

policy, Sreenivas's *Reproductive Politics and the Making of Modern India* offers urgent insights for changing discourses that link family planning with productive economic life. As Sreenivas ends the book, in our moment today, family planning continues to shape visions of futures in the crisis discourse that animates international funding and politics: climate change. And in the time of the endless pandemic, and the cruel policies that have targeted the working poor and migrant workers, this history lives on in the primacy of the life of the economy over the actual lives and deaths of countless people who suffer silently as the Indian state triumphantly claims national progress.

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UPINDER SINGH, ed., *The World of India's First Archaeologist: Letters from Alexander Cunningham to J. D. M. Beglar*. Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2021.

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This edited volume emerges out of Upinder Singh's long interest in the history of archaeology and, as she notes, brings to fruition an undertaking that began in 2005. The volume includes a collection of 192 letters written by Sir Alexander Cunningham to Joseph Beglar between 1871 and 1886, currently held by the Victoria Memorial Museum, Calcutta. Cunningham and Beglar are two very important figures in the history of South Asian archaeology. During a long career in India, Cunningham, Second Lieutenant in the Bengal Engineers, in addition to military and diplomatic work, collected and published a vast amount of information about the people and places he travelled through, including their history and archaeology. Cunningham spearheaded the first-ever archaeological survey of north India (1861–65) as the official Archaeological Surveyor, on his early retirement from the army. Subsequently, between 1871 and 1885, he became the first Director General of the new Archaeological Department of the colonial state. Beglar, a civil engineer who belonged to an Armenian family that had settled in Bengal, was selected as one of his two Archaeological Assistants. Beglar was an Executive Engineer in the Public Works Department of the colonial state, enticed away into the Archaeological Department by Cunningham, eventually becoming the Archaeological Surveyor of Bengal. Through much of his archaeological career, he worked closely with Cunningham.

Upinder Singh's long introduction in the volume not only lays out the historical context and the biographies of the letter writers, it also highlights some of the important insights that a careful reading of the letters provides. The letters are presented in chronological order (a few undated letters have been roughly dated)

and the fact that all the letters (and not just a selection) have been published makes this an invaluable archive. The letters have been transcribed with minimal editing; original spellings and punctuations have been retained and the few sketches included in the letters have been reproduced. The inclusion of marginalia adds another layer to the text. Editorial interventions are minimal, and while I wished for more of a context or a detailed explanation or discussion in certain places, Singh's careful curation of this archive opens the field for a range of interpretations. Photographs, including facsimiles of some of the letters, enrich the project and have been painstakingly collected.

This collection is important for many reasons. The letters are an invaluable source of information about Cunningham's ideas and personal interests. The wide breadth of his interests emerges through his letters, although Buddhist history and monuments remained an abiding preoccupation—epigraphy, monuments including temples and medieval structures, artifacts, sculptures and coins, historical texts in a variety of languages, as well as anthropology (although tinged with the racial ideas of his time) all make an appearance in his letters. To take an example, a single letter (No. 4) discusses the translation of the inscriptions on the Iron Pillar at Delhi; delves into historical geography to discuss the identification of places mentioned in the Mahabharata, Ptolemy and Hiuen Tsang; attempts a convoluted linking of Kubera with the Greek god Demeter to tease out the connections between different branches of the Indo-Aryans; comments on Dowson and Elliot's book; and enquires about details in the sculptures at Bharhut!

Cunningham was a foundational figure in Indian archaeology in the 1870s and 1880s, both in terms of methods and in terms of the establishment of new institutions. Cunningham's first journeys followed in the footsteps of Hieun Tsang, and while his text-aided approach has been criticised for good reason by subsequent generations of archaeologists, his extensive surveys in north, central and eastern India, Cunningham inaugurated a phase in South Asian archaeology that focussed on the empirical observation and recording of monuments, sculptures and artifacts, instead of 'swimming in seas of architectural fancies, and archaeological theories' (Letter No. 5). Beglar's interest and expertise in archaeological photography stood this empirical purpose in good stead, and the letters contain frequent requests for photographs of monuments, inscriptions and artifacts.

Cunningham and Beglar's work were rooted in antiquarianism, a catch-all term that covered early and unsystematic European interest in antiquities, as well as within a wider Orientalist enterprise as evidenced by the close engagement with the work of scholars of languages, architectural historians and others who studied the Indian past evidenced in the letters. Today, Cunningham's archaeological methods, such as the 'opening' of Buddhist stupas to access relics in their centre, ignoring and often disturbing the wider context and archaeological stratigraphy has been severely criticised. However, he played a central role in the early conversations and decisions that shaped the form archaeology has taken in India,

and as the first Director of the Archaeological Department shaped what was to become the Archaeological Survey of independent India.

Archaeological investigation in the nineteenth century was very much a part of the knowledge production of the empire, closely intertwined with the colonial project of rule and its civilising mission. As Singh notes in the introduction, not only do the letters offer insights into the ‘history of archaeological policy in nineteenth-century India’ (xli); but they reveal something of the complex bureaucracy and attendant woes of funding, permits, budgets and the other paraphernalia of government. Negotiations with multiple stakeholders (princes, priests, competing archaeologists) are part of the complex undertaking of archaeology in this period. These included Indian princes who often contributed towards the preservation of the historical and built heritage; emerging Indian scholars and also Indian staff, often relegated to the margins as ‘native’ informants in colonial records.

This volume makes public an interesting archive, replete with a wealth of historical detail but also sketching a very personal insight into the life and ideas of an interesting man and the colleague and friend he was writing to. As a primary resource, it will hopefully encourage further archival research on the history of early archaeology in the subcontinent. The letters can be read in parallel with the archaeological and museum collections that emerged out of Cunningham’s work to better understand the context and creation of this archive. And finally, outside of the academic considerations outlined above, one must admit that reading the letters evokes all the excitement and curiosity that propel us who write about the past. Cunningham’s words reach out to us, revealing his fascination with the past, as he grapples with the mundane and the material.

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