

The world of Helena and Ian

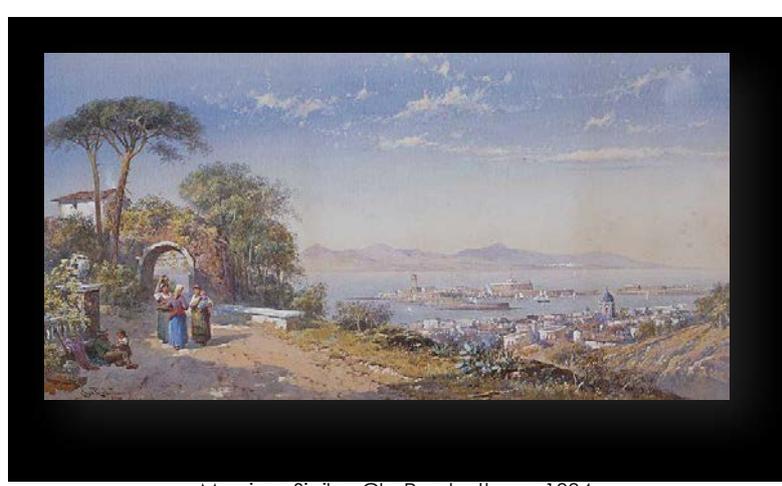
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Greece: Ruins and Cicadas

The European mainland: in the eighteenth century destination for young English gentlemen of class and fortune on the *Grand Tour*, their educational journey. In the course of the nineteenth century, the Continent also started to attract the increasingly affluent middle class.

A rapidly expanding railroad network made travel faster and more comfortable, compared to journeys by sea or in the jolting carriages on bumpy roads.

The era of tourism was dawning, in which English travelers sailed down the Rhine and, Baedeker at hand, visited German palaces and castles.



Messina, Sicily - Ch. Rowbotham, 1884



Temple of Zeus, Athens - J. M. Wittmer, 1833

The favorite destination though remained Italy. Where else could one escape the rainy weather of the island back home?

Italy was sunny and warm, at every turn one came across the remnants of glorified ancient times: ruins of temples and palaces, statues, triumphal arches and dilapidated amphitheatres. Palazzi and cathedrals were overflowing with paintings and statues of old masters, and every piazza, every building had something picturesque that moved the soul.

In spite of all this gushing enthusiasm for landscapes and people, culture and food, one still considered oneself fortunate to be at home in England – a country with

a solid political situation and a clearly structured society, where one lived with style, hygiene and in a healthy, sober faith, far from the vulgar pageantry of Catholic churches.

Especially artists felt attracted to the South. Not only because of the light and the landscapes inspired painters like W.M. Turner or poets like Keats and Shelley, but because life was cheaper and granted more freedom. Far from the watchful eyes of a society demanding a minimum of decency even from artists, far from gossip and ostracizing as punishment for any breach of regulations. In Italy, everyday life didn't wear a corset of rules and regulations. Here, one could try out more unconventional ways of life than in the strait-laced homeland; here, sensuality and eroticism could be lived out even among men.

Only a few dared traveling to Greece, for almost a decade lasted the revolution against Ottoman rule. Independent in 1832, first a prince from Bavaria, then one from Denmark were crowned king, aiming at peace and stability for the country.

But after these years of war and full of refugees, Greece suffered from extreme poverty, struggling to become - under British, French and Russian instruction - an autonomous state after western European example. Some regions were dangerous territory for English travelers, being an easy prey for robbers or even murderers. In England, travels to Greece were advised against, a fact Celia refers to in the letter to her sister.



Kephallinia – after W. M. Turner, 1837

The bold travelled there nonetheless. Archaeologists mostly, getting literally to the bottom of the secrets of ancient cultures, but also poets like Byron, who looked for adventure during the revolution – and painters like Arthur Lawrence.

When I started working on this novel, including on Helena's biography, I couldn't imagine any better place for her to spend the first years of her life. I wanted her to grow up freely and rampantly, as the child of bohemians – Arthur, charming and insouciant, losing himself completely in his art, and Celia, daughter of a good family, having freed herself from the restraints of her social class by this marriage.

On Kephallinia, the largest of the Ionian Islands, Arthur and Celia had tried to start a new life, according to their own rules.

But in spite of all longing for freedom, the superstitious fear of the dangerous foreign land kept a hold on Celia. Out of this fear, she, always the passive one, who had let herself get carried off into this new life by Arthur's thirst of adventure, made a fateful decision.

And Helena, this child of the southern sun, got transplanted into cool, stiff England; first to London, later to Cornwall.

Cornwall: A strange, an eerie place

Cornwall: green pastures and hills under the interplay of sun and clouds. Rough walls along the meandering roads, cottages with rose gardens and impressive manors; turquoise sea, idyllic beaches and fishing hamlets with antique shops. Views that are mainly fair and idyllic.

The other face of Cornwall is gloomy and eerie, wild and skittish, located in the North, between bleak hills with rugged backbones, dark moors and the harsh coast.

"This is the end of the habitable world", stated the Romans at their arrival two thousand years ago.

The sky overcast, the weather often stormy, cold and wet, this side of Cornwall rather seems to belong to Scotland or Brittany than to the otherwise lovely English South.

This landscape is studded with the ruins of abandoned tin-mines, called *knackt bals* in Cornish, populated only by ravens, peregrines and buzzards.



St. Michael's Mount, Cornwall
W. C. Stanfield, 19th century

Farmers and shepherds living on the breadline, their landlords poor compared to their peers everywhere else on the island, fishermen, miners, pirates, smugglers and sailors – out of these grew the people of this austere stretch of land. A distinct kind of people, down-to-earth and bizarre at the same time. Distinct in their thoughts and deeds, distinct also in their language: Cornish, which coos and cracks and has nothing in common with English. Distinct also in their superstitions of the devil and his helpers, of elves and fairies. In Cornwall, mystic and magic of the Celtic heritage remained alive; the traditions of druids, of Merlin and Morgaine-le-Fay, Avalon and King Arthur.

After Celia's death, Arthur moved here, transplanting his children: Jason, still too young to grasp everything that had happened, and Helena, torn out of her familiar surroundings.

Cornwall, far from London and its circles of art and society, seemed a good place for Arthur to continue his existence as a misfit, without being urged by friends and acquaintances to return to a "normal" life.

Here nothing reminded him of Celia, especially not of those happy years in sunny southern Europe that had went by too quickly.

Mainly, Cornwall was a place remote enough so that Arthur Lawrence was able to immerse himself fully in his mourning and his escapism, even forgetting his children, their well-being and taking care for their future.

The biography of Arthur Lawrence is borrowed in parts from the biography of the Victorian painter Lawrence Alma-Tadema.

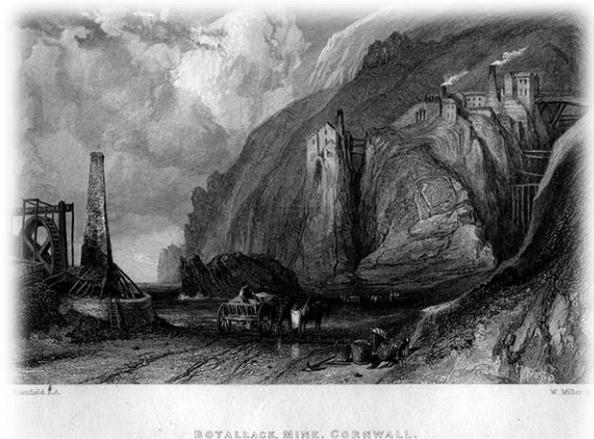
Born Laurens Tadema in the Netherlands in 1836, Tadema also fell into a deep depression after the death of his wife, before he met his second wife, the daughter of a good family, taught in the art of drawing by Tadema; a relationship her father was also against at the beginning.

My idea of Arthur Lawrence's works and his style are also inspired by the paintings of Alma-Tadema, soon forgotten after his death and the end of the Victorian era.

Long before I wrote the first sentence of *The Sky over Darjeeling*, I came across a postcard with one of Alma-Tadema's paintings: *Ask Me No More*, painted in 1906 (see next page), acted as the model for the portrait of Celia at World's End.

With the relocation to Cornwall, Helena's fate as an outsider was sealed. Here, in the deepest backcountry, where rural schools were only able to impart the most basic knowledge and refined manners would have been of no use anyway. With a father, whose former charming insouciance had turned into depression and apathy, and a little brother, to whom she had to be big sister as well as – together with Margaret – a surrogate mother.

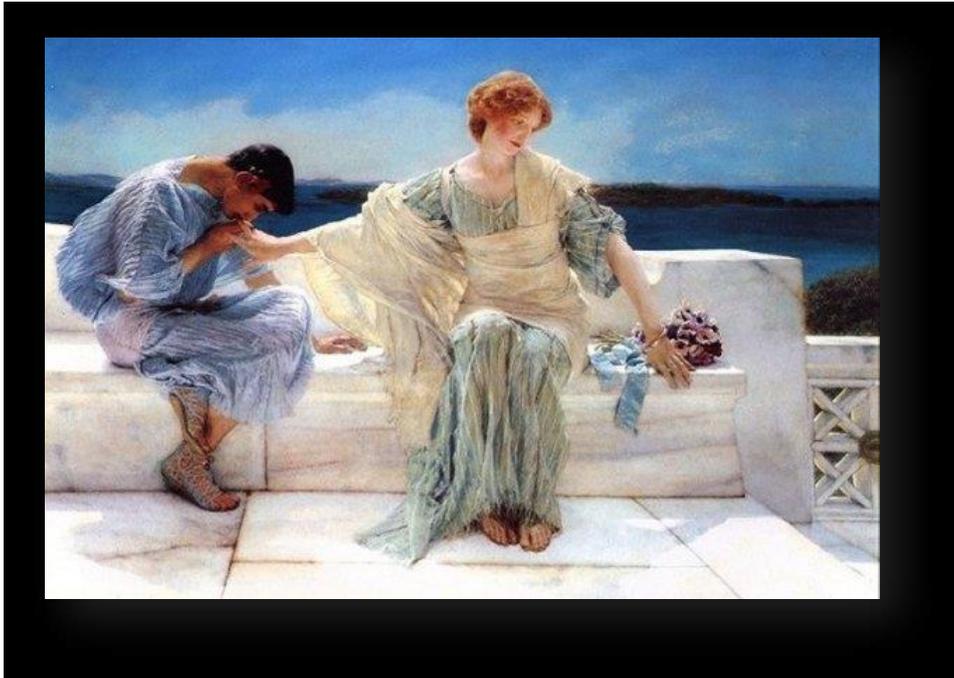
The contrast to her sheltered and carefree childhood couldn't have been more extreme.



Botallack Mine, Cornwall - after W. C. Stanfield, 1836

Cornwall also forms a contrast to the London of Ian and his Indian homeland; nevertheless, I made Helena and Ian meet here. Because the atmosphere of this region corresponds to what attracts them to each other: an unbridled temperament and a longing for freedom; their respective homelessness and the burden of the past either has taken over from the parents.

Fate brought Helena and Ian together in Cornwall, this strange and eerie place, in order to enable Helena to fulfill her destiny, her karma: to be the catalyst for a drama having its origin in India.



Ask Me No More - L. Alma-Tadema, 1906

Bohemian world and polite society

Metropolitan London sets the stage for two interludes in Helena's life. The first of them has its center in a rented house on Broadwick Street in Soho. Although in the immediate neighborhood of elegant boroughs like St. James' Park, Soho itself was not the most fashionable quarter. People of class and wealth, who had inhabited Soho in the preceding century, had moved to larger and more beautiful houses in Bloomsbury, Marylebone and Mayfair. The narrow terraced houses of Soho had been ravaged by time, and therefore, rent was low. Small theaters, music halls and brothels occupied the rooms, and musicians, actors and writers started to locate here - and painters like Arthur Lawrence with his family.

Artists and polite society were connected by a mutual love-hate relationship. Were the works of an artist sought after, he was invited to soirees and balls and got offered a regular seat at the theater or



Broadwick Street - after F. Calvert, ca. 1888

the opera. One boasted with his presence on social occasions and his flamboyant personality and prided oneself of enjoying his acquaintance. Therefore, an artist was easily forgiven his unconventional lifestyle and ignoring the subtleties of social rules; one even enjoyed the accounts of a bohemian lifestyle, the mere idea of it.

Nevertheless, artists were not fully accepted in polite society; hardly anybody of rank, with title and fortune, would have been enthusiastic if the son married an actress, the daughter a painter or poet.

The other way round, artists secretly despised polite society for bowing to conventions and derided the strait-laced customs and the stiff ceremony that determined their lives. The pride to live according to own rules melded with being envious of financial independence.

Nevertheless, artists could not afford to spoil things with affluent gentlemen and ladies. They were the ones who acquired paintings for their parlors, commissioned portraits and genre paintings and recommended the artist to their friends and relatives. They were the ones who bought and read writers' novels, invited musicians to perform in their elegant homes or attended performances at the theater.

As much leniency there might have been for the artists' eccentric way of life: some marks were not to be overstepped, like for instance touching the taboo of homosexuality. Likewise, artistic taste was subject to change: who was the darling of lords and ladies today, whose works were sold for record prices could already tomorrow fall into oblivion.



A Private View - W. P. Frith, 1883 (Detail)



Grosvenor Square

Just like Arthur Lawrence's star rose rapidly after his return from Greece and burned out as quickly when his creativity ran dry after Celia's death.

The polite society is the setting of Helena's second interlude in London, twelve years after the first one.

This time in the noble borough of Mayfair, in Ian's house at Grosvenor Square, one of the most exclusive addresses in London, even for high society standards. Whoever resided here already had the admission card to the most polite society in his hands.

Ian is a man of immense wealth, his demeanor and lifestyle no different from other rich and arrogant gentlemen residing in London or staying there during the social season.

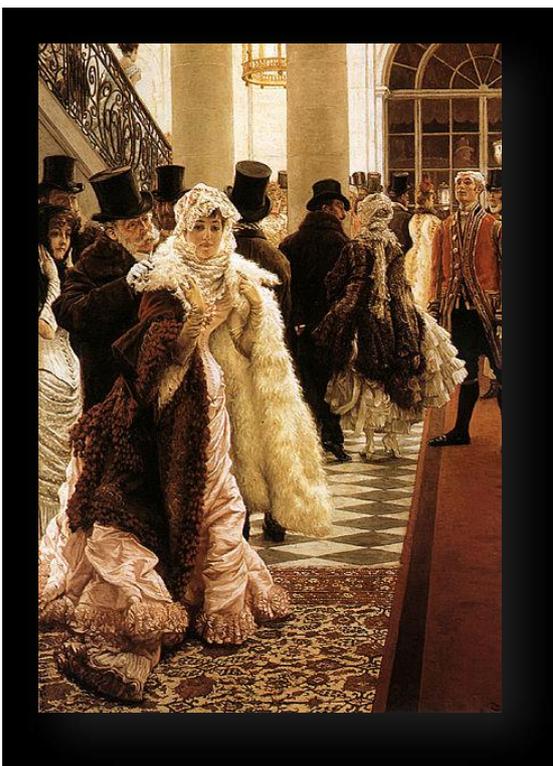
In polite society, there was one elementary rule: whoever was affluent, whoever looked and behaved like a gentleman simply had to be one.

London was the place to be, if only temporarily as in the case with the Claydons. The metropolis gave the note in politics and economy, culture and fashion; all the rest of England was province. To see and to be seen was the motto in London, and for this purpose, the calendar overflowed with mutual visits in the noble townhouses; with invitations to tea and dinner parties, performances at the opera and the theater.

Besides the actual social season lasting from Easter to August and including garden parties and picnics in addition to the vast multitude of balls, a smaller second season during the winter became established. But also in all other months, social life in London was busy.



Of course one indulged preferably in gossip: who with whom, who misbehaved on which occasion and even invoked a scandal or who had worn an unsuitable dress. The season gave ample opportunity for small flirts within the borders of decency and for finding a suitable husband for one's daughter. But there were also lots of occasions to cut unwelcome persons or to put them in their place with skillful (and more or less disguised) spiteful remarks, as demonstrated by Lady Irene at the Chestertons' dance.



Ian knows how to play with the gentlemen and the ladies; for Helena though, without any talent for disguise and deception, this dance meant running the gauntlet. Nobody ever taught her the elaborate and complicated dance steps of the Anglaise or the Quadrille, where dancers form complex patterns and frequently change partners.

Victorian boys and girls destined to be a part of the polite society learned these dances already at a young age, in dancing class – just like all the other subtleties of polished behavior: how to hand over and how to receive a calling card; the exact rules of paying and receiving visits during the day - and how much space had to remain between a gentleman and a lady in order to avoid speculations and compromising the lady concerned.

The morals were enforced by fathers and uncles, mothers and aunts, who not only had eyes everywhere but also their ears; therefore, the language of fans, developed in earlier centuries, remained up to date. Lady Irene quickly opening and snapping shut her fan may convey some kind of impatience with Helena, so much inferior in eloquence, or a secret message to Ian, referring to their last rendezvous: *You are cruel*.

Letters could fall too easily in wrong hands, and if there was the possibility of a confidential conversation, there was also the risk of being overheard, if only by vigilant domestic staff.

"Say it with flowers" – this expression originates in the Victorian era, when every kind of flower and every choice of color, their number and arrangement in a bouquet (or their depiction on stationery and greeting cards, their appearance in a poem) contained a certain symbolism, a hidden message.

A small sunflower meant adoration, a large one conceit. Daisies and white lilies stood for innocence, lobelias for malice and narcissi for egoism. Orange blossoms said *Your purity is as great as your loveliness*, and peach blossoms said *I am your prisoner*.

Who thought red roses too obvious for a declaration of love, chose red tulips instead; those in yellow though disclosed fruitless feelings, and rosebuds in white were reserved for very young girls that were not supposed to know anything about love yet.

One had to know every detail of this social code to avoid one of numerous pitfalls.

Glittering London with its fine web of unwritten rules was definitely no place for Helena.

Passage to India

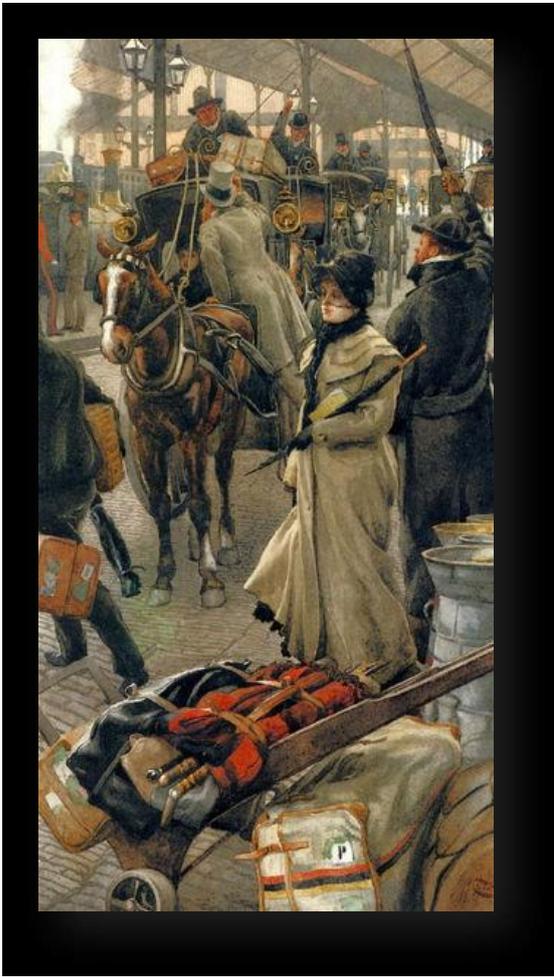
The nineteenth century was characterized by rapid technical progress, especially by the railway.

The steam engine was invented in the preceding century – but only its use for machines and locomotives brought an immense economic boom and an acceleration of everyday life into the Victorian era.

From the South to the North, from the West to the East, railway lines soon traversed Great Britain like a finely branched net of blood vessels and made the kingdom to one of Europe's countries with the highest density of railways. The corresponding train stations mushroomed; there were seven of them in London alone around 1850. Carriages were now only used for city traffic, since traveling by railway was not only faster but also more comfortable.

The steam engine also meant a revolution for overseas travel.

Although the technology of sailing vessels had reached an apogee around 1850 with the slender, streamlined and therefore extremely fast clipper, this type lacked in stowage; therefore, it was mostly used only for carrying mail or tea. Still famous are the clipper races where vessels competed for the fastest delivery of tea from China. For larger cargo or especially for the transport of passengers, this type of ship though was unsuitable. The more spacious *windjammer* took over.



Both types of sailing vessels proved to be much faster than steam-powered vessels when steam technology was still young. But steamers caught up after only a few years, although sailing vessels remained in use well into the twentieth century, just like hybrid ships with sails as well as a steam engine.

The big advantage of steamers was their independence from erratic winds; by that, the time needed for a passage could be calculated more accurately, thus enabling to compile a traveling schedule.

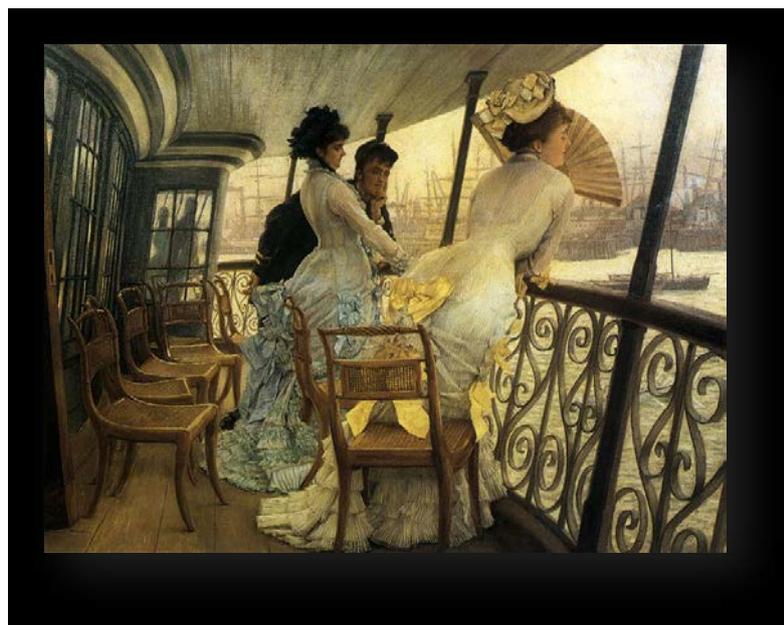
The regular shuttle service by sea was born.

Since India had become a colony of the British Empire, there was also an increase of maritime traffic between the motherland and the ports of Bombay and Calcutta. Not only for trade, though predominating. Soldiers were dispatched or came home on leave, just like officials, missionaries and civilians aiming at building a new existence in the foreign country. Finally their wives and children – and spinsters who had not found a man to marry at home and now counted on the lack of British women in India.

The voyage was tedious and cumbersome. While in the beginning vessels circumnavigated Africa, one soon changed over to the route across the Mediterranean Sea. In Alexandria, the passengers disembarked and traveled on ferryboats the Nile upwards, then with horse-drawn carriages first, later with the railway, to Port Suez, there boarding again a ship that conveyed them via the Red Sea to India. An Egyptian interlude that altogether took 88 hours in addition to the passage by ship.

For that reason, an ambitious project was undertaken that would shorten the route to India considerably: In Egypt, between Port Said at the Mediterranean and Suez at the Red Sea, a navigable canal was dug.

It took nearly eleven years until the Suez Canal was festively opened in November 1869 and cleared for navigation. Now a swift passage between both of the seas was possible, and India could be reached in shorter time – in the meantime having become a popular stopover for shipping companies dispatching their vessels to the Pacific coasts of South America and California or to Australia and New Zealand.





Port Said, Suez Canal, 1880

Bombay and Calcutta were the two main ports of British India. Bombay for those occupied in trade or who traveled further into the west of the subcontinent. And Calcutta for those serving in the Bengal Army or the administration and for those who wanted to continue their journey into India's north or east.

Although the destination of Ian and Helena actually was Darjeeling, located in the northeast and normally reached via Calcutta, they embarked in Bombay, in order to visit the Chands in Jaipur and afterwards Surya Mahal.

I would have loved them to stay longer in Bombay, loved to show more of this city in the novel. But exactly at that time, the British started to redesign the city.

Everything of today's colonial architecture was built from 1876 onwards, and as Bombay had always been oriented towards the functionality of trade, there is hardly any image material of the old Bombay. Not even informative travel accounts from that period, as Bombay used to have no points of touristic interest, only warehouses, business offices and port buildings.



Kalbadevie Road, Bombay, 1890

Ian is the epitome of the rich man of that period, making any kind of progress immediately his own. His wealth may seem fairytale-like from our point of view today but was far from unusual back then. The *nabob*, the Englishman lucky (or skilled) enough to amass immense wealth in India was a metaphor as well as an ideal in those days many soldiers of fortune tried to turn into reality.

Already during the eighteenth century the gap between rich and poor had widened; roughly one hundred years later, the gap had grown even more. The rich were very rich, the commoners well-off – and on the other side, there were the masses who had barely enough to keep body and soul together.

Even the few somewhere in between, with a decent income, lived in the constant fear of descending into poverty anytime.

If Ian's restlessness was an inherent trait or the result of his experiences in life (or both) – in any case, it was not an unusual characteristic in those days. Individually owned railway cars, connected to a locomotive rented from a private or state-run railway company, a ship of one's own – in those days, these were the splendid yachts and private jets of today.

Some of this kind of indulgence still lives on: the *Palace on Wheels*, the tourist attraction of sumptuous trains, demonstrates how luxuriously maharajas travelled through their country between the end of the nineteenth century and India's independence in 1947.

The British brought the railway to India, although the net of railway lines developed much more slowly on the subcontinent: it was not until 1853 that the first line between Bombay and Thana was opened for passengers, and in 1880, the whole length of tracks was only 14,500 kilometers – not much for a country as vast as India. But it was enough to travel the immense distances faster: I was astonished to learn during my research that the distance between Bombay and Jaipur could be traveled in only three days.

Jaipur was the final destination of the railway line in India's west; beyond, there was the vast expanse of Rajputana.



Jaipur, Main Road and Palace of Winds (Hawa Mahal), 1875

Rajputana: The fairytale land in the desert

Palaces, fortresses on the outside, shimmering splendor inside, with lush gardens in courtyards and secret passages in the rocks beneath.

Fairytale castles in midst the dust of the desert or reflecting in a lake. Temples and forts with patterns like lace, cut from pink sandstone.

Maharajas with proud moustaches and beards, clad in expensive robes, fingers adorned by heavy rings, a large diamond holding together the windings of the turban, who breed noble horses as a pastime. Women in colorful saris, the hands painted with elaborate designs in henna, the bracelets on their arms jingling, the eyes rimmed with khol and a sparkling jewel in the wing of the nose.

In between: hawkers and craftsmen, their carts almost falling apart, gaunt children, beggars and cheeky monkeys jumping around everywhere.

Carcasses bleached by the sun between sand and stones. Snake charmers and fakirs placing themselves with bare rear in a tub of glowing coals or swallowing shards of glass in exchange for a few rupees. Sadhus, their hair matted, their emaciated bodies daubed with ashes, frozen in yoga position like a statue.



Rajput Forts - M. North, 1878



Palast of Bejapore - after S. Prout, 1833

Images like this come to mind when one thinks of Rajputana, the largest part of what is today the Indian state of Rajasthan, in its size comparable to the extension of Germany. Seemingly overused clichés, circulating endlessly, surpassed only by the icon of the Taj Mahal.

Right?

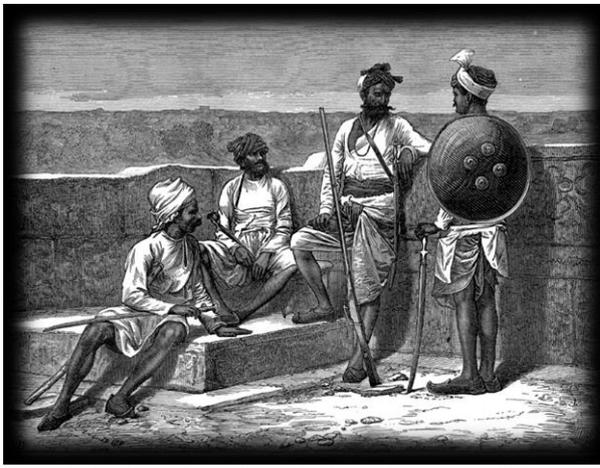
As soon as I started researching the material for *The Sky Above Darjeeling*, I was taught better.

These images reflect reality – in those days of Winston and Sitara, of Helena and Ian, and even well into our days, regardless that the maharajas have lost their political power,

their titles mere adornment, and their palaces turned into deluxe hotels for tourists.

Legendary splendor and enchanting beauty like right out of *One Thousand and One Nights* on one hand, inconceivable misery and need on the other – more than any other region, more than Bombay or Calcutta, Rajputana has shaped our notion of India.

Not by chance.



Rajput warriors - Illustrated London News, 1876

Archaeological excavations have proved that civilization on the subcontinent arrived first in Rajputana. Here the cradle of Indian culture stood, with a society gaining its livelihood from farming, using a plow, and having already an organized structure.

Although large areas of Rajputana consist of desert and steppe all year round, in other parts the monsoon makes two harvests a year possible, and besides large permanent lakes, subterranean water reservoirs exist.

Over the struggle for water and land, the fights for sovereignty against intruders, the leading social class of the Rajputs, the warriors, arose over the centuries and claimed authority.

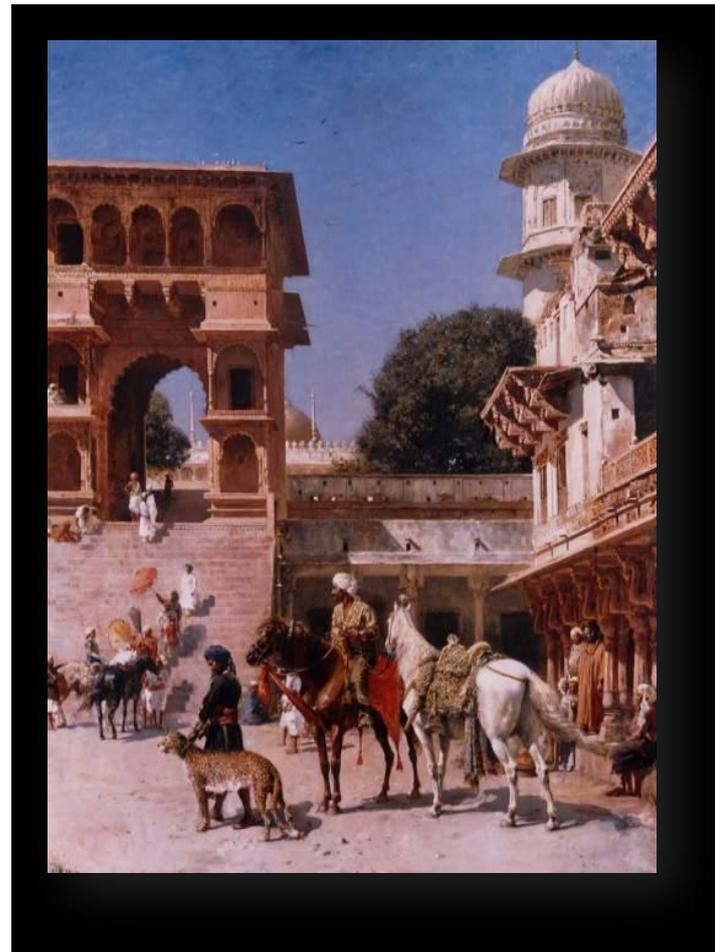
Constant attacks from the outside required the construction of fortresses strategically situated, enabling an entrenchment in times of war.

For the case of being besieged, there had to be enough water from below the earth, providing drinking water and irrigating the gardens within the walls. Also the tradition of secret passages underneath the fortresses originates from this period – although not intended for fleeing into safety; the strict Rajput code of honor demanded of men and women always to choose death over cowardice. Rather, these secret passages served for exploring the camp of the enemy or for a surprise attack.

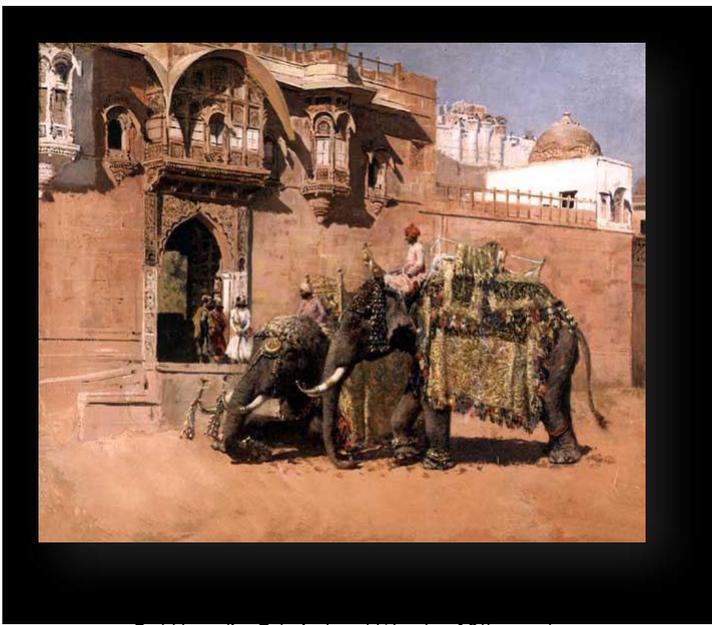
But also of their own volition the Rajputs started wars – in order to seize fertile land and ground rich in treasures like silver or tin and to capture gold, jewels and ivory.

In combination with the taxes levied from farmers and craftsmen, from merchants (who still remained wealthy enough to build themselves splendid houses, called *havelis*, resembling sumptuous forts), the Rajputs acquired fortunes over time. They enlarged their fortresses and sought to make their power visible by the greatest possible luxury: Rajputana became a fairytale land in the desert.

Not a peaceful land though. Fragmented into singular states ruled by *rajas*, *kings* or *princes*, or by *maharajas*, *great kings* or *great princes*, there was often war between these territories. And in a similar way the Rajputs disagreed in their relations to British colonial rule.



Departure For the Hunt – Edwin Lord Weeks, 19th century

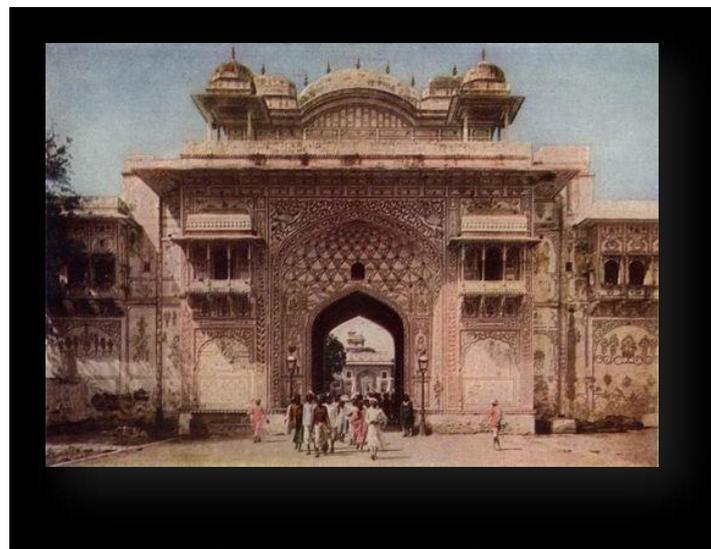


Pal Haveli – Edwin Lord Weeks, 19th century

Just like Surya Mahal kept to itself, neither resorting under British protection (and by that, conceding its independence) nor siding with the rebels during the Indian Mutiny of 1857.

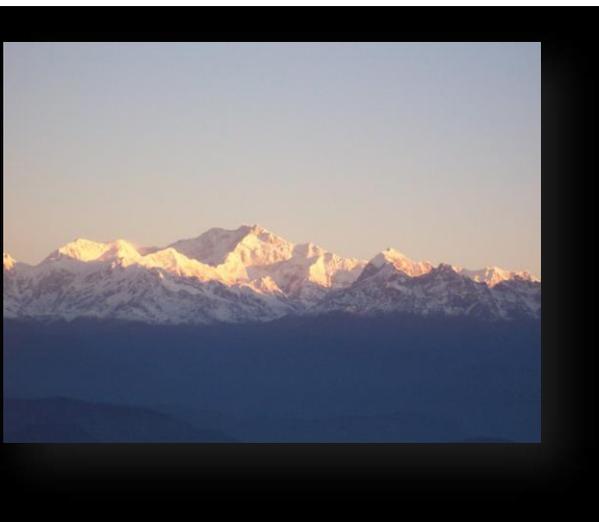
In the novel, Surya Mahal stands for the burden of the past Ian carries with him, for his origins, his heritage, but also for his roots in a positive sense. Partly fortress, partly palace, Surya Mahal is a crucial point for the characters' respective fates, often enough a turning point.

Here in Surya Mahal Helen succumbs to India's magic. Although it is only in fleeting visions that she is able to catch a notion of what had occurred here in the past.



City gate of Jaipur - National Geographic Magazine, 1917

Darjeeling: So close to the sky



Kanchenjunga and panorama of the Himalaya, as seen from Darjeeling

Writing a novel always resembles an adventurous journey. Starting point and the final destination I hope for are fixed quite early – but the route between these two points always comes with some unexpected detours and turns, and every time anew I have to embark on this journey in blind faith.

Nevertheless, writing a novel also needs a large amount of planning, and my favorite occupation in this phase of the process consists of developing my characters' biographies.

With *The Sky Above Darjeeling*, Ian's biography was of special importance, as it determined also the various locations of the storyline, and therefore my research.

From an early point on, I knew that Ian fulfilled his lifelong dream with establishing a tea plantation. But where exactly this plantation would be situated, of that I was unsure.

I felt attracted to the Blue Mountains of Nilgiri, and I liked the tea coming from there. I also thought of Assam or the Dooars. On the maps, I jumped from one place cultivating tea to the next. When I came across the valley of Kangra, I was enchanted by the descriptions of its beauty, by the images I saw; in any case, I would write about this spot.

But although Kangra is rich in orchards and fields, its tea is not considered above average quality. And Ian is not a man content with averages. In the end, there was only one tea region good enough for him: Darjeeling, where the best teas of the world come from.

Located in the district of West Bengal, at 2,000 meters altitude on average, Darjeeling is surrounded by the Sivalik Range, gentle foothills of the Himalaya.

The earliest past of Darjeeling is unknown; its recorded history starts in mid-seventeenth century, when it became a part of the Kingdom of Sikkim.

During the extension of Nepal's dominion towards the end of the eighteenth century, it also swallowed Darjeeling. In a war at the beginning of the nineteenth century, Britain allied with Sikkim and achieved the reversion of Darjeeling to Sikkim.

The borderland between these two realms did not experience any permanent peace though; to resolve these quarrels, two British officers were dispatched in order to mediate between Sikkim and Nepal.

The British were impressed of the landscape, of the agreeably cool climate and the pure air of Darjeeling, and right away, there were considerations to establish a sanatorium for British soldiers. Negotiations about the region of Darjeeling immediately started, and in 1835, the Raja of Sikkim finally consented to lease the territory to the East India Company for the sum of 3,000 rupees a year; an amount doubled later on.



Darjeeling, late 19th century



Toy Train of Darjeeling - W. H. Jackson, 1895

The arrest of two British officers shortly afterwards disturbed considerably the diplomatic relations between the two countries. The East India Company made the best of it: although the two officers were released unharmed, it ceased to pay the lease and simply annexed Darjeeling for the British Crown.

Around 1860, there was finally peace in Darjeeling. Roads were constructed, houses built, and the St. Paul's School was founded – where later on Jason would be one of the pupils. A complete – although only basic – infrastructure was established for soldiers in the need of some recovery, for their wives and children

following soon afterwards for a summer retreat far from the stifling climate of Calcutta. And of course for the tea planters settling here one after another.

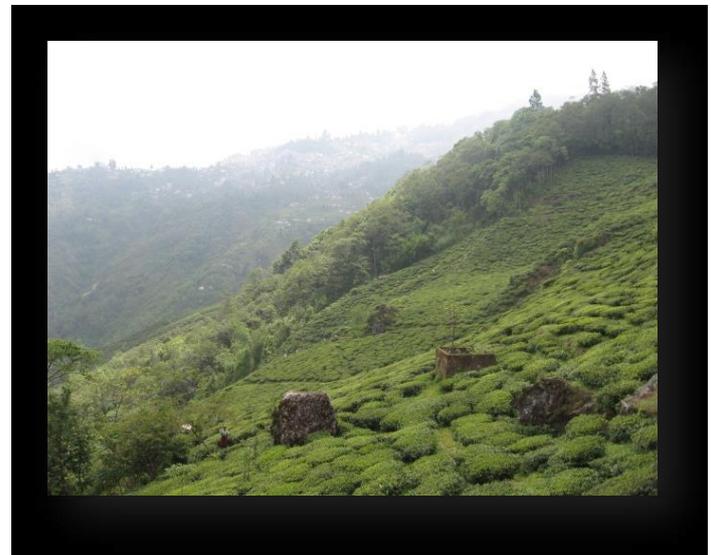
With them, the workers arrived, the craftsmen and traders, and Darjeeling grew: from hardly 100 inhabitants in 1835 to roughly 95,000 around 1871. In 1881, there was already a population of more than 155,000 - Bengals, Nepalese, Tibetans, Chinese, British.

The same year, the railway line between Siliguri and Darjeeling was opened, due to its narrow gauge and the small trains affectionately called *Toy Train*, running in hazardous curves along steep slopes and across deep ravines. By this new means of transport, Darjeeling gained even more popularity.

When Helena arrives there, Darjeeling still is a tranquil town though, and Ian even remembers its beginnings, when he came here to create the plantation out of the rainforest.

The name Shikhara originates from my imagination. Like many words from Hindustani or Sanskrit, I intended the name of the plantation to have a deeper meaning.

In this case, the name is derived from *shikara*, the architectural style of temples in northern India, including Kangra, as well as a play on words with *shikar* / *shikari*, hunter and hunt, and an echo of Sitara, uniting all major motifs of the novel: faith and fate, the past and the hunt for revenge.

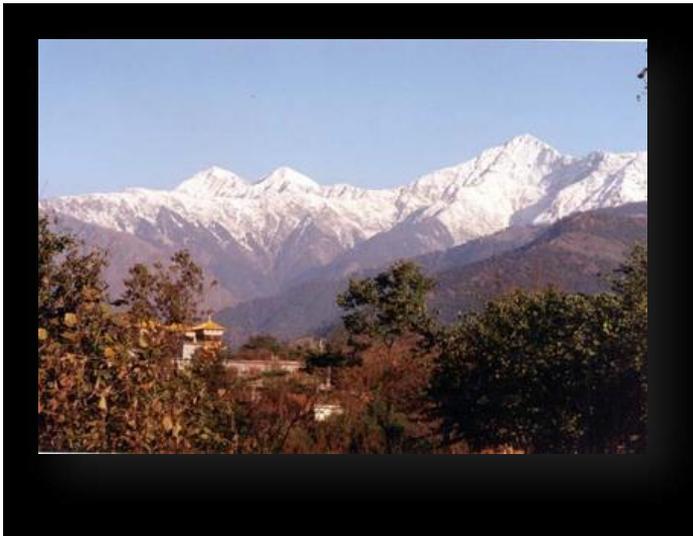


I am convinced that it was not me choosing Darjeeling for Ian – he chose this place for himself: Darjeeling that resembles the valley of his childhood without appearing the same and being a contrast to Rajputana in addition.

Although the past had still a hold on him and his inheritance laid the foundation for the plantation, like a compensation for the deeds of Dheeraj Chand that had such far-reaching consequences: Ian created Shikhara with his own hands. This plantation was his, and his alone, and his attempt to start a new life.

A life that belonged only to him alone.

Kangra: The hidden paradise



Kangra and the Dhauladhar range

It is said that Kangra is one of the most beautiful mountain valleys in the world and the most beautiful valley of the Himalaya.

But the fame of its beauty does not reach far: except from hardcore trekking fans traveling this region, located in the present day Indian state of Himachal Pradesh, almost no one has even heard of Kangra – much less knows that Kangra belongs to a district administrated by Dharamsala, where the Dalai Lama and his supporters found their refuge.

Kangra was also a refuge for Winston, Sitara and Mohan Tajid; here their escape from the soldiers of the raja, seeking to wipe out the disgrace the love between Winston and Sitara meant for clan and caste, found a temporary end.

The valley promised safety and peace, apparently situated far enough out of the raja's reach; although soon in British possession, there were no plans to deploy military troops there.

A place to start a new life and raise children – a paradise as hidden as protected.

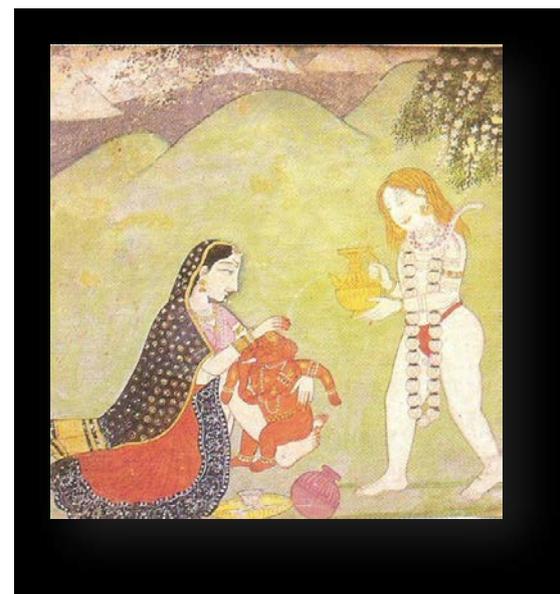
But Kangra knew also other and by far more turbulent times.

We do not know when humans first settled there or how they lived, although the first recorded legends date 3,500 years back.

Once, Kangra belonged to the Trigarta Kingdom, stretching from the mountains of Dhauladhar towards the south and the west, down to Punjab. Trigarta is mentioned for the first time in the Indian epic Mahabharata, one of the oldest heroic poems in history, written down between 400 BC and 400 AC, though originating in a considerably older oral tradition. Rajputs of Chandravanshi ancestry ruled over Trigarta, founded a city and built fortresses, the massive fort of Nagarkot among them.

Kangra was never isolated; its history tells of active contacts with the rest of the world: by trade with mainly Ladakh and Punjab, by pilgrimages and political change.

Again and again, Kangra was attacked, and there were riots and



Shiva and Parvati giving Ganesha a bath
Miniature from Kangra, 18th century



Temples built in shikhara style - Th. Daniell, 1795

uprisings. Mahmud of Ghazni invaded Kangra around 1000, ravaged the Rajput fortress and even looted an immense treasure from a temple. In 1360, Kangra was raided again, before it became subject of Mughal rule the mid-sixteenth century. In 1809, Kangra submitted to the Sikhs until becoming a part of British India in 1846.

Regardless of war and various rulers, art and culture flourished in Kangra to the same extent as its orchards and fields. As if in such an enchanting place the beauty of the surroundings has to reflect in a special human sense of beauty.

In all of India, Kangra was famous for miniature paintings. Originally a form of art practiced by Rajputs as well as Mughals, the valley of Kangra developed a unique style: miniatures of scenes from the Hindu pantheon – just like those Ian, as a boy, found among the ruins of a palace.

In Kangra, palaces were built in a style called *shikara*: slender and tapered cupolas, adorned with reliefs. Similar sacral buildings can be found throughout India's north along the Himalaya; the Nepalese stupa is a variation. In Kangra though there evolved a unique style for these temples; the name Shikhara for Ian's plantation was to be reminiscence to these buildings familiar to him as a boy.

Often the valley of Kangra is described as particularly feminine, due to its gentle, picturesque and fertile landscape. Indeed the local society has always been shaped by its women, linked by a special bond transgressing even the castes of Hinduism.

The women of Kangra spend considerable time together, and contrary to their peers in almost all of India, for them there never existed something like the *purdah*, the custom of banning women from public. This community of women even has its own term: *janasan di biradari*, which means *sisterhood of all women*.

To marriage and motherhood, there are no alternatives for Kangri women: they are an expression of nature's determination.

The wellbeing of the family is fully in women's hands, and for this wellbeing, they do not only take care of the children, their houses and fields but also ask the gods for blessings in favor of men, home, and children with rituals and prayers all year round. Like during the Gangaur festival that also exists in Nepal and Rajasthan: women clad in their red wedding saris and adorned with all their jewelry, the hands decorated with henna paintings, dance, sing and pray for three days, presenting offerings to Shiva and his consort Parvati.

Contrary to the Hindu lunar calendar predetermining the exact day for every ritual, such strict rules barely exist in Kangra. And whenever possible – when cultivating the fields, when sewing or doing the laundry,

while cooking - the women gather to sing traditional folk songs or to tell each other fairytales and legends from the rich treasures of their heritage.

Like the tale of the lion and the king's daughter – indeed a part of Kangra's oral tradition, it is retold in the novel by Mira Devi.

Mira Devi is also the epitome of the female heritage of Kangra's society; traditions Sitara voluntarily adopted in order to find there a new home, a new identity as a mother and wife. Mira Devi's husband though - remaining unnamed within the novel - is the epitome of Kangra's masculine world: head of family and breadwinner, but staying quietly in the background.



Bridge leading to Kangra - S. Bourne ca. 1860

Here in Kangra Ian was born, here he spent the first twelve years of his life.

I would have preferred to concede to him and his family more of this undisturbed peace in this small and idyllic world.

But time never stops, nowhere, and at some point, even the past one has so far managed to escape reaches out again. Just like it happened to Ian's family.

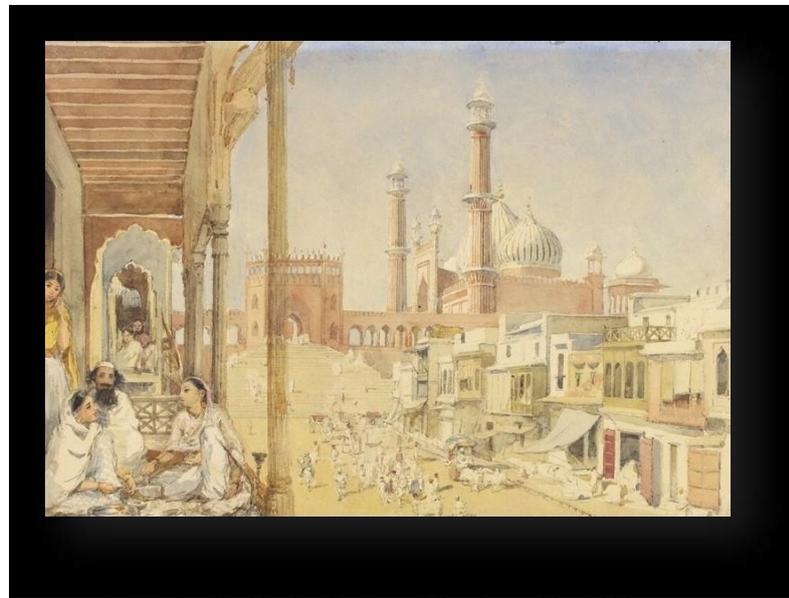
A similar fate befell the valley of Kangra itself: on April 4th, 1905 an earthquake of magnitude 7.8 shook the valley and its surroundings. Nearly 20,000 people were killed, several thousand injured.

Many temples and palaces crumbled to rubble and dust – among them the palace where in the novel Ian was born.

Delhi: The heart of India

One cannot write a novel set against the backdrop of the Indian Mutiny – if only in parts – without writing about Delhi.

Delhi, today the capital of India, is actually New Delhi. The Delhi of 1857 was Old Delhi, the former Shahjahanabad, shaped by Mughal culture and its grand architecture.



Inside the Red Fort with view of the Jama Masjid Mosque
W. Carpenter, 1852

Here the rebellion had its center, and although Cawnpore and Lucknow have always been symbols for the cruelty of this revolt, the decisive events took place in Delhi.

Whoever held Delhi, held the power – and for Delhi and this power the British and the rebels wrestled for months, making the city to the most important theater in this war.

To Delhi the rebels charged after they had torched the garrison of Meerut, after they had butchered British families there. Here they continued their misdeeds, and in the streets of Delhi, this seed fell on fertile ground.

Already for some time, things had festered in India; one was dissatisfied with British dominion and longed for an end of colonial rule. And from Delhi, the rebellion spread in other regions of India.

Delhi became the catalyst for a conflict that had been smoldering for some time.

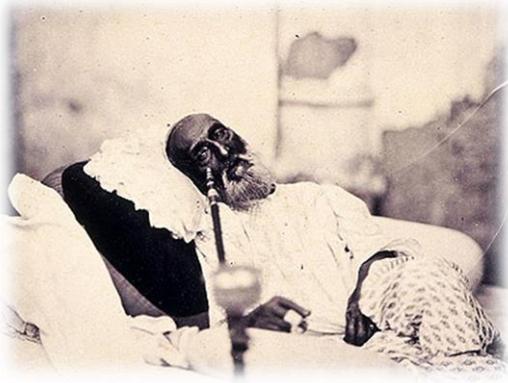
In peace and war, the center of Delhi was the Red Fort, seat of Bahadur Shah, the last Mughal emperor of India.



The rebellion in Delhi – Newspaper illustration, 1857

Right after the Taj Mahal, the Red Fort is probably the most splendid and greatest building Mughal rulers erected on Indian soil. From north to south it stretches for one kilometer, from east to west for half a kilometer. The impressive walls from red sandstone range in height from 18 to 34 meters. In the old days, they used to house a city within the city, with several palaces and a mosque, workshops for paper, fabrics, swords, perfume and handicrafts. With magnificent halls and chambers, gardens with water basins carved from marble, with gildings and colorful inlaid work.

In this enormous fortress the mutineering sepoys remained entrenched, hoping to be able to seize power over India.



Bahadur Shah in 1858, after his trial in Delhi and before being exiled to Rangoon

Therefore, the Red Fort is a location of historical importance; it is not for nothing that Indian troops here still hold a parade and a silent vigil to remind of the anniversary of India's independence in 1947.

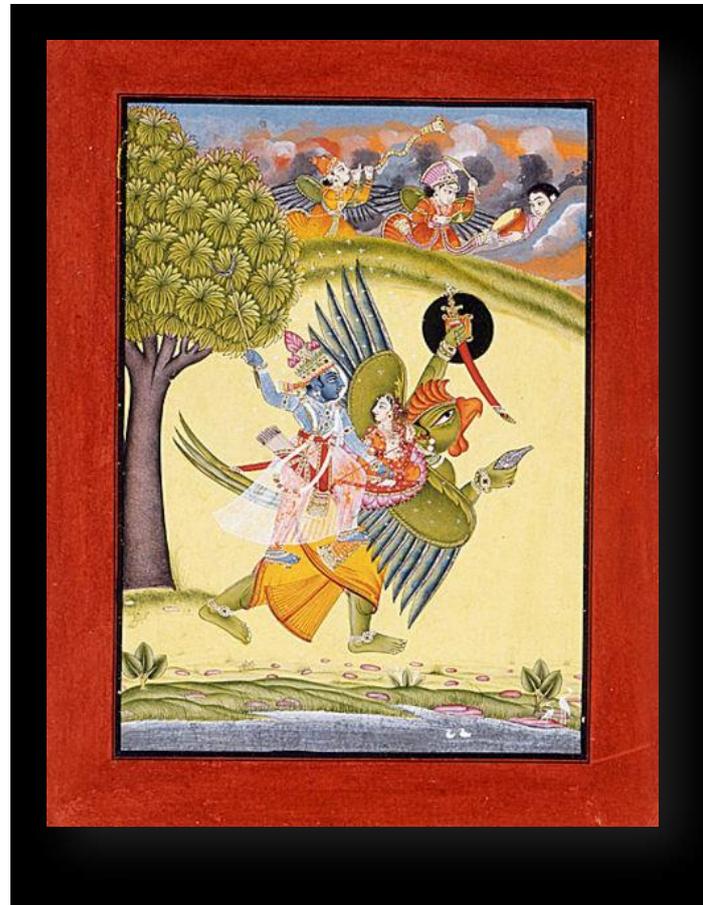
The events revolving around Winston and Sitara, Mohan Tajid, Ian and Emily occurred at a more modest spot – in the ordinary streets of Delhi.

Delhi marks two turning points in the novel. At first immediately after the escape from Surya Mahal, when their attempt to go into hiding fails. Without the events of Delhi in 1844, they would have never gotten to Kangra – and for certain, Ian's life would have taken a completely different course.

But only their second stay in the old Mughal city was the decisive one – when they were outrun by the past. When they literally had to face this past in the shape of the disfigured features of Babu Sa'id – with fatal consequences.

The tragedy of Winston's, of Mohan Tajid's family was intrinsically not related to the historical event of the Sepoy Rebellion.

Nevertheless, the drama Winston and Sitara had invoked with their relationship pulled them into this maelstrom of violence, where Indians and Europeans fought against each other.



Vishnu und Lakshmi on Garuda's back
Painting from Rajputana, ca. 1730

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