TELTSCHER, "COLONIAL CORRESPONDENCE: THE LETTERS OF GEORGE BOGLE FROM BENGAL, BHUTAN AND TIBET, 1770-81"

The Containment and Re-Deployment of English India

Colonial Correspondence: The Letters of George Bogle from Bengal, Bhutan and Tibet, 1770-81

Kate Teltscher, University of Surrey Roehampton

1. At some time in June 1774, somewhere on the road between Bengal and Bhutan, George Bogle, a young Scottish servant of the East India Company, began a letter to his friend John Stewart in Calcutta:

   You must not mind my Dates. As the Folks in this Country are ignorant of the Julian Calender, and the new stile I am obliged to keep a Reckoning like Robinson Crusoe or Sterns Captive and if I make a Mistake it is impossible to rectify it now. I have some doubts about my Epochs, but there is to be an Eclipse which will bring me up. (MSS Eur E 226/77(c))

As the first British envoy to Bhutan and Tibet, Bogle was—quite literally—in uncharted territory. His sense of cultural isolation is signalled here by his inability to adhere to letter-writing convention: he neither dates his letter nor supplies a precise location. Without access to the European calendar, Bogle has recourse to a tally stick—a device suggested by two literary figures: Crusoe on his island and the prisoner in Sterne's *Sentimental Journey*.

2. Defoe and Sterne supply Bogle with two of his epistolary identities. For Bogle fashions entirely different, even incompatible, personae for himself in his letters. In his official correspondence, reporting on his trade negotiations, Bogle shares some of the concerns of the pragmatic colonial merchant Crusoe; but when he writes to his family, especially his sisters, he is a sentimental traveller. This discrepancy is particularly apparent when he is about to leave Tibet. Bogle informs the Governor General that the Bhutanese are keen to purchase articles of trade from Calcutta, especially firearms (Bogle to Hastings 16 October 1774, MSS Eur E 226/77(e)). A few months later, however, writing to his sister Elizabeth (Bess), he represents his life in the hills as a “fairy dream”, spent “without Business.” He signs off:

   Farewell ye honest and simple People. May ye long enjoy that Happiness which is denied to more polished Nations; and while they are engaged in the endless pursuits of avarice and ambition, defended by your barren mountains, may ye continue to live in Peace and Contentment, and know no wants but those of nature. (Bogle to Bess 5 March 1775, MSS Eur E 226/25)

   With this Rousseausque benediction, Bogle completely elides his own role as trade negotiator.

3. In this paper I want to examine the version of East India affairs that Bogle offers for home consumption. How does Bogle represent his own activities, and how does he sustain family relations through correspondence? What literary models does he employ? What are the silences, the inconsistencies? We need to be aware that there are, inevitably, gaps in the archive. The Bogle papers preserved at the Oriental and India Office Collection, the British Library and the Mitchell Library, Glasgow consist of journals, notebooks, letter books, private letters, official correspondence and legal documents. The Glasgow collection comprises the Bogle family papers; largely letters from George Bogle, with a few from his father and male relatives, and a clutch from his friend William Richardson, then secretary to the ambassador at St. Petersburg. This collection had been “judiciously sorted and arranged” by a family friend, before being consulted by Clements Markham who, in 1876, brought out an edition of Bogle’s journal of his mission to Bhutan and Tibet. The papers may have been culled at this stage to conceal the existence of Bogle’s two illegitimate daughters, argues Hugh Richardson in a study of the Bogle family genealogy. These two girls, whose mother was probably Tibetan, were sent to be raised at the family home at Daldowie, after Bogle’s death at the early age of thirty-four. Scarcely any trace of them or their mother remains in the correspondence (Richardson 80).

4. George Bogle was only twenty-eight when he was appointed first British envoy to Bhutan and Tibet, just four years after Romantic Circles has moved! It also has a new look. Find out more about our move, redesign, and plans for the future here.
in Bengal, with charges of extortion and profiteering levelled at Company servants who returned home hugely enriched writing home in the 1770s. The decade saw the first public expression of uneasiness over the conduct of Company servants We also need to ask what particular considerations might be brought to bear on a servant of the East India Company gains its very identity from its dialectic with other selves” (56). Those other selves, the correspondents, of course occupy may feel caught in a world of undependable narrators” (51). For the self revealed in letters “is specifically a writing self that one correspondent to another, see sometimes virtually different selves emerging in different epistolary relationships, we Spacks observes that when we read through a body of correspondence, as we see “the writer’s tone and material shift from Such fluctuations of manner and matter are of course common to letter collections, as Patricia Meyer Spacks has noted. Bogle invariably avoids “weighty” issues in his letters to his sisters; politics, commerce, his own career—all are excluded. Amusements; which I suppose will be exhibited in about two months hence—How I tremble for my fine Triqueté waiscoat” of Mutton and Dishes of Meat at one another—this last however is confined to the cold Season, and is one of the Winter circumstances. There is no hint that such conspicuous wastage might be considered inappropriate, not to say grotesque, in the (Bogle to Matty, 7 September 1770, Bogle Collection). Bogle's touch remains light and the tone gently ironic throughout. While Bogle may have censored, ignored or simply not been aware of the allegations against the Company in September 1770, the aim of the mission was to conclude a trade treaty between Bengal and Tibet to open up the route through Bhutan. For some years it had been East India Company policy to explore the possibilities of trans-Himalayan trade. Tibet was seen as a way into China which would avoid the restrictions placed on the Company at Canton. Such concerns became more pressing following the financial losses sustained by the Company during the terrible Bengal famine of 1769-70. It was the Bhutanese invasion of Cooch Behar, a small state bordering on Bengal, which provided the Governor General, Warren Hastings, with the occasion to expand British influence in the area. The Raja of Cooch Behar appealed to Calcutta for military aid which was provided on condition that the Company gain sovereignty of the state. After the British defeat of Bhutanese forces in 1773, Hastings responded positively to peace overtures made by Lobzang Palden Yeshé, the Third Panchen Lama of Tibet (known by the British as the Teshu Lama), a man of great talent and initiative, who had risen to a position of political influence in Tibet and the neighbouring states during the minority of the Eighth Dalai Lama. It was in response to the Panchen Lama’s peace initiative that Bogle was appointed ambassador to Bhutan and Tibet.

5. Bogle’s letters home provide an exceptional account of British life in Calcutta of the 1770s and offer a fascinating record of the first mission to Bhutan and Tibet. While his observations on Bengali life are heavily influenced by contemporary notions of Indian culture and character, Bogle is a much more sympathetic observer of the Bhutanese and Tibetans. He is perhaps best known for the account of his friendship with the third Panchen Lama of Tibet, apparently a relationship of mutual respect and affection which developed during Bogle’s five-month stay. But among the greatest attractions of his letters home, particularly those to his sisters, are their stylistic inventiveness and playful intimacy. Punctuated by pet names and filled with nostalgic invocations of childhood, they serve to create a private family space. But this domestic space must also accommodate unfamiliar cultures. In what guise is the Orient admitted to the home? By asking such questions, by tracing Bogle’s multiple epistolary identities, we may hope to catch the process of textual, social and colonial self-fashioning at work. 6. The youngest child of a prominent Glasgow tobacco merchant, George had four sisters and two brothers. His mother died when he was thirteen, and the following year he briefly attended Edinburgh University to study logic, before transferring to a private academy at Enfield to continue his education to the age of eighteen. Six months’ travel in France was followed by four years’ work as a clerk in the London counting house of his brother Robert’s import firm of Bogle and Scott. From there, through the influence of friends, he gained an appointment as writer in the East India Company. 7. Bogle arrived in Calcutta at the height of the devastating Bengal famine. In September 1770 he wrote to Robert (Robin) of famine victims dying in the streets, a shocking and pathetic sight. In Bogle’s account the Calcutta government supplies as much grain as possible, thus absolving the East India Company of any responsibility for the suffering. By the following year however, Bogle attributes the escalation in the price of rice to the stockpiling activities of individuals (Bogle to Robert Bogle, 10 April 1771, Bogle Collection). These charges recur in an anonymous account of the famine published in the British press the same year which accuses Company servants of profiteering and criminal negligence: of witholding rice from the market and forcibly buying grain at fixed prices (Gentleman’s Magazine, London Magazine, Annual Register). Indeed the famine would become one of the central issues in attacks on the Company in subsequent years. 8. While Bogle may have censored, ignored or simply not been aware of the allegations against the Company in September 1770, it is clear that the famine itself was not considered a suitable topic for his female correspondents. Writing to his sister Martha (Mrs Brown) at precisely the same time as the letter to Robert, Bogle omits any mention of it. He chooses rather to describe the ease and indulgence of the life of young Company servants in Calcutta, complete with an account of their riotous behaviour at meal times: “after Supper it is usual to pelt one another with Bread, and even to throw Shoulders of Mutton and Dishes of Meat at one another—this last however is confined to the cold Season, and is one of the Winter Amusements; which I suppose will be exhibited in about two months hence—How I tremble for my fine Triqueté waiscoat” (Bogle to Matty, 7 September 1770, Bogle Collection). Bogle's touch remains light and the tone gently ironic throughout. There is no hint that such conspicuous wastage might be considered inappropriate, not to say grotesque, in the circumstances. 9. Bogle invariably avoids “weighty” issues in his letters to his sisters; politics, commerce, his own career—all are excluded. Such fluctuations of manner and matter are of course common to letter collections, as Patricia Meyer Spacks has noted. Spacks observes that when we read through a body of correspondence, as we see “the writer’s tone and material shift from one correspondent to another, see sometimes virtually different selves emerging in different epistolary relationships, we may feel caught in a world of undependable narrators” (51). For the self revealed in letters “is specifically a writing self that gains its very identity from its dialectic with other selves” (56). Those other selves, the correspondents, of course occupy varying positions in relation to the writer according to, among other things, their gender and class or family status. 10. We also need to ask what particular considerations might be brought to bear on a servant of the East India Company writing home in the 1770s. The decade saw the first public expression of uneasiness over the conduct of Company servants in Bengal, with charges of extortion and profiteering levelled at Company servants who returned home hugely enriched.
In Bengal, with charges of extortion and profiteering levelled at Company servants who returned home hugely enriched (the so-called “nabobs”) and a parliamentary enquiry into the financial activities of the former Commander-in-Chief, Robert Clive. For the first time then, the character of the colonial official was subject to public scrutiny. Bogle inevitably fashions his epistolary identities in the light of such interrogation. So in November 1772, Bogle writes to reassure his father of the probity of his own and the Company’s current conduct in response to “the writings they publish in England of the lawless Behaviour of the Company’s Servants” (Bogle to George Bogle Senior, 13 November 1772, Bogle Collection). As in all the letters to his ageing father, Bogle adopts a dutiful tone of filial obedience and sobriety. His father’s shakily written replies are full of pious injunctions, warnings about the all-seeing eye of Providence and shrewd advice on career progress. Bogle’s letters to his brother Robert, by contrast, are considerably less measured, positively thrilling at the idea of easy money. Writing in 1770, two years before the parliamentary enquiry, Bogle observes that he cannot help regretting, the Gilded Days that are past and gone, when a man was almost certain of a Fortune by Trade ... It was good fishing in muddy waters—and afterwards when everything was settled and these Provinces were to all Intents and Purposes our own, and the People entirely under our Government, and Protection, they have been squeezed and oppressed, in spite of every Order from home or every Regulation that was made here, and Individuals have carried home Princely Fortunes. O my dear Robin how amazed you would be to learn the way in which Money has been made in this Country—and how different Peoples Characters are here from what they are in England. (Bogle to Robin, 20 December 1770, Bogle Collection)

Bogle at once confides and tantalises; the scandals come without names or details. But then, as he explains to Robert a week later, he is not entirely at his ease writing letters sent by the Company packet, for he has been told that they are sometimes opened and read; if he wishes to write in confidence, he will send letters by a private hand, and he recommends his brother to do the same. On this occasion he writes two versions of the same letter, a self-censored one for the packet, and an uncensored one to be carried by a passenger on the same ship. In the letter sent privately, he tells Robert of the continuing evasion of orders from London, and of the abuses practiced by Company servants who accept “Presents” or fix the price of rice in the provinces under their control (Bogle to Robin, 26 December 1770, Bogle Collection).

11. Bogle the correspondent, then, operates under various external and internal constraints: the fear of interception, the need to assert his integrity as a Company servant, and the desire to frame his accounts according to his correspondents’ interests and status. There is also the consideration of the letter as literary performance or intellectual display. A letter’s audience may be wider than the named recipient. Bogle’s father writes that he has perused the letters sent by George to his sisters on the outward voyage, and commends his son’s powers of invention, as he never repeats himself. For Bogle senior, epistolary skill stands as a measure of mental agility and as a pleasing indication of future career prospects; George promises to be “a great Comfort” to his father in his old age (George Bogle Senior to Bogle, 11 December 1770, Bogle Collection). Indeed his father’s words are strangely prophetic, for Bogle’s talent as a writer would later win him the favour of Hastings, the Governor-General.

12. In praising the variety of Bogle’s letters, his father selects one of the qualities by which, according to Keith Stewart, the eighteenth-century familiar letter was generally judged. The two other stylistic criteria were “ease,” that is, a natural style implying sincerity, and “vivacity,” the capacity to arouse attention and imagination (Stewart 186-7). While such categories are difficult to apply retrospectively, it seems to me that Bogle’s letters home, particularly those to his sisters, fulfil them admirably. Engaging and playful, the letters to his married sister Martha in London, to Mary, Elizabeth and Anne at the family home in Daldowie, address a range of topics: the condition of Indian women, social life in Calcutta, childhood reminiscences, methods of butter-making, Tibetan ghosts. There is a stylistic inventiveness and freedom in these letters, rarely encountered in those to male correspondents.

13. Bogle is at his most Sterne-like in a letter written to Anne in October 1771 which spirals into an orientalist parody. Bogle begins by asking what has become of an admirer of Anne’s, a Mr. A—t, but breaks off as if such information were a state secret: “I was in great Hopes—but no more of that lest this Letter should be taken by Pirates, and fall into the Hands of Strange Folks” (Bogle to Annie, 31 October 1771, Bogle Collection). The vulnerability of the letter in its epic journey across the ocean appears to suggest the figure of the romance heroine, for it is this role which Bogle assigns next to Anne. Determined to visit her brother in India, Anne attempts to cross the Arabian desert. She is captured, sold as a slave, and married to Haran Alrasheid (the Caliph of the Arabian Nights’ Entertainments) or his son Albarassin:

O what a Charming Story will your Life be—The Riches and Jewells you will be mistress of Hundreds of Slaves to attend you, all the Delicacies of Nature—all the Perfumes of Persia, all the Spices of Arabia lavish’d at your feet. Passing the Day in Cool and Shady Bowers, with Melodious Birds and Cascades of Rose Water, listening to the Tales of a Daughter of Circassia—In the Evening a Collation of the most exquisite fruits and Wines, where the charming Albarassin repairs, and after presenting you with costly Offerings, and many Compliments upon the Charms of your Person, entreats you to relate the Adventures of your Life—What a Conflict there is between Truth and Pride—“If I tell him that my Father was a Merchant that I have three Brothers Merchants, and Traders, in how mean a light shall I be considered by this warlike Son of the Desert,—I will say that my father was a Cheif in the Court of the King, and commanded the left Wing of his Army, on that fatal Day when he lost his life in Battle, and you your Liberty—here have some Tears Ready—that the cruel Invaders carried you Prisoner, and sold you to the Merchants of the Caravan & &c—But what are they doing at Daldowie all this time—There indeed is sad
Bogle decks his story with all the stock orientalist furniture: jewels, slaves, perfumes and bowers. Weaving his tale around his sister, Bogle involves her directly in the narrative. The Annie character is prompted with stage directions ("here have some Tears Ready") and made to collude with the orientalist fantasy when she lies about her origins to impress the charming prince. When we remember that this letter began with a query about Anne’s admirer, known only as Mr. A--t, it seems that Bogle has recourse to the orientalist medium to speak to his sister about female desire. But the seductive Eastern fantasy evaporates when the scene shifts to the Bogle family home. Here the dialogue takes a realist turn, with Father always knowing best, the sisters justifying themselves, and cousin Nancy envying Annie’s good fortune. Bogle concludes by suggesting that perhaps it would be best after all if Anne were chaperoned in her travels by his reliable elderly munchi, or Persian teacher. Then, after a narrow break on the page, Bogle returns to a conventional letter-writing mode, expressing his delight at receiving news of the good health of family and friends. The inserted tale is a charming digression, a knowing literary game. The Arabian Nights' Entertainments version of the Orient which Bogle sends to Daldowie would have been a familiar one; the English version of Galland’s collection was highly influential in eighteenth-century Britain, although generally regarded as suitable reading only for women and children (Mack xvi-xviii). But as we shall see, Bogle often evokes childhood memories or employs a feminized discourse to characterize his experience of the East. And in a sense, Scheherazade is a fitting figure for Bogle the letter-writer, for the narrative or flow of correspondence is coterminous with life itself; as Janet Altman has noted, "[t]o write is to live when the letter is literally the only sign of life" (149). This association of letters with the life-force is particularly appropriate in the case of India, where the mortality rate for Europeans was notoriously high.

14. Much of the charm of the letter derives from its apparent inconsequentiality. It recreates a sense of family intimacy and exclusivity with the story-telling scene. The desire to re-assert familial relationships dominates many of Bogle’s letters. He is engaged in what Altman has called the "impossible task of making his reader present" (135). As many critics have observed, one of the stylistic techniques employed by letter-writers to give the impression of presence and immediacy is to mimic the informality of oral speech (Altman 136, Porter 4, Lowenthal 29-30). In his letters to his sisters, Bogle attempts to conduct written conversations. This is not just a matter of approximating his own spoken voice, but also of writing his sisters’ parts. In a letter of 23 September 1770, Bogle advises Anne (whom he calls by the pet name of Chuffes) to follow his own letter-writing practice:

I write whenever I have spare Hour on my Hands & send my Letters when I can. I wish you wou’d follow the same Plan in writing to me and not waite till you hear from London that the Lord Something Indiaman is to sail soon & then you finish your Epistle, with a “realy I intended to have wrote you a longer Letter but, as my Brother tells my father that there is a Ship to sail next week I have time for no more”—Indeed Chuffes it is an excuse I will not admit of—but I expect that when ever anything strikes you in the Noddle that you wish to let me know—you will then you finish your Epistle, with a “realy I intended to have wrote you a longer Letter but, as my Brother tells my father that there is a Ship to sail next week I have time for no more”—Indeed Chuffes it is an excuse I will not admit of—but I expect that when ever anything strikes you in the Noddle that you wish to let me know—indeed Chuffes it is an excuse I will not admit of—but I expect that when ever anything strikes you in the Noddle that you wish to let me know—you will down with it once upon Paper, no trusting to Memory or Apology for a bad Pen—send me out your Quills and I will make them for you, and you know the making of Pens is the thing I pique myself upon, as being my Forte. O George George will you never give over these outlandish Words? Indeed my Dear Chuffes they are quite homely ones in comparison of those I am now learning—and the next time you see me, pray don’t be surprised if I grace my Conversation with Persian or Moors Words, which will certainly have a Charming Effect. (Bogle to Annie, 23 September 1770, Bogle Collection)

In framing his request for longer letters, Bogle (the youngest member of the family) teasingly assumes a position of fraternal dominance: issuing instructions and parading his linguistic sophistication. Indeed it appears that Anne inhabits a world where the composition and transmission of letters are controlled by male relatives. When Bogle writes of his brother’s message to his father about ships’ departures, he touches on a major preoccupation of colonial correspondence: the workings of the mail. The voyage of the ‘Lord Something Indiaman’ would last around six months, but could be delayed by contrary winds for weeks, if not months. A ship would leave Calcutta for Britain every month or six weeks during the sailing season from September to April (Bogle to Annie, 25 August 1770, MSS Eur E 226/77(a)). The receipt and transmission of mail was therefore seasonal, with the whole cycle (that is, the time required to receive an answer to a letter) taking at least sixteen months (Chaudhuri 74). These problems were compounded for Bogle on his mission, when Bhutanese messengers had to carry letters across the great Himalayan range, impassable during the winter months (Bogle to Hastings, 27 April 1775, MSS Eur E226/23; Bogle to Bess, 30 December 1774, MSS Eur E226/80). The difficulties of conveyance caused Bogle to send copies of some of the mission letters to his family only on his return to Calcutta (Bogle to the family at Daldowie, March 30, 1776. Bogle Collection).

15. Little wonder then that scenes of letter composition and receipt occur frequently in the collection. The arrival of letters from home often provides the occasion for the expression of sentiment and family feeling. Writing from Tassisudon
(Tashichö Dzong), the capital of Bhutan, in August 1774, Bogle tells his sister Elizabeth that he has received a packet of her letters, dated April, June and September of the preceding year. He has read her letters “over and over again,” he will not say how often, but he has “just given them another Reading” (Bogle to Miss B. Bogle, MSS Eur E 226/78). This tribute to the value of his sister’s letters is followed by a reflection on the pain of separation. The Bogles, like so many Glasgow families, were involved in colonial trading enterprises across the globe; Bogle’s middle brother John was a merchant in Virginia and, after the collapse of the London firm, his eldest brother Robert managed a sugar plantation in Grenada. Distance, for Bogle, sharpens the faculty of feeling: “The Country People who live among their Freinds and Relations are strangers to the Pangs of Parting, and to the Sollicitude of Absence. But they know not the Knell of Joy which your Letters give me, and the Tear which now starts from my Eye is worth an age of their vegetable Affection” (Bogle to Miss B. Bogle, MSS Eur E 226/78). Sensibility is here defined in terms of class status. As the tears mingle with delight, Bogle enjoys an exquisite rush of emotion denied to the agricultural labouring classes. Bogle the Company servant shares in that capacity for feeling associated with merchant heroes since the sentimental drama of Steele and Lillo.

16. Pleasure and pain are compounded in the experience of the letter which, as Altman has argued, is an emblem both of separation and connection (15). The letter also acts for Bogle as a memorial to times past; he goes on to tell Elizabeth that he wishes he could have spent longer with his brother Robert at Daldowie:

But Alas, our Destinies have wove for us a different Web. We are scattered over the Face of the Earth, and are united only by Hope and a tender Remembrance. Let us cherish these as the only Pledge that is left us; and while you are passing cheerful Evenings at Daldowie; while Robin with his Negroes (and happy are they that are under him) is planting his Sugar Canes and while I am climbing these rugged Mountains, there is a secret Virtue like a Magnet which attracts us together and chears or solaces us in every situation. (Bogle to Miss B. Bogle, MSS Eur E 226/78)

In this sentimental discourse, destiny stands for empire and slaves are happy (although the parenthesis inevitably implies the possibility of ill-treatment). The brothers cherish memories of the home where Bess resides in cheerful domesticity—reading this very letter. Correspondence and sentiment here unite to ease the grief of separation and sustain the benign work of colonialism.

17. In the letter to Elizabeth, Bogle characteristically omits to explain precisely what he is doing climbing “these rugged Mountains.” Writing to Anne at around the same time, Bogle represents himself as a hapless wanderer:

But where are you got to, say you, with your Valleys and your Boots [Bhutanese]? It is a hard Question; but I think with my Father’s Assistance, Molly’s Knowledge in Geography which she learned at Miss Anderson’s, and her namesakes maps which used to lye in the Cradle that once had Gold Fringes, you may be able to conjure within about 40 or 50 miles whereabouts I am and that is as near as I can find out myself. For it has been by such Turnings and Windings, Ups and Downs, that I have got here that I protest I am as much at a loss as if I had been playing Blind Man’s Buff. (Bogle to Miss A. Bogle, MSS Eur E 226/78)

The precision with which Bogle locates the maps at home presents a striking contrast to the vagueness of his current situation. In this letter Bogle seems more concerned to reaffirm childhood co-ordinates than geographical ones. Bogle turns his mission into a game and represents himself as blindfolded and helpless. With this gesture of self-infantilisation, he apparently renounces any claim to authority or control. In his letters to his sisters, Bogle typically distances himself from his actual project of commercial reconnaissance and diplomatic negotiation, for despite his assertions to the contrary, every stage of the journey is observed and annotated in detail. Indeed before his departure, Bogle had been specifically instructed by Hastings to keep a diary,

inserting whatever passes before your Observation which shall be characteristic of the People, the country, the climate, or the road, their Manners, Customs, Buildings, Cookery, &c., or interesting to the Trade of this Country, Carrying with you a pencil and Pocket-book for the purpose of minuting short Notes of every Fact or Remark as it occurs, and putting them in order at your Leisure while they are fresh in your Memory. (Private Commissions to Mr Bogle, MSS Eur E226/6)

From the start then, the mission was also a textual enterprise. Bogle was to chart the unknown territory beyond the northern borders of Bengal, and the resulting journal was part of his official report.

18. The party which made up the mission comprised of Bogle, a Company surgeon named Alexander Hamilton, the Lama’s agent Purangir Gosain, and a retinue of servants. But in his letters to his father and male friends, Bogle tends to write himself into the role of lone explorer; generally employing the first person singular, invoking such figures as Robinson Crusoe (as we saw earlier), and claiming to be the first Company servant ever to enter the region (Bogle to John Stewart, June 1774; Bogle to George Bogle senior, June 1774. MSS Eur E226/77(c)). For his sisters, however, he exchanges the heroic for a mock-heroic voice. When the embassy arrived at Tashichö Dzong, Bogle was officially received by the Deb Raja of Bhutan. Bogle sends an illustrated account of this occasion to Anne, as an “Opportunity of exercizing ... [her] risible Faculties”:

But it is time I should make you acquainted with the Company and let you know where you are. In order to get a clear Idea of the Deb Rajah’s Presence Chamber you have only to look at the very elegant plan of it Annexed. He
Lama to her adventures (referring no doubt to her entrance into the harem and Turkish baths); describing both of them as 

Letters

Bogle's sartorial relish recalls Lady Mary Wortley Montagu's elaborate account of her Turkish habit in the "negligee" (Bogle to Bess, 31 August 1771, Bogle Collection). Indeed Bogle makes this connection between dress and epistolary style himself when he writes of his delight in his sister Anne's ill-structured letters: "Her Ideas look best in the costuming of the self in various languages and styles" (21). The focus on clothing is suggestive too of the role of Bogle the letter-writer, donning different guises to the theatrically different correspondents, engaged in that epistolary performance which Cynthia Lowenthal has called the "theatrical authority; for while the book's unexpected presence testifies to the universal power of the English text, the book itself appears in a strangely distorted or dislocated form. For here cultural appropriation is figured as abduction or sexual violation (Lady Waldegrave in the hands of the idols) and at the end, Bogle is at pains to stress that decorum has been restored.

19. This scene has interesting affinities with the nineteenth-century colonial "myth of origin" identified by Homi Bhabha as "the scenario, played out in the wild and wordless wastes of colonial India, Africa, the Caribbean, of the sudden, fortuitous discovery of the English book" (102). For Bhabha, this is a moment which at once reinforces and interrogates colonial authority; for while the book's unexpected presence testifies to the universal power of the English text, the book itself appears in a strangely distorted or dislocated form. We may detect something of this unsettling displacement in Bogle's account, light-hearted though it is. For here cultural appropriation is figured as abduction or sexual violation (Lady Waldegrave in the hands of the idols) and at the end, Bogle is at pains to stress that decorum has been restored.

20. But the dominant tone of the letter is that of gentle ridicule, both of the state ceremonial of the court and Bogle's own masculine dignity. He goes on to tell his sister about the formal presentation of a robe:

The investiture in Bhutanese robes represents a potentially disturbing moment of alienation; an anxiety which emerges here through a series of images which confuse gender roles. Cultural cross-dressing turns into transvestite performance with Bogle in his shot-silk gown playing Aunt Katty and Jenny Gilchrist, his old nurse. Between these two Glaswegian women appears Mordecai the Jew, gorgeously attired in royal apparel, a sign of favour from the King of Persia and Media. At once domestic and oriental, ancient and modern, feminine and masculine, Bogle turns himself into a pantomime figure. The fast-shifting analogies distract the reader from the political significance of the scene as a display of amity between Bhutan and the East India Company. And as he signs off, Bogle asserts his original cultural and gender identity by demoting the royal robes to a nightgown, worn at the time of writing.

21. The description of dress is characteristic of Bogle's letters to female correspondents. He enthuses about the warmth and practicality of loose Tibetan clothing, detailing his outfit: a satin gown lined with Siberian fox fur, a cap faced with sable and Russian red leather boots (Bogle to Mrs Brown, 3 November 1774; Bogle to unspecified female correspondent, 27 November 1774, MSS Eur E226/77(k)). The focus on clothing is suggestive too of the role of Bogle the letter-writer, donning different guises to suit different correspondents, engaged in that epistolary performance which Cynthia Lowenthal has called the "theatrical costuming of the self in various languages and styles" (21). Indeed Bogle makes this connection between dress and epistolary style himself when he writes of his delight in his sister Anne's ill-structured letters: "Her Ideas look best in negligee" (Bogle to Bess, 31 August 1771, Bogle Collection).

22. Bogle's sartorial relish recalls Lady Mary Wortley Montagu's elaborate account of her Turkish habit in the *Turkish Embassy Letters* (114-15). In fact Bogle cites Wortley Montagu when he compares his own intimate acquaintance with the Panchen Lama to her adventures (referring no doubt to her entrance into the harem and Turkish baths); describing both of them as...
23. Yet it could be said that the friendship with the Panchen Lama was indeed Bogle’s major diplomatic achievement. This alliance was commemorated in a painting of around 1775 by the Calcutta artist Tilly Kettle which represents the Panchen Lama’s reception of Bogle (the painting is reproduced in Aris 19 and Earle 91). Dressed in Tibetan robes, Bogle presents a ceremonial white scarf to the Lama. The painting is now in the Royal Collection and is thought to have been presented by Hastings to George III; a striking testimony to the political significance attributed to the alliance between Bogle and the Panchen Lama (and charming record of Bogle’s penchant for cultural cross-dressing).

24. As far as trade was concerned, Bogle’s mission was less successful. The route through Bhutan remained closed to East India Company servants; British goods could enter Bhutan only through the agency of non-European traders. Bogle attributed this restriction to the intervention of the Chinese residents, or ambans, stationed at Lhasa, who monitored the direction of Tibetan policy. In the Panchen Lama, Bogle saw a possible future mediator between the Company and the Emperor of China. After Bogle’s return to Bengal, relations between the British and the Lama were cemented by the gift of a plot of land in Calcutta for the establishment of a monastic house. Five years later, the Lama visited Peking, and was to arrange a passport for Bogle to join him to conduct negotiations with the Chinese authorities. But these plans came to nothing: the Lama succumbed to smallpox at Peking and died there in 1780, and Bogle himself died in Calcutta the following year.

25. Among the Bogle family papers in Glasgow survives an emblem of this intended alliance in the form of a photograph of a Buddhist rosary, probably sent by Bogle to his sister Martha (see plate 2). An accompanying letter explains that the beads were given to Bogle by the Lama who received them from the Emperor of China. This gesture of political and personal amity is then replayed in the family setting. Bogle requests that his sister tie one strand of the beads around the neck of her favourite child, and distribute the rest among the children of Bogle’s relatives and friends. He comments:

You will say this is a whimsical Direction—but I dont know the use of these Beads but to wear about Childrens Necks, or as a Token of my Remembrance and a Relique picked up on my present Pilgrimage—in this light you will please to consider it—and then the Emperor’s Cornellians will acquire an imperial Value. (Bogle to Mrs Brown, 3 November 1774, MSS Eur E226/80)

Here Bogle reaches the culmination of his career as sentimental pilgrim. The Emperor’s rosary, originally a sign of political favour, achieves imperial status only as sentimental souvenir, restrung and distributed among the Bogle family and friends (although the photograph, which shows the rosary either intact or reconstructed, suggests that the Bogles may not have followed this direction). Drained of its political significance, the exotic is to be dismantled and reassembled in domesticated form. This act of sentimental appropriation is a characteristic technique of Bogle’s correspondence, and perhaps more widely of colonial letter-writing in general. The rosary also furnishes a suitable concluding image, for Bogle conceived of colonial correspondence itself as a chain to link to the mother country, a guarantee of national identity, a kind of aide-mémoire for the affections. Writing to his sister Anne, he demands news from home, for ‘the memory of our early Friends and Acquaintances is the Chain that attaches us to our native Country, and we cannot forego the one without dissolving the other’ (Bogle to Miss A. Bogle, MSS Eur E226/78).

Notes

1 This article originally appeared in Epistolary Selves: Letters and Letter Writers, 1600-1945 ed. Rebecca Earle (London: Ashgate, 1999). I am indebted to the late Michael Aris for introducing me to Bogle, encouraging my research and answering queries with enthusiasm and generosity. I am also grateful to Hugh Richardson and Hamish Whyte for their help.

2 Clements Markham includes a wood engraving and detailed description of the rosary in the introduction to his edition of Boole’s journal. See
Markham cxliii-cxlv.

Works Cited


*Annual Register*. "Appendix to the Chronicle." 1771. 205-208.


