

Sir John Woodroffe, Tantra and Bengal

**‘An Indian Soul in a
European Body?’**

KATHLEEN TAYLOR



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Cover Photograph: Sir John Woodroffe after his retirement from India

To the memory of my mother, who wanted very much to see this book,
and of James Edward Woodroffe, who did not like talking about his family
but became a dear friend.

For the one thing that strikes a close reader of his exposition is that he is truly an Indian Soul in a European body . . .

(M.P. Pandit: A Commentary on Sir John Woodroffe's: the Serpent Power)

CONTENTS

<i>List of Illustrations</i>	ix
<i>Preface</i>	xi
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	xiii
<i>Abbreviations</i>	xv
INTRODUCTION	1
PART 1 SIR JOHN WOODROFFE 1865–1936	
A biographical study	9
1 GLIMPSES OF A LIFE Camera and pen	11
2 THE YOUNG POLITICIAN Woburn Park School	21
3 THE HIGH COURT JUDGE Popularity and unpopularity	37
4 THE ART CONNOISSEUR Romantic orientalists	61
5 THE DEFENDER OF HINDUISM ‘India is an Idea’	78
6 THE SECRET TANTRIC ‘An Indian soul in a European body’?	93
PART 2 ARTHUR AVALON	
The Creation of a Legendary Orientalist	115
7 THE STUDY OF TANTRA A new orientalist appears on the scene	117

Contents

8	ARTHUR AVALON AMONG THE ORIENTALISTS A public face and an open secret	137
9	ON TANTRA Arthur Avalon and modern studies	154
10	‘ŚAKTIVĀDA’ Soul and body united	174
11	COLLABORATORS, SANSKRIT AND THE SCHOLARSHIP OF ARTHUR AVALON	203
	CONCLUSION	235
	<i>Appendices</i>	239
	<i>Notes</i>	258
	<i>Bibliography</i>	300
	<i>Index</i>	312

ILLUSTRATIONS

- 1 Sir John Woodroffe shortly after his retirement from India
- 2 The young Jack Woodroffe at Frensham Heights
- 3 Sir John Woodroffe in his garden at Oxford (between 1923 and 1930)
- 4 Ellen Elizabeth Woodroffe
- 5 Woodroffe wearing the *dhoti* at the Konarak Temple
- 6 Woodroffe, A.B. Ghose and H.P. Moeller at the Konarak Temple
- 7 The *Śrī Yantra*
- 8 Atal Bihari Ghose

PREFACE

This book began one day in the college library when I looked at the books of Arthur Avalon, alias Sir John Woodroffe, in a long row in red bindings on the shelf. I can only describe it as a powerful feeling that I *ought* to know more about this British judge who had also been a scholar of Tantra. I could not tell why, and I did not, at that time, specially want to. Probably the name 'Arthur Avalon' had tapped into subliminal memories from many years previously, in India in the 1960s, when many young western travellers did seem to think they knew him, on some level.

At any rate, when I chose Woodroffe as the subject of a PhD thesis, the conviction remained for a long time (and despite proofs to the contrary) that everyone knew more about him than I did. At first I was astonished to discover there was no biography. I soon discovered why: no-one, however interesting, can survive their death if they do not leave a record of themselves behind. The thesis had to start with a search for papers. I went to Calcutta armed with another name, and an address of eighty years before. A second vivid memory is of one Sunday afternoon in the company of Mr Keshab Sarkar, of the Ramakrishna Mission Institute of Culture, as we went from door to door in the back roads and gullies of the north of the city making enquiries about the family of Atal Bihari Ghose. It was a fascinating and delightful introduction to a wonderful city. When we eventually found the house we wanted it had two wings and one of them, the one to which I most wanted access, was locked up. The owner had gone to live in Pondicherry. So I bought a rail ticket to Madras, and then a bus journey.

Pondicherry in early March was hot and humid, but from my balcony in the ashram guest house I could look straight out east, to the dawn over the sea. Mr Sobhun Ghose was an interesting and, I instinctively felt, deeply spiritual person. He gave me what I wanted most of all in the world at that moment: a letter of permission to his family for me to enter his house and search in his grandfather's library. It was like being given a golden key. What the search unlocked was evidence of a fascinating collaboration

Preface

between two very different personalities, who had merged to create the figure of Arthur Avalon.

Nevertheless, this book remains essentially a study of Woodroffe. If, as some say, the scholarly monograph is dying in the age of the internet, one devoted to a particular individual is even more unfashionable. But I offer no apologies. In this single person's story, many different themes converge: relationships and choices of individuals against the background of colonialism and nationalism; the debate over the nature of 'orientalism'; the relationship of western enquirer and Indian knowledge in the encounter with Hinduism; the ever-fascinating subject of Tantrism. Unlike more dominating and better known personalities of his day (such as Annie Besant) Woodroffe reflected his social surroundings more than he stamped his image upon them. This, to my mind, makes him even more interesting. We meet less of the individual and more of his world. We find that the fault-lines of his social environment are reflected in internal conflicts and inconsistencies in his personality.

Many generations of people in the West as well as in India have been influenced by 'Arthur Avalon' and fascinated by the figure of Woodroffe. This study has been written in a way that I hope will offer something of interest to the academic, while also not presenting itself as 'a closed book' to the more general reader.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First of all I owe thanks to the two long-suffering supervisors of my PhD: Dr Avril Powell, and Dr John Marr at the School of Oriental and African Studies in London. To Avril Powell especially for her patience and faith that this work would be completed one day – which helped to ensure that it did; to John Marr (and his wife Wendy) without whose warm support, interest, generosity and above all inspiration, it would probably not have been begun. The thesis was made possible by a grant from the British Academy; and my second research visit to Calcutta was financed by a travelling fellowship from the Royal Asiatic Society. I thank also Lindsay Whittome of the SOAS computer centre, for very patiently helping me print copy from my antiquated computer programme.

I owe, as already mentioned, a great debt to Mr Sobhun Ghose for his kindness and support, and for giving me most of the originals of the correspondence between Woodroffe and his grandfather; also to Mrs Sumita Guha and her son Jayadip who gave me much patient help when I was allowed to browse in her grandfather's library; to Mr Krishna Ghose their cousin, who first welcomed me to the house and who had a print made for me of the photograph reproduced in plate 6, and to all the members of the Ghose family. I am equally grateful to Mr T.T. Samdup, son of the Lama Kazi Dawasamdub, who lives at Kalimpong, for giving me the originals of his father's correspondence with Woodroffe and others, and for his and his family's hospitality. Both sets of correspondence are now with the Oriental and India Office Collections of the British Library. Most of the photographs of Woodroffe and his wife were given to me by his son, the late James Edward Woodroffe, to whose memory I am grateful for these and many other kindnesses. Another person who died while this book was being written, and to whom I owe a debt of gratitude is the late retired Justice Mr Somarendranath Bagchi, for giving me copies of his articles on Woodroffe and for sharing his useful interpretation of his story.

I also thank Mr R.A. Ali, son of Sir Torick Ameer Ali, for allowing me to quote from his father's unpublished memoirs; and the Prior and

Acknowledgements

community of Downside Abbey, near Bath, Somerset, for allowing me to research in their archives and to quote from Woburn Park school's journal *The Amoeba*. I also thank Father B.A. Rossiter of St George's School Weymouth for introducing me to the work of Father Stewart Foster of the Servite Order, and to Father Foster himself for allowing me to use the sources he had gathered for the interesting story of Woburn Park school.

I thank warmly Mr Satyakam Sengupta for his long friendship, support and invaluable help, especially, but not only, with translation; and Mr Keshab Sarkar who is mentioned in my preface, who also helped me with translation. I must also mention Mr Gautam Sengupta of All India Radio Archives, Calcutta, who with great patience found the important tape of an interview on West Bengal Radio which is mentioned in chapter 10. I would like to thank Dr Debabrata Sen Sarma and Dr Tapati Guha-Thakurta, for several helpful conversations in Calcutta; and the Mishra family who made me welcome in Darbhanga; also for their support and helpful suggestions many other friends and colleagues, especially: Indira Chowdhury, Francesca Fremantle, Jeanne Openshaw and Singharaja Delgoda.

Parts of chapters 8 and 11 have been published previously in Julia Leslie (ed.) *Myths and Mythmaking*, London, Curzon Press 1996. Quotations from India Office Records appear with the permission of the custodians of the Oriental and India Office Collections, the British Library. Extracts from the letters of Sir E. Denison Ross appear with the permission of the archives of the School of Oriental and African Studies, London. Quotations from all the works published under the name of Woodroffe or Arthur Avalon are in the copyright of Ganesh and Co. (Pvt) Ltd, Madras, including those from the 6th edition of *Shakti and Shakta* which were published under an arrangement with Dover Press, New York.

ABBREVIATIONS

BS	<i>Bhārata Shakti</i> 1) 1917, 2) 1918, 3) 1921.
CWN	<i>Calcutta Weekly Notes</i> , High Court of Calcutta.
DP	Dover Press edition (of <i>Shakti and Shākta</i>).
EIED	Bhattacharje, S.B. <i>Encyclopedia of Indian Events and Dates</i> New Delhi, Sterling, 1995.
ER	Eliade (ed.) <i>Encyclopedia of Religion</i> , New York, MacMillan, 1987.
GLb	<i>The Great Liberation</i> (English translation of MNT) 6th ed. Madras, Ganesh & Co., 1985.
GOL or <i>Garland</i>	<i>Garland of Letters</i> , 9th ed. Madras, Ganesh, 1989.
GOL (1)	1st ed.(1922) Madras, Ganesh; London, Luzacs.
HTSL	Goudriaan T. and Gupta S. <i>Hindu Tantric and Śākta Literature</i> Wiesbaden, Harrassowitz, 1981.
IIC	<i>Is India Civilized?</i> (1918, 1919, 1922).
IIC(3)	<i>Is India Civilized?</i> 1922 Madras, Ganesh & Co.
IOR	India Office Records (at the British Library, London).
ISOA	Indian Society of Oriental Art.
ITS	<i>An Introduction to Tantra Śāstra</i> (The Introduction to MNT published separately): 8th ed. Madras, Ganesh, 1990.
JASB	<i>Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal.</i>
JISOA	<i>Journal of the Indian Society of Oriental Art.</i>
JRAS	<i>Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society.</i>
KKV	<i>Kāma-kalā-vilāsa.</i>
KT	<i>Kulārṇava tantra.</i>
MNT	<i>Mahānirvāṇa tantra.</i>
NAI	National Archives of India (at the Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, New Delhi).
OIOC	Oriental and India Office Collections of the British Library, London.
PST	<i>Prapañcasāra tantra.</i>

Abbreviations

PT/1 & 2	<i>Principles of Tantra</i> (translation of Sivacandra Vidyarnava's <i>Tantratattva</i>) in 2 Volumes 6th ed. Madras, Ganesh, 1986.
SCN	<i>Ṣaṭ-cakra-nirūpaṇa</i> .
SOR	<i>Seed of Race</i> 1) 1919, 2) 1921 Madras, Ganesh.
SP or <i>Serpent</i>	<i>The Serpent Power</i> , 14th ed. Madras, Ganesh, 1989.
SS & SS(DP)	<i>Śakti and Śhākta</i> , New York, Dover Press, 1978. (paperback). Unless an edition number is specified this is always the edition referred to. When more than one edition is mentioned, this one is indicated by SS(DP).
SS(1)	<i>Śakti and Śhākta</i> 1918,
SS(2)	<i>Śakti and Śhākta</i> 1920, London, Luzacs; Calcutta, Thacker Spink & Co.
SS(3)	<i>Śakti and Śākta</i> 3rd ed. Madras, Ganesh, 1927.
ST	<i>Śāradā tilaka</i> .
Studies	<i>Studies in the Mantra Shāstra</i> (Central portion of <i>Garland of Letters</i> originally published separately).
TRT	<i>Tantrarāja tantra</i> .
TT	<i>Tantrik Texts</i> . Volume numbers are indicated TT/1 etc.
VRS	Varenda Research Society.
WAP	<i>The World As Power</i> , 6th ed. Madras, Ganesh, 1981.

NOTE ON REFERENCING

References to Arthur Avalon's or Woodroffe's books on Tantra are placed in square brackets in the text. Editions are as stated in this list. Note that SS (followed by a page number only) indicates the Dover Press edition of *Śakti and Śākta* and *not* the latest edition. All general references, including those to Woodroffe's non-tantric books, are placed in endnotes under each chapter at the end of the book.

INTRODUCTION

... the opinion is expressed that there is in the body of the Scripture called Tantra a nucleus only of Tantrik teaching properly so called, which nucleus is defined as “black art of the crudest and filthiest kind, with a rough background of the Śiva Śakti cult” ... It is of them that the author cited says: “The highly coloured Yogic imagination pales beside the doctrines of the infamous Tantras in which a veritable Devil’s mass is purveyed in various forms to a swarm of sects, mostly of the Śivaite persuasion”. [*Principles of Tantra*, vol 1, p. 6]

In this passage a hitherto unknown orientalist called Arthur Avalon is quoting another Western scholar, the Sanskritist L.D. Barnett.¹ The year is 1913, when the first translations and editions of tantric texts under the name of Arthur Avalon were published. He appeared on the scene quite suddenly in the second decade of the twentieth century as an expert on Hindu Tantra which he claimed was abused and misunderstood because of what today we would call the orientalist discourse. Barnett’s was only one of several examples he gave in the preface from which I have quoted. In line with Edward Said and others in more recent times,² Arthur Avalon attacked Western orientalist ‘knowledge’ which shaped the self-perception of the English-educated in India, and claimed this was particularly so in relation to the tantric tradition within Hinduism. He believed that the influence of foreign orientalists was almost solely responsible for the extremely negative reputation of Tantra among members of the English-educated Indian middle class. His books set out to re-educate both groups, but primarily the latter.

Those books of Arthur Avalon which are still in print have been published for many years under the name of Sir John Woodroffe, a British judge at the High Court of Calcutta who won popularity with many among the Indian public not only for instigating a revival of the tantric tradition, but also as a defender of Hindu culture as a whole. Although written initially for an Indian readership, his work soon became popular

and extremely influential in the West as well, where Woodroffe became an early role model for Western converts to Hinduism or Buddhism. He emphasised the mystical and metaphysical aspects of Tantra, towards which most previous European orientalist scholars had been sceptical.

This made his books controversial at first, for in Tantra there seemed to be much to offend. A large array of divinities, among whom goddesses were more important than their male consorts, were worshipped by complicated rituals strongly focused upon figurative or geometric images and *mantras*. Then the 'infamous' *pañcatattva* rite included sex and alcohol as well as meat and fish among its 'five substances' for worship. With all these elements, plus a reputation for black magic, Tantra represented everything that the notions of 'paganism', 'idolatry' or 'witchcraft' summoned up for Europeans of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In more recent times its always highly sexualized image has led to a reversal of values, so that 'Tantra' evokes popular notions of a romantic cult associated with erotic temple imagery, or 'spiritual sex'.³ But in India, as well as being sexualized, Tantra also still evokes fear because of its association with magic.

In the Avalon/Woodroffe books *Tantrasāstra*, the doctrine contained in the Tantras, emerges as a refined subtle philosophy, its erotic and magic elements either marginalized or reinterpreted in an ethical or rational light; and their author insisted on its place within general Hinduism, rather than on an exotic fringe. Through his influence on contemporary and subsequent scholars he radically affected the study of Tantra for a long time, while his books also had a popular appeal that helped to make Tantra fashionable.

In India however, Woodroffe's significance was wider than that of a tantric scholar. He also wrote and spoke publicly on the more general theme of Hindu culture and the threat of westernization. Although not overtly political, the best known of his books on this theme, *Is India Civilized?*, made Woodroffe especially popular with the Indian public at a particularly sensitive time politically; his name was associated among his contemporaries with this book as much as with his tantric writings. As a British supporter of Indian nationalism, Woodroffe stands alongside more famous contemporaries such as Annie Besant, Nivedita and C.F. Andrews.

Although 'Arthur Avalon' presented his work as that of an independent outsider investigating Tantra impartially, there is evidence that Woodroffe was more personally involved, even to the extent of taking tantric initiation. Exactly how he was first drawn to it is not known for certain, though there are many stories. We find few traces of the process in his writings, which were produced within a relatively short period of time, and there is little chronological development within his work. Its different strata have more to do with the influence of his collaborators.

It is well-known and has been generally accepted for a long time that 'Arthur Avalon' was Sir John Woodroffe's pseudonym. In fact the matter

was not so straightforward. Woodroffe claimed that he used the pseudonym to cover the fact that he worked with ‘others’, especially one anonymous person whom in a previously published paper I identified as the Bengali vakil and scholar Atal Behari Ghose.⁴ The second part of this book probes further the collaboration of these two people, who between them effectively created ‘Arthur Avalon’ as an imaginary character, combining the talents of both men but especially the public image of Woodroffe with the textual knowledge of Ghose.⁵ The first part examines the role played by Woodroffe in contemporary colonial society in which his identity as ‘Arthur Avalon’ took on significance, and the mixture of nationalism and idealistic or romantic orientalism that inspired his circle.

‘Orientalism’

It is necessary to clarify the different contexts in which I use the words ‘orientalist’ and ‘orientalism’. Before Edward Said opened the debate on European constructions of the ‘orient’, *orientalist* in the context of Indian studies referred to those among the British administrators, and especially educationists in India, who favoured ‘oriental’ learning and culture, as opposed to the ‘anglicists’ (a paradoxical alliance of utilitarians, rationalists and some Christian missionaries) who wished to supplant the indigenous culture through English education. The word ‘orientalist’ also had an earlier meaning which denoted scholars of Asian languages and cultures, and especially the English scholars in India of the eighteenth and early nineteenth century who first revealed to Europe the richness of the Sanskritic tradition. Sir William Jones and his followers, who founded the Asiatic Society of Bengal (the quintessential ‘orientalist’ society) were also ‘orientalists’ in the ideological sense I have outlined, in that they placed high value upon the non-European culture they encountered; but their successors in ‘oriental’ studies often took the diametrically opposite view, and placed all non-European cultures at a lower level of development.⁶ It was attitudes typical of the latter group which mostly came under scrutiny in Said’s *Orientalism*, but for Said, *all* European writing on ‘the orient’ in the context of colonialism was characterised by projections upon an essentialized ‘other’ and the desire to shape and control that other. Hence it is less relevant to his argument whether these projections were romantic and idealized, or contemptuous and abusive as in the quotation with which this Introduction begins. In India, however, the two attitudes led to radically different conclusions politically as the former veered close to, and influenced, Indian nationalism (see below chapter 4).

Woodroffe was an ‘orientalist’ in the romantic, idealistic sense and I have used the term ‘romantic orientalism’ to refer to his values and those of his circle.⁷ It is the contention of this book that he was not an ‘orientalist’ in the more literal sense of the term: a scholar of Asian languages, but that he

posed as one – or at the very least allowed himself to be perceived as one. I would have liked to avoid the term ‘orientalist’ altogether in this latter context and substituted ‘indologist’ in its place, but that would have been to overthrow the fulcrum on which the whole story rests. Arthur Avalon in fact perceived Western orientalist ‘knowledge’ in a manner that sometimes approached Said’s, and that he did so tends to uphold my central thesis: that Woodroffe in his role as Arthur Avalon was different from other Western scholars in being open to Indian influence to an unusual degree. Indian writers had attacked the assumptions and sense of racial superiority of certain Western commentators since the mid-nineteenth century.⁸ ‘Orientalism’ connoting a body of scholarship claiming expertise and making certain (positive or negative) evaluations of Indian religion and society from an external and supposedly privileged position, forms the essential backdrop to the story of Arthur Avalon. It was that image of the ‘orientalist’ which Ghose and Woodroffe addressed, appropriated and successfully made use of. Hence I use the term in both senses: as scholarship of Asian languages and culture, and as an ideology. I hope these different senses will be clear from the contexts in which they are used.

SUMMARY

Woodroffe’s life in Calcutta can be looked at through five roles, four public and one half-secret. His most significant role, that of Arthur Avalon the orientalist scholar, takes up the second part of the book which deals with his writings on Tantra. At the same time it forms the backdrop to the other roles which are the subject of part one: the judge of the High Court at a time of political ferment in the province of Bengal (chapter 3); the patron and connoisseur of Indian art, and friend of the Tagores (chapter 4); the prestigious foreigner who won popularity as a defender of Hinduism (chapter 5); and lastly, the secret Tantric, whose secret nevertheless was not well kept (chapter 6). By way of prologue we look at a sixth, unknown role: Woodroffe’s youthful ‘career’ as a leading politician in the Parliament of his highly unusual public school (chapter 2).

Part Two begins with an outline of European attitudes to Tantra within the study of Hinduism and Buddhism prior to Arthur Avalon, followed by a summary of the works published under the Avalon and Woodroffe names (chapter 7). Chapter 8 concerns ‘Arthur Avalon’: the images the pseudonym evoked and the response to this new orientalist who seemed to have such profound textual knowledge of Tantra as well as an understanding that belonged to the ‘insider’, and who seemed a completely new kind of European scholar. This leads up to the appearance of Sir John Woodroffe in the public arena as a scholar of Tantra. The chapter moves on to discuss the choice and significance of the pseudonym. Finally it

introduces Atal Bihari Ghose and presents arguments for his very significant involvement in the Arthur Avalon books, and raises questions around the degree of Woodroffe's Sanskrit knowledge.

The last three chapters focus on the Avalon/Woodroffe books. Chapter 9 outlines the area presented in them as *Tantrasāstra* and relates it to selected modern studies of Tantrism. Chapter 10 analyses some of Woodroffe's apologetic themes, especially against the background of Swami Vivekananda's neo-Vedanta, and closes with a study of how Woodroffe used fashionable western occultist and scientific concepts. This chapter focuses upon Woodroffe's lectures where we can be fairly sure he speaks in his own voice. The last chapter attempts to unravel different strands in the writings. Beginning with Woodroffe's correspondence with Ghose and with Lama Kazi Dawasamdub, it looks at his relationship with these two collaborators. Then it turns to Woodroffe's relationship with Sanskrit and Sanskrit texts, and with secondary literature. Finally it examines his use of the knowledge of Ghose and of other Indian people, arguing that the books put forward a modern 'insider's' re-interpretation of the tantric tradition presented under the name of a foreign 'orientalist'. I end by making some suggestions about how to distinguish the two chief voices, those of Woodroffe and Atal Bihari Ghose, who speak through 'Arthur Avalon'.

Throughout I refer to the author as 'Woodroffe' for passages originally put out under that name, usually because they occur in lectures delivered by him; 'Avalon' is used for passages published originally under the pseudonym; and Avalon/Woodroffe when referring to the whole body of writings. This is because Woodroffe did write under his own name in his lifetime and so 'Arthur Avalon' does not strictly cover all the books.

A NOTE ON SOURCES

Family

After Sir John Woodroffe's death, his widow Ellen lived until her own death in 1944 at Menton on the Italian border. According to their son James Edward Woodroffe, this house was looted twice during the war and he gave this as the reason why there were no family papers and no trace of the extensive art collection his father was said to have amassed. The Woodroffes had three children, two girls called Nancy and Barbara, and James who was born in 1909. None of these children married and so there are now no direct descendants. Barbara died young in 1925; Nancy died in 1973; James Woodroffe lived until 1995, in a caravan near the south coast of England where I first met him in 1989. Most of the information on the family has been provided by him.

Private Correspondence in India

‘The correspondence between Woodroffe and Atal Bihari Ghose which is discussed in this book was discovered in the house of his grandchildren in Calcutta. It was apparently a random selection, found among his manuscript collection and in other places in the house.’ Mostly this consisted of letters written to Ghose from England and France after Woodroffe’s retirement from India. They were kindly donated to me by Sobhun Ghose and are now with the Oriental and India Office Collection of the British Library. Photocopies and typed versions of those letters which are discussed in this book are to be found in Appendix I, where the reference numbers assigned to them are my own.⁹

A larger collection of correspondence that was brought to light in India was that between Woodroffe and Lama Kazi Dawasamdub, who edited volume 7 of Avalon’s *Tantrik Texts*. This was also kindly donated by the Lama’s son Mr T.T. Samdup. As I deal in less depth with this correspondence, I have not reproduced any of it in the appendix. The originals are also now with the India Office collection in London.¹⁰

Public Archives

Among the records of the former India Office Library, information on Sir John Woodroffe’s official career was to be found in the papers of the Judicial and Public Department, now in the British Library in London, and in the Home Department Judicial Proceedings, in the National Archives of India. Private papers of individuals contemporary with him in India yielded occasional references to him, but were mostly useful for providing background. Reconstruction of his judicial career is drawn from the *Calcutta Weekly Notes* published by the High Court, augmented by the India Office files, and reports on Indian newspapers.

Secondary Sources

Anecdotes about Woodroffe appeared in several memoirs and biographies. Those of Ordhendu Coomar Ganguly, art historian and member of the Indian Society of Oriental Art, have provided information for chapters 4 and 6.¹¹ A Bengali biography of the tantric guru Sivacandra Vidyarnava by his disciple Vasanta Kumar Pal provides significant information on Woodroffe intermixed with legend. This source is examined in depth in chapter 6.¹² In the many biographies and memoirs concerning the Tagores, Woodroffe is one of the background figures in a world of charismatic personalities. But among these are significant references to the tantric leanings of Woodroffe and some of his European friends. These sources are also discussed in chapter 6.

Because the nature of this study has been inter-disciplinary, some chapters owe much, especially in theoretical matters, to the work of others who have opened up particular fields. For the historical background to the period when Woodroffe was a judge in Calcutta, Sumit Sarkar's history of the 'swadeshi' years is invaluable.¹³ My chapter 4 owes much to the work of Partha Mitter and Tapati Guha-Thakurta on the relationship between orientalism and nationalism in the aesthetic appreciation of Indian art.¹⁴ Chapter 9, on Tantra, draws much upon André Padoux's book on the doctrine of the Word,¹⁵ and on Alexis Sanderson's articles which reconstruct the historical development of the saivite and śākta tantric sects and their literature.¹⁶ For the mystical and theological world of Kashmir Śaivism and Śāktism I am especially indebted to the work of Debabrata Sen Sarma,¹⁷ and Gavin Flood.¹⁸

Periodicals

Reviews of Woodroffe's writings appeared in many contemporary papers and journals, and a large collection of extracts was reprinted in his books, especially in the third edition of *Shakti and Shākta* [SS(3) ps. iii–xxvi]. Woodroffe is mentioned from time to time in British and Indian-owned English language newspapers in Calcutta. The Calcutta journal *Modern Review* provided a vivid week-by-week entry into the political, social and cultural world of Calcutta from 1907 when the journal started, while *The Theosophist* provided a picture of the period through the views and opinions of the Theosophical Society, with whom Woodroffe had significant connections, even though he was not a member. *Bhārat Varṣa* and *Bāsumati*, two illustrated Bengali literary journals, had editors who were linked to Sivacandra Vidyarnava, and contained significant articles and obituaries of Woodroffe.

Part One

SIR JOHN WOODROFFE
1865–1936

A biographical study

GLIMPSES OF A LIFE

Camera and pen

Sir John Woodroffe does not tell us much about himself. He left no (or at least no surviving) diaries, and his letters reveal few intimacies. His writings for the most part avoid self-reference. But we do have portraits of him in his many-faceted life – in both the literal and figurative sense: photographs, as well as pen-portraits showing how he was seen through the eyes of others, and actions revealing how he presented himself to the gaze of those others. There is the orientalist scholar lecturing on Tantra to an eminent audience; and the pseudonymous ‘Arthur Avalon’ proclaiming his identification with things Indian by his dress at a party (chapter 8); the popular figure at the High Court (chapter 3); the cultured scholar and art connoisseur (chapter 4); the defender of Hindu culture against its detractors (chapter 5); and the various pictures of Woodroffe as a Tantric – slightly eccentric in the eyes of some, the devoted disciple of the guru to others (chapter 6). In most of his photographs in the literal sense he appears enigmatic and unhappy, never looking at the camera but with eyes either down on the ground or gazing at something unseen in the distance. It is the face of a very sensitive, seemingly deeply introverted person [plate 1].

A family photograph of him as a young man shows him in riding clothes, standing in the entrance of what for a time was his parents’ home in England [plate 2]. The house was called Frensham Heights, near Farnham in Surrey, and the site is now a school. Though the original building the Woodroffes lived in has been demolished, the magnificent view from the top of the Heights can still be enjoyed today, and gives a glimpse of the wealth and privilege of the family who once owned the site. Writing on the back of the photograph states that this is “Jack”, taken by his younger brother Alban.

Jack was the eldest of a family of four sons and three daughters. He was born in Calcutta on 15 December 1865 and baptised in St Peter’s Anglican Church there in January 1866.¹ His father, James Tisdall Woodroffe, was a barrister of the High Court who became extremely successful in his profession. At the beginning of the twentieth century he was Advocate

General of Bengal, and a member of the Viceroy's Council, until he resigned from it after a quarrel with Lord Curzon.² The elder Woodroffe was one of the great figures at the Calcutta bar and amassed great wealth.³ The *Calcutta Weekly Notes* often refers to the high fees which barristers could command, something which made litigation a very expensive affair for the public.⁴

The Woodroffes were a family of Irish Protestant clergy and James Tisdall seems to have been the only member of the immediate family to work in India,⁵ but his wife, Florence Hume, came from a family who had lived there for several generations. She was born in India, the youngest child of James Hume, a cousin of Alan Octavian Hume who was among the founding members of the Indian National Congress, and one of a small group of British people who supported it in its early phase.⁶ James Hume was Presidency Magistrate of Calcutta. Someone of the same name founded the only Calcutta club in the 1850s which was open to both English and Indian members,⁷ and this might have been Florence's father. There was also a James Hume who was editor of the *Star* newspaper, but it is not clear if all three were the same person.

Alan Octavian Hume, like his cousin's grandson, not only supported Indians politically but was also drawn to Theosophy and Hinduism,⁸ but both John Woodroffe's parents converted to Roman Catholicism when he was still a child. His mother was probably the Mrs Woodroffe who visited Cardinal Newman in 1873 in the company of Lady Herbert of Lea,⁹ for her husband was soon afterwards giving generous donations to Catholic projects in Bengal. James Tisdall's conversion was said to have taken place in 1875,¹⁰ and led to a passionately-held devotion to his new faith.¹¹ John and his next brother Francis were sent to Woburn Park, an attractively unconventional Catholic public school which opened in 1878. Its headmaster, Monsignor Lord Petre, had views on education which strongly emphasized the autonomy and freedom of the child. As we shall see in the next chapter, John Woodroffe may have felt himself particularly fortunate in being able to stay there throughout most of its seven brief years of existence. Afterwards he attended University College Oxford from 1884–8, where he was one of the first undergraduates to study for the Bachelor's Degree in Law. Training for a profession at Oxford was an innovation at the time, when the prevailing ideal of a 'liberal education' was opposed to specialisation.¹² Although Catholics had been admitted to the university since the 1850s, in the 1880s they were still discouraged by their Church from going there. Woodroffe's progressive headmaster, however, held different views.¹³ The great Max Muller was a prominent personality at Oxford in the 1880s – although retired from his Chair in Comparative Philology – and he entertained people from all over the world, especially from India.¹⁴ Woodroffe would also have been present at Oxford when the university honoured the ninety year old Brian Houghton

Hodgson (see below, chapter 7).¹⁵ But if Woodroffe was ever inspired by such famous figures of nineteenth century orientalism, there is nothing in his writings to suggest it: on the contrary he consciously ploughed a different furrow.

A more pertinent influence – although Woodroffe hardly ever expressly mentions them – would have been the British school of Idealist, or Neo-Hegelian philosophers. T.H. Green had just died when Woodroffe became an undergraduate but his influence was still paramount at Oxford in the 1880s. Overthrowing the dominance of Utilitarianism and Scientific Materialism, the Idealists posited the notion of the Absolute or what was termed ‘the supra-relational unity of all reality’ – which they distinguished from our normal partial apprehension of truth. ‘There is no truth but the Whole’, they declared. Similarities to Hindu Vedanta attracted many Indians to this school.¹⁶ Woodroffe believed in the primacy of what he called ‘the Full or Whole Experience’ [WAP:16]¹⁷ as distinct from the partial and varied experiences of the world of ordinary perception. But he did not equate any of the Hindu systems with Idealism: on the contrary he emphasized their ‘realism’.¹⁸ The significance of Idealism perhaps lies not so much in its direct influence as in its atmosphere. Woodroffe’s profound interest in metaphysical problems and their solutions is clearly manifest in his attraction both to Vedanta and Tantrism. Such metaphysical concern is not fashionable in modern Western culture (unless through the direct influence of non-Western gurus or teachers), and can even appear exotic. In the period between the late nineteenth century and the First World War, however, when the school of Idealism was dominant in Britain and Europe, metaphysical discourse in ‘West’ and ‘East’ would have seemed closer than it does today.¹⁹

Taking his BCL in 1888, John Woodroffe was called to the Bar at the Middle Temple in 1889, and joined his father at the Calcutta Bar the following year. He quickly established himself as an expert on Indian Law, his first two publications being his lectures as Tagore Law Professor of Calcutta University in 1897.²⁰ He was promoted to the judiciary at the comparatively young age of thirty-nine in 1904. Whether or not the influence of his famous father played any part in this, the younger Woodroffe had produced another important book on Indian Law by this time in collaboration with a senior Indian judge, Sir Sayeed Ameer Ali. *The Law of Evidence* was regarded as an authoritative textbook and remained in print for a very long time.²¹

James Tisdall Woodroffe seems to have been a dominating personality, which helped to make him one of the famous figures at the Bar in his day, but it seems also to have made him a formidably authoritarian father. He banished his third son, Alban, both from the family and from the country for an incident involving a relationship with a girl while at his cadet school. His nephew James recounted Alban’s story of what happened when as a

young man he was summoned into the presence of his father, who had a map of the world spread out on a table in front of him. Alban was ordered to select a country from the map, and then was given some money for his passage and sent away. He chose Argentina without knowing anything about it – he had just been drawn to its warm orange colour. Alban eventually did rather well in Argentina and was later on reconciled with his father and even inherited his father's estate instead of his elder brothers. But his nephew James described this uncle as an extremely unpleasant authoritarian character.

James Tisdall made arrangements in his Will for his second son, Francis, to lose his inheritance if he should enter a marriage that was not approved by the Catholic Church. Francis Woodroffe never married, and his Will reveals that he had a long friendship with a woman who was not a Catholic. His nephew described him as a failed actor and a rather restless and unsuccessful person.

James Tisdall Woodroffe's eldest son John seems to have retained his trust, for he was executor of his father's Will, and the father and son lived together at the Bengal Club and in various lodgings until 1900, though they did not share Chambers.²² This son, at least, did not appear cowed by his awesome father, for there is an amusing account of how the two Woodroffes once appeared on opposite sides of the same case and how the younger demolished the elder in court. O.C. Ganguly, at the time a young solicitor's clerk, describes a courtroom crowded with those eager to watch the battle between 'bara' and 'chhoto' Woodroffe. The younger man roundly accused his father of using dishonest arguments, and for some time afterwards the Bar lounge resounded to James Tisdall's outraged protest: 'John calls me dishonest!' His friends are reported as replying: 'He has found you out at last!'²³ This is strong evidence of John's independent spirit.

Despite his ability to hold his own with his father, it is nevertheless extremely unlikely that John Woodroffe could have gone so far as to openly display an interest in Tantra before James Tisdall's retirement from India in 1904, without losing his father's favour and his inheritance. He may well have been secretly drawn to it, however, much earlier. In 1894 his mother died at the age of only forty-eight. There is a cryptic reference by Woodroffe to 'a man I know who had lost his mother,' who was told by Vama Khappa – a Bengali Tantric saint of the last century – to seek out the Mother of the Universe.²⁴ It is highly probable that Woodroffe, though he normally avoided personal references, was here writing about himself. His attraction towards 'the Mother' as divinity in Her own right is prominent in his books.

It may have been soon after his father's retirement, when the younger Woodroffe had just become a judge, that another tantric saint, Sivacandra Vidyarnava, initiated him into tantric rituals. The main source for this story

is the Bengali biography of the saint discussed in chapter 6. No dates are given to the events in the account, but if Woodroffe met the guru soon after becoming a judge in 1904, this would fit in with reports of him practising tantric yoga with his friend the art historian E.B. Havell, who left India in 1906. In 1907, Woodroffe was one of several High Court judges who were among the founder members of the Indian Society of Oriental Art, in which he soon took a leading role. He was a close friend of Abanindranath and Gaganendranath Tagore, the artist nephews of Rabindranath. He may have started studying Sanskrit around this time, or a little later in 1911. 1912 might have been the year of a controversial photograph taken at Konarak temple where Woodroffe, Ghose and a European friend wore Indian dress [plate 6]. As we have seen, the first books of Arthur Avalon were published the following year, in 1913. Woodroffe was knighted in 1915. He retired from the High Court in 1922 and the following year returned to University College Oxford to lecture in Indian Law.²⁵ He finally retired to the south of France in 1930 and died at Beausoleil, a suburb of Monte Carlo, in January 1936.

In 1902 John Woodroffe was married at the age of thirty-seven, to Ellen Elizabeth Grimson, then aged twenty-five.²⁶ She was a concert pianist and belonged to an extremely talented family. Her father Samuel Grimson, a violinist, seems to have been very keen to promote the musical education of his large family, especially the girls. Three of Ellen's sisters pursued successful careers on the concert platform, having been trained by their father from an early age.²⁷ James Woodroffe told me his parents met when his father attended one of his mother's concerts and thereafter they shared a love of music as well as an attraction towards Indian philosophy.

PORTRAITS

Sir Torick Ameer Ali

A lively picture of Woodroffe can be found in the memoirs of the son of Sir Sayeed Ameer Ali, Woodroffe's elder colleague and his first collaborator who was co-author of his legal textbooks (see above). The elder Ameer Ali was an Indian Muslim nationalist who has in modern times been claimed as an early progenitor of Pakistan,²⁸ and would not seem at first sight a very likely friend of someone like Woodroffe. But that their friendship was real is attested by the son in his memoirs, who portrays Woodroffe as a loveable eccentric. This is how he saw him in 1917:

In appearance small and sallow, he had never in his life played an outdoor game, but on the other hand he never missed a race meeting. In repose he wore the mask of a disillusioned gargoyle: when amused

that of a delighted goblin. His two passions in life were classical music, played for him by his wife, an accomplished pianist, and the more abstruse forms of Tantric philosophy. He was at the time engaged on his great work 'Shakti and Shākta'. Due to his pre-eminence as a pandit, Woodroffe J. was yearly elected to be president of the All India Cow Conference, an office which he held with outward decorum and some inward amusement. All these sinister tendencies, together with his rooted objection to wearing night-clothes profoundly disturbed my more conventional father, but fortunately for me had not impaired the friendship between the two.²⁹

The elder Ameer Ali achieved high positions in British India, from which he had retired to England in 1904. He was a member of the Viceroy's Legislative Council, but according to one account he was not fully accepted socially by either the British or the Muslim communities in India, largely because he had an English wife. The Arabic scholar E. Denison Ross worried that Ameer Ali 'would not receive the send-off he would have liked' on his retirement.³⁰ Woodroffe's warm friendship with this man whose personal interests were so distant from his own, attests to the width of his friendships with Indian people, something which is obvious from the wide popularity Woodroffe acquired. By contrast, Denison Ross himself expresses the stereotypical British aloofness: social contact with Indians was rare, and personal friendships seemed to him impossible.³¹

Sir Torick Ameer Ali's account continues: 'It was Woodroffe J's habit after court hours to meditate, bare-headed and semi-clothed in an attitude of yoga on the house roof.' This piece of information leads up to an amusing story: once when he was thus meditating a Calcutta kite had swooped upon his balding head, mistaking it for something shiny, and caused temporary concussion. 'The greatest of Greek dramatists, he told me, suffered the same or an even worse experience.' Woodroffe could tell a joke at his own expense.

The house, we are informed, was in Camac Street. This is situated in the heart of the city close to its two major thoroughfares, Park Street and Chowringhi. It was a select neighbourhood inhabited by high officials of the 'Raj'. Woodroffe had taken the house over from another High Court judge. Thacker's Directory informs us that it was number 4. Government offices now occupy the large site. Perhaps the compound was sufficiently large to conceal the rooftop meditator from the street, but we can guess that Woodroffe would not worry at thus disturbing British-India's sensibilities.³²

Although he was related to Alan Octavian Hume, Sir Torick Ameer Ali commented that Woodroffe himself took no interest in politics, and made fun of the title 'trustee for the Dumb Millions', once bestowed upon

Hume – ‘such cant phrases he abhorred’.³³ The remark suggests that Woodroffe did not identify with his distinguished relative despite some similarities in their sympathies and interests.

We see straightaway that it was a salient aspect of Sir Torick’s image of his host that he should be involved in ‘abstruse Tantric philosophy’ and engaged on ‘his great work Shakti and Shākta’. One interesting piece of information that follows the passage quoted, is that this guest perceived a contradiction between his host being ‘a fine scholar in a dead language’ and his apparently poor linguistic ability in a modern Indian one.³⁴ Woodroffe’s scholarly and philosophical interests are seen as one with his championship of cow protection and his meditation practice, and are all assigned by his guest to the image of lovable eccentricity he casts him in. Woodroffe’s joke at his own expense perhaps shows that he accepted and acted up to this image. Sir Torick reassures us that Woodroffe’s more abstruse interests ‘did not exclude a lively interest in ordinary human affairs’ nor ‘a warm appreciation of a pretty woman’. Like others did, he comments admiringly on the Woodroffes’ home, describing his brief stay there as ‘a week of gracious living’.³⁵

James Woodroffe

A powerful and very sad contrast with this lively and loving picture of Woodroffe is given in the memories of his son James, who was mostly describing a slightly later period, when his parents had returned to England. James was the only living person who was able to give me direct information about his father, but unfortunately he did not like talking about his family, and no-one could penetrate far behind the veil he drew over his childhood. Several years before I began my own research James was interviewed by Dr Louisa Finn for a short article.³⁶ When I first contacted him he immediately stated his dislike of ‘interrogation’ and was much on his guard. This might have been because he wanted to cover up a loss of memory, but he displayed what seemed like a carefully constructed pose of indifference at the mention of any member of his family.

It was evident, however, that the Woodroffes were a most unhappy family, at least in the latter part of their parents’ lives when they were living in England and France. James was not close to his father and seemed to have had little communication with him, and the father seemed to have passed on nothing at all of his knowledge and interests to his son. James’s picture of him was of someone extremely withdrawn and depressed, disillusioned with his life and enjoying no sense of achievement. He recalled long walks which the father and son would sometimes take together during which neither of them spoke a single word.

James had only faint memories of the time he lived with his parents in Calcutta as a child during the First World War, when it is significant that he

thought his parents had few European friends, but many Indian ones. He remembered the Ghoses, and holidays which the two families took together at Ranchi, then a forest area in Bihar. James absolutely refused to countenance the idea that his father was a Hindu (let alone a Tantric of which he seemed not to have heard). When I ventured one day to ask him about reports that his father had an image of the Goddess in his Oxford home, to which he performed rituals, he replied curtly: 'Who's been spreading rumours like that?' James managed to convince Louisa Finn that his father wrote only as an objective scholar, and was not 'a secret adept'.³⁷ James himself was a practising Catholic. He said his father rarely went to Mass, but the children were all brought up as Catholics, and this could not be due entirely to the influence of their grandfather James Tisdall, who died in 1908 when the girls were small and James was not yet born. The girls boarded at a convent school in England, and James eventually went to the Benedictine school at Downside Abbey. Only James was with his parents in India, and even he only for a few years.

James' picture of his father's extreme reserve was shared by Lady Sonya Wilson, daughter of Woodroffe's friend E.B. Havell. Having known each other in India, the Havells and Woodroffes lived near each other in Oxford for a time. Lady Wilson knew Sir John when she was a child of six and remembers him as 'an extremely cold man' who never spoke to her. Woodroffe's obituary in *The Times* of London alluded to his reserve, which was politely put down to 'the shyness of the absorbed scholar' which made him 'slow to reveal his mind to a casual acquaintance'. However 'he could talk much and well when in congenial company'.³⁸

These last descriptions are in contrast to Woodroffe as we shall meet him in the following chapters, as the extremely energetic organiser who had extensive and very warm contacts with people in many areas of Indian life beyond his favourite fields of art and tantric studies. The change is perhaps evidence of greater personal unhappiness after his retirement, when it seems the shadows gathered quickly around him in the form of increased family tensions and his own and family illnesses. He looks unhappy in the photograph in Plate 1 which, James informed me, was taken soon after his return to England. Another photograph, taken in the garden at Oxford a few years later, James introduced by saying: 'This is my father in one of his silent moods'. His posture seems to express deep dejection [plate 3]. The two heaviest of all the burdens would have been the death of his daughter Barbara, and his own Parkinson's Disease from which he eventually died at the age of seventy-one.

The Woodroffes' Marriage: Ellen Woodroffe [plate 4]

James' memories of his mother were stronger than those of his father, though not more favourable. Ellen Grimson had never been to India before