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Review: Scottish Orientalists And India: The Muir Brothers, Religion, Education And Empire

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Avril A. Powell, Scottish Orientalists and India: The Muir Brothers, Religion, Education and Empire (Woodbridge, Suffolk: Boydell Press, 2010), ISBN 978-1-84383-579-0, 336 pages, \$115.00/£65.00.

This thoughtful and well researched intellectual history of two nineteenth century Indian Civil Service (ICS) officials, the Muir brothers, provides key insights into the formation of their influential attitudes and scholarship about the religions and the education of Indians. Professor Avril Powell demonstrates how John Muir (1810-82) and his brother William (1819-1905) brought with them to India evangelical Christian ideas derived from the earlier Scottish Enlightenment. John mastered Sanskrit in order to delineate the origins of Hinduism, the nature of the Hindu community, and what he considered the appropriate educational institutions for it. William mastered Arabic in order to trace the sources of Islam, the nature of the Muslim community in India, and suitable forms of higher education for elite Indian men and women. Each worked with, and occasionally against, Indian scholars concerning the history of these religions and also the proper forms and media for educating Indians. Powell intentionally concentrates on the intellectual activities of the Muir brothers rather than on their official careers but, given their powerful positions as leading ICS officials, their 'after-office pursuits' (page 1) had major consequences for the peoples of north India.

The Muirs, like (but later historically than) many other Scottish middle-class families, became committed to the British Raj through careers, marriages, and progeny. Indeed, John and William had two other brothers in the ICS (who both died young leaving few traces). While the much studied

Scottish Enlightenment had already faded, John and William Muir trained under the followers of its founders; Powell carefully contextualizes this intellectual heritage, probing how distinctly Scottish was the brothers' thinking and development. In particular, the Muir brothers imbued the Scottish pedagogical emphasis on religious and moral philosophy and also the Church of Scotland's strongly evangelical Protestant Christianity. However, during their ICS careers, John and William each adapted more Anglican affiliations due to the Anglocentric nature of the British Raj (John tended toward the high church Society for the Propagation of the Gospel while William supported the low church Church Missionary Society).

John and William both completed their formal education at the East India Company's College at Haileybury. There, each bonded with the other young British men entering the ICS, although Powell does not say much about the later connections or relationships among them. Significantly, each brother stood out from his classmates for his atypically serious engagement with the classical languages of Sanskrit and Arabic respectively. Throughout her book, Powell regards the brothers as part of the more benevolent, rather than culturally appropriative and exploitative, form of Orientalism.

Powell highlights the key stages in John's and William's parallel but differently centred intellectual careers. For John, Powell notes in particular his pivotal year (1844-45) as Principal of the government sponsored Benares Vishvavidyalaya, which later emerged as the Benares Sanskrit College (still later as Queen's College). By shaping its curriculum and by his broader

advocacy of education in the Hindi vernacular, John stood up against the prevailing policies within the British Raj that favored elite English medium education. Further, John devoted much of his energies during his years in India and following his retirement to Scotland in 1853 to selecting and translating into English what he considered the foundational texts of Hinduism, especially from the Vedic period. This emerged as his five volume *Original Sanskrit Texts on the Origin and Progress of the Religions and Institutions of India* (published variously 1857-70). This massive text argued for the trans-Himalayan origins of the Hindus and their cosmology and engaged knowledgably with the leading trends in comparative philology, religion, and cultural and racial history within European scholarship of his day.

Sir William rose higher during his forty year career in India, retiring after an influential term as Lieutenant-Governor of North-Western Provinces (1868-74) and then briefly as Member of the Viceroy's Legislative Council (1875-76). Powell, however, focuses on his effects on education in India and his scholarship on Islam. William advocated broad-based education in the Urdu vernacular. He also used his position as Lieutenant-Governor to establish in 1872 Muir Central College, which later grew into Allahabad University. William's scholarly magnum opus was his four volume *The Life of Mahomet and History of Islam to the Era of the Hegira* (published variously 1858-61); he also began, but did not complete, an Urdu version of this work. Controversially, William presupposed and then argued that Islam was founded

on 'a "false" mission' (page 159). Despite his theological differences with leading Muslims, he worked with Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan to establish the Muhammadan Anglo-Oriental College in 1875 (later becoming Aligarh Muslim University). In their debates over the authenticity of the Prophet Muhammad's message and also over the appropriate curriculum and medium of instruction for the education of Muslims, including Muslim women, William wielded the government patronage and support that Sir Sayyid needed.

Powell's thorough research in European and Indian archives enables her to trace knowledgeably the parallel intellectual lives of these influential brothers. She compares their similarities and differences at each stage in their careers, featuring their interactions with scholars from the Hindu and Muslim communities respectively. Powell's approach organizes her chapters around their parallel intellectual stages which--because nine years separated John and William--occurred in different years. This means that she assumes her readers know the general chronology of British Raj. She also highlights the intellectual exchanges between these brothers and Indian scholars and social reformers which--because of the Muir brother's official positions--tended to be asymmetrical in terms of access to government funds and influence. As with Powell's other fine books, this volume makes a powerful argument that is clearly presented and solidly documented. Scholars of education and religion in India and in Britain during the nineteenth century will find much to ponder and learn from in this impressive book.

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