‘A history of instructive reversals’: (re)interpreting 1857

— Arthur Chapman

The dramatic, chaotic and violent events that took place in Northern India in 1857/8 have been interpreted in many ways, as, for example, the ‘Indian Mutiny’, the ‘Sepoy War’ and the ‘First Indian War of Independence’. The tales that have been told about these events have been profoundly shaped, however, by two facts: first, most of the archives of 1857/8 are British archives, largely constructed as part of the brutal process of re-imposing control; second, it was not possible to tell anything other than an Anglocentric story in print until at least a generation after the events themselves.[1]

Two recent books that address aspects of the events of 1857 exemplify attempts to break the hold of the imperial archive.[2] They are very different kinds of book. Rudrangshu Mukherjee’s *The Spectre of Violence: The 1857 Kanpur Massacres* (1998) is a work in the subaltern studies tradition of ‘history from below’ and, in origin, a very academic book, albeit one that was republished by Penguin India in 2007 as a mass market paperback to coincide with the 150th anniversary of the ‘mutiny’. William Dalrymple’s *The Last Mughal: The fall of a dynasty, Delhi 1857* is a mass market publication by a travel writer who distances himself from academic fashion and, in particular, from subaltern studies.[3] Mukherjee’s book is meta-historical, and consists in large part of a critique of the representation of the events of 1857 in archives and in histories. Dalrymple’s book is a work of narrative history by a consummate story-teller who seeks to construct rather than to deconstruct stories. The books are very similar in many ways, however: both books set out to effect ‘instructive reversals’, to cite the poet Azan, one of Dalrymple’s many Indian sources.[4] Mukherjee sets out to recover ‘Kanpur’ – the site of Indian experiences and actions – from the Anglocentric texts that constructed ‘Cawnpore’ as a metaphor for atrocity. Dalrymple, on the other hand, sets out to tell a Mughal story rather than a British imperial one.

Mukherjee and Dalrymple do very different things. Mukherjee reads the imperial archive ‘against the grain’, asking questions that it was not constructed to answer. His interest is in the symbolic logic of rebel actions – something he reconstructs from British texts that sought only to record atrocity and outrage and from texts written for the British after the fact. Thus, for example, Muhkjerjee differentiates between the two most notorious massacres that took place in Kanpur in 1857, the massacres of Satichaura Ghat and of the ‘House of the Ladies’. Whereas, Mukherjee argues, the former was public and an assertion of collective power at a moment of triumph in which British power had to be conspicuously obliterated to symbolically restore the pre-British regime, the latter was private, was motivated by fear and a desire to remove incriminating evidence and took place at a moment of dissension where unity was evaporating in the face of defeat.[5] Dalrymple innovates not so much by reading conventional sources in new ways but by seeking out and interpreting ‘new’ sources of evidence. Dalrymple’s book is the first in English to make significant use of ‘The Mutiny Papers’ in The National Archives of India, a collection of 20,000 Persian and Urdu documents, many of which are written in rebarbative court shorthand that it requires particular skills to decipher.[6] Interrogating these materials and others like them, allows Dalrymple to present a very nuanced account of events in Delhi in 1857 and one that destabilises any straightforward narrative with binary protagonists: the ‘reversals’ that came with the uprising affected the ordinary citizens of Delhi as profoundly as anyone else and they were certainly disastrous for many of the city’s wealthy. Dalrymple shows that simple polarisations – such as ‘Indian: English’ – do not work and dramatises the power struggles and ambivalences *within* the uprising, on the streets, in the Mughal court, and so on.

Thinking about Dalrymple and Mukherjee’s books is a good way to start thinking about historians’ aims and methods. Both books, and their authors’ interventions in the press at the time of the 150th anniversary, can also enable reflection on the ways in which historians’ understandings of the past are in dialogue with their understandings of the present and with their ethical and other commitments. For Dalrymple:

> *the lessons of 1857 are very clear. No one likes people of a different faith conquering them, or force-feeding them improving ideas at the point of a bayonet. The British in 1857 discovered what the US and Israel are learning now, that nothing so easily radicalises a people against them, or so undermines the moderate aspect of Islam, as aggressive western intrusion in the east.*[7]

These observations I think, reflect sensitivities, heightened by events in the present, that shaped the way that *The Last Mughal* was put together. There are striking differences, for example, in the way in which Dalrymple treats jihadis – whom he argues were as key to events in Delhi as the soldiers who figure centrally in conventional accounts – and the way in which these actors were treated in earlier accounts of the siege of Delhi.[8] It is unlikely, it seems to me, that a book like Dalrymple’s could have been written before the Iranian

revolution of 1979 and, more particularly, before 2001. In the 2007 preface to the re-issue of his 1998 book and also in earlier writings, Mukherjee draws lessons also, but of a different kind.[9] Looking back at his analysis of 1857 in the light of atrocities in New York, Iraq, Gujarat and elsewhere, Mukherjee questions the way in which 'radical historiography… privileged rebel violence' and argues that it is irresponsible for historians to 'sidestep' ethical questions in the past.[10] Conventionally, historians have sought to avoid judging the past and aimed, instead, only to 'show how it essentially was', insisting on the gulf between 'fact' and value': in this respect also these two books effect 'instructive reversals'.[11]

Designing enquiries to make pupils think about different interpretations of 1857

A-level: 16 to 19 years

Notable differences? How do history books differ?

Those who privilege 'narrative' in their accounts of what history is make an important point but they also miss a more important one: histories are not just stories, they are *warranted* and *authored* stories that are shaped by investigative decisions and supported by arguments and citation. Sixth formers cannot understand history unless and until they understand footnotes and bibliographies (among other things). Take three or four books about the mutiny from different decades and task students to explore what their footnotes and references can tell us about what their authors have done. Where have they gone? What sources have they looked at? What can we conclude from these facts about their research strategies?

Key Stage 3: 11 to 14 years

Reading against the grain

To read 'with the grain' is to read sources as witness testimony and to 'listen' to what they literally say. To read 'against the grain' is to devise your own questions and to interrogate your sources often in ways that their authors could not have anticipated. Many of the documents relating to the court of 'the Last Mughal' were collected in his trial papers and are available on the Mutiny at the Margins website. Like Dalrymple's court documents, the trial papers include petitions and requests to the Emperor. Give pupils an hypothesis to test – for example, that Delhi was united against the British – and see what counting and categorising a sample of petitions and requests can reveal. Who did petitioners petition against? What did they petition about?

The Editors

Further reading

Books

Dalrymple, W. (2006) *The Last Mughal: The fall of a dynasty, Delhi 1857* London: Bloomsbury Publishing.

Mukherjee, R. (2007) *The Spectre of Violence: The 1857 Kanpur Massacres*, New Delhi: Penguin India.

Newspaper and Magazine Articles

Dalrymple, W. (2007) 'Guided by an angry god', *BBC History Magazine*, 8 (5), pp. 18-19.

David, S. and Dalrymple, W. (2007) 'Causes and Consequences', *BBC History Magazine*, 8 (5), pp. 20-21.

Websites

The 'Mutiny at the Margins' project website contains excellent material on the mutiny from a number of perspectives, including the Indian oral tradition and a collection of documents relating to the Trial of Bahadur Shah Zafar, the 'Last Mughal': www.csas.ed.ac.uk/mutiny/ Last accessed 5 March 2011.

Dalrymple, W. (2007) 'Public and Private Tragedies: Voices of the Indian Mutiny.' [Online] Available at: http://www.channel4.com/history/microsites/H/history/i-m/lastmughal.html. Last accessed 5 March 2011.

REFERENCES

1 See Bayley, C.A. (ed.) (1990) *The Raj: India and the British, 1600-1947*, London: National Portrait Gallery Publications, pp.136-8.

2 Richards, T. *The Imperial Archive: Knowledge and the fantasy of empire*, London and New York: Verso.

3 For an account of 'subaltern studies' see Lal, V. (2003) *The History of History: Politics and scholarship in modern India*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, pp.186-230. For Dalrymple's ironic observations on subaltern studies see Dalrymple, W. (2006) *The Last Mughal: The fall of a dynasty, Delhi 1857*, London: Bloomsbury Publishers, pp.13-14.

4 Dalrymple, op cit., p162.

5 Mukherjee, R. (2007) *The Spectre of Violence: The 1857 Kanpur Massacres*, New Delhi: Penguin India, pp. 44-77.

6 Dalrymple, W. (2006), op cit note 3, pp.11-16.

7 Dalrymple, W. (2007) ''Delhi, 1857: a bloody warning to today's imperial occupiers', *The Guardian*, Thursday 10 May 2007 [Online] Available at: www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2007/may/10/comment.india.

8 In the account of the siege of Delhi in *The Great Mutiny*, for example, mujahedeen and Ghazis merit one mention each and no analytical comment (Hibbert, C. (1978) *The Great Mutiny: India 1857*, London: Allen Lane, p.277 and p.279).

9 See also Mukherjee, R. (2002) No victors in a violent world: there cannot be a relativist position on violence, *Telegraph* (Calcutta), 14 Dec 2002. [Online] Available at: www.telegraphindia.com/1021214/asp/opinion/story_1477375.asp. and Mukherjee, R. (2007) 'Kill the white man: the revolt of 1857 was too violent an event to celebrate', *Telegraph* (Calcutta), May 10, 2007. [Online] Available at: www.telegraphindia.com/1070510/asp/opinion/story_7754538.asp.

10 Mukherjee(2007), op cit., note 5, pp.xx-xxi

11 Evans, R.J. (1997) *In Defence of History*, London: Granta Books, p.17.

This edition's Polychronicon was compiled by Dr Arthur Chapman, Reader in Education, Edge Hill University.

Polychronicon was a fourteenth-century chronicle that brought together much of the knowledge of its own age.

Our Polychronicon in *Teaching History* is a regular feature helping school history teachers to update their subject knowledge, with special emphasis on recent historiography and changing interpretation.