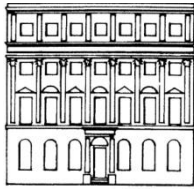


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*Staging Empire: New Perspectives on the 1911 Coronation Durbar and
Imperial Assemblage*

Conference Report

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Staging Empire: New Perspectives on the 1911 Coronation Durbar and Imperial Assemblage. International Conference of the Department of History, Manchester Metropolitan University and the German Historical Institute London, held at Manchester Metropolitan University, 15–16 Sept. 2011. Conveners: Tilman Frasch (Manchester Metropolitan University) and Andreas Gestrich (German Historical Institute London).

In December 1911, King George became the only English ruler to be crowned Emperor of India in India itself. Following the style of previous Imperial Assemblages (1877, 1903), a vast area was laid out on the outskirts of Delhi where the event was staged. More than the previous assemblages or durbars, the Imperial Assemblage of 1911 was a medialized event. Newspapers around the world had sent their reporters to Delhi, and officially appointed photographers from the royal entourage produced images, as did the teams of at least eight film companies which recorded proceedings and began screening their films in Indian cinemas almost immediately after the event.

If older research on the 1911 Coronation Durbar focused on its significance for the history of India and the structure of the empire, more recent studies have addressed individual aspects such as film coverage or music, with the main focus on forms and media of interaction within the Empire and among imperial subjects around the world, while the impact of the durbar on India itself has been neglected. The conference therefore integrated various strands of research in analysing the durbar as one of the Empire's most medialized events.

After welcome addresses by Martin Hewitt, Head of MMU's History Department, and Andreas Gestrich, Director of the GHIL, John MacKenzie (Lancaster) delivered the first of two keynote lectures. In his lively and spirited presentation, MacKenzie emphasized the continuing importance of the Empire as a focus of historical research, and dealt with different perceptions of the durbar as an imperial event. Drawing on a broad range of examples and sources, he stressed the various forms of public engagement with the durbar (and, by implication, with India and the Empire). The durbar, he concluded,

The full conference programme can be found on the GHIL's website <www.ghil.ac.uk> under Events and Conferences.

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was an outstanding example to show how deeply embedded the Empire was in public perceptions.

The first panel of the day, chaired by Martin Hewitt (Manchester Metropolitan University), had ritual as a common theme. Alan Trevithick (Fordham University) dealt with ritual and its theoretical analysis, raising the question of discourse and perspective in ritual. Charles V. Reed (Elizabeth City State University) placed the *darbar* against the backdrop of royal tours to India and across the Empire and highlighted their part in the making of a British imperial culture.

Andreas Gestrich (GHIL) chaired the second panel, which examined images of the *darbar*. Annamaria Motrescu (Cambridge University) used amateur photographs and films to raise crucial theoretical questions such as the relationship between reality and the picture taken by the camera. In her analysis of images, she reflected on the effect of perspective and the creation of an imaginary cartography which became part of the official nostalgia. Unfortunately, Stephen Bottomore's (Bangkok) presentation on imperialism and the early cinema had to be cancelled.

The third panel, chaired by Margret Frenz (Leicester University), investigated symbols of the *darbar*. Stephen Patterson (Royal Collection) presented some of the symbols of royalty connected with the *darbar*, such as clothes, gems, and jewellery from the Royal Collection. He also drew attention to the afterlife of the objects, as some went on permanent display while others were re-worked for use on later occasions. The closing contribution of the first day, by Joachim K. Bautze (Berlin), explored the forms and functions of *darbars* in Indian history and culture. Presenting a wide range of visual sources, Bautze discussed instances in which the Imperial *Darbar* of 1911 not only deviated from its Indian protocol, but was less successful than its 1903 precursor. Bautze concluded that from an Indian point of view, the *darbar* as a political ceremony failed to impress the Indian audience.

Bernard Porter (Newcastle) gave the keynote lecture of the second day, chaired by Burjor Avari (Manchester Metropolitan University). Porter agreed with MacKenzie on the continuing importance of the Empire and the need to research it empirically, but also pointed to the danger of emphasizing the imperial imagination, largely because of the amount of evidence in this domain. Research is equally challenged by the problem of defining the term 'empire' itself, he sug-

gested, as the scope and contexts of sources need to be carefully examined. Referring to cases such as autobiographies by working-class authors in which the Empire or even migration are hardly ever mentioned, Porter ultimately defended his view that the 'Empire out there' could be run without anyone knowing it.

The fourth panel, chaired by Joachim K. Bautze (Berlin), focused on two often underestimated aspects of the durbar. Seán Lang (Anglia Ruskin University) offered interesting insights into Queen Mary's view of the durbar and her travels in India based on her scrapbooks. She can be considered the most overlooked figure of the durbar, and her scrapbooks not only provide a glimpse behind the scenes, but also indicate how the roles were divided between herself and the king. Nalini Ghuman's (Mills College) presentation added another dimension to the medialization of the durbar, in this case by way of Elgar's operatic *Crown of India*. In her multi-layered analysis of the 'March of the Maharajas', Ghuman exposed Elgar's sources and the 'Orientalist' notions that informed the composition, and ultimately discussed the place of the piece in Elgar's oeuvre.

Anindita Ghosh (Manchester University) chaired the fifth panel, which dealt with the repercussions and sedimentations of the durbar in different media and on the ground. Chandrika Kaul (University of St Andrews) argued that the durbar as a media event must be seen against the backdrop of political developments in Europe, and that it mainly aimed to address a British and European public. The durbar, moreover, was a message to British India that the Raj was still intact. Tilman Frasch (Manchester Metropolitan University) examined various media through which people could participate in or consume the durbar globally. One example he cited was postcards written by spectators and used to send private messages and greetings, a form of social networking that bears resemblance to the use of Twitter today. Minoti Chakravarty-Kaul (Lady Shri Ram College, University of Delhi) then looked at the physical space of the durbar, which cannot be separated from the construction of New Delhi and had a huge impact on the livelihood of Delhi's village communities. She pointed out that the requisition of land that began with the durbar and continues to the present day has almost destroyed the traditional way of life and that it has also impacted on other communities, for instance, in the Punjab.

In his concluding remarks, Christoph Cornelißen (Düsseldorf University) put the durbar in a comparative perspective, linking it as a

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public celebration with other forms of a politics of performance in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Like the celebrations of the Emperor's birthday in Germany, these events were part of a social imperialism designed to reshape various forms of public space, making them a crucial part of national integration and confidence-building. Externally, these political performances at the same time served as significant tools in the power contest between states in those days. In order to understand the importance of these events it is important to use as many sources as possible, as the conference attempted to do. But the problem of measuring their resonance still remains. He suggested that a transnational perspective would provide new insights, for instance, by showing how German newspapers reported the durbar.

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