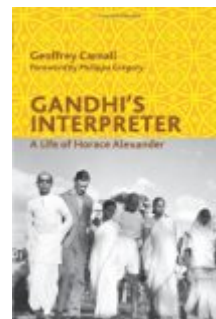


Geoffrey Carnall. *Gandhi's Interpreter: A Life of Horace Alexander.* Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010. xxi + 314 pp. \$115.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-7486-4045-4.



Reviewed by Surendra Bhana

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Commissioned by Sumit Guha (The University of Texas at Austin)

The Quaker connection with the Indian sub-continent goes back to the seventeenth century. The first Quaker came to India in 1657. Geoffrey Carnall, an honorary fellow at the University of Edinburgh, has written a detailed account of one such individual, Horace Alexander (1889-1989), who was deeply committed to peace and liberty in the twentieth century. The author makes copious use of Alexander's papers, his writings, and relevant secondary literature. His many references to people, places, and events require careful tracking of the chronology.

Born of Quaker stock on both sides of his family, Alexander was deeply influenced by his father, who had been actively opposed to slavery and the opium trade. From early on in his life, he began to develop interest in strategies that could prevent violence. Robert Walpole's art of secret diplomacy to end wars impressed him; and he agreed with Norman Angell's *The Great Illusion* (1909), which argued that wars made no rational sense in modern society, and were therefore less likely to happen. The outbreak of the First World

War shocked him. The liberal ideology at Cambridge, where he was a student, also shaped his ideas on internationalism. All of this would help him to develop a program on international relations when he started teaching in 1919 at Woodbrooke, a Quaker college in Birmingham.

One of Alexander's central ideas is encapsulated in his 1920 statement, "Always our first impulse should be, not to destroy those whose actions or opinions we disapprove, but to understand their motives and their justification" (p. 44). Conciliation was the only way to reach permanent settlements. The League of Nations and later the United Nations Organization were instruments to achieve peace in the view of Alexander and other Quakers. They showed concern with the violence inherent in Nazism, and never ceased to work for peace, even after the Second World War began in 1939. In the 1960s and beyond, Alexander focused on nuclear disarmament, the war in Vietnam, and other hot-spot issues. It is, however, his engage-

ment with India in the 1920s through the 1950s that is the central focus of the book.

A tour of India in 1927 began a lifelong interest in India. In the next two decades, Alexander would meet major leaders in the nationalist movement, including Mohandas K. Gandhi (1869-1948), Jawaharlal Nehru (1889-1964), Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941), and others. His earlier doubts about self-rule for the Indians disappeared, especially when he saw that many British officials felt no obligation to work for their welfare. Alexander would serve as mediator between British officials (including the viceroy) in India and the nationalist leadership. The networks he and other Quakers developed gave him ready access to these individuals. Friends and acquaintances from his university days were of great help. But Alexander's own personality had a lot to do with his influence. People trusted him, and trusted what he brought to his role as a mediator.

Gandhi liked the Quakers because they did not proselytize, and valued religious diversity. He was impressed by Alexander and his associate Agatha Harrison (1885-1954), who, like him, believed that small steps could lead to major breakthroughs. The meeting of minds between opponents was central to the tenets of Gandhi's *satyagraha* (truth force). Gandhi was personally warm to Alexander. In one of his letters, he addressed him as "my dear Horace" and ended with "love, bapu." Alexander benefited from his association with Gandhi because the latter served as a role model. Gandhi, the author says towards the end of the book, inspired him to maintain his resolve even in bleak moments in "the creation of a peaceful and ... sustainable world order" (p. 258). Gandhi accepted Alexander's friendship. He recognized that Quakers like Alexander helped to explain India's position to the British people since high-ranking Raj officials did not always understand him or the nationalist movement. They underestimated his resolve and were dismissive of

his enormous popularity. Under these circumstances, the British welcomed Alexander's insights although they did not always trust him. Indeed, India Office officials disliked Quaker initiatives since they regarded people like Alexander as pro-Indian meddlers.

The role that Alexander and his associates played in India's negotiations was significant, especially during periods of crisis. Alexander usually acquainted himself fully with details that would help to move the talks along. When Gandhi came to London for the Round Table Conference in 1933, Alexander helped with the press releases and the Friends' House served as a venue for Gandhi's reception. The Quakers formed the India Conciliation Group (ICG) to help Indians with urgent social needs over a ten-year period from the 1930s to the early 1940s. There was a serious political stalemate in 1942. Indians wanted independence immediately, but wartime prime minister Winston Churchill (1874-1965) promised merely to consider the issue after the war. Alexander saw Gandhi's conciliatory side, and hoped that British officials would take advantage of it. But they were determined to shut Gandhi out as long as he continued to support the "Quit India" campaign during the war. The level of distrust between Indian leaders and the government of India prevented joint endeavors when they were urgently needed, as for example during the 1943 Bengal Famine. The Friends Ambulance Unit was pleased, however, to work with local Indian leaders in the civil defense against threatened Japanese air raids. Alexander secured the help of H. S. Suhrawardy (1892-1963), the powerful head of the Muslim League in Bengal.

Prime Minister Clement Atlee (1883-1967) announced on February 19, 1946 his willingness to grant India independence. When the Simla negotiations for India's independence began, Alexander and Harrison were present to counsel the British about how to read Indian motives without being cynical. They went back and forth to make points

informally, even if the atmosphere was compromised by severe political differences. Alexander advised “endless tact, patience, imagination, and courage” to Lord Pethick-Lawrence, the new secretary of state for India (p. 191). The Muslim League insisted on the partition of British India. Its call for direct action sparked communal violence between Hindus and Muslims in 1946, and the large-scale migration of people at partition was accompanied by horrific carnage. Victories sometimes come in small doses, however. In October 1946, Gandhi went to Noakhali to end violence there. Alexander and Suhrawardy stayed with Gandhi in a Muslim home, and succeeded in bringing a semblance of calm to the area. Alexander remained in India until July 1951 at the Quaker Center in New Delhi, and returned to Britain in 1953.

During the last years of his stay, Alexander interested himself in improving the lot of the ethnic Nagas, relations between India and Pakistan, and other issues. He supported Prime Minister Nehru’s policy of nonalignment; and throughout the 1950s and much of 1960s, remained active in London Yearly Meeting and the Meeting of Suffering. He wrote letters to the press regularly and published books. His last visit to India was in November 1971, when Bangladesh broke away from Pakistan to become a new nation. The Indian government awarded him the Padma Bhushan Medal in 1984, an honor reserved for people who had distinguished themselves in the service of India.

This is a detailed biography. Its focus on his work, however, does not allow us to see the personal side of Alexander’s life. More detailed analysis of his relationships with his spouses, for example, would have given us a clearer sense of Alexander the person. He married Olive Graham (d. 1942) in 1918; and the Philadelphia-based Quaker Rebecca Bradbeer in 1958. Details on his first wife are incidental, and are virtually absent for his second. Alexander was clearly an intense

person who relaxed periodically by engaging in his passionate hobby, bird-watching.

The author refers to events and incidents without providing their full historical context. If, for example, the Quakers were expected to present a truer picture of the independence movement, what was it that prevented a fairer assessment of Indian developments in the British press? There are references to events, major and minor, that needed fuller exploration of their significance and how they impacted negotiations between the British and the Indians. What were the parameters of the 1933 Round Table Conference and why did it fail? Events such as the declaration of independence in January 1930, the 1930 Salt March, the 1935 Government of India Act, or the Indian National Congress’s launch of the Quit India movement had direct relevance to the course of negotiations so central to Alexander’s endeavors. When Gandhi was released from prison in May 1944, Alexander was irritated that he had adopted a politically motivated stance rather than focusing on alleviating poverty. The author should have explained the context here. For one thing, Gandhi’s entire “constructive program” was about eradicating poverty, and for another, it raises the question of why a principled man would take such a stand. In addition, Gandhi’s philosophy as it related to *brahmacharya* (celibacy) and fasting are two areas that require further analysis since they are mentioned by the author. More recent scholarship provides fresh insights on such issues. If Alexander’s books and articles reflected a firm grasp of India and Gandhi’s ideas, this does not always come across clearly in the book.

Other Quakers also advanced Gandhi’s ideas, and brief references to their work would have placed Alexander’s role in sharper historical perspective. A reader unfamiliar with the diversity of Quaker beliefs would have benefited from learning about the approaches of other Quakers. They were in India about the same time as Alexander. Indeed, some of them spent almost their entire

lives in India. The American Quaker Samuel (later Satyanand) Stokes (1882-1946) lived in Himachal running schools, campaigning against forced labor, and planting apples. He became a close associate of Gandhi and courted imprisonment during the non-cooperation movement even though he disagreed with aspects of his policy. Later, the Upanishads and the Bhagavad Gita made a deep impression on him. Other Quakers ran schools, colleges, hospitals, libraries, and farms. Marjorie Sykes (1905-95) spent sixty years in India. She taught at Santiniketan, translated some of Tagore's plays and co-authored a biography of Charles Freer Andrews (1871-1940). Later, she ran a girls' school in the Nilgiri hills, and promoted sustainable agriculture in the Narmada valley at Rasulia (founded 1891), a Quaker settlement. Sykes interested herself in Gandhi's constructive program, especially as it affected women. Laurie Baker (1917-2007), who first came to India in 1945, pioneered low-cost and eco-friendly architecture in Kerala and built a whole village, a clear indication of how Gandhi's environmental ideas had influenced his professional work.

Collectively, then, the Quakers made a deep impression on Gandhi. We see this from the number of references he made to individual Quakers in the *Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*: 88 to Alexander, 198 to Agatha Harrison, 102 to Muriel Lester (1865-1968), 43 to Reginald Reynolds (1905-58), and 42 to Stokes, (according to the well-known scholar Ramachandra Guha). Clearly, Gandhi did not share the assessment of his secretary, Mahadev Desai, who called them "goody-goody fellows" (p. 155).

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