

## Forster's Complaint

### Review of *The Missionary and the Maharajas: Cecil Tyndale-Biscoe and the Making of Modern Kashmir* by Hugh Tyndale-Biscoe (2019)

I found *The Missionary and the Maharajas* at Tim's Used Books, a shop we like to visit on rainy afternoons during our annual trip to Provincetown, on the tip of the Cape. It was published by a minor academic publisher in 2019 by Hugh Tyndale-Biscoe, a grandson of Rev. Cecil Tyndale-Biscoe, who spent fifty-seven years, from 1890 to 1947, as a missionary in India, most prominently as headmaster of London's CMS (Church Missionary Society) School in Srinagar, a large city in the Kashmir Valley. How the book ended up in Ptown for me to find, I cannot tell you. Hand of God?

What's most important to me about it is that Hugh, born in Kashmir in 1929, who used his grandfather's diaries in preparing his manuscript, didn't edit them in the way that they would have been edited by the CMS. And so Hugh, a biologist, is free to admit: "In Kashmir the efforts of the foreign missionaries had mixed success: the evangelists were singularly unsuccessful in converting either Hindus or Muslims in Kashmir proper and had little effect on Muslims in Baltistan or Buddhists in Ladakh..." [1] But what has been of equal importance is that this book quoted from another piece of writing about missionaries that I am even more grateful to have read: a review of one of Rev. Tyndale-Biscoe's books, dismally and revealingly titled *Character Building in Kashmir* (1920). As quoted by Hugh, the review, published in a London periodical, *The Athenaeum*, pulls no punches: the book is described as "noisy, meddlesome and self-righteous," as well as "heartless and brainless" and "full of racial and religious 'swank.'" [1] I didn't doubt it, but I would never have searched out a copy of the review itself if its author's name hadn't been E.M. Forster. Barely three pages long, it is one of the best explanatory summaries of the rationale of the home interest in the missionary movement that I have read. He is addressing the British home interest only, but it rings true for the all the civilian supporters of the American missionary movement, which of course took the British one as its model.

Forster succinctly links the movement's rise and fall to the industrial revolution, an approach that resonates with me and even pings my title, *The Missionary Factory*. "Thanks to the development of machinery," he writes, "a pious and leisured middle class came into existence who, mindful of the Gospel injunction, prepared to evangelize the heathen. There had been missionaries before their day, but they had been isolated idealists like St. Francis, or had held the sword of the State like Cortes or Pizarro." [1]

What the nineteenth-century movement's leaders understood, says Forster, was that in order to achieve their aims with the army of missionaries they were assembling they needed money, and that money needed to come from private enterprises, not the state. What they also understood was that the mission "met a home need." The newfound surplus of middle-class cash was "seeking a sentimental outlet." No wonder "the elderly and childless women [found] comfort in the movement and would sometimes leave it all their wealth." The author of *A Passage to India* goes on to say: "Some societies would have endowed art and literature with the surplus: our middle class spent theirs in trying to alter the opinions and habits of people whom they had not seen." [2]

Forster is writing in the past tense, because by the post-World War I period the movement was on the downswing both in Britain and in the United States. There are, he writes, two, linked reasons why: “The industrial revolution, which created [the movement], also created the abyss that has swallowed it up. The factories, as the century progressed, produced more and more guns and ammunition. The Gospel of Peace was preached to all nations, but the countries that preached it most meanwhile perfected the sinews of war. In 1914 there was an explosion at the heart of Christendom whose effects are incalculable; but among them we may predict the decay of foreign Missions. It is not only that the heathen have shown themselves puzzled and cynical, so that Chinese who have served in France raise eyebrows when cargoes of Bibles arrive in China. It is that there is less money to pay for the Bibles.” [3]

Forster’s essay is actually a review of three other books in addition to Tyndale-Biscoe’s. He gives the others good marks, for he judges their authors to be well-meaning and motivated purely by faith. One of the two, Samuel Pollard, author of *Unknown China*, is, in Forster’s opinion, even a decent wordsmith: “Were one discussing travel-books, one would be able to speak at greater length of this charming writer, and of the wild and lovely world that he reveals.” [4] Meanwhile he brutally slams the reverend’s tome. “If you wish a boy to stay at your school,” Tyndale-Biscoe wrote in a paragraph that Forster quotes, “do not be too kind to him or visit him when he is ill or in trouble (though of course you will do so, notwithstanding, knowing that right will prevail in the end), but be hard on him: and if you have occasion to punish him, then punish him severely, and he will love and follow you like a spaniel: A wife, a dog, and a walnut tree/The more you beat them the better they be,/But truer still of the Kashmiri.” [4] Given my reading of Hugh’s book, his grandfather wasn’t kidding. That is exactly what he did, even though, as Hugh repeatedly points out by way of excusing him, he was physically abused as a boy in a British public (private) boarding school and never, ever forgot it.

Forster seems just as amazed as I have been by the energy expended back then on “the labor of imposing a single religion upon the terrestrial globe.” It was, he concedes as I do, “an extraordinary ideal, whatever one’s personal sympathies, and it will bulk more largely than we realize in our history, when that history comes to be written. To what extent Christians still hope for their universal harvest, it is not easy to say. They think it right not to give up hope, but that is rather different. They can scarcely ignore the double blow that the war has dealt to missions—cutting off their funds and discrediting the Gospel of Peace at its source. And even if they ignore it, the heathen does not.” [5]

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1. “Missionaries,” *The Athenaeum*, 22 October 1920, 545. The review is signed only "E.M.F."

2. Ibid.

3. Ibid.

4. Ibid., 546. Note: The subtitle of Pollard’s book is *A Record of the Observations, Adventures and Experiences of a Pioneer Missionary During a Prolonged Sojourn Amongst the Wild and Unknown Nosu Tribe of Western China*.

5. Ibid., 547.