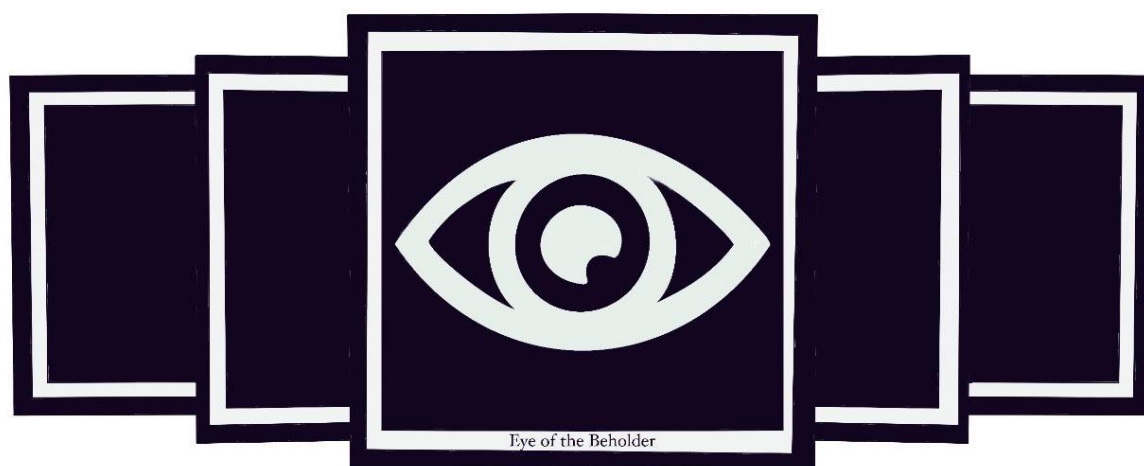




THE EYE OF THE BEHOLDER

SLEEMAN, Sir William Henry

A Journey Through the Kingdom of Oude, in 1849–1850

London: Richard Bentley, 1858. First edition. Two volumes.

Two volumes, octavo. Contemporary mid-nineteenth-century half leather over marbled boards, spines divided by raised bands and gilt rules, gilt-lettered title and volume labels; marbled edges. With the original large folding “Map of the Kingdom of Oude” in Volume I. Complete text in both volumes. Some rubbing and surface wear to the bindings, particularly at extremities and corners, consistent with age and use; bindings nevertheless firm and sound. Internally generally clean, with occasional spotting and toning. Folding map well preserved.

An important first-hand account of the kingdom of Oudh on the eve of its annexation by the East India Company, written by one of the most experienced British administrators in nineteenth-century India.

Sir William Henry Sleeman’s *A Journey Through the Kingdom of Oude* occupies an unusual position among nineteenth-century accounts of India. It is simultaneously a travel narrative, an administrative survey, a political document and a remarkably detailed portrait of a kingdom only a few years before its disappearance as an independent princely state.

Sleeman travelled through Oudh — the region centred upon Lucknow and corresponding broadly with parts of modern Uttar Pradesh — in 1849 and 1850 while serving as British Resident at the court of its ruler, Wajid Ali Shah. The journey was undertaken at the direction of James Andrew Broun-Ramsay, Earl of Dalhousie, then

Governor-General of India, at a time when the future of Oudh had become one of the most contentious questions in British Indian policy.

The resulting work was published posthumously in London by Richard Bentley in 1858, only two years after Oudh was annexed and in the immediate aftermath of the great uprising of 1857. That chronology gives the book an importance extending well beyond ordinary travel literature.

The Kingdom of Oudh

Oudh had long been one of northern India's wealthiest and most culturally distinguished regions. Under its nawabs it developed a sophisticated court culture centred on Lucknow, celebrated for poetry, music, architecture, cuisine, textiles and the decorative arts.

By the nineteenth century, however, the kingdom had entered into an increasingly unequal political relationship with the East India Company. British troops were maintained within its territory; British Residents exercised growing influence at court; and successive governors-general complained of maladministration, fiscal disorder and the power of large landed interests.

For Dalhousie, who pursued an assertive policy of territorial expansion, the condition of Oudh posed both an administrative and political question: should the British government continue to rule indirectly through the nawab, impose structural reform, or assume direct control?

Sleeman was sent into the countryside partly to answer that question.

Sleeman the Observer

William Henry Sleeman was unusually well suited to such an assignment.

Born in Cornwall in 1788, he entered East India Company service as a young man and spent almost his entire professional life in India. He became famous above all for his role in the British campaign against organised bands described by colonial authorities as "Thugs," and his name became permanently associated with the suppression of so-called Thuggee.

Yet Sleeman's career was considerably broader than that episode suggests. He was an administrator, political officer and close observer of rural society. He possessed an intense interest in landholding, agriculture, criminal networks, caste, local custom, military organisation and the mechanisms through which political power functioned outside formal institutions.

By the time he became Resident at Lucknow, he had accumulated approximately four decades of experience in India.

The first volume of the present work opens appropriately with a biographical sketch of Sleeman before turning to correspondence preceding the journey and then to the journey itself. The structure emphasises that this was not simply a personal excursion but an official investigation embedded within larger questions of governance. The published work then continues through the geography and administration of the kingdom before concluding with extensive private correspondence concerning its political future. The first volume contains 337 pages of main text, while the second extends to 424 pages.

A Journey Through a Kingdom

Sleeman travelled district by district through Oudh, recording what he saw and what was reported to him.

His account moves through towns, villages, estates, rivers and cultivated landscapes. He describes landholders and revenue farmers, local chiefs and officials, soldiers, peasants and retainers. He discusses taxation, cultivation, crime, debt, armed conflict, hereditary privilege and the relationship between rural magnates and the royal government.

Names familiar from the geography of nineteenth-century north India recur throughout the work: Lucknow, Fyzabad, Sultanpur, Rae Bareilly and numerous smaller settlements and estates.

The book therefore preserves something increasingly valuable: a granular record of Oudh immediately before one of the greatest political ruptures in its history.

Volume I concentrates substantially upon the opening stages of Sleeman's journey and includes private correspondence preceding it; Volume II continues the tour and eventually turns to correspondence concerning the proposed annexation of Oudh. Your copy retains this complete two-volume structure.

Sleeman's observations are often intensely detailed. He comments on the fertility of particular districts, the character of land tenure, relations between landlords and cultivators, local military forces, the behaviour of officials and the violent disputes that could arise among powerful families.

To the modern reader these descriptions are valuable not only for what they record but for what they reveal about the colonial administrative mind. Sleeman was attempting to transform a complex society into information comprehensible to government: villages into statistics, political relationships into administrative categories, and human conflict into evidence for reform.

His account must therefore be read critically. It represents, unmistakably, a British colonial perspective, and its language and assumptions reflect the political world from which it emerged. That very limitation, however, is part of its historical significance. As a

contemporary source, it documents the reasoning through which British administrators increasingly justified intervention in Indian states.

Sleeman and the Annexation Question

The most interesting aspect of Sleeman's political position is that it cannot be reduced simply to advocacy of British conquest.

He was deeply critical of the government of Oudh. Throughout the work he records examples of corruption, violence, defective administration and weakness in royal authority. He believed reforms were necessary.

But he was much more cautious about annexation than Lord Dalhousie.

Sleeman understood that Oudh possessed deep social structures which could not simply be replaced by decree. Its great landed families commanded local loyalties; large numbers of soldiers in the East India Company's own Bengal Army had connections to the region; and intervention by an external power risked disrupting networks upon which political stability depended.

Thus, while his reports supplied ammunition to critics of the Oudh government, Sleeman himself repeatedly warned of the dangers involved in outright territorial absorption.

This tension gives the book unusual historical power.

It is not merely an indictment of an Indian court written retrospectively to justify conquest. Instead, it preserves disagreement **within the colonial establishment itself** over how power ought to be exercised.

That distinction became extremely important after Sleeman's death.

In February 1856, Dalhousie's government annexed Oudh, deposed Wajid Ali Shah and placed the kingdom under direct British administration. Barely a year later, the uprising of 1857 erupted, and Oudh became one of its principal centres.

Sleeman had died in February 1856 and therefore did not witness either the annexation's consequences or the rebellion that followed.

When *A Journey Through the Kingdom of Oude* finally appeared in 1858, readers were therefore encountering a document written **before annexation but published after catastrophe**.

That timing transformed the meaning of the book.

Warnings that might previously have appeared conservative or overcautious could now be read against the extraordinary violence of 1857–58. The private correspondence included in the work became especially revealing because it showed how extensively the future of Oudh had been debated before annexation was carried out.

The title page itself makes this political dimension explicit, describing the volumes as containing “Private Correspondence Relative to the Annexation of Oude to British India.” Contemporary digitised copies confirm Richard Bentley as publisher and 1858 as the publication date.

Oudh and 1857

The relevance of Oudh to the uprising of 1857 can scarcely be overstated.

Annexation displaced portions of the old administrative and courtly establishment and altered relationships between the British authorities, great landlords and local elites. At the same time, many Bengal Army sepoys were recruited from Oudh and neighbouring districts, meaning that political and economic developments in the kingdom resonated directly within the Company’s own army.

When rebellion spread across northern India in 1857, Lucknow became one of its most famous theatres.

The British Residency was besieged; fighting continued across the city; and rural Oudh became a major centre of resistance.

Modern historians debate the relative importance of annexation, military grievances, land policy, court politics and other causes in producing rebellion. It would therefore be too simple to claim that annexation alone caused the events of 1857.

Yet Sleeman’s book allows the reader to see the political landscape immediately beforehand.

It describes precisely the world of taluqdars, retainers, soldiers, revenue officials and rural power structures through which rebellion would subsequently move.

For this reason, *A Journey Through the Kingdom of Oude* belongs as naturally in a collection concerned with the history of 1857 as it does in one devoted to travel or British India.

The Map

Of particular importance in the present copy is the original folding **Map of the Kingdom of Oude** preserved at the beginning of Volume I.

The map provides a visual framework for Sleeman’s narrative, showing the territory of the kingdom and the principal towns, rivers and routes through which his journey unfolded.

It is more than a decorative adjunct.

Because Sleeman’s narrative is geographically organised, the map enables the reader to follow his movement through districts that were soon to be absorbed into British India. In the context of the book’s political purpose, it also carries a deeper significance:

mapping and administrative survey were fundamental instruments of nineteenth-century colonial governance.

Territory had to be measured, classified and rendered legible before it could be effectively administered.

The survival of the folding map in good condition therefore materially enhances the completeness and desirability of this set. Your original description specifically confirms its presence.

The Binding

The present set is preserved in an attractive contemporary or near-contemporary half-leather binding with marbled paper sides.

The spines are divided into compartments by raised bands and gilt rules, with gilt lettering identifying the title, author and respective volumes. The edges are marbled in complementary colours.

The binding has acquired the surface wear expected from a working nineteenth-century library set: light rubbing, some flaking and wear at the corners and extremities. These signs of use have not compromised the integrity of the volumes, which remain firm.

There is considerable appeal in retaining a nineteenth-century binding such as this.

Unlike a modern rebinding, it preserves something of the material history of the volumes themselves: these were books intended to be read, shelved and consulted within a Victorian library.

The restrained brown leather and marbled boards are entirely characteristic of quality private bindings of the period and suit the sober character of Sleeman's work particularly well.

A Book Between Two Worlds

One of the great attractions of this book is its position at a historical threshold.

Sleeman travelled through Oudh when it was still formally a sovereign kingdom.

He wrote when annexation remained a matter of argument.

He died just as the kingdom was absorbed into British India.

And his account was published only after rebellion had transformed British rule in the subcontinent.

In the short interval between the journey of 1849–50 and publication in 1858, an entire political world disappeared.

The East India Company itself would soon cease to govern India. Following the rebellion, authority was transferred directly to the British Crown under the Government of India Act of 1858.

Thus the book describes one order of power while belonging, physically and bibliographically, to the birth of another.

Few nineteenth-century Indian travel narratives possess quite this sense of historical immediacy.

Collecting Importance

For collectors of books relating to India, *A Journey Through the Kingdom of Oude* has significance across several fields.

It is an important work of British Indian travel.

It is a major primary source on the history of Lucknow and Oudh.

It relates directly to the territorial expansion of the East India Company under Dalhousie.

It provides extensive evidence for the administrative and political conditions preceding the rebellion of 1857.

And it is the work of one of the most recognisable British officials in nineteenth-century India.

The first edition is especially desirable in the complete two-volume format with the folding map present.

The present copy has the additional attraction of retaining its nineteenth-century half-leather binding rather than having been modernised. Its wear is visible but sympathetic, preserving the character of a book that has survived for more than a century and a half.

For the collector interested not merely in decorative books but in volumes that illuminate decisive historical moments, Sleeman's *Journey* is particularly compelling.

It allows us to observe Oudh at the very moment when an independent kingdom was being examined, criticised and ultimately prepared for absorption into an expanding colonial state.

And because Sleeman himself was uneasy about the consequences of annexation, the book resists an overly simple interpretation.

It is both an instrument of empire and a warning from within it.