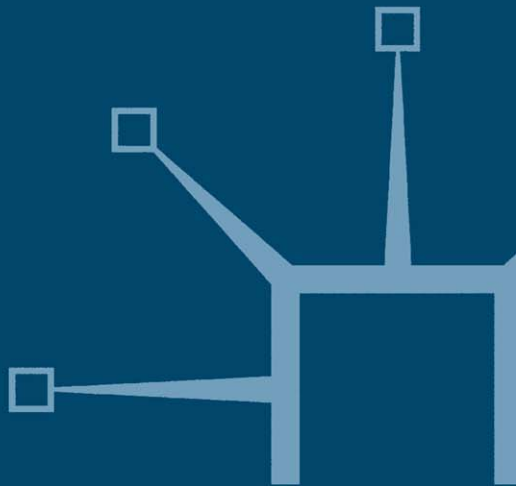


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Books Without Borders, Volume 2

Perspectives from South Asia

Edited by
Robert Fraser and Mary Hammond



Books Without Borders, Volume 2

Also by Robert Fraser

BOOK HISTORY THROUGH POSTCOLONIAL EYES: Re-writing the Script

PROUST AND THE VICTORIANS: The Lamp of Memory

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PUBLISHING IN THE FIRST WORLD WAR: Essays in Book History (*co-editor with Shafquat Towheed*)

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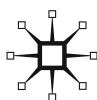
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Introduction, selection and editorial matter
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Softcover reprint of the hardcover 1st edition 2008 978-0-230-21033-2

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First published 2008 by
PALGRAVE MACMILLAN
Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire RG21 6XS and
175 Fifth Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10010
Companies and representatives throughout the world

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ISBN 978-1-349-30290-1 ISBN 978-0-230-28913-0 (eBook)
DOI 10.1057/9780230289130

This book is printed on paper suitable for recycling and made from fully managed and sustained forest sources. Logging, pulping and manufacturing processes are expected to conform to the environmental regulations of the country of origin.

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Books without borders / edited by Robert Fraser and Mary Hammond.
p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN-13: 978-1-349-30290-1 (v. 2 : alk. paper)

[etc.]

1. Books—History. 2. Book industries and trade—History. 3. Books and reading—History. 4. Literature and globalization. 5. Globalization. 6. Civilization, Modern. I. Fraser, Robert, 1947– II. Hammond, Mary, 1960–

Z4.B648 2008
002.09—dc22

2008016739

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1
17 16 15 14 13 12 11 10 09 08

for Benjo, Alex and Sarah

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Acknowledgements

The editors would like to thank the Institute of English Studies (IES), University of London, for their support during the 2005 conference from which these volumes emerged, together with an accompanying exhibition, 'The Colonial and Postcolonial History of the Book, 1765–2005: Reaching the Margins', for which the Oxford University Press and the School of Oriental and African Studies in the University of London generously loaned materials. We are especially grateful to the IES's director, Warwick Gould, for his role in smoothing the path through to publication. Our thanks are also due to the British Academy for sponsoring our keynote speakers at the conference, and the Arts and Humanities Research Council for funding the Open University's Colonial/Postcolonial History of the Book project of which the conference and this two-volume collection were long-anticipated outcomes. Research for Chapter 4 was funded by grants from the National Endowment for the Humanities, the American Institute for Indian Studies, the University of California at Berkeley, and Temple University in Philadelphia. An earlier version of Chapter 9 appeared in *Script & Print: Bulletin of the Bibliographical Society of Australia & New Zealand* 29: 1–4, the editors of which have kindly allowed us to reproduce it. Thanks are further due to the Bodleian Library in Oxford for permission to reproduce Figure 3.1, and to the BBC picture archive for the photograph that appears as Figure 10.1. We acknowledge Shakuntala Tambimuttu and the BBC Written Archives Centre for their gracious permission to quote words by Meary James Thuraiajah Tambimuttu from the relevant radio talks files. For assistance with archival research, the contributors are indebted to Martin Maw of the Oxford University Press, the staff of Edinburgh University Library, the librarian and staff of the Connemara Public Library in Madras (now Chennai) and the staff of the Bodleian for their great courtesies. For advice on Chapter 5, the author would like to thank Professor M. M. Sarma, Dr P. K. Das, Chandan Sharma and Apratim Barua. Every effort has been made to trace all copyright holders, but if any have been inadvertently overlooked, the publisher will be pleased to make the necessary arrangements at the first opportunity.

Introduction

From Palmyra to Print: The Book in South Asia

Robert Fraser and Mary Hammond

I

Zadie Smith famously begins *On Beauty*, her novel of 2005, with a parody of – or at least an act of homage towards – an opening passage by E. M. Forster. To be exact, she echoes the first sentence of *Howard's End*, referring not however to 'Helen's letters to her sister' but to 'Jerome's e-mails to his father'. When introducing the long history of textual transmission in South Asia, one is tempted to pull off an equivalent trick. Predictably enough perhaps, the Forsterian preamble one longs to rework is that to *A Passage to India*. Here is what one might write:

Even apart from the city of Bhubaneswar – and that is forty miles inland – the state of Orissa presents much that is extraordinary. Edged and washed by the Bay of Bengal, it spreads out like some ample sari in sun, and the satin scintillates as it glides. Its streets are colourful and democratic. Its ancient temples are legion. At Puri the bee-hive-shaped towers of the Temple of Jagannath soar irresistibly into the sky whilst, fifty miles distant, the sculptured figures round the chariot-shaped Temple of the Sun at Koranak instruct as they cavort. The chariot wheels turn in their stasis. The stonework glows like honey. The guides are as informative as they are obliging.

In a more sober vein, one might continue thus. Eight miles from the sea, along the well-worn road from Cuttack to Puri, a hillock rises above the coastal plain. On its crest are some inscriptions in the rock face, protected by wire. Written in the Brahmi script and the Prakrit tongue, they were caused to be set up there in 261 BCE by the Emperor Aśoka, ruler of much of Northern India, whose conversion to Buddhism they announce.

This is the oldest known writing in the sub-continent, and its sentiments are humane. Aśoka had recently put down the local hereditary rulers of the region, the Kalingas, and the scale of the slaughter had appalled him. His change of heart, his revulsion from bloodshed, are evident from these, and from texts inscribed on other rock faces, or pillars he ordered to be erected across what are now India, Nepal and Afghanistan. All are idealistic in tone, and all enjoin universal tolerance.

All men are my children. What I desire for my own children, and I desire their welfare and happiness both in this world and the next, that I desire for all men. You do not understand to what extent I desire this, and if some of you do understand, you do not understand the full extent of my desire.

You must attend to this matter. While being completely law-abiding, some people are imprisoned, treated harshly and even killed without cause so that many people suffer. Therefore your aim should be to act with impartiality. It is because of these things – envy, anger, cruelty, hate, indifference, laziness or tiredness – that such a thing does not happen. Therefore your aim should be: ‘May these things not be in me.’ And the root of this is non-anger and patience.

These texts are in many variants and they survive at several far-flung locations. One of Aśoka’s pillars now stands on the ridge a kilometre from the Mutiny Monument above Old Delhi, whither it was brought overland from Meerut. The writing is high up, and difficult to make out from the ground. Another inscription on granite is on display in the museum of the Asiatic Society in Kolkata. James Prinsep (1799–1840), Secretary to the Society from 1832, was the first to translate it into English, and to identify Aśoka – or ‘Piyadasi’ (beloved of the gods) as he calls himself in all these proclamations – as its author.

Prinsep’s translation and accurate attribution were, true to form in those imperial decades, heralded as discoveries. They represented, and still represent, a colonial unveiling and appropriation of a pre-colonial past. From our own perspective, the implications are challenging, though from a rather different angle. For, not simply are the sentiments of Aśoka texts such as in the early twenty-first century would put the United Nations to shame, but the ratios of period involved are such as to dwarf several of our most cherished and modish conceptions of cultural history. Consider these facts. Aśoka’s victory over the Kalingas, and his inscriptions near Puri, date from 261 years before the Common Era. The age of British colonialism in India (taking the activities of the

East India Company as colonial) is usually dated from the annexation of Bengal in 1765 CE. The Independence of India and Pakistan took place in August 1947. Dividing this entire cultural time span into relevant dispensations, one arrives at the following unsurprising statistics. The pre-colonial phase lasted 1,926 years, the colonial 182. The postcolonial age has so far gone on for 60. Salman Rushdie's novel *Midnight's Children*, from the publication of which in 1981 some contemporary pundits (including sometimes Rushdie himself) date the inception of modern Indian literature, is now mere 27 years old. To what extent is Indian literature therefore pre-colonial? The unavoidable answer is overwhelmingly. To what extent is it colonial? The true answer is, transitionally. To what extent is it postcolonial? The proper answer is, to a very modest degree.

One could of course, if so minded, perform an equivalent arithmetic on successive technologies of textual transmission. Regarding Aśoka's inscriptions as the first surviving examples of writing in India – a conclusion to which scholars now seem wedded – and estimating the inception of print from an absconded though bibliographically listed edition of Francis Xavier's *Doctrina Christiana* issued by Portuguese Jesuits in Goa in 1556, the epoch of script in the subcontinent could thus be said to have lasted for 1,817 years, and the era of print for 451, a little under a quarter of that period. These are games, of course, albeit enjoyable and instructive games. They concentrate our attention on the salutary disproportions of cultural history, but they are founded on a conceptual flaw that has vitiated a great deal of global book and communication history to this very day. For all such perspectives and calculations rely on a notion of succession, even when they are not based on an even more spurious premise of evolution. *Pace* the once-fashionable school of Marshall McLuhan and Walter J. Ong, communicative technologies just do not follow or supersede one another in this formulaic kind of a way. History, and more especially communication history, is a mesh.

II

To understand the deeper history of textual transmission in South Asia, it is therefore necessary to supplement diachronic exercises of the sort sketched out above with a more synchronic, and ultimately a more realistic, view. How, to take one magisterial instance, has the *Rgveda* lived on? It is recited daily in Kerala by Namboodiri Brahmins, it exists in a welter of manuscripts, the earliest of which dates from the eleventh century CE, and it has been printed in numerous editions and redactions, in abridgement and in translation. The epic *Ramayana* likewise is hawked

across the length of India by itinerant folk artists who supplement their narratives with painted scrolls; manuscript redactions exist in many of the languages of India, and it has been printed dozens of times in different versions, with commentary and without. Episodes from the *Mahabharata*, the other great epic of the subcontinent, are performed in puppet shows and in local mystery plays; its diversification is attested by a bewildering number of vulgates in the separate regional tongues, each one of which flavours it with distinctive episodes of its own; it has been standardized, with some difficulty, by an editorial team in Pune, and currently a professor and poet in Kolkata is rendering the whole thing into English, regional variants and all. It has been performed in a variety of dramatic realizations; it has been televised. The classical literature of India is thus an ongoing multi-media performance staged in every city, town and village in the land. No succession here. And emphatically no 'evolution'.

Or examine the street life of Kolkata, in any period you care to mention since the construction of the Kali Ghat. For the mid-nineteenth century that office has been performed by Sumanta Banerjee in his indispensable *The Parlour and the Streets: Elite and Popular Culture in Nineteenth-Century Calcutta* (1989). You do not have to share Banerjee's Marxist viewpoint to recognize that here is a model for the way in which book history in its broadest sense can and should be tackled. Here is culture flourishing in every medium, and at every social level: from satirical doggerels aimed at the *bhadralok* middle class, to *panchlali* (rhymed devotional songs), to *malashi* (bootmen's songs), to *biyaya* (songs to the goddess Durga on the last day of her festival) to *jatra* (dramatic performances set to music). Add to these the circulation of cheap religious prints from the northern district of Battala (described by a snooty British resident at the time as the 'Grub Street' of Bengal); the picture scrolls employed by itinerant storytellers; the *pukker* performances at the elite theatres – such as the Chowringhee on what is now Shakespeare Sarani, or its successor the Sans Souci – the growing network of libraries, the polyglossic editorial efforts of the Asiatic Society, the swotting *babus* of the academies with their attendant suppliers of cribs, the book stalls around College Street, the Hellenistic hobbies of the *sahibs*, the triple-decker novel reading of the *mem-sahibs*, and you have a totalizing scene that confounds any attempt at straight jacketing or allocation to simple phases of production. Everything and anything was going on for much of the time.

The essays in this volume, the second of a set simultaneously issued by their publishers under the joint title *Books Without Borders*, are mostly

concerned with the interpenetration of communicative norms through the thickets of South Asian culture. In a survey both methodological and polemical, Harish Trivedi sets the scene with an evocation of three historically placed reading moments. He reopens a debate about the centrality of orality to the cultural life of South Asia, and examines the legacy of *granthas* or palm leaf manuscripts, over three million of which, many uncatalogued and unstudied, are known to languish neglected in the libraries and archives of the subcontinent. The existence of this Himalayan shelf of thought and expression is enough to place in proportion our more historically parochial concerns; it also raises the problem of how we account for the phenomenon of print in our writing up of textual histories from this prolific part of the world. Is and was print, as it is sometimes taken to be elsewhere, the decisive event that altered communicative possibilities forever? Did it represent a fundamental refashioning of art, science and society, or simply a change of medium? Anindita Ghosh takes up this thread by examining the persistence in the popular culture of urban Bengal, whether in India or in Bangladesh, of oral and scripted forms infusing memory, performance and the book. Among the most talented and farsighted of her generation of historians, her work may be viewed as part of a current assault on the hegemony of print; it is more realistically seen as an attempt to place print culture in an authentic continuum, to understand what it has transformed and what it has not.

Turning our attention to that northwest corridor along which so much of worth has spread out across the peninsular, Kitty Scouler Datta stresses the cross-cultural versatility of the *ghazal* poetic form, Persian in origin, adopted in courtly performances throughout northern India, and in translation through the emerging hybrid of Urdu and in the English of the certain eighteenth-century orientalists. The written history of the form embraces the Persian of Hafez and the sorrowful nineteenth-century masterpieces of Bahadur Shah Zafar II, last of the Mughal emperors, calligrapher and poet. Even today ghazals are a staple of North Indian Sufi worship, and flourish simultaneously in bazaars and discos as a much-loved pop vogue. Ghazals transcend divides between oral, scripted and printed. They run across strata of society, technology and taste, from the scholar's bookshelf to the piped background music of local eateries. It is difficult to think of another tradition that amplifies quite so impressively Ghosh's case for the intermingling of artistic forms, both across national boundaries and across generic types.

One possible way of describing the role of print in South Asian culture is that it has supplemented the presence of script; another is that it has reinforced both the presence of alternative writing systems and the

ways in which they occasionally impinge on one another. Hemjyoti Medhi offers us a shrewd case in point. Until the early nineteenth century, Assamese literature was written down in the Assamiya script; following the intervention of American missionaries in Upper Assam, however, two developments occurred. First Assamese texts were printed in some numbers; second to facilitate this exercise Assamiya characters were forsaken in favour of the neighbouring Bangla system, a shift exacerbated by the influx of educated Bengalis into the local government service. The ascendancy of Bengali characters for writing has continued to this day; it amounts, to adopt Sudipta Kaviraj's term, to a form of 'subimperialism' that has only recently been challenged. Polemically, therefore, Medhi's contribution might seem to swim against the tide of the volume as a whole. She is evidently and passionately an Assamese cultural patriot, keen that her overlooked region of India should assert its semiotic independence. Analytically, nonetheless, her essay illustrates more poignantly than most the interaction of codes in an industrializing world, its consequences, the dilemmas in which it places peoples and languages.

From 'subimperialism' we pass on to imperialism proper, to the heyday of print and to the activities of those who may be considered Lord Macaulay's proverbial children and grandchildren, or at least his successful agents. There follows a quartet of essays concerned with the role of overseas publishing firms during the Raj. Academically this is proving something of a growth area. In the wake of Rimi B. Chatterjee's recently published research into Macmillan and the Oxford University Press, we have here a couple of essays by David Finkelstein and Victoria Condie that look at the thriving Calcutta firm of Thacker and Spink. Thackers were leaders in their day; they produced books on most subjects, carrying both fiction and non-fiction lists. They were a recognized conduit for certain official publications; they took out, or rather were sold, the copyright on Kipling's apprentice work. In an incisive archive-based piece Shaf Towheed peers into that particular authorial relationship, the fracture that it led to, the permanent distrust of publishers in general it stirred in Kipling's mind, and the alternative arrangements he then made with the railway list of W. H. Wheeler of Allahabad, before leaving for London and a lasting, if guarded, understanding with Macmillan. Railway editions of course were far from unique to India. They had started with Routledge's Railway series in the steam-randy Britain of 1848; by the 1890s Thomas Nelson and Sons in Edinburgh were issuing their fivepenny classics in a format convenient for this mode of travel. To this very day the extensive Indian railway system has served as a valuable stimulus to literary production. But to linger over

the work of now extinct firms such as Thackers and Wheelers is to enter the literary atmosphere of Victorian India: its packed stores, its heaving book marts, its enterprising street vendors. Nowadays one can glean a transient impression of this vitality by walking up Kolkata's College Street from Presidency College northwards. But one can also sense the latter day ripples of such activity around Rajiv Chowk in Delhi, a city that since the early 1970s has usurped the place in the South Asian book trade once occupied by Bombay. Robert Fraser's essay takes us back to the decades of Bombay's ascendancy by examining, through archival files on which Chatterjee was unable to draw, the fortunes of the Oxford University Press's India Branch during the dark but energizing days of World War II. His lesson is one both of interdependence and autonomy, as the starvation of resources caused by that widespread distribution of trade encouraged the boys in Bombay to take the publishing initiative into their own hands.

The literary generation that emerged in the 1930s, and which used to take up such a large slice in courses on 'Commonwealth Literature', was in very many ways a transitional one. They were national and international, local yet Anglophone in expression. They wrote, they published, and also like Mulk Raj Anand, the publication of whose first novel *Untouchable* is the subject of Susheila Nasta's essay here, they involved themselves in broadcasting and journalism. Nasta and Ruvani Ranasinha examine the position of such writers, who found themselves talking both to and for India. The double angle is perhaps especially obvious in the work of Nirad C. Chaudhuri, ardently Bengali yet always seeming to address an audience at the other end of what he was to call the *Passage to England*. An awareness of addressing different arenas can be heard too in the inflections of Meary James Thurairajah Tambimuttu, Sri Lankan and founder of *Poetry London*, who for a few years before, during and after the Second World War was the darling and gadfly of the Soho pubs. Espousing yet scourging tradition, these writers were part of an international literary cosmopolis; yet they aspired via their work to a version of modernity all their own. Some of them were well on the way to becoming media stars; certainly they grew conscious of addressing a late imperial world arena, and in so doing transformed the views that outsiders took of India, as well as influencing in oblique ways the imminent approach of independence.

The apotheosis of that movement in its lurid ambiguity is the globalized and celebrity-studded school of South Asian fiction that has taken the international world by storm since 1981, year of the publication of Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*. Who or what is speaking from this