



GREY MAN'S BURDEN¹

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ABSTRACT

In 1976 the author encountered Freedom at Midnight, a crucial text for modern Indian writers; other influences on him were Tristram Shandy and The Tin Drum, but the turning point came with his reading of the Baburnama. His discovery of the nama form enabled the organization of his material and shaped his book. A decade of waiting taught him patience and the crucial lesson of orientation. Indian writing in the West--its essential Orientalism--taught him to close his eyes to a foreign audience. His Anglo-Indianness was the motor of a writing visceral in its inspiration; genetic misfits do not need to outsource their hybridity. The Trotter-Nama has survived a pot-belly burning by its author and strategic back-burnering by its UK publishers. Its recognition at home despite neglect in the West was part of the making of an independent literary culture. That project continues.

In the summer of 1976, I visited India after five years in the West. The Emergency was on, shop signs were in blue letters on a cream ground, and *Freedom at Midnight* was on all the bookstands. In vexed times people lap up the past. I stayed a week with my parents in Dehra Dun and travelled on to graduate school in Canada. Two years later I passed through India again—chaotic shop signs were back—with a book of my own. It was still in my head but I had begun to see myself as a novelist.

Freedom at Midnight was history, told with a verve you associate with blockbusters: Richard Attenborough, Salman Rushdie were listening. I didn't buy a copy, but I browsed, on fire. I was preparing to tell the story of the Anglo-Indians and here was a dazzling way. In ten minutes I had conceived a hero born at midnight of India's

¹ This essay was first published as the Afterword in *The Trotter-Nama* edition published by Penguin Random House in 2019.

independence. I can imagine fifty such impregnations. For the rest of that decade I beavered away in libraries around the world, accumulating more facts than I could ever use. Like any beginner I was looking for a way into my material.

In time the Collins and Lapierre gambit lost its shine. Something in it said: scoop, something else: foreign correspondent. The telling was seductive, but it wasn't my style (if you can speak of style before you have a book). My own story moved by fits and starts: *Tristram Shandy* had shown an undergraduate the glories of patchwork. There, if anywhere, was my way. Along with Sterne's Old Testament I carried a New: *The Tin Drum* (which brought Uncle Toby's Flanders up to date in Hitler's Germany). If I could tell a tale like that! The trouble was all these ways of telling were as foreign as the novel form itself. I began to root about for another way: something less fluent than *Freedom at Midnight*, something less explanatory than *Midnight's Children*. Good readers are happy to work, I was sure.

There was something else, more vital than style: I was looking for a form, a jacket if you like, that fit. Yes, Sterne sat at the right hand of God, yes Gunther Grass sat at *his* right hand, but that heaven hung somewhere over Europe. I needed a model that belonged here, was made here. And look at my luck: deep in the stacks of a Canadian library I chance on the *Baburnama*. It had been a title, no more, one of those italicized oddities you routinely gloss over, but here it was, heavy in my hand. I devoured it, binding and all. And it was as I reached for the book beside it on the shelf, Abul Fazl's *Akbarnama*—and beside that the *Ain-i-Akbari*—that I saw the connexion between my way of telling and that of these writers. The *nama* is a medieval court history, a chronicle. My *nama* would chronicle a colonial encounter, the overlap of Europe and India, across seven generations of the Trotter family. The Trotters would embody that history, the history of the Anglo-Indians, down to Independence and after. I had found what I needed. The *nama* was that fitting form.

At a certain point you stop reading, because your labour and your joy have transported you to a place where you are the maker. I didn't realize it, but my quest for a rooted form would last a lifetime. In book after book I faced an old dilemma. It's not enough to write about India. Countless volumes have treatised us as we squirm on Europe's petri dish. Our literary forbears were unconcerned with this gaze: they wrote not as

objects of scrutiny but as subjects in their own right. Kalidas, Kautilya, Babur, wrote without the shadow of a watcher on the page—or no watcher of this world. (Years later I would write a travel book to reverse that gaze—the West is under scrutiny in *Yukon to Yucatan*—and naturally it sold two copies.) Orientation shows. Posed simply, my question was: *Which way do I face?*

I grew up with this worry. Anglo-Indians embodied the dilemma in their very persons. For the longest time they were laughed at because they spoke of Home, which was to say England, without ever having been there. Then, just as diaspora solved their problem, a new group stepped into their shoes: Indians who choose to write in English. The *baba-log* are not the only ones with colonized heads, but they invite an easy disparagement at home, and a certain puzzlement abroad: you think like a Westerner, you look like a wog. This too was an old Anglo-Indian dilemma, and this too has passed to the new Anglo-Indians. But you have something to say and say it you will. You begin to explain. A *baba-log* book is packed with explanations, information of a curious and gazetteer sort, meant for strangers, inhabitants of the West. Being understood and being known *there* is crucial. It's a form of tribute, and you pay it in conscience, for in your deepest being, and sometimes in plain fact, you live there. That *is* Home.

But look. Face the *other* way you are suddenly, rapturously free. Free to *not* be understood by strangers, free to preserve every natural strangeness, because *here it is not strange*. Who you write for determines not just what you leave out but what you put in. Here is true independence, not that semblance we inherited in 1947. Write with your head turned away then. And, if at all possible, write from here.

I came back and began to write. Again, Canada put bread in my mouth. There was money left over after my thesis (on the Guyanese novelist Wilson Harris) to spend three years writing *The Trotter-Nama*. How frugal those Lucknow years only my wife knows, but they were heaven, and not Europe's heaven. I finished writing in 1984 (I was thirty-three, Mrs Gandhi had just been gunned down) but it took four years of waiting before the book appeared. If you add on the years of research in libraries around the world, that is a decade of waiting.

While editing the manuscript with Chuck Eliot of Knopf I painted the first *Trotter* jacket: it shows the Great Trotter falling out of his balloon over a miniature-like landscape. The fall was prophetic in a way I didn't bargain for. My editor in England was Tim Binding. "I really have high hopes for this book," he wrote, and vanished. *The Trotter-Nama* got a January slot, midwinter. Six months later, the jacket of *The Satanic Verses* showed not one but *two* figures tumbling out an aircraft. Two big Indian books in the same year hadn't made publishing sense to the men at Penguin. The story I heard was that Tim and his dark horse were eased out. Without a backer, *The Trotter-Nama* went into a free fall.

Like any good witch, the book refused to sink. Hailed by critics in the first stirrings of an independent literary culture—I like to think it helped enable that culture—it kept its head above water. The Great Trotter fell into the Ganda Nala but he's managed very well. Revived (by India Ink) at the end of the last century, here he is again. His fate, played out in the composite city of Naqlau, mirrors that of his progeny. Migrating or staying on, Anglo-Indians would remain poised between the heaven of imagined refuges around the world and the earth of their nurturing here, late versions of the man on my jacket, suspended above Sans Souci, falling but not falling.

Your average novel is linear, the telling seamless: *The Trotter-Nama* is above all things discontinuous, seamly. Today I realize it's a book of hyperlinks, only the term had not yet been invented. I've spoken of literary influences, but I mustn't favour literature. Was my own experience—my in-betweenness—the engine? An Anglo-Indian growing up in this country is frequently reminded of his difference. His very name is an embarrassment: the queue at the bank freezes when it is called out, every head turning fractionally. We were always slight misfits, no seamless transitions for us: like her or lump her, a woman in a dress stuck out. How odd those first admixtures in this land must have looked in their foreign clothes! Impossible to imagine today when every man wears pants and it's the dhotiwala who sticks out. In 1857 those trousers, that dress, did you in: more Anglo-Indian civilians than British died in that encounter. Today's users put on their modernity lightly, but there's blood on those clothes, on that language.

Babur, new to the land, was making history even as he wrote it, writing out of his exploits. Whatever else *The Trotter-Nama* is, it's true to my dailiness: I find its asides and disruptions wholly natural. But perhaps there is a larger context. English, literary English, is still in an impossible position in this country, lacking an archive, devoid of spoken depth, by turns shallow and stilted. We have no colloquial tradition, no landscape of named forms and creatures, no whole and intimate lexicon—but for that patchwork piecemeal past of those first hesitant Englishers. Orthodox attempts, cut out of whole cloth, have always failed to convince, condemned either to the high priestly tones of a Raja Rao or the comic opera of a Nirad Chaudhari. It's why R K Narayan, innocent of rhetoric and trusting to narrative, came nearer the mark. Today's smartest operators use not English but English-medium.

In *The Trotter-Nama* you meet Eugene the storyteller first thing. He's your stock unreliable narrator, a little up himself. In fact the book is preparing his comeuppance. That comes at the very end when the windbag is deflated and discovered speaking plain Anglo, the Anglo-Indian demotic. The same is true of Eugene's assemblage, that mélange of styles. Bravura, you're tempted to say. Stop and think a moment: was a display of versatility so hard to resist, or might there have been a deeper motive for the bricolage? What I was trying to get at was a fundamental quality of the mestizo experience, something that doesn't leap to the mind of the pure. No single tradition is the Anglo's birthright, no inherited way of dealing with social (or literary) material to hand. Habits, tenets, words, must be worked out on the spot: the customary *does not exist*. Consider the predicament of those first Anglos: not dress, not food, not God, not even language, *not one thing*, came readymade to them, as to those with a history of forms to draw on, a whole culture ready to hand. Shut out by the whole ones on either side, the newcomers were obliged to invent another way by doubting advances. That daily patchwork I tried to reproduce in *The Trotter-Nama* because I hear the scissors grind in my head. Hybridity is not a literary conceit; the theory that goes by that name is cheaply won. The hybridity I mean is innate, so you are at every stage dipping into yourself for material. The meld is visceral: think guts, think cookery if you wish—jalebis baked in custard—but not, for godsake, postcolonial.

Of course, there is another way: the colonial migrates to Europe, takes on the standards of the master and lives by them, a kind of half-life of its own. V S Naipaul is

the exemplar of such accommodation. In that temperate air hallowed forms take on an immutable cast: you can't see past them. But there are (Wilson Harris showed me) other ways, and you must work them out yourself. A tropical form must be not so much sweated over as sweated out: foreign and native, these contradictions are part of your being. It's like the voice of the koel: you can never leave it behind. You cobble a language out of such sounds and patterns; there is no other way forward, and no way out. It was so with the Anglo-Indians: there was nowhere to fall: they were the space between two stools.

This book has led a charmed life. In a mood of despair one Sydney winter I burnt the manuscript in a pot-belly stove. It was a dark night of the soul and the smuts hung in the air of that basement, tormenting their murderer. Too heavy to contemplate burning was the Knopf photo-ready copy (on sheets of high-grade paper that felt like plastic). I put it out for the garbage collectors. In a change of heart—the space-age beauty of the object had something to do with it—I brought it sheepishly back in. I had woken out of a futuristic dream at 4AM, just before the council truck came by. India Ink used that copy for their revival edition in 1999. Continuing its chequered history, the book is back with Penguin. *Penguin Modern Classics* had better work: it's my pension.

The author has led a charmed life too. That summer of 1976 I slept a night in a small town in Bihar on a verandah under a mosquito net. I was about to turn in when Uncle Roland stopped me: there was a snake in my bed! He killed it lickety-split. It was the banded krait, whose bite is fatal.

Life is strange, and swift, and full of grace: fiction must come hobbling after.

Dehra Dun, a day of rain, 2019.

Irwin Allan Sealy was born in Allahabad and educated at Lucknow and Delhi. He lived twenty years in the US, Australia, Canada, and New Zealand, returning to write *The Trotter-Nama*. His other novels include *Hero*, *The Everest Hotel*, *The Brainfever Bird*, and *Red*. He is the author of the memoir *The Small Wild Goose Pagoda*, the travel books *From Yukon to Yucatan*, and *The China Sketchbook*, and a book of poems, *Zelaldinus*. His newest novel is *A-so-ca*. He lives in Dehra Dun.