

Review of Veyrassat, Béatrice: De l'attirance à l'expérience de l'Inde. Un Vaudois à la marge du colonialisme anglais, Antoine- Louis-Henri Polier (1741-1795), Neuchâtel 2022

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Veyrassat, Béatrice: *De l'attirance à l'expérience de l'Inde. Un Vaudois à la marge du colonialisme anglais, Antoine-Louis-Henri Polier (1741-1795)*. Neuchâtel: Livreo-Alphil 2022. ISBN: 978-2-88950-090-1; 248 S.

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More than two decades ago, William Dalrymple published his bestselling book „White Mughals“ about the inter-ethnic liaisons of a Scottish East India Company servant in early nineteenth-century South India.¹ Ever since, there has been a renewed interest by historians in the earliest phase of colonial state building and European diplomacy in South Asia. Historians such as Maya Jasanoff and Durba Ghosh have demonstrated in their widely circulated studies that the cultural boundaries between Western colonisers and South Asians, far from possessing the rigidity of the imperial heyday during the late 19th and early 20th century, remained fairly porous at least until the 1830s or 1840s.² According to these authors, quite a few of the European men (and it were indeed almost exclusively men) involved in colonial trade and expansion were living on the „edge of empire“ and developed a tendency to „go native“. They not only adopted Indian forms of dress and enjoyed local cuisines and various forms of popular entertainment, they also often entered into protracted relationships with South Asian women. In many cases, offspring emerged from such interracial relationships. Occasionally, this has led to a slight romanticisation of early colonial rule, positing that the relationship between Europeans and South Asians was based on mutual respect, tolerance, and intellectual curiosity rather than on racist presumptions, cultural arrogance, and greed.

In her most recent monograph, the Swiss historian Béatrice Veyrassat has added an interesting new facet to this strand of research. Her biography of Antoine Polier (1749–1795), an aristocrat from Lausanne, who spent three decades from the late 1750s to the late 1780s in the Indian subcontinent can serve as a

powerful reminder that both the commercial activities as well as the territorial expansion of the English East India Company (EIC) state during this period cannot be understood by adapting a narrow national perspective. Rather, the EIC was a multinational enterprise, as its activities were driven by an international motley crew of actors, who were serving „John Company“ as soldiers, administrators, medical men, or scientists. This, of course, included manpower from non-colonising European countries like Switzerland. Polier's illustrious life that led him „from Lausanne to Calcutta“ (p. 60) is interesting in yet another respect: When his career as military officer, engineer, and administrator in the EIC was stagnating in the 1770s, he quickly shifted camps and entered the service of Indian rulers, including Mughal emperor Shah Alam II (pp. 82–88). This opportunistic attitude neatly illustrates the complete absence of any exclusive or „natural“ identification with European endeavours, let alone the commitment to a western *mission civilisatrice*. Lastly and perhaps most importantly, Polier's Indian career is momentous as it provides another perfect illustration of the „White Mughal“ phenomenon. As Veyrassat's study demonstrates both verbally and visually (the book contains 14 gorgeous illustrations, some of them colour reproductions of contemporary oil paintings showing Polier in full „native garb“, enjoying a *hookah*, pp. 107 and 129), the aristocrat from the canton of Vaud quickly left his Swiss habitus behind and adopted a hybrid lifestyle involving a fancy for local South Asian fashion, food, and dance. Predictably enough, he also lived with Indian *bibis* (concubines) and fathered at least five children resulting from these relationships, three of whom accompanied him back to Switzerland in 1788 (p. 192). It is noteworthy, however, that in Polier's case, the fascination for all things Oriental transcended mere material and erotic as-

¹ William Dalrymple, *White Mughals. Love and Betrayal in Eighteenth-Century India*, London 2002.

² Maya Jasanoff, *Edge of Empire. Lives, Culture and Conquest in the East*, New York 2005; and Durba Ghosh, *Sex and the Family in Colonial India. The Making of Empire*, Cambridge 2006. See also Chapter 4 of Sanjay Subrahmanyam, *Europe's India. Words, People, Empires 1500–1800*, Cambridge, MA 2017), pp. 211–85.

pects, since it also led him to become a patron of local painters and an avid collector of Indian religious manuscripts. In the final decade of his life, he even stood out as an amateur orientalist of sorts, donated manuscripts to the British Museum and produced a study on sacred Hindu scriptures, which was published posthumously.

Veyrassat has subdivided her book into ten compact chapters, which are framed by a brief introduction (pp. 11–17) and an equally short, but remarkably thoughtful conclusion (pp. 193–196). The first two chapters deal with existing studies on Polier and his violent death amid the post-revolutionary turmoil in the South of France. Chapters III to V subsequently reconstruct his family background in Lausanne and the various stages of his career in the service of the EIC and several Indian rulers. The final years of his life after his return to Europe are discussed much later in Chapter X. Arguably the most intriguing part of the study consists of Chapters VI to IX that are less concerned with biographical detail and take a more thematic approach. In Chapter VI, Veyrassat reconstructs the private life and relationships of Polier during his time in India, thus providing a rich and detailed picture of the culturally hybrid lifeworlds of 18th century „Nabobs“, i.e. the European *parvenus* who had amassed their fortunes in the colonies. Chapters VII and VIII expand her analysis by zooming in on the role of Polier as a collector (and sponsor) of South Asian art and his pioneering part in chasing and compiling the manuscripts of Indian religious texts, which, *pace* Veyrassat, made him an important precursor of later academic Orientalism. Chapter IX finally turns to the elephant in the room by asking the question as to how the role of cosmopolitan *passeurs culturels* such as Polier in the context of European colonialism ought to be assessed. This chapter as well as her conclusion leave no doubt that Veyrassat has taken great pains to provide a multi-faceted and subtle portrayal of her protagonist, presenting him as hybrid figure who was simultaneously part of and aloof from the imperial project. The Geneva historian deserves praise for avoiding facile value judgements and oversimplifications. It is in this sense of careful contextualization and histori-

cal nuance that make her book a valuable addition to existing studies on the cultural and social history of early European colonialism in the Indian subcontinent and its repercussions in Europe itself.

While the overall impression, thus, is a positive one, the book also has its weaknesses. Clearly, the historian from Geneva has succumbed to the charm of her protagonist's flowery prose and, in addition to a number of appendices reproducing long excerpts from original letters or documents, all the chapters contain copious quotes from Polier's writings. These sources are no doubt fascinating, yet this reviewer could not help feeling that their overabundance (much like the timetables and thematic excursions that are occasionally interpolated in the text to provide background information to a non-expert readership) sometimes hampers the reading flow and diminishes the analytical bite of the book. Speaking of sources, it is also regrettable that Veyrassat, while magisterially exploiting a broad array of materials in French and other European languages, only relies on the fraction of Polier's correspondence in Persian that has been translated into English. It would be highly rewarding to include the untapped material for a potential second edition. Along similar lines, it could be criticised that, particularly the passages dealing with Polier's orientalism *avant la lettre*, are based on a somewhat limited selection of the existing research literature and ignore important publications by scholars like Rosanne Rocher, Kapil Raj, Marie Fourcade and Ines Županov and others.³

Finally, it is a bit of a missed opportunity that Veyrassat – who has previously authored

³ See, for instance, Rosanne Rocher, *British Orientalism in the Eighteenth Century. The Dialectics of Knowledge and Government*, in: Carol A. Breckenridge / Peter van der Veer (eds), *Orientalism and the Postcolonial Predicament. Perspectives on South Asia*, Philadelphia 1992, pp. 215–49; Garland Cannon / Kevin R. Brine (eds), *Objects of Enquiry. The Life, Contributions, and Influences of Sir William Jones (1746–1794)*, New York 1996; Kapil Raj, *Cartographier l'humanité depuis Calcutta: à propos de la théorie ethnohistorique de Sir William Jones (1746–1794)*, in: *Littérature 184,4* (2016), pp. 21–34 and the editors' introduction as well as several relevant contributions in Marie Fourcade / Ines Županov (eds), *L'Inde des Lumières: Discours, histoire, savoirs (XVIIe–XIXe siècle)*, Paris 2013.

a fine book on the role of Switzerland and the Swiss in the global economy during the age of empire – has chosen to treat Polier's biography mostly as an isolated case study and rarely links it to the flourishing body of research on Switzerland's wider colonial entanglements.

These few shortcomings notwithstanding, Veyrassat's biography can be easily recommended for historians interested in global perspectives on Swiss history as well as for scholars of the British Empire, European orientalism, and 18th century South Asia.

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