H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Edwin Hirschmann. *Robert Knight: Reforming Editor in Victorian India.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008. 272 pp. $50.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-569622-6.

Reviewed by Jeffrey Patterson (LBJ School of Public Affairs)
Published on Jhistory (May, 2010)
Commissioned by Donna Harrington-Lueker

Challenging the Raj: Robert Knight in India

Renewed interest in, and evolving approaches to, media history have been burdened by a persistence of nationalist paradigms in which media grew from local institutions and impresarios instead of growing from the broader social and cultural networks in the rest of the world. Such approaches ignore the essential transformative power of communicative ideologies and printing technologies that flowed across porous geographic and cultural boundaries. The history of media did not develop independently in isolated regions, but was nurtured as part of the interactions of political and economic demands, liberal principles, and local customs and needs. As Edwin Hirschmann demonstrates in his recent biography of India's pioneering newspaper editor Robert Knight, the principal founder and the first editor of *Times of India* and the *Calcutta Statesman*, these syntheses often were forged amid the frictions and developments of colonialism.

Knight, whose writing skill and passion as a reformer more than made up for his lack of formal journalistic education, was instrumental in nurturing a vibrant national newspaper industry in British India and for Indian nationals. Knight fought for a press free of prior restraint or intimidation–whether it be through the efforts of governments, business interests, or cultural forces. Although he began as less of a critic of colonial rule than of the banalities and incompetence of imperial officials (early on he championed the opportunities possible in a British India), continued disillusion hardened his views in his later life.

His was an inauspicious arrival in Bombay in 1847 at twenty-two years old. Knight was the son of a bank clerk from a lower-middle-class South London neighborhood, and his life was a cipher before he benefited from a family friend with a job as the Bombay agent for a London wine merchant in the first of a series of unsuccessful business opportunities. To make ends meet, Knight wrote articles for local newspapers–a necessity after marrying a customs official's daughter and starting on a family of twelve children. His sideline became a career when he filled in for the vacationing Bombay *Times*'*s* editor in 1857.

The indigenous newspaper industry that Knight thrust himself into in mid-nineteenth-century India consisted of motley small-circulation daily or weekly sheets printed on rickety presses. Few extended beyond their small communities and seldom drew together the disparate mix of castes, tribes, and regional subcultures of contemporary India. The media were more often dominated by the Anglo-Indian presses, which promoted purely British interests. Knight, in impassioned fashion, recognized a void to be filled.

When the Sepoy Mutiny exploded, Knight broke with the rest of the Anglo-Indian press that decried Indian savagery and instead blamed the violence on the lack of discipline and poor leadership in the army. Unpopular with the Anglo community, Knight's critique struck a chord with the *Times*'s Indian shareholders, and he was quickly made editor permanently. Knight continued to critique the mismanagement and greed of the British Raj–annexation policies that appropriated native lands and arbitrarily imposed taxes on previously exempt land titles, ridiculous income taxes, and educational systems that disregarded Indian customs and needs. While some accused Knight of sycophancy to his Indian bosses, Hirschmann instead sees the moral indignation of one whose own experiences as a social outsider had led to an ingrained sympathy for the disadvantaged and disgust for the duplicities of British rule.

Knight led the *Times* to national prominence. In 1860, he bought out the Indian shareholders and merged with the rival *Bombay Standard* while starting India's first news agency (wiring *Times* dispatches to subscribers across the country) and becoming the Indian agent for Reuters news service. In 1861, he changed the name

from the Bombay *Times and Standard* to the *Times of India.* Seven years later, business quarrels led him to sell his shares to his *Times of India* partners and launch a new venture, a periodical called the *Indian Economist* (1869) that focused on financial news. Two years later, he returned to journalism by founding the *Star of India* (it would become the *Indian Statesman* in 1872). An ill-fated diversion into a government job conducting statistical surveys prompted his relocation to Calcutta, but his continued contrariness with governmental authorities through his journalism quickly sparked conflicts of interest with the government that led to a contentious dismissal. Forced back to full-time editorship of the *Statesman*, Knight quickly built it into a worthy rival of Calcutta's Anglo-Indian dailies, the *Englishman* and the Indian *Daily News.* He kept up his advocacy for Indian causes and mocked the British invasion of Afghanistan in 1878 as expansionism and the empire's hiding of the famines occurring on the northern frontier. His reporting embarrassed the government into ratcheting up its relief efforts.

By 1879, Knight returned to England disgusted by Conservative policies and sought to affect British public opinion. The weekly London *Statesman* denounced the British Raj's expensive and morally bankrupt hypocrisy in exploiting India and in fomenting war with Afghanistan. As hard as he tried, however, Knight's London *Statesman* was not a sustainable concern. Though he mortgaged his stake in the Calcutta *Statesman* to stay afloat, both papers succumbed to financial strains. The Calcutta *Statesman* was rescued by the Paikpara family, one of Bengal's largest landed interests.

Knight's story is unfamiliar to many in the field of imperial studies and media history. As Hirschman suggests, this was likely not inadvertent. Knight's prickly personality and flagrant antipathy for the British Raj ensured that he was not to receive prominence in the accounts of British India or the empire. With this biography, however, readers will recognize the common theme of a reformer who stood up to the economic and social hierarchies of society on behalf of those without a voice.

What makes Hirschmann's work an even greater contribution is that it shows that even while Knight may be disregarded by his countrymen, he was one of those editors (no doubt helped by his outsider status) who carried the Western-style principles and values of public dialogue and press through the empire . By engaging and melding Western traditions with the diverse cultural traditions of India, he helped to empower indigenous people to use the periodical press as a tool to criticize government in public debate and fight for their rights and needs amid the emergence of an expanding public communication system.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the list discussion logs at:
http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl.

Citation: Jeffrey Patterson. Review of Hirschmann, Edwin, *Robert Knight: Reforming Editor in Victorian India.* Jhistory, H-Net Reviews. May, 2010.
URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=29634

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.