

# Imperial Player: Richard Burton in Sindh

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The Victorian traveller Sir Richard Burton (1821-90) became famous for his sensational narrative of a journey to Mecca in disguise in 1853, published in 1855-6. Less well-known is Burton's account of his travels in Sindh, in present-day Pakistan, from 1844 to 1849.<sup>1</sup> Before embarking on his career as one of the leading explorers and adventurers in the nineteenth century, Burton was stationed in Gujarat as an officer in the Indian Army. It was here that his voracious appetite for Oriental languages and Oriental knowledge was whetted.<sup>2</sup> Burton was transferred from Gujarat to the Indian Survey in Sindh, where he came to the attention of Sir Charles Napier (1809-54), who had conquered the province of Sindh in 1843. Napier required surveillance reports about the morale among the population. It was during the five years he spent in Sindh that Burton first tried his hand at impersonating natives, working as an undercover agent in disguise.<sup>3</sup>

Burton's book *Scinde; or, The Unhappy Valley* was published in two volumes by Richard Bentley in 1851. As was customary in nineteenth-century travel writing, it appeared simultaneously with a more ethnographic account, *Sindh and The Races that Inhabit the Valley of the Indus; with Notices of the Topography and History of the Province*, published by William H. Allen & Co. What makes Burton's travel narrative both more interesting and more tantalizing than *A Personal Narrative of a Pilgrimage to El-Medinah and Meccah* (published in 1855-6) is the fact that nowhere did Burton refer to his secret missions. Whereas he openly advertised his pilgrimage to Mecca and Medina as the first instance of a European to penetrate the sacred cities of Islam incognito, his travel account of Sindh is silent about his undercover activities in the guise of a native. It was only in the Postscript appended to his next book, *Falconry in the Valley of the Indus* (1852), that Burton described his forays into native life in the persona of a half-Arab, half-Persian trader. 'The

European official in India seldom, if ever, sees anything in its real light, so dense is the veil which the fearfulness, the duplicity, the prejudice and the superstitions of the natives hang before his eyes,' he remarked, referring obliquely to his official mission to gain intelligence (65). Only years later, in the Terminal Essay of his ten-volume translation of the *Arabian Nights*, which was circulated to private subscribers in 1885, did he explicitly mention his intelligence work (Brodie 1967, p. 66). It was Lady Isabel Burton (1831-96), his wife, who revealed his double life as a spy in the biography about her husband that she published after his death.<sup>4</sup>

The most striking feature of *Scinde; or, the Unhappy Valley* is the boisterous sense of humour that suffuses the text. The whole book is an extended joke at the expense of the addressee, one John Bull—clearly a parody of the average armchair reader Burton has in mind. John Bull is presented as a 'fat, old, testy, but very unbloodthirsty *papa de famille*,' grabbing the opportunity to travel as long as Mrs. Bull permits it and 'when there is no squabble. . . in your happy home, — no murders in the neighbourhood to engross your attention' (vol. 1, pp. 4; 2). Large swathes of the narrative are written in the form of direct address to John Bull, serving to characterize him as a grouchy philistine, mainly concerned with securing his animal comforts while travelling. Bull's breath-taking ignorance about the world outside his home is wickedly sent up, as in the following excerpt from his diary, when he notes, 'All to be seen was a troop of beggars, calling themselves "Fukyers," who looked very surly before I gave them a few coppers' (vol. 1, pp. 179-80).

Burton is not above taking a joke himself, however. The narrator is presented as a tourist guide fond of striking a pompous attitude:

I elevated myself, if you recollect, upon my stirrups, extended my right arm, and with the impressive expression of countenance with which an effective cicerone standing at the

Camaldoli pronounces the apophthegm, "Vedi Napoli e poi muori," I looked at you and exclaimed –

"There, Mr. Bull, lies the far-famed, the classic Indus!" (vol. 1, p. 185)

This Romantic pose is immediately deflated by John Bull, who complains that the river 'wasn't broader than the Thames at Black'all', apart from which it was 'still as a mill-pond, foul as a London sewer, shallow, flat-banked, full of sand islets, – briefly, an ugly sight' (vol. 1, p. 186). The narrator is portrayed as tiresomely over-officious, much to the disgust of the easy-going John Bull, who notes in his diary, 'I am sick of them, but that fellow B. will insist upon my visiting all the sights' (vol. 1, p. 179). After indulging in a long diatribe against the stinginess of the government towards army subalterns, the narrator cannot resist a wry joke at his own expense: 'Were he that chatteth with you Lt.-Gen. Sir R. Burton, G.C.B., instead of being a small lieutenant, then might he have some hope of an occasional cheer from you, to enliven his squabble with a brother veteran' (vol. 1, pp. 93-4). The narrator expends copious advice on how to ride a camel, only to relate the hilarious tale of his own first ride:

After considerable difficulty in getting on the roaring, yelling beast, it became palpably necessary to draw my sword and prick his nose each time it crept round disagreeably near my boot. Finding his efforts to bite me unavailing, he changed tactics, and made a point of dashing under every low thorn tree, as close to the trunk as possible, in the hope of rubbing his rider off. . . . At last he settled upon the plan of running away; arched his long neck till his head was almost in contact with mine, and in this position indulged in a canter, which felt exactly like the pace of a horse taking a five-barred gate every second stride. . . .

I did not mount that animal again. (vol. 1, p. 95-6)

The book brims over with tomfoolery and youthful exuberance. The strain of facetiousness spills into the scholarly apparatus of the text. In one footnote Burton gives the original Sindhi term for 'stranger' noting tongue-in-cheek that it was 'a word with a plurality of signification, or, rather, none at all in particular' (vol. 1, p. 167). In another, he refers to the five products of the cow deemed sacred by Hindus, adding, 'if you want to know what they are, consult a Hindostanee dictionary' (vol. 2, p. 288). He even throws in a sly in-joke about his spy status. While recounting an ancient legend, he describes how a caliph had sent a confidential agent, a Hakim, into Sindh, to report on the state of affairs. The spy returned, 'saying that the water was black, the fruit sour and poisonous, the ground stony, and the earth

saline.' In a footnote Burton remarks, 'That Hakim must have been a most discerning traveller; his brief account of Scinde and Scindians is a perfect specimen of pregnant truth' (vol. 1, p. 125). Even a reader ignorant of the background of his travels would not have failed to catch the ironically self-congratulatory reference to Burton's own travel narrative.

On the other hand, Burton cannot resist showing off his expertise in things Oriental whenever he can. The narrator lavishes attention on points of Oriental etiquette, coaching John Bull to follow certain immutable rules:

Whenever anything is said to you, you will be pleased gravely to stroke your beard, with the right hand for goodness' sake! frown a little, roll your head much with a heavy ferocious roll, and ejaculate syllable by syllable, Alhamdu l'illah, "Praise to the Lord," – *à propos de rien*. When a man shows you any thing admirable, such as his horse or his son, you will perform the same pantomime, and change your words to Mashallah, or "What the Lord pleases," . . . Whatever action you undertake, such as rising from your seat or sitting down, calling for your pipe or dismissing its bearer, beginning or ending dinner, in fact, on all active occasions, you must not forget to pronounce Bismillah, "In the name of the Lord," with as much pomposity as you can infuse into your utterance. By this means you will be considered a grave and reverend personage. . . (vol. 2, pp. 10-11)

The text offers a wealth of information on the myths, manners and mores of the people of Sindh – backed up by an even more impressive display of erudition in the purely ethnographic companion volume to the book. Passages of boisterous playfulness are interspersed with lengthy disquisitions on the history and geographic features of the region, bristling with footnotes that demonstrate Burton's learning and formidable linguistic skills. Despite the undercurrent of self-mockery, the narrator is clearly anxious to convey the impression of a scholar who has accumulated a hoard of Oriental wisdom. He is fond of correcting other travellers in the region, such as his predecessor in the Great Game, Alexander Burnes.<sup>5</sup> He flaunts his insight into typical aspects of Sindhian life, ranging from the use of bhang or hashish – 'I have often taken the drug' (vol. 1, p. 262) – to intimate details of the toilette of Sindhian women. The climax of the narrative is an account of a visit to a Baluchi chief, Amir Ibrahim Khan. He was a ruler who had collaborated with the British and thus retained a measure of political power. Here Burton displays his skill in political manoeuvring, triumphantly demonstrating British superiority in the game of one-upmanship he plays with the wily native chief: 'Ibrahim Khan has quietly but decidedly assumed the very, very great man. He expects that we should, according to custom, await

his signal for ending the visit. Therefore we will do nothing of the kind, and he will respect us much the more' (vol. 2, p. 154-5).

For all his enthusiasm about amassing information on Oriental life, it is clear that Burton does not like Sindh. The first glimpse the traveller gets of the landscape is unprepossessing: 'a mere line of low coast, sandy as a Scotchman's whiskers – a glaring waste, with visible as well as palpable heat playing over its dirty yellow surface!' (vol. 1, p. 21). The main impression of the country one is left with by the book is of heat and sand. The port of Karachi launches an assault on all one's senses: 'The perpetual tomtoming and squeaking of native music, mingle with the roaring, bawling voices of the inhabitants, the barkings and bayings of the stranger-hating curs, . . . The dark narrow alleys through which nothing bulkier than a jackass can pass with ease, boast no common sewer. . . ' (vol. 1, p. 29). The text conflates native inhabitants and animal scavengers to offer a cocktail of cacophany, nauseous smells and murky sights. While admitting that the Sindhians have been subjected to wave after wave of political conquest, Burton nevertheless regards them as a degenerate race of slaves, whose natural vices are 'inertness and cowardice, lying and gasconading' [boasting] (vol. 1, vol. 267). Their main activities consist in getting drunk and consuming hashish. At this point in his career, Burton is yet to find the chivalrous Oriental race that he so admires and with whom he identifies – the Bedouin in the deserts of Arabia.

Sindh was, of course, a newly conquered province. The British were faced with hostility and the threat of insurgency wherever they went. 'Everything in this place seems to hate us', Burton remarks (vol. 2, p. 221). He expatiates at length upon his political views for managing the unruly population, strongly advocating military rule as the only form of governance suitable to Orientals. The lenient approach taken by the British will only lead to contempt for the new rulers, he argues. A case in point are the punishments meted out to criminals. The Asians are accustomed to barbaric punishments. By contrast, the indulgent British legal system can only serve to inspire disrespect. As he points out scathingly: 'The Affghan is detected stealing; he expects to have his right hand chopped off: we lodge him for a few months, in what he considers a luxurious retreat, where he can eat, drink, doze, smoke his pipe, and abuse the Frank [European] in plenary animal satisfaction' (vol. 2, p. 69).

Prior to 1857, in pre-'Mutiny' Britain, where the belief in the benevolence of British rule was still strong, it was Burton's ideas on Indian policy that provoked a reprimand in the press. The reviewer of the *Athenaeum* rapped him over the knuckles for harbouring 'very

extreme opinions' and warned him not to disregard 'those well-established rules of moderation which no one can transgress with impunity' (1851, p. 1111). In response Burton, who loved nothing more than a good mud-slinging match, set out enthusiastically to expose the *ignorance crasse* which besets the mind of the home-reader and his oracle the critic.' His main argument was that the Eastern mind itself was 'always in extremes' and incapable of moderation. (1852, pp. 59; 70). To bolster his authority on the Orient he revealed how he had acquired his wisdom—through impersonating natives. In the Postscript to his next book, a volume on the art of falconry, which also drew on his experiences at Sindh, he described the double life he had led:

With hair falling upon his shoulders, a long beard, face and hands, arms and feet, stained with a thin coat of henna, Mirza Abdullah of Bushire [in Persia] – your humble servant, gentle reader – set out upon many and many a trip. He was a Bazzaz, a vender of fine linen, calicoes and muslin; – such chapmen are sometimes admitted to display their wares even in the sacred harem by "fast" and fashionable dames; – and he had a little pack of *bijouterie* and *virtù* reserved for emergencies. . . . Thus he could walk into most men's houses quite without ceremony; even if the master dreamed of kicking him out, the mistress was sure to oppose such measure with might and main. He secured numberless invitations, was proposed to by several papas, and won, or had to think he won, a few hearts; . . . (1852, p. 66)

Burton certainly succeeds in his aim of proving that he penetrated Sindhian culture to an extent no one had done before him. Strangely, however, the main insight he delivers is not that of the Eastern mind, marked by immoderation. Instead, his writing reveals the extraordinary pleasure he gained from slipping into native culture in disguise. This ploy even enabled him to insinuate himself into a harem, a feat that had been rarely, if ever, achieved by male travellers and accordingly had acquired the status of a hoary Western fantasy. His self-revelation served as an authorising strategy for the ethnographic information he had so painstakingly accumulated. But it does more – it reveals Burton's fascination with play-acting.

The next review in the *Athenaeum* was far nastier in tone. The reviewer sneers:

That a good many adventures may be met with, and a good deal of knowledge of a certain kind obtained by an European official in India, who thinks it worth while to assume an equivocal disguise, imitate native feats of sharp practice, and spend months in succession in the houses of female busy bodys, we can also easily understand. But we *cannot* understand how it should happen that the cultivation of habits so wholly irregular should be the best possible discipline for keeping the judgment and the taste in perfect order. . . (1852, p. 766)

What the reviewer implies is not that Burton has gone native and actually crossed the boundary to adopt another culture – it is Burton's penchant for native slumming, as it were, that finds his disapproval. Burton has overstepped class lines to delve into a low-life world of native wheeling and dealing and cloying domestic intimacy. In indulging his pleasure in cultural masquerade, he displays above all a lack of self-control. And the reviewer goes on to hint darkly, 'Tell me who you live with, and I will tell you what you are' (*ibid.*). What this comment is infused with is a strain of antitheatrical thought that goes back to Plato – the belief that performing a role spills over and contaminates the player. In other words: you become what you act.

This was not the first time that Burton would find himself accused of cultivating the wrong friends. As a young subaltern he was often called "White Nigger" for spending so much time in the company of his *munshis*, native scholars who taught him the languages and the social rules which he sought to acquire (Isabel Burton 1893, p. 144). More dramatic was the episode that put paid to his career in India. Apparently one of the missions assigned to him by Napier was to investigate the boy brothels in Sindh. The confidential report he filed for the General contained explicit details on pederastic practices which would have been deeply shocking to strait-laced Victorian sensibilities. In the Terminal Essay of his *Arabian Nights* Burton claimed that when the report fell into the wrong hands, it was used by his enemies against him with the insinuation that it clearly took one to know one. Despite the dogged persistence of Burtonophiles, the report has never been discovered (Brodie 1967, pp. 69; 347). Nevertheless, it is apparent that despite his intelligence and brilliant linguistic skills, Burton's official career never got off the ground. All his life he was an embarrassment for his diverse employers. He never rose to a high rank, either as a soldier or as a consul. Even the Royal Geographic Society, which financed his expedition to the sources of the Nile and awarded him a gold medal, never entrusted him with another scheme of exploration.<sup>6</sup> In a review of Burton's life in the *Edinburgh Review*, the author attributes Burton's blighted career to his 'unrestrained license' and his want of control,<sup>7</sup> rooted in adolescent high spirits.<sup>7</sup>

Burton's fondness for dressing up as a native is manifestly not a sign of 'going native', of excessive empathy with other cultures. On the contrary, what his skill in impersonating natives demonstrates is the cultural superiority of the British. Native identity can be appropriated at will for the purposes of ferreting out the secrets of the colonized. In the case of Burton, cultural masquerade is a strategy to bolster colonial power (Roy

1998). What is remarkable, however, is the sheer excess of theatricality that Burton reveals. Perhaps the most striking thing about Burton is his delight in histrionics. Take, for instance, the following passage, where Burton describes how he presents himself as an Englishman during the day and an Oriental at night:

The timid villagers collected in crowds to see a kind of Frank in a sort of Oriental dress, riding spear in hand, and pistols in holsters, towards the little encampment pitched near their settlements. But regularly every evening on the line of march the Mirza issued from his tent and wandered amongst them, collecting much information and dealing out more concerning an ideal master, – the Feringhee [foreigner] supposed to be sitting in state amongst the Moonshees, the Scribes, the servants, the wheels, the chains, the telescopes and the other magical implements in which the camp abounded. When travelling, the Mirza became this mysterious person's factotum. . . (1852, p. 67)

What is the most noteworthy aspect about this passage is the exorbitant pleasure in performance it displays. One is left with the suspicion that Burton delights in theatricality for its own sake. As Mirza, Burton does collect information, but clearly gains more pleasure from play-acting. In a dizzying theatrical flourish, we are presented with Burton acting at least two roles – that of the sahib as well as that of the native. Burton presents the sahib as performer, acting a role in much the same way as the native character Burton impersonates. The authentic Englishman is as much a spectacle as the fraudulent native, even if here he is mainly created in the imagination of the awe-struck audience.

Significantly, Burton does not aim for discretion in his roles as a native. Instead, he opts for flamboyantly conspicuous disguises, which cannot fail to attract attention. He is just enjoying himself too much to rein in his theatrical abilities in the interest of personal safety. Indeed, it is his exhibitionistic pleasure in make-believe rather than the fact that he adopts native disguise that marks him out as an outsider in the society he lived in. In many ways Burton is a throwback to an earlier age, the Romantic period with its affinity for the Orient and its pleasure in striking theatrical poses – as exemplified by the iconic figure of Byron. In colonial India the generation of East India Company officials at the turn of the eighteenth century were marked by an avid interest in Oriental lore. Administrator-scholars such as Sir William Jones spent hours every day poring over Persian or Sanskrit writings in the company of their *munshis*. The eighteenth-century British in India were often depicted in Indian clothes, smoking a hookah, or were known to have Indian wives or mistresses, like Sir Charles Metcalfe or Sir David Ochterlony, Resident at Delhi. Ochterlony

was famous for his daily constitutional on elephant back in the company of his thirteen wives (Moorhouse 1983, p. 185). But there was no question of these colonial officials endangering the prestige of British rule by their incursions into Indian culture. Indeed, their cultural appropriation only served to shore up the omniscience of the rulers. During the 1840s – the decade that Burton spent in India – colonial society was undergoing a profound change. In the autobiographical fragment that Burton wrote for his biographer, Francis Hitchman, he describes a world where most officers still kept a native mistress or *Búbú*, termed a 'walking dictionary' for teaching the Englishman Hindustani (Isabel Burton 1893, p. 135). But the 1840s saw an influx of English wives into India, and an increasing social segregation between the British and Indians. In point of fact, the policy of social distance had been in place since the turn of the eighteenth century, when Governor-General Cornwallis instigated the Anglicisation of government service, allegedly to bring native corruption and nepotism to a halt. The triumph of what was termed the Anglicist school in the government of India in the 1820s further exacerbated official disdain and contempt for native tradition. Officially, India was to be remade into a model of benevolent autocracy, and slowly inducted into the higher wisdom of democratic governance (Hutchins 1967; Metcalf 1994).

Mid-Victorian society saw the appearance of a militant form of evangelicalism, tied to the spread of the public school modelled on the system introduced by Thomas Arnold at Rugby. Public schools were increasingly seen as training grounds for the empire, and a large number of boys left school to take up imperial careers. The new mid-Victorian ideal of imperial masculinity was closely linked to the emergence of muscular Christianity in England, which set a high premium on earnestness and self-discipline. It is this ethos that marked the emergent paradigm of manhood in the colonial context in the 1840s and 50s – the so-called Punjab school, consisting of a band of brothers who made their mark in the administration of the North-Western part of the empire under the tutelage of the Lawrence siblings, Henry and John. The happy few belonging to this set – men like John Nicholson and Herbert Edwardes – later secured a place in imperial hagiography, earning immortal status through their role during the Mutiny (Tidrick 1992; Wurgraft 1983). Even when evangelical zeal began to ebb, the ethic of duty to the empire remained firmly in place. The British were in India to do a job. India was seen as a testing-ground for one's character. What counted was setting a good example to the natives. To this end, Oriental study was now denounced as the pursuit of arcane knowledge

(Hutchins 1967, p. 25). As the historian Francis Hutchins points out, 'India came to be valued not for its pleasures, or promise, but precisely because it was possible to be desperately unhappy there' (29). Nothing was more destructive to the ethos of work than the solipsistic pursuit of pleasure. Burton's flagrant pleasure in performance was bound to clash with the belief in the value of self-discipline. What he implied was that imperialism was bound up with pleasure – a notion that was emphatically denied in the self-image of the British in India.

Not that the British in India repudiated the importance of performance. Indeed, they were continually engaged in staging a performance of ideal Englishness – white men wearing white masks, as one historian has it (Hyam 1967, p. 156-62). Much of the mystique of the British in India rested on the power of make-believe. Years later, one colonial official would put it in the following words:

Our life in India, our very work more or less, rests on illusion. I had the illusion, wherever I was, that I was infallible and invulnerable in my dealings with Indians. How else could I have dealt with angry mobs, with cholera-stricken masses, and with processions of religious fanatics? ... They expressed something of the idea when they called us the 'Heaven Born', and the idea is really make believe – mutual make believe. They, the millions, made us believe we had a divine mission. We made them believe they were right.<sup>8</sup>

What distinguished this model of performance from Burton was his distance from the role he was playing. Playing consists in entering a play frame, a mood of 'as if' that involves an awareness that one was only playing (Bateson 1972). By contrast, the British in India tended to (or pretended to) believe their own performance. They succumbed to the illusion they themselves had created – they believed what they acted. This gave their role-playing the stamp of authenticity. As the passage quoted above demonstrates, it was this belief that inspired the idealism many Indian Civil Service officers actually displayed. Hannah Arendt once remarked that the empire was an arena for men who clung to petrified boyhood ideals (Arendt 1951, p. 211). Despite the racial ambivalence with which Burton liked to shock his peers, Burton was far more interested in parading his mastery over a range of identity roles than in actually adopting them. However, in a colonial society that deeply distrusted ostentatious theatricality, Burton's ease in slipping in and out of identities as if they were merely roles he was playing marked him down as an imposter. He was rightly suspected of ambivalence towards his own Englishness (Kennedy 2005).

Burton's own self-image was clearly modelled on a Byronic ideal of an aristocratic rebel against middle-class

hypocrisy and moralism (Brantlinger 1988, pp. 158-71). Occasionally in his book he lapses into a melancholy, romantic mood, as in his rendering of a Baluch love ballad that he has translated into English. The lyric abounds with unabashedly poetic lines, such as the following: 'As the tree joys at the prospect of the blossom, / So expanded my heart with delight, / The torments of months left my heart.' Burton frames his translation with ironic disclaimers: 'the hero carries off the heroine by main force, knocking, at the same time, every one he can on the head', but cannot resist the temptation to reproduce romantic poems and legends at length (vol. 2, pp. 203-4). In his later work, particularly in *A Personal Narrative of a Pilgrimage to El-Medinah and Meccah*, (1855-6) he constructed himself as a solitary gentleman-traveller who identified with the chivalric nomads of the desert. The empire seemed to present him with the opportunity of freedom and escape from the crass and vulgar civilisation of Europe. Nothing aroused his scorn more than bourgeois hypocrisy. He was fond of exposing the cant that sugar-coated imperialism, as in the following passage:

Whenever Madam Britannia is about to break the eighth commandment, she simultaneously displays a lot of piety, much rhapsodising about the bright dawn of civilisation, and the infinite benefit conferred upon barbarians by her permitting them to become her subjects, and pay their rents to her. (vol. 1, p. 182)

For Burton, the empire was founded on nothing but naked power – the discourse of the civilising mission of the British was merely a veneer to cover up the unpalatable truth. Burton's sense of superiority is not restricted to natives. He displays a deep arrogance toward middle class British society. Although his books (especially the account of his pilgrimage to Mecca) were well received by the general public, he addressed his work to fellow Orientalists and scholars, as his often pedantic style makes clear. In a gesture of defiance directed at bourgeois sensibilities he insists on treating the empire as a game. And this is precisely what might lie at the core of the mistrust he inspired among both his superiors and his peers.

At first sight this idea might appear paradoxical – Victorian culture was suffused with the spirit of play. Victorian society experienced a games revolution which took hold at all levels of society. Public school culture saw a shift from the code of moral earnestness to a cult of athleticism (Mangan 1975; Vance 1975). The games ethos was explicitly linked to the empire – it was intended to hone the character of future generations of imperial administrators or officers by instilling into them qualities

such as leadership and team spirit. The playing fields of the public schools were regarded as preparation for the battlefields of empire. The Reverend J. E. C. Welldom, headmaster of Harrow School, declared, 'In the history of the British Empire it is written that England has owed her sovereignty to her sports.'<sup>9</sup> The imperial games cult was cultivated in the service of a higher purpose. Play was a serious affair with moral implications. Games, it might appear, evolved into a cornerstone of imperial policy.

However, the problem lies in the fact that there is nothing intrinsic in the nature of play that lends itself to a higher moral purpose. Play, as play theorist Johan Huizinga points out, has no moral function. 'Play . . . lies outside morals. In itself it is neither good nor bad.' (213) Roger Caillois speaks of play as essentially meaningless: 'Play is an occasion of pure waste: waste of time, energy, ingenuity, skill, and often of money' (5-6). Victorian culture attempted to harness play to inculcate notions of patriotism and duty in the service of the empire. With his celebration of play for the sake of play, what Burton insinuated was that the game of empire might serve no ulterior function. His rebellion against middle-class notions of moral earnestness and the cant of the civilising mission of the empire inspired the suspicion that in the final analysis, the British in India had no serious purpose at all.<sup>10</sup> His view of empire comes disturbingly close to Arendt's definition of imperialism as expansion for expansion's sake (1951). The moral justification of empire, the mission to uplift the unenlightened races, appeared in this light as nothing so much as sheer humbug.

To be sure, Burton did have a clear view of the purpose of his own writing. Few travellers are as explicit as he is about how knowledge is bound up with power. In the preface of *Sindh and The Races that Inhabit the Valley of the Indus; with Notices of the Topography and History of the Province* he points out that 'Knowledge is power,' citing as proof Oriental contempt for rulers ignorant of their mores (p. v). In the account of his pilgrimage to Mecca, he presented himself as an adventurer exercised by the urge to remove 'that huge white blot which in our maps still notes the Eastern and the Central regions of Arabia' (1855-6, vol. 1, p. 1). For all his respect for Islam, he clearly saw his role as that of a vanguard laying the groundwork for later conquest: 'It requires not the ken of a prophet to foresee a day when political necessity. . . will compel us to occupy in force the fountain-head of Al-Islam' (1855-6, vol. 2, p. 231). He regarded himself as an indispensable agent of British imperialism. Perhaps Burton himself realised that his foregrounding of playful theatricality had detrimental implications for the prestige of the empire. In a noteworthy passage in his *Personal Narrative*

of a Pilgrimage to El-Madinah and Meccah he reflects ruefully upon his stay in India:

I am convinced that the natives of India cannot respect a European who mixes with them familiarly, or especially who imitates their customs, manners, and dress. The tight pantaloons, the authoritative voice, the pocourante manner, and the broken Hindustani imposes upon them – have a weight which learning and honesty, which wit and courage, have not. This is to them the master's attitude: they bend to it like those Scythian slaves that faced the sword but fled from the horsewhip. (vol. 1, p. 40)

Once again, the contemptuous tone is directed at both his peers, the philistines of colonial society, and at the slavish mentality of the Indians. Nonetheless, in the revised edition of his book on Sindh, *Sindh Revisited: with Notices of the Anglo-Indian Army; Railroads; Past, Present, and Future, etc.* (1877), published after a second trip to Sindh thirty years after his first, all references to wearing native clothes are carefully deleted. In the original volumes the first-person narrator, an old colonial hand, introduces John Bull to Indian clothes to ease the hardship of travel in the heat. In the later version references to native garments are changed into European articles of clothing, and accounts of native habits adopted by the experienced colonial are rigorously cut. A case in point is a reference to the Oriental custom of applying kohl around the eyes: 'Now draw a little surmeh [kohl] along the inside of your eyelids: it will make you look quite an Eastern. . . ' which appears in the first version of the book (vol. 2, p. 40). It disappears without a trace in the revised edition. In post-Mutiny colonial society, imperial prestige was closely bound up with drawing ever more rigid boundaries between the rulers and the ruled. If Burton had evoked distrust with his eccentric behaviour in the 1840s, now his behaviour would have been considered outrageous. His flirting with an Oriental identity would have been seen as a deliberate infringement of the imperial policy of segregation between ruler and ruled: it would have placed him beyond the pale of imperial society.

There is no doubt that Burton's pleasure in disguise was rooted in his fascination with secrecy. All his life he was attracted to secret brotherhoods which promised access to esoteric knowledge. Indeed, he claimed to have been made a master Sufi (Isabel Burton 1893, p. 150). The idea of belonging to a secret club fuelled his sense of elitism. The pleasure of spying, too, consists in the thrill of observing without being observed. Occasionally, however, a note of self-doubt creeps into his writing about how effective the entire notion of surveillance in native disguise was. At one stage he engages with his forerunners in the Great Game, spies like Alexander

Burnes and Arthur Connolly<sup>11</sup>, who had attained mythical status:

Thus you see how it is that many of our eminent politicals – men great at Sanskrit and Arabic, who spoke Persian like Shirazis, and had the circle of Oriental science at their fingers' ends; clever at ceremony at Hindoos, dignified in discourse as Turks, whose "Reports" were admirable in point of diction, and whose "Travels" threatened to become standard works, turned out to be diplomatic little children in the end, which tries all things. They had read too much; they had written too much; they were a trifle too clever, and much too confident. Their vanity tempted them to shift their nationality; from Briton to become Greek, in order to meet Greek on the roguery field; and lamentably they always failed. (vol. 2, p. 7)

Indeed, many of the most celebrated colonial spies had come to a disastrous end – Connolly was executed as a spy by the Amir of Bokhara in 1842, Alexander Burnes was murdered in 1841 by an Afghan mob in the Afghan uprising that followed in the wake of the First Afghan War (1838-40). It marked the culmination of one of the greatest catastrophes in colonial foreign policy. Burton reflects ironically that whatever their other shortcomings, it is impossible to outwit the natives in duplicity. He remarks, 'I would rarely attempt feinting at them; and finally, I would never try to penetrate into their secret motives, well knowing that there I should be overmatched' (vol. 2, p. 8).

Of course, this is precisely what Burton attempts throughout his career, and this is the pretext for his colonial masquerade. It might be that in this passage Burton reveals his suspicion about whether he, too, was being observed and manipulated for the purposes of his native interlocutors. As he mentions casually in his autobiographical fragment, many of his travels were undertaken in the company of his *munshi*, Mirza Mohammed Hosayn of Shiraz, who acted as both chaperone and guard against gross blunders on Burton's part. Hosayn was a member of the Persian Agha Khan clan in exile in Sindh, who were applying pressure on the British to support an armed rebellion against the ruling government in Persia. Burton spent much time in the Agha Khan's household, ostensibly to perfect his Persian and to be trained in Muslim practices, but in reality to inform his superiors about the doings of their ally (Lovell 1998, p. 61; Rice 1990, pp. 89-100). His words suggest that in the contest of gamesmanship with duplicitous natives, Burton might well have found himself outwitted and outplayed.

At one point in his narrative, Burton describes how a native fakir sees through his native dress to perceive his identity as a Frank. The fakir proceeds to pour a stream of invective on the travellers, cursing them as 'crows

dressed in parrot's feathers! (vol. 2, p. 219). While he is merely in Moslem garments, not in disguise, the incident nevertheless leaves a discordant note. It introduces a hint of insecurity in the text about the extent to which Burton is in control of his image.

Burton's legacy lived on in *fin de siècle* imperial culture. A string of fictive Englishmen in native disguise – such as Kipling's Strickland or Flora Annie Steel's Jim Douglas<sup>12</sup> appeared on the scene, travelling back and forth between different cultures as they pleased. In the meantime, the boundaries between the British and the colonised became increasingly impermeable. But while these imaginary figures – possibly modelled on Burton, as Lady Burton asserted (Isabel Burton 1893, p. 159) – lived out fantasy versions of walnut-juice stained Englishmen slipping in and out of native cultures with dazzling ease, it was Burton's real-life exploits that carried the disturbing suggestion that the empire might be nothing but a game played for its own sake.

Burton has rightly been regarded as one of the founding fathers of anthropology. In his travel writing he accumulated a vast wealth of information about other cultures – information that catered to the obsession of the colonial state with amassing knowledge about the people they ruled. His penchant for travelling in native disguise served to underline his sense of racial superiority towards natives and his arrogance toward his hidebound peers. Nevertheless, his writing is riven with ironies. The excessive theatricality flaunted in his texts drew attention to the pleasures bound up with the empire – as one vast playing field for natives from a cold, constricted island. He ironically exposed the justificatory myth of empire as so much cant. What his solipsistic games laid bare was the unpleasant truth that empire might not, after all, serve a higher moral purpose.

#### NOTES

1. An earlier version of this piece appeared in *Travel Writing in the Nineteenth Century: Filling the Blank Spaces*, ed. Tim Youngs (London: Anthem, 2006), pp. 71-86.
2. He allegedly spoke twenty-five languages and innumerable dialects. (Brodie 1967, p. 333).
3. I draw on the biographies by Brodie 1967, Farwell 1963, Lovell 1998, McLynn 1990 and Rice 1990.
4. Isabel Burton 1893, pp. 160-1. She includes two versions of his Indian experiences, drawing on autobiographical fragments written by Burton and the reminiscences he dictated to her.
5. Sir Alexander Burnes (1805-41) became famous for his travels in Central Asia on a covert mission to explore the options for a British invasion of Afghanistan. His *Travels into Bokhara* was an immediate bestseller when it appeared in 1834.
6. His quest for the sources of the Nile was undertaken jointly

- with fellow-explorer John Hanning Speke (1827-64) and culminated in an acrimonious controversy and Speke's suicide.
7. *The Edinburgh Review* 1893, p. 441. It is manifest that the piece was written by Henry Reeve, editor of the journal and an old enemy of Burton's. In an aside the author refers to his own previous review of the *Arabian Nights* (p. 467). Reeve had attacked it as one of the most indecent books in the English language (see Brodie 1967, p. 18).
  8. Walter Lawrence, *The India We Served*, 1929, qtd. in Eldridge 1996, p. 126.
  9. Qtd. in Mangan 1985, p. 36.
  10. See Bivona 1990, pp. 42-50. I am indebted to Bivona for the notion of the empire as a game.
  11. Alexander Connolly (1807-42) was a British officer who travelled in Central Asia (partly in Muslim disguise) as an agent to collect information on Russian territorial designs in the region. His *Journey to the North of India* appeared in 1834. He coined the phrase the Great Game for the rivalry between Britain and Russia.
  12. Flora Annie Steel, *On the Face of the Waters* (1896).

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