



ARTICLE

East Indian misfortunes: the Fraser brothers and the early Raj

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Abstract

Nothing in William Fraser's life in India is better known than his leaving of it. In March 1835, after 30 years in India, Fraser, then the East India Company's chief representative in Delhi, was gunned down by an assassin. The story of Fraser's murder is well covered in history. However, far more of Fraser's life in India—and that of his brothers—is discernible through their letters home to their family in Reelig, outside Inverness in Scotland.

The Frasers sent five sons to India: William, his older brother James, and their three younger siblings, Edward, Alexander, and George. Only James ultimately returned home. If service in the East India Company in the time of Clive had offered the chance of making a killing, so too was it possible to die young of disease or in battle. By the early nineteenth century, after a series of Company reforms, it was no longer as possible to make a huge fortune in India, though early death was still a probability. Nevertheless, salaries were respectable, and one could live well and maybe even send money home. There is a great deal more than these material considerations in the Frasers' correspondence. Among the topics covered are the brothers' impressions of India, descriptions of travel and working life, their professional and social interactions with the British and Indians, and reflections on the contemporary state of medical care. This article will discuss the lives and travails of the Fraser brothers as exemplars of their generation of East India Company officialdom.

Keywords: East India Company; Scotland; debt; murder; poetry

William Fraser's horse returned, riderless, to his residence on the ridge above Delhi. The servant who had accompanied him came running up the drive moments later. The sahib had been shot, he said, and lay in the road just outside the gate. His crumpled body left no doubt; he was dead, shot at close range by a horseman who had been riding just ahead of them, wheeled around, and got off his shots before bolting in the direction of the city. The servants brought Fraser's body to the house and despatched one of their number to the Collector's house to inform Thomas Metcalfe of the murder.¹ It was 22 March 1835; Fraser had been in India for over 30 years, and, at age 50, had outlived many of his contemporaries in the service of the East India Company. He was a robust,

¹ Thomas Metcalfe was the younger brother of Charles Metcalfe, who had earlier served as Resident in Delhi. This description of the assassination is based on a letter from A. Fraser to James Skinner, 23 March 1835, Fraser Papers (FP), Bundle (B) 273, quoted in M. Archer and T. Falk, *India Revealed: The Art and Adventures of James and William Fraser* (London, 1989), pp. 54–55.

irascible, often enigmatic figure who had survived several earlier scrapes with death—but not this time.

Metcalf launched an immediate investigation into the murder. He hired native trackers to decipher the hoof marks in the dirt road to trace the assassin to his destination in the city, but to no avail. John Lawrence,² then stationed in Panipat, heard of the murder the next morning and rode nonstop to Delhi to aid in the sleuthing. The murder was quickly solved, thanks to good detective work, luck in locating both the horse and the murder weapon, and a witness who turned police evidence. Nawab Shamsuddin of Ferozpur and his hired gun, Karim Khan, were arrested, tried, and hanged for Fraser's murder.³

Shamsuddin's motive was somewhat obscure. Fraser had been a close friend of his father, Nawab Ahmad Bakhsh Khan, and of his family, treating the young Shamsuddin kindly. The boy seems to have reciprocated, regarding Fraser as an honorary 'uncle'. After Shamsuddin succeeded his father as Nawab of Ferozpur, his reputation as a petty tyrant and a licentious character reached Fraser, who then refused to receive Shamsuddin when he visited Delhi. This led Fraser's best friend, Colonel James Skinner,⁴ to warn him that the young Nawab might seek revenge, but Fraser brushed it off. The insult added the issue of honour to a conflict between them over money. The Nawab was involved in a dispute with his kinsmen over a government grant, dating back to the time of Lord Lake's conquest of the Delhi territory. It is a long story, but to summarise: Ahmad Bakhsh Khan was awarded a *jāgīr* (land grant) and a pension for siding with the British in 1803. After his death in 1827, his sons inherited shares of the pension: Shamsuddin, the larger share and his younger brothers, a smaller cut. Shamsuddin manoeuvred in the courts to reduce the share of the cadet branch and to maintain control over the distribution of the annual pensions to his kinsmen. The case dragged on, and at some point, Fraser sided with the cadet branch of the family in the dispute. He urged them to travel to Calcutta to pursue their suit at a higher level.⁵ An added dimension to the story was that one of the claimants to part of the disputed share was Asadullah Khan, better known as the poet Ghalib. He and Fraser were acquainted, and William was an admirer of his poetry. Ghalib travelled to Calcutta in 1827 seeking an increase in his pension, but returned, disappointed, to Delhi in 1829.⁶ Ghalib regarded Fraser as his benefactor and was devastated when he was killed, remarking in a letter that his soul was as grief stricken as by the death of a father.⁷

During the murder trial of Shamsuddin, another perspective on his motivation was revealed in the testimony of Ania, the witness who had turned himself in (fearing for

² John Lawrence went on to a distinguished career in India, finally serving as Viceroy from 1864–1869. His brother Henry died in the siege of the Lucknow Residency in 1857. C. E. Buckland, *Dictionary of Indian Biography* (hereafter *DIB*) (reprint, Lahore, 1975), pp. 246–247.

³ The story of the investigation is well-known from W. Sleeman, *Rambles and Recollections of an Indian Official*, (ed.) V. A. Smith (London, 1915), pp. 458–475; cf. Bosworth Smith, *Life of Lord Lawrence*, excerpted in *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* 123 (January 1878), pp. 32–38; cf. P. Spear, *Twilight of the Mughals* (Cambridge, 1951), pp. 182–193.

⁴ Skinner, whose father was a Scot and mother, Indian, was a skilled warrior who could never be an officer in the British-Indian Army because of his mixed racial background. He formed an irregular regiment, Skinner's Horse, allied with the British, in a career covered in James Baillie Fraser, *Military Memoir of Lieut.-Col. James Skinner C.B.*, 2 vols (London, 1851). Both Fraser brothers, James and William, were close friends of Skinner.

⁵ Sleeman, *Rambles*, pp. 459–463, cf. M. Pernau, *Ashraf into Middle Classes: Muslims in Nineteenth-Century Delhi* (New Delhi, 2013), pp. 75–78, 96–99.

⁶ Ghalib was related to the cadet branch as well as, by marriage, to Nawab Ahmad Bakhsh: his wife was the daughter of Ilahi Bakhsh Khan, Ahmad Bakhsh's younger brother. M. A. Farooqi, *Ghalib: A Critical Biography* (Gurgaon, 2021), p. xi; File re Ghalib's Claim to Certain Jagirs, Foreign (Misc) 208, 1830, National Archives of India (NAI).

⁷ R. Russell and K. Islam, *Ghalib: Life and Letters* (London, 1969), pp. 44–55, especially p. 53.

his life at the hands of the Nawab's men). He told the court that the Nawab had explained to Karim Khan (the gunman), with Ania present, that all the people who depended upon him for their bread were going to lose it and would become poor. Why? Because his brothers, with the aid of Mr Fraser, had gone to Calcutta to get the estate divided differently. If Fraser were eliminated, then their bread would be assured. Clearly, the Nawab was presenting the problem in terms that would convince his hirelings to act. But the pension case, by then, was out of Fraser's hands and it had been settled before his death. Nevertheless, this animus doubtless contributed to the Nawab's deadly purpose.⁸

The Frasers—and other Scots—in India

It was a tragic end to an amazing career of both fortune and misfortune, typical in many ways of the early nineteenth-century East India Company servant's trajectory, and in other ways more akin to that of an eighteenth-century freebooter. William Fraser (1785–1835) was the second son of Edward Satchwell Fraser of Reelig, a minor estate located a few miles from Inverness in the Scottish Highlands. Like many Scottish families in the late eighteenth century, the Frasers were deeply in debt and struggling to keep their property. The solution, as for other impecunious Scots lairds of the day, was to send sons to India. Munro, Malcolm, and Elphinstone had all followed that path, and though they were from different class backgrounds, they all had financial insolvency in common.⁹ Service with the East India Company in the time of Clive might have offered the possibility of making a killing,¹⁰ but it was just as possible to be killed in battle or die young of disease. After the reforms effected under Warren Hastings and Cornwallis, it was no longer as possible to make vast fortunes in India, though early death was still highly probable. Private trade had been abolished or curtailed, but salaries were respectable, and thus it was possible to live well—certainly better than one could at home—and, with judicious husbanding of funds, to send money home. The Scots were plentiful in East India Company service during this period,¹¹ as they were in the agency houses of Calcutta and in the British-Indian Army.¹²

The Frasers had a history of colonial involvement. William's grandfather, James Fraser (1713–1754) had served the East India Company in Surat in the 1730s and 1740s, and was a Persian scholar of repute who wrote an account of Nadir Shah's invasion of India based on original sources, and had amassed a collection of Persian and Sanskrit manuscripts that eventually went to the Bodleian Library at Oxford.¹³ His son, Edward Satchwell Fraser (1751–1835), never went to India, but joined the Grenadier Guards and fought in the American Revolutionary war. He subsequently invested in a sugar plantation at Berbice in Guyana, mortgaging his Scottish lands to do so. Unfortunately, the sugar market went through many vicissitudes in the late eighteenth century, and the Frasers found themselves unable to extricate their estate from debt. They eventually sold their interest in the Berbice plantation, at a loss, in 1817.¹⁴

⁸ File re Fraser Murder Case, Foreign (Misc) 320 (8-13), 1835, NAI.

⁹ M. McLaren, *British India and British Scotland, 1780-1830: Career Building, Empire Building, and a Scottish School of Thought on Indian Governance* (Akron, OH, 2001), pp. 15–28, especially p. 26.

¹⁰ P. J. Marshall, *East Indian Fortunes: The British in Bengal in the Eighteenth Century* (Oxford, 1976), chapters 7–8.

¹¹ Thanks to the generous patronage of Charles Grant, a Scot who was Chairman of the Company's Court of Directors. A. Embree, *Charles Grant and British Rule in India* (London, 1962), pp. 19–20, 123–28.

¹² D. Peers, 'Soldiers, scholars, and the Scottish Enlightenment: militarism in early nineteenth-century India', *International History Review* 16.3 (August 1994), pp. 441–465.

¹³ Buckland, *DIB*, p. 55.

¹⁴ Archer and Falk, *India Revealed*, p. 19.

William's older brother, James Baillie Fraser (1783–1856), worked in Guyana from 1799 to 1811, overseeing the family plantation and attempting to salvage some of their investment, but without much success.¹⁵ William was the first brother to follow in his grandfather's footsteps to India. After schooling in Edinburgh, he secured a writership in the East India Company, thanks to the patronage of Charles Grant, and shipped out to India in 1801, at the age of 16. He was among the early students at Fort William College, and won a gold medal in languages, doing well in Persian, Hindustani, and Bengali. He noted that he was also studying Arabic, but it was very difficult. He loved Persian poetry, and in a letter to his father quoted a translation of a verse of Hafez, writing that this poem alone would tempt a man to learn the Persian language, foreshadowing his love of poetry that recommended him to poets such as Ghalib later in life.¹⁶ Also from Calcutta, William wrote to James about the expenses of life in India. The number of servants one required to maintain even a moderate establishment was such that it was impossible to stay out of debt. This did not bode well for one who wanted to send money home, though he did send the £500 prize money from his gold medal to Reelig.¹⁷

William Fraser and Delhi

When it came time to be assigned to a post, William was sent to Delhi as assistant to the Resident. His journey upriver lasted six months, from 14 July 1805 to 15 January 1806, involving a flotilla of boats and all the vicissitudes of wind and currents during the monsoon season (this was well before river steamers). At one point the cooking boat disappeared along with its crew. Visiting Patna, William described it as a 'vile assemblage of miserable huts' and mentioned its main commerce: the opium trade.¹⁸ They passed Benares/Varanasi, the holy city of the Hindus, with the 'spires of its temples towering above the rest of the city', where he visited 'all the chief pagodas'.¹⁹ Occasionally, they would disembark for hunting expeditions (he mentions crocodile and deer), whether to supplement their ship's menu of rice and curry, or simply for exercise.²⁰ William fell seriously ill with a fever in Cawnpore/Kanpur, where he stayed for over a month. Thereafter, the trip proceeded on land, either by *dāk* (stage coach), or palanquin (sedan chair), or elephant. In Agra, he visited the Taj Mahal, and was lyrical in his description, noting especially 'the exquisite delicacy and perfection of the workmanship'.²¹

When he finally arrived in Delhi, William breakfasted with the Resident, Colonel Sir David Ochterlony, an eccentric Scot (although Boston-born) with whom he bonded. Ochterlony, sometimes known as 'Looney Akhtar' by the inhabitants of Delhi, lived the life of a Mughal grandee. He had established the Residency in Dara Shikoh's former palace, and liked to entertain his Indian and European friends in the evenings with music and *nautch* dancers. He had several wives and/or concubines; his favourite wife was an aristocratic woman named Mubarak Begum, with whom he had two daughters.²²

The contrast between the protocols of British society in Calcutta and the 'White Mughal' lifestyle of Delhi was striking. What is clear from the length in both time and

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ W. Fraser to his father, 14 July 1803, FP, vol. 28, p. 192.

¹⁷ William to James, February 1802, FP, vol. 28, pp. 106–107; Archer and Falk, *India Revealed*, p. 12.

¹⁸ William's diary of the journey to Delhi, FP, vol. 29, pp. 28–29.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 33–36.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 22, 39–40, 44.

²¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 50–52, 59–60.

²² W. Dalrymple, *White Mughals* (London, 2002), pp. 30–31, 53, 183; part of Ochterlony's military career is detailed in A. P. Coleman, *A Special Corps: The Beginnings of Gorkha Service with the British* (Edinburgh, 1999), pp. 34–35.

distance of the journey from Bengal that William had just made, and the tenuous quality of communications at that time, was that the Delhi Resident and his staff had a lot of autonomy. Delhi, in some respects, was the 'wild West'. The Mughal emperor was powerless, and the surrounding territories were unruly. Percival Spear characterised the Delhi territory as a 'virgin tract' that brought out the best or worst in young officials. Calcutta was too far away to interfere as long as the revenue was collected. Spear described the routine of a young Collector as: 'touring the country, meeting and studying the villages, noting strange customs... restoring order and dispensing justice with a lordly hand'.²³ For Fraser and his contemporaries, young men just entering their twenties, going up country in India could be described (with apologies to Wordsworth):

Bliss was it in that dawn [of empire] to be alive,
But to be young [and in charge] was very heaven.²⁴

These romantic reflections upon the lives of this generation mask a host of difficulties involved in this transitional stage of the British Raj. The graduates of Fort William College had been trained in the languages and routines they needed to forge cooperation with native landlords, village headmen, and officials of the Mughal and other regional principalities. The British were there to improve the administration of the revenues and the courts; it was an inspiring ambition that these young men took to heart. Nevertheless, securing local cooperation involved meeting local customs and cultures halfway. The revenue system of British India, as a consequence, became a crazy quilt of various methods of collection, depending upon the traditions of the regions they controlled: zamindari (landlord-centric), mahalwari (village-centric), ryotwari (based on individual holdings). The courts too had to struggle to mesh a host of local traditions, customs, and legal structures. Spear asserts that the newly established courts were locally regarded as 'a lottery, and a [legal] case as a profitable speculation'²⁵—not a high recommendation. Improvement involved change, and change involved both creativity and conflict. Little wonder, then, that the complicated litigation in the Ferozpur pension case, over which William Fraser had only temporary and not decisive jurisdiction, proved so complex and, ultimately, fatal.

Returning to the first months of William Fraser's life in Delhi, he gradually became accustomed to the routine jobs of Assistant Resident, including not only revenue work, but also attendance upon the 'king', the Mughal, Shah Alam (r. 1759–1806). William observed that he 'could not but admire the extreme nobility' of the old man, and that 'the loss of his eyes does not at all disfigure his countenance'.²⁶ William here displayed sympathy for the plight of the emperor, reduced to being only the king of Delhi and a pensioner of the British. The ambiguous position of the Mughal is another example of the British meeting Indian culture halfway. Accepting robes of honour (*khil'ats*) from the emperor, and offering in return gifts of cash (*nazrs*), in a ritual which theoretically implied submission to his authority, was a fiction maintained by the British well into the 1830s. It was a recognition that, though powerless, the Mughal was still a symbolic source of political legitimacy. The Residents and their subordinates participated on a regular basis, although Governors-General, punctiliously, did not. Honoured guests to Delhi, such as Bishop Heber, described in detail his experience in 1824 of receiving a *khil'at* from the

²³ Spear, *Twilight*, p. 84.

²⁴ W. Wordsworth, 'French Revolution, as it Appeared to Enthusiasts' (1809).

²⁵ Spear, *Twilight*, pp. 109–111.

²⁶ William's diary, FP, vol. 29, p. 76.

Mughal, Akbar Shah (r. 1806–1837).²⁷ Fraser certainly participated in robing rituals as part of his official duties. One instance of this is described in the official *akhbār* of 21 April 1830, when William, together with Thomas Metcalfe, Colonel James Skinner, and other dignitaries assembled to celebrate the anniversary of Akbar Shah's accession.²⁸

Ochterlony was replaced as Resident by Archibald Seton, another Scot who was very fond of William and gave him a number of important assignments, including settling the revenue in some dangerous districts, a job William relished and accomplished with bravado, even carelessness for his own safety. The other Assistant Resident, and Fraser's contemporary, was Charles Metcalfe (1785–1846). Metcalfe was of a cooler temperament than Fraser, bookish, but equally sharp of mind and ambition. He lacked Fraser's talent as a horseman, but he was always more diplomatic and better able to manage relations with his superiors. In 1808, Seton sent him on a diplomatic mission to Ranjit Singh, ruler of the Punjab, which resulted in the Treaty of Amritsar of 1809. Metcalfe went on to be Resident in Delhi (twice), well ahead of Fraser, served in the central government in Calcutta, and later as Governor of Jamaica and Governor-General of Canada.²⁹

Meanwhile, William Fraser's career thrived, thanks to his linguistic ability and his physical courage. Fraser spent many days on horseback enthusiastically surveying districts and settling the revenues. He wrote home: 'I ride 16–17 hours a day', and that this had improved his health, whereas staying in Delhi doing desk work would reduce him to 'puny, liverish melancholy'.³⁰ He was deputed to be Elphinstone's secretary during the embassy to Kabul in 1809, which ended inconclusively in Peshawar, since the Afghan king, Shah Shuja, had been deposed and was in exile there. It was nevertheless a journey that introduced Fraser to the territories to the West, including Mewat, Bikaner, and Bahawalpur, and across the Indus River.³¹ He relished the travel and observed the ways of the tribal horsemen of the region. After his return to Delhi from the Kabul assignment, he settled the districts of Rohtak and Ludhiana and northwards into Garhwal. He became close friends with Colonel James Skinner and received government permission to serve with Skinner's irregular cavalry in several campaigns. He and Skinner, together with Ahmad Bakhsh Khan, the Nawab of Ferozpur, had a side business: trading, as well as breeding, horses at Skinner's estate in Hansi. William needed the money this commerce brought him. He was constantly in debt and was building himself a house on the ridge outside the walled city of Delhi, though he still managed occasionally to send money to Reelig.³²

In addition to these considerations, William had a family. Near Hansi, in a village called Raneeah/Rania, Fraser had a *bībī*, named Amiban, with whom he had children.³³ In this, he was not alone. Ochterlony was a more flamboyant example, but Charles Metcalfe too had an Indian family, and openly lived with them in Delhi, later sending his children to England for schooling.³⁴ Fraser, however, preferred living in the village when he could, and never admitted to his parents that he had Indian children. His brother James knew

²⁷ Bishop R. Heber, *Narrative of a Journey through the Upper Provinces of India* (Philadelphia, 1828), vol. 1, pp. 450–452; cf. G. Minault, 'The emperor's old clothes: robing and sovereignty in late Mughal and early British India', in *Robes of Honour: Khil'at in Pre-Colonial and Colonial India*, (ed.) S. Gordon (New Delhi, 2003), pp. 125–139.

²⁸ M. Pernau and Y. Jaffery, *Information and the Public Sphere: Persian Newsletters from Mughal Delhi* (New Delhi, 2009), pp. 238–239.

²⁹ On Charles Metcalfe the sources are plentiful. Spear, *Twilight*; D. N Panigrahi, *Charles Metcalfe in India, 1806–1835* (Delhi, 1968); both cite J. W. Kaye, *The Life and Correspondence of Charles, Lord Metcalfe*, 2 vols (London, 1854).

³⁰ William Fraser to his father, 1 January 1811, FP, vol. 29, p. 237.

³¹ Memoirs of William Fraser: Caubul (Kabul) Embassy, FP, vols 21 and 30, 13 October 1808–6 July 1809; cf. M. Elphinstone, *An Account of the Kingdom of Caubul*, 2 vols (reprint Karachi, 1972).

³² Archer and Falk, *India Revealed*, p. 17.

³³ A painting of her is reproduced in *ibid.*, p. 18, fig. 8.

³⁴ Pernau, *Ashraf to Middle Classes*, p. 167; Spear, *Twilight*, pp. 156–157; Buckland, *DIB*, p. 287.

of his family and urged him to send the children 'home', which he never did. James, when leaving India a few years later, urged William to write to him in a kind of code, a way of giving him news of his family in terms that would not upset their parents.³⁵

William's physical courage was legendary, but not always conducive to the regular life of civilian duties. He fought in the Nepal war of 1814–1815 and, with Ochterlony, was instrumental in forming the Gurkha regiments thereafter.³⁶ Victor Jacquemont, the French naturalist who knew William in the 1830s, commented on his character:

When there is a war anywhere, he forsakes his tribunal and goes to it. He is always the first at a storming party, an amusement in which he got two good saber cuts on his arms, a pike thrust in his loins, and an arrow in his neck, which nearly killed him...The emotion of danger is the most voluptuous to him: that is the theory of what is called his madness.³⁷

The throat wound was sustained during the Nepal war. William also survived an assassination attempt near Panipat in 1819, when he was attacked by a trooper wielding a sword. William was wounded but managed to evade his assailant, who was killed by one of his Gurkha guards. In a letter to James, William gave a detailed account of the attack and claimed that he was 'perfectly recovered', describing the would-be assassin as 'a bungler'. His letter, however, indicates that it was more serious. He received a blow to the head that stunned him, and cuts to an arm and a foot (which was saved by his boot).³⁸

For 'relaxation', William enjoyed hunting, and was reputed to have killed several tigers using spears. Writing to his father, who was worried upon hearing this, William vowed that henceforth, he would no longer hunt 'tyger' in that fashion, but would borrow an elephant to go shooting.³⁹

William's health was remarkably robust, with only occasional reports in his letters of illness. In 1813, however, he notes that he had an illness involving his liver and stomach that obliged him to take a 'course of mercury, which necessarily confined me to a warm room for a month'.⁴⁰ Elsewhere in the correspondence, there are prescriptions for medications, including calomel, turpentine, camphor, laudanum (an opiate), and again, mercury.⁴¹ A friend, hearing of this, wrote: 'I do not understand what kind of affliction in the loins you can have that would render mercury beneficial. You have, I dare say, been flourishing your genitals over and above that which nature requires.'⁴² The nature of the illness aside, if William was prescribed mercury, which is now a known neuro-toxin, it could well explain some of his mood swings and even irrationality. The medications of that time were often worse than the ailments they were meant to cure. The abysmal state of medical knowledge was a cause of misfortune to the entire cohort of East India Company officials.⁴³

The 'madness' noted by Jacquemont was the cause of other problems in William's career. It was one thing to fight wars to advance the cause of the empire, or even to slay the

³⁵ James's Travel Diary, 1820, FP, B 304, pp. 397–402; excerpted in Archer and Falk, *India Revealed*, p. 52.

³⁶ Coleman, *A Special Corps*, *passim*.

³⁷ V. Jacquemont, *Letters from India* (reprint, Karachi, 1979), vol. 1, pp. 345–346.

³⁸ William to James, Panipat, 6 April 1819, FP, vol. 23, pp. 99–104.

³⁹ William to his father, Delhi, 7 March 1814, FP, vol. 29, p. 278.

⁴⁰ William to his mother, Meerut, 25 December 1813, FP, vol. 29, p. 288.

⁴¹ Charles Ray to William, Hariana, n.d. (1821?), FP, B 426, pp. 1–3; Dr Ludlow to William, n.d., FP, B 429, pp. 37–38.

⁴² F. Young to William, Dehra, 19 August 1821, FP, B 430, pp. 95–98.

⁴³ For a fictional account of mid-nineteenth-century medical knowledge (in this case, the cause of cholera), see the argument between Drs McNab and Dunstaple, in J. G. Farrell, *The Siege of Krishnapur* (Harmondsworth, 1975), chapter 25, pp. 274–84.

occasional tiger, but it was quite another to differ with one's superiors over assignments. William turned down several promotions in the interests of staying in the Delhi region. His brother James cautioned him against this, as it would lead to his being passed over when a plum assignment arose. Indeed, William missed being appointed to the Residency in Lucknow, and turned down a post in Bundelkhand in Central India.⁴⁴ Charles Metcalfe, who was the Resident in Delhi from 1811 (following Seton), was acutely aware that his advancement over Fraser was irksome, and that Fraser coveted the job:

I remembered that he was my equal in age, that we were appointed to the service on the same day...and that I was indebted solely to the wheel of chance for my superiority in office...I felt that it must be unpleasant to him to serve under me and I determined to make up as much as possible for the annoyance by the utmost delicacy...Wherever possible I have avoided interfering to the slightest degree in his proceedings.⁴⁵

Metcalfe thus explained his attitude toward their disagreements, which were many. Their largest clash was over the Delhi system of land revenue collection, in which they had both toiled for years, with Metcalfe more in the policy seat and Fraser seated on horseback in the districts. Metcalfe argued for a 'light and indulgent settlement', whereas Fraser 'warned against taking too little'. Metcalfe thought that a high demand 'meant sacrificing for our temporary and delusive increase of revenue the affections and prosperity of our subjects'.⁴⁶ When Fraser turned down the position in Central India, Metcalfe, it seems, had finally had enough. Writing to William, he acknowledged that the chance of their ever agreeing about revenue policy was improbable and the only way he saw around this dilemma was for him to petition the government to separate the Revenue Department from the Residency, transferring its control to other hands. He went on to claim that his enmity was only for William's system, and that: 'I would be very happy to see you a Resident, or a Secretary to Government, or a Member of Council, or anything, in short, but my Assistant.'⁴⁷

Metcalfe left the Residency of Delhi soon thereafter but came back in 1825–1827, during which time Fraser was appointed a member of the Provincial Board of Revenue, returning to Delhi when Sir Edward Colebrooke was Resident, 1827–1829. William served as acting Resident in Delhi in 1829 during the suspension and ultimate dismissal of Colebrooke for corruption, although he did not get the job permanently at that time. His actions were regarded as too lenient toward Colebrooke, who was very much a man of 'the old school', resembling Ochterlony and even Fraser himself in his tastes for an Indian lifestyle and Indian women. By the late 1820s, that approach clashed with the reforming zeal exemplified by Charles Trevelyan, the young Assistant Magistrate who had accused Colebrooke of corruption, and who went on to a stellar career in Lord Bentinck's Calcutta, marrying T. B. Macaulay's sister and founding a civil service dynasty.⁴⁸

It was clear from Colebrooke's dismissal and the decision not to appoint Fraser in his place that the autonomy of upcountry officials was no longer what it used to be. Delhi, nevertheless, was still the seat of the Mughal, and thus the government's choice of Francis Hawkins to be acting Delhi Resident seemed strange. Hawkins had been in India

⁴⁴ James to his father, 14 May 1818 and 9 November 1818, FP, vol. 23, pp. 59–61, 75–85.

⁴⁵ C. T. Metcalfe to J. Ferguson, n.d. (1817 or 1818), FP, B 326, p. 53.

⁴⁶ Panigrahi, *Metcalfe in India*, pp. 55–57, citing Kaye, *Metcalfe*, pp. 48–53.

⁴⁷ C. T. Metcalfe to W. Fraser, 16 February (1818?), FP, B 329, pp. 38–44.

⁴⁸ On the Colebrooke affair, see Spear, *Twilight*, pp. 167–181; cf. K. Prior, L. Brennan and R. Haines, 'Bad language: the role of esoteric tongues in the dismissal of Sir Edward Colebrooke as Resident of Delhi in 1829', *Modern Asian Studies* 35.1 (2001), pp. 75–112.

since 1783 (and thus 'old school'), but had mostly served as a magistrate in areas of direct British rule, with little experience of Indian rulers and less sense of their prerogatives. Akbar Shah soon complained to Calcutta that Hawkins seldom attended upon him, and when the Resident did engage in a ritual with the presentation of a *nazr*, he did so disrespectfully (with one hand instead of two). The final straw, however, was that Hawkins had taken an English friend, both of them on horseback, into the imperial palace at the Red Fort. The Mughal was away at the time, so Hawkins' visit was wholly unauthorised, and their mounted entrance into the *dīwān-i khās* (the hall of private audience) violated every protocol imaginable. Hawkins was reprimanded, but stayed on, until he was replaced by another acting Resident, William Martin, recommended to the government by his experience in the Nizam's Hyderabad.⁴⁹

William Fraser too remained in the area, continuing his service as a revenue commissioner/magistrate, frequently touring the districts, as was his wont.⁵⁰ During his tours, William encountered the young French naturalist, Victor Jacquemont, and they became friends, corresponded frequently, and seriously discussed travelling together to Ranjit Singh's kingdom of the Punjab and to Kashmir. In a letter home to France, Jacquemont gushed:

This man...who is generally considered a misanthrope, I found the most sociable person in the world. He is a thinker, who finds nothing but isolation in the intercourse of words without ideas, miscalled conversation by the society here, which he therefore very seldom frequents.⁵¹

He further reported:

The reason why he is so desirable a companion is that...His mode of life has familiarised him, more perhaps than any other European, with the customs and ideas of the natives...Hindoostanee [sic] and Persian are like his mother-tongue to him...⁵²

Fraser requested a leave of ten months for their journey, and Jacquemont was confident that he would receive permission. But times had changed since William had taken leave to fight in Nepal and then go on a long tour with his brother James in the Himalayan foothills.⁵³ The Governor-General, Lord Bentinck, eventually turned him down, citing the 'propriety of allowing a high public servant like yourself to go about for the purpose you have suggested'.⁵⁴ There was doubtless some diplomatic hesitation in contemplating Fraser at the court of Ranjit Singh for no other reason than his being a visitor in the company of a French citizen, especially given the fact that some of Ranjit Singh's army commanders were French, including General Allard, who had fought for Napoleon.⁵⁵ The possibilities for a misunderstanding were too great, and so their joint adventure did not happen. Jacquemont travelled through India, corresponding with Fraser in great detail as he

⁴⁹ M. H. Fisher, *Indirect Rule in India, Residents and the Residency System, 1764-1857* (Delhi, 1991), pp. 183-184, citing Foreign Political Consultations (FPC), 19 March 1830, Nos. 6-7, NAI.

⁵⁰ The official *akhbār* listed his frequent absences from the city. Pernau and Jaffrey, *Information and the Public Sphere*, pp. 166, 173, 175, 222-223, 364, 371, 391, 401.

⁵¹ Jacquemont, *Letters*, vol. 1, p. 345.

⁵² *Ibid.*, pp. 346-347.

⁵³ See below, note 63.

⁵⁴ H. Prinsep to William Fraser, Calcutta, 18 February 1831, FP, B 345, pp. 4-6.

⁵⁵ Jacquemont, *Letters*, vol. 1, pp. 347-348; regarding the French officers at the court of the Punjab, see J-M. Lafont, *French Administrators of Maharaja Ranjit Singh* (Delhi, 1986); and J-M. Lafont, *Indika: Essays in Indo-French Relations, 1630-1976* (New Delhi, 2000), chapters 7-9.

went.⁵⁶ Towards the end of his tour, he wrote that he had been ill with a liver complaint, caught in the tropics, but was recovering.⁵⁷ Unfortunately, he was too optimistic. He arrived in Bombay towards the end of 1832, from where he planned to sail back to France, but was bedridden, and died there. His last words were: 'Remember to write to Mr. Fraser'.⁵⁸

One may conjecture that denying Fraser permission to take off ten months to travel with Jacquemont might simply have been Governor-General Bentinck's way of keeping him on the spot in the event of another personnel disaster. In early 1832, Bentinck consulted Charles Metcalfe on whether it was wise to appoint Fraser to the Delhi Residency. Metcalfe gave him a mixed review:

He is masterly and self-willed to so great a degree that no power can be entrusted to him without some risk of its being abused... But he can be, when he chooses, exceedingly amiable, and would have no difficulty in dealing with the higher order of natives, with some of which he has been more intimate than most.⁵⁹

In 1832 William finally got the job that he had coveted all his working life, Resident in Delhi, although the position had undergone a change in title and was now Agent of the Governor-General. By then, he did not have long to enjoy the post.

The Fraser siblings in India

William's misfortunes were compounded by those of his brothers. Alexander Fraser (1789–1816), or Aleck, was encouraged by William to join the East India Company's service. Aleck was an indifferent student at Fort William, in spite of receiving brotherly advice from William about the importance of mastering local languages.⁶⁰ He arrived in Delhi to serve as a junior magistrate in 1811. Less brilliant than his brother, Aleck was nevertheless steadier of purpose. He enjoyed the work of the *kachahri* (law court), and was also a more assiduous correspondent, keeping their parents regularly apprised of their life in the Mughal capital. He shared quarters with William in a bungalow on the ramparts of the city overlooking the Jumna River. In summer 1812, they were joined by Edward (1786–1813), or Ned, who had worked in the Caribbean sugar business before coming to India to seek employment. When he arrived, however, he was in indifferent health, and so spent the hot summer getting acclimated. In the autumn of 1812 he was seized with violent coughing and vomiting of blood. It seemed abundantly clear that he had consumption, and a doctor advised that he go to sea for his health. Aleck selflessly volunteered to go along to care for him, and so they journeyed downriver to Calcutta and then embarked on a ship bound for St Helena. They endured a miserable and stormy trip during which Edward's condition deteriorated. He died on St Helena in 1813, and Aleck returned to India to take up his service again, only to develop symptoms of the fatal disease himself. He remained in Calcutta hoping to regain his health, finally undertaking the gruelling trip northwards, but he died before reaching Delhi in 1816. The demise of his two younger brothers was a terrible blow to William, especially that of Aleck, whom William had mentored to good effect. James noted with alarm how deeply Aleck's

⁵⁶ Jacquemont's letters to William are in several bundles of the Fraser papers (B nos. 274, 338, 343, 346, 452). They have, to my knowledge, never been transcribed, edited, or published, and are well worth exploring by some future scholar.

⁵⁷ V. Jacquemont to W. Fraser, Salsette, 26 September 1832, FP, B 346, pp. 44–51.

⁵⁸ John Bax to William Fraser, Bombay, 8 December 1832, FP, B 337, pp. 32–33.

⁵⁹ C. T. Metcalfe to Lord Bentinck, 19 February 1832, in C. H. Philips, *The Correspondence of Lord William Cavendish Bentinck* (London, 1977), vol. 2, pp. 759–760.

⁶⁰ William to Aleck, 6 February 1809, FP, vol. 29, p. 152.

death had affected William, who was 'terribly shocked' and 'in total despair'... 'weeping and groaning most bitterly'.⁶¹

James Baillie Fraser had left Guyana in 1811 and set off for India in 1813, seeking employment in one of the several managing agencies (most run by Scots) in Calcutta. James was also a talented linguist who knew Persian, and a passable artist, whose skill in sketching scenery improved during his travels in India. In Calcutta, he went to work dealing in indigo and other cargoes, and corresponded with his parents and brothers, managing the family finances to the extent that this was possible. He also created a number of paintings of the British colonial capital that are an eloquent reminder of Calcutta's early splendour.⁶² In 1815, he went to Delhi to visit William following the Nepal war. The two of them travelled in the Himalayan foothills for several months, James sketching as he went.⁶³ James also took an interest in the painters of Delhi (known as 'the Company school') and, through William, commissioned a number of them to paint ethnographic scenes: images of caste types, soldiers, servants, musicians and dancers, nomads, traders, holy men, villagers, one of William's magnificent horses, and even the emperor's elephant. These comprise one of the most valuable records of Indian life at that time.⁶⁴ James himself admitted that he was not much good at painting figures, but his series of paintings of Calcutta and his Himalayan vistas were turned into engraved prints and marketed after his return to Britain. In this, he followed the Daniells, whose magnificent prints of Indian scenes and monuments in the late eighteenth century were popular with the British public, who, years before photography, wanted to know what India looked like.⁶⁵ James's art and his travel diaries, also published, later helped to allay some of the debt on the Reelig lands.⁶⁶

James returned to Calcutta in 1816, to his business career in the agency house headed by Aeneas Macintosh, a family friend, for several years more. He left India for good in late 1820, journeying to Delhi to see William for what turned out to be the last time. Their heart-to-heart conversations led James to characterise his brother in stark but affectionate terms:

He has little changed since I saw him last...in disposition, he is the same, warm, kind-hearted, but strange and capricious creature as ever...[T]hrown as William was in early life upon the world, in a manner uncontrolled in any way, the warmth of his disposition acquired strength, instead of being moderated... His feelings are so intense that he cannot bear control in matters where his humour or pleasure is concerned...The impatience of control has been dreadfully increased by the boundless power which he had possession of... and the disposition to melancholy thoughts... has been nursed by the long periods of solitude which his business continually subjected him to.⁶⁷

This is a remarkable, almost psychoanalytical, portrait of his beloved younger brother, showing both deep love and frightening ambivalence.

James left Delhi in late October 1820, travelling overland via Rajputana, shipping out of Bombay to the Persian Gulf. He then toured Persia extensively, as far as Mashhad in the

⁶¹ Journal of J. B. Fraser, 1-3 June 1816, FP, vol. 19, pp. 205-211.

⁶² Reproduced in Archer and Falk, *India Revealed*, pp. 74-88.

⁶³ Reproduced in *ibid.*, pp. 62-72.

⁶⁴ Among the artists were Ghulam Ali Khan, Mazhar Ali Khan, and Lallji. These are attributions based on comparisons with other manuscripts cited by Archer and Falk. Selection of the Fraser Album Company drawings, reproduced in *ibid.*, pp. 90-136.

⁶⁵ M. Archer, *Early Views of India: The Picturesque Journeys of Thomas and William Daniell, 1786-1794* (London, 1980).

⁶⁶ Archer and Falk, *India Revealed*, p. 57.

⁶⁷ J. B. Fraser to his mother, Delhi, 8 October 1820, FP, vol. 24, pp. 16-18.

East, through Khorasan, Mizandaran, Tabriz, Kurdistan, then through Ottoman Turkey and Europe, reaching home in early 1823. James married Jane Tytler, a cousin, later that same year, lived at the estate in Reelig, and improved it over the years. He did not settle down entirely, however, for he went on a diplomatic mission to Persia in 1833–1834, and helped arrange for the visit of the Qajar princes to Britain in 1836.⁶⁸

After William's murder, there was still another Fraser brother in India. The youngest, George (1800–1842), chose military rather than civil service. He was posted in the Deccan, married there, and had a child. He journeyed to Delhi after William's death, to help with the settling of his estate and to oversee the sale of his house on the ridge to the Maratha nobleman, Hindu Rao.⁶⁹ He then rejoined his military unit, dying young, also of fever, while posted in Aurangabad.

As a postscript, indicating that William was mourned and remembered by others than his family, James Skinner built for his friend a magnificent marble tomb, with stone inlay work like that at the Agra and Delhi forts, locating it next to St James Church, which he had constructed near Kashmiri Gate in Delhi. The tomb was inscribed in part:

The remains interred beneath this monument were once animated by as brave and sincere a soul as was ever vouchsafed to man by his creator. A brother in friendship has caused it to be erected, that...it may remain as a memorial...of one dear to him as life.⁷⁰

The tomb, however, was destroyed during the revolt of 1857. Ghalib was scandalised by the vandalism.⁷¹

Conclusion

The lives of the five Fraser brothers of Reelig were spent in spreading British rule in India while simultaneously seeking to save their land in Scotland. Four of their lives were sacrificed in that quest. What stands out in this story, above all, is their devotion and duty to their family, but also their position in the transitional generation of the East India Company officialdom from commercial agents to rulers. They were of a generation trained in the languages of India and susceptible to its customs and cultures, willing to meet India and its people halfway, speaking to them in their languages, and recognising the legitimacy of some of their rulers. Later generations of British officials became progressively convinced of their own superiority and the need to 'reform' Indians, expecting them to adopt their language and adapt to their ways. The Fraser brothers left behind a detailed record of their passage through a period of trial and error, of travail and occasional triumph. William was brilliant, capable, a true member of the generation that established British rule in India with all of its flaws. He was also a rebel against the very authority that paid him to do the work he valued, even loved. He was both a conflicted figure and an exemplar of the age—a loose cannon, a term born of an age of dangerous navigation. His brothers also shared both the adventurous streak and hard-headedness that took them away from home in search of new opportunities. Their story contains love, labour,

⁶⁸ Archer and Falk, *India Revealed*, pp. 53–57.

⁶⁹ File concerning settlement of William Fraser's estate, FP, B 282–283. The house still stands, considerably remodelled and expanded, and is known as the Hindu Rao Hospital.

⁷⁰ The complete inscriptions on the tomb are quoted in Spear, *Twilight*, pp. 189–190; a painting of the tomb is reproduced in M. M. Kaye, *The Golden Calm: An English Lady's Life in Mughal Delhi* (New York, 1980), p. 77.

⁷¹ Mirza A. K. Ghalib, *Dastanbuy: A Diary of the Indian Revolt of 1857*, (trans.) K. A. Faruqi (Bombay, 1970), p. 31.

and tragic loss. It is also punctuated by art, poetry, and murder. It sounds like the plot of a novel.⁷²

Acknowledgements. My contribution to this *festschrift* in honour of Francis Robinson is a way of thanking Francis for his friendship and collegiality over more than 50 years. I first met Francis Robinson in the National Archives of India when we were both doing PhD research. Combing through government records was valuable, but more intriguing were the personal letters and publications of those whom we were studying. This led us to the papers of Muhammad and Shaukat Ali at the Jamia Millia in Delhi, and the papers of Maulana Abdul Bari at Firangi Mahal in Lucknow. From these early forays into personal archives, Francis went on to devote an important part of his scholarly work to the *‘ulamā* of Firangi Mahal, including a biography of Maulana Jamal Mian. I went on to study the history of Muslim women’s education in India, based largely on personal papers, journals, and memoirs of the women and families involved in that quest.

Conflicts of interest. The author reports none.

⁷² In fact, Shamsur Rahman Faruqi has written an Urdu novel in which William Fraser, Nawab Shamsuddin, and Ghalib all appear. It is not focused on the Frasers, but rather on the culture of Delhi at that time. It is fiction, and will not be reviewed here. S. R. Faruqi, *Ka’ī Chānd The Sar-e Āsmān* (New Delhi, 2006), translated by S. R. Faruqi as *The Mirror of Beauty* (New Delhi, 2013). On a personal note, my thanks to William Dalrymple, whose book, *City of Djinn* (London, 1994), first introduced me to the existence of the Fraser brothers’ correspondence. He graciously put me in touch with the Fraser family, and I was able to spend a month in Scotland reading some of the brothers’ letters. My profound thanks to Kathy and Malcolm Fraser of Reelig for their help and hospitality. While there, I happened to mention that my mother’s ancestors were from Scotland, and she had told me that her family name, McKim, was somehow related to Fraser. It turns out that, indeed, McKim/Mackim is a version of MacSymon and thus a sept of Clan Fraser. Kathy welcomed me to the clan and presented me with a short clan history: C. I. Fraser, *The Clan Fraser of Lovat* (Edinburgh and London, reprint 1960).

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