FEAR AND LOATHING IN AMRITSAR:
THE EMOTIONAL EXPERIENCE OF COLONIAL CRISIS
by Kim A. Wagner

‘We cannot be very brave unless we be possessed of a greater fear.’
Brig.-General R.E.H. Dyer, 1919

‘To her mind the words ‘sedition’, ‘Nationalism’, ‘rebellion’, ‘Home Rule’, conveyed one thing and one only, and that was a picture of herself being raped by a procession of jet-black coolies with rolling white eyeballs. It was a thought that kept her awake at night sometimes.’
George Orwell, Burmese Days (1936)

The prospect of losing one’s mind or ‘going native’, succumbing to heat and illness, rumours of rebellion and the questionable loyalty of native servants, or the sexual threats to white women by men of colour, as well as miscegenation and the breakdown of racial barriers – this was the stuff of which colonial nightmares were made. Such concerns did not simply affect high-strung individuals in the distant corners of Western empires, but were equally pervasive in the imperial metropoles. From the Mutiny to the Mau Mau, from Kipling to Conrad (and beyond), fear and anxiety was at the heart of the colonial experience. Imperialism could in and of itself be seen to trigger strong psychological responses in colonisers and colonised alike: Being cut off from civilization and their fellow white men might cause Europeans to ‘go Fantee’, while too much civilization, too soon, would make natives ‘run Amok’. Defying easy diagnosis, the mental strain, or ‘nerves’, suffered by colonisers was often medicalized under the vague nomenclature of ‘tropical neurasthenia’, or its geographically specific equivalents, ‘tropenkoller’ and ‘philippinitis’. Even non-pathological responses to the colonial situation were cast in distinctly epidemiological terms: With rumour as their virus and the unintelligible ‘jungle-drums’ as their source, anti-colonial conspiracies and insurgencies were seen to be contagious and could spread amongst the local population like an outbreak of the plague. Colonial identities and relationships were furthermore galvanized during such moments of crisis: colonial mastery and masculinity was forged, or destroyed, in the face of perceived threats, while white women nobly defended their virtue or succumbed to hysteria. Crucially, when colonial authority was at its weakest, the local population could prove their loyalty, and thus testify the success of the civilizing mission, or, conversely, reveal their ‘true nature’ as inherently irrational and bloodthirsty ‘savages’, thus denoting its failure.

The emphasis on the perceived vulnerability of the colonial condition, as well as the political instability of the colonial state, obviously runs the risk of overstating the argument – large swathes of the world were after all subjugated and occupied by Western imperial powers leaving a lasting legacy the ramifications of which are still felt today. The real challenge facing the historian is accordingly to navigate the dichotomy between what Michael G. Vann has described as the

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contradiction of ‘white power and white vulnerability’. How do we take seriously colonizers’ sense of weakness when colonialism was defined by coercion and when crises within the European empires were so often followed by brutal suppression and the violent reassertion of colonial authority?

This essay revisits the events surrounding one of the most emblematic instances of colonial violence, namely the Amritsar Massacre of 1919, when colonial troops under General Dyer fired on a crowd of Indians killing hundreds and wounding more than a thousand. Deliberately sidestepping the major events, and important historical figures, the following pages focus on the experience of a single individual, Mrs. Melicent Wathen, as recounted in her diary. Melicent, or Mel as she was known, was the wife of Gerard Wathen, principal of the Khalsa College in Amritsar, and supposedly the model for Forster’s character of Henry Fielding, arguably the main protagonist of *A Passage to India*. The diary reflects the experience of the British Raj in peril and its denizens in headlong flight – a notion repeatedly invoked by General Dyer and his supporters at the time but which historians today can only dismiss as hyperbolic and calculated attempts to legitimise colonial suppression. Although the situation in Punjab was undoubtedly serious, the British in India were not about to be overrun in 1919, and it is this basic incongruity that makes the British response to anti-colonial riots appear so blatantly disproportional and callously brutal. From the distance of a century, it is virtually impossible to reconcile the violent spectacle of the Amritsar Massacre with claims of British victimhood. It is nevertheless precisely when we make allowance for diverse perspectives, however implausible, that we can appreciate the complexities of the past, and the multiplicity of past experiences. Melicent’s diary provides an intimate account of colonial crisis – as more than simply a political language, reflected in the above-cited quote by Dyer, and as more complex than the racist rants and feverish imaginings of the two-dimensional caricature of Anglo-Indians so often mediated through fiction, as exemplified by Orwell.

**DIARY OF MELICENT WATHEN, INDIA, 1914-1920, pages 169-181**

Until 1919, the lives of the Wathens could have been ripped from the pages of Kipling: The hot seasons were spent at the picturesque hill station of Gulmarg in Kashmir and back at the Khalsa College in Amritsar acquaintances kept stopping by for visits, weddings of young friends had to be arranged, and polo horses submitted for the annual show at Lahore (Dinky ‘got 2nd against a pretty good class of English and Walers’ in December 1918). The World War nevertheless loomed large in the background of the Wathens’ carefree colonial existence. News of the declaration of Armistice in November 1918 was received with a sense of patriotic glee and prompted Melicent to wish she could herself have witnessed the ‘ignominious’ surrender of the German fleet at Scapa Flow. As the Wathens

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3 Indian rioters attacked and killed five Europeans at Amritsar on 10 April 1919; General Dyer ordered his troops to fire at Jallianwala Bagh three days later, resulting in at least 400 dead and upwards of a thousand wounded, and this was followed by an extended period of martial law and indiscriminate punishment across the region.

attended a mask ball in Delhi around new year, however, she found herself in the very same room where she had last danced in March 1914 – ‘which rather haunted one with memoirs of all those one knew now dead.’

But the end of the war did not bring peace and when the Wathens returned to Amritsar after Christmas in 1918, Gerard found for the first time that the Indian students at the Khalsa College were preoccupied by politics. In light of the fact that the Indian National Congress was to hold its next annual meeting at Amritsar, he went out of his way to talk to his students and ‘explain’ the recent colonial legislation, especially the much-maligned Rowlatt Acts which were ‘the present cry taken up by the Seditionists.’ Engaging with the students in this manner turned out to have been well worth the effort, as Melicent later wrote, since Gerard’s work ‘was most doubly repaid when the trouble came.’ Hartals, or strikes, called by Gandhi’s burgeoning Satyagraha movement in protest against the Rowlatt Acts, soon became a recurrent feature throughout Punjab, alongside misinformation about the way the laws would interfere with peoples’ public and private lives. ‘These lies were specially spread amongst the lower classes such as the tonga wallahs and sweepers and fruit sellers’, according to Melicent, and ‘by the beginning of April we realized things were nasty.’ Even so, Gerard afforded himself of the opportunity to take a week off shooting and the family went together to enjoy the festivities at the Mela Hola Mohalla festival at the nearby Sikh Shrine at Tarn Taran. A missionary couple they met there nevertheless reminded the Wathens that all was not well as they ‘spoke gravely and foretold a bad Sikh rising in the near future.’

Back in Amritsar things now began to happen very quickly: when Melicent took an acquaintance to see the Golden Temple on Saturday the 5th of April she found the number of locals gathered, with no obvious purpose, to be highly disconcerting and hurried home towards the British lines: ‘for the first time I had an instinctive feeling of relief as I crossed the railway bridge out of the city.’ The very next day there was a political meeting in the ‘native’ part of town and ‘a nasty crowd collected.’ The Anglo-Indian community continued to go about their weekly routine yet the pretence of normality became increasingly difficult to maintain: ‘We went to church but the road was guarded & the soldiers wore ball cartridges. After that no Englishman could get a tonga – the shops refused to serve us – a sais was beaten who had been sent to fetch a tonga. There was no doubt that clouds were gathering – I refused to let the nurses go to the City on

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5 MW Diary, 169.
6 MW Diary, 170. The Rowlatt Acts were…
7 MW Diary, 170. The teleological wording clearly indicates that this was written after April 1919.
8 MW Diary, 170. The implication was evidently that people’s grievances were not real and that they were in essence being misled – supposedly by the so-called ‘Seditionists’ although their identity was never specified. See Rowlatt Satyagraha edited book
9 MW Diary, 171. The fact that some Anglo-Indians seriously expected a Sikh rising reflects the distance between rulers and ruled – the colonisers had no real sense of the lay of the land and were instead prone to ‘information panics’
10 MW Diary, 171. Spatiality, Antoinette Burton, railway bridge firing and panic makes sense, see colonizing settler space
11 MW Diary, 171. Still no indication why or whom – grasp of anti-colonial nationalism is virtually non-existent…its not just in the description of Indians that this blanket criminalization is taking place, it is also in the very experience of Indian mobilization = criminal and dangerous. The trope of counter-insurgency is about more than just representation – it is also about experience and encounter…
12 This is an obvious legacy of 1857, when some British garrisons were attacked while in church unarmed. The re-enactment of such precautionary measures constituted a tangible link between the past and the present and was as such constitutive of the manner in which the situation in 1919 was perceived.
On the following Wednesday, April 9th, Mr. Jarman, Municipal Engineer, lunched with the Wathens and told them that ‘a plot had been discovered to murder all Europeans on 16th when Ghandi was expected.’ Moreover, the local nationalist leaders, Doctors S. Kithclew and Satyapal, were making ‘most inflammatory speeches and things were in a very bad state.’ This alarming news convinced Melicent that she needed to leave with children as soon as possible; the annual trip to the hills, to escape the heat of the summer-months, had been scheduled for 25th April but she now wired for a car for the 13th instead. Although none of the students at the Khalsa College had so far observed the hartals, which was considered ‘a great triumph’ for Gerard, he was also hearing ‘serious rumours’ through his teachers and Melicent and he decided both to visit the Commissioner, Miles Irving, in person. The Commissioner was not at home and they were instead received by his wife whom, to Melicent’s dismay, ‘seemed not to have grasped the situation at all’. If the Wathens had expected their worries to be put at ease they were sorely disappointed and the Commissioner’s wife simply ‘laughed at the people who were nervous, said someone had thought arrangements ought to be made for women and children to go to the Fort if anything occurred, but nothing had been done and she didn’t think they had remembered the people in the Khalsa College at all!’ Melicent and Gerard left the Commissioner’s house ‘thoroughly dissatisfied about things.’

That night Melicent and Gerard dined with several other couples, including the Becketts who had just come back from Lahore where they witnessed the military and police firing on the crowds protesting the Rowlatt Acts. ‘But though it subsided then it was by no means over’, Melicent lamented, ‘and yet this had not opened people’s eyes.’ Melicent tried to get her dinner guests to come to their sense but similarly to Mrs. Irving they dismissed the seriousness of the situation: ‘They laughed and Scott said it was ridiculous to be nervous with all our machine guns and aeroplanes. Poor man, he was dead within 15 hours – brutally murdered.’ Melicent resolved to leave with the children at the earliest possible date which was two days later, Friday the 11th.

April 10th, Thursday. The day began like any other day and servants sent to the bazaar to buy flour said that ‘all was quiet.’ Unbeknownst to the Wathens, however, the British authorities had decided to forestall any unrest and secretly arrested and deported the two nationalist leaders Kithclew and Satyapal around 10am that morning. Melicent only found out what had occurred much later. Precautions were only considered after the arrests, when it was too late to do much, and a small military contingent (I.D.F.) was placed at the disposal of the civil authorities at the Ram Bagh Gardens.
‘feeble and untrustworthy’ as Melicent described them.22 Half a dozen mounted gunners were meanwhile posted at the railway bridge to guard the main road leading from the Indian city to the British lines. At 10.30, Irving and Beckett, the Commissioner and Assistant Commissioner, made a tour of the city and while the former found “all satisfactory”, the latter did not.23 Beckett was apparently ‘so unsatisfied’ that he rode back to the bridge at 11.30 and now encountered ‘a furious mob pouring out, headed by pleaders and shouting for Kitchlew and Satyapal’.24 Beckett tried to stop the crowd and promised to tell them where the two nationalist leaders were if they would retire to the gates of the city; this was, however, to no avail and he was pushed back over the bridge, towards the British lines, as the crowd made for the court house. At the foot of the bridge, Beckett found four mounted gunners posted whom he ordered to push the crowd back but on no account to fire on them; he then rode off to get hold of his superior, Commissioner Irving. When Beckett later returned to the bridge the crowd had been pushed back over the bridge but F.A. Conner, Extra Assistant Commissioner, informed him that he (Connor) had been ordered with a handful of mounted troops to disperse the crowd: ‘This he had tried to do by firing on them – with the result that they went mad and he had to retire leaving the mob looting the National Bank and murdering every English man they could find and wrecked the telegraph and telephone office.’25

At the Khalsa College, the Wathens were slowly realizing that all was not well: ‘All that morning we knew things were unquiet, but how bad we did not guess till we were at lunch when Beckett galloped up looking very wild, his horse covered with foam and blood, saying the crowd was in the station and coming to the civil lines.’26 Melicent had in fact been prepared for something like this all morning, ‘as I felt things were bad’.27 First she dressed the children in comfortable cloths and prepared three small rolls of bedding that could easily be carried along with some food; then she put on her khaki riding trousers. And then the wait began, Melicent ‘expecting to have to fly to the Professors quarters or some village at any moment. It was not pleasant.’28 As the Wathens were walking around the College grounds, they met Mr. Kitchen, Commissioner in Lahore, who was passing in a car along with the deputy Inspector of Police. Gerard got in the car and they all went to see Irving, leaving Melicent behind at the College waiting for her husband: ‘It seemed hours till he came back. I don’t know that I even expected him back, everything seemed all on end.’29 Finally, at 3 in the afternoon, Gerard returned ‘looking ghastly’, with news of what had occurred that day: ‘Stewart, Scott, Thompson and two others had been hideously murdered. All Banks wrecked, the station wrecked, the telegraph office, a church and various other buildings and that but for an unexpected company of Gourkhas who had just passed through we must have been wiped out. All communication was cut and the lines below and above the station pulled up.’30

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22 MW Diary, 173.
23 MW Diary, 173. This is not elaborated but there are several hints at tension between the British administrators – see also order to fire later on, also in volume III. Ann Stoler and other shave of course made a point of studying the fissures of the colonial state – which also makes it problematic to talk of ‘colonial discourse or mentality as if it was a unified and coherent entity.
24 MW Diary, 173.
25 MW Diary, 174. Interestingly, the story comes from Beckett who claims to have ordered the troops not to fire but in his absence someone else gave that order and that set off the crowd on a rampage.
26 MW Diary, 174.
27 MW Diary, 174.
28 MW Diary, 174. Again space – and references to 1857…
29 MW Diary, 174. There is a lot of worrying about Gerard…departure at train station, departure from India
30 MW Diary, 175.
As the Wathens were trying to come to terms with the magnitude of the day’s events, ‘a crowd of students and Professors appeared,’ and not being sure of their intentions, Melicent expected the worst: ‘here’s the end I thought!’ Yet Melicent’s worries turned out to be misplaced as the students and teachers ‘came to beg Gerard to let them guard us and the college through the night and not to send us to the Fort’. ‘It was’, she asserted, ‘a triumphant moment. After that my spirits rose a little.’ Melicent and the children were nevertheless still going to leave and their luggage was sent ahead to the small station of Chakarta [Chheharta] in readiness for their departure by train to Rawalpindi. At 5.30pm, Gerard and Mel drove over to the house of the Ashford’s, which was the assembly point for the European women and children being evacuated to the fort: ‘It was a tragic sight – never did I see horror so grimly written on any face except those who had come from the trenches. There were women and children all herded together, several not knowing if their husbands were dead or alive. Some knew within the hour that they were dead. Others were not relieved of their suspension till after midnight. I uttered a heartfelt prayer of thankfulness as I drove home to my own house to sleep. There were over 400 people in the Fort with no provisions but bully beef and biscuits and only four bathrooms and three rooms. The dust and glare and heat were ghastly - and several people and children went in ill. So much for the forethought of our D.C. Miles Irving and yet he must have known.’

That night the Wathens slept safely in the garden as usual and Melicent even forgave the students who asked for new hockey balls so that they could see them and play in the moonlight, although they ruined the flowers beds. Only later, they learned of the extent of the violence and destruction of the riots that day: ‘After the mob had gone mad, they attacked National Bank, beat Mr. Stewart with lathis and then pouring oil on him when he was half unconscious burnt him. They did the same to Mr. Scott – first piling the furniture on the top of him. Nothing was left of the Bank, it was gutted – they then went on to the Alliance Bank. Mr. Thomson defended himself and then ran upstairs and bid, but they found him, dragged him and threw him out of the window, poured oil on him while he was still alive and burnt him. They then burnt the R.C. Church, hunted and beat nearly to death a missionary, Miss Sherwood, saying she was English and must die. Though she was eventually picked up unconscious and carried by an Indian into his house and to safety. Hunted Mr. Jarmen who was rescued by Indians, and another Thompson and another missionary lady, all of whom owed their lives to their clerks, and then pulled up the lines and wrecked the station – killing a goods inspector with lathis, trampling to death a Tommy whom they caught escaping to the Fort. It was just as they were marching to the Civil lines that the Gurkhas turned up, were detrained – fired on the mob and drove it back into the City and held it. At 7pm an aeroplane at last arrived from Lahore. At midnight the Londons came from Jullundur. At 2am those British troops and an armoured train arrived from Lahore. Only then may we have been said to be in some safety.’

April 11th, Friday. At 7am, when Gerard heard that troops would be entering the city and that they would open fire on everyone they encountered, he dashed off to the train station where the detachment was being prepared. A meeting of the local authorities was already under way and, as he later told Melicent, he spent an hour trying to dissuade them, arguing ‘that it was political madness to do such a thing now without warning. Yesterday when the murdering was in swing would have been a different matter.’ He finally managed to convince Major MacDonald (of the 1-124th Baluchis, whom had only just arrived from Lahore) and eventually the rest of the committee, and it was agreed that the crowds should be

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31 MW Diary, 175.
32 MW Diary, 175-6.
33 MW Diary, 176-7.
given till 2pm to bury those killed the day before and then disperse. Gerard would send some of his students and a local maulvi to warn people within the city: ‘At 2 [pm] aeroplanes were to ascend and if the crowds still persisted bombs were to be dropped.’

Meanwhile, Melicent and Mary, an acquaintance who were staying with them, were trying to finish the packing; The luggage that had been sent ahead to Chhehasta was reported to be safe although the servants had been bullied by the crowds who had apparently ‘looted the rest of the station.’ Gerard sent some of the students to watch over the luggage until the train they hoped to catch later that evening would pass through. ‘Our feelings were intense all that morning,’ Melicent noted and she sought to distract herself with a novel: ‘I read the ‘secret city’ by Walpole feverishly in between whilsts – the more lurid situation about the riots in Petrograd being peculiarly in keeping and somewhat harassing to one’s nerves during those trying hours. […] No news from the city. Mary and I managed to pack away all my favourite things that morning – afterwards as I lay for a few minutes on the sofa, nerves stretched to breaking point, she gave me a whiskey and soda and I began to understand how people took to drink.’

The day passed, and the deadline for the dispersal of the crowd approached: ‘As the time drew on and 2 o’clock came nearer tension was intense. At last the hour struck – we heard the planes go up. Would they fire? Had the crowds dispersed? One, two, three minutes passed – Mary and I went onto the drive, breathless to listen. Gerard came up. Then the old maulvi appeared. He had been to the mosques. At the one by the Hall gate he had had some trouble to get a hearing, but he did so at last, they had listened to him gone to their homes. […] Still the planes hovered round, but no bomb was dropped. Gerard had saved the city and saved the government from endless political difficulties in the future.’

The Wathens sat together and walked around the grounds of the College till finally at 4pm the time for their departure had arrived and they all left – Melicent and the children packed into a tonga and Gerard riding alongside on his bicycle. They soon reached the train-station two miles away, and with that a greater sense of safety: ‘At the station the relief of finding oneself guarded by plenty of troops was immense. British and Gurkhas, fully armed guarded every inch of the place, in a siding stood the armoured train, machine guns ready – overhead droned the two aeroplanes. At the relief after the last four days no-one can imagine.’ Melicent described in great detail her and her husband’s final hours together while waiting for the train that was to take her and the children to the safety of the hills – Gerard would travel with them only as far as Lahore: ‘We got some tea with great difficulty – not a soul was on the platform except the D.C. and Commissioner and these soldiers – everything was hushed and expectant. I couldn’t help a sickening feeling at the thought of leaving Gerard and the journey before us, but I also felt the journey must be got through at all costs. The train was nearly four hours late, but she came in at last. […] At Chheharta there was a seething mob, but our good students put our luggage in and thanks to them we have lost nothing. It was dark now and as we passed through station after station and stopped at Attari and Jallo with these dense crowds of restless angry-looking peasants I cannot think: now why they did not attack us, as indeed they took to doing all up the line the next day. Had they done so, all would have been up.

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34 Between 20 and 30 Indians were killed when the British troops on several occasions fired to drive the crowds back from the railway bridge and the train station during the turmoil of 10 April, see…
35 MW Diary, 177.
36 Tell this only once…
37 MW Diary, 178.
38 MW Diary, 178.
39 MW Diary, 178-9.
40 MW Diary, 179.
At Lahore it was a grim spectacle – pickets of Sikhs up and down the platform, talk of strikes all down the line, processions, rioting, meetings in Lahore, grave looking soldiers eating hurried meals in the refreshment room, ourselves the only civilians. Gerard took me in for a last meal. He was dressed in khaki with his collar open and like every other man looked as though he had neither sleep or rest for days, like all these men he wore the tense look, the look of constant expectation – of what? Of what no-one could tell. He said ‘We may never meet again – things are as bad as they have ever been in our history – the whole country is ablaze – We don’t yet know what we are in for’. And with almost these words, and very much these feelings, we parted. He standing there on that hot platform with its lurid half-light in which soldiers stood and sat in knots, they showed all that is best in our race and so we passed out of the station, only one thing certain, that we were all in greater danger at that moment than ever in our lives, or that I hope we may ever be again.’

Melicent and the children made it safely to Rawalpindi and then onwards to Gulmarg; it was at this hill-station in the beautiful hills of Kashmir that she wrote this first part of her diary between 13 and 18 April 1919. Although she was to return to Amritsar in September of that year and continued her diary until her final departure from India the following December, we shall in the following concern ourselves only with her experience in Amritsar up till 11 April.

ANALYSIS

Melicent Wathen’s diary provides a unique vantage-point that allows for a radically different understanding of colonial fear and anxieties during the crisis of April 1919. Crucially, hers is a story of Amritsar in April 1919 without the massacre – and without even General Dyer: Melicent and the children fled Amritsar in the evening of 11 April mere hours before Dyer arrived and she only heard of the massacre through a letter from her husband a week later. Where most accounts simply start from the moment Dyer enter the stage, with but a brief reference to the preceding riots, Melicent’s experience begins months before and ends the very moment that ‘History’ commences. Instead of the teleologically overdetermined narrative of the events leading up to the massacre at Jallianwala Bagh, we thus have a fragment of the past told as events were unfolding and it is this very ‘incompleteness’ that makes Melicent’s experience so remarkable. The Italian historian Giovanni Levi’s description of microhistory seems pertinent in this regard: ‘Phenomena previously considered to be sufficiently described and understood assume completely new meanings by altering the scale of observation.’ In Melicent’s diary the scale of observation is certainly altered and unlike most other accounts hers is not framed by the subsequent Hunter Committee inquiry, nor by the heated debates amongst politicians and in the press, in India and in Britain, which sought to either condemn or condone British violence. This is not to say that the diary presents a more ‘authentic’ narrative, merely that it is unburdened by the hindsight so characteristic of most of the contemporary accounts. The most obvious comparison, namely the article written by Mrs. Beckett, the wife of the Magistrate, and published anonymously in *Blackwood’s Magazine* in 1920, had as its explicit aim to show how Dyer’s actions saved the lives of the European women and children at Amritsar.

41 MW Diary, 180-1.
43 Blackwood’s and Decay. The identification of the author may be found in Decay.
Melicent wrote her diaries intermittently throughout the decade preceding 1919, and would document the big events in her life, interspersed by the quotidian, and then put down the diary only to take it up much later. The diaries are full of memorabilia taped to the pages, including locks of her children’s hair or the colourful feathers of birds, but also contain numerous small water-colour sketches of ruins, palm-trees and sunsets of the type beloved by so many amateur-artists of the Raj. Although the diaries in places have a certain literary quality, Melicent did not seem to be writing for anyone else; allusions to her misgivings about Gerard’s decisions, or her explicit criticism of Commissioner Irving, for instance, suggests that it was not intended for publication or a wider readership, even within her family. The diaries were only made public long after both Gerard and Melicent had passed away. The diary-entries relating to Amritsar in 1919 constitute one discreet ‘chapter’ and although they relate events as they are unfolding, they also reflect an attempt at making sense of a traumatic experience and imbue extremely confusing events with a sense of coherence. It was from the safety of the hills in mid-April that Melicent looked back over the preceding months and decided to describe the sequence of events that brought her and the children there.

The overriding mood, and indeed the leitmotif of Melicent’s account, is that of an increasing sense of vulnerability fuelled largely by uncertainty and the fact that the Wathens were very much at the margins of the European community at Amritsar. Gerard apparently loathed ‘Anglo-India’, as the Forster-circle described the pukka Sahibs and Memsahibs, and earlier entries in Melicent’s diary suggests that she only frequented the ubiquitous club to be polite. Melicent’s description of the women and children seeking refuge in the fort at Amritsar, and the primitive conditions with which they had to make do, is particularly revealing in this respect. Where the account of her compatriots, such as that of Mrs. Beckett, includes prayers for everyone’s safety, Melicent is simply grateful for not having to endure the discomfort of the fort along with everybody else. This feeling of exclusiveness, in part self-chosen, was further exacerbated by the manner in which the Wathens’ concerns were dealt with, or rather ignored, by the authorities in the days leading up to the riots. The Wathens’ had apparently been forgotten when the evacuation plans were made and their disillusionment with the ability of the local authorities to protect them had a profound impact on Melicent’s experience of the unrest. During the crisis at Amritsar, the Wathens found that they could rely on neither their Indian

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44 See M.M. Kaye (David Larkin ed.), The Far Pavilions Picture Book (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1979), for a good example of this particular genre.
46 Ibid., and Trevelyan, 476.
47 It may be noted that the European Association at Amritsar later petitioned, albeit unsuccessfully, for a commission to investigate the failure of the British authorities to adequately protect them during the riots of 10 April 1919, see…
servants and friends, nor the colonial administration, and the feeling of isolation and vulnerability was thus near complete. As the principal of a Sikh school, and one with an openly liberal leaning at that, Gerard was not part of the official colonial establishment and Melicent was thus doubly disempowered – both as an outsider and as a woman. The gendered aspects of her account is indeed remarkable -men are active, women to be protected – she can only sit around and wait -all her worries are about Gerard – comment on their unhealthy relationship…

When going over her experiences in the diary, however, Melicent retrospectively ordered this confusion and uncertainty and the entire narrative is structured in a strictly teleological fashion, constantly prefiguring what would later happen. The diary, as a result, takes the shape of a vindication of Melicent’s fears – her vague sense that something bad was about to happen, which was repeatedly dismissed by her fellow Anglo-Indians, turned out to be only too prescient. -Some attempt at upturning conventional narrative of helpless woman – it is Melicent’s worries that ultimately saves the lives of the children (in her understanding at least)

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Put with Colonial Anxieties: true and what might have been cast as hysteria or nerves turns out to be vigilance

In Melicent’s narrative, what might otherwise have been dismissed simply as a woman’s hysteria or case of the ‘nerves’, turns out to have been warranted vigilance. And this fact speaks to the power of the mutiny motif – the difference between panic and foresight was all but negligible. Melicent’s teleological account of the unrest at Amritsar, i.e. that the signs she and Gerard recognized turned out to be only too true, is nevertheless deeply flawed. It was the British themselves who brought about the riots they feared

-Uncertainty – anticipation worse than actual disaster/concrete threat – bourke article fear and anx pp. 114

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Indian nationalism not understood – and that is what makes it so scary

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HISTORY OF EMOTIONS

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48 In the diary, it may be noted, every instance of Indian ‘loyalty’ during the unrest is attributed Gerard’s efforts and the account is thus also framed as an implicit victory for liberal paternalism.

49 The theme of the vigilant colonial protagonist, who knows the land and can correctly interpret the signs of impending unrest, but whose warnings are consistently ignored by an ignorant and complacent administration, is of course a recurrent motif in Anglo-Indian fiction as embodied in, for instance, John Masters’ novels about ‘Thuggee’ and the ‘Mutiny’, see Deceivers and Nightrunners of Bengal.
The study of the history of emotions is most productive when it forms part of a broader approach, and when particular concepts, such as ‘fear’ and ‘anxiety’, are not simply reduced to ideas that are to be historicized according to the norms of a given age, society or class. Emotions form but a part of the experience of the past and if the aim is to provide a thick description and comprehensive examination of particular events or structural dynamics, they ought not to be reified as epiphenomena.

-Ranajit Guha

2016 thoughts:
Within the study of the history of emotions, the experience of individuals in the past is at times approached merely as so many concepts to be historicized, while particular emotions, such as ‘fear’ or ‘anxiety’ are reified as epiphenomena. If instead of a single emotion we take as a starting-point a historical event or experience of an individual, the complexity of emotional experience is revealed, as well as the fact that emotions form but one aspect of lived experience.

The emotional experience of people in the past is at times studied simply as concepts to be historicized reduced to Emotions are at times reduced to reified

The emotional experience of people in the past is sometimes reduced to reified concepts

If we are to make sense of the emotional experience of people in the past

analysed merely reduced to re is at times a tendency to reify particular emotionsconcepts emotions as focus on particular historicized concepts, such as ‘fear’ or ‘anxiety’,

When emotions are historicized within the study of the history of emotions this often entails that emotions are simply reified as epiphenomena.

The problem is, ironically, that the history of emotions focus too much on emotions and too often lack what might be considered as a thick analysis. It ends up as a prosopography of particular concepts rather than a rounded historical inquiry - the history of emotions is somewhat limited in scope if our concern is more than simply the deployment of certain concepts in the past. Emotions form but one aspect of the lived experience of the past and to single them out, or even single out just one, is to almost deliberately delimiting the scope of analysis. It makes more sense to study particular events, beliefs and practices and to include an attention to emotions within a much broader context of relevant elements. Emotions constitute but one aspect of lived experience and to single them out is to risk a highly partial analysis.

Emotions have to be grounded in the life-world of individuals and not merely the emotional discourse of a given period. People and events constitute a more productive point of departure than specific emotions which otherwise are constructed as historical agents in and of themselves...
To live in fear is to experience the world in a particular way. The paranoid style – when perfectly inconspicuous events or actions assume the form of a threat and instill fear. Just like conspiracy theories or rumours constitute a sort of political interpretation of uncertain events, so too does fear constitute a way of making sense of the world – no manner how senseless such fears appear to be – anxieties colour and shape the experience of the world surrounding the individual – during moments of crisis, political turmoil and great uncertainty, anxieties provide a semblance of meaning – even when they ultimately induce panic.
British fears create their own nightmares – mel is vindicated but really the British fear is constitutive of violence

ANTI-COLONIAL NATIONALISM: not known, so fear

GENDER: Melicent is doubly disempowered: by British authorities and as a passive woman – men act, women worry

CONCLUSION

1857 and 1919

Guha – fear and anxiety

Fear and anx and paranoid style

Melicent’s experience of the unrest at Amritsar helps us make sense of the senseless violence that characterized the British suppression of the unrest at Amritsar and in Punjab more generally. To many of the British officials and Anglo-Indian civilians it seemed as if a second ‘Mutiny’ was unfolding in front of their very eyes; rather than the peaceful Gandhian protests that embody the manner in which Indian nationalism of the period is today remembered, Melicent, as well as Dyer, believed the rape and murder of the entire European community to be imminent. Perhaps after all, General Dyer was not being so disingenuous when he claimed that his actions were motivated by fear – it was unfortunately a fear caused by a paranoid colonial imaginary more than the actual situation confronting him.

EPILOGUE

The final words shall be left to Melicent and the concluding paragraph she wrote as she and the children set out on their journey back to England in December 1919. Melicent’s diary offers a glimpse of a well-known story told entirely anew: Where most histories of the Amritsar Massacre emphasize British brutality and Indian suffering, and rightly so, Melicent’s experience was characterized by fear and the uncertainty of what became a headlong flight from Empire. The very discrepancy between Melicent’s story and the conventional understanding of what happened at Amritsar in April 1919 should encourage a more nuanced appreciation of the complexities of lived experience – as well as a more probing consideration of the relationship between imperialism, violence and the vulnerability of the colonial condition. Tinged by a Kiplingesque sentimentality, Melicent’s single biggest concern remained to the last the safety of Gerard and a dark foreboding of what the future might bring for British rule in India:
'And now that England was really within my grasp, I never felt I wanted to leave India less. I was really depressed at going. All this year I had looked forward to the voyage home with Gerard, and here I was going off alone with the three children, leaving him to go back to Heaven knew what. At the very least to a miserable cold comfortless house, with his eyes so bad that he could scarcely read a line to himself and his health far from good… And at the worst, and quite a possible worst, bloodshed and murder. No wonder I hesitated now the time had come. Besides, we had been happy at Amritsar in a way we had never been happy before, and life glowed with interest…'

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50 MW Diary, 195. Sentimentality of Anglo-Indian life and the feeling of leaving home behind. But also fear of what was happening to British rule in India. The same life-long nostalgia that Kipling always talked about…