

Powell, Avril A.: *Scottish Orientalists and India. The Muir Brothers, Religion, Education and Empire*. Rochester: Boydell & Brewer 2010. ISBN: 978-1-84383-579-0; 318 S.

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A few publications on Scotsmen connected with India or working with the East India Company were published during the last couple of years.¹ Scots seem to have been more committed to building and running the British Empire than hitherto thought since the elite of the „Celtic Fringe“ had always played an active part in constituting the Empire. Avril Powell’s book demonstrates vividly and highly sophisticatedly in how far the Muir brothers John and William were involved in administrative, literary, scientific and missionary activities in British India and at home. John Muir (1810-82) and William Muir (1819-1905) belonged to that Scottish class of scholar-administrators in India who spent their leisure hours with the study of India’s classical languages, the writing of India’s religious history as well as promoting their missionary aims. Both the Muir brothers received their education for service in British India at the East India Company’s college in Haileybury. The teachers there, however, did not have a particular academic background but were retired administrators and battle-weary soldiers. Students including the Muir brothers, therefore, did not appreciate the education much. Yet being taught classical languages of India, Sanskrit and Persian, must have had a decisive influence on John and William.

Once in India the Muirs became part of a small but influential network of British administrators based in the North-Western Provinces, which also consisted of evangelicals pursuing an educational-cum-missionary programme in northern India. Soon John and William set up contacts with various Indian educational and scholarly networks. John Muir studied Hindu society, culture and religion whilst William did the same with Islam and Muslim culture. John’s first and famous book, the „Original Sanskrit Texts“, was a masterpiece of enlightened methodology

developed in Europe testing the „progress“ of societies across different stages of development in order to probe the level of civilization exhibited in each of the stages. In fact, John Muir crossbred the famous tradition of Scottish history writing with the latest scientific results of German Indology. Like the early „Orientalists“ of the late eighteenth century he made out a Hindu classic past yet stressed the degenerated state of contemporary Hindu society.

In stark contrast to his brother, William turned out to be a rather judicious historian. His major work on Islam was „Life of Mahomat“. In a fairly utilitarian manner William forced an initially comprehensive history into a „narrow groove in Muhammad’s seventh-century Medinan state by the conviction that certain Islamic injunctions rendered any society whose legal authority was the shari’at irrevocably ‘stationary’ and incapable of any ‘progress’ beyond the limited point already reached in that country.“ (p. 141). The touchstone of William’s allegations was „polygamy“, „divorce“ and „slavery“. The ‘woman question’, in contrast to his brother, became the core evidence of the backwardness and decadence of Muslim people, society and civilization – which reminds the reader of presentday debates on the liberality of Islam and Muslim societies, women being the objective and, at the same time, the touchstone of that liberality. To this day the lack of liberality indicates the lack of freedom. Whilst John Muir synthesized an ‘enlightened’ mode of history writing and philological findings, William remained confined within an established tradition of medieval European polemic on Islam thus contributing massively to the discursive construction of Islam and Muslim societies.

It was Sayyid Ahmad Khan who strongly opposed William Muir’s vision of Muhammad’s life in particular and Islam in general (pp. 199-211). Nevertheless Sayyid Ahmad Khan cooperated with William Muir who, as Lieutenant-Governor of the North-Western Provinces in the 1870s, was eager to establish institutions of learning and education. After many years of planning and negotiating

¹ E.g.: George K. McGilvary, *East India Patronage and the British State. The Scottish Elite and Politics in the Eighteenth Century*, London 2008.

the curriculum for the Mohammedan Anglo-Oriental College William insisting on 'liberal secular teaching' refraining from any religious education, the university was established at Aligarh in 1875, three years before the Muir Central College had opened in a temporary accommodation at Allahabad. Both institutions would later expand and form the core of fully-fledged universities, at Allahabad in 1887, and later in Aligarh by 1929.

The question of vernacular languages (Persian, Sanskrit and Arabic) or English as instruments of instruction resolved itself within a couple of decades. Sanskrit and Persian managed to survive until the turn of the century. Arabic however, weak from the very beginning of teaching, lapsed altogether. In addition, every plan for improving or altering the curriculum saw the increase of English as the language of instruction at the expense of the vernacular languages. When the Oriental Department closed in 1885, Arabic was shifted to the English Department. Yet this decline was not only caused by the government but was also a reaction to the students' demand for English who wanted to make a career in the colonial government which required a solid knowledge of the language.

The results of the book can be summarized as following: The book is the first full study of the life, career and scholarship of John and William Muir and their interchanges on Indian religions and societies. None of the previous explorations of Oriental learning during middle decades of the nineteenth century has highlighted the Scottish contribution to the British Indian education debate. It is a highly valuable contribution to the so called Orientalist/liberal - Anglicist/utilitarian debate of the late 1820s and the 1830s showing that positions were not that rigidly distributed among the personnel of the East India Company's civil servants. Even among Scotsmen was no uniform 'liberal spirit' usually associated with the Scottish Enlightenment determining that debate, as the biographies and the „Indian career“ of the Muir brothers indicate.

Without doubt the book deserves great scholarly attention and a prominent place on the shelves of academic libraries.

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