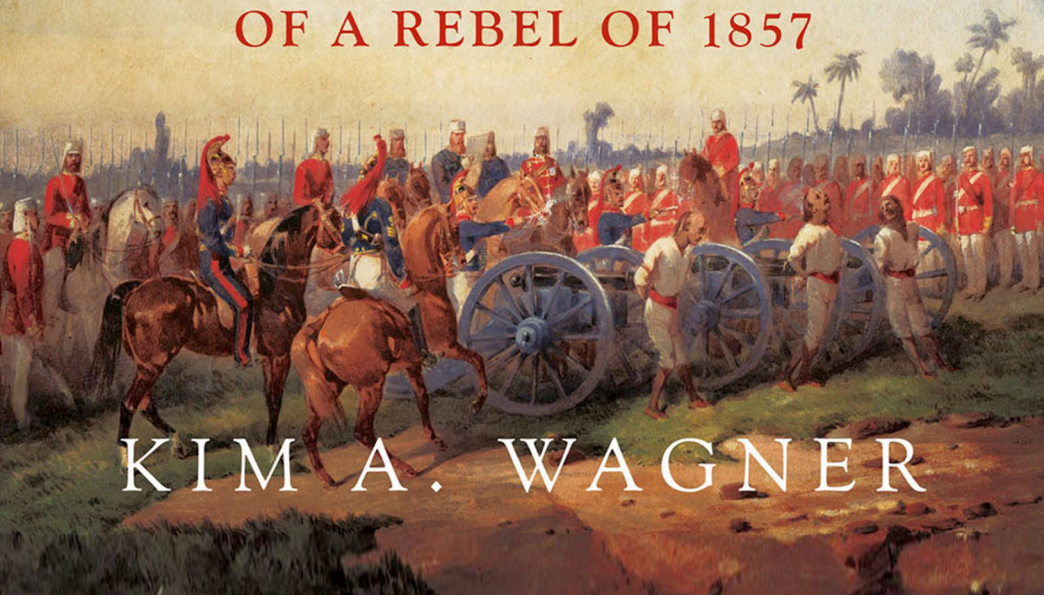
THE SKULL OF *Alum Bheg*

THE LIFE AND DEATH OF A REBEL OF 1857



KIM A. WAGNER

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This book is dedicated to the memory of a certain Merlot-drinking reference-*munshi*–I will always carry you with me.

CONTENTS

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Maps

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GLOSSARY

ayah	Indian nanny
bania	trader or moneylender
barkandaze	matchlock man or armed guard
batta	extra pay for military service outside British territories
bazaar	market
bhang	food or drink to which cannabis has been added
Bhumihar	agricultural Brahmin, often employed as *sepoys*
Brahmin	high-caste Hindu, often employed as *sepoys*
Chamar	caste of tanners, untouchable
charas	hashish
charpoy	light Indian bedstead
chauki	police post
chaukidar	police officer or watchman
chauprassi	police officer or messenger
cote	bell-of-arms, small structure where muskets were kept
dak	official mail
darogha	police or prison officer
dhoti	cloth worn by sepoys instead of trousers when out of uniform
fakir	Muslim ascetic or mendicant
ganja	cannabis
ghat	landing place
Gujar	pastoralist caste, often described as 'predatory' during the Indian Uprising
havildar	sergeant

jemadar	lieutenant
kaffir	infidel
khalasi	low-caste worker
khansama	house-steward or cook
khitmutgar	servant
kotwali	police station
lathi	staff or metal-studded stick
lota	brass drinking vessel used by high-caste Hindus
Mehtar	caste of sweepers and scavengers
munshi	clerk or learned man
naik	corporal
nullah	ravine or creek
panchayat	council or meeting
perwanah	official proclamation or letter
Purbiya	literally: easterner, refers to *sepoys* from Awadh and Bihar
Rajput	high-status Hindu warrior or cultivator
ryot	peasant
salaam	formal greeting
sati	widow-burning
sepoy	private infantry soldier—sometimes spelt *sipahi*
serai	resting place or shelter for travellers
sowar	cavalry trooper
subadar	captain
syce	groom or grass-cutter
'Thug'	highway robber and bandit-retainer
'Thuggee'	the phenomenon or practice of 'Thugs'
tulwar	curved Indian sword
yogi	Hindu ascetic or mendicant
zamindar	landholder or petty ruler

A NOTE ON SPELLING

Colonial spelling was invariably inconsistent and Sialkot, for instance, might thus appear both as Sealkote and Seealkot. While I recognise the colonial connotations of nineteenth-century transliteration, I have retained the original spelling in quotes to avoid confusion and to stay as close to the primary material as possible. Throughout this book I refer to the events of 1857–8 as the Indian Uprising. I use 'Mutiny' to refer to the manner in which the British conceived and commemorated these events.

PROLOGUE

THE SKULL IN THE PUB

In 1963, the new owner of The Lord Clyde, a pub in the eastern English coastal town of Walmer in Kent, discovered a human skull stowed away under some disused crates and boxes in a small lumber room in the back of the building. The skull was missing its lower jaw, the few remaining teeth were loose, and it had the deep sepia hue of old age. Inserted in the eye-socket was a neatly folded slip of old paper, a handwritten note that briefly outlined the skull's history:

> 'Skull of Havildar "*Alum Bheg*," 46th Regt. Bengal N. Infantry who was *blown away from a gun*, amongst several others of his Regt. He was a principal leader in the mutiny of 1857 & of a most ruffianly disposition. He took possession (at the head of a small party) of the road leading to the fort, to which place all the Europeans were hurrying for safety. His party surprised and killed Dr. Graham shooting him in his buggy by the side of his daughter. His next victim was the Rev. Mr. Hunter, a missionary, who was flying with his wife and daughters in the same direction. He murdered Mr Hunter, and his wife and daughters after being brutally treated were butchered by the road side.
>
> Alum Bheg was about 32 years of age; 5 feet 7 ½ inches high and by no means an ill looking native.
>
> The skull was brought home by Captain (AR) Costello (late Capt. 7th Drag. Guards), who was on duty when Alum Bheg was executed.'

In the exuberant handwriting typical of the late nineteenth century, the note purposefully seeks to breathe life into the inanimate skull. The

sparse text conjures up the image of Alum Bheg, the alleged perpetrator of such horrible deeds, by describing his age, his height, his personality ('ruffianly disposition'), and his appearance (not 'ill looking'). Apart from his exotic name, the qualifying descriptor of his being a 'native' further emphasises his racial otherness. The text is in many ways closed and self-referential and the reader is presumed to already know and appreciate its context. There is, for instance, no indication as to why Alum Bheg would have murdered these people, apart from his innate 'ruffianly' character. Yet the allusions to the 'Bengal Native Infantry' and 'mutiny', would have rendered any such explanations superfluous within a British Victorian context.

As a 'principal leader' of the Indian Uprising of 1857, Alum Bheg is thus immediately identifiable as a deceitful conspirator, in the mould perhaps of well-known Indian rebels like Nana Sahib or the Rani of Jhansi. The description of the ambush and callous murders of innocent Europeans fleeing for their lives corresponds to the dramatic imagery associated with the event that the British referred to simply as the 'Mutiny'. The allusion to the 'brutal treatment' of the women is respectably vague but nevertheless hints at a sexual attack, thus drawing upon one of the most potent tropes of the British colonial imagination. Within the British Empire, rebellion was synonymous with the subversion of racial hierarchies and the inevitable rape and murder of white woman by dark-skinned men. The details of Alum Bheg's alleged crimes account for much of the brief note but are prefaced by the description of his execution and the brutal technique deployed: being blown from a cannon. The text describes the threat to British rule in India, but the skull itself testifies to the defeat of that threat. It thus establishes the skull as both a relic of Indian savagery and as a trophy of colonial retribution. The skull of Alum Bheg is the ultimate proof of colonial power.

The brief note accompanying the skull was the only clue to its origin, and nobody at the time knew how it ended up in The Lord Clyde to be discovered more than a century after Alum Bheg's execution. The 'nerve-shattering discovery' was duly reported in the local press in 1963, including photographs of the new owners of the pub proudly posing with the grisly trophy. The skull was subsequently put on display

at The Lord Clyde as a mascot, and when the owners died it was finally passed on to their relatives, who kept it hidden away in a cupboard.

* * *

In 2014, as I was sitting in my office in Mile End in London, writing about colonial executions, I received an email from the couple who had come into possession of the skull. They did not feel comfortable with the 'thing' in their house, and yet did not know what to do with it. Having tried and failed to find anything out about Alum Bheg on the internet, they came upon my name as a historian with an interest in the Indian Uprising. My curiosity was obviously piqued, but I also did not really know what to make of the story. After further correspondence, we agreed that I would come and collect the skull in order to conduct further research, and, if possible, verify its provenance. It was clear from the outset that the skull belonged neither in their attic, nor in my office, and we agreed that the final aim of my research should be to prepare for Alum Bheg to be repatriated to India, if at all possible. And so it was that I found myself standing at a small train-station in Essex, on a wet November day, with a human skull in my bag. Not just any skull, but one directly linked to a part of history that I write about and that I teach my students every year.

It should be no secret that I felt an immediate urge to recover something of the life-story of the man who once looked out through those eye-sockets and chewed with those teeth—the man who in so many ways inhabited the skull as 'the palace of the soul' (to use Byron's words). Alum Bheg never imagined that, more than a century and a half after his death, the remains of his head would still be around, and furthermore be probed and prodded by perfect strangers thousands of miles from where he died. There is indeed a sense of intrusion in handling the skull of an individual who never consented to such an intimate touch, not to mention that Hamletesque realisation of one's mortality, that someday this could be myself (it also doesn't help that I am Danish).

To be the custodian, however temporarily, of the remains of another human being is a serious responsibility. I am keenly aware that I am only the latest in a long line of people who have held the skull of Alum Bheg and that it is for me to break the cycle of humiliation and igno-

miny that he has suffered. Both the manner of his execution, and the subsequent collecting of his head as a trophy, were acts of physical and symbolic violence intended to dehumanise Alum Bheg. In this book, I set out to restore some of the humanity and dignity that has been denied him by telling the story of his life and death during one of the most dramatic episodes in the history of British India. Very few people ever really knew that his skull existed: it was never exhibited in a museum, it is not described in the history books, and there are no descendants clamouring for its return. But returned he should be, and with this book I hope to have prepared the ground for Alum Bheg to finally find some peace, albeit 160 years late.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First of all, I would like to thank Dee and John for the serendipitous foresight they had in contacting me about the skull in their attic in autumn 2014. They subsequently trusted me to look after Alum Bheg, and none of this could have happened without them.

Writing this book has been an intense yet also fun process. I sent the proposal to Michael Dwyer at Hurst on 11 December 2016, proposing a 2018 publication-date. Michael immediately countered with an offer of publication if I could deliver the manuscript in seven months. Two days later I had the contract in hand and somehow I managed to finish on time. Thanks to Michael for seeing the potential in this project. Thanks also to Jon de Peyer and the rest of the staff at Hurst, and Ranjana Sengupta at Penguin India, who have been amazing to work with. Two anonymous readers cleared the way for the US imprint, and I appreciate their generous feedback which was based on only a few rough chapter drafts. Research for this book has been generously supported by the Marie Skłodowska-Curie Global Fellowship Programme.

During the short but hectic period I have worked on Alum Bheg's skull, I have collected many debts of gratitude. I owe much to my friends and colleagues including, in no particular order: Sarah Longair, Clare Anderson, Doug Peers, Steven Wilkinson, Vijay Pinch, Michael Vann, Saul Dubow, Erica Wald, Jon Wilson, Will Jackson, Crispin Bates, Kama Mclean, Harald Fisher-Tiné, Michael Mann, Gautam Chakravarty, William Gould, Matt Shutzer, Chris Cowell, Sarah Morton, Katherine Schofield and William Dalrymple, as well as Stephen Casper and everybody else at the 'Phrenology,

Anthropometry, and Craniology' workshop at Clarkson University in 2015.

I am very fortunate to have close friends who work within the same subject area, broadly speaking, and with whom I have been able to share and refine my ideas over the years—a heartfelt thanks to Mark Condos, Gavin Rand, Gajendra Singh, John 'Balu' Pincince, Ricardo Roque and Derek Elliot (thanks also for the company during research-trips, the illegally downloaded pdf's, the post-panel drinks, the laughing-fits and the smoked salmon. Sincere apologies to anyone we annoyed or offended along the way). Mark had the dubious honour of reading and editing the first and very rough draft of the manuscript, and he did a beautiful job turning my inchoate ramblings into readable prose—any remaining Danishisms are no fault of his. Hopefully I will be able to return the favour, Bandar-ji!

I am much indebted to fellow head-hunter Jeremiah Garsha for sharing his work and thoughts—he read the completed manuscript in just a few days and made numerous insightful suggestions. I cannot say I am not envious of his project on Mkwawa's head and I look forward to much more 'skulduggery' in the future. Thanks also to Gajendra for so proficiently, and patiently, helping translate the odd Hindi and Urdu words and sentences I would throw at him at all hours of the day. Jacob Smith helped me out with additional research in London and I have relied heavily on his excellent thesis on the hunt for Nana Sahib and the aftermath of the Indian Uprising.

Dane Kennedy hosted me at George Washington University and has been a generous and amazing interlocutor during my time in the US. Dane is living proof that it is possible to be a nice person, and all-round good-guy, despite the corrupting influence of power in Washington, DC. I would also like to express my gratitude to Ammar Ali Jan, Tabby Spence and the Jan family who made my stay in Lahore truly memorable. In Sialkot, I was extremely fortunate to have Shaloom and Solomon Naeem as my guides. They, and their family, went above and beyond what can reasonably be expected from perfect strangers and helped me get the most out of my visit.

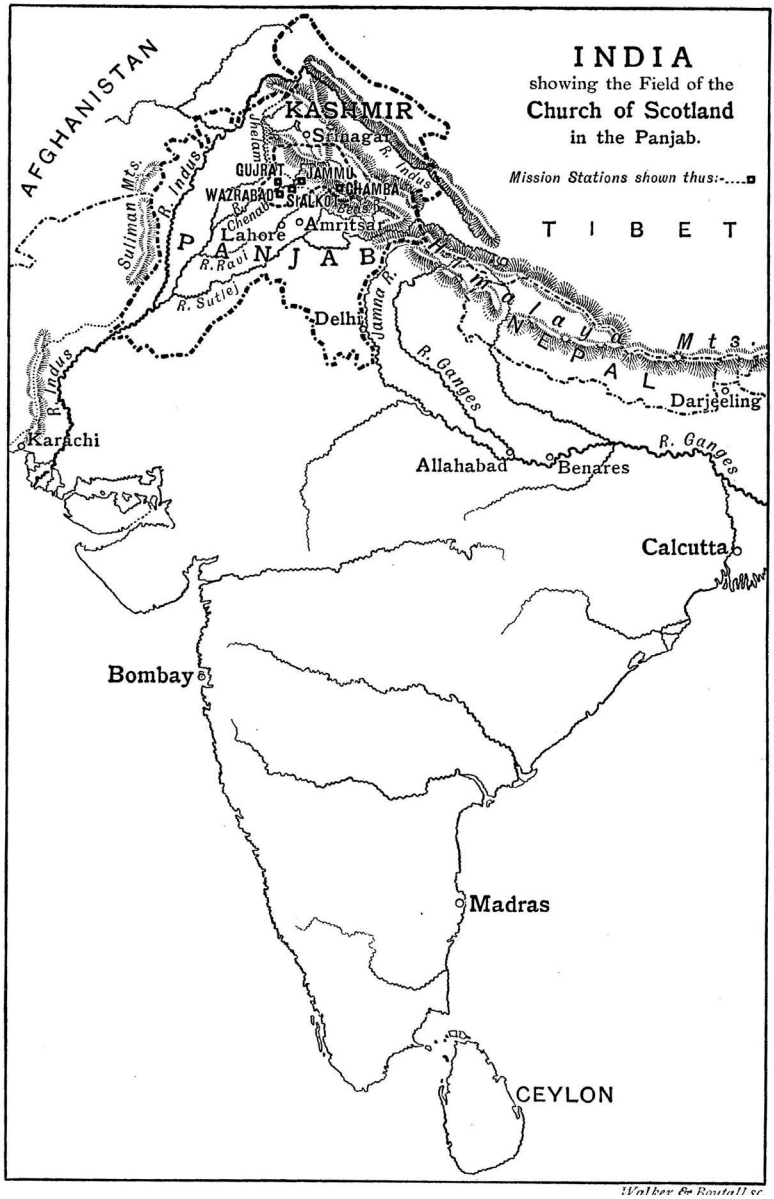
I am grateful to Heather Bonney at the Natural History Museum, London, for taking the time to examine Alum Bheg's skull and for providing me with enough scientific certainty to let me pursue this

research with some degree of confidence. Another debt is owed to Frances Larson, author of the highly recommendable *Severed: A History of Heads Lost and Heads Found*, which has been a great source of inspiration. On a similar note, Simon Harrison's *Dark Trophies: Hunting and the Enemy Body in Modern War* was also extremely useful as I was working on the manuscript—readers who want to know more on this grisly subject are strongly encouraged to consult their books.

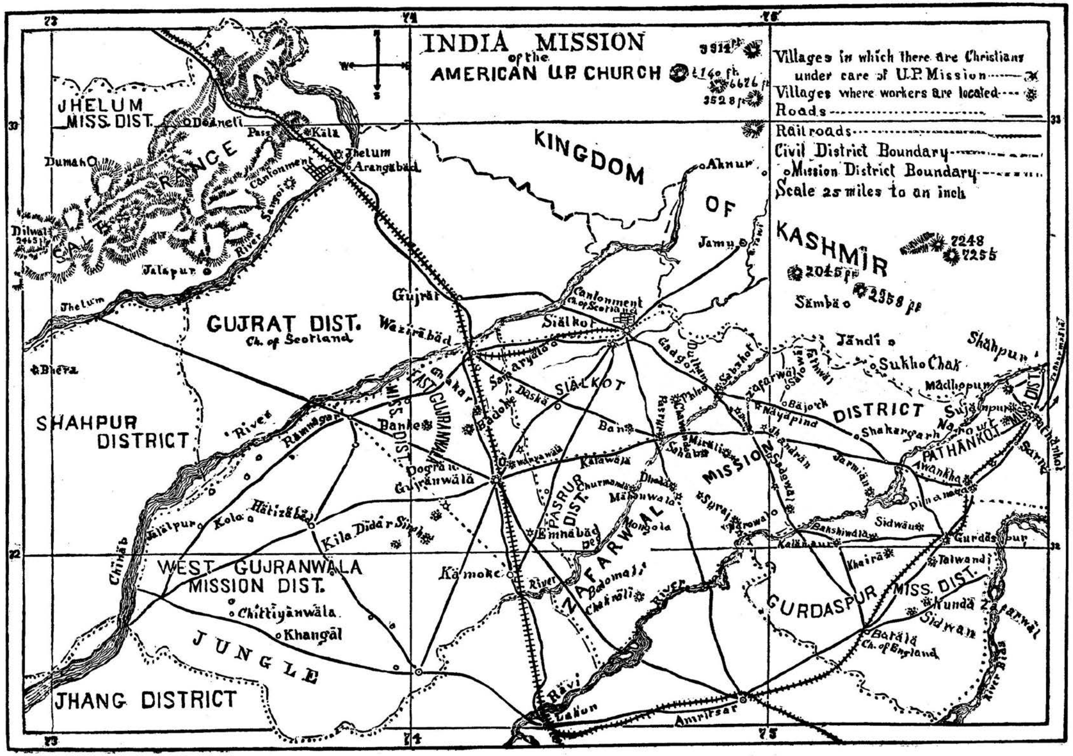
Many thanks to the editorial board of *Past & Present* for permission to use material from my article 'Calculated to Strike Terror: The Amritsar Massacre and the Spectacle of Colonial Violence'. Thanks also to the staff at the Gelman Library, George Washington University, the National Archives of India in Delhi, and the Asian & African Studies Reading Room and Map Collections in the British Library. I could furthermore not have written this book from a small town in rural Maryland without hathitrust.com, archive.org or any of the nineteenth-century newspaper databases.

The environment in which one works while writing is crucial to the creative process and I would like to express my deep-felt appreciation to the following musicians who have, unknowingly, provided the soundtrack for my work over the past many years: Eluvium (Matthew Cooper), 36 (Dennis Huddleston), Thom Brennan, William Basinski, Stray Ghost (Anthony Saggers), Rafael Anton Irisarri, and the late Lucette Bourdin. Also thanks to the distilleries of Islay.

I owe an apology to Ada and Max, and further away, to Sigrid and Gustav, for having been so absentminded while writing this book—and thanks to Netflix for stepping in when I should have been parenting. Thanks also to Elaine and Pop-Pop for letting us stay with them in Maryland. Finally, I cannot begin to express my love and gratitude to my beautiful wife Julie, who may be my harshest critic, but who has been a patient and constant source of support—tak, min elskede!

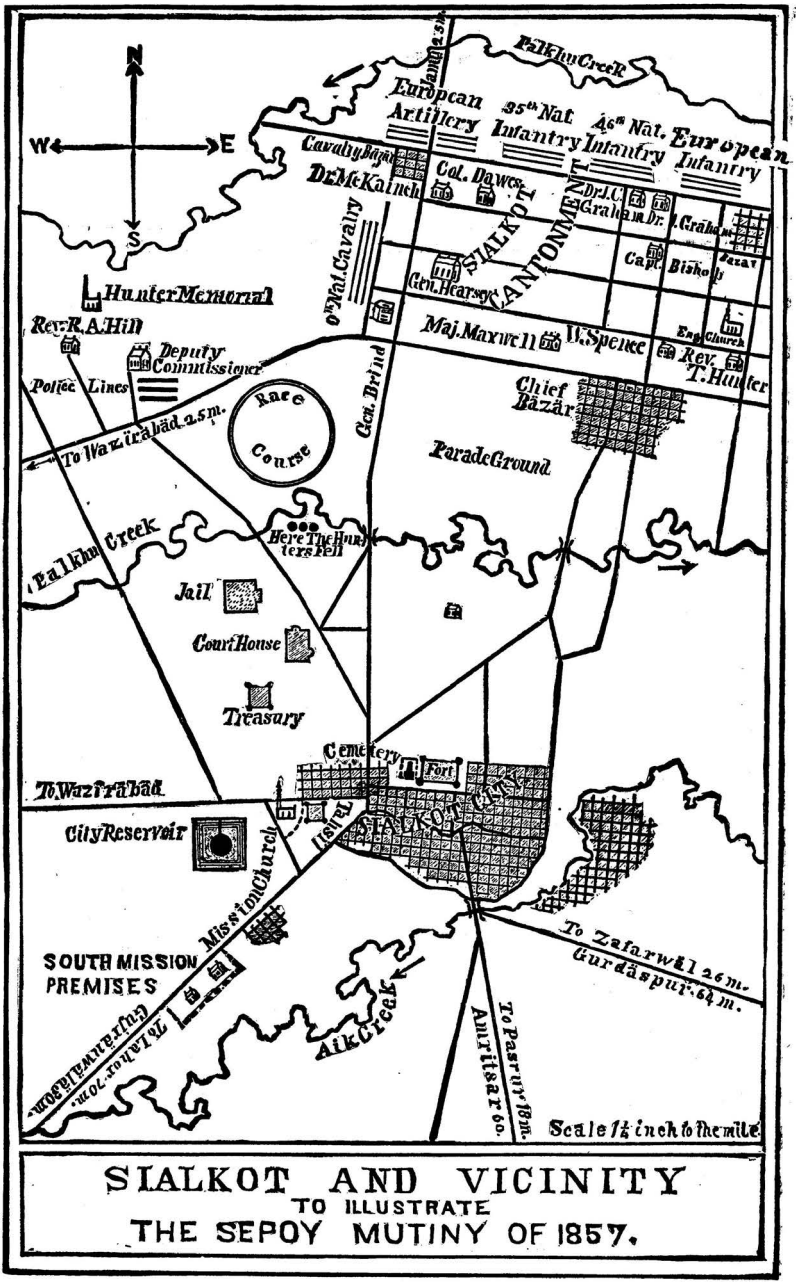

INDIA
showing the Field of the
Church of Scotland
in the Panjab.
Mission Stations shown thus:-....
AFGHANISTAN
KASHMIR
Srinagar
R. Indus
Jhelum
GUJRAT
JAMMU
CHAMBA
WAZRABAD
SIALKOT
R. Chenab
Lahore
Amritsar
Sulliman Mts.
R. Indus
R. Ravi
PANJAB
R. Sutlej
Delhi
Jamna R.
TIBET
Himalaya Mts.
NEPAL
Darjeeling
R. Indus
R. Ganges
Karachi
Allahabad
Benares
R. Ganges
Calcutta
Bombay
Madras
CEYLON
Walker & Boutall sc

Map 1



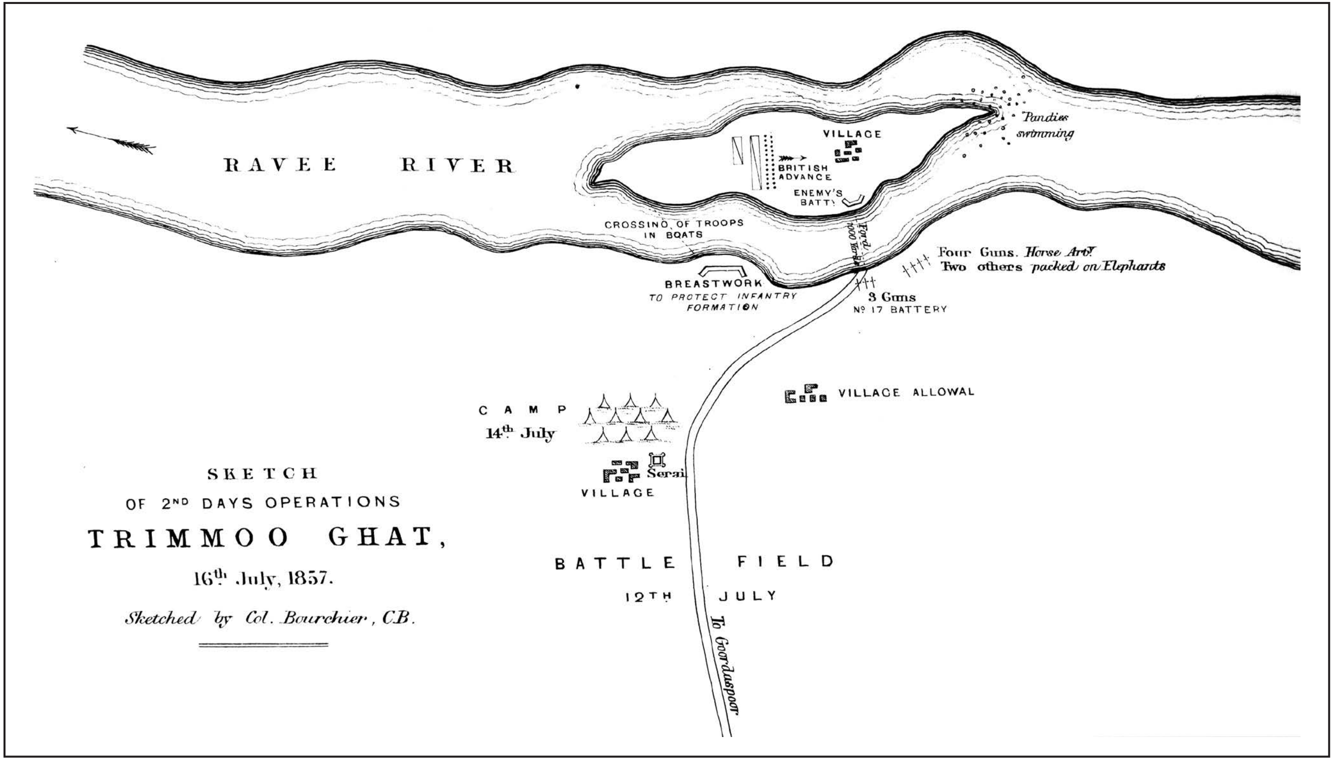
INDIA MISSION
of the
AMERICAN U.P. CHURCH
Villages in which there are Christians under care of U.P. Mission
Villages where workers are located
Roads
Railroads
Civil District Boundary
Mission District Boundary
Scale 25 miles to an inch
KINGDOM OF KASHMIR
JHELUM MISS. DIST.
SALT RANGE
GUJRAT DIST.
Ch. of Scotland
SHAHPUR DISTRICT
EAST GUJRANWALA MISS. DIST.
SIALKOT DISTRICT
PASRUR DIST.
ZAFARWAL MISSION
PATHANKOT MISS. DIST.
WEST GUJRANWALA MISSION DIST.
GURDASPUR MISS. DIST.
JUNGLE
JHANG DISTRICT
Jhelum
Gujrat
Wazirabad
Sialkot
Jamu
Akhnur
Samba
Jandi
Shahpur
Sukho Chak
Madhopur
Shakargarh
Gujranwala
Hafizabad
Kila Didar Singh
Kamoke
Emnabad
Chittiyanwala
Khangal
Lahore
Amritsar
Ravi
Gurdaspur
Talwandi
Barala
Ch. of England
Chinab

Map 2



SIALKOT AND VICINITY
TO ILLUSTRATE
THE SEPOY MUTINY OF 1857.

Map 3


RAVEE RIVER
VILLAGE
Pandies swimming
BRITISH ADVANCE
ENEMY'S BATTY
CROSSING OF TROOPS IN BOATS
Ford 1000 Yards
Four Guns. Horse Arty
Two others packed on Elephants
BREASTWORK
TO PROTECT INFANTRY FORMATION
3 Guns
No 17 BATTERY
VILLAGE ALLOWAL
CAMP
14th July
Serai
VILLAGE
SKETCH
OF 2ND DAYS OPERATIONS
TRIMMOO GHAT,
16th July, 1857.
Sketched by Col. Bourchier, CB.
BATTLE FIELD
12TH JULY
To Goordaspoor

Map 4

INTRODUCTION

'And then I made a brusque movement, and one of the remaining posts of that vanished fence leaped up in the field of my glass. You remember I told you I had been struck at the distance by certain attempts at ornamentation, rather remarkable in the ruinous aspect of the place. Now I had suddenly a nearer view, and its first result was to make me throw my head back as if before a blow. Then I went carefully from post to post with my glass, and I saw my mistake. These round knobs were not ornamental but symbolic; they were expressive and puzzling, striking and disturbing—food for thought and also for the vultures if there had been any looking down from the sky; but at all events for such ants as were industrious enough to ascend the pole. They would have been even more impressive, those heads on the stakes, if their faces had not been turned to the house. Only one, the first I had made out, was facing my way. I was not so shocked as you may think. The start back I had given was really nothing but a movement of surprise. I had expected to see a knob of wood there, you know. I returned deliberately to the first I had seen—and there it was, black, dried, sunken, with closed eyelids,—a head that seemed to sleep at the top of that pole, and, with the shrunken dry lips showing a narrow white line of the teeth, was smiling too, smiling continuously at some endless and jocose dream of that eternal slumber.'

'I had no idea of the conditions, he said: these heads were the heads of rebels. I shocked him excessively by laughing. Rebels! What would be the next definition I was to hear? There had been enemies, criminals, workers—and these were—rebels. Those rebellious heads looked very subdued to me on their sticks.'

Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness* (1899)[1]

When today we encounter human skulls, it is usually within the context of a natural history museum or perhaps a medical collection, or even an ethnographic display. Such skulls rarely retain the name of the individual to whom they belonged, but are anonymised and referred to by a catalogue number, which renders them ethically more palatable. A skull in the doctor's office might affectionately be referred to by a name, but it is really meant to represent humankind and supposed to show what a generic human cranium looks like. The anatomy students also do not need to know who the person they are dissecting was, nor how he, or she, died. Trying to determine racial categories in the past, the anthropometrist similarly did not care for individuality, but on the contrary sought to identify the broadest possible categories based on statistics of measurements. This sanitised presentation of skulls hides the sad and sordid past of the individuals whose remains ended up on the dissection table or in the display cabinet. The collection of human body parts indisputably entails some degree of violence, whether it was the posthumous dissection of the unclaimed corpses of criminals and the poor two centuries ago, the emptying of graves in far-away places a century ago, or the decapitation of a donated corpse today. And even when that violence is explicit in the exhibit, as is the case, for instance, of the *tsantsas* or shrunken heads displayed at the Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford, neither the name of the individual, nor the exact circumstances under which they died, are considered significant.[2]

A trophy-skull like that of Alum Bheg is different. Where a scientist's collecting of a skull is not supposed to be about violence, that of a trophy-skull is irrevocably linked to a narrative of violence. The trophy in that sense becomes meaningful by highlighting the circumstances of its taking—as opposed to scientific museum specimens, whose presentation in glass cabinets deliberately obscures any trace of the human being and the circumstances of their death. Without a story, it ceases to be a trophy. While provenance is obviously important for all human remains, in order for them to be considered of value, in the case of a trophy, this is the only thing that really matters. On their own, both the skull and the note are meaningless, and would probably have been discarded. To use the words of one of my colleagues, Alum Bheg exists only as a 'composition of actual bone and historical narrative'.[3] The note is accordingly central to the 'making'