

Deviance and Empire: Major Anthony G. McCall's *Lushai Chrysalis*

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Abstract

The British colonial empire was one of the largest and most influential empires in history. It spanned across various parts of the world, including territories in Africa, Asia, the Americas, and the Pacific. Throughout its existence, the British Empire faced numerous acts of defiance and resistance from the indigenous populations of the colonized regions. In addition, the annals of history are replete with acts of defiance that originated within the colonized territories themselves, rather than from external forces. One such act of defiance was by Major Anthony G. McCall, who was appointed as the Superintendent-in-Charge of Lushai Hills (present Mizoram) during the 1930s and 1940s. McCall broke with protocol to lambast the policies of the British administration leading to his removal in May 1943. The events of his life in Lushai Hills have been documented in the book *Lushai Chrysalis* or *Lushai Land of Tranquility and Upheaval* (1949). The book is not only an important ethnographic document in the study of Northeast Indian history but it also gives insight into the personality of McCall and other ICS officers of the British administration. This, in turn, provides better insight into the working of the British colonial structure and gives us alternative viewpoints to what is normally seen as a monolithic one.

Keywords: colonialism, defiance, organizational structure, psychology, World War II

The Oxford Learner's Dictionary defines "deviance" as "a difference from what most people consider to be normal or acceptable." A concept which has gained its recognition mainly due to its inception in twentieth-century sociology or the sociology of deviance. Sociology of deviance explores certain actions which violate social norms across formally enacted rules (e.g., crime) and also informal violations of social norms (e.g., rejecting folkways and mores). Furthermore, the French sociologist Emile Durkheim viewed "deviance" as an inevitable part of how society functions. He argued that deviance is a basis for innovation and change, as well as a way of defining or clarifying important social norms. When individuals or groups deviate from established norms, it can lead to a reevaluation of those norms and a potential shift in societal attitudes. Similarly, deviant ideas, behaviors, or practices can spark innovation by introducing alternative approaches or perspectives. When individuals deviate from conventional norms, they may develop new solutions or strategies to address perceived shortcomings. However, the term seems unsurprisingly missing from the colonial lexicon, although such acts of undesirables and rouges, bad characters are filled within the pages of colonial archives. During the nineteenth century, the annals of colonialism are filled with the anxiety of "degeneration." It was viewed that power was justified by the myth of the superior characters who discharged it but it was no less likely to be seen as a self-destructive force. For many in Europe, the colonial world was the site where "Europe" was undone. The empire was a potential site of decay and scandal; and therefore, its corrosive powers were not to be neglected.

To contain such abominations, the British Empire, in particular, had taken drastic measures. The trials of Warren Hastings, Governor of Bengal is a case in point. The trial and subsequent impeachment of Warren Hastings on accusations of misgovernance happened before the House of Lords on 13 February 1788. It was held at irregular intervals covering seven years, ending in his acquittal in April 1795. (Stone 1) His scandal gave articulation to domestic constituencies of feeling and provided the rhetoric for liberals, abolitionists, and humanitarians to advance their political agendas and also to claim 'Britain' as their spirit.

If we critically examine the functionality of these accounts of deviance, they seem to serve a dual and paradoxical purpose. Such transgressions invoke the very boundaries and resolidify the very boundaries they revoke. Egregious offenders like Hastings or General Dyer only proved the rules that they had broken. The trials commissioned or the punishments awarded to these offenders provided vital rhetorical and ritualised spaces where deviance is simultaneously repudiated as well as invented. It also entails the fact that these offenders were at fault and not the ‘empire’ itself and in turn colonial rule itself could be redeemed. In the nineteenth century, various scandals such as Governor Eyre’s suppression of the Morant Bay rebellion in 1865, the passing of the Ilbert Bill in India in 1882 and the “red rubber” scandal in the Belgian Congo all seemed to reiterate and prove the rhetoric that the British Empire was always about moral strength and goodness and its dereliction. In a way even later on, the scandals of the later eighteenth century and nineteenth century were recursively replayed: the cast had changed but the message was much the same.

Such a colonial officer in the context of Northeast India was Anthony McCall (1895–1978), the superintendent of the Lushai Hills from 1931–43. He became a rogue officer in the view of the ICS and was dismissed from his post in May 1943 during one of the most intensive periods of fighting against the advancing Japanese. The transcripts surrounding McCall and his sacking are fascinating as they reveal the extent to which McCall broke with protocol to lambast Sir Andrew Gourlay Clow as governor and James P. Mills, his private secretary at the time, for incompetence regarding the tribal areas. McCall had become disenfranchised with the “filthy” war as a result of the Allied forces, and to some extent, the ICS as well, seeing the people of the tribal areas of Assam as sacrificial lambs to be fed to the Japanese if need be. (Alexander 140) McCall with his persistence and hard work had established a real connection with the tribal chieftains of Lushai Hills. He having served as an officer during World War I was not unknown to the strategies that needs to be played out in the theatre of war. However, in the years between May 1942 and May 1943, McCall seems to get disillusioned with the war efforts of the British Empire and openly rebukes their intent towards the welfare of the people of Lushai Hills. Though the transcripts between May 1942 and May 1943, begin on an amicable note with Clow and Mills expressing support and praise of McCall for his defence scheme of Lushai Hills, it

quickly takes a U-turn in the “Gilbertian scheme,” and ends with McCall rebuking and making fun of the whole situation.

The events of his life in Lushai Hills have been documented in the book *Lushai Chrysalis* or *Lushai Land of Tranquility and Upheaval* (1949). The book is an ethnographic account providing insight into the land of the people of Lushai Hills. The history, demography, customs and traditions, food habits, the general psyche of the people and other aspects have been documented in this book. Furthermore, the exposure and explanation of McCall’s persona and life in Lushai Hills give us insight into the structure of the British administration in Lushai Hills. Monolithic narratives of the “British Empire in India” have always painted a glorified or romanticized version of colonial life in India. At the other end of this spectrum, particularly with the onset of postcolonialism, are narratives which debase and dehumanize those in power. However, there are various slippery zones which escape any classification. In this regard, Clive Dewey (1993) argues that “the ideology of the ICS can be typified by two types of individuals: evangelical Christians who considered Indian culture to be depraved and in need of an overhaul, as personified by F. L. Brayne and referred to as the ‘Gospel of Uplift’; and humanists who were sensitive and sympathetic to Indian culture” (3). The writings of McCall reveal him to be a man who came to India with the first characteristics and gradually embraced the characteristics of the second persona as his interactions with the people of Lushai Hills increased. The recovery of this man’s thoughts and activities from historical obscurity is important as it allows for a better understanding of how British power was maintained and ultimately diminished during the Raj. It challenges idealized narratives of colonialism and contributes to a better understanding of the exploitative and repressive nature of colonized rule. By amplifying marginalized voices, we can strive for a more comprehensive and accurate understanding of history and its impact on societies.

McCall in his book gives a detailed account of the first forty years of contact between the British Empire and Lushai Hills. He classifies the years as 1898-1938 and writes:

The advent of the British form of government and control for a time certainly paralysed the people.... The British occupation of Lushai marked the presence of a power, hitherto unforeseen and unimagined. The world of Lushai was staggered, bewildered. (196)

The British occupation of Lushai Hills was twofold as pointed out by McCall. He asserts that on one side was the British Government personified by the Political Officer, later the Superintendent and the other was the missionaries. In his words: "The former aimed at securing peace, law, and order, while the latter aimed at converting the Lushais from their animist beliefs to those of the Christian religion, as interpreted from their standpoint" (196). There were mainly two dominant Mission Societies: the Welsh Presbyterian in the north and the London Baptist Missionary Society in the south. Against these varying contacts, the Lushais had no equipment on which to fall back for strength, except the traditions and the stories of their grandfathers. But the pillars of their strength had tumbled down with shame and humiliation before these new and irresistible British invaders.

Talking about the implications of the British occupation McCall laments that the British Government's influence on the people of Lushai Hills had been both "decisive" and "tremendous" (198). He feels that the British Government had failed to comprehend the responsibilities for humanity, which they thereby undertook. As a result, the missionaries were afforded *carte blanche* to work amongst the people. They were also given full responsibility to shape the education system. They became the de-facto official educationists, while still being inevitably wedded to the call of spreading the Holy Gospel. This combination of opportunities had resulted in their becoming the most important employers, and education, itself the passport to material distinction, early became very nearly synonymous with the need for Christianity, if not with Christianity itself. Thus, McCall places the importance of the combination of opportunities presented to missions through the handling of spiritual and educational institutions as the primary reason for the troublesome scenario of Lushai Hills. In this context, he asserts:

...the history of the first forty years of contacts has been overshadowed by a full-scale assault upon the people by the missions, and a watching brief by government, operating chiefly without much positive policy, relying, rather, for its contribution on the efficacy of a static preservation of the customs of the people. If there are faults, Government, as well as the Missions, is fully contributory. (198)

McCall also discusses the changes that had been brought about in the general psyche of the chieftains after the advent of the British colonial empire. In particular, he highlights several key features which showcases how the chiefs had been adversely affected by this change. He relates to the vesting of interest and the apportioning of land by the Government as one of the primary reasons for the traditional chieftains being vanquished of their original position and rank. As a result, they stood bereft of their erstwhile freedom of action. Secondly, the withdrawal of certain rights like the right to order capital punishment, the right to seize food and property of villagers, propriety rights over lands, the right to tax traders, etc. shifted the allegiance of the natives tilting towards the Government. Commenting on these profound changes McCall observes that:

...when Government itself has to be prepared to sweep aside privileges by the stroke of a pen, regardless of the gaps so caused, some moderation is befitting before condemning the inevitable results of European missionary influence. There is no room, whatever, for any sense of perfection in the Government's approach to a problem, which was, is, and will be, difficult, and which demands far greater care than is generally realised, judging from much which has been written on this interesting: and vital problem of the administration of backward peoples. (203)

About the cost incurred by the Government on education and its implications on the people of Lushai Hills, McCall observes that the progress that had been made in the sector of education was mainly due to the missions and their funds. Because of this, Lushai Hills had

made significant progress in the field of education and had a very good standard of literacy. According to the *All-India Census Report* for 1931, the percentage of literacy was as high as 12.9 per hundred, an incidence further increased to 19.3 in the 1941 census (203).

The main obstacle with the missionaries involved in the education process was the fact that the primary goal of the missionaries was to share their religious beliefs and spread the words of the Gospel. This at many times overshadowed the technical considerations of education. As a result, decisions made by the missionaries may not always have been driven by practical or strategic factors. Additionally, differences of opinion among missionaries were also common, which further added to the complexity of their work. These factors demonstrate the intricate interplay of religious, organizational, and personal dynamics that influenced the actions and decisions of European missionaries. Education plays a crucial role in shaping the development and opportunities available to individuals within a society. When an education system is primarily tailored to one specific group, it can lead to marginalization and exclusion of other communities, such as the Lushai people in this case. This can perpetuate existing inequalities and hinder social progress at large. Recognizing this very tenacity within the Lushai context, McCall observes that:

Lushai instinct is steeped in the attributes, as well as the defects, of the nomad, the fatalism, and yet colour, of animism, the subjection of the individual to the major need of communal security, the whole pervaded by the ever-present need for propitiating the countless spirits, which have dominated life all through the years. Such a background has not been productive of leadership, independence of thought, conservation of the property, thought for the morrow, precision of application and inspiration, and all those qualities without which academic achievement must remain but a hollow shell. But while material independence, based on money, provided mainly by the Government or the missions, was promoting an un-indigenous oligarchy, Christianity was imposing great changes among the ordinary people. (207)

Though McCall is quite critical of the work done by the missionaries in the field of education, he also praises various projects undertaken by the missions to set up indigenous industries like the Lushai Hills cottage industry, cotton starching processes etc. In this context, he comments that “It is a great tribute to the missions in Lushai that their teaching and influence have been so compassionate and considerate. They have made mistakes, it is true. Their administrative and social usefulness will depend greatly upon the ability of the missionaries and their supporters to correlate Christianity and Lushai agriculture, homes, industry, schools, and every and all the practical experiences of Lushai life. ...But if the Missions do fail great lawlessness may well prevail” (228). He is critical of the administrative policies undertaken by the British Government concerning the hill tracts of Assam. He envisions that “the time has come for a revival of interest in Parliament’s approach to the peculiar and delicate problem in general of administering peoples following a different form of life to that followed by us at home, but yet who are dependent on us till either we cast them aside or nourish them to some status more in tune with that enjoyed by their neighbours” (230).

McCall, in conclusion, states that the missionaries, who may have their own cultural and political agendas, have had a greater influence on the Lushais than the Government. The District Officer, who represents the Government, has not been given clear directives or goals by Parliament. As a result, there have been inconsistencies in the approaches taken by different District Officers over time. They have changed frequently, while the missionaries have remained in the area for longer periods. This situation has led to a disparity in the development of political and cultural autonomy among different groups of people. Unshackled people, like the plainsmen, who are more advanced and self-reliant, have been able to shape their political future. On the other hand, backward or less developed people, like the Lushais, have struggled to initiate their development. They have relied more on the reliance and guidance of missionaries rather than having a clear direction from the government. Overall, this situation highlights the need for a coherent and consistent approach from the government in terms of providing guidance and support for the development of different communities. It suggests that relying solely on the missionaries for cultural and political influence may not be the most effective or sustainable

approach. Instead, the British Government needs to focus on empowering local communities and providing them with the necessary tools and resources to develop their future and that would be a more equitable and effective strategy to move forward.

In the book *The Colonizer and the Colonized* (1957,2021), the Tunisian philosopher Albert Memmi argues that the process of colonization has two sides to it. He argues that it not only affects the colonized but participation in a colonial administration can lead to the destruction of the humanity of the colonizer also. He writes: “In short, [the colonizer] knows, in his own eyes as well as those of his victim, that he is a usurper. He must adjust to both being regarded as such, and to this situation” (53). The book *Lushai Chrysalis* exhibits not only the internal psyche of the ICS officer McCall, but also explains why institutions and individuals acted as they did from a socio-political theoretical framework. The various criticisms of the missionaries and the working of the colonial administration at the large exhibit the anti-colonial tendencies present subconsciously within a character like McCall. This was in some ways due to the compassion and affection he had towards the people of Lushai but also informs us about the inconsistencies of the British power structure at large. In this context, Leela Gandhi (2006) in her book *Affective Communities Anticolonial Thought, Fin-de-Siecle Radicalism, and the Politics of Friendship* writes, “colonialism failed [in] its informing orientalist enterprise largely on account of the irremediable leakiness of imperial boundaries” (3). Thus, McCall, as a highly educated and well-read man, encountered anti-colonial thought, understood it, and became, internally at least, somewhat sympathetic towards it for a time during his tenure as a superintendent of the Lushai Hills. However, in the case of McCall, this overture leads him to implement certain policies which did not fit with the larger colonial scheme and was deemed as acts of “defiance” by his superiors. Considering the Japanese aggression on British territory, McCall devised a defence strategy to defend the frontier regions of Lushai Hills. However, in 1943, he was recalled under protest by Andrew Clow, the Governor of Assam to a desk job in Assam’s provincial capital, Shillong. The decision to recall McCall was probably forced upon Clow at the behest of the military leaders operating in the area. McCall had developed a defensive scheme that was not under the military’s control. McCall’s defence strategy deeply relied on the local people and required the trust of the people he had governed since 1933. However, this lack of

control and reliance on the local population was deemed unfit and thus seen as a potential area of weakness or liability. His plan was centred around the people's fondness for him and his wife rather than their loyalty to the Empire of fear of forceful measures for non-compliance. The military's inclination towards finding militaristic solutions meant that they could not fully trust McCall defence's scheme, as it depended on non-coercive means and the goodwill of the local population. This difference in approach likely led to the decision to transfer McCall to a desk job, which would have limited his influence and involvement in the defence strategy. His clear mindset and the difference in opinion between him and his immediate superior Clow is evident by the number of correspondences between them. In July 1942, at the height of the hostilities with Japan, McCall wrote to James P. Mills, Clow's private secretary, about the dynamics of the Lushai Hills and the role of the superintendent within local governance as he saw it. He writes:

7 July 1942—Lushai is a heterogeneous area. It has no Maharajah. It has no central unifying force when once the majesty of Government is withdrawn. The value of the Superintendent lies more in his utility to those who need him from time to time than in any vague idea that he is almost a 'mythical figure beloved by every man, woman and child'. The Superintendent has considerable utility in governing the people because he will not sanction unwise approaches to the people, can see where unfairness is irritating from the Lushai point of view and maintains a balance of scrupulous impartiality in all dealings. But these qualities are not adequate to secure him from the flows inseparable from a heterogeneous people with a not much stronger binding than that exercised by the Pax Britannica. (Alexander 152)

With these issues in mind, in April 1942, during the British retreat from Burma due to Japanese advances, gathered three hundred tribal chiefs of the Lushai Hills. He sought their voluntary alliance with the British Government and asked them to sign a promise to participate in a territorial defence scheme (referred to as "TDS") for the area. After discussing among themselves and questioning McCall, the chiefs and village elders, known as Upas, joined

together with McCall and his wife Jean. They linked arms around the flagpole and sang the British national anthem “God Save the King,” which acted as a symbolic gesture confirming their allegiance and support to the British administration. The TDS involved guerrilla hostilities, abandoning villages, denying food and water to the invaders, laying booby traps, destroying bridges, and supplying information to the British only (Woodruff 323). Despite McCall’s transfer to Shillong in May 1943, the TDS largely held throughout the war and it was the “disappointment [of their failure to gain a foothold in Lushai Hills] which broke the back of the Japanese army and made their progress impossible” (Raghavaiah 106).

The events before, during and after World War II in British-ruled India played a significant role in the conflict and also laid the platform for the subsequent collapse of the British Raj in India. As a frontier tract, the hill areas of Assam, like Lushai Hills were the area of contestation for control of South Asia during a particular period between 1942–43. As such, certain events and also the people in power ruling these frontier tracts become significantly important in understanding the tenets of British colonialism in India. The Neo-Gramscian writer, Marcus Green (2011), states that “intellectuals provide a non-coercive reinforcement of the state and the power and authority of dominant groups” (5). Thus, the academic character of those recruited to the ICS was crucial to the maintenance of imperial power during the Raj. Furthermore, Dewey (1993) points out the organizational structure and group-thinking procedure of British administration. In regards to the positioning of the ICS, he specifically argues that “[...] Civilians had no discretion, no initiative; they simply implemented policies approved by the authorities at home. A clear-cut chain of command, resting on a rigorous system of reporting, linked the humblest griffin to the House of Commons” (3). However, an analysis of the life story of ICS officers like McCall and the book points out otherwise. It is seen that these ICS officers often spent a considerable amount of time on their own in the field without any communication with their offices for days. Therefore, it only entails the fact that these servicemen had to respond to events quickly and make decisions impromptu. The decision-making process as is evident from the life stories of McCall and other such officers working in very remote and easily inaccessible areas is not always per the book. Furthermore, the ICS personnel tended not to socialize too much with each other unless they were positioned in the big cities of Bombay,

Calcutta or Delhi. Thus, rather than a system of robust reporting, the prestige of the ICS was the result of the careful handpicking of servicemen whose initiative could be relied upon to make the “correct” decision as empire, and the imperative of economic exploitation, required. At certain times, the decisions taken by these officers are quite in opposition to the regulatory framework provided to them. These become acts of defiance and bring into light many aspects of the British administrative structure considered monolithic. An investigative inquiry into the operation of colonial power and knowledge reveals in the words of Michel Foucault (1978), “the *governmentalite* of colonial regimes” (10). However, the characteristics which makes colonial systems and their ideologies the basis for social control has to be questioned. The answer to this has been provided by recent scholarship into varied aspects of colonial regimes like colonial science, the history of medicine and the body, the reproduction of sentiments, sexuality, the control of borders etc. However, these researches delve a bit too much emphasis on the state which relegates (or misses out completely) the whole canopy of fringe figures like General Dyer, Warren Hastings or Anthony McCall. Though their offenses might be not of the same degree, nonetheless they were acts of deviance. These “rogues” of the British administration not only suffered the effects of the Empire but also to a greater extent subverted the rules and regimes imposed upon them. Their acts of colonial deviance can be effectively explored in the mundane the day-to-day settings-on the veranda, the back step, on the street or the beach-as on the more conspicuous stage of political scandal. Though these acts may seem insignificant and petty in relation to the Grand British Empire in India, their acts of defiance had a profound and significant impact on the subsequent events undertaken to restrain, underplay or control these acts. They interestingly also point out the contested and contradictory interplay of private feeling, public good and protocol maintenance of colonial officers. It also highlights the complex and dynamic nature of value systems, social hierarchies, and deviance within colonial contexts. It suggests that these systems and hierarchies were interconnected and constantly evolving, influencing, and being influenced by each other. Rather than attempting to create a conventional, straightforward history of colonial regimes, acts of deviance explore the various ways in which these actions challenged and undermined the rules and power structures of the colonial empire. As such, deviance is not a fixed or static concept but rather a fluidic and mobile force, capable of exerting powerful exclusionary effects. It takes on various shapes depending on the context and the actors involved. Ultimately, we gain insights into the processes of erosion and resistance

against imperial rule. Narratives such as these encourage a nuanced examination of the complexities and contradictions inherent in colonial societies and open up new avenues for historical analysis.

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The author declared no potential conflicts of interest about the research, authorship and publication of this article.

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