

TRADING KNOWLEDGE: THE EAST INDIA COMPANY'S ELEPHANTS IN INDIA AND BRITAIN*

SUJIT SIVASUNDARAM

Gonville and Caius College, Cambridge

ABSTRACT. *During the East India Company's rule of India, Britons observed the pervasiveness of elephants in local modes of warfare, hunting, trade, and religious symbolism. The colonizers appropriated this knowledge about elephants: for instance, in the taking-over of Mughal trade routes or Tipu Sultan's stables. What Indians knew about the elephant also fed into a metropolitan culture of anthropomorphism, exemplified in the celebrated shooting of the elephant Chuny in 1826. Anthropomorphic approaches to the elephant held by Britons worked alongside Sanskrit texts and Mughal paintings. These hybrid understandings gave way by the mid-century to an allegedly objective and Christian science of animals, which could not be tainted by what was called pagan superstition. By using the elephant as a point of focus, this article urges the importance of popular traditions of colonial exchange in the emergence of science, and cautions against the reification of indigenous knowledge. The argument aims to show the strengths of a history of knowledge-making that is not focused on elites, the metropolis, or the periphery. A study of the uses of the elephant in colonialism also suggests the multiple and easily interchangeable meanings that animals could carry.*

In a book replete with useful instructions for those about to sail to India, written by Thomas Williamson, who had served in the Bengal army for twenty-five years, appears a plate depicting the Marquis Wellesley and his suite at the breakfast table of the nawab of Awadh (Fig. 1). Before them is the spectacle of two elephants engaged in a battle of wills. While the nawab and his European guests sit in the shade of a canopy, out in the field a number of local people watch the two creatures test their strength. At first glance the plate indicates the mutual gratification of Britons and Indians in celebrating their dominion over nature. Lest this message of equality be taken too seriously, Williamson added:

The late Nabob of Lucknow, Asoph al Dowlah whose intellects were as heavy as his enormous head; derived much pleasure from such spectacles; and often expressed his surprise, that our Governor-General did not amuse himself and his court in a similar manner. He might have learnt, from experience, that the British government was intent on contests of much greater importance!¹

* I wish to thank Chris Bayly, Nick Jardine, John MacKenzie, Peter Marshall, Sadiah Qureshi, and Harriet Ritvo for their advice and assistance.

¹ Thomas Williamson, *The European in India, from a collection by Charles Doyle* (London, 1813), Plate xx, p. 2.



Fig. 1. 'Marquis Wellesley and his suite, at the nabob of Oude's breakfast table, viewing an elephant-fight', from Thomas Williamson, *European in India, from a collection by Charles Doyley* (London, 1813), Plate XX. By permission of the Syndics of Cambridge University Library.

By these means the author asserted the triviality of the elephant-fight and presented it as the amusement of an inferior mind. No explanation was given for the avid European interest depicted in the engraving. Does this illustration then exemplify a shared heritage or suggest constructions of difference?

Rhetorically the British empire rested on a tradition of rational natural improvement; colonial conquest was justified in part by the divine injunction to

rule and subdue the created realms.² The representation of the non-European who was superstitious, wasteful, and ruthless in engaging with nature allowed Britons to project notions of superiority. But even as Britons made gestures towards their innate difference, new and hybrid forms of natural knowledge appeared in South Asia as a result of collaborations between colonizer and colonized.³ It is the aim of this article to trace the exchange of knowledge between the British and those they ruled, by taking the elephant as the subject. In doing this it suggests that the later nineteenth century's professionalized science of animals arose at least in part out of popular traditions shared by Britons and Indians. I hope to avoid reifying what some historians have called 'indigenous knowledge'.⁴ In fact before the arrival of the British, knowledge about the elephant in India already incorporated diverse strands: a Mughal concern with display and grandeur, the personification of the elephant as god in the form of Ganesh, and Buddhist reverence for white elephants. British rule was not unique in witnessing transfers of knowledge; it fitted into a longer history of trade in information.

The claim that collaboration and dialogue were crucial to the making of knowledge in India is now well established. By paying attention to the display of elephants brought on the Company's vessels to London, however, the article seeks to show that negotiation between British and other natural knowledges was not restricted to the colonies.⁵ In fact observers of the shooting of the famous elephant Chuny, whose death created a sensation in London in 1826, discussed the event side-by-side with how Asaf al-Daula hunted elephants.⁶ In the meanwhile surgeons had to be brought in to give advice on how to kill Chuny. Cultural

² See: Richard Drayton, *Nature's government: science, imperial Britain and the 'improvement' of the world* (New Haven, 2000).

³ See for instance Christopher Bayly, *Empire and information: intelligence gathering and social communication in India, 1780-1870* (Cambridge, 1996); Eugene Irschick, *Dialogue and history: constructing south India, 1795-1895* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1994); Tony Ballantyne, 'Empire, knowledge and culture: from proto-globalization to modern globalization', in A. G. Hopkins, ed., *Globalization in world history* (New York and London, 2002), pp. 115-40; Kapil Raj, 'Circulation and the emergence of modern mapping: Great Britain and early colonial India, 1764-1820', in Claude Markovits, Jacques Pouchepadass, and Sanjay Subrahmanayam, eds., *Society and circulation: mobile people and itinerant cultures in South Asia, 1750-1950* (New Delhi, 2003), pp. 23-54.

⁴ For a theoretical discussion on the weaknesses of the term 'indigenous knowledge' in relation to science see Colin Scott, 'Science for the West, myth for the rest?: the case of James Bay Cree knowledge construction', in Laura Nader, ed., *Naked science: anthropological inquiry into boundaries, power and knowledge* (London, 1996), pp. 69-86; Arun Agrawal, 'Dismantling the divide between indigenous and scientific knowledge', *Development and Change*, 25 (1995), pp. 413-39. For a prescription of how to overcome the problem of 'indigenous knowledge' in the history of science, see David Wade Chambers and Richard Gillespie, 'Locality in the history of science: colonial science, technoscience and indigenous knowledge', *Osiris*, 15 (2000), pp. 221-40. See also the introduction to Michael Bravo and S. Sörlin, eds., *Narrating the Arctic: a cultural history of Nordic scientific practices* (Nantucket, MA, 2002).

⁵ The arrival of Indian knowledges about nature in Europe is also discussed in Richard Grove, 'Indigenous knowledge and the significance of south west India for Portuguese and Dutch constructions of tropical nature', in Richard Grove, Vinita Damodaran, and Saptal Sangwan, eds., *Nature and the Orient: the environmental history of south and south east Asia* (Oxford, 1998), pp. 187-209.

⁶ See *Every-Day Book*, 9 Mar. 1826.

historians of Britain should thus pay attention to the arrival of Indian traditions in the metropole. Knowledges from colonized lands were appropriated and reinvented, they did not disappear powerless in the face of conquest, and neither were they isolated to colonial territories. The linkages of correspondence and the trade in objects that were brought about by imperial control made it possible for knowledge to travel.

Knowledge about elephants crossed between Britons and Indians at a variety of venues. For example, the East India Company urged that their military was distinct from that of the Indians even though they learnt to use elephants for the conveyance of war materials from local potentates. In order to keep baggage-elephants, the British had first to take control of Mughal establishments for catching elephants and pre-colonial trade routes for the supply of elephants. The colonizers believed that they trapped elephants with more benevolence than Indians, even as they took note of how the colonized caught elephants. Anthropomorphic understandings of animate nature were widespread in the early century and the relation between the anthropomorphic bent in Indian knowledges and British traditions with respect to animals will be a particular focus of this article.⁷ Elephants were given human character in the Company's army, where they were named and mustered. Anthropomorphism also characterized British engagement with elephants on hunts, where the importance of listening to animals was urged. This anthropomorphic gaze shares much with Eastern religions and Mughal practice. For instance, right up to the fall of Mughal rule, elephants appeared regularly in paintings to celebrate the power of emperors, and as prized and named creatures. However, because of the new science's association with Christian natural theology, the anthropomorphism that was shared by Britons and Indians became irreconcilable with scientific claims about nature.

This article draws on a variety of sources. The military records of the East India Company shed light on the use of elephants in war; popular books on the elephant reveal the public base of the anthropomorphic tradition; an expensive illustrated volume on hunting points to how Britons learnt to trap elephants; and British surveys of what became Hinduism show why elephant imagery was antithetical to rational religion. These accounts need to be studied side-by-side because they referred to each other: writers on the elephant consulted a variety of texts and cut and pasted knowledge. For example, a popular volume which concerned itself exclusively with the elephant and which was published in a series titled *The Menageries*, included chapters on the history of captive elephants in Britain, the elephant's physical structure and natural habits, the methods used to take elephants captive in India, how elephants were hunted in Africa, the use of elephants for warfare in India, the employment of elephants for religious

⁷ For more on the debate between the new science and anthropomorphism, see Paul White, 'The experimental animal in Victorian Britain', in L. Daston and G. Mitman, eds., *Thinking with animals: anthropomorphism in historical and contemporary perspective* (New York, forthcoming).

ceremonies, and the study of the fossilized remains of the elephant.⁸ The footnotes in this volume range over as wide a variety of sources as this article does. In the periodical press, there were occasions when a dozen pieces on the elephant were published together.⁹

By choosing to frame this article around the object of the elephant rather than an easily distinguishable set of sources or a geographical region, it is possible to trace the flow of information across various contexts. For instance, the use of elephants in hunting does not lie far from the use of elephants in theatrical performance. The first number of the *Oriental Sporting Magazine* included the amusing account of two Britons who ‘sallied forth’ in search of a tiger on an ‘untried’ female elephant. A tiger was soon found and about to be trodden on by the elephant when, to the surprise of the hunters, the elephant thought it fit to dance ‘a *pas seul*’.¹⁰ The animal’s rider was dislodged on to the same ground as the tiger, and barely managed to escape up a tree. The training of elephants for entertainment occurred alongside the training of elephants for hunting, and most huntsmen were engaged in military affairs. In tracing the connections between these various uses, it is possible to show how information passed between amateur and elite practitioners of natural history, between the colonial periphery and the geographically removed metropolis, and between what became Hindu religion and science. Before the professional turn in science, a variety of people could theorize on the elephant with confidence, and several traditions worked simultaneously in serving up information on the animal.¹¹

The invisible passage of Indian knowledges about the elephant into the new science occurred in the extraordinarily military context of early nineteenth-century India. An estimate of the European population in 1830, for example, shows that there were seven soldiers and officers of the army for every non-military European in India.¹² By forging a large standing army, Britons presented themselves as credible rulers of India. Since the army was always at the forefront of expansion, its officers were in an unique position to assimilate Indian knowledge and disseminate European practice. The military culture of the period justified this annexation of natural knowledge.

I will begin with a discussion of how elephants were used in the Company’s military, and how they were caught by the British and deployed on their hunts.

⁸ Anon., *The menageries: quadrupeds, described and drawn from living subjects*, II (London, 1843).

⁹ For more on ‘cut and paste’ journalism in relation to the story of Chuny, see Jonathan R. Topham, ‘The *Mirror of Literature, Amusement and Instruction* and cheap miscellanies in early nineteenth-century Britain’, in Geoffrey Cantor et al., eds., *Science in the nineteenth-century periodical: reading the magazine of nature* (Cambridge, 2004), pp. 15–16.

¹⁰ *Oriental Sporting Magazine*, I (1828), p. 9.

¹¹ For more on popular science see the special issue of *History of Science*, 24 (1994).

¹² Douglas M. Peers, *Between Mars and mammon: colonial armies and the garrison state in early nineteenth-century India* (London and New York, 1995). Census figure for 1830 from p. 54. See also Douglas M. Peers, ‘“Those noble exemplars of the true military tradition”: constructions of the Indian army in the mid-Victorian press’, *Modern Asian Studies*, 31 (1997), 109–42; Seema Alavi, *The sepoys and the company: tradition and transition in Northern India, 1770–1830* (New Delhi, 1995).

The anthropomorphizing vision of British engagements with elephants in India also characterized displays of the creature in London. The middle section will document how the metropolitan idea – that elephants were very similar to humans – shared many of its tenets with Eastern religions and Mughal practice. The article will end with the tale of Chuny, the elephant who was shot dead in London. After its demise the animal was phrenologized to determine its mental capacities. Chuny's story provides a perfect example of the contest between anthropomorphism and professionalizing science. The anthropomorphic tradition did not die away with the rise of elite scientific knowledge; it merely operated in a different sphere by the later century.

I

When the armies of Amir Timur drew up for battle against the Delhi sultanate in December 1398, they found themselves set against an enemy equipped with 10,000 horses and 120 war-elephants, who according to a chronicler, were 'surging like the ocean and trumpeting like thunder clouds'.¹³ Elephants were used for warfare in India from ancient times. The Delhi sultanate's elephant stables or *pilkhana* was well renowned; it regularly acquired animals as tribute or plunder. As an early invader from central Asia, Timur was less familiar with war-elephants. He is said to have ordered a prayer-carpet to be spread and for supplications to be made to the Almighty for victory. As if in response, Timur's armies successfully turned the elephant drivers upside down; and captured 120 elephants who were quickly despatched across the ruler's dominions.

By the time of Mughal control in North India, the value of elephants in warfare had come to be appreciated by the Muslim rulers. Emperor Akbar (r. 1556–1605) was obsessed with elephants. In expanding his kingdom, he often acquired war-elephants as prize, and mastered the art of ferocious elephant charges. His corps of noble warriors called *mansabdars* were required to support a specified number of war-horses and war-elephants from their salary, on a formula based on their personal or *zat* rank.¹⁴ The number of elephants kept for warfare under Mughal rule is difficult to estimate as the animals were divided between the *mansabdars* and the imperial stables, while others were kept in provincial establishments. Some accounts place the number as high as 30,000, while others put it at 400.¹⁵

With the East India Company's infiltration of India, Britons became wise to the value of elephants and were anxious to control the traditional source of the animal in the forests of eastern Bengal.¹⁶ In the late eighteenth century, in

¹³ Simon Digby, *War-horse and elephant in the Delhi sultanate* (Oxford, 1971), p. 80.

¹⁴ John F. Richards, *The Mughal Empire* (Cambridge, 1993), p. 63; see also K. K. Trivedi, 'The share of the *mansabdars* in state revenue resources: a study of the maintenance of animals', *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, 24 (1987), pp. 411–21.

¹⁵ Digby, *War-horse and elephant*, p. 58.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 68.

Sylhet and Dhaka, the British inherited from the Mughals the social relations produced by the trade in elephants. The *zamindars* or landholders of these regions had used elephants as a means of paying their dues to the Mughal rulers for at least fifty years.¹⁷ Initially, the Company took upon itself the task of procuring the majority of the elephants it required for military transport. The superintendence of the *keddahs*, or enclosures formed for catching elephants, served as one of the primary roles of the Company's early officers in this region. But the elaborate arrangements necessary to catch elephants proved too expensive; and the Company soon realized that it could get access to elephants more cheaply from the private market. Released from the official task of supplying elephants to the Company, British officers in the region started to catch elephants to increase their own wealth. William Makepeace Thackeray who became the first collector of Sylhet in 1772, and his successor Robert Lindsay, both made fortunes from selling elephants. Lindsay noted how he derived his scheme for catching elephants directly from pre-colonial traditions: 'During the Mogul government, Sylhet was always considered the chief station [for elephant catching], and upon my arrival here I found the very important remains of the old establishment, viz., six *coonkies*, or decoy females ... There were also still remaining many experienced old men, regularly brought up to the profession.'¹⁸ Thackeray's name in the meanwhile became synonymous with elephants, after he won a court case against the Company, when it declined to pay him for sixty-six elephants, the majority of which died on their journey from Patna to Belgaum.¹⁹

By 1810, a military commissariat had been established for the Bengal presidency; its duties ranged from supplying food and rum to the troops, feeding and keeping elephants, bullocks, horses, and camels, supplying gram for the cavalry and horse artillery and boats for the transportation of troops and stores.²⁰ The supply and management of elephants thereafter came under standardized control. Amongst the recommendations set before the commissariat was the idea of capturing elephants for military conveyance from the northern frontier of Awadh, as an alternative to eastern Bengal.²¹ The stipulations governing the management of elephants, in the meanwhile, kept alive the Mughal tradition of naming creatures.²² For example, elephants were to be mustered on the first day of each

¹⁷ John Sumner to Thomas Kelsall, chief supervisor of Dacca and Sylhet, 18 Feb. 1771, in W. K. Firminger, ed., *Sylhet district records*, 1 (Shillong, 1913), p. 4.

¹⁸ Alexander Crawford Lindsay, *Lives of the Lindsays*, III (London, 1849), p. 190.

¹⁹ F. B. Bradley-Birt, 'Sylhet' *Thackeray* (London, 1911), pp. 177-215.

²⁰ For the founding of the Bengal commissariat see The Board of Control, Board's Collection, 1796-1858, The East India Company Records (EICR), F/4/315 File 7223.

²¹ Adjutant general to John Adams esq. acting secretary to government military department, 1 July 1809, EICR, F/4/315 File 7223, p. 269.

²² For more on the Mughal tradition of naming elephants, see Asok Kumar Das, 'The elephant in Mughal painting', in Som Prakash Verma, ed., *Flora and fauna in Mughal art* (Mumbai, 1999), pp. 36-54.

month and the commanding officer was told to hold a roll of the names of the elephants. The commissary department employed a committee of officers to survey elephants whenever they were procured for public service. ‘The report of the Committee is to specify the age of each elephant, which shall not be less than twenty years; his stature not less than seven feet; and also the conviction of the Committee that each Elephant is able to carry a load of at least twenty maunds, exclusive of his gear.’²³ These records were vital to the Company’s aim of increased efficiency, in the context of the recurrent death of elephants from fatigue and ill-health.²⁴

The Company’s reliance on pre-colonial practice is also borne out in the south. When the Company’s army went to battle with the Tipu Sultan of Mysore in 1799, the revelation that it would take at least six months to equip and assemble an army in the Carnatic caused great concern.²⁵ A permanent establishment for bullocks and elephants intended for military purposes was soon set up. The Company used the sultan’s stock of cattle to serve as the starting point of this new venture.²⁶ Captain Barclay, who was put in charge of the elephants ascertained how the sultan’s men fed their charges. ‘The elephants have always received ghee and goor along with their rice; and they would certainly suffer very much, perhaps be rendered quite unserviceable if these articles were now struck off entirely.’²⁷ With the setting up of this establishment, it was possible to standardize traditions in the various presidencies. It was said for instance that Bengali elephants did not require ghee and goor when in the service of the Company like Mysore elephants.²⁸ While the Mysore establishment required two drivers per elephant, it was remarked that elephants kept in Bengal required just one.²⁹ By September 1802, the commander in chief could assure the court of directors, that the public bullocks were now far ‘more efficient and serviceable’ while being ‘carefully trained and dexterously managed’. He noted that during recent military operations ‘the movements were conducted with an expedition, and the artillery and Stores were transported with a facility which had long been considered unattainable, and which must be ascribed principally to the excellent quality of the Bullocks’.

The Company’s style of governance is also apparent in the transportation of elephants across the region. For instance, the Mysore establishment found its stock improved by elephants brought from Ceylon. As early as 1800, an

²³ Printed pamphlet which is stitched in at the end of the file. ‘General orders of his excellency the vice president in council’, EICR, F/4/313 File 7223, p. 40.

²⁴ For a case concerning an inquiry into the death of elephants, see J. Paton, commissary general to Lieutenant Colonel Ball, 29 Mar. 1811, EICR, F/4/360 File 8756, p. 162.

²⁵ The governor general to the court of directors, 20 Mar. 1799, EICR, F/4/95 File 1933, p. 7.

²⁶ From the military board, 18 Apr. 1800, EICR, F/4/95 File 1933, p. 47.

²⁷ R. Barclay, in charge of public elephants in Mysore, to Captain John Maclean, secretary of the military board, extracted from a letter from the military board, 23 May 1800, EICR, F/4/95 File 1933, p. 86.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 86.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 88.

agreement was set up with the government of Ceylon for the supply of elephants.³⁰ The agent for public cattle described the supply from Ceylon:

there appears to me from their height twelve fit for our Service, that is there are that number five cubits and upwards in height, and I am of opinion that none under that height ought at any time to be purchased for the Company ... Elephants of this size, if strong in proportion will answer very well as working Elephants whether Male or Female, but it is necessary to mention that the two lots received in September and October last although the best, in point of size, were in such wretched order, that two of them died on the passage to Cuddalore, two died on the road to Mysore, and two have died since their arrival here.³¹

Elephants had been traded between Ceylon and India since ancient times; and by following this precedent the Company brought a system of exchange that predated their arrival under their own control. But as characteristic of the Company careful accountancy was vital. The comments of the agent for public cattle suggest a desire on the part of the Company to bring order and measurement to the trade in elephants. Soon, the notion that Ceylonese elephants were superior to Indian ones in size was translated into financial arithmetic and discredited as a proper form of reasoning. The military auditor general noted that while Ceylonese elephants cost 2,000 rupees each, a Bengali elephant could be procured for 750 rupees. Since quite adequate elephants could be procured from Bengal, he recommended that the Ceylonese supply be discontinued.³² In addition to Ceylon, Madura at the extreme south of the peninsula also served as a source of elephants to the Company's army. In these southern reaches of Company rule, elephants were seen as a threat to cultivation and Britons were faced with the task of destroying elephants that ravaged settlement.³³

In 1822, the collector of Coimbatore sent a map of the region to the board of revenue: 'Coimbatore contains 8,000 square miles, 3,700 of which are subject to the ravages of the elephants, and the greatest part of this large tract of country is in their undisturbed possession.'³⁴ In the interest of economy, the Company had by this time disestablished a group of 7,000 to 8,000 peons employed in pre-colonial times to keep wild elephants in check and to protect cultivation. Initially, the collector of Coimbatore was instructed to re-establish the company of peons. But this proposal could not be effected. Consequently, the board of

³⁰ See the following and other documents that are filed alongside these: Frederick North, governor of Ceylon to Right Honourable Lord Clive, 12 June 1800, EICR, F/4/95 File 1933, p. 109; also the collector of Jaffnapatam to Major Robert Turing, 15 Aug. 1800, EICR, F/4/95 File 1933, p. 117; and letter from the military board, 14 Feb. 1803, EICR, F/4/154 File 2690, p. 33.

³¹ H. Mackay, agent of public cattle, 1 Feb. 1803, EICR, F/4/154 File 2690, p. 34.

³² Minute of the military auditor general on a proposed change in the present mode of obtaining elephants for public service, EICR, F/4/154 File 2690, p. 43.

³³ The collector of Madura gave advice to the collector of Coimbatore on how to trap and destroy elephants that were a threat to cultivation; see R. Peter, collector of Madura in an extract of the board of revenue, 17 Mar. 1825, EICR, F/4/862 File 22786, p. 176.

³⁴ J. Sullivan Esqr. collector of Coimbatore to the president and members of the board of revenue, 2 Mar. 1824, EICR, F/4/862 File 22786, p. 106.

revenue acceded to the collector's request that some hunters from Chittagong be brought to Coimbatore to train a few chosen inhabitants in the modes of entrapment used in that region. The transportation of the Chittagong method to the geographically distant area of Coimbatore suggests how the Company could use the extent of its power to its own benefit by standardizing practice. Yet it is important to pay due attention to how the Tipu Sultan, who ruled Coimbatore before the Company's arrival, had also introduced the Chittagong method in the region.³⁵ When we look beneath the appearance of British hegemony therefore and question the self-presentation of colonial power, we see that it was not unique in its ability to control the economy of nature.

In using elephants for military conveyance, the Company therefore relied on already existent trade patterns and practices, which it mastered for its own purposes. Yet the Company's management of elephants never became efficient enough for its military to be totally independent of the favours of local rulers who owned animals. Upon a military exigency, the resident at Lucknow had to apply to the nawab wazir for the loan of some elephants. He explained the request: 'Circumstances having required the assemblage of a portion of the British Troops on the Northern Frontier of the Honble Company's Dominions ... induces me to solicit on this occasion the loan of twenty or twenty five Baggage Elephants for the use of the Regiment in question.'³⁶ The wazir's reply underlines the Company's dependence. He noted that on a previous occasion when he was asked for elephants, he had been addressed by no other than the governor general in council. Hinting at the improper etiquette of the current request, he denied the Company its application unless the established protocol was followed again.³⁷ This episode must be interpreted alongside others such as Prince Muzaffar Bakht's request to the Bengali government for the loan of some elephants and tents on the occasion of the marriage of two of his sons. Here the passage of elephants between hands reflected the prince's vassalage rather than the Company's dependence. The prince observed: 'I therefore now write to you with the pen of Friendship to require that you would enable these marriages to be celebrated in a manner conformable to the customs of a Royal Family.'³⁸

Despite insisting on strict accountancy, the Company also appropriated the practice of using elephants as gifts. The geography of India made the possession of a well-sized elephant a material advantage for travel and a symbol of the range and mobility of the ruler's power. This made an elephant a perfect present. Under Mughal rule, for instance, the exchange of elephants served as both a symbol of friendship and subservience. Emperor Jahangir (r. 1605–27) received

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 126.

³⁶ J. Baillie, resident at Lucknow to his excellency the vizier, 9 Jan. 1809, EICR, F/4/306 File 7017, p. 13.

³⁷ His excellency the vizier to J. Baillie, resident at Lucknow, received 8 Jan. 1809, EICR, F/4/306 File 7017, pp. 14–15.

³⁸ From his royal highness the prince Mirza Mozuffer Bukht, received 26 Dec. 1811, EICR, F/4/402 File 10106, p. 7.

elephants and gave elephants as gifts. He was so pleased with Prince Khurram's present of an elephant called Alam Guman that he mounted the creature, rode it, and scattered money as a sign of beneficence. Two paintings were subsequently made of this creature.³⁹ In a similar vein, after the setting up of the Mysore establishment for public bullocks and elephants from the Tipu Sultan's stock of cattle, Colonel Wellesley requested that one of the best of the sultan's elephants be used as a present.⁴⁰ In Chittagong, in the meanwhile, after the *keddah* season for 1810/11, the commissary general noted that there was an elephant that could serve as a perfect gift. He was 'an uncommonly fine Goondah'. He continued: 'His name is Raji Mungul, his Stature is 8 $\frac{1}{2}$ feet and is esteemed perfect in all his points ... Unquestionably an Elephant possessing such beauty, as is represented to me of Raji Mungul should not be deemed to the drudgery of baggage.'⁴¹ The Company also oversaw patterns of tribute between subject rulers, which involved presentations of elephants. For example, in 1823, the nawab of the Carnatic complained about the elephants he had received as part of an annual tribute from the rani of Travancore, claiming that they were unfit for riding. In reply the rani asked the East India Company to forward three elephants to the nawab and to apologize for the inferior quality of her earlier gift. She explained that this inadequacy arose from the small 'size of the Travencore Elephants, and not from any want of attention on the part of Her Highness to the due performance of her obligations to her ancient and respected ally and protector'.⁴²

While learning how local peoples used elephants as gifts, Britons also appropriated modes of observing elephants which were indigenous to India. In the early period, Robert Lindsay wrote that Britons knew little about local taste in elephants. He added, however, that 'An elephant born with the left tooth only is reckoned sacred, – with black spots in the mouth unlucky and unsaleable.' He explained that a 'goondah elephant', like that mentioned above, was a male animal who had been expelled from his tribe for misdemeanours.⁴³ By 1807, when Thomas Williamson wrote *Oriental field sports*, Britons had acquired a comprehensive grasp of how local peoples classified elephants. According to Williamson this knowledge was vital for participation in the elephant trade.⁴⁴ The residents of Bengal were said to prefer elephants with their 'toe nails thick and black'. Williamson noted of elephant toe-nails that to 'please a native, there should be five on each fore foot and four on each hind foot: odd numbers are considered by them as unlucky'. The trivialization of local forms of assessment continued as the condition of the tail was said to be indispensable to the identification of a perfect animal. 'The tail should be long, very thick at the insertion, and

³⁹ Das, 'The elephant in Mughal painting', pp. 46–7.

⁴⁰ From Colonel Wellesley, 20 May 1800, EICR, F/4/95 File 1933, p. 83.

⁴¹ J. Paton, commissary general to C. W. Gardiner, acting secretary of government, 19 Sept. 1811, EICR, F/4/360 File 8756, p. 309.

⁴² Lieutenant Colonel D. Newall, resident in Travancore, to Chief Secretary Wood, 9 Apr. 1822, EICR, F/4/946 File 26558, p. 7.

⁴³ Lindsay, *Lives of the Lindsays*, III, pp. 193–4.

⁴⁴ See Thomas Williamson, *Oriental field sports* (London, 1807), p. 31.

tapering well to the end ... No man of consequence would be seen on an elephant whose tail was barren of hair, and particularly if broken short, as is often the case.⁴⁵

This attention to local observation is also apparent in a paper presented to the Royal Society in 1799, which asserted that the people of Bengal divided elephants into 'two casts [sic]'.⁴⁶ The koomerah caste signified a 'princely race' being derived from the word '*koomārah*, a prince, or king's son'. These elephants were 'deep-bodied, strong, compact' and 'with a large trunk, legs short, but thick, in proportion to the size of the animal'.⁴⁷ They were especially prized since large trunks were taken to be a sign of beauty. Slipping elusively between the terms caste and species, the author, Mr John Corse, a naturalist in Tipperah, noted, 'The nearer an elephant approached to the true *koomerah* species the more he is preferred, especially by the natives, and the higher price he will consequently bear.'⁴⁸ Meanwhile, 'the *merghee* cast' was said to be less perfect: it was described as having 'not so compact a form, nor ... so strong, or so capable of bearing fatigue'.⁴⁹ Corse signalled by his definition that elephant castes were typified in physical form and function. By the later century Edward Balfour noted six further classes in his *Cyclopaedia of India* (1889). For instance, an elephant with just one tusk was apparently called 'Ek-danti or Ganesh, after the Hindu god of wisdom, who is represented with the head of an elephant, and one tooth.'⁵⁰

As a naturalist, Corse sought to bring scientific methods to the management of the Company's elephants. In another paper presented to the Royal Society in 1799, he described several experiments that he had conducted in Tipperah. Elsewhere, these experiments were acclaimed for proving that elephants could be bred in captivity.⁵¹ After selecting an elephant described as 'young and handsome' Corse decided to put the creature's 'procreative powers to trial with a tame female'. He encouraged the union with 'some warm stimulants ... onions, garlic and turmeric, and ginger were added to their usual allowance of rice'. Two months later, the male 'covered the female without any difficulty'.⁵² She was soon pregnant. Jubilant at his finding, Corse concluded his paper by asserting that he had demonstrated how to improve the 'size, strength and activity' of elephants.⁵³ Corse's investigations became so well known that he had to take measures to 'prevent any interruption from the number of spectators' who were assembling to watch the mating of elephants.⁵⁴ When what is described as the 'Rajah's

⁴⁵ All of these quotations from *ibid.*, p. 31.

⁴⁶ John Corse, 'Observations on the different species of Asiatic elephants and their mode of dentition', *Philosophical Transactions* (1799), p. 205.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 206.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 206–7.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 206.

⁵⁰ Edward Balfour, *Cyclopaedia of India and of eastern and southern Asia* (London, 1885), p. 1038, under 'elephant'.

⁵¹ Edward Turner Bennett, *The Tower Menagerie: comprising the natural history of the animals contained in that establishment; with anecdotes of their characters and history* (London, 1829), p. 173.

⁵² John Corse, 'Observations on the manners, habits, and natural history of the elephant', *Philosophical Transactions* (1799), pp. 44–5.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 55.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 51–2.

elephant' was covered by a male animal on three successive days of October 1796, he noted that 'many Europeans as well as natives were present'.⁵⁵

These experiments on the elephant may be used to urge the view that Britons sought to rationalize their engagement with the animal, and to dissociate themselves from the classificatory systems used by Indians that prioritized aesthetics. In fact there were occasions when the Company criticized the excessive use of elephants for display by its officers.⁵⁶ However, an easy distinction between the utilitarian practices of the British and the ornamental display of elephants under princely rule is obviously too simple. The manner of Corse's investigations suggests that display and science worked together. In addition I have argued that though Britons did not go to war on elephant-back like the Mughals before them, they learnt to keep elephants for military conveyance from the regimes that predated them. There was such enthusiasm for war-animals that the commander in chief could write how it was a subject 'inseparably connected with a consideration of the nature of our situation in India, the largeness of our possessions, and the modes of War in this Country'.⁵⁷ As a further strand in this trade in knowledge, the British also established control over the pre-colonial economy of the elephant. An assumed dichotomy between British and indigenous engagements with the elephant may therefore be discarded.

Such a dichotomy might also be put into question by attending to how the colonizers played out a drama of the imagination in trapping elephants and in hunting on elephant back. These contexts of the colonizers' engagements with the elephant need to be set alongside the terse accountancy of the documents in the board of control's archive.

II

Thomas Williamson's book *Oriental field sports* provides a detailed account of two of the prime methods employed in trapping elephants, which were used since Mughal times and appropriated by the British.⁵⁸ One of them involved tricking elephants into an enclosure or *keddah* by the use of noise and foods. The other involved the employment of decoy female elephants to entice wild males. In both instances wild nature was tamed by appeals to its uncontained desires.

About 6,000 or 8,000 locals were employed with 'fire-arms, drums, trumpets, fire-works, and, in short, everything that can intimidate' to drive a herd of elephants into a *keddah*, 'a large area surrounded by a board ditch, too wide for an elephant to stride over' surrounded by a 'a paling of large timbers'.⁵⁹

⁵⁵ Ibid., p. 52.

⁵⁶ Extract of political letter from Bengal, 4 Aug. 1809, EICR, F/4/311 File 7096, p. 8.

⁵⁷ The minutes of the commander in chief, Lieutenant General Stuart, 28 Sept. 1802, EICR, F/4/154 File 2690, p. 25.

⁵⁸ For more on modes of entrapment see also John Corse, 'An account of the method of catching wild elephants at Tipura', *Asiatick Researches*, 3 (1799), pp. 229–48.

⁵⁹ Williamson, *Oriental field sports*, p. 29.

The entrance to the *keddah* was strewn with the choice fruit and vegetables of elephants. The process of trapping a herd took several days of labour. Upon the arrival of the opportune moment, a circle of men formed a passage for the herd that led to the entrance of the *keddah*. 'Although by no means reconciled to their fate, the elephants begin to taste of their favourite foods, which being quickly consumed, some by degrees venture into the *keddah*; where the baits are in greater abundance.'⁶⁰ Once caught, it was usually the custom to deny the animals the very pleasures that had led to their captivity, by starving them and using tame animals to bind the captives by strong ropes to large trees. The benevolent care of the keeper eased the creatures into resignation. And in the 'course of time, the animal would answer to his name, lie down and rise again when commanded, and even allow the *mahout* to sit on his back'.⁶¹ Kindness was thus, as in other relations in the colonial enterprise, expected to cajole submission.

In the second method in general use domesticated female elephants were employed to catch lone males who had been expelled from their herd for aggressive behaviour. These creatures then presented a threat to livelihood because they 'destroy every living object within their power, and in the most wanton manner pull up sugar canes, plantain trees; &c. rending the air with their disconsolate trumpeting'.⁶² By taking ferocious elephants into captivity, Britons presented themselves as protectors of crops and local settlements. Upon approaching a lone male, the *kookie* or decoy female, was said to caress it 'raising his passions by the most libidinous demeanour'. The elephant drivers lay hidden beneath the decoy elephant and passed 'ropes with wondrous dexterity round the fore legs' of the male elephant. Because the wild elephant 'like many a love-sick swain, has his thoughts anywhere but where they should be' it was relatively easy to tie him to a tree.⁶³ Initially, the captive turned down any offer of sustenance. But with time, Williamson continued, 'the impulse of nature soon operates, and induces him to pick at branches of plantains, the stems of those trees, sugar canes, bundles of *dhul* grass' and he 'generally finds it most convenient to submit'.⁶⁴ Both means of captivity operated on the strategic use of benevolence in order to ensure easy submission. Williamson noted that coercion 'should be avoided as much as possible: it is far better to gain gradually upon an elephant's disposition, than to have recourse to any act of violence'.⁶⁵

Despite having learnt how to trap elephants from local peoples, Britons sought to dissociate their methods from those still used by Indians. The colonizers urged that British methods were more benevolent. Daniel Johnson, in his rival publication entitled *Sketches of field sports as followed by the natives of India*, which appeared slightly later in 1822, describes the sport of 'Hunquah' which was carried out in north India.⁶⁶ A jungle was selected, and animals were driven into it while fires

⁶⁰ Ibid., p. 29.

⁶¹ Ibid., p. 30.

⁶² Ibid., p. 34.

⁶³ All quotes from *ibid.*, p. 35.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 39.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 39.

⁶⁶ Daniel Johnson, *Sketches of field sports as followed by the natives of India with observations on the animals* (London, 1822), p. 13.

were lit for a distance of ten or twenty miles around in every direction. Nets were placed at a chosen spot and about one hundred men, women, and children drove the animals into the nets. They did this, according to Johnson, by raising a ‘most hideous noise, continuing it as they advanced towards the nets, which they tried to do as well as they could in the form of a crescent’.⁶⁷ In judging the merits of this scheme, the author noted that as the animals approached the nets, ‘such confusion arose as is past all description’. ‘Balls and arrows were flying in all directions, some of the party were screaming, others shouting; drums and other noisy instruments beating; many animals were caught in the nets, but a great number escaped, either by leaping over them, or not becoming entangled and so passing over them after they had fallen.’⁶⁸ This chaos was rather unbearable for Johnson, who complained that the ‘excessive heat of the weather, and the constant noise’ gave him ‘a violent headache’.⁶⁹ The local mode of trapping elephants was presented here as disordered and uncivil.

Another instance of this rhetorical presentation is evident in the widely publicized hunting practices of Nawab Wazir Asaf al-Daula. According to the *Asiatic Annual Register*, his hunting party in 1794 included: ‘40,000 men, and 20,000 beasts; composed of 10,000 soldiers, 1,000 cavalry, and near 150 pieces of cannon, 1,500 elephants, 300 carts of hackeries, and an innumerable train of camels, horses, and bullocks’.⁷⁰ Contemporary accounts emphasized the waste and opulence of this sport and Asaf al-Daula’s lack of concern for the cultivations of his peoples.⁷¹ Daniel Johnson noted how he had observed ‘the poor cultivators running behind the Vizier’s elephant bawling out for mercy’. But Asaf al-Daula seldom attended to their request.⁷² On one occasion, when the wazir came upon a wild elephant, he immediately formed a semi-circle with 400 hundred elephants who were directed to advance and encircle him. According to the *Asiatic Annual Register*, ‘the shock was dreadful’. Using female decoys, the wazir ordered that the elephant be entangled with nooses and running ropes, but this failed. The potentate then ordered the elephant’s death: ‘Immediately a volley of 100 shots were fired.’ When the story of this elephant’s death was recycled in the *Every-day Book* of 9 March 1826, alongside the tale of Chuny’s death, it was presented as a tale of savagery. The elephant had apparently been ‘chased by persons injured to the danger, and determined on his destruction’.⁷³

The British therefore prized benevolence in their entrapment of elephants rather than coercion, just as Britons hoped to use gestures of generosity as an aide to subjugating the Indian. Indians’ relations to the environment, in the meantime, were presented as violent and savage. Yet beneath this rhetoric of difference the reality was that Britons learnt to capture elephants from local potentates. The practical knowledge of how to take elephants was traded between colonizer

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 21.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 22.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 23.

⁷⁰ *The Asiatic Annual Register, or a View of the History of Hindustan and of the Politics, Commerce and Literature of Asia*, 1804, p. 12.

⁷¹ Johnson, *Sketches of field sports*, p. 172.

⁷² *Ibid.*, p. 173.

⁷³ *The Every-day Book*, 1826, p. 338.

and colonized; just as the economic systems surrounding the creature were appropriated by the British and an understanding of the elephant's value in war came to be part of colonial military strategy.

III

While British presentations of benevolence may be problematized by showing the local ancestry of adopted traditions, they can also be put into critical relief by close readings of how Britons hunted on elephant-back. John MacKenzie has already paid attention to the general features of this genre.⁷⁴ But in order to give a closer account of this literary form and its rhetoric, I will focus my attention on just one such account taken from the *Oriental Sporting Magazine*.⁷⁵

A letter signed 'Nimrod in the East' appeared in the *Oriental Sporting Magazine* for 1829 and described the death of a tiger, which always appeared in accounts of hunting as the opposite of the elephant.⁷⁶ The correspondent wrote that he would give 'worlds' in order 'to make the sporting reader feel one hundredth, a mere particle even, of the gratification' afforded by this particular hunt. The day's events are described in the manner of a game with no utilitarian purpose. Accompanied by seven elephants, the hunting party approached the tiger. By the time of the sixth ball, it was assumed dead. Yet since the British hunters relished a battle of wills that ended with a confirmation of their supremacy this would have made for a poor contest. Defending his claim that this was a hunt like no other, the author noted that the tiger 'seemed on the point of rolling to the bottom, but recovering his footing his increased effort showed his determination of crossing the very summit of the hill'. In order to match this show of strength, the party redoubled its efforts. 'Those with whose excited spirits the slow and tedious pace of the elephants' was unbearable were soon on horseback. The tiger was spotted again:

Let a man picture to himself so noble an animal standing at such an elevation – as it were in the very air itself, looking full down on his pursuers – his tail lashing, his eyes flashing defiance, his mouth foaming with rage and pain, and each ball as it whistled past his head resented with a deep and determined growl!

Though this description presents the tiger as a regal beast, it is a retrospective characterization. For the nobility of the beast was contingent on its ultimate death, and subject to the fact that it brought no harm to human life. In the same letter, 'Nimrod in the East' noted, for example, that the 'taste of human flesh appears to have a wonderful effect on a tiger'. Tigers which ate men and ignored the natural ordering of creation were said to be feminine: 'it almost invariably happens that a man-eater is a female – making him cowardly, sneaking and

⁷⁴ John M. MacKenzie, *The empire of nature: hunting, conservation and British imperialism* (Manchester, 1998). ⁷⁵ The account is from *Oriental Sporting Magazine*, 4 (1829). All quotes are from pp. 183–4.

⁷⁶ See Harriet Ritvo, *The animal estate: the English and other creatures in the Victorian age* (Harvard, 1987), p. 17, for an explanation of these types of oppositional identities.

mute; he never roars, seldom even wounded – and never before – charges and is constantly on the alert, trying every method of avoiding you’. The manner in which the tiger was represented therefore depended on the way it related to the hunter and the type of sport that it provided.

The moment of climax comes later in the narrative. When one of the hunters approached the target, his elephant ‘was obliged to sink on his knees’. This servile beast was suddenly attacked by a ‘roar, accompanied with a tremendous spring’ and the enemy appeared ‘in front and within a few feet of the elephant’. The tension here is linked to the question of whether the tiger would claim life. Would the creature deflate the excitement of the day’s sport and present itself as a coward rather than a royal beast? ‘A barrel each was fired as he lighted on the ground, and from the uneasiness of the aim, nothing more or less than a flying shot, both balls missed.’ When the ‘noble beast’ sprang towards the howdah where the hunter sat, the author commented: ‘God what a critical moment!’ But a well-aimed shot brought the creature dead on the elephant’s trunk. In the end the tiger had put up an admirable fight, and the elephant had kept to its duty perfectly. There was nothing more that could be asked of the hunt.

While the tiger’s nobility arose from the fact that it had done its best to contribute to the excitement of the sport, the elephant was noble because it had remained subservient to human command. This reading of the hunt suggests how Britons also ascribed identities to animals. The use of notions of masculinity, and categories of nobility and servility, confirm that Britons did not see the taming of elephants in purely utilitarian terms. Their representation of animals needs to be compared with that of the Indians. A crude distinction between rational and useful science and ornamental views of nature held by colonizers and colonized must thus be set aside, even in relation to representations of the elephant.

IV

The methods employed for trapping, keeping, and hunting with elephants suggest how distinctions were created between Britons and Indians even though knowledge crossed between them. In order to consider the precise relation between Indian and British forms of knowing, I will now turn to one such genre of shared knowledge, namely the anthropomorphic portrayal of the elephant, exemplified in the naming and ordering of animals in the Company’s army and in Indians’ prescription of castes to elephants. I will assess the placement of British anthropomorphism in popular culture and Indian anthropomorphism in Eastern religions and Mughal practice so as to reveal how colonizer and colonized could borrow from each other.

In typically anthropomorphic vein, British hunters were told to listen to elephants. The *Oriental Sporting Magazine* noted that the ‘kind of *language* an elephant *speaks*’ is ‘very simple, consisting of but *one word*, which can never be misunderstood’. An elephant named ‘Hyder Guj’, said to be ‘one of the best tiger-hunters in India’, was ‘never known to *speak* but when he smelt a tiger’.

When this occurred he struck his trunk on the ground and produced a sound 'like the tap of a drum'.⁷⁷ A book on elephants published by Charles Knight claimed that 'the popular history' of the animal has become 'a matter of romance'.⁷⁸ Lining itself against the claim that elephants could speak, the author noted: 'the practice of addressing the elephant ... from the general belief that he understands what is said to him ... is in many instances carried to a ridiculous excess'.⁷⁹

Commentators on the elephant also referred to the trunk as a hand and supposed it to be important for movement and sensitivity. In an anonymous pamphlet, titled *The elephant, principally viewed in relation to man* (1844), the author traced a history of classical writers who had termed the elephant's trunk a hand, and added: 'the Caffre, who has learnt nothing from the poets and orators, but is taught by nature alone, when he kills an elephant approaches the trunk with a superstitious awe, and cutting it off, solemnly inters it, repeatedly exclaiming, "The elephant is a great lord, and the trunk is his hand."' ⁸⁰ Another writer noted of the trunk: 'It is equally as flexible, and as capable of laying hold of objects as the finger of man.'⁸¹ These modes of describing the trunk allowed elephants to seem similar to humans, even though their anatomy was so different. Even Charles Knight's book, which was written in a scientific vein, took account of this anthropomorphic vision. In describing the elephant's anatomy, it noted: 'the vertical height of the skull when compared with its horizontal length – is elevated by causes which have no connexion with the volume of the brain'. This visual trick was said to give the elephant the appearance of 'great sagacity' in the 'eyes even of common observers'.⁸²

The tenderness of an elephant's attachment was another location for this strategy of comparison. J. Harrison, the author of a pamphlet titled *Interesting particulars relating to the elephant* noted that elephants know 'better than ourselves the pure delight of secret pleasure, being wholly taken with one beloved object. They retire into the shady woods and most solitary places, to give themselves up, without disturbance and restraint, to the impulse of Nature.'⁸³ The *Every-day Book* of 1826 observed that elephants help the sick or wounded of their own species. Should an elephant die, his compatriots 'bury him, and carefully cover his body with branches of trees'.⁸⁴ Elephants were said to be benevolent towards members of other species. The tale was told of an animal who allowed a ram to butt at it. 'But if the ram abused the liberty he gave him, the only punishment he inflicted upon him for it was, that he took him up with his trunk, and threw him upon a

⁷⁷ *Oriental Sporting Magazine*, 5 (1829), p. 219.

⁷⁸ Anon., *The menageries*, p. 32.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 154.

⁸⁰ Anon., *The elephant: principally viewed in relation to man* (London, 1844), p. 50.

⁸¹ Anon., *The extraordinary performances of the great Siam elephant* (London, 1830), p. 6.

⁸² Anon., *The menageries*, p. 49.

⁸³ Pamphlet titled *Interesting particulars relating to the elephant*, printed and sold by J. Harrison, 56 Long Acre in folder titled 'Exeter'Change, 1 Mar. 1826: death of the elephant, Chuny', The Theatre Museum Archives, Covent Garden, London (TM).

⁸⁴ *The Every-day Book*, 1826, p. 362.

dung-heap.⁸⁵ Another story, which originated in the *Philosophical Transactions*, retold how an elephant had formed a strong attachment to a young child. The nurse used to put the child in a cradle under the creature's feet. 'This he became at length so accustomed to, that he would never eat his food except when it was present.'⁸⁶

The elephant's likeness to humans was also said to be evident in the way it held itself in company. Thomas Williamson in his book *Oriental field sports* noted: 'the generality of an elephant's deportment cannot but raise our wonder, and prompt us to treat with some deference an animal which exhibits a sense so nearly allied to our own distinguishing characteristic'.⁸⁷ A male animal at the Exeter 'Change Menagerie was said to 'move in cadence to the trumpet and tabor'. On the stage, one of the observers of the Great Siam Elephant who performed in London wrote that the creature was admired for the 'great regularity with which she moves'. At the conclusion of her first performance, 'the elephant made her appearance, walked back from the stage to the footlights without any attendant, and seemed, by the extraordinary movements of her trunk and tail, to enjoy the roars and laughter and applause which she excited'.⁸⁸ But anthropomorphism was an ambiguous genre of representation. Williamson's book also contained the comment that the 'gait of an elephant is very peculiar'.⁸⁹ Another writer used the same word in stating that 'the peculiarity of the progressive movement of the elephant is generally attributed to the weight of his body, and is so different from the motion of other animals with which we are familiar, that we are in the habit of hastily calling the conformation which produces it a deformity'.⁹⁰

The most crucial point of tension, for the humanizing vision, related to the creature's staggering size. This is exemplified, for instance, in a fictional children's book which described a visit to an elephant. The captive creature was said to be 'nearly eleven feet, appearing to their unpractised eyes, a moving mountain.' "'It is a very large animal, is it not grandpapa?'" inquired Harry. "'Yes, my dear, very large and very wonderful, as well as useful.'" "I suppose it is taller than you grandpapa?'"⁹¹ In addition to being amazed at the elephant's size, the children were inquisitive about the eating habits of the creature. "'They must eat a great deal grandpapa'" said Joanna softly, as she watched the elephant eating apples ... "Their food is entirely vegetable, my dear, the young shoots of trees, different sorts of grain, and fruits of various kinds abounding in the East."⁹² A simultaneous fascination with size and appetite is evident in many of the sources that discuss elephants in this period. One writer noted that the elephant destroyed as 'much vegetable food as he consumes, by the broad feet which sustain his prodigious weight'.⁹³ An elephant owned by Louis XIV, for example, was said to

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 353.

⁸⁶ *The Mirror of Literature*, 7 (1826), p. 151.

⁸⁷ Williamson, *Oriental field sports*, p. 43.

⁸⁸ Anon., *The extraordinary performances*, p. 4.

⁸⁹ Williamson, *Oriental field sports*, p. 31.

⁹⁰ Anon., *The elephant: principally viewed in relation to man*, p. 42.

⁹¹ Anon., *A visit to the elephant* (London, 1825), p. 32.

⁹² *Ibid.*, p. 45.

⁹³ Anon., *The elephant: principally viewed in relation to man*, p. 33.

have needed a daily ration of ‘eighty pounds of bread, twelve pints of wine, a large quantity of vegetable soup, with bread and rice’.⁹⁴ In keeping with its aim of reducing the elephant’s character to factual and scientific evidence, the book published by Charles Knight claimed that the elephant’s appetite indicated how it was best suited to plains rich in vegetation. The animal’s consumption of food was also said to arise from the construction of its stomach and intestines.⁹⁵

The shared character of elephants and humans drew support from the creature’s alleged intelligence. Gilbert Pidcock, the first proprietor of the Exeter ‘Change Menagerie, wrote that the elephant’s intelligence ‘makes as near an approach to man as matter can approach spirit’.⁹⁶ One elephant kept at the menagerie was taught to pick up coins using its trunk. Once when a coin landed beyond its reach, it stood motionless for a few moments and then decided to blow with great force against the wall.

The angle produced by the opposition of the wall made the current of air act under the coin, as he evidently anticipated it would; the sixpence travelled within his reach, and he picked it up ... This complicated calculation of natural means at his disposal ... was an intellectual feat beyond a vast number of human beings would ever thought of, and would be considered a lucky thought, a clever expedient, under similar circumstances, in any man.⁹⁷

Natural histories of the elephant in the press and in printed books abound with unusual tricks performed by elephants and unexpected displays of memory.⁹⁸

In the preface to Thomas Williamson’s *Oriental field sports*, it is stated that ‘the elephant may be said to possess the energy of the horse, the sagacity of the dog, and a large portion of the monkey’s cunning’.⁹⁹ Yet in a guide to the Tower Menagerie, Edward Turner Bennett noted ‘that those who have attributed to the Elephant a degree of intelligence superior to every other beast, have been misled by outward appearance, and by the natural prepossession arising from his gigantic and imposing figure’. Bennett put the creature’s intelligence down to the flexibility of the trunk. The creature’s tricks were said to be ‘nothing more than mechanical actions, to the performance of which he is stimulated like other beasts, at first because of the promise of reward or the fear of chastisement, and afterwards by the mere force of habit’.¹⁰⁰ The debate about elephant intelligence was widespread. The book published by Charles Knight cited a traveller on the subject of the elephant’s trunk: ‘But for this instrument, and its great strength, I think it doubtful whether it would be ranked higher, in intellectual endowments, than a despised animal of the same natural family – the hog.’¹⁰¹ Yet the author

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 28.

⁹⁵ Anon., *The menageries*, p. 45.

⁹⁶ Gilbert Pidcock, *A brief description of the principal foreign animals and birds now displaying at the grand menagerie over Exeter 'Change, the property of Mr. Gilbert Pidcock* (London, 1800), p. 4.

⁹⁷ Newspaper cutting with no provenance on page with cuttings from the *Mirror of Literature*, folder titled ‘Exeter 'Change, 1 Mar. 1826: death of the elephant, Chuny’, TM.

⁹⁸ *Mirror of Literature*, 7 (1826), p. 150; Williamson, *Oriental field sports*, p. 41.

⁹⁹ Williamson, *Oriental field sports*, Preface.

¹⁰⁰ Bennett, *The Tower Menagerie*, p. 175.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, p. 160.

chose to disagree and put forward the thesis that the docility of the elephant attested to its superior mind.

Debates surrounding elephant intelligence, and anxieties about the elephant's gait, its size, and its ability to converse, reveal that this was a period of historical transition. Natural histories had begun to aim for objectivity and raged against myths and fables. Anthropomorphism was to have no place in the professionalized life sciences of the later nineteenth century. In the earlier period, however, battles had to be fought to define fact and to distinguish it from popular error, and to distance the new science of animals from anthropomorphism.

V

Undoubtedly, there are important connections between the anthropomorphic portrayal of elephants and Romantic sensibility. However, authors who aimed to educate and entertain also paid attention to the link between their assignation of human characteristics to elephants and Eastern approaches to the animal, a point which is overlooked in the secondary literature. The contest between the new science of animals and the anthropomorphic genre appeared as a battle between rational Christian natural theology and the allegedly heathen views of nature held by other cultures.¹⁰²

Anthropomorphism has a long history in India. In the *Vedas* the term used for elephant might literally be translated to mean a beast with a limb functioning as a hand; the same form of reference that British observers used to describe the trunk.¹⁰³ In these ancient texts anthropomorphism worked alongside religious adoration. One British commentator drew attention to a Sanskrit text which described how the earth was supported by eight elephants. It compared these creatures to living mountains. One of them was said to be 'covered with various countries, and adorned with numerous cities'. Another was said to be 'snow-white' and to support the earth 'with his beautiful body'.¹⁰⁴ According to Sanskrit texts, Indra, the deity of rain and sky, was said to ride a flying elephant.¹⁰⁵

Indians were thought to use elephants in explaining the origin and function of the earth because of their reverence for the 'reproductive power of Nature'.¹⁰⁶ For instance, Hindu poets were said to allude to the 'fragrant juice which oozes, at certain seasons, from small ducts in the temples of the male elephant'. According to myth, this liquid explained the 'delicious odour' of a river that god Krishna smelt on one occasion. 'He was eager to view the source of so

¹⁰² For an introduction to the debates between science and religion see John Hedley Brooke, *Science and religion: some historical perspectives* (Cambridge, 1991); David C. Lindberg and Ronald L. Numbers, eds., *God and nature: historical essays on the encounter between Christianity and science* (California, 1986); John Hedley Brooke and Geoffrey Cantor, *Reconstructing nature: the engagement of science and religion* (Edinburgh, 1989). None of these accounts pays attention to the placement of non-Western religions.

¹⁰³ B. Ch. Chhabra, 'Elephant in Indian art', *Journal of Indian History*, 51 (1973), pp. 486-7.

¹⁰⁴ Anon., *The menageries*, pp. 208-9. ¹⁰⁵ Chhabra, 'Elephant in Indian art', pp. 486-7.

¹⁰⁶ Anon., *The menageries*, p. 79.

fragrant a stream, but was informed by the natives that it flowed from the temples of an elephant, immensely large, milk-white and beautifully formed.¹⁰⁷ This theological interest in reproduction was seen to be superstitious and morally degrading when contrasted with the supposed rationality of Christian views of nature.¹⁰⁸

However, the most important point of contact between accounts of the elephant in Sanskrit texts and Christian theology pertained to the god Ganesh. He was described, in an influential survey written by Rev. W. Ward, the Baptist missionary, as ‘a fat short man, with a long belly, and an elephant’s head’.¹⁰⁹ This description characterizes the tenor of British accounts of Hinduism in the early nineteenth century. It falls into the same tradition as the frontispiece of Edward Moor’s *The Hindu pantheon* (1810) which accentuates the physical shape of Ganesh’s body (Fig. 2). Yet it was not Ganesh’s belly but Ganesh’s head that created the greatest discussion in the period. The idea that the god’s head symbolized ‘sagacious discernment’ may be traced to an article written by Sir William Jones in the *Asiatick Researches* for 1788. Sir William compared Ganesh to the Greek God of Wisdom, Janus, and suggested that the two deities were related. The rat that Ganesh sat above was said by Sir William to be ‘a wise and provident animal’.¹¹⁰ The claim that Ganesh was a god of wisdom also appeared in Moor’s work.¹¹¹ Yet in the better researched survey written by Rev. W. Ward, it is stated that the elephant head does not symbolize wisdom, but rather the mystical sound Om.¹¹² This debate over meaning indicates how Europeans extrapolated from their own anthropomorphic tradition, which saw elephants as intelligent, in coming to an understanding of the character of Ganesh. British commentaries on the elephant therefore reveal a two-way exchange of symbols: European anthropomorphism borrowed from Sanskrit texts while it served as a vantage point from which to make sense of the alien.

British anthropomorphism must also be contextualized in relation to Mughal practice. Most famously, the *Akbarnama*, the history of the reign of Emperor Akbar, written to invest him with mystic and divine qualities in 1590–1, is littered with elephants. In this text, Akbar’s ability to ride the wildest elephants is taken as a sign of his ability to bring order to his kingdom, and also as proof of divine sanction for rule.

On the day that he halted at the stage of Karoha, he calmly mounted the elephant Ran Sangar, whom experienced men would not approach on account of his being violent mast.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ See for instance the comment on white elephants in Anon., *The beavers and the elephant: stories in natural history for children* (Edinburgh and London, 1829), p. 146.

¹⁰⁹ Rev. W. Ward, *A view of the history, literature and religion of the Hindoos, including a minute description of their manners and customs and translations from their principal works* (London, 1817), p. 56.

¹¹⁰ *Asiatick Researches*, 1 (1788), p. 226.

¹¹¹ Edward Moor, *The Hindu pantheon* (London, 1810), p. 169.

¹¹² Ward, *A view of the history*, Preface, p. xxxii. Much later, *Hogg’s Instructor* agreed that Ganesh’s head did not denote sagacity. See *Hogg’s Instructor*, 5 (1850), p. 349.

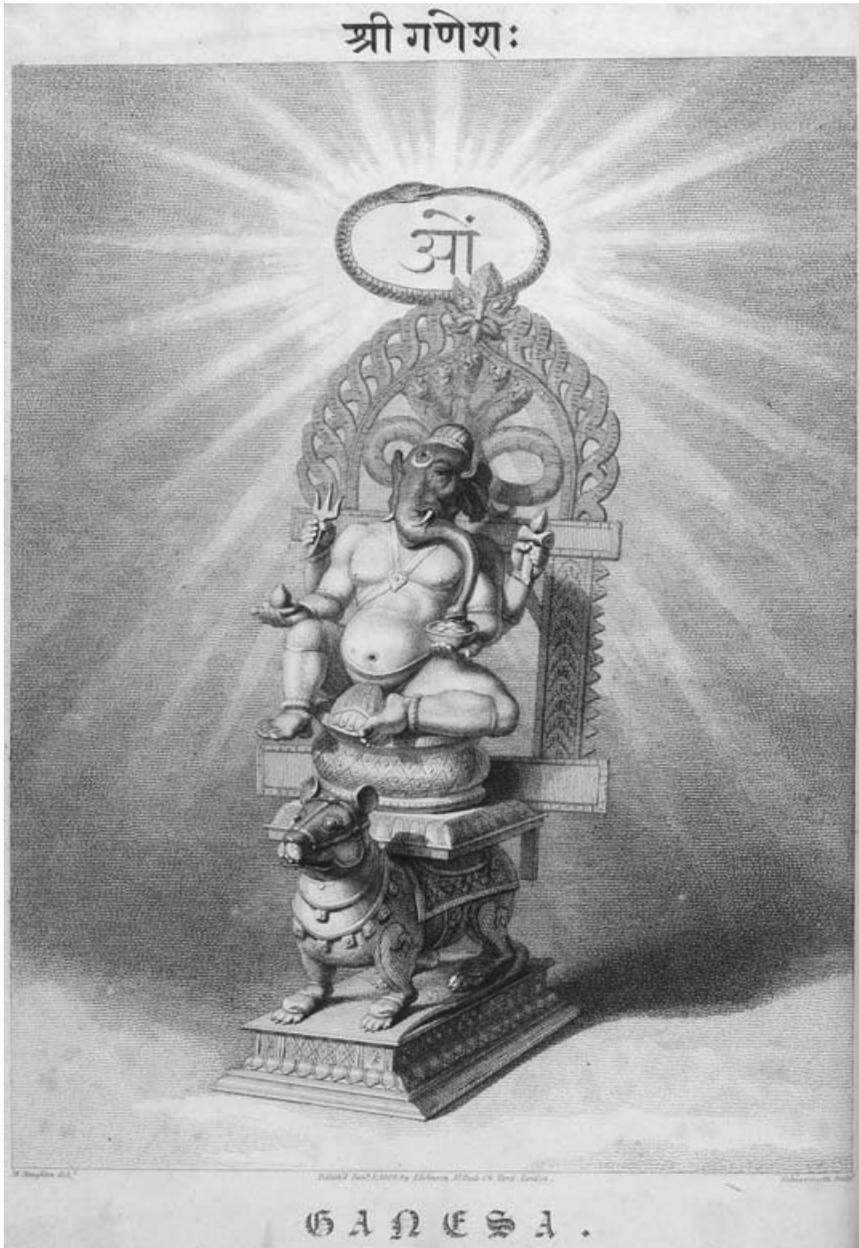


Fig. 2. 'Ganesh' from Edward Moor, *The Hindu pantheon* (London, 1810), Frontispiece. By permission of the Syndics of Cambridge University Library.

That riotous one submitted to the might of H.M's fortune ... Some learnt one of the thousand laudable qualities of H.M. and some emerged from the ravine of denial and entered the rose-garden of devotion. Wonderful acts were always oozing forth from the great man.¹¹³

The 101 elephants that Akbar had in his possession for his own personal use were given individual names, and trained staff were devoted to their upkeep. Mughal paintings from the reign of Akbar, and the three centuries that follow, depict how the line of emperors used the creatures for elephant-fights, the punishment of criminals, display, and hunting.¹¹⁴

Mughal painters developed a distinct style of depicting the elephant, which was characterized by clinical interest in the creatures and a concern to emphasize the grandeur of the rider by highlighting the size of the elephant.¹¹⁵ This genre worked side-by-side with the vibrant schools of Kota and Bundi, outside the Mughal court, that also became renowned for elephants. Starting with the unknown painter called 'The Master of Elephants' who produced works in the mid-seventeenth century and going right up to the artist, Sheikh Tajū (fl. 1707–20), the Kota painters made elephants their forte. Artists could consult elephants regularly because the fort at Kota lay in fertile breeding grounds, and so their paintings are characterized by more empathy than their Mughal counterparts. One of the Master of Elephants' most impressive works depicts an angry elephant struggling to break its chains.¹¹⁶ The location of the elephant in religious ceremony and military engagement is neatly combined in the panoramic, *Elephants and horses assembled before the image of Brijnathji, who is seen looking down from a balcony in the palace* (c. 1730–40).¹¹⁷ The image shows the elephants all named and in rank, together with a collection of formally arranged soldiers prostrate before the god Brijnathji. The Kota school and Mughal paintings did not operate in isolated spheres. With the consolidation of Mughal rule, the imperial style of art came to have an impact on the regional schools.¹¹⁸ British approaches to the elephant were formed therefore in an already fluid field of diverse traditions that operated on the basis of anthropomorphism, religion, and display.

The exchange of symbols between the Muslim traditions of Mughal art, and what came to be called Buddhism and Hinduism, is exemplified for instance in the special interest displayed by Mughal painters to white elephants.¹¹⁹ British observers also showed an inordinate degree of attention to accounts of white elephants. An article in the *Asiatic Journal* for 1825 noted: 'XA'CCA, the name of the first founder of idolatry in the Indies and eastern countries; in the history of his life reports, that when his mother was big with him, she dreamt that she

¹¹³ H. Beveridge, *The Akbarnama of Abul-Fazl translated from the Persian*, III (Calcutta, 1904), p. 298.

¹¹⁴ See Das, 'The elephant in Mughal painting'.

¹¹⁵ See Stuart Cary Welch, ed., *Gods, kings and tigers: the art of Kotah* (Munich and New York, 1997), pp. 36–42.

¹¹⁶ Welch, ed., *Gods, kings and tigers*, p. 22.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 130.

¹¹⁸ For more on this see Andrew Topsfield and M. C. Beach, *Indian paintings and drawings from the collection of Howard Hodgkin* (London, 1992), p. 15.

¹¹⁹ Das, 'The elephant in Mughal painting', p. 52.

brought forth a white elephant, which is the reason the kings of Siam, Tonquin, and China, have so great a value for them.¹²⁰ The possibility for humans to mother white elephants was central to an ‘extraordinary fact’ that was referred to in passing in the same issue. The tale was told of a white elephant gifted to a Burmese king. The creature differed little in colour from any other animal but had ten women ‘attached to the animal’ for the purpose of providing milk.¹²¹ These fantastic accounts were well suited to a culture that was fascinated with the display of curiosities and with the difficult boundaries between human, beast and oddity.

One Indian prince was said to take the title of ‘king of white elephants’. Each white elephant in his possession had a house of gold and got its food in vessels of gilt silver. ‘Every day when they go to the river to wash, each goes under a canopy of cloth of gold or silk, carried by six or eight men, and eight or ten men go before each, playing on drums, *shawms*, and other instruments.’¹²² In accounts such as this, there is an ambiguity over the question of whether Eastern approaches to the elephant count as a form of deification or anthropomorphism. This confusion comes to the fore, for instance, in accounts of white elephants that could speak. In military engagements it was said that ‘an unusual grunt from the white elephant was at all times sufficient to interrupt the most important affairs, and cause the most solemn engagements to be broken off’.¹²³ Commentators realized that these stories did not distinguish between the divine and regal status of the white elephant.¹²⁴ This slippage made it possible for Eastern religions to influence Western anthropomorphism.

Overall, however, British commentators were anxious that Indian traditions of engaging with the elephant were too ‘heathen’. British natural history was allegedly based on the rational foundations of Christian natural theology which could not be tainted by those who deified the elephant, or who assigned mystic character to the creature. The natural historical imagery that was common in India was taken as an indicator of lesser intelligence. James Mill’s influential *The history of British India* (1817), stated that there were two sources that could ground ‘just and rational views of God’. These were revelation and reflection on the nature of the universe. In describing the condition of the Indians, Mill asserted: ‘If all our unrevealed knowledge of God, who is the immediate object of none of our senses is derived from his works, they whose ideas of those works are so far from being just, rational and sublime ... cannot, whatever may be the language they employ, have elevated, pure, and rational ideas of their author.’¹²⁵ It was ‘perfectly clear’ that the Indians ‘never contemplated the universe as a connected and perfect system, governed by general laws, and directed to general ends’ and therefore their religion was said to be irrational. Central to this argument was the

¹²⁰ *Asiatic Journal and Monthly Register*, 19 (1825), p. 50.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 278.

¹²² Anon., *The menageries*, p. 203; see also *Asiatic Journal*, 18 (1824), p. 584.

¹²³ Anon., *The menageries*, p. 204.

¹²⁴ See *Asiatic Journal*, 18 (1824), p. 584.

¹²⁵ James Mill, *The history of British India* (London, 1817), p. 236.

framework of nineteenth-century natural theology. It was the Christian belief that God revealed himself in nature to those who did not have access to revelation in scripture. A Christian believer could thus look from nature to nature's God by observing the design of the universe. This step of faith was seen to be impossible to the Hindu or for that matter to a Mughal ruler, because it was alleged that the Indians had made little progress in science. What emerged from a poor understanding of nature was a view of God that was 'loose, vague, wavering, obscure, and inconsistent'.¹²⁶

More sympathetically, Edward Moor divided the beliefs of the Hindus into two camps: 'the first is preached to the vulgar, the second known only to a select number'.¹²⁷ Moor asserted that Hinduism was a strictly monotheistic religion. However, for the purpose of educating the masses, the priests had invented a myriad personifications. Anything in nature could be personified: 'the sun, the moon, and all the heavenly host; fire, air, and all natural phenomena'.¹²⁸ The popularity of these images arose from the rein they gave to the imagination. In the meanwhile, Hindu poets had worked up natural historical incarnations 'with wonderful fertility of genius and pomp of language'.¹²⁹ Moor confessed that he had found the 'utility of pictures and visible objects' in understanding Hinduism immeasurable.¹³⁰ He had fourteen images of Ganesh in his own possession: and some of them were 'gilt images of silver with gold rings; some with rubies in the eyes and other parts'.¹³¹ Despite a fascination with these images, Britons characterized the use of visual artefacts to formulate theology as an inferior practice. For instance, the *Edinburgh Review* noted: 'in proportion as the human mind improves, its notion of the attributes of God are elevated'.¹³² While Christians used images to refer to their God; Hindus were seen to have deified the image and confused it with its subject.

Indian approaches to the elephant were therefore seen to be inferior on at least two counts: first, because Christianity was a comprehensively monotheistic religion and second, because Christians approached nature with an investigative mind. The book on elephants published by Charles Knight therefore took on a natural theological language of conquest in explaining the relation between elephants and empire. It ended by praising the power of science and noting that 'to the scriptures true knowledge has never been hostile'.¹³³ While 'uncivilized communities' were said to be as powerless as 'the beasts of the field', Britons had begun their mission of harnessing nature to conquer the earth. Yet, 'how large a proportion of the most fertile countries remains uncultivated – how many marshes are there to be drained, how many wastes to be tilled!'. The nations 'who are blessed with the largest shares of freedom and knowledge' were urged to act relentlessly in cultivating and subduing nature.¹³⁴

¹²⁶ Ibid., p. 203.

¹²⁷ Moor, *The Hindu pantheon*, Preface, p. xii.

¹²⁸ Ibid., p. 2.

¹²⁹ Ibid.

¹³⁰ Ibid., p. 1.

¹³¹ Ibid., p. 171.

¹³² *Edinburgh Review or Critical Journal*, 17 (1810), p. 383.

¹³³ Anon., *The menageries*, p. 390.

¹³⁴ Ibid., p. 393.

Britons prided their position of power over nature and contrasted it with the irrational views of Hindu believers who worshipped nature, and Mughal emperors who for instance compared their rule with the taming of an elephant. Indian adoration of the environment was said to arise from morally degrading principles. In contrast, rational Christians were endowed with the responsibility of propagating a scientific relation to nature which accorded with scripture. Since science was important in the justification of empire, the promoters of this new knowledge could gain great benefit from aligning anthropomorphic thinking with pagan superstition. In their eyes, the future belonged to science, Christianity, and the British empire; anthropomorphism and Hinduism would be forgotten.

VI

Amongst the British public, however, anthropomorphism continued to hold a wide base of support. The elephant continued to be humanized, at least in part because of the culture of putting beasts in cages. The status of the cage in the debate between science and anthropomorphism is vexed: the possibility of viewing a displayed elephant was seen to be a triumph for objectivity, even as other observers found it to be a useful means of framing an animal so as to look human. Anthropomorphism and science therefore operated concurrently in public displays.

Edward Turner Bennett's guide to the Tower Menagerie provides an intriguing history of the display of animals. According to Bennett, in the dark ages, 'the captive brute occupied his station side by side of the vanquished hero'. The relation between war and animals was so well established that menageries were used to train animals in combat. 'In the theology too of those dark ages many animals occupied a distinguished place, and were not only venerated in their own proper persons, on account of their size, their power, their uncouth figure, their resemblance to man, or their supposed qualities and influence, but were also looked upon as sacred.' Menageries provided the context where the 'moral qualities' of animals could be studied so as to support each of these agendas. But as 'civilization advanced and the progress of society favoured the development of the mind' a new type of menagerie appeared. Curiosity was replaced with a 'love of science'; and 'whatever was rare or novel was no longer regarded with a stupid stare of astonishment and an exaggerated expression of wonder, but became the object of careful investigation and philosophical meditation'.¹³⁵ Bennett claimed that a humanizing and deifying gaze was displaced by an objective vision and that the early nineteenth-century animal cage was a triumph of this new science.

But in actual fact, cages altered the appearance and behaviour of the animal in captivity and presented the problem of how to come to an objective view. Observing an elephant in an enclosed space necessitated a particular mode of seeing. 'According to the principles of perspective,' the anonymous author of *The*

¹³⁵ Bennett, *The Tower Menagerie*. All quotes from Preface, p. ix.

elephant principally viewed in relation to man, noted, ‘a large object is not properly seen, unless we are removed to about three times the distance of its height and size’.¹³⁶ Thomas Williamson criticized the manner of the display at Exeter ‘Change Menagerie. He wrote that if an elephant were to be put on the ‘same level as the observer’, the spectator’s ‘judgement’ could have ‘fair play’ and enable him ‘to compute the stature’ more accurately.¹³⁷ An ideal display was expected to convey the idea of how the animal behaved in its natural habitat, so as to facilitate an understanding of its natural theological design. This was impossible in a small cage. Of the elephant who was well kept, it was said that ‘with man by his side, some notion may not only be formed of his vastness, but the mind may be incited to the contemplations of those arrangements of Providence, by which a creature of such prodigious bulk is enabled to provide his daily sustenance without difficulty in a natural state’.¹³⁸ This prescription for the good cage is striking in that it combines anthropomorphism with objectivity, without seeing them as contradictory.

A captive animal was also said to require new outlets for the application of intelligence and energy, which made it difficult to generalize from what was caged to an objective view of the creature. According to Buffon,

almost every elephant, under confinement, has a peculiar movement, as if it were necessary to substitute some exercise for the unrestrained activity of a state of nature ... Thus, an elephant in a cell is always feeling about with his trunk – inserts the finger, as it has been expressively called, into the minutest crack – and examines every new object which is presented to him with the most eager curiosity.¹³⁹

Captive elephants were thought to be more susceptible to disease, and their close confinement was also said to aggravate periodical fits of rage and to make lasting changes to movement.¹⁴⁰ Thus a female elephant in a cage at the Exeter ‘Change Menagerie was said to roll constantly on her body, ‘as if she were swayed by the motion of a ship’. She was said to have acquired this habit during her voyage from Calcutta.¹⁴¹ Observers were therefore confused by the appearance of an exotic animal in a cage and struggled to interpret what they saw.

These tensions related to the broader theme of how menageries made colonial territories more familiar. Just as entrapped elephants in India celebrated the power and benevolence of the East India Company’s officers, the elephants in London’s menageries publicized the effectiveness of the Company’s rule. Their presence in the metropolis was contingent on the Company’s ability to transport objects across vast distances. Both elephants at the Exeter ‘Change Menagerie in 1800, for instance, were bought directly from the East India Company’s

¹³⁶ Anon., *The elephant: principally viewed in relation to man*, p. 40.

¹³⁷ Williamson, *Oriental field sports*, p. 42.

¹³⁸ Anon., *The elephant: principally viewed in relation to man*, p. 40.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 25–6.

¹³⁹ Cited *ibid.*, p. 21.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 21.

vessels.¹⁴² Ten years later, when Edward Cross, the new proprietor, wrote his guide to the menagerie, he was keen to draw attention to the male elephant which arrived in the East-Indiaman named the *Lady Astell* in 1810.¹⁴³

This elephant – named Chuny – attracted unprecedented public interest. It had already killed a keeper, when it threatened to cause commotion by breaking out of its cage and storming the city, a likelihood that was put to rest when it was shot dead. The *Every-day Book* called Chuny's death a 'sensation' and noted that it was the most remarkable happening in the metropolis since the panic in the neighbourhood of the Royal Exchange.¹⁴⁴ The title of a pamphlet which set out to give more details of what happened to Chuny – *Extraordinary occurrence, every particular respecting the madness of the tremendous elephant at Exeter Change and the manner adopted to destroy that living mountain* – confirms the degree of attention excited by this event.¹⁴⁵ By virtue of their popularity, elephants in the metropolis could propagandize empire and serve as the point of first contact with colonial possessions. The descriptions surrounding such displays – 'extraordinary', 'living mountain' and 'sensation' – suggest how these creatures became sites for the navigation of the unfamiliar.

Chuny's tale also provides many insights into how anthropomorphism operated concurrently and in competition with the new science in the public gaze. On arriving from India, Chuny had two keepers and these men went with him when he was sold for 900 guineas to Mr Harris, the proprietor of Covent-Garden Theatre.¹⁴⁶ Chuny appeared on stage for the first time on 26 December 1811, and according to the *European Magazine*, the 'great animal was preceded with a slave with a dish, from which, we suppose he was indulged with a *sup* of rum; as he appeared to enjoy it much, and dipped in his trunk with infinite complacency'.¹⁴⁷ After being dismissed from the theatre, Chuny was sold to the Exeter 'Change Menagerie, where his fame redoubled. Those who visited the creature behind his den of oak attested to his personality and charm. Edmund Kean, the tragedian, claimed that he was recognized by Chuny on every visit. Upon returning from a sojourn in America, Chuny 'put forth his trunk and fondled over him'.¹⁴⁸ One of

¹⁴² According to Gilbert Pidcock who was proprietor of the menagerie, at this time, the male elephant was bought from Captain Dempster of the East-Indiaman named *Rose*; while the female elephant was bought from Captain Lindsay of the East-Indiaman named *Rockingham*. See Pidcock, *A brief description of the principal foreign animals*, pp. 1–9.

¹⁴³ See Edward Cross, *Companion to the royal menagerie, Exeter 'change containing concise descriptions, scientific & interesting of the curious foreign animals* (London, 1820), A1; for more details Richard Altick, *Shows of London* (Harvard, 1978), pp. 309ff.

¹⁴⁴ *The Every-day Book*, 1826, p. 322.

¹⁴⁵ See scrap book page which includes the letter to the editor of *Bell's Life* from Jack Scroggins, denying that he ate the flesh of Chuny with Cross, dated 9 Mar. 1826 in folder titled 'Exeter 'Change, 1 Mar. 1826: death of the elephant, Chuny', TM.

¹⁴⁶ John Taylor, *The life, death and dissection of the largest elephant ever known in this country and which was destroyed a few days since at Exeter 'Change* (London, 1826), p. 5.

¹⁴⁷ Cited in Altick, *Shows of London*, p. 311. For the details of the appearance of the elephant on stage and the public acclaim that it excited see, Playbills File 1812, TM.

¹⁴⁸ *Mirror of Literature*, 7 (1826), p. 149.

his keepers, John Taylor, ‘frequently for weeks together, slept near his favourite animal’.¹⁴⁹ A poem which appeared anonymously in the press, also spoke of Chuny’s affability:

I’ve been a visitor,
 Of old, a sort of a Buffon inquisitor,
 Of thy Menagerie – and knew the beast
 That is deceased!—
 I was the Damon of the gentle giant,
 And oft have been,
 Like Mr. Jean,
 Tenderly fondled by his trunk compliant
 Whenever I approach’d the kindly brute
 Flapp’d his prodigious ears and bent his knees—
 It makes me freeze
 To think of it! – no chum could better suit,
 Exchanging grateful looks for grateful fruit,—
 For so our former dearness was begun.
 I bribed him with an apple, and beguiled
 The beast of his affection, like a child;
 And well he loved me till his life was done
 (Except when he was wild):
 It makes me blush for human friends— but none
 I have so truly kept or cheaply won!¹⁵⁰

In addition to humanizing the elephant, Chuny’s visitors therefore spoke of him as a friend. It was said that ‘every person, especially in London, has either heard or seen the enormous elephant that has for some time past been exhibited at Exeter ‘Change in the Strand’.¹⁵¹ This public acclaim was thought to have affected the caged animal, making him less than typical of its kind in the wild. Chuny ‘appeared to receive particular gratification from the gaze of the spectators that were constantly visiting the menagerie’.¹⁵²

Without exercise, Chuny grew prodigiously. John Taylor wrote that he had ‘grown to such a size that it was with difficulty he could lay down in his den, which so worried him that he became more mischievous and required additional care’.¹⁵³ After his death, *The Times* explained that the condition in which Chuny had been kept explained why the elephant had become so furious in his last hours. It was the elephant’s ‘season of excitement’, the correspondent noted, and in India when that time comes round ‘the keepers ride the animals until they are

¹⁴⁹ Taylor, *The life, death and dissection*, p. 8.

¹⁵⁰ See scrap book page which includes a satirical operetta on Chuny’s death in folder titled ‘Exeter ‘Change, 1 Mar. 1826: death of the elephant, Chuny’. TM.

¹⁵¹ From pamphlet titled *Extraordinary occurrence: every particular respecting the madness of the tremendous elephant at Exeter ‘Change and the manner adopted to destroy that living mountain by firing nearly 150 Balls with particulars relation to his dissection* (W. Percival, Printer and Publisher, 63 Long Lane, London), in folder titled ‘Exeter ‘Change, 1 Mar. 1826: death of the elephant, Chuny’, TM.

¹⁵² From pamphlet titled *Interesting particulars*, TM. ¹⁵³ Taylor, *The life, death and dissection*, p. 5.

much exhausted, and then confine their legs with ropes; when thus subdued they become calm, and recover in the course of a few days'.¹⁵⁴ The cage itself drew close attention in the media: the *Every-day Book* presented an engraving of the den which it described as 'minutely correct in form and proportion' and 'essential to the right understanding of the narrative'.¹⁵⁵ An anonymous letter published in *The Times* and signed by Chuny attested to the public feeling about encaged animals: 'to place an elephant, or any beast, without a mate, and in a box bearing no great proportion to his bulk that a coffin does to a corpse is inhuman; and there can be no doubt that confinement and the want of a mate caused the frenzy which rendered it necessary to destroy the late stupendous and interesting animal'.¹⁵⁶ The cage was thus not only seen to be unscientific, it denied Chuny whatever ambiguous human status his viewers assigned him. It was said to be the focus of the elephant's anger in his enraged state. On the morning when Chuny was killed, 'he made a tremendous rush at the front wholly excited by provocation' and broke the 'square end at the top of the hinge story-post, to which the gates are hung' and, consequently, 'the strong iron clamped gates which had hitherto resisted his many furious attacks' lost their security.¹⁵⁷ Edward Cross decided to have Chuny destroyed.

Cross resolved to obtain some of the foot guards from Somerset House to put Chuny to death by shooting balls at him; but their efforts had little result as the elephant's skin was too hardy for the easy penetration of the shots. The surgeons, Mr Brookes and Mr Clift, both acquainted with the anatomy of the animal, pointed out those parts which were most vulnerable.¹⁵⁸ Upon their advice, balls were aimed immediately behind the blade-bone, in the direction of the heart. According to the *Mirror*, the total number of balls fired was 152: 'the greater portion in the trunk, but some in the head, and one in the eye'. Those who humanized the elephant and who felt that he had been treated cruelly by being put to death for a form of excitement that had been caused by the conditions of its keeping were quick to ennoble his death. The correspondent of the *Mirror* continued,

The noble animal of India, fell twice, and twice sprung up again, during the terrible hail shower of balls by which he was lacerated. At last, he sunk down slowly and majestically on his haunches, and expired, in the posture which is assumed by the elephant when about to be loaded, and which he was wont to assume when ordered.¹⁵⁹

Another observer echoed these sentiments, contrasting the elephant's conduct with those of his assailants: 'the noble brute seated himself on his haunches; he then folded his forelegs under him, adjusted his trunk, and ceased to live, the only peaceful one among us cruel wretches'.¹⁶⁰ Notions of Chuny's nobility had come into such currency, that Charles Knight could write: 'Thine was a sagacious and

¹⁵⁴ *Times*, 3 Mar. 1826.

¹⁵⁵ *The Every-day Book*, 1826, p. 335.

¹⁵⁶ *Times*, 10 Mar. 1826.

¹⁵⁷ *The Every-day Book*, 1826, p. 326.

¹⁵⁸ *Mirror of Literature*, 7 (1826), p. 146.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 147.

¹⁶⁰ Cited Altick, *Shows of London*, p. 312.

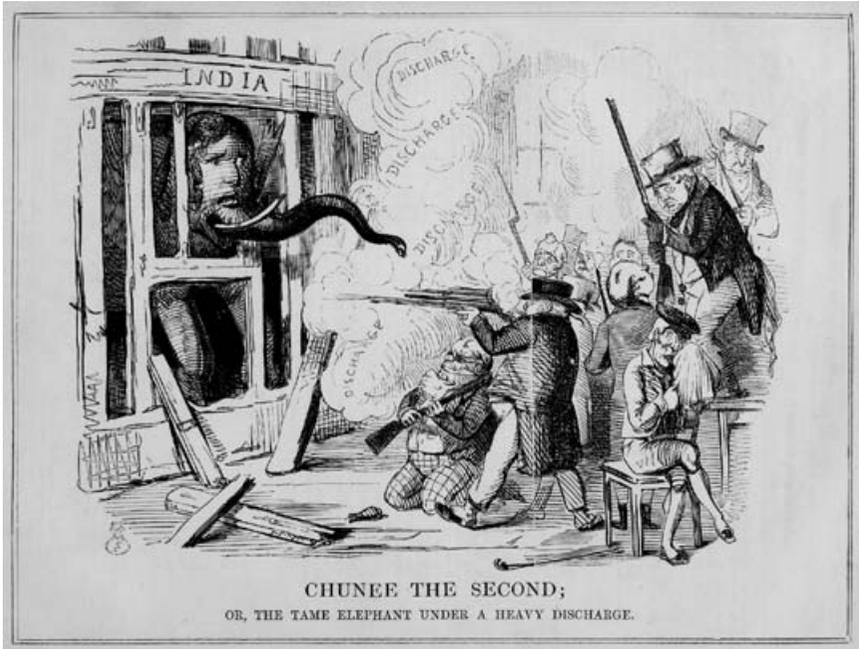


Fig. 3. 'Chunee the second: or the tame elephant under a heavy discharge', *Punch*, 6 (1844), p. 213. In this print from more than fifteen years after the shooting of Chundy, the elephant has come to symbolize how India needs to be contained. By permission of the Syndics of Cambridge University Library.

noble nature ... Gradually thou droppest on thy knees, and in calm dignity let the pitiless storm beat on. When they grew tired, they found thee still in that posture, erect, but dead.¹⁶¹ Even at the moment of the elephant's death, observers were concerned with posture and movement. These were the criteria that allowed the elephant to be anthropomorphized.

As soon as the elephant was dead, however, whatever ambiguous humanity had been assigned to the creature was denied to its remains. The following day's *Times* noted, 'numerous applications are made by anatomical pupils to be permitted to be present at the dissection'. The correspondent continued that 'applications have also been made to the proprietor, by many, for pieces of the flesh, for which liberal sums of money have been offered'.¹⁶² On Saturday morning, preparations were made for Chundy's dissection. 'In the afternoon pillars of enormous size were erected on each side of the den, so as to support a strong-cross beam, from which a pulley, capable of raising ten tons was suspended'.¹⁶³ Butchers were employed through the night to flay the skin, and Chundy's hide was

¹⁶¹ Cited *ibid.*, p. 313.

¹⁶² *Times*, 4 Mar. 1826.

¹⁶³ Newspaper cutting titled 'Dissection of the elephant' and dated 7 Mar. 1826 of unknown origin in folder titled 'Exeter' Change, 1 Mar. 1826: death of the elephant, Chundy', TM.

subsequently tanned at Greenwich.¹⁶⁴ The *Mirror* noted that on Saturday evening, any visitor to the menagerie might have seen how ‘two large steaks’ were cut from the ‘rump’ of the elephant and ‘broiled’. ‘A surgeon ate part; and during the day several other persons, male and female, partook of them, expressed no disrelish for this novel food; but on the contrary, declared that it was pleasant to the taste.’¹⁶⁵ Later that evening, Chuny’s bowels were thrown off Waterloo bridge.¹⁶⁶ On Sunday morning a number of surgeons appeared at the menagerie, under the command of a Mr Ryals. ‘The body was first turned, by ropes fastened to the fore legs, and the carcass being raised, the trunk was cut off, and the eyes extracted.’¹⁶⁷ The *Mirror* continues by giving a very detailed account of the operation, dense with measurements and medical observations; the dissection in effect reduced Chuny from a humanized beast to a scientific specimen. If Chuny’s captivity in a cage had served as a commentary on unsuccessful science, Chuny’s death took this argument further. Dr Brookes the surgeon wrote to *The Times* denying a report that he ‘dressed and ate part of the putrid elephant’.¹⁶⁸

Chuny’s navigation of the boundary between human and beast is best exemplified in the manner in which he was phrenologized by Johann Sprurzheim, the celebrated proponent of the controversial theory of mental physiology. In the meantime a mould of the ‘prodigious beast’ entered Deville’s phrenological collection.¹⁶⁹ The *Phrenological Journal* of 1830 observed,

Mr. Deville’s exhibition-room contains upwards of EIGHTEEN HUNDRED casts or skulls, of men of every grade in society, of every profession, and almost of every face, from the most brutal and barbarous up to the most civilized ... In addition to these, he has begun a collection of the skulls of animals, of which he possesses between three and four thousand.¹⁷⁰

The mould of Chuny’s skull fitted no doubt into a hierarchy of humanity, where animals and humans alike were placed at separate levels of development. If we are to follow the account of the *Transactions of the Phrenological Society* for 1824, it would seem that animal phrenology was a rare subject at this time; phrenology was primarily seen to be a human science.¹⁷¹ The first volume of the *Farrier and Naturalist*, however, presented a list of phrenological organs for animals. Under destructiveness, it observed, ‘the skulls of carnivorous and herbivorous animals, on inspection, exhibit a striking difference’.¹⁷² A carnivorous animal was said to have a well-developed bump where the organ of destructiveness was located, while a herbivorous animal did not. Chuny’s organ of destructiveness became the

¹⁶⁴ Ibid.

¹⁶⁵ *Mirror of Literature*, 7 (1826), p. 148.

¹⁶⁶ From pamphlet titled *Extraordinary occurrence*, in folder titled ‘Exeter’Change, 1 Mar. 1826: death of the elephant, Chuny’, TM.

¹⁶⁷ *Mirror of Literature*, 7 (1826), p. 143.

¹⁶⁸ Altick, *Shows of London*, p. 314.

¹⁶⁹ From pamphlet titled *Interesting particulars*, p. 10, in folder titled ‘Exeter’Change, 1 Mar. 1826: death of the elephant, Chuny’, TM.

¹⁷⁰ *Phrenological Journal*, 6 (1830), p. 572.

¹⁷¹ *Transactions of the Phrenological Society*, 1824, p. 380.

¹⁷² *The Farrier and the Naturalist*, 1 (1828), p. 73.

subject of discussion in an operetta, which was published in the press soon after the elephant's death. In its text, Deville accounts for the elephant's madness by pointing to the well-developed nature of this organ whilst a stranger notes: 'this intellectual animal from all must take the feather, with bumps before and bumps behind – he's all a bump together. Sing tol de rol &c.' The chorus of beasts in the meantime sing: 'The deed, alas! is done. Accomplished is our fear, Great Chuny's soul is gone.'¹⁷³ The dissection and phrenological analysis of Chuny's skull was implicated therefore in the question of whether the elephant was destructive or intelligent, and whether science had robbed its soul.

Cross was estimated to have lost £1,000 when Chuny was killed. In an attempt to salvage the claim that he had acted blamelessly in keeping the elephant so tightly caged, and perhaps with a view to recouping his finances, he had Chuny's skeleton put on display in the den in which the creature had lived. A press report from 1828 noted: 'the work has been admirably performed, – the articulations are perfect, – not a bone is absent, – and the huge remains of this most sagacious of quadrupeds cannot be viewed without exciting feelings of astonishment'.¹⁷⁴ If the elephant could not stay in the cage while alive, Cross was determined to have the skeleton encaged. In 1829, the skeleton appeared at the Egyptian Hall, where one report stated that 'two thousand persons visited in one day this last week, and its attraction continues unabated'.¹⁷⁵ Then after a short stay at the new London University, it ended up in the Hunterian Museum of the Royal College of Surgeons. The skeleton was destroyed by bombing in the Second World War.¹⁷⁶

VII

The account of Chuny's death reveals how science and anthropomorphism could operate together in the public eye, even as professionalizing men of science sought to disassociate the two traditions. By the middle of the nineteenth century, however, the natural history of the elephant was better established. The encyclopaedic survey of elephant diseases compiled by William Gilchrist, assistant surgeon of the East India Company's army in Honsoor and published in Calcutta in 1841, suggests that the creature had at last been mastered by the eye of Western science. Gilchrist wrote: 'The inflammation of the brain is marked by furious delirium. The animal is extremely restless, tries to escape, and to attack its keeper ... A highly characteristic symptom of this disease is the trunk becoming much shorter, sometimes to half its former length.'¹⁷⁷ Gilchrist named this disease

¹⁷³ From 'New operetta' on scrap book page in folder titled 'Exeter 'Change, 1 Mar. 1826: death of the elephant, Chuny', TM.

¹⁷⁴ From newspaper cutting of unknown provenance, dated 1828, on scrap book page, in folder titled 'Exeter 'Change, 1 Mar. 1826: death of the elephant, Chuny', TM. ¹⁷⁵ Ibid.

¹⁷⁶ See Altick, *Shows of London*, pp. 315–16.

¹⁷⁷ W. Gilchrist, 'A memoir on the history and treatment of the elephant with instructions for preserving its efficiency as an animal of transport and a general outline of its anatomy also an account

Bhoa-ka-Murz-Dhaag-ka-Murz-Perpsaka-Murz. In advising how animals with this condition should be treated he wrote that they should be bled in the first instance and that only then should the ‘Mussals’ local keepers were in the habit of giving be administered.¹⁷⁸ Even by the middle of the century, as racial boundaries were being defined, Britons continued to rely on local information in engaging with elephants. Veterinary practice encompassed the transcription of local cures, their comparison with British methods and their assimilation into a corpus of Western knowledge. In the introduction of Gilchrist’s monograph, however, he noted that ‘the theory of the Cattle attendants regarding disease has at least the recommendations of simplicity. They consider all diseases arise either from a superabundance of heat in the animal system or from a deficiency in the temperature ... They have no idea of the powerfully curative effects of bleeding or purgation.’¹⁷⁹ Despite incorporating Indian medical knowledge, Gilchrist attempted to dismiss such information. In the meantime, he claimed that his one aim was to better the usefulness of elephants for the Company’s army. He rested the case of the superiority of British science behind the rubric of practical efficiency and standardized control.¹⁸⁰ Though the later century saw the rise of professionalized science and the dismissal of anthropomorphic traditions; there is clearly a story to be told about exchange across racial boundaries for that period.

Britons in India believed that they had brought unique traditions for the rational management of the environment to the region; in fact their customs were often reinvented forms of local practice. While British knowledge of the elephant was still vague, there was a consonance between European anthropomorphism and Hindu symbols. In the meanwhile, Britons learnt to trap, keep, and train elephants from Indians. These transfers of expertise were hidden even as science was consolidated as a way of knowing and identified as Western. In the earlier decades of the century, who counted as a scientist was being moulded by rival factions: elite and popular, religious and secular, professional and amateur.¹⁸¹ The neutrality of Western science was up for debate and its logic could encompass phrenology alongside comparative anatomy. Christopher Bayly’s seminal examination of the East India Company’s rule and its dependence on local networks of political and social intelligence was critical in alerting historians to the appropriation of local and hybrid knowledge by colonizers.¹⁸² In the meanwhile, Eugene Irschick has gone to the extent of suggesting that the consonance between British and Indian actors in the making of new knowledge about the environment of South India necessitates the assignation of equal participation to both groups.¹⁸³ This article follows in the wake of these studies, but extends the

of the medicines used in the cure of its diseases’, in Board’s Military Collection, L/MIL/5/482, EICR, p. 11. ¹⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 213. ¹⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 4–5. ¹⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 1.

¹⁸¹ James A. Secord, *Victorian sensation: the extraordinary publication, reception, and secret authorship of Vestiges of the Natural History of Creation* (Chicago, 2000); Alison Winter, *Mesmerized: powers of the mind in Victorian Britain* (Chicago, 1998); Michael Shortland and Richard Yeo, eds., *Telling lives: essays on scientific biography* (Cambridge, 1996). ¹⁸² Bayly, *Empire and information*. ¹⁸³ Irschick, *Dialogue and history*.

scope of geographical attention by tracing the arrival of knowledge from India in London.

The early nineteenth century saw the emergence of reason and objectivity, leaving no place for anthropomorphism. Classifications of the natural world abounded and distinctions between humans, animals, and plants were reinvented. The burgeoning literature on the ethnological gaze and the bestialization of the savage has gone some way to understanding the ambiguities behind new-found classifications in the colonial context.¹⁸⁴ Yet the opposite question of when and how animals could be humanized has as yet received little attention. With the pioneering work of John M. MacKenzie and Harriet Ritvo the ground is now set for more detailed study of the cultural history of animals.¹⁸⁵ My account of the elephant suggests how depictions of these creatures could stimulate comments on caste, gender, and race in India. Britons did not only naturalize humans in producing stratifications of those they governed; they projected notions of human organization on to animals. Classifying nature became an ideologically charged enterprise. Indians posited moral qualities to nature; and Britons were keen to note how the colonized observed nature. Nature served as a site of social cohesion while it became a common ground of knowledge. The environment of South Asia might have been distinct from Britain, yet the uses to which it was put and its successful transplantation in the metropolis allowed both colonizers and colonized to share similar experiences and to trade in the typologies of nature.

This has been an attempt to think creatively about what counts as nature and science and to take into account the shared trajectories of metropole and colony. A regional focus is valuable in recovering local agency; and yet there are other ways of relativizing European power and knowledge. Historians' attempts to recover an indigenous viewpoint should not lead to the marginalization of Indian history with respect to the rest of the world. Because elephants were transported from India to London they serve as a good case of how knowledge crossed seas in this period. Information about elephants flowed not only across geography but also across class and race: men of the military, nawabs, hunters, guides, scholars of Hinduism, journalists of the British press, viewers of elephants in menageries, and the reading public of Britain could exchange knowledge about the elephant. Even as historians take a wider frame for accounts of colonial information, it will become important to pay due attention to the multiplicity of knowledges

¹⁸⁴ David Bindman, *Ape to Apollo: aesthetics and the idea of race in the 18th Century* (London, 2002); Lee D. Barker, *From savage to negro: anthropology and the construction of race* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1998); Douglas Lorimer, *Colour, class and the Victorians: English attitudes to the negro in the mid-nineteenth century* (Leicester, 1978); Anne Maxwell, *Colonial photography and exhibitions: representations of the 'Native' and the making of European identities* (Leicester, 1999); Sujit Sivasundaram, 'Natural history spiritualized: civilizing islanders, cultivating breadfruit and collecting souls', *History of Science*, 32 (2001); Sadiya Qureshi, 'Displaying Sara Baartman', the 'Hottentot Venus', *History of Science*, 42 (2004), pp. 233–57.

¹⁸⁵ Ritvo, *The animal estate*; MacKenzie, *The empire of nature*.

that predated British contact overseas. Indian knowledges about the elephant incorporated Sanskrit texts as well as Mughal practice.

The exchanges that lay at the foundations of new knowledge were often hidden from view, so as to support the supremacist rhetoric of the empire and the theological credentials of science. Yet beneath this rhetoric, the newly objective science was built in part on what Britons learnt in India.