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IIC

Indian Independence, the British Media and Lord Mountbatten

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Indian Independence, the British Media and Lord Mountbatten*

This talk seeks to analyse how the first major decolonisation of the twentieth century was interpreted at the metropolitan heart of empire by examining its portrayal in the British media, focussing primarily on the British national press.¹ The organisation of official publicity under the Viceroy, Lord Mountbatten, forms a key aspect of this analysis for the light it throws on the transformed imperial context within which the public mediation of these events transpired. This talk forms part of a more ambitious project investigating the media coverage of Independence and Partition that will also analyse the response of the BBC, the major newsreels as well as Indian newspapers and All India Radio and is to be published in my forthcoming book: *Communications, Media and the Imperial Experience: Britain and India* (Palgrave 2012).

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Newspapers were critical in creating the first draft of the history of British decolonisation, and in significant ways impacted on future remembrances of the occasion. Over the twentieth century, the press became inextricably linked with Britain's imperial enterprise and its pro-empire thrust was widely acknowledged.

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At Indian Independence in 1947, a widespread British perception of decolonisation was to view it as an orderly and planned *transfer of power* that involved the minimum disruption and served as the fulfilment of long cherished nineteenth century Macaulayite ideals that underlay the very establishment of the empire. What role, if any, did the press play in furthering the official line on decolonisation? James Epstein has recently argued that to understand the 'constitutive impact' of empire on Britain requires moving beyond generalisations to 'analysing specific contexts.'² It is hoped that this investigation will contribute towards a more empirically sensitive history of just such a specific context in the process of India's impact on Britain and help tease out some of the ways in which the end of empire was explained to a popular audience.

British Press Coverage

The majority of the foreign press had been encamped in the Imperial Hotel in Delhi for several months before Independence and included news agencies such as the Associated Press of America, Agence France Presse, Tass and the Central News Agency, China. Among the newspapers and magazines represented were the *New York Post*, *New York Times*, *Life*, *Time*, *Chicago Daily News*, *Chicago Tribune*, and *Sydney Morning Herald*. In this context, the British press or Fleet Street enjoyed unprecedented access to sources of information, news and comment. It deployed special correspondents in larger numbers than before and its leader writers in London were men of ability and longstanding experience of the East. Apart from Doon Campbell of Reuters and Bob Stimson of the BBC, there were over 15 special correspondents from the British national press with both quality dailies like *The Times* and *Daily Telegraph and Morning Post* and more popular papers like the *Daily Express*, *Daily Mail* and *Daily Herald*, electing to have two or more journalists on the spot. The British press had also established links with English language Indian newspapers like the *Statesman* in Calcutta, the *Times of India* in Bombay and the *Civil and Military Gazette* in Lahore, and were able to report with an immediacy from these cities. Some such as the *Manchester Guardian* had Indians like Shiva Rao of the *Hindu* reporting for them on the ground. Newspapers also relied, as before, on Reuters news agency and its Indian wing, the Associated Press of India. However, there remained areas that were poorly covered such as the North West Frontier with large centres like Peshawar unrepresented by the foreign media.

Thus to recap: by 1947, a buoyant Fleet Street's networks of communication and information from India were generally sound but the question remains: on the day, how did the British press choose to interpret the first major decolonisation of the twentieth century?

In terms of presentation, with the exception of the conservative *Times* and the liberal *Guardian*, the press accorded the story pride of place on the front page with no effort being spared in making the headlines bolder and larger than before: the labour *Daily Herald* was possibly the most impressive in this regard. Coverage extended into editorials, featured reports, and by lines from special correspondents strewn throughout their pages. In terms of column inches, *The Times* and *Guardian* more than made up for their more restrained presentation, with the conservative *Daily Telegraph*, the liberal *News Chronicle*, and the *Herald* coming in lower down the ranking, and the picture-led *Daily Mirror*, unsurprisingly, making up the rear, devoting only 14 lines or 66 words on its front page to the story. The fact that maps of the new nations were produced in only a few papers like the *Daily Mail* and *The Times* (which had its own cartographic department), was understandable given that the Boundary Commission had yet to make its recommendations.

The iconic symbol of change used by most papers were the new flags of the two 'dominions'. In this context, the one photograph that was centre staged on the front page did carry a profound resonance. While Nehru and Mountbatten had reached a tacit agreement that the newsreels were not to film the lowering of the Union Jack anywhere, Fleet Street referred to the lowering of the British flag flying from the ramparts of the ruined residency in Lucknow: 'from which' the *Telegraph* informed its readers, 'it had never been lowered since recapture of the town after the siege of 1857. It was hauled down for the first and last time at midnight last night', 'secretly and without ceremony' (*Mail*) and replaced with the Indian tricolour marking the transference of power to Hindustan. For its readers this served as an emotional and symbolic reminder of heroic British sacrifice for the greater glory of imperial conquest and its inclusion as part of the Independence celebrations is not without significance. Should there be need for further reminders, the *Contemporary Review* featured an article on the

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subject 'A Flag Hauled Down', with the author A. F. Fremantle quoting Wordsworth's lament over the fall of a great city: 'And what if she had seen those glories fade, Those titles vanish, and that strength decay; Yet shall some tribute of regret be paid'. Fremantle offered just such a 'tribute of regret' in the form of an account of the fall of the Residency and what it meant 'and means still, to those who have known it and something of its history.'³ The use of flag imagery to symbolise momentous change was further captured via pictures showing the hoisting of the Indian tri-colour above the India Office in London—a ceremony witnessed by the outgoing Indian High Commissioner Vellodi and cheered on by hundreds of Indians. A similar function was

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reported for the Pakistani flag that was hoisted at Lancaster House by Vellodi's counterpart E. Rahimtoola, whose flower bedecked and beaming face graced the front page of the *Herald* on 14 August.

While Fleet Street was unanimous in extending the 'universal goodwill' of Britain (*Spectator*), and promises of 'unstinting' support should the new Dominions need British assistance (*Telegraph, News Chronicle*), one overarching, and possibly predictable, theme to emerge was the self-congratulatory tone of most papers. Self-conscious witnesses to history in the making, journalists of both quality and popular papers wrote of the 'transfer of power' as a peaceful and planned outcome of British policy, which, the *Mail* argued, had 'given the lie to those on the other side of the Atlantic and elsewhere who proclaimed us oppressors.' Macaulay's 1833 dictum on Britain's 'proudest day' was widely quoted⁴ and the *Guardian* emphasized how 'freedom by a voluntary transfer of power was unique in history'⁵ The *News Chronicle* concurred with these sentiments: 'Never has a great Imperial Power surrendered its proud domain or freedom been acquired by subject millions by so peaceful and friendly a transition.'⁶

The Times, Guardian and *Herald* also featured a potted history of the Raj. The *Guardian* editorial stressed how Britain went to India 'not to conquer but to trade. Events not intention created the British Raj'. Indeed, it was through 'contact with the outer world' facilitated by the British that the Indians 'recovered a vitality and self-confidence such as they had not known for over a 1000 years. As soon as this

happened, the political changes now being completed could only be a matter of time, for Great Britain had neither the desire nor the ability to rule a people which had recovered the will to rule itself.⁷ Similarly, the *Herald's* special correspondent referred to the Raj as 'an accidental empire', 'willingly relinquished' by the imperial nation: 'Here, when the world is dark with suspicion, a shining act of faith and justice is done.'⁸

Having acquired the empire, the civilizing agency of the Raj was to the fore, the fruits of which were now the abiding legacy for Indians. For *The Times* it was such British qualities as 'the strength and adaptability of the tradition of political freedom', 'a new conception of public service', and 'the spirit of cooperation and compromise' that were guiding the Indian leaders in their attempts to cope with the communal violence. The writer of the editorial, H. M. Stannard, went even further when he contended that the 'political ideas and constitutional methods for reconciling liberty with order which are now guiding the deliberations of the Assemblies at Delhi and Karachi' were 'Britain's special gifts to mankind'.⁹ Institutional structures like the Indian Army and the ICS also came in for high praise: thus Sir George Schuster in the *Guardian* wrote of the ICS as an institution of 'such integrity, such single-hearted devotion, such thoroughness and accuracy', that it would be 'a priceless heritage' for the two Dominions.¹⁰ Yet, despite such paeans of praise for the Raj, there was little attempt to pass a final verdict on British rule. *The Times* appeared to speak for Fleet Street when it intoned: 'It has reached its term but it cannot yet be viewed in perspective.'

In true media tradition, there was a strong tendency to personalise politics. Taking the lead from Attlee, Wavell was all but forgotten, the press hailing Mountbatten as Britain and India's saviour. The *Mail* voiced a common sentiment in claiming that Mountbatten's Earldom was richly deserved: 'By his own remarkable powers of personality he brought the Indian leaders together and achieved in less than five months what others for more than a decade had sought in vain to do.' Mountbatten's charismatic personality, good looks, and royal connections no doubt played a large part in feeding this press adulation. Attlee, too, came in for a fair share of the praise 'for the firmness of his Indian policy' (*Mail*), including from erstwhile critics like the *Spectator* which acknowledged that 'the courage displayed by the Prime Minister in committing himself to a great act of faith in the face of responsible and instructed criticism will, ... have its place in history.'¹¹

Indian protagonists did not, however, fare as well. Thus while Nehru's 'tryst with destiny' speech was quoted by several papers, and Jinnah was the recipient of a few positive though passing references, what the *Express*, *Mail*, *Telegraph* and *Herald* chose to emphasize instead was the 'sagacity' of the imperialists as reflected in the gratitude expressed towards Britain by Indian leaders. So the selected excerpts from the speeches by Indians were all directed to this end. For instance, Sarvapalli Radhakrishnan was quoted as saying: 'When we see what the Dutch are doing in Indonesia and the French in Indo-China, we cannot but admire the sagacity and genius of the British people. ...As from midnight tonight we can no longer blame the Britisher.'¹² High praise for the British was also accorded by Rajendra Prasad, the Assembly's President, who described the achievement of freedom as 'the consummation and fulfilment of the historic traditions and economic ideals of the British race.'¹³ The imagery of the grateful imperial subject/student and the wise and benevolent colonial master/teacher was a recurrent underlying motif in much press writing.

In contrast with the act of Independence itself, the fact that it was accompanied by Partition was lamented in many quarters. Sir Stanley Reed in the *Spectator* called it 'a tragedy' while *The Times* special correspondent, Ian Morrison, writing from New Delhi, stressed how the unavoidable balkanisation of the sub-continent, 'has come

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in a way that has been a disappointment to many Indians who have devoted their lives to the struggle for independence. The vision which they have always had of a strong united India has proved impossible of attainment. Partition has brought sadness to many, and joy in the ceremonies...is not unalloyed.'¹⁴ Yet responsibility for Partition was laid squarely at the door of the Indians. Even the *Guardian*, long the stalwart of Indian nationalism, editorialised: 'We have handed over India to the Indians: they have chosen what to the warmest friends of India, Indian and British, seems a second best—a divided India. But it is their choice; if they come together well and good, but their destiny is in their own hands.'¹⁵ In fact, although the ongoing communal strife received some coverage on the day,¹⁶ the more dominant theme was the relatively subdued celebration in Karachi on 14 August compared to the more joyous festivities that erupted in India

the following day. For *The Times* special correspondent this 'public apathy' might be explained by a combination of factors including the 'lethargic temperament of the ordinary Sindhi, to the fact that the majority of the population of Karachi is Hindu, or to a realization by its inhabitants of the tremendous problems which overshadow the birth of this new state and which in Karachi are already making life difficult for the ordinary man in the street.' Only Andrew Mellor, the *Herald's* correspondent seemed to contradict this general impression. Referring to Karachi as 'The City of Flags', where 'Cars hooted and bumped each other, people climbed lamp posts and stood on roofs or got jammed in the dense masses in the roads.'

The one major negative note as far as the British Government could be concerned, and spread across the range of quality and popular papers, was their criticism of the dereliction of duty towards the 560 odd Princely states. Long the bulwarks of conservative imperialism in the face of increasing nationalist agitation, the special relationship between the British Raj and Princely India came to an abrupt end with Independence (though Mountbatten did manage to secure special concessions and the privy purse for the largest of these). 'That Britain should have had to default in its obligations to the Princes is deeply to be regretted', argued the *Spectator*. 'Nothing could be more repugnant to public opinion in Great Britain than any enforced severance from the Commonwealth of rulers who have, in many cases, given loyal support to it in war and in almost all cases value their British connection highly.'¹⁷ For instance, the *Express* special correspondent, Sydney Smith, chose to give prominence to the largest of these princely states, Hyderabad—the size of England and Wales—where he claimed, there were no celebrations on 15 August.¹⁸

Overall, notable through its lack of emphasis, was the fact there was no detailed discussion of nationalism or the freedom struggle in the newspapers. While the *Guardian* did allude to the key personalities of the Congress and to their contributions, it devoted the most space to Nehru's perorations on the tasks ahead. And the *Mail* chose to highlight Indian contribution during the Second World War as 15 August was, it reminded its readers, also the second anniversary of VJ-Day. 'The coincidence is fortuitous but worthy of remark. Many outside, as well as inside,

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India may see in today's momentous creation one of the few real manifestations of the principles of human liberty and freedom for which that war was fought.¹⁹ Although Victor Thompson in the *Herald* made a specific, albeit brief, reference to the Indian struggle, he attributed the rise of the nationalist movement to the seeds sown chiefly by British liberals who 'continually questioned British rule, insisted that self government must always be the eventual goal, [and] forced the authorities to proceed with the Indianisation of administration and services.'²⁰ Where M.K. Gandhi was mentioned, he was invariably portrayed as a sad old man, aloof from the celebrations in Delhi, depressed at the communal tensions and the failure of his dream of a united India. 'How can I be happy with the vivisection of India', Gandhi was quoted during an interview with Cliff. 'Having striven for freedom, peace and unity', noted Cliff, 'he cannot reconcile himself to violence and division, although he believes that Pakistan has come to stay.'

Finally, while most of Fleet Street echoed the sentiments expressed in the *Chronicle* that 'many of the links which have been forged over two hundred years between Britain and the Indian peoples will remain', there was an overwhelming acknowledgment

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that a new balance of power needed to be created in the East and that Britain's foreign policy, and especially her economic and security needs, would have to be reassessed. The role of the Commonwealth was, in this context, considered critical. There was some doubt about whether both the Dominions would join the Commonwealth, but no hesitancy in emphasising its unique role. Thus the *Spectator* was convinced that: 'By severance from the Commonwealth they can gain no freedom which is not theirs already; by association with it they will ensure a co-operation that must inure in every way to their advantage.'²¹ There was also a sense that India and Pakistan, with their ancient civilization and traditions, were somehow uniquely placed to act as mediators between the East and West in ways which the *Mail* argued 'may profoundly affect the future of all the world. Their statesmen now have the power, if they use it right, to bridge the gap between East and West; to make us both, in a true sense, one world.'²² In addition, the significance of the creation of Pakistan as 'the leading State of the Muslim world', meant, according to *The Times*, that at last the vacuum

left by the collapse of the Turkish empire had been filled and Karachi had emerged as 'a new centre of Muslim cohesion and rallying point for Muslim thought and aspirations.'²³ A prescient sentiment indeed, given the contemporary context of world politics.

The Mountbatten Factor

In an analysis of imperial coverage the bounded context is pre-eminently important for, though Fleet Street prided itself on its independent stance, in reality the constraints of coercive rule and imperial subjugation that underlay the Raj always threatened to impinge in significant ways upon the extent and nature of its coverage. With combined circulations of the daily national press reaching 15.5 million, officials were not in a position to underestimate its potential to influence the voting and consuming public. In 1947, there was the added factor in the shape of the new Viceroy and his publicity team.

Lord Wavell, Mountbatten's predecessor, had been warmly endorsed by the British press upon his appointment, undoubtedly influenced by his war record, but while aware of the role of public opinion, Wavell did not feel the necessity to cultivate the media (with the possible exception of *The Times*) on a systematic footing. The contrast could not have been more striking with Mountbatten who was 'extrovert and sociable' and functioned 'in a blaze of publicity'.²⁴ His capacity for self publicity is legendary: while being filmed for an ITV series in the 1970s, he insisted on directing the lighting and camera angles as 'it was important for him to be shot from 6 inches above his eye line.'²⁵ He was excited by the communication revolution of his times, an interest stimulated early in his naval career as a wireless officer.²⁶ Mountbatten transformed the traditional approach to the office of the Viceroy by appreciating the extraordinary demands of the situation—as one commentator remarked: 'India in March 1947 was a ship on fire in mid-ocean with ammunition in the hold.'²⁷ Against precedence, he handpicked a new public relations team to accompany him in which a key player was Alan Campbell-Johnson who became the first (and only) press attaché appointed to the Viceroy's staff, heading a team that successfully orchestrated the stage management of the Mountbatten handover of power and helped create the mythic dimensions of his personal role in this process.

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Campbell-Johnson, with a background in the Royal Air Force, had worked closely with Mountbatten at the Combined Operations Headquarters in South East Asia and was in a unique position to witness Mountbatten as a 'communicator'. Mountbatten, he claimed, 'wanted always to simplify, to popularise, and in particular to photograph. He was a believer in developing and using an image' and was 'at his very best in public'.²⁸

Such synergy is apparent in the negotiations prior to the departure of the Viceregal party for India. It was felt important to develop a strategy *vis-à-vis* the press. Campbell-Johnson liaised extensively with the India Office Information department and with Sudhir Ghosh, the Press Officer at the Indian High Commission in London. The consensus was weighted against any regular question and answer sessions with the Indian press since the danger of misrepresentation was felt to outweigh any potential benefits. Instead, it was planned to have 'an editorial tea-party' soon after Mountbatten's arrival, to be followed by off-the-record meetings with them individually.²⁹ Mountbatten set the ball of his diplomatic charm offensive rolling almost immediately by going against protocol to make a speech at his inauguration where he stressed that it was 'not a normal Viceroyalty' on which he was embarking: 'I shall need the greatest goodwill of the greatest possible number, and I am asking India today for that goodwill.'³⁰ And for the first time 'film cameras whirred and flash bulbs went off' in the Durbar Hall to capture the swearing-in ceremony on celluloid.³¹

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By the tone of not just the Anglo-Indian but also the Indian-run press, Mountbatten appeared to have got off to a good start with papers commenting upon his engaging frankness and charm of manner (*Hindustan Times*), his readiness to take quick decisions in an emergency (*Pioneer*), his embodying 'that combination of natural authority and progressive spirit which characterises the British Royal House' (*Statesman*).³² The *Tribune* argued that Mountbatten would need to do his utmost to 'enable transfer of power to keep India united' in which case India would remain Britain's friend, while the *Sind Observer* warned that the need of the hour was a firm hand and not vague generalities, and *Dawn* was convinced that Mountbatten had 'great and unprecedented responsibilities' but would 'doubtless be wooed and fawned upon, cajoled and alternately threatened, a time honoured Congress way.'³³

Once in office, the minutes of every staff meeting demonstrate how systematically press comment was scrutinised and how keen an interest Mountbatten took in cultivating journalists, both Indian and foreign: proffering advice, correcting mis-statements and being available to lunch as occasion demanded. One high point of this interaction came at the Viceroy's press conference in Delhi when he expounded the Plan of 3 June with respect of Independence with Partition. Campbell-Johnson enthused how the event had been 'a tremendous success, and has done much to clarify and stabilise the situation and control the whole tone of press comment.' The reactions of nearly 300 correspondents present 'were quite the most enthusiastic I have ever experienced.'³⁴ Mountbatten, speaking without notes, demonstrated a command over the subject that moved Stephens to recall years later: 'For sheer intellectual range and vigour, for assured grasp of minutiae, yet brilliant marshalling of the main lines of a long, difficult argument, it was an extraordinary performance.'³⁵ Mellor of the *Herald* claimed to be 'stunned' by the performance, while Britter called it a '*tour de force*'.³⁶

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Only two major Indian papers—the *Hindustan Times* and the *Indian News Chronicle*—were critical of the balkanisation of the sub-continent as envisaged in the plan, but significantly not about the Viceroy's performance. All India Radio covered it in special bulletins, provincial Governors had it translated for distribution in regional languages; and British representatives in London, Washington, Canberra, Toronto, Singapore, Rangoon and Shanghai received copies in time for a near simultaneous release.³⁷ Fleet Street and the BBC were seminal to Mountbatten as he attached 'the greatest importance to clear transmission in England and America'.³⁸ He was also keen to have 'the widest broadcast publicity' for speeches by Nehru, Jinnah and Baldev Singh,³⁹ for to be seen to be endorsed by the Congress, League and Sikh political interest groups was deemed critical to achieve a positive public response. In the event, the BBC's coverage of the 3 June announcement was considered to have been 'magnificent' and as Campbell-Johnson noted: 'it is good to see that they have at last woken up to the full importance of India.'⁴⁰

Campbell-Johnson thus operated in an imperial context that put enormous store by image and presentation. His own attention to detail, frequent press conferences,

informal press briefings and overall attempts to personalize the Government-press interface bore handsome dividends. In his words: 'By dint of giving up some of the hours of the day and sacrificing some of the paper work, I have managed to achieve fairly good relations with most of the correspondents here. I am sure it pays to be available even if one has not a lot to say, and the Indians undoubtedly react favourably to minor courtesies which the European correspondents might take for granted.'⁴¹ Throughout these tense months, and particularly during the partition civil strife following Independence, Campbell-Johnson was able to maintain harmonious working relations with both the foreign and the Indian press. He was, for instance, instrumental in having Mountbatten dissuade Nehru from imposing censorship on the foreign media which he had threatened to do during a press conference on 28 August. He collaborated with his counterpart A. H. Joyce, the Adviser on Publicity Questions at the India Office, to help advise Fleet Street editors and the London representatives of Indian newspapers. By 1947, the latter were a substantial presence in the capital and it was arranged for them to have separate weekly press conferences from May to August in lieu of the fact that they had a special interest to serve, and their quota in the Parliamentary press gallery was supplemented whenever possible. Joyce had a wealth of direct Indian experience as he had helped to reorganise Government of India publicity during 1936-37. The smooth operation of the official co-operation between London and New Delhi, thus owed a great deal to the personal commitment and shared vision of these two administrators and lay at the heart of the successful government publicity arrangements during these months.

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BBC and Newsreels

Despite their hectic schedules during trips back to London before August, Mountbatten and Campbell-Johnson prioritised meetings with the British media including the BBC and newsreel companies. The audio-visual was felt to be a pivotal aspect of official publicity and the BBC and AIR broadcasts (in the latter case working closely with Sardar Patel, the head of Communications in the Interim government) were utilised on an unprecedented scale with AIR being especially influential for its rural programmes which reached listeners who may not be able to read newspapers. Meeting with Sir William Haley,

the Director General of the BBC, Mountbatten was able to secure the Corporation's 'very full attention to the period of the transfer of power.' However, while there was approval of measures to cover the events just before and after 15 August, there was concern, as articulated by the Secretary of State Lord Listowel, that should there be continued communal violence after the transfer of power, then the BBC's aim of emphasising British achievement might give offence unintentionally as 'we should appear to be trying to emphasize awful consequences of abandonment of power.'⁴² Mountbatten concurred: 'It would be far better to let the new Dominions find their own feet within the Commonwealth, rather than overstress the whole business at the start.'⁴³ Mountbatten was also 'anxious that all important phases of the ceremonies, should be covered by newsreel men',⁴⁴ but was 'appalled at the indifference' of the major companies who, apart from the American financed Paramount and Movietone, had no outlay on covering the celebrations.⁴⁵ Thus with only four weeks to go, John Turner of Gaumont News, was hastily appointed as the official representative of the Newsreel Association working on a rota agreement. Mountbatten was assiduous in ensuring official support with the Government paying for his travel within India though he was not attached to his staff since it was emphasised that Turner was 'to publicise India and not the Viceroy.'⁴⁶

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Conclusion

This talk has had two prime foci: one the influential British press and the diverse arguments put forth into contemporary popular debate about the end of empire, and second, the powerful government propaganda machinery in New Delhi and the India Office, and its evolving relationship with the media especially under the direction of the publicity conscious Louis Mountbatten, who played a seminal role in mediating the public image of decolonisation.

Overall, Campbell-Johnson felt that the independence celebrations 'went off very well from the publicity viewpoint', and the reception accorded to the Mountbattens in both Delhi and Bombay was 'quite extraordinary.'⁴⁷ Despite last minute preparations, the film rota agreement had worked successfully resulting in both Gaumont and

Paramount producing 'excellent newsreels'.⁴⁸ In fact, as Turner's own reminiscences reveal, and, as historians like Philip Wood have argued, the overwhelming emphasis in the newsreels took the shape of eulogistic accounts of the official ceremonies revolving around the Mountbattens, with key Indian and Pakistani protagonists and events often sidelined or ignored completely.⁴⁹ Fleet Street was in a strong position—its journalists enjoyed unprecedented access to the locus of imperial power and to sources of information and comment. Special correspondents were deployed in large numbers and its leader writers in London were men of ability and longstanding experience of the East, like Professor Rushbrook Williams who wrote the majority of the leaders in *The Times*. Williams had been successively Professor of History at Allahabad University, Chief propaganda officer to the Government of India during the Great War, and Adviser at the Ministry of Information during the Second World War.

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Colin Reid, the *Telegraph's* special correspondent, was a considerable expert on Middle Eastern affairs and on the Muslim culture of Egypt and the Levant.⁵⁰

Although the majority of the national press broadly supported the imperial project, they appeared to reach, with only a few murmurings of regret, a remarkably consensual verdict on the loss of the proverbial jewel in the Imperial Crown. As the *Herald's* special correspondent concluded, India was 'willingly relinquished' by the imperial nation as 'a shining act of faith and justice'.⁵¹ Distinctions between papers of different political persuasions, so marked in domestic politics and indeed in the lead up to independence, appeared to dissolve in the moment of its realisation. The extent to which this reflected a pragmatic response to what was perceived as an inevitable change given the general political consensus at Westminster or was influenced by new international pressures operating in a post war world and specifically from the self-proclaimed leader of the free world, the USA, needs further investigation. There is less doubt, however, that sophisticated systems of information management and political propaganda were deployed by a Government anxiously looking towards the world's stage for approval and keen to maintain productive ties with the new nations of the East. British enterprise and capital investment

'dominated India's private foreign sector in 1947.' Britain still had a powerful stake in India economically and strategically, and official priority was to protect this scenario. By the end of the 1950s British private capital in India 'was well above the 1948 level.'⁵²

To deny that official media management and what *The Times* referred to as Mountbatten's 'high powered diplomacy of discussion', and, Pamela Mountbatten as her father's 'Operation seduction',⁵³ had an impact in fashioning the story conveyed to the British reading public would be fantastic, though it is problematic to gauge the extent and nature of this influence across the press. What is also of import is the impact of Fleet Street coverage within the sub-continent where it was taken to reflect a wider British popular opinion. What is open to much less debate, however, is that this honeymoon period in press reportage of the sub-continent was over almost as soon as it began. And herein lies the seminal paradox.

The narrative as structured on Independence day was one of the fulfilment of Britain's imperial destiny in India: Macaulay's dream in the 1830s. The press were able to portray Independence as a British achievement—as something arising almost organically out of her long term policy and vindicating British rule. However, within a few days, sections of the British, particularly conservative press, (as well as some US newspapers) began to reassess and question the capacity for self governance of the Indians. The consequences of Independence were increasingly seen as bearing out the warnings of those like Churchill who had seen the empire as necessary for good governance and stability within India—the so called Pax Britannica. Therefore, both the act of Independence and its aftermath—though for very different reasons—were seen as justifying imperial rule. Thus the *Observer's* editorial argued on 31 August that 'the Punjab massacres are a sad commentary on India's attainment of independence, barely a fortnight old.'⁵⁴ The fact that the mass of the foreign correspondents were based in Delhi further directed the critical spotlight on the Indian government and imposed in effect a news blackout from Pakistan. The attribution of blame for the communal troubles was laid almost unequivocally at India's door,

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a sentiment apparently reinforced when Delhi was engulfed in the crisis during September. For the *New Statesman* this 'deliberate press campaign designed to convince the British public that the end of British rule in India has thrown the entire country into a state of anarchy is as wicked as it is misleading. Every incident in the Punjab tragedy indicative of local breakdown in administration is exaggerated and distorted to give the impression of nation-wide collapse.' While acknowledging that the suffering and killings were immense, the *New Statesman* maintained that even this provided 'no justification for the silly suggestion in some newspapers that the Indian settlement was a mistake.' And while these massacres were 'a ghastly by-product of painful re-birth' in India, they were 'much less serious' than for example the 1943 famine which was 'barely reported in England when one and a half million died.'⁵⁵

Thus, there emerged two main accounts of Indian independence: a pro-empire version apparently co-existing with a celebration of decolonisation. In other words, press comment vindicated British rule for achieving a peaceful transfer of

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power and at the same time British rule was also vindicated by the subsequent violence that engulfed the new nation states. How do we explain this apparent dichotomy? Perhaps one could suggest that both approaches contained essential truth about the British imperial experience. The British had always been divided as to the meaning of its Indian Raj—a paternalist despotism in the name of superior Christian civilization or a progressive programme of improvements leading to eventual self-rule. Of the two, the former had deeper roots in the mainstream British press and helps to explain the reversion to this kind of coverage in the post-independence period. What requires explanation, therefore, is why the more optimistic view prevailed in the lead up to and during August. To some extent this can be attributed to the Mountbatten-India Office media operation. Both Mountbatten and the decisive plan he enunciated inspired confidence. He provided a narrative for Independence that seemed to render it a progressive British achievement. The positive newspaper reportage was not entirely unexpected, and, in following the official position on empire in 1947, it was consistent with its coverage of the 1930s when the bulk of the

press backed a policy of appeasing Indian nationalists through the devolution of self-government. In a sense, therefore, Mountbatten reaffirmed this position with his skill in imperial choreography, his role being to dramatise a script that was already largely written and in so doing to provide the imagery that would fix how the world saw 15 August then and how we see it now. Yet, while this was true for the lead up to and Independence day itself, it could hardly be sustained against the facts of the communal bloodbaths and civil war that accompanied Partition and the mass migration in its aftermath during the autumn of 1947. This helped to create deep fault lines both within Fleet Street as well as between the foreign and the Indian press and political opinion, fracturing trust in western perceptions of the new post-colonial realities and feeding into demands for the setting up of a Third World Information Order.

Endnotes

- 1 NB Unless stated otherwise, all press references are to the year 1947.
Dailies – *Daily Telegraph*, *The Times*, *Manchester Guardian*, *News Chronicle*, *Daily Mail*, *Daily Express*, *Daily Herald*, *Daily Mirror*, *Daily Worker*, *Star*; Weeklies and Periodicals – *Spectator*, *Observer*, *New Statesman and Nation*, *News of the World*, *Illustrated London News*, *Radio Times*, *Reynolds Newspaper*, *Contemporary Review*, *Quarterly Review*, *Nineteenth Century and After*, and, *Punch*.
- 2 James Epstein, 'Taking class notes on empire', in C. Hall & S. Rose (eds.), *At Home with the Empire*, CUP: Cambridge 2006, p. 274.
- 3 *Contemporary Review*, Jan 1948, Vol CLXXIII, pp. 14-15.
- 4 see *Times*, *Guardian*, *Chronicle*, *Herald*, and *Mail*.
- 5 *Guardian*, 11 July 1947.
- 6 *Herald*, 'Freedom Day', 15 August 1947.
- 7 *Guardian*, 15 August 1947.
- 8 *Herald*, 15 August, p. 2.
- 9 See also *Guardian*, 15 August 1947.
- 10 In *Guardian*, 15 August 1947.
- 11 *Spectator*, 18 July 1947, p. 1.
- 12 *Mail*, 15 August, p.1, *Express*, 15 August, *Telegraph*.
- 13 Quoted in *Herald*, 16 August, 1947, p. 1.
- 14 'Partition of India', *Times*, 15 August 1947, p. 5.
- 15 *Guardian* 15 August.
- 16 'High Death Roll in Punjab', 'Fierce Communal Battles' ran *The Times* story; 'Lahore Ablaze' reported Ralph Izzard the *Mail's* correspondent, while the *Herald's* header screamed: '120 Killed as India riots and feasts'.
- 17 *Spectator*, 18 July 1947, p. 1.
- 18 The *Contemporary Review* featured an in depth survey on the new constitutional status of the States, 'The Indian States' by V. S. Swaminathan, *Contemporary Review*, August 1947, pp. 82-87.
- 19 *Mail*, 15 August 1947, p.1.
- 20 *Ibid*.
- 21 *Spectator*, 15 August 1947, p. 1.
- 22 *Mail*, 15 August 1947, p. 1; see also *Guardian*, 15 August 1947.
- 23 'The end of an era', *Times*, 15 August 1947, p. 5.
- 24 Stephens, Pakistan, p. 148.
- 25 Cited in Brian Hoey, *Mountbatten the Private Story*, Sidgwick and Jackson, London 1994, p. 4.
- 26 John Terraine, *The Life and Times of Lord Mountbatten*, Arrow Books, London 1980, p. 179.
- 27 Lord Ismay cited in A. Campbell-Johnson, *Mission with Mountbatten*, Robert Hale, London 1951, p. 221.
- 28 A. Campbell-Johnson, *Mountbatten in Retrospect*, Spantech and Lancer, South Godstone 1997, pp. 49-50.
- 29 Johnson to Mountbatten, 14 March 1947, Mss Eur F 200/114, IOLR.
- 30 L/I/1/1467, fol 162.
- 31 Johnson, Mission, p. 42.
- 32 *Hindustan Times* 23 March, *Pioneer* 24 March, *Statesman* 23 March.

- 33 *Sind Observer* 21 March, *Dawn*, 23 March.
- 34 Johnson to Joyce, 5 June 1947, F 200/114.
- 35 Stephens, Pakistan, p. 148.
- 36 Cited in Johnson, Mission, p. 110.
- 37 Memo by Johnson, 27 May 1947, F 200/114.
- 38 Johnson to Joyce, 1 June 1947, F 200/163.
- 39 Johnson to Joyce, 3 June 1947, F 200/163.
- 40 Johnson to Joyce, 25 June 1947, L/I/1/1456.
- 41 *Ibid.*
- 42 Listowel to Viceroy, 13 July 1947, F 200/114.
- 43 Viceroy to Listowel, 15 July 1947, F 200/114.
- 44 Viceroy to Listowel, 14 July 1947, F 200/114.
- 45 John Turner, *Filming History*, BUFVC, London 2001, p. 114.
- 46 Viceroy to Listowel, 16 July 1947, F200/114.
- 47 Johnson to Joyce, 24 September 1947, L/I/1/515, IOLR.
- 48 *Ibid.*
- 49 P. Wood in Chandrika Kaul (ed.) *Media and the British Empire*, Palgrave Macmillan London 2006, pp. 145-159.
- 50 Johnson, Mission, p. 68.
- 51 *Herald*, 15 August.
- 52 M. Lipton and J. Finn, *The Erosion of a Relationship*, OUP London 1975, p. 86.
- 53 Pamela Mountbatten and India Hicks, *India Remembered*, Anova Books, London 2007, p. 66.
- 54 *Observer*, 31 August.
- 55 NS&N, 'The Punjab's Price for freedom', 6 September.

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