

The Amritsar Massacre: The Untold Story of One Fateful Day

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Late in the afternoon on 13 April 1919, the British officer Brigadier-General Reginald Dyer, with 90 native troops under his command, entered the enclosure known as the Jallianwala Bagh in Amritsar in Northern India. A crowd of several thousand civilians were gathered in the public garden to protest against the imprisonment of two local nationalist leaders by the colonial authorities. Riots had broken out in several cities in the region and, following the murder of five British civilians in Amritsar, a curfew had been introduced and all political rallies banned. Without prior warning, Dyer ordered his men to open up a sustained fire on the crowd, which lasted for ten minutes, during which some 1650 rounds were spent. According to the official figures 379 people were killed and 1200 wounded, although the actual casualties were probably much greater.

The Amritsar Massacre has since become a byword for colonial brutality and repression and in India it is remembered as the watershed that irrevocably put Indian nationalists on the path to independence, a struggle which came to fruition almost two decades later in 1947. Thanks to the visceral depiction in Attenborough's 1982 *Gandhi* film, the massacre is also one of the most recognisable images of British India. More recently, Nigel Collett's mammoth biography of Dyer, *The Butcher of Amritsar* (2005), has further contributed to the public perception of this crucial historical moment - a representation which emphasises the personal culpability of Dyer and the moral bankruptcy of imperialism.⁽¹⁾

Now, with Nick Lloyd's new book, the time has apparently come for a complete whitewash. *The Amritsar Massacre: The Untold Story of One Fateful Day* is written squarely against Indian nationalist myth and aims to provide a broader and more even-handed analysis of the events of 1919. Rather than the well-known story

of a disproportionate and brutal response to local protests, Lloyd draws a picture of embattled colonial officers with the best of intentions, doing their job under increasingly difficult circumstances; the British consistently acted with great restraint and only used force as a final resort, he claims. Lloyd has in other words turned the story of the Amritsar Massacre into a polemic piece of empire apologia the like of which has not been seen since the heyday of the *Morning Post*. Anachronism is indeed the key to understanding Lloyd's particular brand of history. He writes exclusively from the perspective of, and in identification with, colonial officials like Dyer and the Lieutenant-Governor of the Punjab, Sir Michael O'Dwyer, for whom he reserves the greatest admiration. Keeping that in mind, the outdated nature of Lloyd's account is perhaps more understandable but no less distasteful – one does not have to be an Indian nationalist or bleeding-heart liberal to find this book deeply problematic, never mind poor scholarship.

In Lloyd's account it is Gandhi who emerges as the great villain, with naive and sentimental Liberal politicians like E. S. Montagu, who were pushing for reforms and increased negotiations with moderate Indian politicians, coming a close second. Liberal policies upset the precarious balance of colonial India, Lloyd argues, and necessitated the continuation of war-time emergency legislation, the infamous Rowlatt Acts of 1919. The wave of Indian protests that followed these acts, we are told, was not caused by the fact that they curtailed basic civil rights (the acts were the precursors to modern-day anti-terrorism legislation), but rather because they were poorly understood and furthermore misrepresented by anti-British agitators. Indians, in other words, were protesting against something they did not understand and which, moreover, was for their own good.

Since the Rowlatt legislation was aimed at suppressing illegal anti-colonial movements, Gandhi's call for Indians to disobey the authorities amounted, in Lloyd's estimation, to a call for them to become revolutionaries: 'Gandhi's *satyagraha* pledge committed its signatories to refuse to obey the Rowlatt Bills, but this was impossible *unless one actually became a terrorist*' (italics in original, p. 35). Civil disobedience constituted a breach of law and thus, Lloyd seems to suggest, all Indians who protested against the British were effectively criminals or worse and should expect to be treated accordingly. Lloyd further argues that '[t]here is no evidence that the Mahatma directly organised or called for violent resistance to the Raj, but his objectives were revolutionary in that they openly disobeyed the authorities and tried to overthrow government legislation' (p. 128). Following this rationale, the people gathered in the Jallianwala Bagh on 13 April 1919, in blatant disregard of the ban on public meetings, only had themselves, and Gandhi, to blame for what eventually happened. The meek ascetic unleashed forces beyond his control and in spite of his celebrated advocacy of non-violence, Lloyd argues, colonial officials were criminally naive not to recognise the non-cooperation and civil disobedience movement as a 'threatening conspiracy' (p. 128).

The heroes of Lloyd's narrative (since Whig history must have heroes) are the brave men of the Indian Civil Service and above all, Sir Michael O'Dwyer (affectionately described as 'a battered breakwater standing firm against the onrushing tide'), who 'was totally committed to his work and imbued with that sense of purpose the ICS was famous for; spending hours in the saddle every day, traversing the fertile plains, meeting villagers, dispensing justice, settling disputes' (p. 59). In Lloyd's opinion, there is no doubt that O'Dwyer represented 'the very best of the ICS, able to set an example of duty and selflessness to the people and continue the tradition of the early British rulers of the Punjab – the legendary figures of Henry and John Lawrence, John Nicholson, James Abbott and others – who were able to dominate a warlike province through their will, determination and formidable ability' (p. 61). Where most historians would critically examine the ideological underpinnings of imperialism, Lloyd simply embraces them; he clearly believes in the 'White Man's burden' and has nothing but admiration for the 'paternalist despotism' that guided British rule in India. This naive and deeply anachronistic nostalgia would be laughable were it not for the callous jingoism in Lloyd's analysis of colonial state violence.

Having identified so completely with the British of 1919, Lloyd is at pains to play down the various types of punishment the authorities implemented once martial law had been declared after mid-April. In the lane in Amritsar where a British female missionary had been brutally attacked by a crowd, Dyer ordered Indians to crawl on all fours. But, Lloyd argues, Dyer's anger over the attack on a British woman was 'understandable, if overzealous', and the 'crawling order' was itself an 'insignificant' incident; after all, it was only applied to

one lane for five days and only 50 Indians were subjected to the humiliation. Martial law, Lloyd assures us, was administered 'sensibly and with the best of intentions' and randomly flogging Indians or conscribing them for short-term forced labour saved them the trouble of going to jail, while poor people actually preferred corporal punishment to fines. Lloyd further suggests that the British who controlled Lahore under martial law 'deserve some credit for doing a thankless task in a highly difficult situation' – they were after all only trying to 'improve life in Lahore', as Lloyd puts it, 'and reminding people of the need for "loyalty" and "honour"' (p. 138). Re-assessing the evidence Lloyd thus finds it 'difficult to avoid the conclusion that at certain times, martial law orders were actually *popular* among the people ...' (italics in original, p. 148). Needless to say, Lloyd is not too concerned with the explicit racism reflected in the types of punishment meted out by the British, most of which would have been unthinkable even in places like Ireland during the 'Troubles'.

So what of the massacre itself? Lloyd's reinterpretation of the events at Jallianwala Bagh on 13 April 1919 is based on the assumption that only Dyer's initial report on his actions should be considered, while his later testimony before the Hunter Committee and subsequently written defence should be dismissed. The linchpin of Lloyd's narrative is thus the brief report Dyer wrote just hours after the massacre:

'I entered the Jallianwallah Bagh by a very narrow lane which necessitated my leaving my armoured cars behind. On entering, I saw a dense crowd estimated at about 5,000; a man on a raised platform addressing the audience and making gestulations [*sic*] with his hands. I realised that my force was small and to hesitate might induce attack. I immediately opened fire and dispersed the crowd. I estimate that between 200 and 300 of the crowd were killed. My party fired 1,650 rounds'.⁽²⁾

Dyer did not expect the meeting at the Jallianwala Bagh to take place in the first place, Lloyd argues, and when he suddenly found himself face-to-face with what was assumed to be thousands of dangerous rebels, the General had no choice: 'He had to open fire' (p. 203). Once Dyer had given the order to fire he could not very well stop until he had scattered the crowd, otherwise he and his men might have been overrun. The reason why Dyer kept firing for ten minutes was because of the number of people gathered, combined with the few exits leading from the Bagh, and it was these tragic circumstances, rather than the General's actions, which according to Lloyd caused the massacre. Yet Lloyd is also keen to prove that the crowd, tragically massacred, was not the 'peaceful' gathering of Indian nationalist myth.

According to Lloyd, 'the danger posed by the meeting should not be underestimated', essentially because the inflammatory content of the speeches made at Jallianwala Bagh 'would not have contributed towards the restoration of law and order within Amritsar and may have provoked further unrest' (p. 168–9). Moreover, the meeting was planned as a provocation and in response to Dyer's public ban on such gatherings and so it follows, Lloyd argues, that everyone present at the Bagh knew that they were breaking the law. Lloyd is probably right in suggesting that there were not that many women and children in the crowd at Jallianwala Bagh, but the undisputed presence of at least some speaks against the notion that the gathering was volatile and largely composed of would-be rioters.

It is usually assumed that a considerable number of people, including villagers from the surrounding area, were present in the Bagh on the 13th because it was the day of the popular Baisakhi festival and a large cattle-fair had taken place at Amritsar just three days earlier. That was not so, Lloyd insists, since the violence of the preceding days had interrupted the fair, and third-class railway travel to Amritsar had been banned by the authorities. Accordingly, he argues, the villagers present in the Jallianwala Bagh cannot be assumed to have been ‘innocent’ (whatever that means) and, furthermore, ‘Dyer believed that the presence of villagers was indicative of the desperate situation he was in and he may have been right’ (p. 170). Knowingly or not, Lloyd here invokes the old bogey of villagers joining the rebel sepoys of 1857, which is nothing short of absurd in the context of 1919. Of the alleged conspiracy to spread disorder in the countryside, and draw in pillaging villagers to Amritsar, he can provide no evidence whatsoever – probably because such a conspiracy never existed outside the fevered mind of the likes of Dyer. Consistently dismissive of the depiction of Anglo-Indian hysteria, found in works such as Forster’s *A Passage to India*, Lloyd himself nevertheless trades in the most worn-out tropes of the ‘Mutiny’.

Taken on its own narrow terms, Lloyd’s line of reasoning is furthermore deeply flawed. Supposedly Dyer went to the Jallianwala Bagh completely unprepared, and when he realised the composition and size of the gathered crowd he had to fire, which he did within 30 seconds of entering the enclosure. How Dyer, in a matter of seconds, could have identified the composition of a crowd of thousands Lloyd never explains, nor what tell-tale signs would have told the General that the crowd was not ‘totally peaceful’ or indeed not ‘innocent’. Lloyd suggests that as many as 25,000 people were gathered, which is rather more than the official estimates, but claims that this was ‘something that would have undoubtedly influenced Dyer’s appreciation of the situation’ (p. 171). As appears in the above-quoted report, however, Dyer clearly did not believe he was faced by a crowd of more than 5,000. The smoking gun of Lloyd’s revisionist argument thus reeks of empirical ineptitude.

Lloyd reluctantly admits that there was no evidence of a grand conspiracy against the British in 1919, but since the Hunter Committee concluded that the Punjab had been in a state of ‘open rebellion’, he is only too happy pointing out that the British were legally justified in using lethal force to suppress the disturbances. However, if shooting fish in a barrel, which is what the events at Jallianwala Bagh amounted to, complies with the notion of ‘minimum force’, and thus in Lloyd’s view is defensible, is it not possible that military historians might have to reconsider their moral compass? And besides, if the Amritsar Massacre was an example, if not exemplar, of the ‘minimum force’ doctrine, as Lloyd suggests, what would ‘maximum force’ have looked like? Lloyd does not make his approach any more palatable by concluding his book with a description of communal conflict and state violence in independent India – presumably as evidence that, after all is said and done, the ‘natives’ were better off under British rule. It is no mean feat that Lloyd manages to make Niall Ferguson seem like a tree-hugging leftie by comparison.

In spite of Lloyd’s claims of extensive research, which some reviewers appear to accept, it is obvious that South Asian history is not his area of expertise. The bibliography is woefully inadequate for a book which seeks to radically reassess a major historical event, and looks more like the inventory of small-town public library than the result of years’ worth of research. Thus K. L. Tuteja’s article ‘Jallianwala Bagh’ (1997), which is standard fare on undergraduate courses, or indeed Taylor Sherman’s recent study, *State Violence and Punishment in India, 1919–1956* (2009), are both conspicuous omissions though by no means the only ones.⁽³⁾ Lloyd does not appear to be aware of the extensive research on trauma and brutalization after the First World War, most of which explicitly discusses the Amritsar Massacre - Susan Kingsley Kent’s *Aftershocks* (2009) comes to mind as an obvious example.⁽⁴⁾ Given Lloyd’s interpretation of Indian nationalism it is perhaps not surprising that any reference to the wider global context of the crisis of empire in 1919 should be largely absent, though works such as Erez Manela’s *The Wilsonian Moment* (2007) might appropriately have been mentioned (at the very least).⁽⁵⁾

Lloyd’s anachronistic take on early 20th-century Indian history could in fact only be the result of a narrow and highly selective reading – one that leaves out the most significant historiographical developments of the past 30–40 years. His argument rests entirely on the premise that British police reports and official records

can be taken at face value as accurate representations of fact. The pitfalls of such an approach should be obvious and Lloyd never gains sufficient distance from his source-material to be anything but a spokesperson for the British involved in putting down the unrest in Punjab. Lloyd's historical analysis is thus also characterised by a terminology that was in fashion pre-1947. Evidently not familiar with Ranajit Guha's 'The prose of counter-insurgency', Lloyd writes of 'the forces of agitation and sedition' as if these were objectively meaningful descriptors, rather than politically loaded concepts.⁽⁶⁾ Indian rioters are invariably described as faceless 'mobs', often 'abusive' and 'menacing', sometimes 'howling' or 'baying'.

The Amritsar Massacre: The Untold Story of One Fateful Day seems to be part of a general revisionist trend within the war studies community in Britain, and Dyer is only the latest of his contemporaries, Field Marshal Haig being the most notable example, to be rescued from the 'calumnies' of liberal (or, even worse, theory-based) historiography. There is nothing inherently wrong about historical revisionism of course – most historians can attest to the value in reassessing longstanding myths and popular misconceptions. The problem is that self-proclaimed revisionism tends to be motivated by highly politicised agendas (of varying denominations) and to operate within a narrowly Manichean world-view, where angry polemics take the place of constructive debate. This book was not written with a view to understanding the events of the past as much as to exculpate the British Empire in the present. Readers who believe that Dyer has been unfairly treated by history would, however, do better by reading Ian Colvin's defence of the General from 1929 (or perhaps revisit the *Morning Post* of 1920); those of a less nostalgic persuasion have yet to wait for a credible and more nuanced reassessment of the Amritsar Massacre.

Lloyd has dedicated his book to the memory of George MacDonald Fraser (1925–2008), which is somewhat puzzling – but perhaps this reviewer simply missed *Flashman and the White Man's Burden*.

Notes

1. Nigel Collett, *The Butcher of Amritsar: General Reginald Dyer* (London, 2005).[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. *Parliamentary Papers: Disturbances in the Punjab. Statement by Brig.-General R. E. H. Dyer, C. B., 1920, Appendix C: Report on Operations*, 14 April 1919, p. 28.[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. K. L. Tuteja 'Jallianwala Bagh: a critical juncture in the Indian national movement', *Social Scientist*, 25, 1/2 (Jan.-Feb. 1997), 25–61; and Taylor Sherman, *State Violence and Punishment in India, 1919–56* (London, 2009).[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. Susan Kingsley Kent, *Aftershocks: The Politics of Trauma in Britain, 1918–1931* (Basingstoke, 2009). As it happens, Kent's argument is not very persuasive but ought nevertheless to have been considered if Lloyd's academic credentials are to be taken seriously. [Back to \(4\)](#)
5. Erez Manela, *The Wilsonian Moment: Self-Determination and the International Origins of Anticolonial Nationalism* (Oxford, 2007).[Back to \(5\)](#)
6. Ranajit Guha, 'The prose of counter-insurgency', *Subaltern Studies II* (Delhi, 1983), 1–42.[Back to \(6\)](#)

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