
British Trade Publishing in 19th Century India: An Analysis of Murray and Macmillan's Colonial Series

Abstract

British publishing in Colonial India represented a cultural link between Britain and India. While British academic publishing was determined by political agreements with educational institutions, trade publishing's success depended mainly on the readers' reception. This essay compares John Murray's Colonial and Home Library and Macmillan's Colonial Library, analysing the two publishers' similarities and differences in approaching the Indian market. This essay has two main aims: firstly, to determine the level of contribution of British trade publishing in perpetuating the link between military and cultural conquest through English literature. The second aim is to underline the importance of studying Indian readers' reactions to those cultural impositions, analysing their active interpretation of the colonial series' titles.

Key Words

Colonial India, British publishing, 19th century literature, colonial series, fiction, trade publishing

Introduction

The role of British publishing in Colonial India played a crucial part in the cultural communication process between the UK and India and is strictly linked with political and educational factors. The Indian market was extensive and potentially profitable for British publishers, which entered the market taking advantage of Indian Education Acts introducing a westernised type of education, allowing English to prevail 'on its indigenous rivals by securing a place for itself as the principal language of secondary school education' (Fraser 2008, 70). Another opportunity presented to publishers was to fulfil the need of both British colonisers and Indian readers for works of fiction and leisure reading.

While the sale of scholastic texts was determined by previous agreements with the government and academic institutions, consequently allowing British publishers to establish a permanent position in the Indian subcontinent and in other British dominions, trade publishing and the creation of colonial series involved less predictable results, depending on the readers' reception. This essay compares two different approaches to the colonial trade market, John Murray's Colonial and Home Library, active between 1846 and 1849, and Macmillan's successful Colonial Library in 1886. The span of 40 years between the two prevents an even contextual comparison, but these publishers had similar aims and were encouraged by similar circumstances, and juxtaposing them is useful to demonstrate the importance of a proactive approach involving a direct relationship with colonial readers.

The analysis of the availability and success of leisure reading also provides a problematic view on a subtler form of cultural subduing, which used English literature to promote control rather than assimilation, concealing British oppression behind 'trust, honour and obligation' (Viswanathan 2015, 108), this time not through a direct imposition on the academic curriculum, but through an indirect control of leisure activities. This essay aims at determining if and how British trade publishing contributed in fostering the cultural conquest process through English literature and how perceptive was the Indian readership in accepting or rejecting those cultural impositions. In order to have a more complete perspective on this controversial issue, it is useful to analyse the type of texts chosen by publishers, and consider 'that Indian readers were neither passive recipients of British print nor bit players in a story dominated by European production' (Joshi 2002, 18).

Cultural and Educational Contexts

An overview on different analyses of culture as an instrument of colonial power is fundamental to understand the consequent role played by British publishers. Two scholars in particular, Viswanathan and Joshi, believe in the combination of power and culture as a ruling strategy, for 'the English literary text, functioning as a surrogate Englishman in his highest and most perfect state, becomes a mask for economic exploitation' (Viswanathan 2015, 20). However, Viswanathan argues that the Indian response to this ideology is not

worth taking into account because it 'so removed from the coloniser's representational system, his understanding of the meaning of events, that it enters into the realm of another history of which the latter has no comprehension or even awareness' (Viswanathan 2015, 12). Conversely, Joshi believes that English literature becomes a means for Indians to gain the self-consciousness that eventually led them to independence, and applying her theory to British publishing in India demonstrates the influence of Indian readership in the shaping of colonial series.

The choice of English literature as the perfect tool to preserve social order has mainly two explanations. Firstly, while on the British Isles and in other colonies religion helped to maintain the crown subjects under moral and social laws, in India this was impossible, for any attempt at Christianising locals would be met with violent reactions (Viswanathan 2015, 71). Secondly, the racist consideration of Indians' minds as inferior and childlike associated them as more receptive to social and moral messages delivered through literary techniques such as plot, narratives and characters (Viswanathan 2015, 84). Therefore, while the main effect of this belief is seen in the creation of academic curricula and syllabi, an indirect reinforcement was applied through leisure fiction, which as will be analysed, was intrinsically British in topic despite the majority of readers being Indians.

Joshi agrees on the role of cultural oppression assigned to English literature, but provides a positive view of the Indian reaction to the British novel, underlining that Indian readers 'voraciously consumed the English novel as a way of understanding and learning about British culture' (Joshi 2002, 15). The typical Indian reader of English novels could belong to any social class or religion but was generally male, not necessarily approving westernisation, a student, civil servant, or a newly literate English reader who had moved to cities from the countryside (Joshi 2002, 44-45). Through her research, she provides an overview of the Indian book market in English, showing that British books represented 95 percent of book imports into India in the second half of the 19th century (Joshi 2002, 18), and argues that Indian readers were influential in determining 'the kinds of books British publishing firms such as Macmillan began to ship to the country' (Joshi 2002, 30). Analysing subscription patterns in various Indian libraries from the 1850s to the 1870s, she found that

the number of readers fluctuated according to library purchases. For example, following the acquisition of more serious titles, the number of subscriptions would drop, forcing these institutions to oblige their subscribers' taste (Joshi 2002, 56-58).

Another argument underlining Indian readers' influence associates their choice of authors in the series with ideological hidden means. For example, the denouncement of social and class inequities written by the novelist Reynolds were particularly successful among the Indians. The association the British made between the English working class and Indian subjects was reverted from an Indian perspective, for they would have found a 'symbolic affinity between their struggles against the social machinery and those of Reynolds's oppressed masses in London against the ruling classes. The fact that it was the same class that oppressed both groups was probably not lost upon Indian readers' (Joshi 2002, 82). It is therefore likely that the disappointment of the expectations imparted through education in terms of jobs and respect allowed readers to sympathise with other oppressed members of British society, underlining the importance of the impact of education.

In fact, the British colonisers' influence on Indian education is directly relevant to the role British publishers played in this market, for if cultural conquest was the aim, educational policy was the means (Boman-Behram 1942, 611). Most British publishers started their Indian business with educational texts, communicating with academic institutions and depending on the British government's arrangements on education. The first relevant decision was the 1813 Charter Act, establishing the necessity to provide for the Indians' mental and moral reform through an annual budget devoted to improve literature and science, imparted first by the East India Company and, from 1858 onwards, by the British Crown. The first financial settlement arrived in 1823, because of the slowness of the legislative machine and of theoretical discussions regarding the best form of education, which started a debate between two schools of thought, Orientalism and Anglicism.

Orientalism was most popular until the 1830s and it was based on the idea that 'an efficient Indian administration rested on an understanding of 'Indian culture'' (Viswanathan 2015, 28). However, according to Said, this attitude was only apparently respectful, as 'the

imaginative examination of things Oriental was based more or less exclusively upon a sovereign Western consciousness out of whose unchallenged centrality an Oriental world emerged' (Said 2003, 8). Anglicism was established as a reaction to Orientalism and allowed radical thinkers to establish 'a system of comparative evaluations in which one culture could be set off and measured against the other' (Viswanathan 2015, 30). With Macaulay's Anglicist speech and the subsequent English Education Act in 1835, the Indian curriculum was permanently linked with the study of English literature. Macaulay wanted a 'class of interpreters between us and the millions whom we govern—a class of persons Indian in blood and colour, but English in tastes, in opinions, in morals and in intellect' (Macaulay 2007, 12). This approach conceptualised the British cultural and linguistic imposition as a philanthropic gesture, and created an analogy between Latin and the Roman Empire and English with the British Empire, reinforcing the military and cultural conquest, linking culture with power (Boman-Behram 1942, 239).

John Murray's Colonial and Home Library

With the increase in literacy, a need for understanding British culture and for a form of entertainment aimed at colonisers and colonised, British publishers saw India as a profitable market. While the boom of colonial series started in the 1880s, one publisher foresaw the market gap and approached it before anybody else. John Murray was the first to start a series for the colonies, taking advantage of favourable historical and political changes by 1843. However, the approach was not structured enough and as will be explained, failed in 1849.

In 1843, books in India were incredibly expensive, their retail price being set in London without any consideration for the Indian market. Both Indian and British readers wanted books to be cheap, of the same quality as the domestic editions, and available soon after the publication date. Murray understood, at least partially, this need and launched its Colonial and Home Library, aimed for sale in Britain and in the colonies. The main reason convincing Murray to spread this series globally is related to copyright changes. In 1842, the

Parliament passed a new Copyright Act whose main aim was to protect publishers against foreign piracy, particularly in the American market, where piracy rates were a heavy weight on publishers' finances. The act imposed a monetary penalty against books under UK copyright imported illegally in the British dominions, enabling British publishers to sue the copyright infringers.

The second encouragement came from the British government, as the conservative Gladstone suggested Murray to produce cheap books for the colonies. The publisher had already attempted at publishing cheap books in the UK with its Family Library (published between 1829 and 1834 and eventually sold to Tegg), which was failing because it needed large sales to break even. Therefore, Murray embarked on the new project without considering the special requirements of its content as 'the thought of displacing the competition from American piracies, coupled with a sense of obligation towards the government for the new [copyright] legislation, was much more prominent than social engineering' (Fraser 1997, 345).

Despite the clear presence of a market gap, the series' failure can be explained by the inability to understand customers' needs. Firstly, Murray mainly focused on exploiting its reputation, addressing a large audience rather than segmenting it and undertaking research on specific titles: the series was broadly aimed at the 'student and lover of literature at home', 'the settler in the back-woods of America', 'the occupant of the remotest cantonments of our Indian dominions', all at a low price and 'within a short period of their appearance in England', providing the reader with the 'intellectual gratification of the works of native author, without doing any wrong or injury to those authors' interests' by acquiring pirated copies' (Fraser 1997, 351). On an economic level, Murray's *faux pas* was to set the same retail price in all countries, the main risk being that copies destined for the colonies would sell at a lower price in the UK, provoking a revenue loss.

The choice of titles was another issue. If considering the Indian market, where fiction had already proved to be appreciated, Murray's choice of titles was inappropriate. Only four out of 49 titles were novels, the rest mirrored Murray's main list of travel writing and history, showing 'the firm's preference for endorsing instruction over recreation' (Joshi

2002, 104). Most titles focused on figures as Nelson and Cromwell or on Britain at war, and were considered heavy-reading, unsuitable for the colonial readers. Murray did not acknowledge the different audiences' tastes and cultures, treating this series as a domestic one, he 'appear[ed] to convey an imperial world-view and to reflect a sense of national superiority, that was because it carried a baggage of values encoded from the cultural starting point' (Fraser 1997, 358).

In contrast to the statement in the advert, most of the works were reprints of old titles, as denounced by many colonial reviews of the series, particularly in Canada. Murray was therefore accused of 'colonial dumping', a practice 'in which old titles or large print runs were disposed of cheaply overseas in the hope of squeezing a little more profit from them rather than issuing editions of 'latest works' that were still turning a profit at home' (Joshi 2002, 103). The series' first title is a perfect example: Southey's *Life of Nelson* 'had first appeared in 1813 and then had been included in 1830 in the Family Library, in which format 21.000 copies were printed but almost 6000 were remaindered to Tegg. It had thus had a good deal of exposure in cheap forms' (Fraser 1997, 348). Moreover, as the series was 'priced at a level that might bring it into the hands of a readership lacking the moral defences attributed to affluence' (Fraser 1997, 360), Murray asked authors to edit or abridge their works from the previous versions, thus creating a different, arguably simplified edition.

In 1844 it was clear that the series was not successful in the colonies and this led to a subtle change of its marketing: 'the official designation became 'Home and Colonial Library', although the covers of the volumes still bore the 'Colonial and Home' device', while some different, more domestic recipients were added, such as 'factories' and 'parochial and lending libraries' (Fraser 1997, 371). After the series' failure in 1849, Murray stopped adding titles, blaming piracy and governmental laxity in fighting it in the colonies. The series, however, was still available and 'would still be marketed as an entity through the 1860s' (Fraser 1997, 389), with some occasional reprints merged in other series until the plates' destruction in 1907.

Macmillan's Colonial Library

By the 1880s the situation had changed significantly from the 1840s, if only in terms of higher rate of readership and education: the 1870 Forster Education Act made primary education available to everybody in imperial metropolises giving another boost to publishers, which targeted colonial editions to 'particular segments of the colonial readership, notably students and readers of fiction in English' (Fraser 2008, 74). Other factors of change included lower production costs, speedier transport and distribution networks, and a better level of information and involvement in the colonies' markets from publishers.

Macmillan in particular was very successful in Australia and Canada and had established a strong reputation in India by 1873, focusing on educational primers and textbooks and addressing Indian readers directly (Towheed 2011, 135). However, the publisher's main efforts took place between 1885 and 1886 when Maurice Macmillan combined 'a marriage tour with a business inspection of Australia and India' (Chatterjee 2002, 156), to study the colonial possibilities by talking to local experts. After his return, he reorganised its education department and on 1 March 1886 he launched 43 titles of the Macmillan's Colonial Library (later changed from 'Colonial' to 'Empire' in 1913, and to 'Overseas' in 1937), which would have an incredible success in the Indian market, including 1738 titles by 1960 (Fraser 2011, 75). Throughout the years, Macmillan had evolved its practice from sending out to India suitable books designed for England, to planning works for Indian requirements, publishing them in London before exporting them (Morgan 1943, 187). The final step would be the 1903 opening of the Bombay branch.

Macmillan's series had some common elements with Murray's, but a different strategy and perception of colonial readers' needs allowed Macmillan to be incredibly successful. As with Murray, the whole enterprise was influenced by the perception of a weak system of colonial libraries and a copyright law renewal. In 1886, the Berne Convention was signed, meaning the birth of a better regulated international publishing law, especially as the English colonies were subject to British copyright legislation. This also

meant that the British print monopoly in India was becoming more oppressive, for 'it was a considerably close market, insulated from foreign imports by British protectionist policies that included a tax on all non-British print' (Joshi 2002, 133).

However, Macmillan's structural strategy was different from Murray's. Firstly, the Colonial Library titles were only for sale in India and the colonies, protecting UK sales from cheaper editions (Joshi 2002, 102). Secondly, Macmillan realised that a higher profit could be made listening to the existing demand and was not accused of 'colonial dumping', for the titles' publication date coincided with the British date, 'sometimes even appearing in the colonies a few months *before* their domestic counterparts' (Joshi 2002, 115). Macmillan understood that due to the extensive number of readers in India, it was worth satisfying their tastes. Therefore, Macmillan's marketing, unlike Murray's, specifically targeted the Indian subcontinent. While Murray exploited its reputation to recycle its old best-sellers, Macmillan used its influence on the education market to promote an innovation: after the already mentioned Indian market's interest for fiction, it is not surprising that 'not only was the Macmillan Colonial Library the most successful colonial publishing venture of its kind, but it was also the most overtly fiction heavy' (Towheed 2011, 136). The list is specifically advertised to 'messes, clubs, school libraries, and native book-clubs' to 'give English readers out here the same advantages that are enjoyed at home' (Murray 1886, 217).

Macmillan also reinstated its reputation of quality through the choice of authors included in the series. For example, the rights for Thomas Hardy's works were bought from Sampson Low and Chatto & Windus to be included in the series, adapting typeset, format and font to those previous editions for consistency, so the colonial reader would associate Hardy with Macmillan (Towheed 2011, 139). Another example regards Edith Wharton: despite her low domestic sales, she was included in the colonial series and was given a higher royalty than more successful authors as Marion Crawford, as a demonstration of the firm's intention to provide the colonial readers with their best authors (Towheed 2011, 144-45).

Concerning the series' variety of titles, it is interesting to understand what type of fiction Macmillan considered suitable for colonial readers. Fraser notices that at first 'there

seems to be an assumption that readers in the colonies will be interested primarily in colonial themes, and in books with contiguous settings' (Fraser 2011, 123). The early titles include memoirs from New Zealand, South Africa and India, but also novels from Thomas Hardy, a literary history of England by Oliphant and progressively evolve with a resemblance to the domestic list. This is explained in different ways: Fraser argues this choice was considered a cure for the English expatriates' nostalgia, only mentioning the Indian reader to state they might have found 'a locus of fantasy, aspiration or possibly misdirected sentiment' (Fraser 2011, 124). He concludes stating that despite the 'sprinkling titles with colonial backdrops [...] this is a collection of contemporary middle-brow British novels intended for readers living far away, who at the moment wish they were not' (Fraser 2011, 124). For Towheed the series aims at being a 'high-quality, low-cost and relatively up-to-date fiction list, [...] designed to furnish British emigrants with the kernel of both high culture and contemporary cosmopolitan taste' (Towheed 2011, 147).

Joshi, however, explains that the shift from colonial themes to novels was because the former sold weakly if compared to fiction, due to the Indians' disinterest for non-fiction, and because the number of British abroad was too slim a market share for these titles to be successful (Joshi 2002, 107). She also argues that the Indian reader would assimilate the themes of these novels in different ways, without passively absorbing a message of oppression. Anti-realistic novels as F. Marion Crawford's *Mr Isaac*, where characters had complete control over their feelings in contrast to the alienating social and political circumstances, were successful with Indian readers because they 'were 'translatable' into an Indian world where they simultaneously resonated with and empowered his readers into exercising agency from within against an oppressive external world over which they were otherwise powerless' (Joshi 2002, 127). Therefore, Indian readers would either skim the incomprehensible or unsuitable parts of English texts and focus on the 'translatable' messages, or apply Indian specific realities as a filter over English themes, as seen with Reynolds's novels.

However, the explanations provided by various scholars, more or less aware and interested in the Indians' active readership, are problematic and demonstrate how

multifaceted the issue is. What appears is that Macmillan's venture, despite being more committed to market research and more careful in pleasing the audience than Murray's, merely looks for the most profitable outcome, and publicly classifies the British expatriate as the ideal target reader, implicitly supporting the use of literature as an imposition rather than providing an opportunity for social cohesion, in a society where the majority of readers were Indians. The overall message of the series changes with time 'from a numbered list of itemised books to buy, to a browseable, descriptive list of works of literature to collect: in other words, the essential apparatus for a discriminating, bourgeois culture of reading' (Towheed 2011, 148-149). Whether this culture to Macmillan's eyes could integrate the Indian native, is arguable and seems a derivation of the Anglicist attitude: it is the Indians who had to become more English to adapt to their rulers' moral and social codes.

Conclusion

In conclusion, through colonial series British publishers were indeed able to create a 'world literature of popular forms uniting a nationally and internationally diverse group of readers who consumed fiction differently, each group to its own ends' (Joshi 2002, 136). However, in the cases proposed in this essay, despite the fact that Macmillan's effort relates more positively than Murray's to the Indian market, both publishers' use of English literature still acts as an indirect reinforcement of the cultural 'mask of conquest' mainly promoted through education, rather than a tool to improve mutual understanding and collaboration. The ability of Indian readers to actively interpret the texts of these series, finding a meaning significant to them, is also another important element to consider in order to aim for a more objective picture when analysing this complex segment of history.

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