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EIGHT

Another Passage to India

Sarah's story

London, 1801. It is barely twenty years since the hanging of Major John André, but the men sitting listening in this quiet backstreet room inhabit a world that is already utterly changed from his, and they know it. The speaker before them is as hardened a military and imperial actor as André was himself, but in more than just the obvious respect is otherwise a very different human being. We are in another country, and besides, this wench is determined to stay alive. Her name is Sarah Shade, and the story she tells is of India. Life has taught her how to read, and how to speak several languages, but not how to write, so her tale has to be reconstructed solely from memory. Accordingly, she stumbles over dates and the precise ordering of events; but she cannot afford to falter or give up. This is a year of high food prices and unemployment in Britain, as well as global war, so it is vital that she secures the attention and aid of these cautious, charitable gentlemen. All too familiar with tales of misery from the labouring poor, and wary of fraudsters seeking to extract money, the directors of the benevolent foundation are fortunately able to recognise gold when they hear it. Sarah's experiences are teased out from her at length, polished and amended as seems fit, and then published as a pamphlet in the hope that it will sell well enough to provide for her and her latest husband. This is the genesis of the first, reasonably authentic account by an English working-class woman of what it was like to attempt conquest in India and to be captured there.[1]

This is not the kind of text, or the sort of individual, with which conventional imperial histories – or even post-colonial histories – normally concern themselves. Looked at superficially, Shade seems indeed a purely idiosyncratic figure, inevitably marginalised in the broader scheme of things by virtue of her gender as well as her poverty. A worker for British imperial power in India, and therefore not even a conventional victim, she none the less possessed in her own right no power, no glamour, and no capacity for heroic endeavour; and may even have been unaware of

the wider significance of the events in which she was caught up. The word 'empire' does not figure at all in the *Narrative of the Life of Sarah Shade*. Yet, for all this, Shade and her story are representative and repay close attention.

She herself was representative in that most Britons who worked in India from the 1740s to the winning of Independence in 1947, were in some respects exactly like her: lower-class and attached to the army. And – for all the peculiarities of its transmission – the tale she told derived from and draws attention to a major shift in British national mood and imperial direction at this time. Shade was not the first plebeian Englishwoman to testify in print to Indian adventures. The credit for that belongs to a Hannah Snell, whose ghost-written memoir *The Female Soldier* was a runaway publishing success in 1750. As her publisher told it, Snell had adopted male costume after being deserted by her husband. She joined the British army as a marine, and by 1748 was in an East India Company fort on India's southern (Coromandel) coast, subsequently taking part in a British assault on the French stronghold of Pondicherry. Wounded in the groin – where else? – Snell was none the less able to keep her identity secret until the regiment's return to England allowed her to dictate her tale at leisure. At the time, it seems to have been widely believed. Chelsea Hospital even awarded her an out-pension as a wounded veteran of imperial warfare. Yet it remains doubtful whether Snell's published Indian adventure contains more than a kernel of accuracy.[2] Certainly, reading it side by side with the *Narrative of the Life of Sarah Shade* is to experience an immediate sense both of disparity and of rapid change over time. It is not just that Hannah Snell's tale is probably bogus in the main, while the details of Sarah Shade's Indian life can be substantially verified in the archives.[3] These two accounts of semi-literate, impoverished women were also separated by a period of fifty years during which the pattern of global empire and of Britain's relations with India underwent a revolution.

In *The Female Soldier*, the Indian subcontinent, and the small European forces contending in the 1740s for a place on its southern shores, are little more than an exotic backdrop to a traditional tale of a bold, lower-class female driven into adventure and transvestism by lost love. Composed half a century later, Shade's narrative is utterly different. Her text is saturated with allusions to more than twenty years' exposure to southern India and Bengal. There are references to Indian cuisine, wild-life, scenery, shipping, languages, and Anglo-Indian sexual relations; and there are Indian place-names galore that Shade seems to have pronounced with facility to her cold, London auditors, and they have sometimes mistranscribed. Back in 1750, Hannah Snell's publishers had relied on episodes of cross-dressing and female transgression to sell her story. But for the men writing down

43. Hannah Snell as imperial warrior.

Sarah Shade's tale in 1801, it was its information on India that mattered, and understandably so. Now that the richest and oldest sector of Britain's empire in North America had broken away, political and public attention was shifting ever more markedly towards the Indian subcontinent. In the words of William Pitt the Younger, prime minister at the time that Shade's adventures were published: India's importance for the British 'had increased in proportion to the losses sustained by the dismemberment of other great possessions'.[4]

Sarah Shade and the story she related, then, emerged from and appealed to a sharper British awareness of India and appetite for it. Shade also typified the quality of British imperialism at this stage in a more intimate fashion. Not just her published story, but even her own body was a text of empire. While in India, she had been wounded twice in the face. A musket ball had passed through the calf of her right leg; and a sabre had slashed her right arm: 'the marks of which wounds are visible upon her'. Nor was this all. Shade had been scarred as well by powerful claws. She bore the marks of the tiger. She was thus, in her own riven and spoilt flesh, a fit representative of an extraordinarily violent phase of British overseas activity, both in India, and in every continent of the world. The geographical scope of warfare, and the rate at which Britain gained and lost territory in the course of it, had been increasing since the 1750s. From the 1780s, though, the global span of violence became even more pronounced, the stakes became higher, and the possible penalties for losing much greater. In the American Revolution, Spain, the Dutch, and above all France, had intervened to strip Britain of its Thirteen Colonies, and of other territory in the Caribbean, the Mediterranean, and Africa. By the time Sarah Shade dictated her story, at the start of the nineteenth century, Britain and France were caught up in a still bigger conflict that started formally in 1793 and lasted with scarcely a break until 1815. For much of this time, the British were at risk not merely of losing the war, but also of being invaded by Napoleon Bonaparte's numerically superior armies, and deprived of some or all of their overseas territories, a point often forgotten in conventional accounts of the relentless 'rise' of British empire. Britain, judged an experienced army officer in 1810, was 'menaced with destruction by a much superior force', and its 'empire of the seas' was unlikely to last for very much longer. Even now, the British had no way of knowing that unmatched global dominion would briefly be theirs.[5]

British aggression and expansion in India were bound up with the escalation in global warfare after the 1750s, but they also partook of this period's extreme uncertainty, anxiety and conspicuous vicissitudes. At the time, the 'swing to the east', as this shift towards India is often styled, seemed a far

more close run and nervous thing than it came to appear in comfortable retrospect. How could it have been otherwise, given the besetting British dilemma: an excess of overseas ambition married to a serious deficiency of domestic size? In the context of India's geographical scale and its vast, indigenous population, Britain's smallness appeared particularly painful and exposed. The challenge for the latter, as always, was to find or manufacture ways around this: and doing so was difficult and fraught with risk. Sarah's mutilated body, like her narrative, evokes the high levels of violence and fear that swept over large parts of the subcontinent and its peoples at this time, and that also sometimes daunted and engulfed the British themselves.

Accompanying this woman on her strange but not atypical passage to and through India is, then, a way of exploring the quality of early British imperial activism in a place that always seemed too large, too crammed with life. It is a means, too, of establishing the essential background to British captivity panics in the subcontinent. Sarah's is a tale of the sea and of the East India Company, and of the constraints and collusions imposed by woefully limited British numbers. It is a tale of aggression and desperate improvisations, and – in the end – a tale of tigers.

Limits

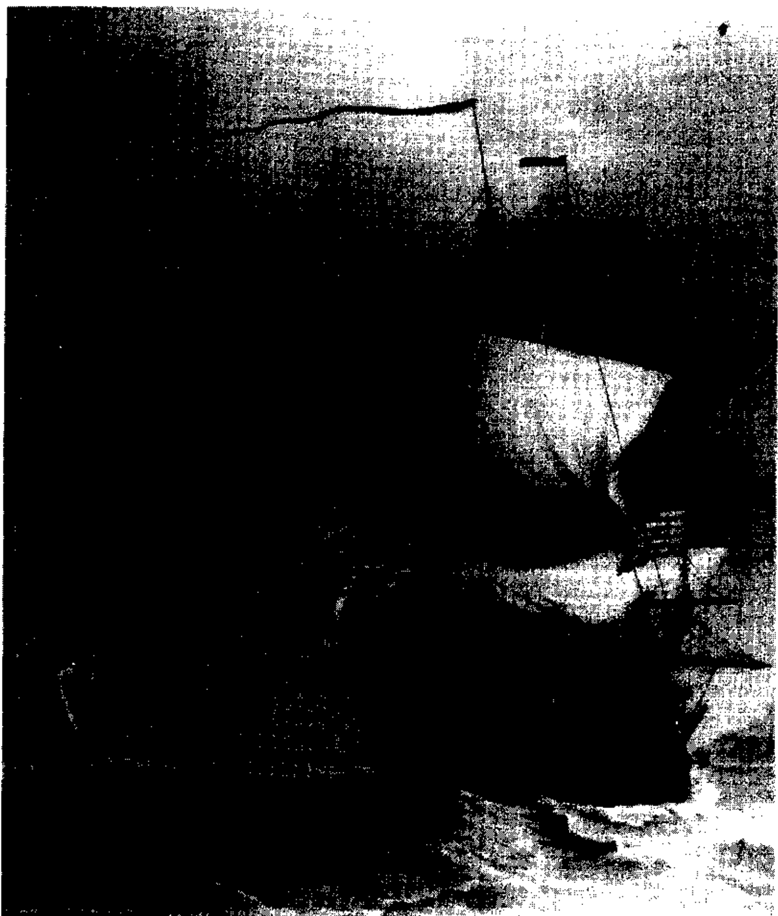
As many of her compatriots would do, Sarah embarked for India because of very limited options at home and in the hope of making her fortune or at least making out. Born to an artisan family in Herefordshire in 1746, and christened Sarah Wall, she was orphaned in her early teens. By her own account, she then 'led the life of a slave' as an agricultural servant, before escaping to work in a button-manufacturer's in Birmingham. It was there that her stepfather, John Bolton, who may also have been her lover, caught up with her and made his proposal. 'Having lost her parents', he told her, 'and being, in short, very comely withal, she would do well to proceed [with him] to India'. And so they did.

It was on 20 January 1769 that they set sail for Madras on the three-decker East Indiaman, the *New Devonshire*. Its log-book, immaculately kept by Captain Matthew Hoare, confirms their embarkation at London, and shows that Sarah masqueraded for the trip as John Bolton's wife.[6] East India Company ships' logs of this sort are rich, still under-used sources that convey very powerfully the range, industry and audacity of 'the grandest society of merchants in the universe'. They document the intricacy of these ships' loading, the co-ordination, book-keeping and

organisation required to stock a massive vessel like the *New Devonshire*, over several weeks and from different London dockyards, with the cargo, cannon, gunpowder, army and navy recruits, livestock and provisions needed for a protracted voyage in often dangerous waters. They demonstrate, too, the level of skill and hardship that was involved in navigating these heavily loaded, complex vessels from Britain to India and then on to China, a trip that in the 1760s still lasted close to a year, and for which an ordinary seaman got paid just £22.[7]

British marine artists loved painting East Indiamen. Obvious emblems of national reach and riches, they are represented in literally hundreds of canvases, sailing low in the water as they bring their precious commodities home, or setting out in convoy to keep privateers at bay, their red and white striped Company flags (which must surely have influenced the design of the Stars and Stripes), snapping and fluttering as the huge, drenched sails catch the breeze. Yet, looked at from another angle, these images convey not simply Britain's maritime and commercial reach, but also the quality and the limits of its power. The British delighted in pictures of the sea because – for two centuries or so – their merchant and naval vessels predominated there. Like the Dutch, however, they also relished marine art, because the sea afforded them a global ubiquity that compensated, but never entirely made up for, the restrictions inherent in their own constricted geography and demographic size. By means of the sea and ships, these puny people could and did go everywhere. Ships cannot operate on dry land, however; so after landfall things for the British were always very different, and usually far more difficult. This was emphatically the case as far as the East India Company was concerned.

The Company had been founded by a charter from Elizabeth I in 1600 and granted a monopoly on English trade with Asia. At this stage, neither the Crown, nor the Company's governor and twenty-four London-based directors, were in a position seriously to envisage an eastern empire. They aimed rather at making the English effective bit-players in one of the richest, most advanced, and most competitive manufacturing and commercial sectors in the world. The eight or so ships that the Company sent out every year during the first century of its existence concentrated initially on aromatic spices from the Indonesian archipelago, the cloves, nutmeg, pepper, cinnamon bark and cardamon that made unrefrigerated food and unwashed bodies more tolerable. But, by the second half of the seventeenth century, the Company had begun its work of transforming English lifestyles and consumer habits, importing an expanding range of fine Indian textiles, as well as coffee from Mokha in Yemen, and tea and porcelain from China. As far as the Indian subcontinent was concerned, the



44. English East Indiaman, by Paul Monamy, *c.* 1720.

Company came to operate out of three main coastal bases. The oldest and most southerly was Madras (now Chennai), established in 1639 and with an Indian population by 1700 of some 100,000 souls. On the western coastline was Bombay, acquired in 1661 along with Tangier as part of Catherine of Braganza's dowry. And to the north-east was Calcutta, founded in 1690 to take advantage of Bengal's expert weavers and trade along the Ganges and Jumna rivers. By way of this magic triangle – Madras, Bombay and Calcutta – the East India Company gradually

became Britain's single biggest commercial enterprise, and secured a greater share of India's export business than the rival Dutch, Danish, Portuguese and French trading companies.[8]

But it continued for a long time to view its role and rationale mainly in private and commercial terms. Again, this is a point that can be made effectively through contemporary art. In 1731, the Company's directors commissioned George Lambert and Samuel Scott to paint six canvases for the walls of its newly-rebuilt headquarters in Leadenhall Street, London. The resulting works convey very well the Company's restricted image of itself at this time, and the limitations too of its vision of India. Two of the six Company bases chosen for commemoration were actually situated outside the subcontinent, on the Cape of South Africa (then under Dutch control), and at St Helena in the south Atlantic. As this suggests, at this stage, the Company saw itself as an intercontinental trader, rather than as having a unique commitment to India. Even the four Indian locations selected – Bombay, Madras, Calcutta, and Tellicherry on the Malabar coast – were represented from the perspective of the sea, from without. To be sure, Scott and Lambert were careful to foreground the incontestable sources of the Company's reach and power. Here, in their canvases, are the great masted East Indiamen, cannons booming, pennants flying, lying at anchor before the walls of Fort St George, Madras, and the Company's warehouse in Bombay. But these are still emphatically marine and coastal views. The Indian interior does not feature in them, and neither does the Indian population: for, even by the early decades of the eighteenth century, the East India Company possessed in regard to these minimal power and only intermittent interest.[9]

By the time of Sarah's passage to India in 1769, however, circumstances had changed: and, however unconsciously, she would participate in and witness still more violent and radical alterations. Behind all the changes lay the fluctuating fortunes of three different imperial systems. On the one hand, as the eighteenth century progressed, the power and grip of India's own Mughal emperors waned disastrously; on the other, the same Anglo-French competition that was responsible for convulsions and captivities in North America at this time also began impacting on the subcontinent.

After 1744, French and British traders on the Coromandel coast began recruiting small numbers of sepoys (indigenous soldiers), and raising extra levies of men from their respective home states, most of them paid for by the companies themselves, but some of them regular troops. This proved a dress-rehearsal for more extensive Anglo-French warfare in parts of India after 1750, and more ruthless interventions in local struggles and politics. In June 1756, the new young Nawab of Bengal, Siraj-ud-Daulah, seized

45. Bombay, by George Lambert and Samuel Scott.

the East India Company's settlement at Calcutta. The response was immediate and savage. A one-time Company civil servant at Madras turned soldier, Robert Clive, first recaptured Calcutta, and then destroyed Siraj-ud-Daulah at the battle of Plassey in June 1757. Subsequent skirmishes undermined the French and their indigenous allies, and culminated in a major Company victory at Buxar in northern India in 1764. The following year, Clive, by this stage Governor and Commander-in-Chief of the East India Company's forces, received the *diwani*, or land revenue rights, to Bengal, Bihar and Orissa as a (reluctant) grant from the Mughal emperor, Shah Alam II. A trading company once confined to the margins of India and of Mughal regard thus became responsible for some twenty million Indians, and also – and crucially – for the subcontinent's richest province. From now on, the Company had much less need to ship bullion from Britain in order to pay for the textiles, spices and saltpetre it had traditionally sought out in India. Instead, Indian land revenues could now be used to pay for the Company's purchases. Over time, these same revenues also came to pay for ever larger armies of Company soldiers and bureaucrats.[10]

Yet, even after securing the *diwani*, the East India Company's administrative power remained confined to Bengal and adjacent areas of Hyderabad, to the Northern Sarkars, and to its long-established coastal

India after the battle of Buxar in 1764.

settlements at Bombay and Madras, while its British personnel continued to be perilously few.[11] Virtually the whole of Sarah's Indian career was shaped by just one aspect of this sparsity of British numbers. On her voyage out from England in 1769, she found herself 'the only woman on board' sailing with 185 men, most of them Company troops. A one-way passage from Britain to India at this time cost at least £30 (well over a thousand pounds in today's values), and the Company disliked laying out such sums on the wives of soldiers and menials. Moreover, Sarah was no wife. Three weeks into the voyage, 'in a fit of inebriety', her stepfather tried to exploit her rarity value by selling her to one of the soldiers on board. When the ship's captain halted the deal, the two men fought him in their fury and frustration. On Sarah's arrival at Madras, she was immediately taken under the protection and into the bed of a Company lieutenant who refused for a long time to release her to one of his subordinates, Sergeant John Cuff, who won her in the end by marrying her. As soon as Cuff died in southern India in the 1780s, she was immediately snapped up in marriage by an army corporal fighting there. One notes her pitiless descent through the ranks of the army as age, war, and the Indian sun stole away with her good looks.

Yet the sexual feeding-frenzy that Sarah Shade so spectacularly provoked in India had much less to do with whatever personal attractions she may have possessed, than with just one aspect of the crucial deficiency there in British numbers. Neither at this nor at any other time was the subcontinent viewed by the Company or London's politicians as a potential settlement colony. The rate at which British women arrived there increased after 1750, but even by comparison with the very limited numbers of their countrymen, they remained a tiny minority. The official intention was never that substantial numbers of Britons should settle there and reproduce themselves by sexual congress with their own kind. This was just as well since, in the eighteenth century and after, many who made the passage to India did not survive long enough to reproduce themselves at all. Of the 645 white male civilians who worked for the East India Company in Bengal between 1707 and 1775 (just 645!), close to 60 per cent are known to have died there, often in the early years of their appointment. Even at the end of the century, one in four British soldiers stationed in India perished every year.[12] Edmund Burke's famous accusation that India's indigenous inhabitants scarcely knew what it was like to see a grey-haired Briton was thus both partisan polemic and perversely accurate. Only a minority of high-level Company servants were able to do what Burke accused them all of doing: make vast, illicit profits in the subcontinent and return triumphantly to Britain as millionaire nabobs. The majority

of Britons in India at this stage made limited fortunes or nothing at all, and simply did not survive long enough to go home. As a tour around the oldest Anglican church in India, St Mary's at Madras, demonstrates, one of the favoured epitaphs for memorials and gravestones of Britons perishing in India was necessarily: 'Wisdom is the grey hair unto men'. For many of those arriving in the subcontinent from Britain before and even after 1820, this was the only variety of grey hair that they had any chance of acquiring.[13]

Because their numbers in the Indian subcontinent were so modest and subject to severe attrition, the British always understood at some level that they could never satisfactorily and durably capture it, and that on their own they could not even try. India was too far away from their own islands. It was too big and too complex; and above all it was much too populous. India, calculated a Scottish politician and former military man in 1788, contained 'eleven times as many people' as Britain and Ireland put together, and this was probably an underestimate.[14] Even at the start of the eighteenth century, India's population may already have reached 180 million, which meant that then, as now, it contained a fifth of all the inhabitants of the globe. By contrast, the combined population of Britain and Ireland in the 1780s was under thirteen million souls. Of course, there is an obvious respect in which such a comparison between British and Indian population totals misleads. As Benjamin Disraeli remarked, eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Britons were nervously prone to imagining India as one mighty, unmanageable unit, but it was not one unit at all.[15] India at this stage was still a geographical expression, a collocation of states, kingdoms and sects, further subdivided by hundreds of thousands of intensely localist village communities. This in the end proved vital for British success. At their peak, the Mughal emperors had shown a capacity to tax efficiently, maintain stability, and monopolise force, and some of the successor states emerging in their wake proved highly sophisticated and resilient. But the subcontinent as a whole lacked impersonal, unifying state apparatus or national ideology. By contrast, the East India Company was increasingly bound up with a British state that was able to become precociously centralised and increasingly nationalistic in large part because it was also small and compact in territorial extent.

But for all this – for all the commercial success and financial muscle of the East India Company, for all its access through the British state to naval power on a scale that Indian rulers could only dream of, and for all its busy and highly successful exploitation of religious, cultural and political divisions within the subcontinent – the huge disparity in numbers between the British in India on the one hand, and its indigenous population on the other,

meant that the former were of necessity always dependent upon the latter. As Om Prakash and K.N. Chaudhuri have shown, the East India Company – like its European rivals – only established itself to begin with through the aid of Indian bankers and shipping, by leasing land for its initially modest fortifications from Indian rulers, and by working closely with local merchants in the various regional economies, Gujaratis in the western Indian Ocean, Chettiyar and Muslim traders in the south. As late as the 1740s, close to half of the ships servicing the Company's base at Madras were still Indian-owned; and, when Siraj-ud-Daulah moved against Calcutta in 1756, almost all of its white inhabitants were in hock to Indian moneylenders.[16] The shift to military conquest over the next half-century only gave rise to fresh forms of British dependence. The Company increasingly relied on local rulers, agents and landowners to raise men and taxes, and employed a growing array of Indian informants, spies, suppliers, clerks and administrators of all kinds. Most of all, it was obliged to recruit from the same huge labour market of armed peasants that had traditionally served the Mughal emperors. In C.A. Bayly's words, these conquerors would always be 'strictly limited in what they could achieve, for to a great extent the British empire in India remained an empire run and garrisoned by Indians'.[17]

This dependence on those they increasingly strove to rule influenced both how Britons in India experienced captivity, and how the Company and its employees were regarded by their countrymen back home. In the Mediterranean region, and in North America, capture by non-Europeans usually signified, for the British settlers, soldiers, voyagers and traders involved, a sudden, traumatic exposure to alien customs, alien cultures, alien food, alien language and alien dress, and occasionally to cross-racial sex. In India, however, Britons were so thinly distributed and so dependent on the local population, that those who stayed here more than a short time usually had some experience of these things anyway. Indian food, languages and dress, and often Indian sexual partners, were things with which most Britons in the subcontinent before 1820 (especially male Britons) had at least some familiarity. Consequently, captivity here was often less of a cultural shock than in other zones of overseas enterprise, especially when the victims involved were poor whites.

The woman who became Sarah Shade is a case in point. When captured alongside her first husband, Sergeant Cuff, and imprisoned at Bangalore for eleven months by the forces of Haidar Ali, ruler of Mysore, she was able to derive comfort from more than just the companionship of her army spouse. She was aided too by the degree to which by this stage – the early 1780s – she had of necessity become assimilated. One of her Indian guards at Bangalore turned out to be a defector from the East

India Company's Madras army, and he 'interested himself for her on account of [her] speaking his language, and understanding cookery', by which was meant of course southern Indian cookery. This anecdote may seem too good to be true, but I suspect that there was some substance to it. Certainly we know that when Sarah returned to London and was widowed for a second time, in the mid-1790s, she kept herself going for some years by making vegetable curries and other Indian dishes. She would cook these meals to order and at a price for a network of 'different East India families' living in the capital, people, who – like her – had returned to what was nominally their home country, yet found themselves homesick for the vast subcontinent they had left.

This points to another respect in which the meanings of British captivity in India were distinctive. In the eyes of many of their compatriots at home, *all* Britons who spent substantial time in India were at risk of becoming captive there in a fundamental, if not in a literal sense. Since Britons in India were so sparse, and dependent on the local population in so many ways, fears were regularly expressed back home – particularly at this early stage – that they would be taken over by their Indian surroundings, become entrapped by indigenous habits and values, cease to be authentically British, and go native.

As suggested by the enthusiasm for Sarah's curries among white veterans of the East India Company back in London in the 1790s, these anxieties were not entirely misplaced. But those who gave voice to them, believed that Britons in India were at risk of being suborned in far more serious ways than through their palates and taste buds. They accused the nabobs (and it is suggestive of course that this corruption of *nawab*, meaning a Muslim ruler, was applied to wealthy Britons returning from India) of succumbing to – and exacerbating – endemic Indian corruption and despotism, and of bringing these evils back home. 'They find themselves exotics, and that they have all along been considered as such,' complained one retired East India Company official of the reaction he and his kind encountered back in Britain:

> The honest, free-hearted Indian [and note the use of this term by a British Company servant about himself!] is ever considered as worse than a heathen and despising all religions – in short one of those miscreant delinquents, the produce of whose rapine and violence has poisoned and extirpated every genuine virtue of their native country.[18]

This was in 1797. In earlier decades, expressions of hostility within Britain to the East India Company's white employees, both civil and

military, were still more pronounced and pervasive. This helps to explain why the published captivity narrative took so long to emerge as far as India was concerned. Before the 1740s, Britons there had rarely seemed dangerous or profitable enough for it to be worth indigenous regimes' bothering to capture them. But, even after this – when captivity for the British did become far more of a risk – printed captivity narratives from this zone of imperial enterprise remained for some time rare.[19] In part, I am sure, this was because, to those on the home front, Britons in India still seemed a long way away, the agents of a greedy, grasping Company rather than of the nation at large, alien in terms of their reputed behaviour, and altogether unworthy of much sympathy. If Britons in India sometimes suffered, Britons at home had no great desire – and would not have until the late 1780s – to read about or identify with their sufferings.

The seeming conspicuous exception to this, John Zephaniah Holwell's *A Genuine Narrative of the deaths . . . in the Black Hole* (1758), only serves to make the point more strongly. When Siraj-ud-Daulah seized Calcutta in June 1756, Holwell, a Dubliner by birth and a senior East India Company official, was imprisoned overnight along with, he claimed, 145 others in an eighteen-foot square punishment cell. By the morning, he tells us, all but twenty-three of them had suffocated, died of dehydration, or been trampled to death by fellow captives frantic to reach the only window, their only chance of air. The real body-count was probably closer to fifty people, not all of whom were British. Yet while Holwell clearly exaggerated what had happened so as to demonise Siraj-ud-Daulah, and revenge the damage done to his career and the death of several of his friends, this in itself was scarcely surprising. Much more striking was the limited impact that Holwell's narrative of the 'Black Hole', and the event itself, had at the time back in Britain. The Victorians would in due course convert 'the Black Hole of Calcutta' into a poignant foundation myth of British India: 'that great crime', as the future Lord Macaulay called it in 1840, 'memorable for its singular atrocity'. Holwell's British contemporaries reacted differently, and in many cases not at all. Extracts from his captivity narrative were, to be sure, reprinted in the English, Scottish and Irish newspaper and periodical press in 1758, but no new edition of it appeared in the English language after that year. Nor do British printmakers or painters seem to have devoted imagination to this episode before the nineteenth century. A monument to the 'victims' was only erected in Calcutta because Holwell commissioned and paid for it himself. It was quickly allowed to crumble into dust, and not replaced until Lord Curzon, Viceroy of India, intervened in the early 1900s.[20]

Some of the reasons why this emotive piece of partly bogus imperial history was neglected for so long have already been touched on. British public sympathy for, and patriotic indentification with the East India Company and its agents were limited at this stage, and remained so for some decades longer. 'I think the East India Company are greatly to blame for provoking the Moors' was how one British officer reacted to Calcutta's fall in 1756. By contrast, Holwell's vilification of Siraj-ud-Daulah was not generally accepted at this time. In 1772, a Parliamentary enquiry was firmly told by one witness that 'he did not believe the nabob had any intention of a massacre when he confined the English in the Black Hole'.[21] Even a careful reading of Holwell's own narrative reveals how removed we are at this point from a careful wrapping of the Company and its works in India in the Union Jack. Few of the Black Hole's victims are presented in heroic terms. Instead, they are described as desperately stripping off and sucking sweat from their clothes, or drinking their own urine until its concentrated acidity revolts them. We learn, too, how – as the night and the heat wore on, and oxygen became used up – those captives who were still living trampled on the dead and dying out of a sheer animal instinct to get to the one window and survive. 'All regards of compassion and affection were lost,' a British writer recalled with disgust in the early nineteenth century, 'no one would recede or give way for the relief of another.' This was not obviously the stuff of stirring imperial adventure, and nor was the immediate background to this episode. When Siraj-ud-Daulah's forces swept into Calcutta in 1756, there were just seventy Company soldiers to oppose them; there were no more than 500 British troops – perhaps less – in the whole of Bengal.[22]

The India in which Sarah arrived in the 1760s, then, was altered more in prospect than in substance. True, European powers had now succeeded, for the first time ever in global history, in disrupting the political order in India, and an armed, mercantile company from Britain was now entrenched in one of its richest regions, Bengal, governing ostensibly as a vassal of the Mughal emperor. But the degree to which the East India Company was able to penetrate the Indian interior at this stage – or that anybody expected it to do so – remained very limited, and so did British domestic interest in and sympathy with such a project. Most of all, and more conspicuously even than in other zones of overseas enterprise, British manpower in India was markedly circumscribed and highly vulnerable. In order to expand their power here, the British would require a quantum leap in military force and available personnel. During the course of Sarah's career in India, they learnt how to acquire it. The price was paid in money, but also in terrible violence, warfare, and captivities.

Almost all of Sarah's life in India, from the late 1760s to the 1790s, was spent in armed camps, or tramping after a succession of uniformed males in one military campaign after another. As the subtitle of her narrative put it: hers was a saga of a woman 'traversing that country in company with THE ARMY [sic], at the sieges of Pondicherry, Vellore, Negapatam', and more. Sustaining this rate of warfare in India required a more dramatic and distinctive augmentation in manpower than the British had ever previously experienced. Back in 1744, a year of war, the East India Company had employed only about 2500 European soldiers in Calcutta, Madras and Bombay combined. By 1765, there were 17,000 Company troops in Bengal alone, and this was just the beginning. In 1778, British army and Company forces in the subcontinent comprised – at least on paper – 67,000 men. When Sarah left India, in the 1790s, the total was in excess of 100,000. By 1815, the Company's armies in India had risen to a quarter of a million.[23]

The connections between this military build-up and the expansion of the Company's territorial reach in India are well known. At one level, sudden, shattering reverses like the loss of Calcutta became much less likely. Enhanced military power made it far easier for the Company to hang on to such territory as it had already secured. At another level, exploitation became easier. The sword proved a powerful argument when extracting land revenues and taxes, or squeezing protection money or treaties out of individual Indian rulers. At another level still, this expanding, turbulent army took the Company much further into the Indian interior than the politicians and directors in London ideally wanted to go. In the half-century after the battle of Plassey in 1757, debates in Parliament, and the reams of correspondence between India House in London and its civilian and military servants in India are full of variations on the theme of 'conquest is by no means our desire', but they got it anyway.[24] Yet escalating military might and violence did not make comprehensive British empire in India a foregone conclusion. In at least four respects, the East India Company's position after 1757 was more vulnerable than the rapidly expanding size of its armies appears to suggest.

To begin with, there were the enduring challenges of the subcontinent's distance from Britain and its population and geographical extent. One indicator of the degree to which Indian history remains 'othered' even today, is the reluctance to apply to it the sort of logic that is customarily employed in analyses of British power in North America. It is a commonplace that the British will to defeat revolution in America was tested by