

The Presidential Addresses of Sir William Jones: The Asiatick Society of Bengal and the ISCSC

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‘Men will always differ in their ideas of civilization, each measuring it by the habits and prejudices of his own country.’

Sir William Jones, *Fourth Anniversary Discourse* (1786)

Introduction

The Asiatick Society of Bengal, founded by Sir William Jones in Calcutta in 1784, would seem to be a principal ancestor of the two scholarly organizations – the ISCSC and the Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes – which conceived and co-hosted the 35th world congress of the ISCSC, held in Paris in July 2006, the congress for which this essay on Sir William Jones was first written. Raymond Schwab writes in his influential *La Renaissance orientale* that the field of comparative oriental studies entered the academy – that is, was institutionalized – in 1868 with the founding of the Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes in Paris and the introduction of Indic studies into the curriculum (Schwab, 1984: 8). This so-called curriculum would be in the ‘section d’histoire et de philologie’, one of four main sections established by the original decree of 31 July 1868 that may be considered a direct result of Sir William Jones’s initiatives, begun almost a century earlier. The influence of Sir William Jones on the ISCSC, though perhaps indirect and spiritual rather than institutional, is nonetheless profound and significant, as I make clear in the following pages.

The founding of the Asiatick Society reflected – and then influenced – a profound change in humankind’s view of itself. This change had to do with the realization that the study of human society and its cultural and political manifestations had to encompass much more than the Greco-Roman and Judaeo-Christian world, and that the meaning of human history could not be made to depend primarily on a Judaeo-Christian conception of the world and of human destiny. According to the Indian

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SAGE: Los Angeles, London, New Delhi and Singapore, <http://dio.sagepub.com>

DOI: 10.1177/0392192108090744

scholar O.P. Kejariwal in his history of the Asiatic Society of Bengal (Kejariwal, 1988: 26–7), as well as to David Kopf, in his *British Orientalism and the Bengal Renaissance*, it was Voltaire who first championed the idea of a universal human nature and of its particular cultural manifestations in his famous *Essai sur les mœurs et l'esprit des nations* (1756). There is more that is directly relevant to comparative civilizationists today: in the words of Wallace Ferguson, author of *The Renaissance in Historical Thought*, Voltaire's essay is said to have 'paved the way for a history of civilizations' (Kopf, 1969: 23). I believe, however, that Voltaire suggested rather than paved the way.¹ Further, I believe it was really Sir William Jones who blazed the trails and then mapped them for subsequent travelers in the discipline we now call the comparative study of civilizations.² He did so first as the founder in 1784 of the Asiatic Society of Bengal and as its first President from 1784 to his death in 1794, and second as a scholar of comparative civilizations whose eleven programmatic presidential addresses cause us to reflect on the origins of our discipline and on important aspects of its practice.

Sir William Jones was a polymath as well as an extraordinary linguist, famed for his knowledge of 28 languages. He was able to carry on a correspondence not only in English but also in Arabic, Persian, French and Latin. He was the first translator of the pre-Islamic Arabic odes known as the *Moallakât* (1782) and of the Sanskrit drama *Śakuntala* (1789).³ The latter translation was in fact a double translation, first into an interlinear Latin version and then into English. The published work took Europe by storm, influencing writers as diverse as Coleridge, Schiller, Goethe, Chateaubriand and Heine,⁴ and it opened Indian eyes to the greatness of their own literary tradition⁵ as well as to the excellence of Kālidāsa as a dramatist, compared by Jones to Shakespeare. Jones contributed to Persian studies by authoring, among other works, *A Grammar of the Persian Language* (1771). He contributed to the history of English law with a volume entitled *An Essay on the Law of Bailments* (1781). He contributed to the codification and utility of Indian law with the posthumous *Institutes of Hindu Law* (1794).⁶ Jones wrote on Indian medicine and chemistry; on botany; on the history of Indian science and mathematics; on Indian music. He is famous for postulating in his Third Discourse the common linguistic origin of Greek, Latin, and Sanskrit. Because of his comparative work on those languages as well as on Arabic and Persian he is often considered to be the father of comparative linguistics. He wrote poetry which was widely admired at the time. Indeed, Garland Cannon (1990: 237) called him 'the first Anglo-Indian poet' and even went so far as to say that he played 'an indirect role' in the development of Comparative Literature (p. 239).

But I am not concerned here with the panoramic portrayal of a polymath, a linguist, a translator or a poet, however admiring I may be of his many talents. My intention is more limited. As a former President of the ISCS, I became curious about Jones's presidential activities, specifically about how he shaped and led the Asiatic Society of Bengal, transforming it into the first society in European history dedicated to the comparative study of civilizations. The key to this transformation lies in his eleven presidential addresses or discourses, all published in the journal of the Society, *Asiatick Researches*, which began publication in 1788.⁷ In those discourses may be seen an attitude of mind and inclination of spirit that can inspire us as students of comparative civilizations. The discourses also reveal the dangers inher-

ent in the large comparisons and overly speculative inferences which comparative civilizationists are wont to make.

The Discourses

On 11 April 1783, having been knighted on 20 March and married on 8 April, Sir William Jones began the long journey to India with his wife Anna Maria on the frigate *Crocodile* in order to take up a judgeship in the Supreme Court of Calcutta. They sailed down the west coast of Africa, around the Cape, up the east coast of Africa and across the Indian Ocean, eventually arriving in Calcutta at the end of September. In January of 1784, he and approximately 30 other English gentlemen, 'the *élite* of the European community in Calcutta at the time' (Mitra, 1986: 2), founded 'The Asiatick Society of Bengal'. At the initial meeting of 15 January, Jones delivered in effect his first presidential address,⁸ which in volume three of *The Works of Sir William Jones* carries the following title: 'A Discourse on the Institution of a SOCIETY for Inquiring into the History, Civil and Natural, the Antiquities, Arts, Sciences, and Literature, of ASIA. By the President.' This 'First or Preliminary Discourse' is notable both for Jones's openness of mind and for his programmatic desires for the nascent society. Here are the opening words:

When I was at sea last August, on my voyage to this country, which I had long and ardently desired to visit, I found one evening, on inspecting the observations of the day, that *India* lay before us, and *Persia* to our left, whilst a breeze from *Arabia* blew nearly on our stern. A situation so pleasing in itself, and to me so new, could not fail to awaken a train of reflections in a mind which had early been accustomed to contemplate with delight the eventful history and agreeable fictions of this eastern world. It gave me inexpressible pleasure to find myself in the midst of so noble an amphitheatre, almost encircled by the vast regions of *Asia*, which has ever been esteemed the nurse of sciences, the inventress of delightful and useful arts, the scene of glorious actions, fertile in the productions of human genius, abounding in natural wonders, and infinitely diversified in the forms of religions and government, in the laws, manners, customs, and languages, as well as in the features and complexions of men. (Jones, 1784: 1–2)

Most significant is what has *not* been said, how Jones has *not* situated himself in relation to India. Behind him and to the west is Arabia, Persia to his left and north, and ahead, to the east, lies India. Europe is simply not here. The 'West' or Europe may be present by implication because of the phrase 'this eastern world', but Jones makes no move to compare the East with the West. Rather, he is delighted to be where he is, anticipating the diverse wonders of Asia. This is a non-Eurocentric statement of the first magnitude, all the more remarkable because he had not yet arrived in India and because, as some scholars have pointed out, he was still relatively ignorant about India as a civilization. In sum, Jones here shows himself to be open to new experiences, to new cultures and civilizations, without prejudging their worth in relation to the glory that was Greece and the grandeur that was Rome.

Taking as his model the Royal Society of England, which began modestly with 'only a meeting of a few literary friends at Oxford, [then] rose gradually to that

splendid zenith at which a Halley was their secretary, and a Newton their president' (Jones, 1784: 3), Jones states that he hopes to guide the Asiatick Society to similar heights. He permits himself to put before his audience 'a few general ideas on the plan' of the Society. It is to be bounded 'only by the geographical limits of Asia' (p. 4), with India at its center and various Asian cultures around it, from Yemen and Arabia to Iran, Tibet, China and Japan. Thus the geographical limits. And the 'objects of our inquiries'? He answers, 'MAN and NATURE; whatever is performed by the one, or produced by the other' (p. 5). There follow some remarks on the frequency of meetings and the advisability of publishing an 'Asiatic Miscellany' (p. 8).⁹ The only qualification for membership will be 'a love for knowledge, and a zeal for the promotion of it' (p. 9).¹⁰

Nothing in these plans turns the members' attention to Europe. In fact, as he searches for a name for the new society, Jones arrives at the following insight: 'if it be necessary or convenient, that a short name or epithet be given to our society, in order to distinguish it in the world, that of *Asiatick* appears both classical and proper, whether we consider the place or the object of the institution, and preferable to *Oriental*, which is in truth a word merely relative, and, though commonly used in *Europe*, conveys no very distinct idea' (Jones, 1784: 5). The researches and comparisons were intended to be intra-Asian. This was a stroke of genius on Jones's part, for by limiting the Society's activities geographically and by simultaneously considering no corner of human knowledge or aspect of nature to be beyond its reach, Jones prevented the tendency to compare non-European cultures with Europe. Invariably, non-European cultures suffered by such a comparison because Europeans believed then, as many do now, that European culture is the most advanced and most important one in the world. In effect, Jones shifted the intellectual center of gravity from London to Calcutta. An examination of the four volumes of the *Asiatick Researches* published between 1788 and 1794 shows how thoroughly he succeeded in convincing the members of the Asiatick Society of Bengal to focus on topics related to Asian history, languages, cultures, and nature herself. Yet it must be admitted that Jones himself did not completely follow his own advice. On the one hand, Jones's decision not to follow his own advice slavishly was fortunate, for some of his most enduring insights arise from comparisons that he, and perhaps only he, was uniquely qualified to make between western languages like Greek and Latin and eastern ones like Arabic, Persian and Sanskrit, or between ancient Greek chronology and ancient Hindu chronology. On the other hand, some of the comparisons he does make between West and East show how pervasive the influence of Eurocentrism could be even on the most cosmopolitan of minds.

The confident ambition behind that 'first or preliminary discourse' of 1784 may be partially traced to an informal document which Jones wrote during the sea voyage itself. John Shore, generally known as Lord Teignmouth, author of the first biography of Sir William Jones (printed 5 years after his death), brings to light a memorandum dated by Jones himself on 12 July 1783 and entitled 'Objects of Enquiry during my residence in Asia' (Shore, 1977b: 3–4). The range of topics that Jones intends to cover is remarkable. He plans to study, paraphrasing Jones's own language and in the order given in the memorandum, the laws of the Hindus and Mohammedans; the history of the ancient world; proofs and illustrations of

Scripture; traditions concerning the Deluge, etc.; modern politics and geography of Hindustan; the best mode of governing Bengal; arithmetic and geometry, and mixed sciences of the Asiatics; medicine, chemistry, surgery, and anatomy of the Indians; natural productions of India; poetry, rhetoric, and morality of Asia; music of the eastern nations; the Shi-King, or 300 Chinese odes; the best accounts of Tibet and Cashmir; trade manufactures, agriculture, and commerce of India; the Mogul constitution, contained in the Defteri, Alemghiri, and Ayein Aebari; the Mahratta constitution. Jones further plans to translate the Gospel of St Luke into Arabic; to publish law tracts in Persian or Arabic; and to translate the Psalms of David into Persian verse. Apparently, Jones is confident that he will be able to make significant headway on all of the above, for he adds that, 'if God grant me Life' he intends also to write: elements of the laws of England, modeled on his own essay on Bailment and on Aristotle; the history of the American war [of independence], modeled on Thucydides and Polybius; a heroic poem on the constitution of England, entitled 'Britain Discovered', modeled on Homer; forensic and political speeches modeled on Demosthenes; philosophical and historical dialogues modeled on Plato; a series of letters modeled on Demosthenes and Plato. Such an enormous and varied amount of work is more suitable for an entire faculty of a college rather than for a single individual. Though such confidence may strike us today as being beyond the pale, it was not unusual for 18th-century intellectuals. We need but recall the personality and ambition of Voltaire or Samuel Johnson. But Sir William Jones, surely, surpasses them all in ambition and perhaps even in what he was able to accomplish in a relatively brief life of 47 years.

Jones delivered a presidential 'discourse' to the Asiatick Society in February of each of the next 10 years after its foundation. They covered a variety of topics, Jones being careful to describe them as programmatic and general, and to state that he reserved the more detailed and scholarly explorations for 'dissertations' or articles, which he also published in *Asiatick Researches*. The discourses treated the following topics: the history, culture and potential of India (Discourse 2); cultural, religious, and linguistic issues in the study of India (Discourse 3); Arabian culture and society (Discourse 4); the Tartars or Mongolians (Discourse 5); the Persians (Discourse 6); the Chinese (Discourse 7); the islands and peoples bordering 'Asia' (Discourse 8); the 'origins and families of nations' (Discourse 9); historiography and Indian natural history or science (Discourse 10); and finally 'the philosophy of the Asiaticks' (Discourse 11).

As we peruse the discourses, we notice several tendencies. First, Jones seems in part to be pursuing the 'objects of enquiry' as laid out in the memorandum authored during his voyage to India. Second, he is constantly expanding his horizons year by year, taking on new challenges, such as learning Sanskrit or chemistry or botany. Some of the discourses seem to be 'reports' on what he has learned in the year since the previous discourse. Third, there is the teacher's quality to his rhetoric, as if he were introducing a group of students to a particular area of learning. Fourth, the discourses have a hortatory quality, as Jones tries to inspire his audience to acquire certain disciplines and to pursue certain topics in a country which up to that point had been seen primarily as an outpost of empire to be exploited commercially and for personal advancement.¹¹ Fifth, he is most authoritative when he speaks about

language and how language may be used to construct cultural histories, especially comparative cultural histories. He insists that no culture should be interpreted without the scholar knowing its language. Sixth, the speculative and religious side of his personality becomes stronger as his Christian faith reasserts itself. This last is a point that no commentator emphasizes, perhaps because it conflicts with the view of Jones as a cosmopolitan citizen of the world, as a European who transcended his origins. Yet even this most enlightened son of the Enlightenment does not finally free himself from the influence of a Christianity that nurtured him in England and, it appears from his letters and other documents, comforted him in India.

A closer perusal of the discourses shows also the evolution of a comparative civilizationist. The comparative civilizationist's tolerance of other cultures and the desire to learn about them are there from the beginning. In today's terminology, Jones would be considered a multiculturalist and a champion of diversity. That attitude of mind does not fundamentally change from the first discourse to the last. In other aspects, however, he does evolve. The earlier discourses focus on particular cultures with an eye to comparative topics within those cultures. As he learns more about the various cultures that comprise 'Asia' he becomes more comparative and more speculative. He also becomes increasingly a diffusionist in his interpretations. The ultimate diffusionist view is that everything – heroes, myths, specific languages, social customs, architecture, agricultural practices, religions, and so on – originates *elsewhere* and attains its definitive form in a target culture, be it India, Arabia, China or even Peru. Jones seldom proposes that any two similarities in different geographical areas may have had separate and merely coincidental origins. Such resemblances are best explained, he would hold, by intercultural contact; in a word, by diffusionism. Jones shares another quality of mind with a number of comparative civilizationists that is related to diffusionism and becomes apparent only in the later discourses: what I would call the quest for a unified field theory of civilizations, for a comprehensive explanation that accounts for the origin of culture or humankind, and then for its subsequent dispersion and evolution. The tension in Jones's mind between the drive for the elegantly simple explanation or the comprehensive generalization and the respect for complexity makes his work both interesting and instructive. The principle of Occam's razor, which holds that the simpler and more reductive of any two explanations is to be the preferred one, is, after all, generally better suited to philosophical than to historical analysis. And Jones, in my view, did cut himself from time to time.

Let us now put some flesh on the bare bones of these remarks as we consider some of the individual discourses, not all of which, of course, are equally relevant to my assessment of Jones as a comparative civilizationist.

In the discourses that Jones delivered between 1786 and 1791, that is, from the third through the eighth discourse, he is ever the inquisitive and non-Eurocentric scholar. The third discourse is probably the most famous, and justifiably so. In it, he announces his intention to study the five principal nations of Asia in five distinct essays in order to ask himself, after these analyses have been completed, about 'the connexion or diversity between [the five nations] and [to] solve the great problem, whether they had any common origin, and whether that origin was the same, which we generally ascribe to them' (Jones, 1786: 28). The problem of a possible common

origin among the nations he addresses in the ninth discourse. In the third, he focuses on India, praising it for its abundance of wealth, the ancient splendor of its arts, excellence of governance, wisdom in legislation, and eminence in knowledge (philosophy, literature, religion), regardless of 'how degenerate and debased' India may appear to be at the present time (p. 32). He laments the paucity of documentation concerning India's history and culture, regretting that the Greeks who accompanied Alexander to India said so little about the culture (p. 33). The key to recovering some of the knowledge of the history and culture of India, he now believes, rests upon the acquisition of Sanskrit, a language he had been studying for about a year by the time he delivered the third presidential discourse. Filled with the enthusiasm of the neophyte – but a neophyte who already has an advanced knowledge of Latin, Greek, Arabic and Persian, among other languages – he praises Sanskrit in a statement that is often quoted: 'The Sanscrit language, whatever be its antiquity, is of a wonderful structure; more perfect than the Greek, more copious than the Latin, and more exquisitely refined than either, yet bearing to both of them a stronger affinity, both in the roots of verbs and in the forms of grammar, than could possibly have been produced by accident; so strong indeed, that no philologer could examine them all three, without believing them to have sprung from some common source, which, perhaps, no longer exists' (p. 34). Comparative Linguistics dates its origin from this statement, with its awareness of an Indo-European proto-language as the root of so many of our languages today. In the third discourse, also, Jones presents as a possibility the common origin of Indians, Egyptians, Tuscans, Scythians, Goths, Celts, Chinese, Japanese and Peruvians and states that he will look into the matter in a future discourse.

So unfamiliar was Buddhism to the West in the 18th century that knowledge of the existence of Sarnath, located on the outskirts of Benares or Varanasi and where the Buddha delivered the Deer Park Sermon, lay some years in the future, to be discovered by a future member of the Asiatick Society of Bengal. That lack of general familiarity with Buddhism permitted Jones to make the following speculation: 'Sa'cya is a title of Buddha, whom I suppose to be Woden, since Buddha was not a native of India, and since the age of Sesac perfectly agrees with that of Sa'cya, we may form a plausible conjecture, that they were in fact the same person, who travelled eastward from Ethiopia, either as a warrior or as a lawgiver, about a thousand years before Christ, and whose rites we now see extended as far as the country of Nifon [Nippon], or, as the Chinese call it, Japuen, both words signifying the Rising Sun' (Jones, 1787: 58). While today we may readily agree that the Buddha was neither the Germanic Wotan nor an Ethiopian warrior, we must also acknowledge that Jones was driven by a motivation common in the discipline of comparative civilizational studies. Speculative diffusionism – the desire to make connections where sometimes they do not exist – is a great temptation for comparative civilizationists. Jones's example stands as a warning to us all not to speculate beyond the evidence that we know to be true. Ironically, Jones here makes a mistake that he accuses others of making: that of following false leads because of tempting (and misleading) similarities in words.¹²

As much as Jones loves India, and is beloved by Indians for his acceptance of them and his concern for their wellbeing both inside and outside his courtroom, Jones is

intermittently Eurocentric in the discourses. When to that Eurocentrism is added the diffusionist perspective and the quest for an elegantly abstract and persuasive theory that would explain everything of any consequence in the comparative history of civilizations, including the question of the common origin of all civilizations, he gets into some difficulty. Occam's razor leaves a wound. The relevant discourses here are the second, the ninth and the tenth. Early in his presidency, Jones has his audience of British men in Calcutta very much in mind as he delivers his discourses. For them, the superiority of England over India is not in question, and Jones, in the second discourse, supports that sense of superiority. At the same time that he is introducing the history, culture and potential of India to his listeners, he tells them: 'Whoever travels in Asia, especially if he be conversant with the literature of the countries through which he passes, must naturally remark the superiority of European talents: the observation, indeed, is at least as old as Alexander' (Jones, 1785: 12). He remarks that in the sciences, 'the Asiaticks, if compared with our western nations, are mere children' (p. 19). He drops the rhetoric of western superiority for several years, but that view returns, disguised as the search for the origins of human history, in the ninth and tenth discourses in which his diffusionist view of historical change unites with his Christian faith. He opens the ninth discourse with a word of thanks to his audience for its patience in having heard him describe various 'Asiatick nations' in the previous discourses. Now, however, he proposes to 'trace to one centre the three great families, from which those nations appear to have proceeded, and then hazard a few conjectures on the different courses, which they may be supposed to have taken toward the countries, in which we find them settled at the dawn of all genuine history' (Jones, 1792: 185). He argues that 'if the human race then be, as we may confidently assume, of one natural species, they must all have proceeded from one pair; and if perfect justice be, as it is most indubitably, an essential attribute of GOD, that pair must have been gifted with sufficient wisdom and strength to be virtuous, and, as far as their nature admitted, happy, but intrusted with freedom of will to be vicious and consequently degraded' (p. 188). The pair is, of course, Adam and Eve. From those first parents, he traces 'antediluvian history' down to the Flood itself, after which the three sons of Noah were dispersed 'in separate families to separate places of residence (p. 194). Further, Noah's family established itself in the northern part of Iran (p. 201) and then over the centuries migrated gradually in Africa, Arabia, India, even into Mexico and Peru (p. 203). In the Tenth Discourse, Jones again turns to the Biblical conception of history – 'all our researches have confirmed the Mosaick accounts of the primitive world' (Jones, 1793: 208) – and again he brings in Mexico and Peru. He finds that the *Purāṇas* – those ancient and sacred Hindu texts dealing with religious matters – contained an account of the flood which he identified with Noah's flood (1793: 212–13).

In these statements, Jones has resurrected a Judaeo-Christian and teleological conception of history as old as St Augustine and recalled a theory believed by some influential theologians in the 16th century that the Indians of Mexico and possibly Peru descended from one of the lost tribes of Israel. I mention these aspects of Jones's theory of history and of historical explanation not in order to knock him from the pedestal on which he has so often been placed but in order to acknowledge that even he is the child of his age. While he was able to transcend his era in certain respects,

he remained bound to it in others. He was as rational and scientific as Sir Isaac Newton and yet, also like Newton, he was a believer in the ultimate truth of revealed Christianity and its Hebraic roots.

Legacies

Anna Maria, whose health had been continually compromised in India, left for England on 7 December 1793. Jones was planning to follow her later and to continue his work on India in English libraries as well as in his own large personal library. However, on 20 April 1794, two months after delivering what would become his final presidential discourse to the Asiatick Society, Jones fell ill. At first he had no idea what ailed him and made light of his indisposition. Very soon, however, physicians diagnosed what Lord Teignmouth described as ‘a complaint common in Bengal, an inflammation of the liver’ (Shore, 1977b: 260). The progress of the disease was rapid, and on 27 April Jones succumbed. According to witnesses, Jones’s last moments were spent in meditation, and his passing was peaceful, ‘without a pang or a groan’ (Shore, 1977b: 261).

At the time of his death, Jones enjoyed a very high reputation, and that would continue for about two decades. But after the publication of James Mill’s *History of British India* in 1818, and Macaulay’s infamous Minute on Indian Education in 1835, Jones’s reputation declined.¹³ Mill and Macaulay, both ignorant of any Indian languages, confidently dismissed much Indian culture as insignificant beside the magnificence of European and English achievements. Indeed, in their view, India, if it was to be modern, had to anglicize itself and to adopt English manners, language and education. As this view became dominant, the accomplishments of the British orientalist of Jones’s generation and after faded from memory. The tolerance of ethnic and religious differences as well as of varied customs and practices, a curiosity about languages, geographies and histories to be learned for their own sake rather than primarily for the utilitarian purpose of governance or conversion – all that suffered likewise. The history of Anglo-Indian relations would have been far different in the 19th century and beyond had the ideas and attitudes of Jones, Wilkins, Colebrooke and other early British orientalist prevailed. But they did not, and modern Anglo-Indian relations were shaped more by Thomas Babington Macaulay, who scorned Indian culture and who remained in India for 4 brief years before returning to England in 1838, yet whose Minute of 1835 influenced subsequent Indian history more than anything Jones did or wrote. But it was Jones, as has been noted by scholars both Indian and British, who awakened India to the glories of its own cultural and literary heritage and, in doing so, became one of the sources of inspiration for India’s intellectual and political independence.

Sir William Jones made mistakes, a great many of them in fact, as all intellectual adventurers must who dare to explore the unknown with tools invented on the fly, or with the relevant skills so recently acquired that they must constantly be revisited. But Jones’s various legacies transcend his mistakes.¹⁴ He was the first, or one of the first, in so many areas of learning. Though he did not set out to become a Sanskrit scholar (indeed he first wrote to his friend Charles Wilkins in 1784 that he was too

old and too busy to learn the language) (Cannon, 1970: 646), he became one out of necessity and thus, partly out of necessity also and partly out of inclination, he became a bridge between West and East, or, as one scholar put it, 'the interpreter of India to the West' (Krishna Sastry, 1998). He was an able and effective administrator; the society that he founded has flourished, and it has an active on-going program to this day. His legal work, both as a judge and as a translator, laid the foundation for India's justice system. By his own example, he demonstrated to his contemporaries and their successors what a scholar should be: open-minded, curious, tolerant, indefatigable, willing to pursue any line of inquiry wherever it might lead, willing to learn whatever skills are needed, committed to the study of primary materials and valuing them over secondary work, and willing to change his views if the evidence warrants it. Yet even this most excellent of scholars, as we have seen, had some very human flaws and ethnocentric limitations which negatively impacted on his work.

In 1787, by then dedicated to the plan of study which would earn him a hallowed place in the scholarly pantheon, Jones described for the Second Earl Spencer the challenges facing him as a scholar. This description is found in a long letter composed of daily entries logged between 5 and 30 August 1787. The entry for 23 August reads in part: 'Suppose Greek literature to be known in modern Greece only, and there to be in the hands of priests and philosophers, and suppose them to be still worshippers of Jupiter and Apollo, suppose Greece to have been conquered successively by Goths, Huns, Vandals, Tartars, and lastly by the English, then suppose a court of judicature to be established by the British Parliament, at Athens, and an inquisitive Englishman to be one of the judges: suppose him to learn Greek there, which none of his countrymen knew, and to read Homer, Pindar, Plato, which no other European had even heard of, such am I in this country, substituting Sanskrit for Greek, the Brahmans for the priests of Jupiter, and Valmic, Vyasia, Kalidasa for Homer, Plato, Pindar' (Cannon, 1970: 755–6).

Jones was singularly aware of the importance of his own work. He was also aware of how much he had yet to do. After his death, there was found among his papers an undated document entitled 'Desiderata' (Shore, 1977a: xi–xii), which may be seen as complementary to the 'Objects of Enquiry' written in 1783. Lord Teignmouth writes that the Desiderata list explains 'the comprehensive views of his enlightened mind' (Shore, 1977a: x), shows how Jones had fulfilled some of his earlier ambition, and details what projects he intended to pursue before his final illness struck him down. The Desiderata is divided geographically into India, Arabia, Persia, China and Tartary. Of these, 14 projects relate to India: four concern Arabia, three Persia, two China and one Tartary. In order, Jones wanted to study: the ancient geography of India, etc., from the Puranas; a botanical description of Indian plants, from the Coshas, etc.; a grammar of Sanskrit, from Panini, etc.; a dictionary of Sanskrit; the ancient music of the Indians; the medicine of India; the philosophy of the ancient Indians; a translation of the Veda; ancient Indian geometry, astronomy and algebra; a translation of the Puranas; a translation of the Mahabharat and the Ramayan; Indian theatre, etc.; Indian constellations, with their mythology, from the Puranas; the history of India before the Mahommedan conquest. Concerning Arabia, Jones was interested in the history of Arabia before Mahommed; a translation of the Hamasa; a translation of Hariri; a translation of Facahatul Khulafa. Concerning

Persia, he was committed to projects on the history of Persian from authorities in Sanskrit, Arabic, Greek, Turkish and Persian, both ancient and modern, along with work on Firdausi's *Khosrau nama*; a translation into prose of five poems by Nizami; a dictionary of pure Persian. In respect of the Chinese, he was interested in a translation of the *Shi-king* and of *Can-fu-tsu* [Confucius]. Finally, he wanted to write a history of the Tartar nations, basing his work on Turkish and Persian sources. As was the case with the *Objects of Enquiry*, the range and variety of interests are extraordinary. The *Desiderata*, however, is somewhat more focused on his strengths and talents as a linguist. Who knows what Jones could have accomplished had he had another 25 or 30 years of productivity.

In a commemorative volume honoring Sir William Jones, published in 1998 by Oxford University Press, the editor Alexander Murray (1988: v) laments in his opening remarks that 'history is unkind to polymaths' and that Jones had fallen into an undeserved obscurity. The great Sanskrit scholar Friedrich Max Müller (1910: 4–5) had said much the same thing more than a century earlier in his address to students at Cambridge University, all of them candidates for the Indian Civil Service. The time is long overdue to show some kindness to Sir William Jones, and to acknowledge, to analyze and to assess his contributions to so many fields, not the least of which is the comparative study of civilizations.¹⁵

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Notes

1. Voltaire begins his 'essai' with a chapter on China, a tactic which in itself challenges the Eurocentrism of previous historiography.
2. Jones was not the first Englishman to have pursued Indian studies as a scholar. That distinction, according to O. P. Kejariwal (1988: 18–20), belongs to John Marshall in the 17th century and later to John Jeremiah Howell and Warren Hastings in the 18th.
3. I follow the practice of referring to *Śākuntala* as the play and to Śākuntalā as the character in the play, as the orthography reflects a slight difference in pronunciation (Figueira, 1991: 214)
4. Dorothy Figueira (1991) has written a widely reviewed book on the resonance of *Śākuntala* in European literature (see also Franklin, 1995: 99–103).
5. Jones 'resuscitated India's ancient culture not only for Europe but for India herself. Now India could boast of a poet as great as Shakespeare, a language that was superior to Greek and Latin, a philosophy that could rival the best of Greek philosophy, and an advanced system of astronomy that was independent of the Greek system' (Kejariwal, 1988: 74).
6. The *Institutes* were finished by the scholar H. T. Colebrook and published in four volumes in 1798. F. Max Müller considered Colebrook to be the greatest of all Sanskritists.
7. Jones published 19 other essays in the pages of *Asiatick Researches*, on very diverse topics. He wrote on the orthography of Asiatic words in Roman letters, as well as a comparison of Greek, Italian and Indian divinities, both in Volume One. He also published articles on chess, on the Indian zodiac, on Hindu music, on Indian plants, on Indian chronology (establishing for the first time a comparative chronology between Indian and western history), even on Chinese subjects.
8. In fact, Jones was not yet President of the Society, though the members treated him as such. At the next meeting, held on 22 January 1784, it was decided that Warren Hastings, because of his position as governor-general of all British India and his interest in oriental matters and scholarship, be offered the presidency of the Society. Jones wrote Hastings that very evening to offer him the presidency

- (Cannon, 1970: 626–7). When Hastings politely declined, it was unanimously moved at the 5 February meeting of the Society that Jones ‘reaccept’ the presidency. He did so (Cannon, 1990: 204–6).
9. Jones founded *Asiatick Researches*, which he personally edited between 1788 and his death in 1794. Four volumes edited by him appeared in 1788, 1790, 1792, and 1794. When the first volume of *Asiatick Researches* arrived in England, it created enormous enthusiasm. A few years later it was even translated into French, an unusual honor for a scholarly journal. Ironically, a volume entitled *Asiatick Miscellany* did appear in Calcutta in 1785–6, and since it contained so many of Jones’s more ephemeral publications, such as hymns to Hindu divinities and other poems, it was thought to have been edited by Jones himself, an attribution which disturbed the scholar in him and perhaps contributed to his zeal to bring out the *Asiatick Review*. Though its financial difficulties were many, the *Asiatick Review* continued to be published until 1839, when it ceased publication in its 20th volume.
 10. There were no Indian members present at the Society’s creation, though Jones (1784: 8) immediately suggested that they could be enrolled at any time. Nor were they active in the early years of the Society. And if they wanted to participate they had to transmit their papers to a British member for presentation (Cannon, 1995: 34). It was not until 7 January 1829 that ‘Dr. H. H. Wilson proposed some native names and they were elected’. In the Code of Rules it was stated that ‘persons of all nations shall be eligible as members of the Society’ (Mitra, 1986: 8).
 11. That he was successful in this attempt is clear from the contents of *Asiatick Researches* both during and after his lifetime. See ‘Appendix D’, an index of papers and contributions to *Researches*, published by Rajendralal Mitra to supplement his history of the *Society* (Mitra, 1986: 106–95). Jones’s success is also clear from the fact that the Asiatick Society, after some difficult years, did indeed prosper and become something like the kind of society he envisioned.
 12. See, for instance, the second and third discourses (Jones, 1785: 18; 1786: 25).
 13. See Garland Cannon’s work in general but especially his succinct paragraph in Cannon (1995: 45).
 14. Although its focus is rather different from mine, the essay by Kenneth Kennedy (1995) on Jones’s legacy complements my remarks here.
 15. O. P. Kejariwal (1995) makes the claim that what Copernicus was to astronomy, Jones was to the study of history. Though the claim is exaggerated, I am sympathetic to it.

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