’, an impulse that seems to have fuelled many of her moves when acquiring objects.61 Not long afterwards, in October 1830, she was given a set of Thugs’ dice by the acting magistrate in Cawnpore, the Thugs having been arrested and executed for the murder of 35 travellers.62 Her last purchase, bought in Cape Town in 1845
when she and Charles were on their way back to England, having left India for good, was a ‘kaross [cloak] of eighteen heads’ for which she paid four pounds. ‘It is very large and handsome,’ Fanny wrote, adding that: ‘With the exception of the kaross the Kafir is entirely unincumbered with clothing.’

Most of her acquisitions, however, were made in Allahabad between the years 1831 and 1845. She largely purchased these wares at the great fair (now called the Kumbh Mela, although Fanny’s term for it is Bura Mela) held annually on the banks of the Ganges at its confluence with the Jumna, being the site of enthusiastic commercial activity as well as intense religious worship. This location, which even today is to Hindus one of the most sacred sites of their most sacred river, reaches a peak of religious significance every 12 years and is celebrated with a Maha Kumbh Mela which millions of pilgrims attend.

On 2 February 1832 Fanny wrote that she ‘went to the Bura Mela, the great annual fair on the sands of the Ganges, and purchased bows and arrows, some curious Indian ornaments, and a few fine pearls’. But her ethnographic interest lay more broadly than curious objects, writing in the same paragraph about one of the fakirs (holy men) at the fair:

On the sands were a number of devotees, of whom the most holy person had made a vow, that for fourteen years he would spend every night up to his neck in the Ganges; nine years he has kept his vow: at sunset he enters the river, is taken out at sunrise, rubbed into warmth, and placed by a fire; he... is apparently about thirty years of age, very fat and jovial, and does not appear to suffer in the slightest degree from his penance.

One year later, in January 1833, Fanny visited the fair once again. In Wanderings, she noted that the area had been filled with commercial and sacred booths, and that it had attracted ‘merchants from all parts of India’. At the booths ‘Very good diamonds, pearls, coral, shawls, cloth, woollens, China, furs, &c., are to be purchased.’ She also chose to relate an amusing story against herself, of how she bought a ‘remarkably fine’ pink coral necklace at this fair; and how some years later a friend of hers, a Mahratta lady, seeing her wearing the beads, exclaimed: ‘I am astonished a mem sahiba should wear coral; we only decorate our horses with it.’ Fanny immediately gave her necklace to her horse.

The fair took place over a period of two months, offering many opportunities for finding curiosities. Amongst other things, she bought ‘a Persian writing-case, and a book beautifully illuminated, and written
in Persian and Arabic: the Moguls beguile me of my rupees’ as well as two musical instruments and other ‘curious things; Hindoo ornaments, idols, china’, she reflected. It was at this fair that Fanny bought her most splendid and beloved curiosity, a huge white marble statue of Guneshu weighing some three hundredweight, painted and gilded. Growing wise to the ways of the merchants, she ‘sent a Rajput to the owner, and, after much delay and bargaining, became the possessor. … The man had scruples with regard to allowing me to purchase the idol, but sold it willingly to the Rajput.’

Fanny related that (see Figure 6.1) ‘Although a pukka Hindu, Ganesh has crossed the Kala Pani or Black Waters, as they call the ocean, and has accompanied me to England. There he sits before me in all his Hindu state and peculiar style of beauty – my inspiration – my penates.’

Fanny clearly gained a reputation for collecting curiosities and frequently described objects she had been given. In May 1832 she wrote that a friend gave her ‘a pair of the most magnificent cow-tails, of the yak or cow of Thibet’, adding that ‘They are great curiosities, and shall go with my collection to England’. These cow-tails feature in the frontispiece illustration to Wanderings of a Pilgrim, at its centre the huge marble Ganesh, and featuring the rarest and most interesting items from her museum – from the white marble statue of Ram to the ‘brazen image of Gunga’ represented by a woman sitting on an alligator (see Figure 6.1). This idol was, according to Fanny, rare and valuable. ‘Victory to Gunga-jee!’

Another ‘great curiosity’ sent to her by a friend was ‘a common dark brown-red shawl, worn by low caste women at Hissar. It is worked all over in large flowers, in orange silk; the centre of the flower contains a circular bit of looking-glass about an inch and a half in diameter. … The appearance of the dress as the light falls on the looking-glass is most strange and odd … in what an extraordinary manner the light must be caught on all those reflecting circles of glass!’ Including this ‘low caste’ item in her collection allowed Fanny to show that her interest in textiles extended beyond luxury items, demonstrating her wide-ranging interest in Indian culture. One can only imagine how astonished she would have been to see skirts of this mirrored material being worn by young European women in the 1960s.

In March 1832 the Parkes’ close friend Colonel Gardner stayed with the couple in Allahabad, much to their delight. While there, he taught them how to use an Indian bow and arrow. Fanny described how ‘Archery, as practised in India, is very different from that in England’. Fanny tells us, ‘The arm is raised over the head, and the bow drawn in that manner: native bowmen throw up the elbow and depress the
right hand in a most extraordinary style’. While learning of the skills of archery, Fanny was also the recipient of a bow. She described how, ‘A very fine bow has been given to me, which was one of the presents made by Runjeet Singh to Lord Wm. Bentinck … when strung, it resembles the outline of a well-formed upper lip, Cupid’s bow.’ Fanny added that she ‘could not resist going continually into the verandah, to take a shot at the targets, in spite of the heat.’ The bow was undoubtedly one of the curiosities brought back to England, the story of its origins adding lustre to the gift. Ownership of the bow, the narrative discourse of its acquisition, and the nostalgic memories it evoked, were more important to her than the object itself.

Fanny’s reputation as a collector brought visitors to her door, one being a German-Jewish convert to Christianity, Mr Wolff, who was keen to see her collection of Hindu idols. Fanny had by this time been in India for 11 years and her knowledge of Hindu culture, the language and the rituals, had increased enormously since her arrival in the country. She would no longer feel, as she had earlier in her residence in Calcutta, that she was ‘much disgusted’ by rituals such as the Churuk Pooja in which men swung from hooks pierced through their skin – even if she admitted that she was also ‘greatly interested’ by the sight (see Figure 6.4).

Figure 6.4  Wanderings, vol. 1, digital edition p.84: The Churuk Puja, or Hook Swinging. © The British Library Board, 1947. B 170 vol. 1 p. 84.
Her energetic pursuit of information had led her to be able to fashion herself as an expert – albeit an undisciplined (and thus perhaps a more ‘authentic’) one – in anything that took her interest. Her perceived expertise would give her cultural leverage when she returned to the metropole, and is an example of one of the ways in which British women came to benefit from empire.

One of the sculptures given to the India Museum on Fanny’s death was a piece of white stone on which a figure had been carved. Fanny’s account of the circumstances in which she acquired it is very typical of her all-embracing enthusiasm. In March 1844 she and Charles were on their way back to India from Cape Town where Charles had been recuperating from an unspecified illness. The ship had dropped anchor off Pooree (now Puri) and Fanny had, as always, grasped the opportunity to go ashore.

A carved stone was presented to me, brought from the ruins of a city of great extent, about forty miles from Pooree; its name has escaped my memory, but it appeared from the account I received to be full of curiosities; few persons, however, had ventured to visit the ruined city, deterred by the probability of taking a fever, in consequence of the malaria produced by the thick jangal by which it is surrounded. The stone is white, and upon it is carved the figure of some remarkable personage, above which is an emblem of Mahadēo.

She added, demonstrating the jackdaw tendencies in her collecting, that ‘A very fine tiger’s skin was also added to my collection. I carried off my prizes with great delight, and they now adorn my museum.’ It was this museum of curious objects that visitors entered after viewing the diorama.

The palimpsest of all these objects is clear, and even though their whereabouts today is unknown, Fanny’s brilliantly evoked images bring them vividly to the mind’s eye. But it is the curiosities that have a known resting place in today’s metropole, albeit on the confined shelves of a museum’s basement, that are freighted with particular meaning. These are the two pieces of carved black stone that were presented to the India Museum on Fanny’s death and which are now in the British Museum collection (see Figure 6.5).

Fanny’s description of these objects lacks hard information, but her account of how she acquired them and her comments on the place, the people, and the culture in which she found them are especially revealing about the ways in which colonial material culture mediated relations between the colonizer and the colonized. Fanny and Charles were taking
the slow boat upriver to Allahabad from Calcutta in November 1844 rather than travelling the more rigorous overland dak route. The journey gave them ample opportunity for exploration. Fanny wrote (see also Figure 6.6 and 6.7):

Lugaoed at Barragh, a small village on the right bank: climbed the cliff in the evening; a fisherman who resided there showed me two sati mounds on the top of it, – the one built of stone sacred to a
Brahmān, the other of mud in honour of a Kyiatt. A kalsā is the ornament on top of a dome; there were two of stone, without any points on the satī mound of the Brahmān; and two of mud, decorated with points, and one small image, on that of the Kyiatt.

I gave a small present to the people, and took away one of the kalsās of mud as a curiosity: a number of broken idols in black stone had been dug up, and placed on the satī mound of the Brahmān, – I was anxious to have two of them, and determined to ask the fisherman to give them to me. The old man told me with great pride that one of his family had been a satī, and that the Brahmāns complained greatly they were not allowed to burn the widows, as such disconsolate damsels were ready and willing to be grilled.....

The Brahmānī ducks are calling to one another from the opposite banks of the river... The wind is down, there is a soft and brilliant moonlight, – the weather is really charming, and the moonlight nights delicious; from the high bank by the satīs one can see the stream of the Ganges below, glittering in its beams....

Ten P.M.; I have just returned from the satī mound, accompanied by the old fisherman, who brought with him two of the idols of black stone from the Brahmān’s mound... the old man gave them to me the moment I asked for them; I gave him a present afterwards,
therefore he did not sell his gods; but he requested to be allowed to bring them to the boats during the darkness of the night. He and his family are now the sole inhabitants of a little hamlet of five houses... his four brothers... are dead, and their houses, which are in ruins, are close to the mounds; the old man lives in the centre, with one young son and two daughters, and keeps his dwelling of mud in comfortable condition. They tell me fowls and chakor (the red-legged partridge) are abundant there; I was unable to procure the latter.  

Fanny’s actions and her assumption that it was acceptable to buy objects of religious significance from this native subject echo the collecting practices of the time. But what she was conveying here in this intimate

encounter was the assertion of ‘knowing first-hand’ the country and culture that she was about to leave.\textsuperscript{83} The ‘authenticity’ of this experience rings true, even if it is underpinned by a sense of patronage and dominance, displaying as it does the supposed superiority of the colonial ruler.

**Conclusion**

Ten months later, in September 1845, Fanny and Charles left India forever. She was 51 years old and in good health. Charles, four years younger and unwell, would die in 1854 of kidney disease. During the eight years before his death, Fanny arranged the publication in 1850 of her account of her life in India, based on her journals and letters to her mother and lavishly illustrated with her own drawings and paintings; in 1851 she organized a display at considerable expense to herself, the ‘Grand Moving Diorama of Hindostan’; and exhibited her ‘Cabinet of Curiosities’. Fanny’s impulse to bring her memories of India and the objects she collected there to the attention of the public demonstrates not only her urge to forge a new persona for herself shaped by her life in India, as Jasanoff would suggest, but also satisfied what Susan Stewart describes as the ‘insatiable demands of nostalgia’.\textsuperscript{84} Her experiences and her accumulated knowledge, shared with the British public, gave her authority and status in a largely masculine area of activity. Her access to the intimate world of the exclusively female harem of high-caste Indian women and her descriptions of this offered a rare insight into an exotic world and enhanced the picture of the colonized for a fascinated metropolitan public. She turned what she had gained in India – independence, knowledge, experience – into a new life for herself in the metropole. Her expertise brought her status and legitimacy in this imperial metropolitan world.

Her engagement with India may have been limited and partial in its investigations, her ‘travelling gaze’ to some extent blinkered by a sense of imperial entitlement and prejudice, the arrangement of objects in her Cabinet of Curiosities lacking coherence and organization, the picture she drew revealing more about colonial beliefs and behaviour than those of the subject race. But it is the energy and enthusiasm fuelling her project that now brings colonial British India in all its failings and insecurities vividly to life.