

The Indian Rebellion, 1857–1859

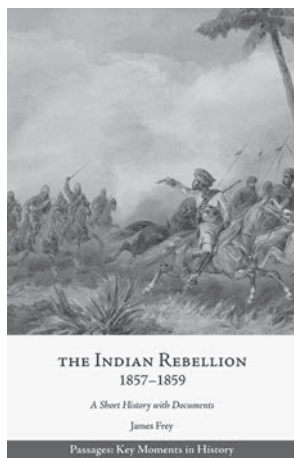
A Short History with Documents

By JAMES FREY

INDIANAPOLIS: HACKETT PUBLISHING COMPANY, 2020

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Reviewed by Brian P. Caton



The rebellion in northern and central India, beginning in 1857, has been the object of countless published works, several of them published even before July 8, 1859, when the Government of India officially declared India to be at peace. It has also taken a place of privilege in many histories of modern India, as the moment when Parliament replaced early colonial rule under the British East India Company with “Crown” rule, overseen directly by the British metropolitan government. So perhaps it should come as little surprise that Hackett Publishing Company, having published in 2017 Ian Barrow’s volume

on the history of the East India Company, should follow it with a volume on this key moment in India’s modern history. James Frey’s book, like others in the series, consists of a moderate-length narrative, slightly over half of the book’s total length, and a series of primary-source documents selected and edited by the author. The table of contents lists thirty-four documents, though in fact several of these are different sections of the same work: for example, Documents 1, 5, and 19 are all selections from the 1873 translation of Syed Ahmad Khan’s *Causes of the Indian Revolt* (1858). The combination of a narrative with edited primary sources suggests that the book is meant to be used in a teaching context rather than as a direct contribution to the historical debates on the subject of the rebellion; however, certain aspects of the book’s production may limit the number or type of classrooms in which it can be effective.

Frey’s narrative conveys a great deal of information efficiently and offers carefully considered analysis. The narrative is at its best in Chapter One, in which Frey lays out the warp threads of caste and religion, as Indians understood them in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, through which political actors large and small wove the weft of regime change that produced a fabric of colonialism in patches of direct and indirect rule. By doing so, Frey adeptly addresses the issues—fear of losing one’s caste or religion—that captured mutineers most frequently cited as the causes of their action, while also addressing the many underlying causes of rebellion among Company soldiers, including stagnation of real wages, declining status, and the spatial and temporal lengthening of deployments. Frey also rightly dwells on the aggressive exercise of annexation and retrenchments in the 1850s under the Governor-General Lord Dalhousie as one of the reasons Indians outside the army took up the rebellion, particularly in the regions of Awadh and the Ganga-Yamuna watershed. The narrative in this chapter might have provided additional social, cultural, or political groundwork to help explain why rebels did not find much support in Bombay and Madras Presidencies or in the regions of Punjab and Bengal within the Bengal Presidency; without this

groundwork, the story of the extinguishing of the rebellion in Chapter Two sometimes appears as though the battles were fought entirely by white troops reallocated from elsewhere in the Company’s Indian territories or shipped in from Europe.

Having dispensed with the March 1857 mutiny of Mangal Pandey at Barrackpur (a military post just north of Calcutta) in the introduction, Frey is free in Chapter Two to begin his narrative of the rebellion itself with the mutiny of troops at the Meerut cantonment in the Ganga-Yamuna watershed. Frey’s narrative here demonstrates the military historian’s zeal in narrating the blow-by-blow of key battles, sieges, and advances, delighting in the effort to identify the singular military maneuver that changed the fate of millions. In other moments the fine detail of the narrative attempts to convey a more visceral sense of the nature of combat or of the physical characteristics of the environment in which a battle or chase took place. Occasionally Frey seems to take on the perspective of his sources, which are overwhelmingly British, and this is most apparent in his neglect of the punitive measures British field forces meted out to villagers resident between the sites of major battles.¹ Certainly any narrative of the progress of this or any rebellion requires some level of detail, to explain why the rebels marched in one direction and not another, or why colonial forces were able to recover one garrison town quickly and another one after only a long siege. But one wonders if a slightly more compact presentation of this narrative could have allowed for an expansion of the Conclusion, where Frey discusses the aftermath and historiography of the rebellion.

The transformative nature of the rebellion and its place in the historiography of colonial or modern India should have compelled the author or publisher to expand the Conclusion. Frey clearly identifies the timeline for organizational changes in British government in India that very frequently are glossed as the imposition of Crown rule in 1858. Descriptions of post-rebellion changes to the British Indian Army (which replaced the Company’s Army) are similarly clear, although Frey might have explained more about why the so-called “martial races” tended to be limited to men recruited from the far northern territories of British India rather than from central and southern regions who also contributed to the effort to extinguish the rebellion. The discussion of the rebellion’s aftermath needed to be expanded significantly to account for the anxiety, occasionally growing into paranoia, among British officials and civilians about the possibility of the recurrence of a rebellion of a similar scale as the one that ended in 1859. One need look no further than the architectural style chosen for the Lahore Railway Station, begun in 1859. But this anxiety about the “loyalty” of Indians erupted in the British response to the Ilbert Bill in 1883, which proposed that magistrates or sessions judges who were Indian could try European British subjects. Given that the Indian National Congress was formed in 1885 as a direct response to the racist criticism of the Ilbert Bill, attention to British anxiety would allow for a richer connection of the bureaucratic and administrative changes introduced from the 1860s to the budding nationalism of the Congress, both of which Frey includes. Frey demonstrates an admirable command over the vast historiography, stretching from the earliest accounts published in Britain in 1858 to Kim Wagner’s 2010 book *The Great Fear of 1857*.² All of the major schools of thought are covered with clarity and concision. An expanded historiography might have allowed Frey to discuss more than one work to represent each school, and Frey could also have discussed works published within the past ten years, particularly as the Indian book publishing market has worked diligently to meet the demand for Hindu nationalist interpretations of the rebellion since the 2014 Lok Sabha elections. Frey also could have placed this book more

clearly into its own historiography, though perhaps the intention is to allow students reading the book to carry out that work for themselves.

Hackett has made it clear that the book is meant for students, though certain characteristics of the book make it unclear what sort of student is meant to read it. The language and style are pitched to college or university undergraduates, though it may be possible for very well-prepared secondary school students to understand and use the book effectively. The wide range of documents make the book particularly valuable for in-class exercises in reading a single document closely, or for out-of-class exercises asking students to read several documents together. All of the documents have been previously published, so an enterprising instructor could find the original publication in order to put a longer version in front of students for the full flavor of nineteenth-century prose. Put differently, though, one could say that the publishers passed on the opportunity to print previously unpublished archival sources, which would have greatly increased the value of the book to instructors and researchers alike. The documents speak to the themes raised in Chapters One and Two of Frey's narrative, and unfortunately few of them speak to the themes raised in the discussion of the consequences of the rebellion. The chronology printed in the front matter is quite helpful. The glossary and maps, however, are woefully inadequate. The three maps show India as a whole, the city and cantonment of Delhi, and the city of Lucknow. Readers and instructors not already familiar with north Indian geography (using the place names current in the nineteenth century) will find themselves perpetually interrupted by the need to find the numerous places mentioned in the narrative but absent from the first map. Similarly, Frey uses Hindustani terms that provide accuracy and seasoning to his narrative but do not appear in the glossary. Military terms, such as *chevaux-de-fris*, remain un glossed, while the uninitiated will have little idea how many troops comprised a brigade, battalion, regiment, or corps. For readers and instructors without prior knowledge of northern Indian or British military history, these obstacles might prove too many or too great to merit the adoption of this book for use in courses such as world history or a very broad history of modern Asia. Instructors of courses in modern Indian history or British

colonialism might find it relatively quick work to prepare an additional glossary and maps, or to ask students to do this work—an investment of time that might pay dividends elsewhere in such courses.

On balance, the book is a commendable achievement. Its narrative concision and historiographical fairness make it not only accessible to undergraduate students but also a model, in some ways, for how to carry out good historical and historiographical writing. The chief virtue of this type of book is absolving instructors of the labor of having to search for and reproduce primary source documents on a single topic, and Frey's judicious selection of documents means that students may read them through the lenses of class, gender, or other themes that may be relevant to other segments of a course for which the book is suitable. Such courses are likely limited to those on modern Indian history or the history of British colonialism, but an instructor especially committed to the topic of the Indian rebellion might find a way to apply this book to a course on another topic. ■

NOTES

1. See, for example, C. B. Singh Sheoran, *Gallant Haryana: The First and Crucial Battlefield of AD 1857* (New York: Routledge, 2019).
2. Kim Wagner, *The Great Fear of 1857: Rumours, Conspiracies, and the Making of the Indian Uprising* (Oxford: Peter Land, 2010).

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