

The 1857 Indian Uprising and the Politics of Commemoration

The Cawnpore Well, Lucknow Residency, and Delhi Ridge were sacred places within the British imagination of India. Sanctified by the colonial administration in commemoration of victory over the ‘Sepoy Mutiny’ of 1857, they were read as emblems of empire, which embodied the central tenets of sacrifice, fortitude, and military prowess that underpinned Britain’s imperial project. Since independence, however, these sites have been rededicated in honour of the ‘First War of Independence’ and are thus sacred to the memory of those who revolted against colonial rule, rather than those who saved it. *The 1857 Indian Uprising and the Politics of Commemoration* tells the story of these and other commemorative landscapes and uses them as prisms through which to view over 150 years of Indian history. Based on extensive archival research from India and Britain, Sebastian Raj Pender traces the ways in which commemoration responded to the demands of successive historical moments by shaping the events of 1857 from the perspective of the present. By telling the history of India through the transformation of mnemonic space, this study shows that remembering the past is always a political act.

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This book is dedicated to Janet, who never stopped reading, Ranjit, who never stopped believing, Tatsiana, who never stopped loving, and Florence, who never stopped paying!

Contents

<i>List of Figures</i>	page viii
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	x
<i>List of Abbreviations</i>	xiii
Introduction: Meaning, Memory, and Monument	1
1 ‘Remember Cawnpore!’: British Counter-insurgency and the Memory of Massacre	18
2 ‘Forget Cawnpore!’: Commemorating the Mutiny, 1857–1877	46
3 Negotiating Fear: Celebration, Commemoration, and the ‘Mutiny Pilgrimage’	83
4 The Mutiny of 1907: Anxiety and the Mutiny’s Golden Jubilee	106
5 The War of Indian Independence: A Struggle for Meaning, Memory, and the Right to Narrate	131
6 Remembering the Mutiny at the End of Empire: 1947–1972	156
7 Celebrating the First War of Independence Today: Caste, Gender, and Religion	191
Conclusion: Memories of the Present and Echoes of the Past	219
<i>Bibliography</i>	225
<i>Index</i>	251

Figures

1.1 Sir Joseph Noel Paton, <i>In Memoriam</i> . c. 1858, oil on panel, 123 cm × 96.5 cm, private collection	page 21
1.2 This painting, which shows how <i>In Memoriam</i> would have looked when first exhibited, was commissioned by the author and painted by Galina Maximova and Dmitry Repin of the Moscow State Academic Art Institute named after V. I. Surikov, based on research conducted by the author and an analysis of the painting conducted by Simon Gillespie, which was generously funded by Peterhouse, Cambridge, through the Greta Burkill Fund	44
2.1 Photograph showing Woolner’s design for the Cawnpore monument	62
2.2 Left: The Memorial Well of Cawnpore. Right: The Angel of the Well	63
2.3 Erection of two monuments at Lucknow in memory of Sir Mountstuart Jackson and other European and native victims of the Mutiny	67
2.4 The Delhi Mutiny Monument	71
2.5 The Residency and ‘Lawrence’s Cross’	76
4.1 Photograph of Lord Roberts, Colonel J. P. Robertson, and Edward M. Wrench at the Inspection of Mutiny Veterans at the Royal Albert Hall, London	129
5.1 Sir Robert Cassels unveils the monument at Badli-ki-serai	149
6.1 Mr Ireland, Residency Caretaker, with the last Residency Flag	161
6.2 The Angel of the Resurrection at All Souls’ Church	167
6.3 The ‘Delhi Table’	175
6.4 The Nicholson monument in a shipping crate	181
6.5 Mountbatten unveils the Nicholson monument at the Royal School	182
6.6 Bust of Tantia Tope in Nana Rao Park	186
7.1 Woman dressed as a soldier stands in front of a bust of Uda Devi during a ceremony	202
7.2 Maharani Lakshmbai Nyas procession through Varanasi in 2018	209
7.3 1857 Rashtravaadi Manch protest the grave of William Hodsden (left) and hold a torchlight procession in Chinhut (right)	217

List of Figures	ix
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C.1 Left: Nagesh Yoglekar’s statue of Subhas Chandra Bose, photograph by Biswarup Ganguly which has been slightly edited to remove powerlines obscuring monument. Right: John Henry Foley’s statue of James Outram	220
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My fascination with the history of India was born over the course of one remarkable summer when I was around fifteen years old. I had grown up listening to the stories of Madan Singh, my paternal grandfather, describing his time serving in the Royal Indian Navy (RIN) during the Second World War and better still his account of the RIN ‘Mutiny’ of 1946, in which he had played a notable part. But it was during that long summer holiday that I rigged up an old ADAT audio recorder and spent several weeks documenting his remarkable life. My task was made much easier by having such a willing subject! My grandfather would spend many hours writing and arranging his notes in the evening so that he would be ready to help organise his interrogator’s haphazard questions into a coherent narrative the following day. The result was a long series of often comical, but sometimes tragic, personal anecdotes of events that occurred in India, the United States, the United Kingdom, Russia, the Middle East, and Africa, all seamlessly blended into an overarching story of the end of empire, and the complex and bloody process of decolonisation.

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xii Acknowledgements

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Abbreviations

ASI	Archaeological Survey of India
BJP	Bharatiya Janata Party
BMGS	British Monuments and Graves Section of the High Commission
BSP	Bahujan Samaj Party
CRO	Commonwealth Relations Office
EIC	East India Company
IOR	India Office Records
IWM	Imperial War Museum, London
LDTA	Lucknow Diocesan Trust Association
MLN	Maharani Lakshmibai Nyas
NAI	National Archives of India, Delhi
OBC	Other Backward Class
OIOC	Oriental and India Office Collection, the British Library, London
RSS	Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh
SP	Samajwadi Party
SPG	Society for the Propagation of the Gospel
TNA	The National Archives, Kew, London
UKHCI	United Kingdom High Commission in India
UP	Uttar Pradesh
USPG	United Society for the Propagation of the Gospel