

India

A Short History

Andrew Robinson

Thames and Hudson 224 pp £16.95

INDIA presents its historian with unique challenges. It is a land of great disparity in economic conditions. It is composed of many linguistic groups and diverse cultures. India had a long history of engagement with the world outside. Yet, for a people that have so much to remember, Indians maintained an indifferent attitude to history. Reliable chronicles before the 19th century are rare. History scholarship was encouraged by the British Indian state, but the effect was not wholly salutary. While uncovering new evidence, both British imperialists and Indian nationalists built stylised versions of history to make political points. In the 20th century, the old nationalism cooled, but new nationalist agendas emerged. Even the narratives that are free of obvious biases disagree, often sharply, on the link between modern India and its past.

Writing an accessible and coherent history of India is, therefore, an ambitious task. Andrew Robinson meets the challenge successfully. Among recent books written in response to a renewed interest in the region, *India: A Short History* stands out for its distinct tone. The book is as much an effort to present India free of biases as it is a personal debt to 'a civilisation that has changed my life'. The author's many-sided engagement with the subcontinent –

FILM & EXHIBITION

STRAIGHT AFTER watching *Mr Turner*, Mike Leigh's engaging, if frequently unflattering, film dramatisation of the later years of J.M.W. Turner, I returned to the Tate Gallery's exhibition of the painter's late works, dating from after his 60th year in 1835, hoping to see the paintings with fresh eyes informed by the film.

Immediately obvious is that the excellent casting of the jowly Timothy Spall as Turner must have been strongly influenced by an 1840 portrait in the exhibition, *Turner on Varnishing Day* by William Parrott. Here a stocky, top-hatted, Turner, brushes and palette in hands, intent on putting finishing touches to a painting for a Royal Academy exhibition, has his back to two other watching Royal Academicians, who are apparently gossiping about him. Turner's famous 'red blob' spat with John Constable at a varnishing day is a highlight of the film. By contrast, Turner's 1851 death mask, placed next to this



Mr Turner A film by Mike Leigh

Late Turner Painting Set Free

An exhibition at Tate Britain, until January 25th, 2015

portrait in the exhibition, seems shockingly small, almost wizened, compared with the bed-ridden Turner's robust appearance in the film as he utters his last words, 'The sun is God!', although these may have been an invention of his admirer, John Ruskin.

Then a second, less obvious, thought occurs. Why the sketchiness of the human figures, particularly the faces, in Turner's works? Leigh, in a Tate interview, states that, although Turner was no portrait painter, 'in the simplest way he delineates character'. But this claim remains highly debatable, as it was for Turner's contemporaries; hence the many paintings in the exhibition that failed to please their patrons. Not even Turner's large canvases depicting classical mythology, prominent in the exhibition though not in the film, pay much attention to human character. In *The Fighting Temeraire* (1838) and *Rain, Steam and Speed – the Great Western Railway* (1844) people

are practically invisible: that is, the sailors on the deck of the warship and the two tiny figures in a boat on the Thames to the left of the railway bridge. A less familiar painting, *The Disembarkation of Louis-Philippe at the Royal Clarence Yard, Gosport* (1844), admittedly unfinished according to the catalogue, devotes more than half its space to the sky and does not bother to depict the French king. Indeed, the heads of the drowning people in the painting selected for the exhibition's poster, *The Morning after the Deluge* (1843), are little more than dots for the eyes, nose and mouth enclosed in a circle.

One cannot help wondering whether Turner's apparent indifference to humans in the face of nature was a product of his mighty self-absorption, verging on misanthropy, as chronicled by Leigh. Apart from an affectionate relationship with his father and later with Mrs Booth, the widow from Margate with whom an incognito

Turner eventually settled in Chelsea, the film's Turner has no other deep friendships. 'He was a giant among artists, single-minded and uncompromising, extraordinarily prolific, revolutionary in approach, consummate at his craft, clairvoyant in his vision', writes Leigh. 'Yet Turner the man was eccentric, anarchic, vulnerable, imperfect, erratic, and sometimes uncouth. He could be selfish and disingenuous, mean yet generous, and he was capable of great passion and poetry.'

Most of these characteristics emerge, often vividly, through Turner's encounters with, for example, the impecunious artist Benjamin Haydon, the supportive Ruskin,

the privately dismissive Queen Victoria and a lampoon of his paintings in a popular London theatre. The film also offers a diverting cornucopia of busy Victorian interiors and street scenes. Technology and science are woven in, too, notably railways and daguerreotypes. A fascinated Turner sits for his photograph, while muttering that photography may replace painting. He observes the magnetic properties of violet light in the spectrum of a prism, demonstrated at his house by the indomitable Mary Somerville. Yet, for all its strength of character, the film never gets quite to grips with the relationship between the man and the art. There is barely a hint of how and why the Covent Garden-born Turner became obsessed with sunlight, landscapes and seascapes. The focus is on the man, not his art. But then, the most sublime art by Turner is unlikely ever to divulge the mysteries of its creation.

Andrew Robinson

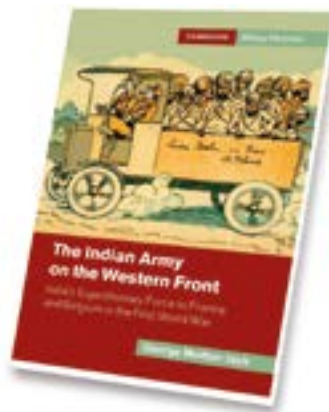
REVIEWS

Robinson has authored books on the film-maker Satyajit Ray and the poet-reformer Rabindranath Tagore – makes this book more readable than the course texts lately produced by professional historians. In terms of coverage and analyses of facts, it is just as knowledgeable and authentic. To call this book 'popular history' would be doing it an injustice.

In broad sweep, Robinson covers the Indus Valley Civilisation that began around 2600 BC, the settlements in the Gangetic plains around 1500 BC that produced the extraordinary corpus of hymns now known as the Vedas, followed by chapters on the age of Buddha, classical Hinduism, the Indo-Islamic empires, the British colonial period and postcolonial India. Some of this ground would be familiar to anyone who has already been in contact with Indian history, but even a specialist will enjoy reading it. Here history is not an arrangement of the classical, medieval and modern on a chronological scale; rather it is an attempt to understand why the classical persists into the medieval and the modern. For example, the greatest of the Indo-Islamic states, the Mughal Empire, was established by a central Asian (Mongol) warlord, but its remarkable vitality was owed to a successful incorporation of indigenous and Hindu politics within the imperial frame. Or again, in the late-1700s, the British East India Company officers designed a civil law for Bengal after manuals written in the era of classical Hinduism (c. 500 AD), unwittingly incorporating classical ideas of caste into their own legal codes.

The front cover of Robinson's book shows Benares, one of the oldest holy cities of the world, while on the back cover there appears a panoramic view of the Bandra-Worli sea link, one of modern India's key engineering projects. In *India: A Short History* these images come alive as integral, but not necessarily harmonious, parts of the Indian world today.

Tirthankar Roy



The Indian Army on the Western Front

George Morton-Jack

Cambridge University Press 335pp £65

THE INDIAN ARMY that arrived in Marseilles six weeks after the start of the war was probably the most curious of the First World War. In a battle for freedom the Indian army was from a country that was itself not free and to call it Indian was a misnomer. The Raj's racial theory restricted recruitment to the so-called 'martial races', the only Indians considered capable of fighting. So the soldiers came from a thin strip of rural communities, generally in the north, with one group, the much loved Gurkhas, from Nepal, a neutral country whose last war had been nearly a century earlier against the British themselves.

The British did value the fighting qualities of these 'martial races' but they could not accept they could ever become officers. To be an officer the person had to be pure British, one Indian parent or grandparent made the person ineligible. Even then the British of the Home Army were so contemptuous of their fellow Britons in the Indian army that they called them 'Hindus' and objected to any marriage alliance between them and a 'Hindu daughter'. In the middle of the war, when a British officer of the Indian army left the front one Home Army senior cavalry commander wrote that British forces in France were 'well rid of a stupid old Hindu'.

Modern historians have argued that the Indians should never have ventured west. Badly trained for modern warfare they could not cope with the climate and were

so frightened by German shell fire that they deliberately shot themselves in the hand, calf or foot to be invalided. It has been estimated that in the first ten days of fighting 65 per cent of all Indian wounds were self-inflicted, much higher than that for British forces.

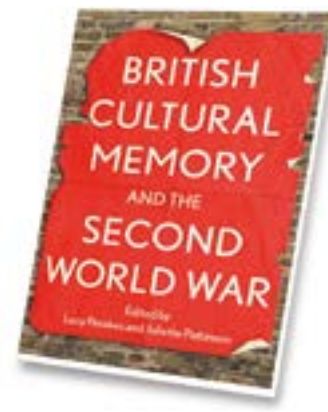
Morton-Jack brings all his forensic skills as a barrister to demolish these conclusions, showing that in the First Battle of Ypres, between October and November 1914, the Indians provided a vital link that helped the Allies avoid 'a disastrous defeat'. Also, the crucial decision to withdraw the Indian battalions in late 1915 was not because they were useless but because were needed to capture Baghdad, which they did in March 1917. Despite being used to fight rebellious tribals on the North-West Frontier, they adapted well to the mud of Flanders and their court-martial convictions for

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malingering were a fraction of those for British troops.

The research cannot be faulted but the voice we most often hear comes from the senior ranks of the Raj. Lower-ranked British soldiers were not so impressed with Frank Richards of the 2nd Royal Welch Fusiliers in a 1933 book, concluding: 'The bloody niggers were no good at fighting.' Morton-Jack dismisses this as racist thinking but does not fully examine whether the praise from on high was not motivated by the postwar imperial need of shoring up support from Indian collaborators just as the nationalist agitation was gathering strength. Despite this, by shining the light on a little discussed subject, this book fills a big hole in the literature on the war.

Mihir Bose



British Cultural Memory and the Second World War

Edited by Lucy Noakes and Juliette Paterson

Bloomsbury 218pp £16.99

THE CENTENARY of the outbreak of the First World War has reawakened controversy about its origins. Those of the Second World War are less debatable, but arguments over its legacy continue. Once a paradigm of British triumph, an event that, to trivialise, is topped only by England's World Cup victory in 1966 in evoking pride.

In recent years this view of when Britain 'stood alone (if the contribution of the Empire troops is disregarded)', 'a people's war' of equal hardship and sacrifice with class differences put aside, civilians pulling together in a brave and feisty example of British endurance fortitude and unity has been steadily chipped away. More prominence has been given, for example, to the treatment of conscientious objectors, the internment of thousands of aliens – many of them fugitives from Nazism – the embedded nature of antisemitism, the rise in crime, examples of official incompetence and contumely, sometimes even cowardice and the way that hardship continued to fall more heavily on the poor than the rich. The Second World War remains a live forum for debate about nationality, class, governance, morality and pragmatism.

In a series of essays Noakes' and Pattinson's volume probes