

The Privatized Subcontinent

On John Corbet Anderson and C.R. Francis, „Sketches Of Native Life In India“

by Alexander Roob

Among the innumerable illustrated travelogues about India directed to a primarily British audience in the 18th and 19th centuries, „Sketches of Native Life in India,“ a book that was published in London in 1848, has gained a special reputation for its exceptional visual impressiveness and its idiosyncratic qualities. Today, even single illustrated sheets from this work are almost impossible to retrieve from specialized booksellers and antiquarians, although it was able to summon up as many as 350 subscribers (as can be seen in a list the editor enclosed as an appendix) and found distributors in London and Edinburgh.

Charles Richard Francis, the author of the book, was serving the *Bengal Medical Establishment*, an institution created to organize medical supplies for his compatriots on the Indian subcontinent. Like all other colonial institutions, it was founded as part of the H.E.I.C., the *Honourable East India Company*. In the course of the 17th and 18th centuries, this Company had a phenomenal career – starting from a regionally operating trade mission to eventually become a globally active, para-national organization that was even granted the right to entertain its own individual legislation and autonomous recruitment rights. At the height of its influence, the H.E.I.C. controlled half of the global trade from North America and South Africa all the way to Japan. A considerable number among the colonial wars of the 18th and 19th centuries, whose effects are oftentimes still recognizable in the present, can be traced back historically to the entanglements and power of this trading company. Considering that it directly refers to their greatest political triumph – rejoicing not only in the victory over the French Emperor that resulted in an undamped mercantile expansion in Asia but also being entrusted to guard him as a prisoner – it is not at

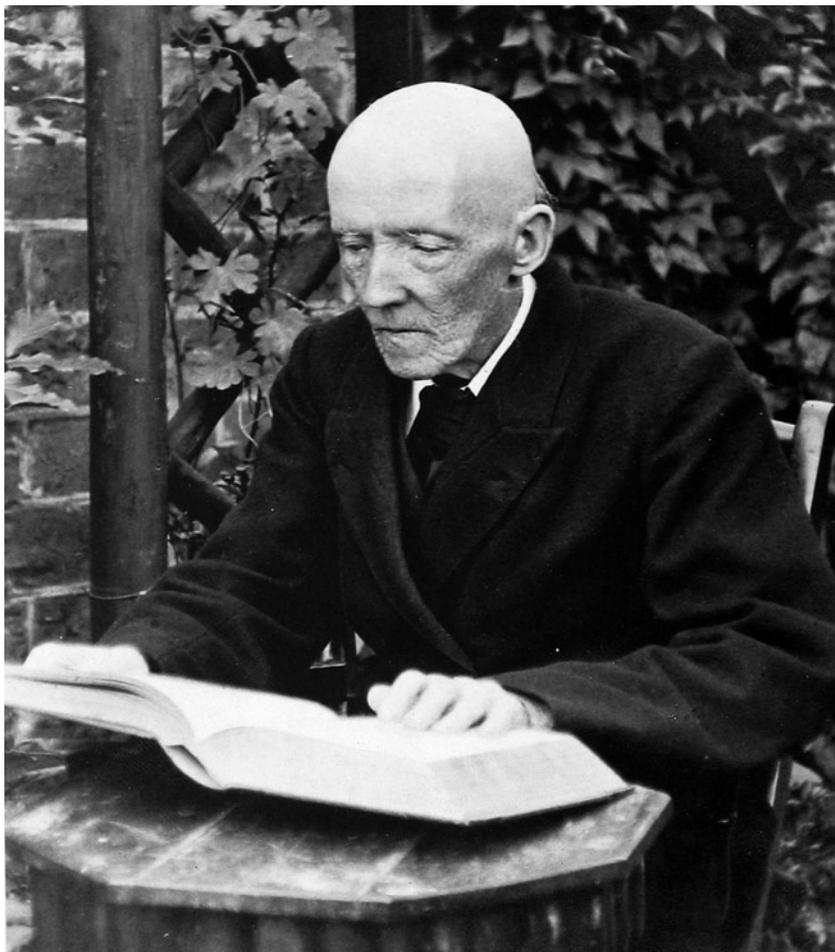
all by chance that the final page of Francis's commented picture book is illustrated with a view of St. Helena, an island that had been annexed by the H.E.I.C. since the middle of the 17th century,

The 1840s, in the course of which the book has been created, mark a saturated phase for the East India Company. Thrown back in competition by the loss of the trade monopoly that had been granted to them by the British Parliament, they had to face being limited to the formal properties of a generic trading company. At the same time, the two won wars against the Sikh allowed them to extend their influence sphere onto all of North Indian and the Kashmir region.

At the beginning of the 19th century, cotton trade became a more lucrative business than ever before for the Company's British traders. By shifting their textiles production to Europa and importing machine-made, cheap fabrics, the supporting structures of local textile manufacturers were all but erased in almost no time. As an effect, the Indian subcontinent declined from market leader in the production of textiles to a supplier of cheap raw materials for other producers, and eventually succumbing to a complete economic dependency. Supported by the outcome of the so-called First Opium War against China, in which the Empire had tried to prevent social disintegration in China caused by uncontrolled drug trafficking from India, the financial foundations of all H.E.I.C. activities continued to remain untouched.

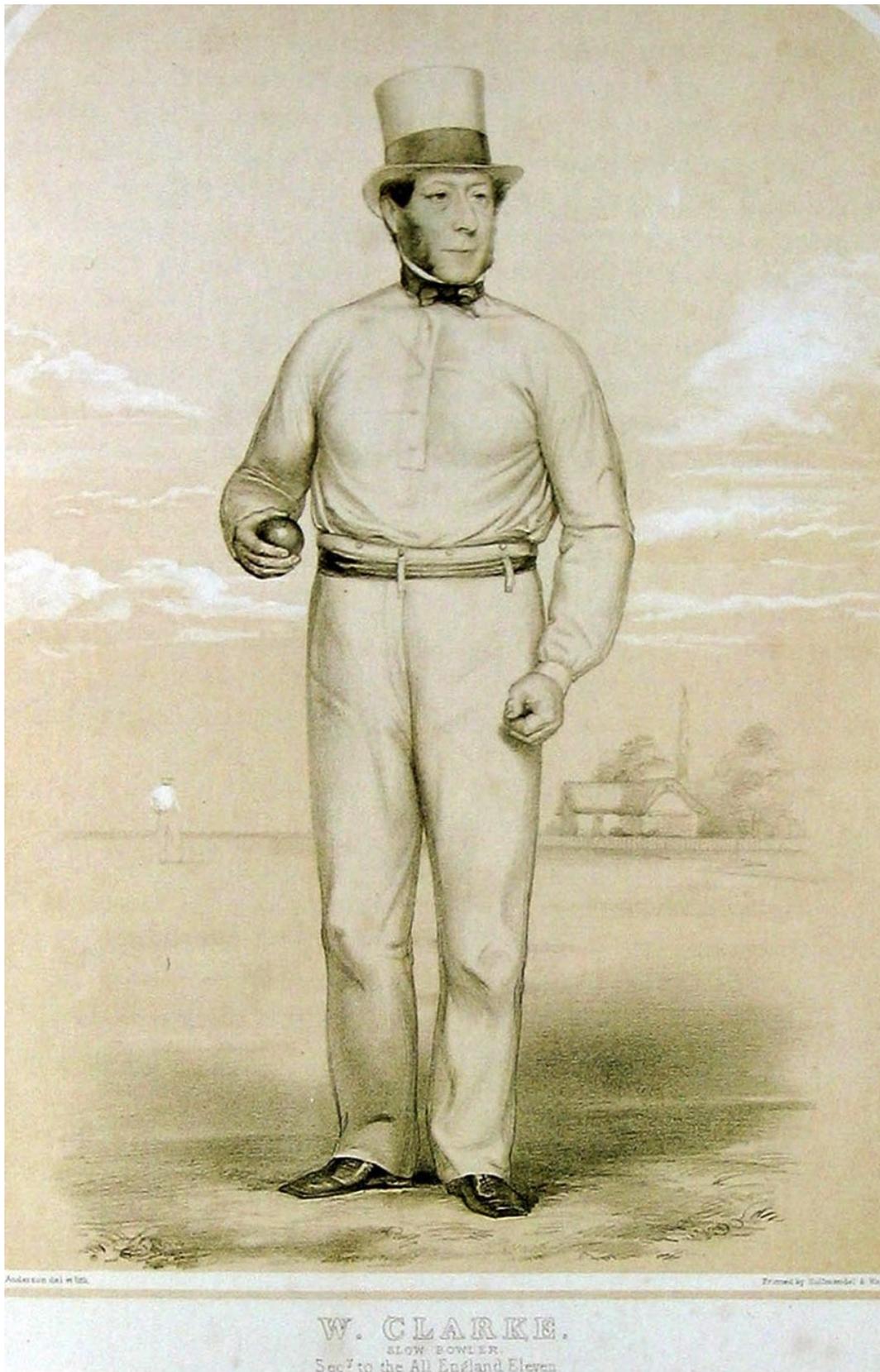
In his introductory essay, Francis describes his motives to publish the book saying he tried to make everyday life and customs and practices of the Indian population as vividly imaginable to the average British reader as possible – without, as he emphasizes, ever falling victim to the dual danger of either amassing irrelevant scientific detail or artificially spectacularizing mere images. The author states that he guarantees the veracity of all his depictions, even in those cases where he had to rely on remembered events or secondary materials. He hopes, as he adds in the introduction, that his description of India's everyday cultural life may modestly contribute to a proof of the superiority of the Christian faith over the native religious systems of the Indians. To the same effect, all of the author's captions are enhanced by passages from the Bible.

All in all, the book is illustrated with twenty-two crayon lithographs, executive lithographer is one J.C. Anderson. This undoubtedly refers to the then twenty-one year old John Corbet Anderson, a disciple of history painter Benjamin Haydon. His uncompromising anti-academic attitude as well as his spectacular suicide in 1846 contributed to his quickly becoming an object of romantic worship among artists. In his theoretical writings, Haydon had called for an unconditional veracity in the practice of the art of drawing, especially with reference to the depictions of the human figure and of architecture¹



His disciple had appropriated the same artistic objectives, with a quite similar radicality. After winning a number of succès d'estime with other lithographic works, most of all with a series about cricket players he took a whole decade to complete, and after another travel book about India, he dedicated the remaining fifty years of his life almost exclusively to exploring the history of the church next to his home in the London Surrey neighborhood, otherwise leading a humble existence as a private scholar. When the church was destroyed by a fire in 1867, its subsequent reconstruction was made possible by the many, many drawings and detailed descriptions Anderson had provided in his publications.²

It was the special cautiousness and diligence with which Anderson set out to emulate the particularities of Francis's designs in his drawn transpositions that made his work become an exceptional testimony of lithographic craftsmanship. This attitude distinguished him fundamentally from the usages of the guild of draughtsmen working in the illustration departments of the big print shops and magazines, which would, normally, only strive to gain homogenous results conforming to the late classicism of their day from their heterogeneous source materials.





The bigger part of the plates for the book on India was printed in the lithographic workshop of *Charles Joseph Hullmandel*. Hullmandel doubled as a British landscape painter and as a chemist who, very early on, had recognized the true meaning of Senefelder's achievements in printing technology, which led him to seek his guidance and ask him to initiate him to the secrets of lithography. In close collaboration with the draughtsman James Duffield Harding, who had been John Ruskin's drawing tea-

cher, as well as with Godefroy Engelmann³, a master lithograph and Senefelder disciple from Mulhouse, he took crayon and tonal lithography to a new stage and, with his own patent on the so-called lithotint procedure that help to imitate watercolor painting effects, won himself the leadership among Britain's lithographic workshops.⁴

The illustrative tables of his book on India give an excellent example of the simple, yet very effective qualities of tonal lithography. They were printed from two stones, one bearing the actual drawing, and another one recording the light-colored parts, which served as the so-called *tonal stone*.

Initially, Anderson's tome was calculated to have sixty illustrations. It was for financial reason as well as for the sake of an increased clearness, writes Francis in the introduction, that he eventually decided to limit the number of illustration to only one third, instead enlarging the scale of the book's layout. Thus, most of the image plates measuring 24 x 34 cm have to be seen as combined arrangements of multiple scenes. One part based on his own memory, another part taken from sketches made on location and from found ethnographic materials, the almost schoolbook-like panoramas are often reminiscent of the vividness of execution, the multi-perspectivity and narrative complexity of Early Renaissance examples from Italy

¹Benjamin Robert Haydon, *Lectures on Painting and Design*, London 1844. – For more on Haydon cf. Morris Eaves, *The Counter-Arts Conspiracy. Art and Industry in the Age of Blake*, Ithaca and London, 1992.

²J.C.Anderson, *Monuments and Antiquities of Croydon Church*, London 1855; idem, *Shropshire: Its Early History and Antiquities*, London 1864; idem, *Antiquities of Croydon Church*, London 1866; idem, *Chronicles of Croydon*, London 1870.

³Engelmann war für die Weiterentwicklung und Verbreitung von Senefelders Erfindung von entscheidender Bedeutung. Durch die Gründung einer Societé lithotypique 1815 in Mulhouse führte er die neue Drucktechnik in Frankreich ein. Kurze Zeit darauf etablierte er sich mit einer eigenen Firma in Paris und unterhielt zeitweise auch eine Niederlassung in London. Charles Hullmandel hatte mit ihm einen Beratervertrag abgeschlossen. Die Abfassung von dessen technischem Handbuch „The Art of Drawing on Stone“ (1824), das in mehreren Auflagen erschien, wäre ohne Engelmanns Mithilfe kaum denkbar gewesen.

⁴Catalogue: Charles Hullmandel and James Duffield Harding. *A Study of the English Art of Drawing on Stone 1818-1850*, Northampton 1982