



THE SKULL OF

Alum Bhag

THE LIFE AND DEATH
OF A REBEL OF 1857



KIM A. WAGNER

THE SKULL OF ALUM BHEG

KIM A. WAGNER

The Skull of Alum Bheg

The Life and Death of a Rebel of 1857

OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS

OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Oxford University Press is a department of the
University of Oxford. It furthers the University's objective
of excellence in research, scholarship, and education
by publishing worldwide.

Oxford New York
Auckland Cape Town Dar es Salaam Hong Kong Karachi
Kuala Lumpur Madrid Melbourne Mexico City Nairobi
New Delhi Shanghai Taipei Toronto

With offices in
Argentina Austria Brazil Chile Czech Republic France Greece
Guatemala Hungary Italy Japan Poland Portugal Singapore
South Korea Switzerland Thailand Turkey Ukraine Vietnam

Oxford is a registered trade mark of Oxford University Press
in the UK and certain other countries.

Published in the United States of America by
Oxford University Press
198 Madison Avenue, New York, NY 10016

Copyright © Kim A. Wagner 2017

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced,
stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means,
without the prior permission in writing of Oxford University Press,
or as expressly permitted by law, by license, or under terms agreed with
the appropriate reproduction rights organization. Inquiries concerning
reproduction outside the scope of the above should be sent to the
Rights Department, Oxford University Press, at the address above.

You must not circulate this work in any other form
and you must impose this same condition on any acquirer.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data is available
Kim A. Wagner.
The Skull of Alum Bheg: The Life and Death of a Rebel of 1857.
ISBN: 9780190870232

Printed in India on acid-free paper

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

CONTENTS

<i>List of Maps and Images</i>	ix
<i>Glossary</i>	xv
<i>A Note on Spelling</i>	xvii
<i>Prologue: The Skull in the Pub</i>	xix
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	xxiii
Introduction	1
1. The Hot Wind of an Indian May	11
2. A Religious Question from Which Arose Our Dread	37
3. Common Fame is but a Lying Strumpet	65
4. Escape at Once from This Horrible Place	85
5. Tenants of Pandemonium	97
6. Their Blood Have They Shed Like Water	117
7. Gorging Vultures and Howling Jackals	133
8. Justice so Prompt and Vigorous	149
9. A Pursuing Destiny	161
10. Sharp and Short as the Cannons Roar	175
11. But from the Skulls of the Slain	191
Epilogue: The Dead Bodies of Thy Servants	217
<i>Notes</i>	225
<i>Bibliography</i>	261
<i>Index</i>	273

LIST OF MAPS AND IMAGES

Maps

- Map 1: India. ('India—showing the Field of the Church of Scotland in the Panjab', John F. W. Youngson, *Forty Years of the Panjab Mission of the Church of Scotland, 1855–1895*, Edinburgh: R. & R. Clark, 1896)
- Map 2: Sialkot and the part of Punjab bordering onto Kashmir—the battle of Trimmu Ghat took place where the road crosses the Ravi River, between Shakargarh and Awankha, near 32.18 latitude and 75.33 longitude. ('India Mission of American Church', Andrew Gordon, *Our India Mission: A Thirty Years' History of the India Mission of the United Presbyterian Church of North America*, Philadelphia: Andrew Gordon, 1886)
- Map 3: City and cantonment of Sialkot in 1857. ('Sialkot and vicinity to illustrate the Sepoy Mutiny of 1857', in Andrew Gordon, *Our India Mission: A Thirty Years' History of the India Mission of the United Presbyterian Church of North America*, Philadelphia: Andrew Gordon, 1886)
- Map 4: Battle of Trimmu Ghat ('Sketch of Operations at Trimmoo Ghat, 16th July 1857', G. Bouchier, *Eight Month's Campaign Against the Bengal Sepoy Army, During the Mutiny of 1857*, London: Smith, Elder and Co., 1858)

LIST OF MAPS AND IMAGES

List of Images

- Image 1: The skull of Alum Bheg. (Author's photo)
- Image 2: Newspaper report about the discovery of the skull in The Lord Clyde pub in 1963. (Author's collection)
- Image 3: The note found with Alum Bheg's skull. (Author's photo)
- Image 4: The church and bungalows of a quintessential cantonment station in mid-nineteenth century British India ('Our Station', G.F. Atkinson, "*Curry and Rice, on Forty Plates; or, The Ingredients of Social Life at "Our Station" in India*, London: Day & Son, 1860)
- Image 5: A late nineteenth-century view of Sialkot city taken from the fort. ('Sialkot city, view from the fort in the city', Youngson, *Forty Years*)
- Image 6: The artillery barracks in Sialkot cantonment, late nineteenth century (Author's collection)
- Image 7: Sudder Bazaar, Sialkot, late nineteenth century (Author's collection)
- Image 8: Reverend Thomas Hunter (Youngson, *Forty Years*)
- Image 9: Jane Scott Hunter (Youngson, *Forty Years*)
- Image 10: Dr James Graham (Courtesy of National Army Museum, Chelsea, London)
- Image 11: Reverend Andrew Gordon (Gordon, *Our India Mission*)
- Image 12: New recruits for a *sepoy* regiment in the Bengal Army. (Anon., *Narrative of the Indian Revolt: From Its Outbreak to the Capture of Lucknow by Sir Colin Campbell*, London: George Vickers, 1858)
- Image 13: *Sepoys* practising with the Enfield rifle. ('Sepoys at rifle practice', G.F. Atkinson, *The Campaign in India, 1857–58: From Drawings Made During the Eventful Period of the Great Mutiny*, London: Day & Son, 1859)
- Image 14: The *khalasi* at Dum-Dum telling a high-caste *sepoy* about the offensive grease on the cartridges. (Author's collection)
- Image 15: The circulation of chapattis before the outbreak in May 1857. (*The Leisure Hour*, 1858)
- Image 16: A proclamation prophesising the imminent end of British rule in India (W.H.G. Kingston, *The Young Rajah*, London: T. Nelson and Sons, 1876)

LIST OF MAPS AND IMAGES

- Image 17: A European family butchered by mutineers as imagined by the Swedish artist Egron Lundgren, who accompanied William Howard Russell to India during the uprising. (Karl Asplund, *Med Egron Lundgren i Indien, 1858–1859*, Stockholm: Bonnier, 1931)
- Image 18: European men, women and children being tortured and killed by Indian sepoys. This rare illustration is by the renowned French artist Gustave Doré (Author's collection).
- Image 19: *Sepoys* protecting their British officers during the outbreak. (Anon., *Narrative of the Indian Revolt*)
- Image 20: 'Dr Graham shot in his buggy by the Sealkote Mutineers', from Charles Ball's popular history of the uprising, published in 1858. Though perhaps capturing something of the drama of the incident, the image is not entirely accurate: there was no Indian coachman as Graham was himself holding the reins, and he was shot at close range by a pistol rather than the distant rifle-shot depicted. (Charles Ball, *The History of the Indian Mutiny*, 2 vols, London: London Printing & Publishing Co., 1858, Courtesy of Anne S.K. Brown Military Collection, Brown University Library)
- Image 21: Jon Nicholson as a noble Victorian hero of the Empire. (Lord [F.S.] Roberts, *Forty-One Years in India: From Subaltern to Commander-in-Chief*, London: Macmillan and Co., 1897)
- Image 22: The other face of 'muscular Christianity'—Nicholson in action at Trimmu Ghat. (*The Boy's Own Paper*, 1921)
- Image 23: 'Attack on Sealkote mutineers by General Nicholson's Irregular Cavalry'—a contemporary depiction of the final stage of the battle of Trimmu Ghat (Ball, *The History of the Indian Mutiny*)
- Image 24: The bodies of dead rebels after a battle, by Egron Lundgren. (Asplund, *Med Egron Lundgren i Indien*)
- Image 25: Fleeing sepoys captured by British cavalry (Atkinson, *The Campaign in India*)
- Image 26: Two illustrations illustrating, respectively, Indian treachery and British retribution: 'The Massacre at Cawnpore'. (Courtesy of Anne S.K. Brown Military Collection, Brown University Library)

LIST OF MAPS AND IMAGES

- Image 27: The companion-piece to the previous image: ‘Hodson refusing supplications of grovelling mutineers’. (Courtesy of Anne S.K. Brown Military Collection, Brown University Library)
- Image 28: ‘Outlying Picket of the Highland Brigade at Benares’. The benign title of this illustration from Charles Ball’s book does not quite reflect the indiscriminate violence it captures. (Ball *The History of the Indian Mutiny*)
- Image 29: Photograph by Felice Beato of an execution of two Indian rebels in 1857. Beato himself ran up and grabbed the kicking legs of one of the prisoners, as the movement was ruining the picture. (https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Indian_Rebellion_Hangings.gif)
- Image 30: Another photograph by Beato, showing the aftermath of the assault on Lucknow. Beato had the skulls and skeletons of dead rebels disinterred to provide more drama. The image reveals how easy it would have been to collect human remains during the uprising. (Courtesy of Anne S.K. Brown Military Collection, Brown University Library)
- Image 31: ‘Fugitive *sepoys*’ fleeing into the Himalayas. Contemporary illustration which probably took a pre-existing image of the mountain range and added a more exciting title. (Author’s collection)
- Image 32: A captured rebel guarded by Indian policemen. (Author’s collection)
- Image 33: *Sepoys* about to be blown from a cannon. (Courtesy of Anne S.K. Brown Military Collection, Brown University Library)
- Image 34: The spectacle of colonial retribution—*sepoys* being blown from cannon. (Courtesy of Anne S.K. Brown Military Collection, Brown University Library)
- Image 35: ‘The king’s slaughtering place’ at Kumasi, which Stanley described as ‘the great Golgotha’ during the Ashanti Expedition in 1874. (*Illustrated London News*, 1874)
- Image 36: Trophy-skull from a *sepoys* executed at Sialkot, which has been turned into a cigar-box, and which was exhibited in 1911 at the Royal United Service Institution museum. (*The Sphere*, 1911)

LIST OF MAPS AND IMAGES

- Image 37: Photograph of Captain Thomas B. Ray, who served in the volunteer cavalry unit known as the Khakee Ressalah during the Indian Uprising. The skull is probably that of Shah Mall, a local rebel whose head was paraded on a lance. (Courtesy of the National Army Museum, Chelsea, London)
- Image 38: The site of the battle of Trimmu Ghat as it appears today, looking from the southern shore of the Ravi River towards the island where the rebel took refuge. (Author's photo)
- Image 39: A piece of a *sepoy's* skull with a bullet-hole clearly visible. This was excavated from the well at Ajanala in 2014, along with the remains of 281 other *sepoys* butchered by Cooper in July 1857. (Author's photo)
- Image 40: Shaloom, my guide in Sialkot, and the old caretaker of the Hunter Memorial Church, April 2017. (Author's photo)

GLOSSARY

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

GLOSSARY

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

PROLOGUE

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

PROLOGUE

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 Bhég 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 Bhég 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 Bhég 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 Bhég and that it is for me to break the cycle of humiliation and igno-

PROLOGUE

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 Bhag. 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 Bhag 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,

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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-around 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

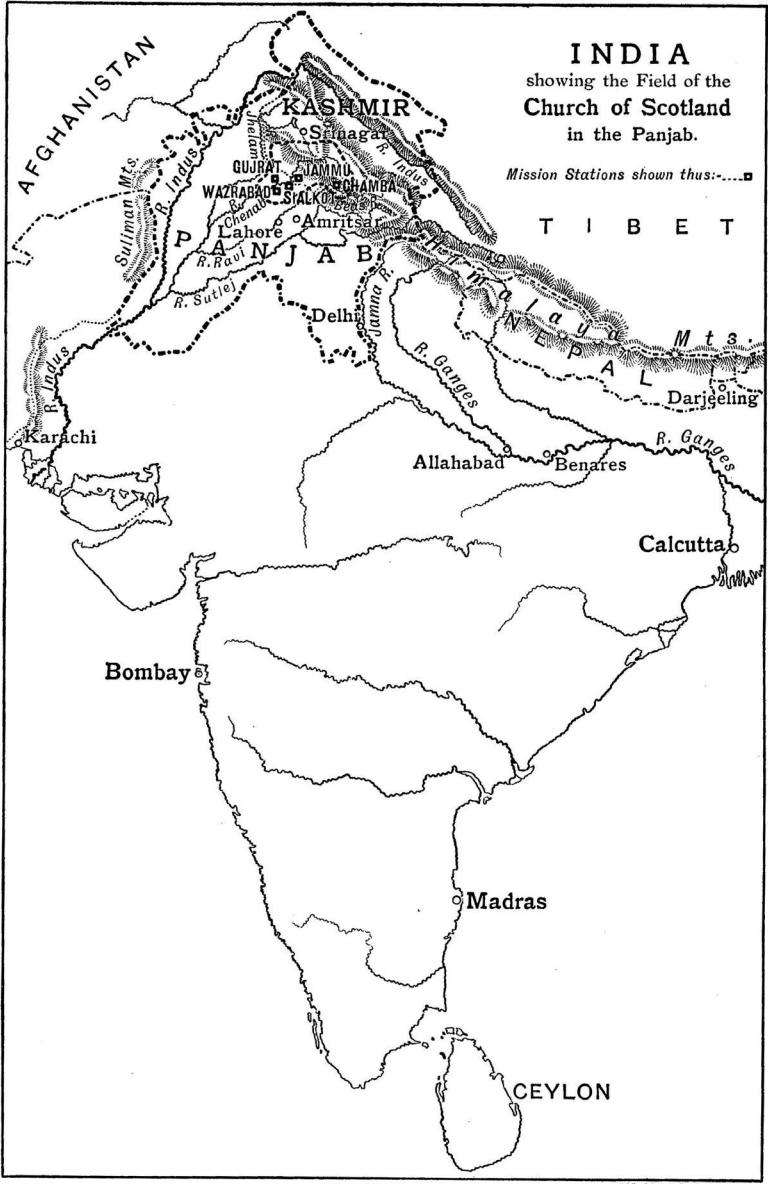
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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.

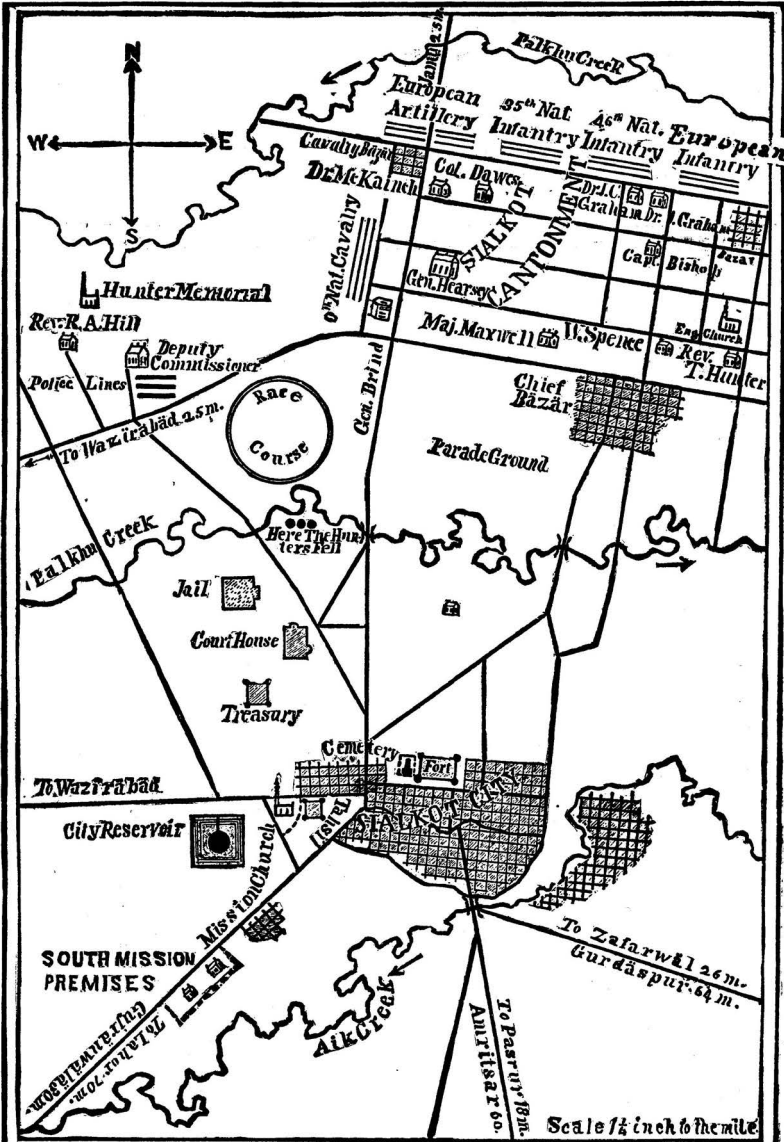
Many thanks to the editorial board of *Past & Present* for permission to use material from my article 'Calculated to Strike Terror: The Amritsar Massacre and the Spectacle of Colonial Violence'. Thanks also to the staff at the Gelman Library, George Washington University, the National Archives of India 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 Saggars), Rafael Anton Irisarri, and the late Lucette Bourdin. Also thanks to the distilleries of Islay.

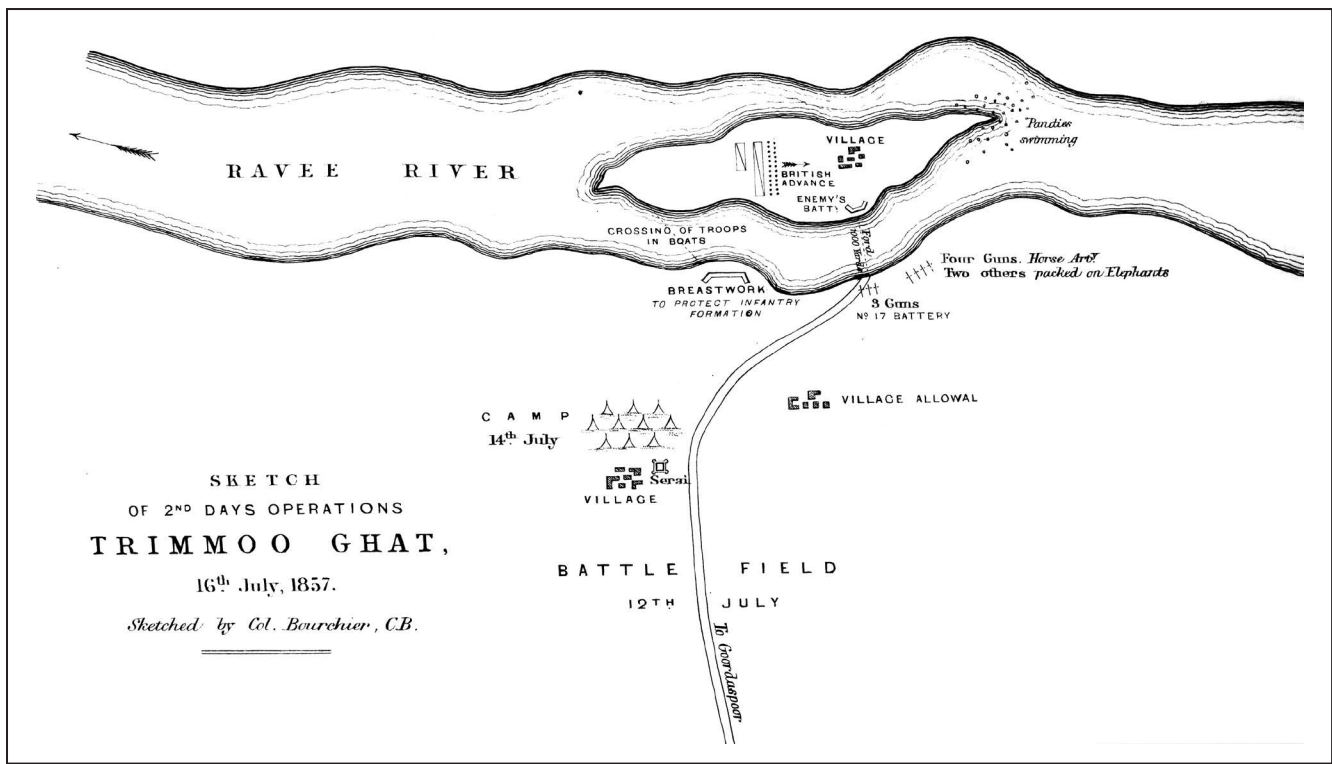
I owe an apology to Ada and Max, and further away, to Sigrid and Gustav, for having been so absentminded while writing this book—and thanks to Netflix for stepping in when I should have been parenting. Thanks also to Elaine and Pop-Pop for letting us stay with them in Maryland. Finally, I cannot begin 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!



Map 1



SIALKOT AND VICINITY
 TO ILLUSTRATE
 THE SEPOY MUTINY OF 1857.



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

THE SKULL OF ALUM BHEG

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'