

# Review of *The Frontier in British India: Space, Science, and Power in the Nineteenth Century* by Thomas Simpson

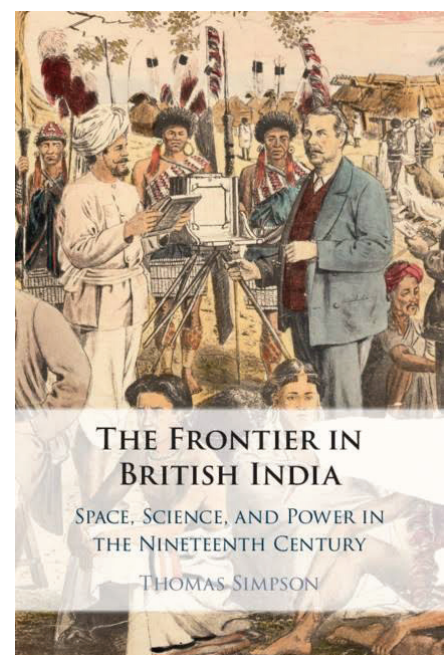
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Thomas Simpson. *The Frontier in British India: Space, Science, and Power in the Nineteenth Century*. 2021. Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, New Delhi & Singapore. Cambridge University Press. 350 pp., €87.23 (Hardback). ISBN: 978-1-108-84019-4

**Keywords:** British, India, Nineteenth Century, Darrang, Naga, Balochistan

It is often difficult to comprehend the peripheries of British India in the nineteenth century with its changing boundaries through various form of entanglements and the scale of the mountainous landscape that is peopled with numerous communities with their own internal structures, cultures and histories. *The Frontier in British India* brings together the regions – the north-western and north-eastern frontiers, which are at the longitudinal ends of the Indian subcontinent which share similarities and sometimes differences through the colonial state’s efforts in territorial expansion and control.

Through an extensive dive into the colonial archives, Simpson stitches together the intricate and often overlapping workings of the officials at the frontiers to present the complicated history of colonial expansion and rule in the two regions. Divided into five chapters that delineate five modes, often intricately entwined, through which the colonial state makes inroads at the frontiers, Simpson explores the concept of “colonial exceptionalism” in these regions and the personalities that encouraged this.



The first chapter recounts the performance of border making at the frontiers and dismantles the idea of a clearly delineated space. Looking at three distinction periods of colonial rule, it draws out a number of complexities. The first period, covering the 1820s and 1830s, looks at how the state tried to bring communities in Assam, which were beyond their legitimate control, into the empire through reform of the *posa* system (an economic arrangement to discourage raiding in the plains) and their attempts to control border transgressions in Punjab. The second period between 1860s and 1870s was marked by acts of “official subversion” by the colonial officials, whereby frontier officials frequently superseded their formal remit and broke boundaries as much as making them, which the author describes as varying between “vexation, acquiescence, and explicit approval” (p. 24). These subversive tactics performed in the Naga Hills District, boundaries of Balochistan in the north-west and Darrang district of northern Assam were marred with violence, confusion and point to the role of the colonial official “on the spot” and their persistent attempts to overstep their functions and jurisdiction, which ultimately favoured colonial expansion as it conveyed the idea of an unstable frontier and the significance of the official’s presence in the region. The third period between 1890s and 1910 brings our attention to international border making and highlights the creation of the Durand and MacMahon lines which delimited Afghanistan and Tibet respectfully from British territories and the border in the Chin-Lushai Hills in the north-eastern frontier. Taking advantage of violence between communities at the borders and construing an existential threat to the empire, colonial officials were able to carve out an international border that was fragmented and beset with tensions.

The second chapter shows the advent of colonial spatial science through surveying and map making. It focuses on the point that British frontier maps were “imperfect, contestable and certainly not iron foundations of colonial power” (p. 71). Simpson develops Mathew Edney’s concept of ‘cartographic anarchy’, which describes the chaos and heterogeneity of surveying in British India, by revealing that instead of trying to push for the ‘perfect geographic panopticon,’ the surveyors and the administrators at the frontiers were quite vocal in their official correspondences and made public in books, periodicals, newspapers, and the meetings and journals of learned societies, especially the Royal Geographical Society about their reservations of the information they produced. Beginning with route surveys at the fringes till the 1840s that followed the logic of expansion and annexation, this undertaking was mired with problems of fallible instruments and lack of coordination among the different colonial institutions that resulted in different forms of survey data. Through a case study of the Great Indus Series in the 1850s by Andrew Waugh as the survey general and John Walker as lead surveyor, this phase of surveying marked a realisation in the upper echelons of colonial surveying “that the map - and even the raw observational data that undergirded map-images - was not, nor could ever aspire to be, the territory” (p. 88). Parallel to this was the significant technological advancement such as colour lithography and photozincography in the production of the survey maps which centralised the question of maps as material objects and its dissemination in the 1860s. In the attempt to cater to the growing fascination among the agents of empire and various publics in colony, metropole, and beyond, the Survey of India published maps that incorporated the frontier spaces into new and existing map series. Although giving an impression of order, the information drew on numerous sources, combined various survey techniques and levels of details. The processes and publications of maps alludes not only to the quantity of representation but also their frequent incompatibility and this, according to Simpson, illustrates the insurmountability of India’s frontiers “within unitary and rigid modes of cartographic depiction” (p. 95). In the following decade, with the intensification of colonial advancement, surveying the frontiers was supported by a wider network of military escorts, support from the local administration, informants and labourers in the effort to collect ‘accurate’ data. This new phase also vocalizes the anxiety of the frontiers through the surveyors’ narratives that describe their own heroism and also call for an embodied experience of frontiers that remain unknowable. This chapter highlights that surveying and representations of spatial knowledge at the close of the nineteenth century was incomplete and unreliable as opposed to the impression of order and scope.

The third chapter explores the frameworks that structures the colonial understanding of the people who lived and moved at the outskirts of state space. Meandering through the various locales of the frontier, from the Naga Hills to Balochistan, Simpson compiles the works of various colonial admin-ethnographers and

soldier-ethnographers dispersed through various publications either as monographs or articles in the *Asiatic Journal* from the 1820s onward. Such publications operated with a host of models varying from biblical or pre-sanskritic and ancient historical origins of the inhabitants which lead to idea of the of 'mountain tribes' in northern Assam and aboriginal remnants in the Punjab Frontiers, thus proving and maintaining their apparent differences from 'settled' agrarian populations in the plains.. Simultaneous to this were the development of representational forms of ethnographic knowledge from sketches to photographs in the field that embedded certain characteristics that were deemed 'essential' to frontier tribes. Examining the various people and developments through gathering information about the frontier reveal the growing interest in this region by linguists and ethnographers, all of whom contributed to the attempts to explore and control this region but also resulted in very unstable and contested ethnographic knowledge.

The fourth and fifth chapters seek to address the entanglement of violence and administrative practices in the frontier regions. Simpson looks at instances of violent acts against the Bugtis in the Upper Sind region, the Angamis of the Naga Hills and expedition in the Black mountain region in Punjab, which sees the evolution of colonial violence in frontier communities and eventually leads to growing doubts among the colonial officials over the efficacy of such violence. Focusing on military ventures targeting frontier communities, violence towards these communities was justified as reactionary and educative. Violence paved the way to establish any form of administration and Simpson works with the Benjamin Hopkins's concept of 'frontier governmentality' – "which describes state interventions that acted upon populations while keeping them outside forms of administration practiced elsewhere in British India" (p. 225 from Marsden and Hopkins 2011) - to identify the nature of administration and the peculiarities it adapted. Simpson examines two periods where two distinct types of administrative measures were "premised on subtly different logics" by looking into the displacement of communities in Upper Sind and Assam and their relocation in colonies from mid-nineteenth century. Secondly, after the 1860s the colonial state, in an effort to overcome the anxieties of the Rebellion of 1857, made Balochistan and the Naga Hills locales of administrative experiments to formalize control over these regions. However, such attempts failed to create uniform bureaucratic government but rather produced a highly fragmented region with varying administrative practices that privileged the colonial official 'on the spot' with discretionary power and control.

Simpson provides a commanding account of colonial power and knowledge production through a thematic approach and factors in a wide scope and is encyclopaedic in detail. *The Frontier in British India* provides a much needed in depth analysis of the connections and entanglements between the frontiers that occurs through the 'men on the spot' and their actions that shaped these regions. A captivating example of this is the use of the word 'khel' originating from the north-west which alluded to the Pashtun sub-tribes and was first applied to Angami-Naga clans in John Butler's tour diary in 1870. Butler had borrowed this term from his experience in the Punjab frontier and eventually by the late nineteenth century the term transformed into a central feature of Naga social organisation (p. 150-151, p.177).

The map of the two frontier regions provided early in the book becomes a handy tool to anchor the reader through the various case studies that are spread through each chapter highlighting the various colonial actions at localised levels by different colonial agents and shifting focus from one valley or hill region to the next that are populated by different communities. The reception of the colonial policies barring the violent reactions by the local population and the role of local intermediaries that facilitated access into the region is a theme that is perhaps beyond the scope of this book. However, by focusing on the trajectories of the agents of empire, who saw the frontier as a 'resource' and saw opportunity in creating chaos, Simpson traces out, in great detail, the history of colonial rule in the North west and North eastern frontiers of British India and develops a convincing argument about the nature of colonial power in the frontiers being "fragmented and fractious".

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