

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Heterodoxies of the Body: Death, Secularism, and the Corpse of Raja Rammohun Roy

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Abstract

In 1833, Rammohun Roy, the so-called “Father of Modern India,” died abruptly while traveling in England. Because cremation was then illegal in Britain, he was buried rather than immolated according to brahminical norms. This article situates the micro-history of his colonial corpse within the genealogy of secularism. I take secularism as a formation of the body in the most morbidly literal of ways—fused to embodied formations of race, caste, class, and gender and entangled with the transcolonial networks of nineteenth-century heterodoxy. Roy’s ritually indeterminate flesh was a site for cultural improvisation around a Victorian-colonial secularity formed in and through the body.

Keywords: heterodoxy; colonial India; Modern Hinduism; cremation; Cemetery Movement; caste; slavery; Unitarianism; Brahma Samaj; Raja Rammohun Roy

In a garden cemetery in the British port city of Bristol, there stands a most curious monument. The twenty-first-century visitor enters the cemetery from a busy road, passing through a neoclassical gate and then strolling the grand Ceremonial Way that leads into the cemetery’s wooded depths. Suddenly, he sees it off to the right—a limestone *chhatri* (dome or canopy) topped with a thicket of spires, flanked by somebody else’s angel (figure 1). Underneath, the visitor finds a rectangular plinth inscribed with these words:

Beneath this stone rest the remains of Raja Rammohun Roy, Bahadoor. A conscientious and steadfast believer in the unity of the godhead, he consecrated his life with entire devotion to the worship of the divine spirit alone. To great natural talents, he united thorough mastery of many languages and early distinguished himself as one of the greatest scholars of his day. His unwearied labours to promote the social, moral, and physical condition of the people of India, his earnest endeavors to suppress idolatry and the rite of suttee, and his constant zealous advocacy of whatever tended to advance the glory of God and the welfare of man live in the grateful remembrance of his



Figure 1. Tomb of Rammohun Roy, Arnos Vale Cemetery, Bristol. Photo by author, 2016.

countrymen. This tablet records the sorrow and pride with which his memory is cherished by his descendants. He was born at Radhanagare in Bengal in 1774, and died at Bristol September 27th 1833.

Any student of South Asia knows the name of Rammohun Roy, the so-called “Father of Modern India.” Rising to prominence in Calcutta in the 1810s and 1820s, Roy traveled to Britain in 1830 as an ambassador of the Mughal emperor. While there, he unexpectedly took sick with a fever and died. Because cremation was then illegal in Britain, Roy’s body could not be immolated according to brahminical rites. Instead, it was buried—twice. First, the remains were put to rest beneath a “shrubby” on an English country estate. Then, a decade later, they were transferred to the newly founded Arnos Vale Cemetery, where (rumors to the contrary notwithstanding) they almost certainly reside to this day.¹

In the nearly two centuries since his death, Roy’s many enthusiasts (Indian nationalists, British multiculturalists, neo-Vedantins, Brahmos, Unitarians, and more) have lavished attention on his gravesite, turning his tomb into a site of public memory that is also a site of structured amnesia, a palimpsest of half-

¹When Roy’s monument was lifted off the ground during a 2007–2008 restoration so that rusted iron rods inside its columns could be replaced, his intact coffin was visible below. Cemetery staff inferred that his body remains inside. Janine Marriott (Public Engagement Manager at Arno’s Vale Cemetery Trust), in discussion with author, Bristol, England, 15 May 2018.

forgotten pasts.² Roy's corpse indexes the intercontinental intimacies of empire, standing in for the many bodies that colonialism put out of place.³ His dislocated bones thus chafe against nationalist narratives that presume an identity of peoples and places, whether in postimperial Britain or postcolonial India.

Consider the group of Brahma Samajists—members of the religious society that Roy founded—who in 1946, on the eve of India's Independence, requested that the British government repatriate his remains. (Bureaucrats dithered about how to respond to their request until, come 1947, their jurisdiction was moot).⁴ By the 1940s, Roy had become a symbol of the postcolonial nation-state. He was the "Father of Modern India," an epithet in circulation by 1903 that was cemented during his 1933 death centennial.⁵ This epithet entailed an anachronism. Roy, as Brian Hatcher has argued, hailed from "India before India," with his sense of country or *desh* "conceptually both larger and smaller than what we think of as India today."⁶ He thus became an "Indian" only after his death—a process that could be said to have begun in 1872, when the inscribed plinth was added to the circa 1844 *chhatra*. Attesting to the "remembrance" of Roy's "countrymen," the plinth echoed the broader emergence of the nationalist movement in the 1870s and 1880s.

What kind of Indian nation does Roy symbolize? Presumably a nation that, like him, is polyglot, cosmopolitan, and—although here we come to another anachronism—secular. If casting a brahmin man as an emblem of Indian secularism seems to build that secularism around a constitutive contradiction, this is no mistake. What is now understood as a distinctively "Indian" secularism emerged between roughly the 1920s and 1960s around Gandhian ideals of pluralist tolerance and respect for all religions. It was a means both of marking India's national difference from Britain and managing the religious and caste diversity of the postcolonial nation-state. Like other national secularisms, this secularism seems to have reinforced existing hegemonies—in this case, by locating the roots of its tolerance ideal in a culturalized form of liberal-pluralist Hinduism.⁷ Indian secularism's idealized liberal Hinduism redeployed a set of nineteenth-century rhetorics developed by Brahma Samajists and other (mostly male, bourgeois, and dominant-caste) Hindu reformers. Roy's caste body concretized this tangled genealogy, distilling its internal tensions.

Another such history of re-memorialization became visible in the 1980s and 1990s, when citizens of Bristol repositioned Roy's tomb as a symbol for their city's multicultural identity. In 1997, Bristol even erected a statue of Roy in a prominent square and placed a bust of his head in the city council building (prompting some resistance from white Bristolians, one of whom insisted that Roy be replaced with

²Pierre Nora, "Between History and Memory," *Representations* 26 (Spring 1989): 7–24.

³Lisa Lowe, *Intimacies of Four Continents* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015).

⁴British Library, London, India Office Records/L/PJ/7/10869/1946–47/80.

⁵See Bipin Chandra Pal quotation in "Ranade and Ram Mohun Roy," *Christian Register* 82 (Boston), 16 Apr. 1903: 450–51; and Satishchandra Chakravarty, ed., *The Father of Modern India: Commemoration Volume of the Rammohun Roy Centenary Celebrations* (Calcutta: Rammohun Roy Centenary Committee, 1935).

⁶Brian Hatcher, *Hinduism before Reform* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2020), 42.

⁷Shabnum Tejani, *Indian Secularism: A Social and Intellectual History, 1890–1950* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008); C. S. Adcock, *The Limits of Tolerance: Indian Secularism and the Politics of Religious Freedom* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).

Bristol-born Cary Grant). Initially galvanized by the 1983 sesquicentennial of Roy's death, these public celebrations eventually resulted in the 2007–2008 restoration of the Arnos Vale *chhatra*.⁸

From the 1960s forward, multiculturalism emerged as a key paradigm whereby the postwar British state could manage the collapse of empire.⁹ Linked to shifting legal regimes of citizenship that increasingly curtailed the right of British-colonial subjects to reside in Britain itself, multiculturalism provided a means of both regulating domestic racial diversity and implicitly detaching the question of race from the history of empire. Liberal multiculturalism often functions as a depoliticizing discourse, reifying cultural difference and granting only certain kinds of difference official recognition.¹⁰ In 1970s and 1980s Britain, its foregrounding of “culture” deflected from questions of “race” and thus helped to produce a rhetorical disaggregation of Black and Asian Britons around the culturized category “ethnicity.”¹¹ Emerging from this historical conjuncture, the British-multicultural Roy thus served several functions as once. A point of pride for Bristol's South Asian community, he was also a means whereby white Bristol could selectively narrate its imperial past. Indeed, Roy would seem a convenient object of adulation in that he distracts from Bristol's more queasily obvious connection to empire: alongside Liverpool, it was Britain's preeminent Atlantic slave port.

Precisely because Roy's tomb generatively refracts these twentieth-century political imaginaries, it remains an interesting site for critical inquiry in the present. Yet, as I will argue, these contemporary Roys (secular-nationalist, liberal-multicultural) also obscure an earlier set of what, following Talal Asad, could be called formations of the secular.¹² Here, I work to excavate these lost historical worlds, approaching the contemporary horizon from an oblique angle to see it in new perspective, especially around questions of “religio-racial” difference.¹³ “Religion” and the “secular” are, as Asad and others have shown, conceptual conjoined twins that emerged together between roughly the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries as part of a broad reordering of the social field in the age of empire.¹⁴ Roy's two gravesites, the shrubbery and the *chhatra*, participated in these historic shifts. They marked their soil as situated between the religious and the secular, in a manner specific to their historical moment.

⁸Lynn Zastoupil, *Rammohun Roy and the Making of Victorian Britain* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 163–65; Rohit Barot, “Memory of Raja Rammohun Roy in Bristol” (unpub. MSS).

⁹Richard Ashcroft and Mark Bevir, eds., *Multiculturalism in the British Commonwealth* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2019).

¹⁰Elizabeth Povinelli, *The Cunning of Recognition: Indigenous Alterities and the Making of Australian Multiculturalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002); Wendy Brown, *Regulating Aversion: Tolerance in the Age of Identity and Empire* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006).

¹¹Paul Gilroy, “*There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack*”: *The Cultural Politics of Race and Nation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991).

¹²Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003).

¹³For the “religio-racial,” see Judith Weisenfeld, *New World A-Coming: Black Religion and Racial Identity during the Great Migration* (New York: NYU Press, 2016).

¹⁴Talal Asad, “Reading a Modern Classic: W. C. Smith's *Meaning and End of Religion*,” *History of Religions* 40, 3 (2001): 205–22. For secularism between Britain and India, see especially Gauri Viswanathan, *Outside the Fold: Conversion, Modernity, and Belief* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998); and Peter van der Veer, *Imperial Encounters: Religion and Modernity in India and Britain* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001).

Despite a rich scholarship on Roy's life, there is still no comprehensive account of his death and afterlives. This article brings that corporeal history into clearer view to develop an argument about what I describe as "heterodoxies of the body." With this term, I mean both to conjure a historically specific mid-nineteenth-century milieu and also to develop a conceptual space for thinking about the constitutive entanglement of religious dissent with embodied infrastructures of race, caste, class, and gender. My discussion moves in loosely chronological order, from Roy's initial 1833 burial to his 1843 reburial and onward to the emergence of pilgrimage practices around the second grave by the 1860s. Conceptualized from Bristol, this article pays relatively more attention to Britain than to Bengal, aiming to read the metropole via the colony in the tradition of postcolonial cultural criticism.

From Bengal to Bristol: Itineraries of a Transcolonial "Raja"

To historians, Rammohun Roy has often seemed a kaleidoscopic figure, a man of shifting and shimmering parts: cosmopolitan liberal, social crusader, colonial ventriloquist, Unitarian fellow-traveler, Vedantin theologian, theorist of global selfhood, Georgian-era celebrity, polymath, modern man.¹⁵ These multiple legacies attest both to his variegated life and his several afterlives.

Born in 1772 or 1774 to the brahmin family of Ramakanta Roy and Tarini Devi in the Bengali town of Radhanagar, Roy was trained from an early age for a multilingual bureaucratic career spanning Persian, Arabic, and Sanskrit. His profession was augured by his very name: the honorific title of *rai* or Roy had been bestowed on an ancestor by the Nawab of Murshidabad, to recognize the family's service to his realm.¹⁶ Roy's earliest extant publication, *Tuhfat-ul-muwahhidin* (A gift to monotheists), is a Persian-language tract that develops a rationalist account of the origins of religion. Published in Murshidabad around 1804, it dates to roughly the same moment that Roy became the official *munshi* or clerk to East India Company employee John Digby. The two men spent the next decade traveling together to various upcountry towns, moving deep into the Company's interior territories and beyond.¹⁷

In 1814, Roy relocated to the colonial metropolis of Calcutta and embarked upon what would become the defining period of his career. Over the next sixteen years, he founded the Brahma Samaj; launched three periodicals in English, Bengali, and Persian (the first printed Persian journal in the world); and advocated for press freedom and English education. He also became a vocal critic of Hindu orthodoxy, especially in debates about the practice of widow-burning or "suttee." Befriending British Unitarians, whom he saw as allies in a joint struggle against polytheism, Roy published his own version of the Christian gospels, *The Precepts of Jesus* (1823). He

¹⁵David Kopf, *The Brahma Samaj and the Shaping of the Modern Indian Mind* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979), 3–15; Bruce Robertson, *Raja Rammohun Ray: The Father of Modern India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1995); Andrew Sartori, *Bengal in Global Concept History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 68–108; C. A. Bayly, *Recovering Liberties: Indian Thought in the Age of Liberalism and Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012); Amiya Sen, *Rammohun Roy: A Critical Biography* (Delhi: Viking, 2012); Milinda Banerjee, "'All this Is Indeed Brahman': Rammohun Roy and a 'Global' History of the Rights-Bearing Self," *Asian Review of World Histories* 3, 1 (2015): 81–112.

¹⁶Hatcher, *Hinduism before Reform*, 134.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, 14.

also became increasingly attuned to global politics—criticizing British colonialism in Ireland, celebrating constitutional revolutions in the Iberian Atlantic, and waxing enthusiastic over France’s 1830 July Revolution.

When Roy left for Britain, in 1830, he did so both as an extension of these global interests and to escalate his advocacy for social causes back home. He would fight for the right of Indians to sit on juries in Company courtrooms, despite white resistance. He would urge Parliament to uphold Bengal’s 1829 ban on suttee, assuring them that its traditionalist defenders did not represent the “sentiments” of all Hindus.¹⁸ He would also serve as envoy for the Mughal emperor Akbar Shah II, petitioning the East India Company to increase the emperor’s annual stipend. To mark his new status, Akbar Shah bestowed upon Roy the honorific title of “Raja” or king.¹⁹

Boarding the *Albion* in Calcutta in November 1830, Roy disembarked in Liverpool in April 1831. He arrived to near-instant celebrity, with pictures of him (as an associate remarked) “exhibited in every print shop in the place”: an 1822 side-portrait had preceded Roy to Britain, circulating in Unitarian publications.²⁰ More portraits would follow, including a miniature ivory “mechanical sculpture” made by inventor Benjamin Cheverton.²¹ For sixteenth months, Roy’s social calendar was packed with meetings with British luminaries: Jeremy Bentham, William Wilberforce, Robert Owen, James Mill, Benjamin Disraeli, George III, Harriet Martineau. Indeed, he was so overbooked that some less-prominent persons—like rising House of Commons star Thomas Babington Macaulay—got turned away.²² Roy also had ample official business. Arriving in Britain as Parliament prepared to renew the East India Company’s charter in 1833, he provided written testimony to the select committee investigating the Company’s affairs; Company officials thus tried to court his favor and even threw a dinner party in his honor.²³

In 1831, Bristol Unitarians Catherine Castle and Ann Kiddell sent Roy an invitation to visit their country estate of Stapleton Grove and stay with them at Beech House, its main residence. When Roy returned his regrets, the ladies commissioned London-based artist Henry Perronet Briggs to paint a full-length portrait of their would-be houseguest. Almost eight feet high, the painting depicts Roy in a studio setting, standing before an Orientalized landscape while holding a book (figure 2). (Roy, reportedly, did not care for the likeness).²⁴ In 1832, the portrait was exhibited at the Royal Academy.²⁵ It then seems to have been returned to Castle and Kiddell, who presumably displayed it at Beech House.

Two years would pass before Roy belatedly accepted Castle and Kiddell’s invitation. He arrived at Stapleton Grove in September 1833 (perhaps to discover his own visage on the wall?). By this time, his busy schedule had taken a toll on his

¹⁸Jogendra Chunder Ghose, ed., *English Works of Raja Rammohun Roy* (Allahabad: Panini Office, 1906), 479–80; Zastoupil, *Rammohun*, 117–20.

¹⁹Jatindra Kumar Majumdar, *Raja Rammohun Roy and the Last Moghuls: A Selection from Official Records (1803–1859)* (Delhi: Anmol, 1987).

²⁰Zastoupil, *Rammohun*, 2–3, 41–43.

²¹David Wilson, *A Portrait of Raja Rammohun Roy* (London: David Wilson Fine Art, 2013).

²²Zastoupil, *Rammohun*, 4.

²³*Ibid.*, 120.

²⁴F. Max Müller, *Biographical Essays* (New York: Charles Scribner, 1884), 3 n1.

²⁵Zastoupil, *Rammohun*, 47.



Figure 2. Briggs, Henry Perronet. *Portrait of Rammohun Roy*. 1832 / © Bristol Museums, Galleries & Archives / Given by Miss A. Kiddell to the Bristol Institution (forerunner of the City Museum), 1841, and transferred to Bristol Art Gallery, 1905 / Bridgeman Images.

health, or so his friends worried.²⁶ An 1833 portrait by U.S. painter Rembrandt Peale seems to depict a sicklier, heavier man than Briggs had captured a year or more earlier (figure 3).²⁷

Whatever the reason, Roy fell ill with a brain fever while at Beech House (latter-day diagnosticians have dubbed it meningitis). Soon his travels, and his life, would be at an end.

First Burial: A Silent Home beneath a Shrubbery

“It was,” as surgeon John Estlin later wrote in his journal, “a beautiful moonlight night.” If one looked out the window, one saw a “calm rural midnight scene.”

²⁶Ibid., 2; Robertson, *Raja Rammohun*, 48.

²⁷Zastoupil, *Rammohun*, 50–52.



Figure 3. Peale, Rembrandt. *Half Portrait of Rammohun Roy*. 1833. Courtesy of Peabody Essex Museum, Salem, Mass.

Meanwhile, inside there was “this extraordinary man *dying*. I shall never forget the moment.”²⁸ The acclaimed houseguest had developed a fever eight days earlier, and that fever had gotten steadily worse. Now he was declining by the minute, “his breathing more rattling and impeded, his pulse imperceptible.” Medically there was nothing to be done, so at half past one Dr. Estlin yielded to pleas that he get some rest. An hour later, when he was awakened, the sickness had ended. Raja Rammohun Roy was no more. His body, however, persisted—and that posed a problem.

As a brahmin, Roy should have been cremated. While Hindu funerary practices have changed substantially over the millennia (and indeed continue to vary), they eventually settled into a standard set of caste-circumscribed rites. A corpse is washed; a pyre constructed; a set of sacred words uttered; a flame lit. After the ceremony, the bereaved undergo a ritual bath and enter a period of impurity. There are certain exceptions to this orthodox ritual (infants, suicides, ascetics), as well as procedures for death abroad: the deceased’s family should bring his body, or a symbolic thirty-three bones, home; or, alternately, burn a grass effigy in its place.²⁹ None of these rites

²⁸Mary Carpenter, *The Last Days in England of the Rajah Rammohun Roy* (London: Trübner & Co., 1866), 144–46.

²⁹Raj Bali Pandey, *Hindu Samskāras*, 2d ed. (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidas, 1969), 234–74.

seems to have been conducted for Roy. Neither was the simplified cremation ceremony developed by later Brahmos.³⁰

In 1833, cremation was illegal in Britain (it would remain so until 1884). The circle of friends surrounding Roy's deathbed thus faced a funereal predicament. Something would have to be done with the body—but what? Castle, a twenty-year-old whiskey distillery heiress, and Kiddell, her maternal aunt and companion, initially offered in act of hospitality and even radical kinship to have Roy interred in their family vault in Bristol's Unitarian burial ground. They were soon reminded, however, of Roy's dying wishes. To prevent rumors of deathbed conversion to Christianity, he had specifically asked to be buried on a "small piece of freehold ground" near which a cottage could be built for the "residence of some respectable poor person." Following these instructions (if omitting the cottage), Castle thus selected a gravesite for her deceased guest "in a shrubbery near her lawn, and under some fine elms."³¹

Weeks passed as the necessary arrangements were made. Roy died on 27 September but was not buried until 18 October. The intervening period saw several public commemorations, including notices in the *Bristol Mercury* and a eulogy by Reverend Lant Carpenter at Bristol's Unitarian Lewin's Mead Chapel.³² When the burial finally came, it was a wordless affair, conducted by a small circle of mourners. These included Castle and Kiddell, plus prominent Bristol citizens such as Lant and Mary Carpenter; Dr. Estlin, probably accompanied by his mother Susanna; Joseph Henry Jerrard, the president of Bristol College; and Reverend John Foster, a prominent Baptist essayist who lived at Stapleton.³³ It also included three members of Roy's traveling party: Ramhari De, his servant; Ramrattan Mookerjee, variously described as a servant or associate (he later went on to a civil service appointment in India); and Rajaram Roy (b. 1817), an adopted orphan sometimes rumored to have been Roy's illegitimate son, possibly by a Muslim mistress (the archive is unclear and contested on this matter; Rajaram too went on to a bureaucratic career, both in Britain and, less successfully, India). A Muslim servant, Shaikh Baxoo, who arrived with this party in Liverpool seems not to have been at Stapleton Grove.³⁴ Perhaps Rajaram's presence sounded an echo of orthodox cremation rites, wherein the son plays the major role. Alternately, if rumors about his parentage trailed him to the gravesite, perhaps his presence made the burial seem still more heterodox.

The ceremony itself was minimalist. The funeral party followed a gravel walkway to a winding path that led through trees to the burial site. There, the coffin-bearers deposited their load into a newly constructed brick grave. All of this happened "without any ritual, and in silence"—except, apparently, for the audible sobs of

³⁰Kopf, *Brahmo Samaj*, 98; Blair Kling, *Partner in Empire: Dwarkanath Tagore and the Age of Enterprise in Eastern India* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), 237.

³¹Lant Carpenter, *Review of the Labours, Opinions, and Character of Rajah Rammohun Roy in a Discourse on the Occasion of His Death* (London: Browne & Reid, 1833), 122.

³²"Rammohun Roy," *Bristol Mercury*, 14 Sept. 1883; "Rajah Rammohun Roy," *Bristol Mercury*, 5 Oct. 1833.

³³L. Carpenter, *Review*, 122–23.

³⁴For Mookerjee's and Rajaram's later careers, see Michael Fisher, *Counterflows to Colonialism: Indian Travelers and Settlers in Britain, 1600–1857* (Delhi: Permanent Black, 2004), 259, 300–4. For accounts of Rajaram's parentage, see Zastoupil, *Rammohun*, 3; L. Carpenter, *Review*, 115; M. Carpenter, *Last Days*, 173; Sophia Dobson Collet, *Life and Letters of Raja Rammohun Roy*, 2d ed. (Calcutta, 1914), 169–71.

Mookerjee and De, who wept as they leaned against the trees. The coffin was closed, the mourners departed for the house, and the funeral was at an end.

The mourners then gathered in the breakfast room at Beech House. Because there was no way to officially register the burial, witnesses signed copies of an informal record drawn up in case it was needed for some legal purpose.³⁵ Lant Carpenter also read aloud five sonnets that twenty-six-year-old Mary had written upon Roy's passing—much, Mary later recalled, to her own “surprise and confusion.” Her lines did indeed provide a fitting coda to this improvised interment: “To our blest Isle thou didst with transport come/ Here hast thou found thy last, thy silent home.”³⁶ Another poet (a Miss Acland) rendered the scene in even purpler language, describing how the “drooping boughs” of “shadowing elms” served to “shroud his cold remains in sacred gloom.”³⁷

Perhaps Roy's burial was simply the deferral of a final decision about what to do with the body; one could always, after all, cremate later. Yet even as a makeshift affair, this cultural performance opens a window onto its era. What kind of rites were these? How did they ritually configure the silent body at the center of them, as well as the “blest” English soil around him? What is it for a pastoral scene to provide “sacred gloom”?

Secularism, and Other Heterodoxies

As a first pass at answering these questions, I propose that we understand Roy's remains as articulating a “heterodoxy of the body.” If this phrase registers as counterintuitive, that is because heterodoxy denotes divergent belief and thus seems to indicate not bodies but minds. The modern concept of “religion” likewise typically foregrounds belief, thus occluding the body as a site of power.³⁸

To link heterodoxy to the body is to think against the grain of modern common sense by insisting that belief is necessarily an embodied practice that derives its salience from larger socio-political structures. (By this line of thought, describing Roy's burial as “heteroprax” risks reinscribing the distinction between doxa and praxis, as though doxa were not necessarily itself a praxis.) Here, I am especially interested in the structural entanglement of “religion” with “caste” and “race”—historically pliable terms that overlapped throughout the nineteenth century in writing by Jyotirao Phule, Frederick Douglass, and others and which are thus probably all best kept in scare quotes, as per Paul Gilroy's practice with “race.”³⁹ All three concepts intersected in the “Hindu” body, as site for both Bengali and British identity formation.

Roy's heterodox body was situated within a historically specific constellation of bodies, circulating within the networks of what I will describe as *mid-nineteenth-century transcolonial heterodoxy*. (My periodization is deliberately loose, but I am primarily interested in the period from the 1830s to the 1870s). This milieu was

³⁵L. Carpenter, *Review*, 123.

³⁶*Ibid.*, 138–40; M. Carpenter, *Last Days*, 147–60.

³⁷M. Carpenter, *Last Days*, 203–4; *Bristol Mercury*, 10 June 1843.

³⁸Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993).

³⁹Gilroy, *Ain't No Black*. For Douglass and his context, see Hari Ramesh, “India, Racial Caste, and Abolition in Charles Sumner's Political Thought,” *Modern Intellectual History* 19, 3 (2022): 708–33.

comprised of jostling socio-religious movements, including Brahmo Samajists, Unitarians, spiritualists, Chartists, freethinkers, blasphemers, Swedenborgians, Derozians, utopian socialists, charismatic Vaishnavas, and more—a sort of mid-century analogue to the scene of *fin-de-siècle* radicalism.⁴⁰ To mark it as “heterodox” is to note its pervasive spirit of dissent from orthodox mores of various stripes. To mark it as “transcolonial” is to emphasize its entanglement with the embodied infrastructures of empire, with heterodoxy part of a broader “civilizational assemblage of race and religion.”⁴¹

This heterodox assemblage was of critical importance for the cultural histories of both secularism (as political form) and the secular (as epistemic or cultural category) in the anglophone world.⁴² Indeed, the very word *secularism* emerged from this scene. It was coined in 1851 by George Jacob Holyoake to describe the philosophic outlook of Britain’s freethinkers—capturing the critical sensibility of much the same social circles that had welcomed Roy some two decades earlier. The 1869 coinage *agnosticism* would later annex some of this semantic ground, with *secularism* subsequently coming to indicate certain public policies around religion. Given these lexical confusions, I opt for a different period term to describe this milieu: *heterodoxy* (as seen in retrospective surveys like Charles Davies’ *Heterodox London, or, Phases of Free Thought in the Metropolis* [1871]). For a time, one could say, *heterodoxy* and *secularism* functioned as semi-synonyms.

To approach secularism via heterodoxy is, as Gauri Viswanathan has argued, to see how oppositional discourses within “religion” blur the line between religion and its supposed secular others (politics, economy, literature, etc.), thereby articulating mobile ground for dissent. Indeed, Viswanathan suggests, heterodoxy may be “so resistant to stable cultures of belief that it offers a model for a more expansive idea of secularism.”⁴³ Mid-nineteenth-century transcolonial heterodoxy’s expansiveness derived, in no small part, from its unstable relationship to “politics,” as religion’s constitutive other.⁴⁴ Heterodox dissent unfolded from the juxtapolitical space opened up by the modern concept “religion,” availing itself of this space’s porousness and instability.

Roy’s two gravesites, of 1833 and 1843, emerged from these transcolonial currents, constituting a kind of literal heterotopia—a place or *topos* for the concretization of heterodoxy or difference.⁴⁵ “Without any ritual” (i.e., outside “religion”) and beyond formal state structures for regulating death (i.e., outside law), Roy’s first burial would seem to define a space of pure difference, refusing existing norms while declining to articulate new ones. Or at least it attempted to create such a space. Even as Roy’s mourners stripped their rite of verbal signifiers of religious particularity, they enacted the iconic form of a Christian burial. With Roy’s gravesite overdetermined by

⁴⁰Leela Gandhi, *Affective Communities: Anticolonial Thought, Fin-de-Siècle Radicalism, and the Politics of Friendship* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006).

⁴¹Tisa Wenger, *Religious Freedom: The Contested History of an American Ideal* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2017).

⁴²Asad, *Formations*, 2.

⁴³Gauri Viswanathan, “Secularism in the Framework of Heterodoxy,” *PMLA* 123, 2 (2008): 466–76.

⁴⁴Hussein Ali Agrama, *Questioning Secularism: Islam, Sovereignty, and the Rule of Law in Modern Egypt* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012).

⁴⁵Michel Foucault, “Different Spaces,” in James Faubion, ed., *Aesthetics, Method, and Epistemology: Essential Works*, vol. 2 (New York: New Press, 1998), 175–85.

multiple configurations of the religio-racial body, established mores had a way of reasserting themselves.

A “Heterodox Dog”: On Race, Caste, and the Believing Body

To see these mores in action, let us turn to one of the more pungent summaries of Roy’s public predicament—fresh from the lips of Sydney Smith, a clergyman who took umbrage, in 1831, when informed by an acquaintance that meeting him was small consolation for having failed to gain a meeting with the overbooked Bengali:

Compensation! Do you mean to insult me—a beneficed clergyman—an orthodox clergyman—a nobleman’s chaplain—to be no more than compensation for a Brahmin—and a heretic Brahmin too—a fellow who has lost his own religion and can’t find another—a vile heterodox dog who, as I am credibly informed, eats beefsteaks in private—a man who has lost his caste—who ought to have melted lead poured down his nostrils if the good old Vedas were in force as they ought to be.⁴⁶

In denouncing Roy as a “heretic Brahmin” and prescribing “Vedic” (or, more correctly, Shastric) punishment, Smith laid claim to the combined authority of Christian and Hindu orthodoxies—an unorthodox move for an Anglican clergyman, and one that entailed certain conceptual instabilities. The phrase “heretic Brahmin” simultaneously invokes both “religion” and “caste,” with the former concept pulling away from the body even as the latter pulls toward it. As a “heretic,” Roy appears analogous to heterodox Britons, his deviancy deriving from wrong belief. Heresy, however, sits differently on a brahmin, or so Smith implies. It settles into his flesh, with wrong belief displaced by surreptitious beefsteaks.

In the violent fantasia that concludes his tirade, Smith clearly delights in punishing this deviancy of the caste body. He reimagines Roy as a “vile heterodox dog,” less than human and thus open to grotesque violence. This is a racializing move. It also, at least potentially, poaches on the caste-inflected sense of dogs as ritually polluting. It is far from inconceivable that elite-Indian barbs and insults were unconsciously absorbed into the class habitus of elite Britons, with that class habitus thus partly recoded as caste habitus—a brahminization of British flesh.

One might thus venture an against-the-grain reading of Smith’s diatribe and, with it, the broader scene of nineteenth-century British heterodoxy. Smith uses the conceptual gap between white-Christian “faith” (disembodied) and Hindu “caste” (fleshly) to deflect from his own body and reduce Roy to a merely bodily being, a politically unqualified canine animal. What would it look like to disallow this move by emphasizing the intrinsic relationship of British heterodoxies to an embodied politics of race, caste, class, and gender?

The direct object of Smith’s ire was, after all, his umbrageous interlocutor: Thomas Babington Macaulay. Macaulay, an East India Company employee from 1834 to 1837, made his public name starting in 1830 by arguing for lifting civil disabilities from British Jews (as had been done for Catholics in 1828). These proposals caused consternation in Parliament from those worried that welcoming “alien” Jews into the

⁴⁶Thomas Pinney, *Selected Letters of Thomas Babington Macaulay* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 57–59.

House of Commons would effectively open its doors to “all British subjects,” whether born “in Quebec, Jamaica, Calcutta, or Bombay.”⁴⁷ Macaulay was working to develop a new vision of a post-Protestant British Empire, in which the alignment of whiteness, Englishness, and Anglicanism would be loosened and rearticulated.⁴⁸ The orthodox Smith thus had good reasons to dislike this homegrown heretic and rhetorically abuse him. Macaulay too was a “vile heterodox dog.” Furious at being made substitutable for Roy, Smith countered by substituting Roy for Macaulay.

By this reading, Smith’s Protestant rectitude gains its force by wishing violence on all heterodox flesh, tactically aligning itself with dominant-caste mores to shore up Englishness as religio-racial habitus. Smith redeploys a dominant-caste imaginary of bodily abjection to bolster his orthodox whiteness. His “religion” was a transcolonial bodily practice, a biomoral property more akin to “race” and “caste” than he realized.

Religion as Family Property

Both in this heated interchange and more broadly, Roy cathected a larger set of historical anxieties. He was a site around which Britons could debate heterodoxy, empire, and the limits of the nation. He was also, importantly, a heterodox subject in his own right. A voraciously eclectic intellectual, Roy read broadly in multiple languages and made generative use of the space that opened up between them. His literary experiments were also lived experiments, occasions for inhabiting a heterodox habitus. Expressed through the body and its material connections, these experiments were thus implicated in gendered networks of kinship.

Religion in colonial India was a family property—and in two senses. First, to be “Hindu” was to be marked by caste. As recent research suggests, this term referred *only* to dominant-caste groups well into the twentieth century.⁴⁹ Taking Hindu as a “religious” identity tends to obscure this fact. If caste was a “biomoral” property written into the body by both behavior and blood, and thus intrinsically linked to the heteropatriarchal joint family, then so too was Hinduism.⁵⁰

Second, colonial-era property regimes foregrounded religio-familial status.⁵¹ Starting in the 1780s, the East India Company governed its Hindu and Muslim subjects according to what it understood as their traditional religious laws, the scope of which it increasingly restricted to family matters like marriage, divorce, and inheritance.⁵² A person’s religious status determined their access to family property. Conversion and heterodoxy in colonial India were thus never merely

⁴⁷J. Barton Scott, *Slandering the Sacred: Blasphemy Law and Religious Affect in Colonial India* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2023), 91.

⁴⁸Viswanathan, *Outside the Fold*, 3–43; Scott, *Slandering*, 79–104.

⁴⁹Joel Lee, *Deceptive Majority: Dalits, Hinduism, and Underground Religion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021).

⁵⁰McKim Marriott, “Hindu Transactions,” in Bruce Kapferer, ed., *Transaction and Meaning* (Philadelphia: Institute for the Study of Human Issues, 1979), 109–42.

⁵¹Ritu Birla, *Stages of Capital: Law, Culture, and Market Governance in Late Colonial India* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009).

⁵²Julia Stephens, *Governing Islam: Law Empire and Secularism in South Asia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 57–85.

individual affairs, but rather highly overdetermined by legal and other institutional structures.⁵³

Roy knew this all too well. In a circa 1832 letter, he explained how his youthful questioning of Hindu orthodoxy prompted his father Ramakanta to temporarily disown him.⁵⁴ When Ramakanta died in 1803, family property shifted to his sons, but their mother Tarini Devi opposed Rammohun's inheritance.⁵⁵ To prevent it, she brought suits in Crown and Company courts alleging that Rammohun was an "apostate" and thus unable to inherit under Hindu law. The suit failed, and mother and son eventually reconciled prior to her 1822 death.⁵⁶ By this time, however, Rammohun had a new set of inheritance concerns: he had sons himself, by his second wife. Radhaprasad (b. 1800) and Ramaprasad (b. 1812) would, along with his third wife Uma Devi, outlive him.⁵⁷ There was also Rajaram, his adopted or perhaps illegitimate son. Roy's actions in England affected all these relations.

In traveling to Britain, Roy was a pioneer. It was unusual, if not unprecedented, for such a prominent brahmin to risk caste status through the ritual pollution that would almost certainly result from moving among *mleccha* barbarians. At the very least, he would need to undergo a *prayashchit* or atonement ceremony upon returning home. Food was a particular problem. To solve it, Roy's traveling party included two servants to cook for him and (at least when they boarded the ship in Calcutta) two cows. Arriving in Britain, Roy cut an abstemious figure, appearing in public "surrounded by hearty feeders upon turtle and venison and champagne and touching nothing himself but rice and cold water."⁵⁸

Even if he himself did not take such brahminical mores seriously, Roy could not risk the chatter of critics back home—until, that is, finances intervened. At the time of his death, Roy was, as Sanskrit scholar H. H. Wilson recalled, "embarrassed for money" and thus "obliged to borrow of his friends," as well as accept their food.⁵⁹ His financial predicament seems to have had several causes, including a predatory secretary (Sandford Arnot) and a failed British banking house.⁶⁰ Family was an

⁵³Viswanathan, *Outside the Fold*.

⁵⁴Robertson, *Rammohun*, 5–6, 12; Müller, *Biographical Sketches*, 43–44. I follow Robertson in taking this letter as a viable source despite its having been transcribed by Roy's ne'er-do-well secretary, Sandford Arnot.

⁵⁵For the legal and financial complexities of this inheritance, see Rama Prasad Chanda and Jatindra Kumar Majumdar, eds., *Raja Rammohun Roy: Letters and Documents* (Delhi: Anmol, 1987).

⁵⁶Robertson, *Rammohun*, 12, 19; William Adam, *A Lecture on the Life and Labours of Rammohun Roy* (Calcutta: G. P. Roy, 1879), 6.

⁵⁷Most biographies, if they mention Roy's wives at all, repeat Collett's claim that he was married thrice sequentially, with his first two wives dying before he married Uma Devi. Robertson, by contrast, working with Bengali sources, reports that Roy was married to all three girls when he was nine, in keeping with the practice of Kulin brahmin polygamy. Given mid-century efforts to reform that practice, it seems entirely conceivable that Collett or her interlocutors narratively reworked Roy's 1780s nuptials. He may have married at least his first two wives concurrently. See Collet, *Life*, 6–10; Robertson, *Raja Rammohun*, 14; Chanda and Majumdar, *Raja Rammohun*, xxxiv. For social reformist debates, see Ishvarachandra Vidyasagar, *Against High-Caste Polygamy*, Brian Hatcher, trans. (New York: Oxford, 2023).

⁵⁸*Asiatic Journal*, Aug. 1831, in Brajendranath Banerji, *Rajah Rammohun Roy's Mission to England* (Calcutta: N. M. Raychowdhury, 1926), 31.

⁵⁹Collett, *Life*, 220–21.

⁶⁰Fisher, *Counterflows*, 254–57.

added problem: Roy's sons neglected to send him money from the family's Calcutta accounts, despite the Mughal pension his ambassadorship had garnered them.⁶¹

Finance problems were family problems were caste problems were religion problems. When Roy asked for a simple burial on "freehold ground," he was operating within the constrained space defined by these overlapping social fields. He could not afford an expensive funeral. Neither could he afford certain kinds of hospitality, like being interred in the Castles' Unitarian family vault. A Christian burial would risk ritually transforming his brahmin body into another kind of flesh—potentially endangering both his public legacy and his family's finances. While alive, Roy skillfully negotiated the fraught cultural space demarcated by "conversion" to his own advantage, pivoting between cultural, religious, and linguistic frameworks when speaking to different kinds of audiences. His corpse, newly vulnerable to the words of others, could rely on no such rhetorical finesse.

All of these histories were concretized in a single object. When Roy died, "the thread of his caste" was observed around his body, "passing over his left shoulder and under his right," and thus marking him, in Bengal, as a brahmin man.⁶² The Stapleton Grove burial was designed so as not to metaphorically unravel this sacred thread. At the shrubbery, a group of white Unitarians were stepping gingerly around caste norms in the name of cosmopolitan sympathy, trying to avoid any ritual alteration in the body of the deceased.

The "Stranger's Hand": Caste Cosmopolitanism at Stapleton Grove

The caste body thus became a conceptual hinge for these Unitarians' own religio-political projects. In the early nineteenth century, certain British Protestants began styling themselves as "cosmopolites," thus laying claim to political ideals more often associated with the Continental Enlightenment (e.g., Kant's "cosmopolitics"). Missionaries—although not necessarily those most active in Bengal—were especially keen on this rhetoric, using it to burnish their reputation as unsophisticated lower-middle-class enthusiasts. They thereby domesticated select ideals of the French Revolution, rendering cosmopolitanism comfortably English by depoliticizing and sentimentalizing it. Missionary cosmopolitanism emphasized affect, asking British Protestants to broaden their sympathies from the family unit to all mankind.⁶³

Roy's Unitarian associates differed in many ways from their Baptist, Methodist, and Anglican contemporaries, yet they were committed to a similar affective project. Roy's body appeared to them as a site for the production of cosmopolitan sentiment—often a gendered procedure. Take the case of Lucy Aikin (b. 1781), a popular historian and author of such works as *Epistles on Women* (1810). She hosted Roy several times at her Hampstead salon and was particularly impressed with his denunciation of suttee and general "feeling for women," through which he "won our hearts."⁶⁴ The exotic visitor seems to have produced a strong affective response in

⁶¹ Collett, *Life*, 220–21.

⁶² L. Carpenter, *Review*, 101. On the specificity of caste structures in Bengal, see Hitesranjan Sanyal, *Social Mobility in Bengal* (Calcutta: Papyrus, 1981).

⁶³ Winter Jade Werner, *Missionary Cosmopolitanism in Nineteenth-Century British Literature* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2020).

⁶⁴ Zastoupil, *Rammohun*, 88–90.

Aiken. “Just now my feelings are more cosmopolitan than usual,” she wrote in 1831. “I take a personal concern in a third quarter of the globe, since I have seen the excellent Rammohun Roy.”⁶⁵ Aiken’s feeling for Roy expanded outward into the distant masses that his racialized body metonymized as it entered the intimate space of her English home. One sees why the press speculated that she had fallen in love with, and perhaps even secretly married, him (a story reprinted as far away as Tasmania).⁶⁶ With its sexist undertones, that rumor clearly deflected from the political project evident in Aiken’s cosmopolitan affect. Still, it is possible that her feelings did fuse erotic to political desire, each amplifying the other.

Such desires continued to circulate around Roy’s gravesite, with several unmarried British women authoring poems about the deceased celebrity. At least one of these took caste as a trope for imagining her utopian cosmopolitan community:

Yes: far from Ganges’ consecrated wave,
Beneath our pallid groves and norther skies,
A stranger’s hand hath laid thee in the grave,
And strangers’ tears have wept thine obsequies
A stranger? No! thy caste was human kind—
Thy home wherever Freedom’s beacon shine.⁶⁷

Here, Miss Acland (whom we encountered above, writing about “sacred gloom”) seems aware that the touch implicit in the “stranger’s hand” might be supercharged by caste and its sensory regimes. As though to neutralize that charge, she insists that Roy’s only caste is “human kind,” a collective of strangers thereby defined around common touch. The circle of mourners around his gravesite appears as a metonym for this caste of strangers. By the logic of the poem, Acland and Roy are of the same caste: human. Here, Acland takes “caste” as a means of recoding a mode of difference more usually defined via “race.”

Where Acland took caste as a metaphor for this transcendent humanity, another poet—a “Miss Dale”—looked to a more obviously pertinent Hindu custom: cremation. Her poem on “The Interment of Raja Rammohun Roy” describes his mourners’ sentiments creating a kind of funeral pyre: “All silently the sacrifice arose/ From kindling hearts, in one pure flame, to Heaven.” Here, Dale sublimates cremation’s gross corporeality by transmogrifying its flames into “pure” (and silent) feeling. She then takes this transcendence of mere flesh to spell out her cosmopolitan vision, wherein the “varying hues” imposed by “frail” human senses “o’er things divine” dissolve to reveal an underlying unity. Dale closes the poem by seeming to equate Roy’s body to God, the “narrow” grave enclosing “Him, whose diffusive love had all mankind embraced.”⁶⁸

Dale’s primary point of reference for the Hindu cremation pyre was likely the rite that became infamously known as “suttee,” a major obsession of the British press in the 1810s and 1820s. Correctly speaking, the *sati* is the woman who mounts the funeral pyre of her deceased husband in the caste-specific rite of *sahagamana* or

⁶⁵Collett, *Life*, lxxiv.

⁶⁶Zastoupil, *Rammohun*, 3, 90; Daniel White, *From Little London to Little Bengal: Religion, Print, and Modernity in Early British India, 1799–1835* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013), 176–77.

⁶⁷*Bristol Mercury*, 10 June 1843.

⁶⁸M. Carpenter, *Last Days*, 202–3.

sahamarana, “going/dying with.”⁶⁹ Roy proposed “concremation” as an English translation of this term. He and his interlocutors, including Aiken, wrote extensively about the topic.

Suttee was typically depicted as grotesquely corporeal—stinking with what Herman Melville described in 1851 (referring to cremation more generally) as “an unspeakable, wild, Hindoo odor”⁷⁰—as well as horrifyingly loud, defined by the screams of the woman thrust unwillingly on the flames. Sophia Collet deployed these tropes in her much later account of Roy’s defining experience of suttee. In 1811, he watched his brother Jaganmohan’s wife die: “her orthodox relations and the priests forced her down with bamboo poles” as “drums and brazen instruments were loudly sounded to drown her shrieks.”⁷¹ Appalled, Roy resolved to abolish the custom. If this scene drove his later career as social reformer, he was not alone. Suttee was *the* defining issue for critiques of orthodoxy in early nineteenth-century Bengal, the gendered ground on which the tradition/modernity binary as such emerged.⁷²

Suttee staged a primal scene where (as Gayatri Spivak succinctly summarizes) “white men are saving brown women from brown men.”⁷³ Roy’s first gravesite might be taken as a kind of inversion of this scene. At Stapleton Grove, two white women (Castle and Kiddell) were saving a brown man from the consequences of *not* being burned. Whereas, in India, suttee articulated a reformist paradigm that would eventually transform cremation—sanitizing, modernizing, and democratizing it—in Britain a different set of pressures emerged. Non-cremation would come to appear as the superstitious custom that needed reforming: burial expressed a theological mandate, a Christian eschatology of the resurrected body. Reformers sought to displace it with cremation, as modern funerary rite.

At Stapleton Grove, Castle, Kiddell, and company were experimenting with cremation of a different kind. They would incinerate Roy’s corpse with cosmopolitan sentiment, taking his burial as an occasion for imagining an ethereal, utopian, and even semi-divine coming community. Their caste of humanity pulled away from bodies in their “varying hues,” even as it remained rooted in the body as site of touch and desire.

On “Freehold Ground”: Slavery and Stapleton Grove

In their utopian dreaming, these white bourgeois subjects gazed away from the ground on which they stood as they buried Roy. Yet that ground’s material history was significant. As property, it was linked to the Atlantic slave trade that undergirded Bristol’s economy well into the nineteenth century. Bristol ships carried half a million people across the Atlantic and into slavery. The city’s warehouses were full of slave-grown tobacco, cocoa, and sugar. Its factories made copper sheaths for slave-ship

⁶⁹John Hawley, ed., *Sati, the Blessing and Curse: The Burning of Wives in India* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994).

⁷⁰David Arnold, *Burning the Dead: Hindu Nationhood and the Global Construction of Indian Tradition* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2021), xv.

⁷¹Collet, *Life*, 22.

⁷²Lata Mani, *Contentious Traditions: The Debate on Sati in Colonial India* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998).

⁷³Gayatri Chakraborty Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?,” in Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg, eds., *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 271–313.

hulls, as well as glass ornaments, brandy, and gunpowder for trading on the African coast. Its suburbs housed one of Britain's largest concentrations of absentee West Indian landowners.⁷⁴

Stapleton Grove was among the many Bristol country estates with links to slavery. In the mid-eighteenth century it was owned by Joseph Kill—a Quaker who, in the 1750s, was one of eight major donors to Bristol's Quaker meeting to join the Society of Merchants Trading to Africa.⁷⁵ (As historian Madge Dresser notes, "ties of economy, kinship, and politesse meant that the social gap between slave-traders and Quakers in Bristol was not ... as absolute as modern readers might assume").⁷⁶ In the 1760s, Kill's daughter Hannah and her husband Joseph Harford inherited Stapleton Grove. The Harford family fortune derived from the Bristol Brass Company, which was founded by two of Kill's fellow Quaker slavers, Nehemiah Champion and Edward Lloyd.⁷⁷ Joseph Harford stood with the abolitionists, or at least was chairman of the Bristol antislavery committee.⁷⁸ Still, his financial position was owed at least in part to the slave trade. His family firm's profitable mines, smelters, and brass works would almost certainly have produced brass used in slave ships' copper hulls, as well as for copper trading on the West African coast.

In July 1833, just before Roy arrived at Stapleton Grove, slavery was abolished across the British Empire (except in India, where caste-based agrestic slavery remained legal into the 1840s and was practiced for much longer).⁷⁹ The estate's links to slavery were, however, not yet finished. Young Catherine Castle (b. 1812), the whiskey heiress, died in the house in 1834.⁸⁰ Although her will favored the Kiddell side of the family, it left Stapleton Grove to the Castles—specifically to Michael Hinton Castle, who seems to have taken possession of the estate sometime between 1834 and 1836.⁸¹ Hinton Castle was a Bristol distiller who owned a Trinidad plantation with 243 enslaved Black workers. When these workers were emancipated in 1833, the British government paid Castle £11,000 in reparations.⁸²

⁷⁴Madge Dresser, *Slavery Obscured: The Social History of the Slave Trade in an English Provincial Port* (London: Continuum, 2001).

⁷⁵*Ibid.*, 131, 156 n5.

⁷⁶*Ibid.*, 132.

⁷⁷Peter Wakelin, "Harford Family," in David Cannadine, ed., *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), <https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/47495>.

⁷⁸*Ibid.*

⁷⁹See Andrea Major, *Slavery, Abolitionism, and Empire in India, 1772–1843* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2012); Rupa Viswanath, *The Pariah Problem: Caste, Religion, and the Social in Modern India* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014).

⁸⁰*Borrow's Worcester Journal*, 18 Dec. 1834; *Cheltenham Chronicle*, 25 Dec. 1834. For Catherine's inheritance, see *Bristol Mercury*, 26 May 1821; *Morning Chronicle* (London), 8 Nov. 1823. For an effort to lease Stapleton Grove, see "Advertisements and Notices," *Bristol Mercury*, 11 and 18 Oct. 1824; 10, 24, and 31 Jan. and 7 Feb. 1825.

⁸¹See the mentions in "Died," *Bristol Mercury*, 30 Apr. 1836, and "Agricultural Intelligence," 8 June 1842. Ann Kiddell moved to Devon County, dying there in 1847; see "Notices," *Bristol Mercury*, 9 June 1849.

⁸²Castle descendent and amateur historian Colin Salter has reconstructed this family history, including the Castles' history as enslavers, and cites letters from the private family collection on his blog. See <https://talltalesfromthetrees.blogspot.com/>. For the legal contest around Castle's will, see also *Sanders v. Kiddell* (1835), S.C. 5 L. J. Ch. 29, *English Reports* vol. 58 (Edinburgh: William Green, 1905), 943–44; and "Notice," *Bristol Mercury*, 7 Feb. 1835.

Before he died, Roy spent a full week with William Wilberforce, abolitionism's famed champion in Parliament. Meeting Wilberforce, Roy said, meant more than "an introduction to all the Monarchs in Europe."⁸³ There was some irony, then, in his being buried on "freehold ground" that belonged to a former enslaver. One might further ask who precisely was laboring on Hinton Castle's Trinidad plantation after 1833, when many plantations that previously relied on enslaved Black labor began recruiting indentured South Asians, many or most from oppressed-caste communities. The first "coolies" arrived in Mauritius in 1834. Like Roy, these laborers would have been buried, but for different reasons. Cremation was legally restricted in plantation colonies; it was also a dominant-caste custom observed by only a minority of South Asians. One recent study estimates that, prior to the late nineteenth century, only a third to a half of Indians in urban areas, and far fewer in rural ones, would have cremated their dead.⁸⁴

Placing Roy in this wider context clarifies the extent to which his heterodoxies, and those of his Unitarian friends, were buoyed and secured by their bourgeois status. Roy's posthumous fate was quite different, for instance, from that of Sarah Baartman, the South African performer who rose to fame in 1810s London under the stage name "Venus Hottentot" and died in Paris in 1815. Her body was dismembered and put on scientific display for the education and amusement of the public, remaining there until the 1980s.⁸⁵ Roy, by contrast, was given the dignity of a private ceremony devised to protect his body not just from ill-use but also from corrosive rumor.

The caste cosmopolitanism that took shape around Roy's grave thus appears in new light. It established an alliance between whiteness and brahminism. To take these two religio-racial identities as a metonym for all humanity—beckoning toward an ever-widening solidarity, a caste of human strangers—may well have expressed a utopian hope. Yet in the decades to come, that hope was not realized. This cosmopolitan circle did not widen very far, nor did the "caste" it established become coextensive with humanity. It remained, fundamentally, a bourgeois affair.

A Bourgeois Burial for a Little King

Roy, then, was not a subaltern. Neither, however, was he a literal king—despite bearing the title "Raja." His burial was middling. Actual monarchs who expired in England received grander treatment. In 1824, for instance, Kamehameha II and Kamaamalu, the king and queen of Hawai'i, were visiting London to cultivate Britain as an ally against U.S., French, and Russian intrusion in their kingdom. While there, they died of measles, their royal bodies tragically vulnerable to European disease. Not only did George IV volunteer the royal surgeon to embalm them, but they also received an official lying-in-state before their bodies were returned to Hawai'i.⁸⁶ Compared to these rites, Roy's provincial burial was a humble affair indeed.

Yet Roy was called a "Raja." What to make of this title and its bearing on his burial? One set of cues is provided by Hatcher, in his revisionist take on Roy. Too often,

⁸³Caledonian Mercury (Edinburgh), 14 Mar. 1833, as quoted in Zastoupil, *Rammohun*, 147.

⁸⁴Arnold, *Burning the Dead*, 44, 73–74.

⁸⁵Clifton Crais and Pamela Scully, *Sara Baartman and the Hottentot Venus* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009).

⁸⁶Coll Thrush, *Indigenous London: Native Travelers at the Heart of Empire* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016), 145–51.

Hatcher argues, scholars have taken Roy as a paradigmatic liberal reformer, even though he could not yet have been a “liberal” in the mid-Victorian sense.⁸⁷ The word *liberalism* was not even coined until the 1820s (in transcolonial Spanish, from which it percolated into French and English).⁸⁸ Rather, Roy inhabited the world of what Partha Chatterjee has dubbed “early colonialism,” which came to an “unsung end” around 1833.⁸⁹ In this world, Bengali merchant-magnates functioned like feudal lords, ruling over grand Calcutta mansions intricately connected to their rural landholdings.⁹⁰ Their power and gravity derived from scalar networks of sovereignty that included both “political” bodies (nizams, rajahs, peshwas, Mughal emperors, etc.) and “religious” ones (e.g., tantrikas, mahants, pirs).⁹¹ It was thus no mistake that these elite men cited the manners and mores of kings, donning the “accouterments of the royal court” to place themselves at the center of what amounted to little “polities,” shifting zones of political authority.⁹² Roy did much the same. Already forty years old when he arrived in Calcutta, he owed his wealth to his rural landholdings and his basic cultural orientation to his years upcountry. In the city, he too would be a little lord.

The early Brahmo Samaj was thus not, Hatcher argues, a Victorian-style civic association. Rather, it was closer to an aristocratic salon, a “personalized darbar” for a miniature king akin to other *darbars* and *sabhas* hosted by Calcutta’s zamindar-merchant-princes.⁹³ Only later would the Samaj be reinvented as a bourgeois-liberal civic association, part of a larger formation of the liberal public. This shift is evident in a series of name changes: the Atmiya Sabha (est. 1815) became the Brahmo Sabha (in 1828) and then became the Brahmo Samaj. Where *samaj* (society) implies a stable organization, *sabha* (assembly) indicates a more open-ended gathering and potentially connotes the ritual performance of kingship. The standard translation of Atmiya Sabha as “Society of Friends” is thus misleading, Hatcher argues, and on two fronts. He provocatively translates it as “A Court of One’s Own,” taking *atmiya* as reflexive pronoun.⁹⁴ Rather than an egalitarian liberal association, it was closer to a royal assembly.

The location of Roy’s death—a comfortably bourgeois Unitarian household—could be said to have cemented his transformation from miniature sovereign to bourgeois religious reformer. In his burial, Roy’s feudal-mercantile body was reborn as that of a liberal individual, situated in the sentimentalized religio-cultural networks of “heterodoxy” instead of the religio-political networks of early-colonial Bengal’s scalar sovereignties. Or, perhaps better, the burial overlaid these two networks. The idioms of royalty persisted, becoming entangled with the idioms of liberalism, and

⁸⁷ See Elaine Hadley, *Living Liberalism: Practical Citizenship in Mid-Victorian Britain* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010).

⁸⁸ Glenda Sluga and Timothy Rowse, eds., “Global Liberalisms,” special issue of *Modern Intellectual History* 12, 3 (2015).

⁸⁹ Partha Chatterjee, *The Black Hole of Empire: History of a Global Practice of Power* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), 134–58.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 154–55.

⁹¹ Hatcher, *Hinduism before Reform*; Indrani Chatterjee, “Monastic Governmentality, Colonial Misogyny, and Postcolonial Amnesia in South Asia,” *History of the Present* 3, 1 (2013): 57–98.

⁹² Hatcher, *Hinduism*, 70.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 179.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 185–94.

thus anticipating later developments in South Asian political thought.⁹⁵ By remembering that Roy's quasi-royal body was itself a site for the articulation of sovereignty, we can better see how it came to articulate new microstructures of power. It was king. It was not-slave. It was property-owning male and landlord. It was a site of racialized desire and utopian sentimentalization.

Interlude: Property in Bodies, or, The Head and the Hair

If liberalism rooted political rights in the body as site of property in self, it did so inconsistently—certainly for the dead, and even more so the racialized dead. Shortly after Roy expired, Dr. Estlin examined his corpse and, evidently, opened his cranium. He noted that Roy's brain was "inflamed, containing some fluid and covered with a kind of purulent effusion: its membrane also adhered to the skull." Estlin further arranged "a cast for a bust," an object later described by Mary Carpenter as a "death-mask" made when Roy was still "quite warm."⁹⁶ The resulting bust (or at least one of them) was, by 1915, housed at the Rammohun Roy Free Library and Reading Room in Calcutta (figure 4).

Lant Carpenter mentioned this death mask in his late-1833 book about Roy, which is probably how Scottish phrenologists learned of its existence. Sometime in late 1833 or early 1834, the Reverend B. T. Stannus wrote Estlin from Edinburgh requesting a copy of the cast for phrenological purposes. Estlin complied, and Stannus then published his findings in the *Phrenological Journal and Miscellany* (figure 5).⁹⁷

Roy was no stranger to phrenology. In 1822, he supplied phrenologist George Paterson with "twelve Hindoo crania" of unknown caste, along with a promise to "procure" more ("as many as you may think sufficient for your present researches"). A decade later, Roy had soured on this so-called science. When he met German phrenologist Johann Spurzheim in Liverpool in 1831, Roy dismissed phrenology as quackery.⁹⁸ That skepticism mattered little after his death, however. Phrenology found him anyway.

In fact, Roy's earlier involvement with phrenology seems to have shaped the interpretation of his own skull. In 1823, Paterson published an article about the particularities of the "Hindoo" cranium, which included overdevelopment in the regions for "Veneration" (making Hindus bow to authority) and "Ideality" (making them credulous).⁹⁹ In 1834, Stannus presented Roy as an exception to

⁹⁵See Milinda Banerjee, *The Mortal God: Imagining the Sovereign in Colonial India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

⁹⁶L. Carpenter, *Review*, 120; M. Carpenter, *Last Days*, 167.

⁹⁷"On the Life, Character, Opinions, and Cerebral Development of Rajah Rammohun Roy," *Phrenological Journal and Miscellany* 8 (Edinburgh: John Anderson, 1834), 577–605. For video footage of the Scottish cast, now in archival storage, see *A Bristol Pilgrimage: In Search of Rajah Rammohun Roy* (Aniruddho Sanyal, director, 2005), which is readily available online. Sanyal notes that the Scottish cast is smaller than the Calcutta one, with slightly different ears.

⁹⁸Crispin Bates, "Race, Caste, and Tribe in Central India: The Early Origins of Indian Anthropometry," in Peter Robb, ed., *The Concept of Race in South Asia* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1995), 219–59; Zastoupil, *Rammohun*, 4, 181 n55.

⁹⁹George Murray Paterson, "On the Phrenology of Hindostan," *Transactions of the Phrenological Society* (Edinburgh: John Anderson, 1824), 430–48.



Figure 4. Mary Carpenter, *The Last Days in England of the Rajah Rammohun Roy* (Calcutta: Rammohun Library, 1915), xiv. Public Domain.

this racializing rule. He constructed a table enumerating the size of the major lumps on Roy's head, each correlating to a character trait ("cautiousness, large"; "concentrativeness, large"; "self-esteem, very large"). He then checked these measurements against Roy's biography. The "unusual volume" of his brain was racially atypical. So was the attenuated development in the cranial regions associated with "Veneration" and "Wonder" ("the two sentiments which are most influential in forming the religious character"), as befitted a rational reformer. "The mysterious and unintelligible had no charms for him: he submitted everything to the test of consistency and reason."¹⁰⁰

¹⁰⁰Stannus, "Cerebral Development," 579, 598.

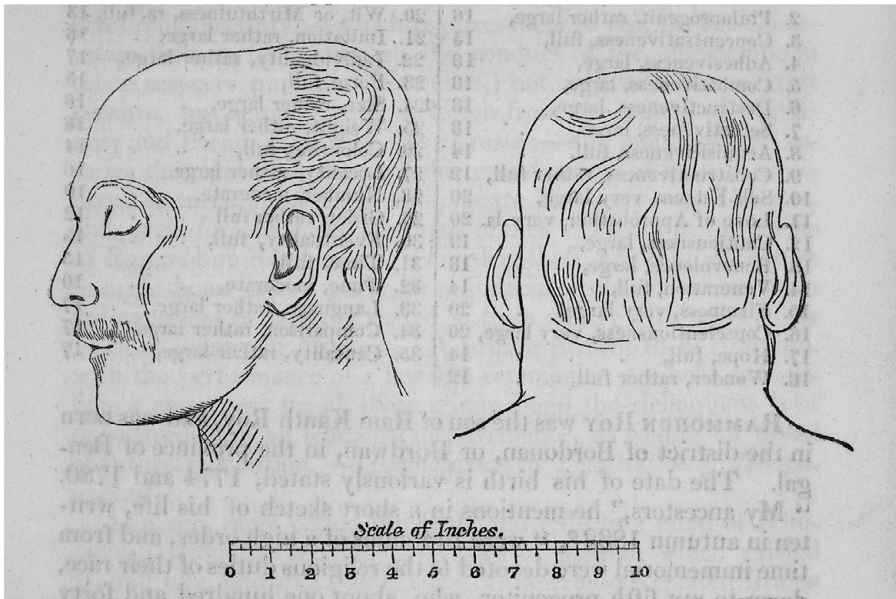


Figure 5. Phrenological sketch of cast taken from Rammohun Roy's head. *The Phrenological Journal and Miscellany* 8 (Edinburgh: John Anderson, 1834), 579. Courtesy of University of Bristol Library, Special Collections.

In the nineteenth century's early decades, phrenology appealed to a wide cross-section of the Anglo-Atlantic public. It was many things at once: divine intervention, casual entertainment, secularist metaphysics, site for heterodox experimentation with the body.¹⁰¹ In Edinburgh, phrenologists' investigations into the origins of religious belief were perhaps shadowed by Scottish Enlightenment disquisitions like David Hume's *Natural History of Religion* (1757). Or perhaps phrenology appeared there, as elsewhere, "the crowning essence of true religion"; in 1832, when Spurzheim arrived in Boston, Unitarians swarmed to see him, hoping phrenology would resolve their theological quandaries by proving that religion was hard-wired into the brain.¹⁰² Was Reverend Stannus engaged in a parallel theological endeavor as he pored over Roy's cranium two years later?

If Roy's death mask circulated in the juxta-religious spaces of nineteenth-century heterodoxy, so too did his hair. In the days before Roy's death, Dr. Estlin arranged for a haircut, presumably in connection with medical treatment for brain fever. The front of Roy's head was shaved, and the back trimmed.¹⁰³ Estlin retained the trimmings. (Several clippings survive to this day in the collections of the British Library and Bristol City Museum.)

¹⁰¹John Lardas Modern, *Secularism in Antebellum America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 29, 147–57.

¹⁰²*Ibid.*, 149.

¹⁰³Stannus, "Cerebral Development," 591.



Figure 6. Envelope sent by John Estlin to Samuel May, 1844. Boston Public Library/ Digital Commonwealth–Massachusetts Collections Online. <https://ark.digitalcommonwealth.org/ark:/50959/dv145504s>

A decade later, in 1844, the hair resurfaced, some of it having been tied into lockets by an unnamed “lady.” Estlin and his daughter Mary took six of these lockets plus six individual strands and packed them into envelopes bound for Leicester, Massachusetts (figure 6). Their Unitarian recipient, Samuel May, Jr., carried the packets to Boston to be sold at an “Antislavery Bazaar” alongside sundry Bristol craft objects, including sketches by Mary Carpenter. The hair would raise money for abolitionism, and May felt confident it would sell well. Not only had the envelopes been “done up” in “very fine manner,” but many people “would rejoice to possess one of these undoubted relics of a most extraordinary man.”¹⁰⁴

Gifting hair, and even wearing it as jewelry, was a common practice in the nineteenth century, and these “secular relics” memorialized both the intimate and the famous dead.¹⁰⁵ Hair relics were also common in abolitionist circles: in 1840, hair from deceased Quaker abolitionist Thomas Clarkson was distributed to delegates at the World Anti-Slavery Convention in London.¹⁰⁶ Nonetheless, Roy’s hair had particular properties, circulating as it did within a cultural economy of race. Surely part of its commodity-appeal at the Boston “bazaar” derived from its Oriental exoticism.

What cultural work is accomplished by commodifying part of a colonized body to raise capital to abolish slavery, a commodification of bodies under racial capitalism? If Roy’s commodified hair speaks to the dark ironies of empire, it also speaks to empire’s transcontinental intimacies. Let us end this interlude by imagining a Boston lady approaching these charismatic relics, “done up” in their envelopes, and taking one home. Perhaps she wore it in a necklace or ring. What kinds of imagined intimacies did these hair relics produce? Did their very physicality, their availability to a stranger’s touch, help create, in the most minor of keys, something like a caste of humanity?

¹⁰⁴John Bishop Estlin to Samuel May, 29 Oct. 1844, and Samuel May to John Bishop Estlin, 30 Dec. 1844, Boston Public Library, MS B.1.6 v. 2.

¹⁰⁵Deborah Lutz, “The Dead Still among Us: Victorian Secular Relics, Hair Jewelry, and Death Culture,” *Victorian Literature and Culture* 39, 1 (2011): 127–42.

¹⁰⁶Zastoupil, *Rammohun*, 94.

Second Burial: From Shrubbery to Vale

The year before Roy's hair traveled to Boston, the rest of his body traveled a shorter distance, from Stapleton Grove to Arnos Vale. Buried under his shrubbery in 1833, Roy was disinterred and reburied in 1843 in the newly established garden cemetery.

If Roy's first burial skirted the possibility of his becoming a pauper, his second returned him to something like kingship. The man behind this ascension was Roy's friend and associate Dwarkanath Tagore (b. 1794), the Calcutta merchant-magnate known in royalizing style as "Prince Dwarkanath." He presided over an empire of banks and land, jute and opium. In 1842, Tagore traveled to Britain on his personal steamship and visited various elites (including Queen Victoria, who described him in her diary as "a very intelligent and interesting man").¹⁰⁷ He also visited Roy's gravesite. Evidently displeased with the shrubbery, Tagore resolved (as the *Bristol Mercury* later reported) that his friend's remains should be "consigned to a more conspicuous resting place," beneath a "suitable memorial."¹⁰⁸ Arrangements seem to have commenced after Tagore returned to Calcutta.

Tagore decided to reinter Roy in the new Arnos Vale, purchasing plot L4 on the non-consecrated (i.e., non-Anglican) side of the cemetery, prominently located near the main road. He then hired his colleague William Prinsep to design an appropriate monument for the site. Prinsep chose a royal idiom: the *chhatri*. Literally meaning "umbrella," the *chhatri* is a cupola form used in Rajput funerary architecture to mark the spot where a nobleman was cremated, and a portion of his ashes interred. By transmuting the royal symbol of the umbrella into stone, it indicates the kingly sovereignty of the dead.¹⁰⁹ Rising to popularity later in the nineteenth century, the *chhatri* participated in what David Arnold has described as a broader "Rajputization" of death, recoding cremation in a kingly and thus political idiom.¹¹⁰ Prinsep drew up designs for three typical Bengali *chhatris*, one of which was selected and constructed over two years by an anonymous Bristol stonemason.¹¹¹ It was likely completed in 1844.¹¹² As an Indo-British monument, it would have echoed the Orientalist estates of eighteenth-century Company "nabobs" as well as anticipating later "Indo-Gothic" architecture.¹¹³

When Roy was reburied in 1843, money was still being forwarded from India for the construction of a "stately monument" in the "Hindu style of architecture."¹¹⁴ At 7:00 a.m. on 29 May, under the supervision of an unnamed Tagore deputy and on the property of Michael Hinton Castle, "the coffin of the deceased, but very slightly injured from the effects of long interment, was lifted from its temporary receptacle and subsequently deposited in the unconsecrated portion of the beautiful cemetery at

¹⁰⁷ Kling, *Partner in Empire*, 168–75.

¹⁰⁸ *Bristol Mercury*, 10 June 1843, 6.

¹⁰⁹ Melia Belli Bose, *Royal Umbrellas of Stone: Memory, Politics, and Public Identity in Rajput Funerary Art* (Leiden: Brill, 2015).

¹¹⁰ Arnold, *Burning the Dead*, 18.

¹¹¹ Carla Contractor, "The Chattri or Mausoleum of Rajah Rammohun Roy" (unpub. MS).

¹¹² Wilson, *Portrait*, 12.

¹¹³ Tillman Nechtman, *Nabobs: Empire and Identity in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 166–72; Thomas Metcalf, *Imperial Vision: Indian Architecture and Britain's Raj* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989).

¹¹⁴ "Rammohun Roy," *Newcastle Courant*, 30 June 1843: 3; *Derby Mercury*, 28 June 1843: 4.

Arnos Vale.”¹¹⁵ Roy’s body had found its new home. Presumably Tagore visited the new site on his 1846 return trip to Britain, where, in an unexpected epilogue to this tale, he too died and was then buried without religious rites at London’s Kensal Green Cemetery. His sons burned his grass effigy on the banks of the Ganges in a Brahmo version of that traditional ritual (the first of its kind, according to his son Debendranath).¹¹⁶

If, in 1843, Roy seemed to deserve unequivocally royal treatment, this was likely due to his shifting status back in Calcutta. After Roy left for Britain, the Brahmo Samaj languished. Watching its weekly worship service was, one Brahmo later recalled, like watching “the dim-burning pyre at the burning-ghat.”¹¹⁷ In 1839, Debendranath founded a group called the Tattvabodhini Sabha to encourage study of Vedanta. In 1842, he attended a meeting of the Brahmo Samaj and saw just how far it had declined; he resolved to revive it by having the Tattvabodhini Sabha take over its affairs. This revitalization began in earnest in 1843, the very year Roy was reburied. Tagore *filis* launched a new periodical, the *Tattvabodhini Patrika*, and set about republishing Roy’s works, thus clearly positioning him as the founder of a new religion, a Brahmo Dharma or Brahmoism.¹¹⁸

Roy’s royalizing reburial did literally what the Brahmo Samaj revival did figuratively: it repositioned Roy, affirming the grandeur of his legacy. Indeed, one might reasonably suggest that without this repositioning it would have been difficult to later claim Roy as the “Father of Modern India.” It was insofar as Roy fathered Brahmoism—and thus, by extension, a certain kind of liberal-reformist ethos—that he could be taken as the father of the Indian-modern. To reconsider his vaunted paternity of liberal India via the royalizing *chhatra* is, in sympathy with Hatcher, to see that liberalism in slightly different light. Roy’s posthumous liberalism was still entangled with the political idioms of kingship.¹¹⁹

Neoclassical Bodies: Secularism and the Cemetery Movement

If Roy’s reburial repositioned his religious legacy in Bengal, it also—and rather more literally—repositioned him within a North Atlantic history of death centered on a new institution known by the hifalutin Greek name of “cemetery” (i.e., sleeping place).

For centuries, the English had interred their dead in parish churchyards. By around 1800, however, this practice had begun to produce problems: churchyards were overfull, with the soil level rising noticeably year after year since the practice of periodically removing old bones to a shared charnel house was abandoned in the sixteenth century.¹²⁰ The “miasmic” odor around many city graveyards was uncomfortably pungent, especially in summer, causing a health hazard. Still more

¹¹⁵“The Late Rajah Rammohun Roy,” *Bristol Mercury*, 10 June 1843: 6.

¹¹⁶Kling, *Partner in Empire*, 236–37.

¹¹⁷Hem Chandra Sarkar, as quoted in Brian Hatcher, “Remembering Rammohan: An Essay on the (Re-) emergence of Modern Hinduism,” *History of Religions* 46, 1 (2006): 50–80, at 64.

¹¹⁸*Ibid.*, 67–71. See also Brian Hatcher, *Bourgeois Hinduism, or the Faith of the Modern Vedantists* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).

¹¹⁹Banerjee, *Mortal God*.

¹²⁰Peter Jupp, *From Dust to Ashes: Cremation and the British Way of Death* (New York: Palgrave, 2006), 21.

grotesquely, graverobbing “resurrection men” were selling corpses to medical schools for dissection, as only criminals’ corpses could be legally used as cadavers. The resulting public hysteria facilitated the passage of the 1832 Anatomy Act, which made donated corpses and the “unclaimed” poor available for dissection.¹²¹

This North Atlantic panic was entangled with the colonies, including India. In the 1820s, British readers could devour tales of suttees and “ghat murders” alongside those of Scottish serial killers smothering boarding house guests to sell their corpses.¹²² If India played into British anxieties about death, it also presented its own set of resistances around medical cadavers. When dominant-caste students in Calcutta refused to dissect corpses (ritually polluting objects traditionally handled by oppressed-caste groups), Dwarkanath Tagore intervened. He donated prize money to induce them to participate and also made a point of frequently visiting the dissection lab himself.¹²³ To walk amongst medical cadavers was to experiment with a heterodoxy of the body. It was perhaps even to court the kind of radical de-sanctification that another transcolonial figure—Roy’s acquaintance Jeremy Bentham, who helped write the Anatomy Act—cemented when, in 1832, he had his corpse taxidermized as an “Auto-Icon.”¹²⁴

The Anglo-Atlantic cemetery movement took shape from within such experiments. It responded to the corpse crisis of the 1820s and 1830s by moving death to the outskirts of the city, where it would be administered not by the church but by profit-seeking corporations that offered paid amenities like locked vaults. The earliest Anglo-American cemeteries were Boston’s Mt. Auburn (est. 1831) and London’s Kensal Green (est. 1832), with Paris’s Père Lachaise (est. 1804) their main template.¹²⁵ Arnos Vale opened shortly afterward. Founded in 1836—on land likely previously owned by copper merchant William Reeves, whose mansion Arnos Court supplied its name—the cemetery began construction in 1837 and was completed in 1839.¹²⁶ Its influences included a scale model of Paris, with detailed Père Lachaise, exhibited in Bristol in 1832 by Frenchman Louis Choffin.¹²⁷

Arnos Vale was a business, the Bristol General Cemetery Company, with shareholders and a director. Its commercial success, moreover, was far from assured. In 1839, it had only one burial; in 1840, just four. Numbers increased thereafter, with sixty-three in 1843 (Roy among them).¹²⁸ Still, finances were sufficiently tight that board chairman Charles Bowles Fripp delivered an 1843 address chiding shareholders for not doing more to promote the cemetery, including buying plots themselves.¹²⁹ Fripp must have been relieved when Tagore

¹²¹Ruth Richardson, *Death, Dissection, and the Destitute* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1987).

¹²²C. A. Bayly, “From Ritual to Ceremony: Death Ritual and Society in Hindu North India since 1600,” in *Origins of Nationality in South Asia* (Delhi, Oxford University Press, 1998), 133–71, 151.

¹²³Kling, *Partner in Empire*, 158.

¹²⁴Scott, *Slandering*, 98–99.

¹²⁵Thomas Laqueur, *The Work of the Dead: A Cultural History of Mortal Remains* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015); Jupp, *Dust to Ashes*, 19–69.

¹²⁶Lindsay Anne Scott Udall, “Arnos Vale, South Bristol: The Life of a Cemetery,” PhD diss. University of Bristol, 2016; <https://www.heritagegateway.org.uk>

¹²⁷Udall, “Arnos Vale,” 212.

¹²⁸*Ibid.*, 350.

¹²⁹*Ibid.*, 347–48, 475.

purchased an especially prominent plot for Roy. The *chhatri* was the first monument on the Ceremonial Way and the most opulent in the cemetery.¹³⁰

These new cemeteries gave rise to new ritual forms. Shaped by the dictates of sanitation and science, cemeteries invoked the pastoral aesthetic of Romantic art and English gardens, as well as the architectural styles of Greco-Roman antiquity. At Arnos Vale, the entrance lodges, designed by Bristol architect Charles Underwood, were explicitly modeled on Greek temples, complete with Doric columns; the Anglican and Nonconformist chapels were also neoclassical. Greek temple architecture had long before been repurposed so as to safely indicate not pagan “religion” but rather a kind of a secular gravitas. Other ancient architectures required closer containment. An 1848 New Haven cemetery gateway, for instance, caps its faux-papyrus Egyptian temple columns with a New Testament passage about the resurrection of the dead.¹³¹ Courting heterodoxy, this structure articulates its funerary secularism by superimposing Christian scripture onto a pagan temple.

The nineteenth-century cremation movement experimented with a similar mix of ritual forms. In the 1790s, French revolutionaries revived the Roman custom of cremation as part of their broader anticlerical attack on Christian tradition. This neopagan current persisted among Italian freemasons and Romantic poets, as seen in the 1822 immolation of Percy Bysshe Shelley off the coast of Italy, and was later fused to a rhetoric of scientific hygiene.¹³² Proponents of modern cremation routinely looked to India, where Calcutta and Pune had already, in the 1860s, constructed hygienic modernized facilities.¹³³ In the 1870s, when cremation reached broad popularity in the North Atlantic world, these transcolonial elements continued to recombine in novel ways. In 1876, for instance, the theosophist Baron de Palm was immolated in a Darwinian-Spiritualist-Greco-Roman-Indo-Egyptian ritual presided over by Henry Steel Olcott as high priest.¹³⁴ Caste norms traveled the same transcolonial networks. Early British crematoria burned brahmins, Arya Samajists, and white people (including Madame Helena Petrovna Blavatsky), but refused services to oppressed-caste persons, who thus had to be buried instead.¹³⁵

The new cemeteries, in short, were “secular” spaces inasmuch as they were “heterodox” spaces. That is, they combined what we would now be inclined to describe as scientific, commercial, Christian, neopagan, Orientalist, and other elements to develop a new ritual aesthetics for death. To try to separate these elements, even analytically, is to misrecognize the cultural work being done here. In such spaces, these vectors were not just fused; they did not exist independently.

“A Sacred Place for Hindoo Pilgrims”

It should thus not be surprising that Roy’s royalizing *chhatri* gave rise to a new religious or quasi-religious practice. Before or during the 1860s, it became a site of

¹³⁰Ibid., 378, 388.

¹³¹Scott Trafton, *Egypt Land: Race and Nineteenth-Century American Egyptomania* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 156–57.

¹³²Laqueur, *Work of the Dead*, 495–548.

¹³³Arnold, *Burning the Dead*, 57–58.

¹³⁴Stephen Prothero, *Purified by Fire: A History of Cremation in America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 15–45.

¹³⁵Ibid., 106, 114, 132.

pilgrimage. The first pilgrim may have been Rakhal Das Haldar, a Brahmo Samajist who visited Stapleton Grove in 1861, declaring it “a most lovely spot. I thought that the Rajah’s death had taken place in a paradise.”¹³⁶ At the time of Haldar’s visit, the estate seems to have been owned by a branch of the Estlin family, Hinton Castle having died in 1846.¹³⁷ Haldar was greeted by none other than Mary Estlin, Dr. Estlin’s daughter, who apparently showed him a cast of Roy’s head kept inside the house and then gave him “snippings of the Rajah’s hair” as a “memento.”¹³⁸ The hair had become a pilgrim’s relic.

The next decade saw more pilgrims, and the emergence of a standard itinerary that included Stapleton Grove, Arnos Vale, and the home of Mary Carpenter—by this time a prominent social reformist with strong India connections. Her 1860s guests (all with Brahmo background) included Satyendranath Tagore, Manmohun Ghose, Boston-ordained Unitarian minister Joguth Chunder Gungooly, Sashipada Banerjee and his wife, and Dwijadas Dutta.¹³⁹

One visitor described his journey to Carpenter in unambiguously religious terms: Roy’s “funeral temple,” he said, was “a sacred place for Hindoo Pilgrims.” Another, in thanking Carpenter, vacillated in describing “this pilgrimage (if I may so call it).” Was this a pilgrimage and thus nominally “religious”? Or was it something else? This unnamed pilgrim declared the trip a “duty” for those of his “countryman” who could afford it. Embodying Brahmo-cosmopolitan ideals, it pointed to the day when the difference between “the English, the Hindoo, and the Jew” will be replaced by “the fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of man.”¹⁴⁰ In 1870, a much more famous Brahmo traveler arrived in Bristol: Keshub Chunder Sen. He, too, used the word “pilgrimage.”¹⁴¹ Standing before Roy’s *chhatra*, Sen became “deeply interested in the beautiful spot and did not leave the tomb until, kneeling beside it, surrounded by his sympathizing friends, he had engaged in earnest prayer.” He then signed his name “in the book kept at the [Greek temple] lodge for Hindu visitants.”¹⁴² That book, alas, has since been lost.¹⁴³

These pilgrims sought to remember Roy. They also lived in a world that was rapidly changing. The “country” they honored by visiting his tomb was a slightly different *desh* than that of the 1830s, and it would change still more in the decades to come. Pivoting between anticolonial nationalism and sentimental cosmopolitanism, these pilgrims suggest the possible overlap between these imagined communities, an overlap that would help establish one formation of Indian-secularism. Death, meanwhile, was changing too. By the time that Max Müller delivered an address in Bristol to commemorate the 1883 fiftieth anniversary of Roy’s passing, cremation was

¹³⁶Sukumar Haldar, *A Mid-Victorian Hindu* (Ranchi: S. Haldar, 1921), 84–86.

¹³⁷The estate was advertised for sale in 1846 and again in 1861. Later newspaper notices associate it with the Estlin-Bishops: *Bath Chronicle and Weekly Gazette*, 12 June 1845; *Bristol Mercury*, 28 Mar. 28, 1846; *Standard* (London), 3 Dec. 1846; *Western Daily Press* (Yeovil), 7 June 1861; *Bristol Mercury*, 21 Feb. 1863.

¹³⁸Haldar, *Mid-Victorian Hindu*, 84–86.

¹³⁹Barot, “Memory of Raja Rammohun”; Rohit Barot, *Bristol and the Indian Independence Movement* (Bristol: Historical Association, 1988); “Visit of a Christian Brahmin to Bristol,” *Bristol Mercury*, 18 Aug. 1860.

¹⁴⁰M. Carpenter, *Last Days*, 182–83.

¹⁴¹Keshub Chunder Sen, *Lectures in India*, 2d ed. (Calcutta: Brahmo Tract Society, 1886), 366–67.

¹⁴²Sophia Dobson Collet, *Keshub Chunder Sen’s English Visit* (London: Strahan & Co., 1871), 332.

¹⁴³Marriott, interview, *ibid*.

on the verge of being legalized.¹⁴⁴ Eventually even Arno's Vale would boast a crematorium, a 1927 conversion of its Nonconformist chapel.¹⁴⁵

Let us close with one final pilgrim: Roy's great-great-grandson, who visited Arnos Vale in 1923 (figure 7). The cemetery hired local photographer Tom Burchell to commemorate the occasion by creating a "souvenir" for later pilgrims. The compressed handwriting makes the signature difficult to read. It seems to say, "Rex Rohin Chatterji," with the *rex* a cheeky Latinization of *raja*. The photograph

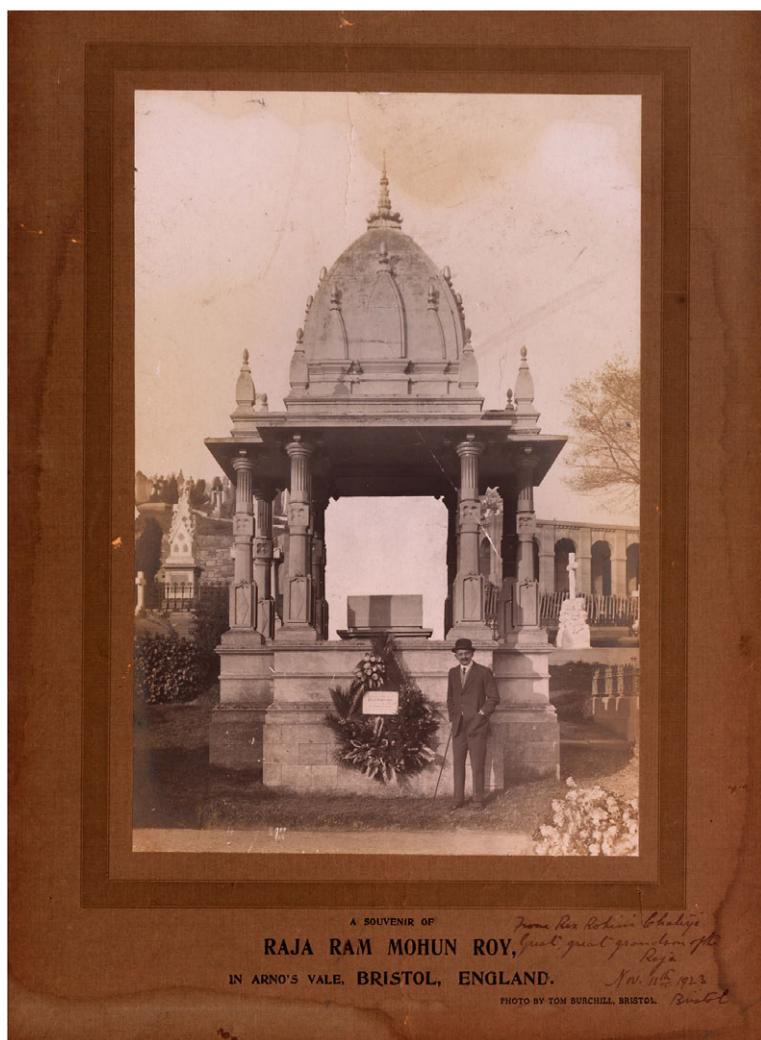


Figure 7. Framed photograph of Raja Rammohun Roy's chattri, 1923. Courtesy of Bristol Archives, Ref. # 41455/5/1.

¹⁴⁴Müller, *Biographical Essays*.

¹⁴⁵Udall, "Arno's Vale," 334–35.

shows a besuited gentleman with stylish bowler hat and cane standing before the tomb, which is adorned with a large wreath. Here, the modern fashion of the 1920s joins together with the ritual, political, and aesthetic idioms of an earlier era.

An iconic representation (a photograph) of an indexical trace of Roy (his descendent), this souvenir would seem to democratize this Rex, making his royal body available to any tourist or pilgrim—possibly for a fee. In its way, it anticipated the intensified travel practices of the latter half of the century. By 2008, Arnos Vale was regularly commemorating “Rammohun Day,” observed on a Sunday before or after 27 September, and cemetery staff regularly encountered Indian visitors waiting at the gates in the morning with flowers to place near Roy’s tomb.¹⁴⁶ Meanwhile, in Kolkata, Brahmo Samajists created a replica of the *chhatra* for devotees who could not make the voyage to England.¹⁴⁷ Roy did finally return home, virtually, within a chain of global significations.

In 1981, Bristol’s diasporic South Asian community converted a deconsecrated Methodist church into the “Bristol Hindu Temple.” In video footage of the inauguration festivities, a temple spokesman informs a newscaster that this “Hindu” space is for people of all “races, creeds, and religions.” The camera then cuts to poster-art images of select Hindu deities arrayed alongside Jesus, Guru Gobind Singh, M. K. Gandhi, and Jawaharlal Nehru—an inclusively secularist tableau, set inside this temple to mark its British Hinduism as a bastion of pluralist tolerance.¹⁴⁸ In early 1980s Bristol, it seems, British-multiculturalism and Nehruvian secularism joined together nearly seamlessly, with Rammohun Roy a key stitch in their suture.

By undoing this late twentieth-century stitching, we can better see the conditions for the emergence of its pluralist dispensation. Mid-nineteenth-century heterodoxy was not yet a rhetoric of and for the state, nor did it presume a harmonious rainbow of world religions. Instead, it gestured to a more expansive set of utopian desires both larger and smaller than twentieth-century pluralisms. This heterodoxy’s limitations and internal contradictions are, in retrospect, all too clear, with its ritual reinvention of the body overdetermined by structures of race, caste, class, and gender. Still, precisely as an unfinished project, perhaps this lost heterodoxy holds lessons for the present, unmooring our reified notions of religion and secularism and nudging us to imagine them otherwise.

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¹⁴⁶Marriott, *ibid.*

¹⁴⁷At <https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=113525701251444&set=pb.100083189058028.-2207520000>. My thanks to Brian Hatcher for this reference.

¹⁴⁸At <http://www.hindutemplebristol.co.uk/videoslist.php?#MIDDLE>.

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