

An Unreliable Witness? Surgeon Rennie's *Bhotan and the Story of the Dooar War*

Mary Margaret Brennan and Trevor Lipscombe***

Abstract

David Field Rennie, a Scottish military surgeon and author, wrote what is often considered the only contemporary account of the Second Anglo-Bhutan War (1864–1865), published in 1866 as *Bhotan and the Story of the Dooar War*. How believable, though, is Rennie's book? As a participant in the conflict, did he favor the claims of the British Empire over those of Bhutan? Aggrandize the achievements of the regiment to which he was attached over those of others? Or puff up his own exploits over those of his comrades? In this article, we explore the life of Rennie and compare his narrative to British newspaper accounts and other near-contemporary accounts of the war, to assess the reliability of Rennie and the story he tells.

Introduction

The Duar War commenced, officially, with the proclamation at Fort William by Colonel H.M. Durand - secretary to the Government of India - on November 12, 1864¹, and ended almost exactly one year later, with the signing of the Treaty of Sinchula on November 11, 1865. This short-lived conflict was unpopular in Britain, given the costs involved and the lack of

* Mary Margaret Brennan, Research Associate, Department of English, Graduate of The Catholic University of America. Email: mmmbrennan05@gmail.com.

** Trevor Lipscombe, Director of the Catholic University of America Press. Email: lipscombe@cua.edu, to whom correspondence should be addressed.

¹ See Aitchison (1865, pp. 364–366).

acquaintance of the British people with Bhutan. Additionally, the defeat - if not rout - of British forces at Dewangiri² at the hands of the Bhutanese, with the concomitant loss of life and of armaments, was widely regarded by the British press as a national disgrace.

Hostilities broke out due to border skirmishes between the Bhutanese and British India, as well as the poor treatment of the British envoy to Bhutan, Sir Ashley Eden. That, at least, was the British pretext. A not-exactly-hidden motive was economic, with the British East India Company seeking to exploit the rich tea-growing region of recently annexed Assam.

As Sarkar and Ray (2017) write:

The East India Company turned to Assam for tea plantation in 1833 when the Chinese Government did not renew the Company's monopoly right over its lucrative trade in tea. Speculations on tea made duars lucrative to the British since the clearance of undulating forest in this region was expected to generate revenue from timber, and to make the place at the same time ideal for the cultivation of tea.

Contemporary views from the United States support Sarkar and Ray's interpretation. *The Vermont Watchman* (June 16, 1865) reported, in an article entitled "England Extending her Dominions," that:

The [Bhutanese] people have repeatedly invaded the neighboring territory and grossly mistreated a British envoy sent there to demand redress. Another reason may be the fact that the hostile kingdom borders on the tea-growing region of Assam, which the envoy was compelled to cede to Bhootan for the sake of saving his life.

The *North American* (January 19, 1866) went farther:

² Modern-day Deothang.

We fear that the day will come when the immense empire of China will become hers [England's], and with it the monopoly of the tea trade. This is the meaning of the Bhootan War.

No matter the causes, the historical importance of the conflict is summed up well by Dorji Penjore (2004), “No country has threatened Bhutan’s territorial integrity militarily since the Duar War of 1864–65.”

Untangling the nature of the war is difficult. As the cliché puts it, “History is written by the winners.” It is often felt that David Field Rennie’s book *Bhotan and the Story of the Dooar War* (hereafter *Dooar*) is the only summary of those twelve months.³ Certainly there is mostly silence from Bhutanese sources. As Karma Ura has shrewdly observed (*italics ours*):

The Duar War’s story can *only* be told from the point of view of the winner, the British, because the Bhutanese did not keep any account of it... Bhutanese history will remain poor due to a lack of account by Bhutanese on this important conflict that changed the southern boundary completely.⁴

In this article, we seek to determine to what extent Rennie’s account of the war is an accurate summary of the events. To do so, given the lack of Bhutanese sources, we examine other British narratives that exist, such as contemporary newspapers and other first-hand accounts. We also explore the life of David Rennie, to determine what weight we may place on his narrative.

David Field Rennie, Author, Surgeon, Soldier

The life of David Field Rennie emerges from a patchwork of archival records, legal proceedings, and personal

³ Surgeon Rennie, MD. *Bhotan and the Story of the Dooar War*. (London: John Murray, 1866).

⁴ Karma Ura (2023, pp. 246–247).

achievements, forming a narrative that invites as many questions as it answers. Born on May 7, 1823, in Edinburgh's St. Cuthbert's parish, the Scottish surgeon's story is seemingly one of professional success and social mobility. The documentary evidence forms a fractured biographical narrative of a questionable career and complicated character, presenting a compelling case for examining history through interrogating the teller.

Rennie's parents, Richard and Frances Clementina Rennie, wed at St. Cuthbert's on July 1st, 1822; David was born barely ten months later. The family struggled financially, culminating in a high-profile legal entanglement over Frances' inheritance, which was resolved by the House of Lords. In addition, Richard was "frequently in difficulties in regard to pecuniary matters, he having been unsuccessful in business."⁵ Despite these early hardships, Rennie began attending the Edinburgh Academy in 1832, remaining for just two years.⁶ He entered the medical profession sometime before 1848, when he obtained the Licentiate'ship of the Royal College of Surgeons of Edinburgh.⁷ The oral examination took place on June 20th, with Sir William Newbigging serving as an "examinator".⁸ Rennie's medical knowledge was assessed along with another candidate, (later Sir) William Aitken, and both "after being examined on their skill in Anatomy, Surgery, and Pharmacy were duly qualified to practice these Arts and received Diplomas having paid the usual fees to the Treasurer."⁹

⁵ House of Lords, *Ritchie v. Rennie*, *The Jurist* 9, no. 1 (1846): 435.

⁶ As listed on the Edinburgh Academy register (1824–1914).

⁷ "David Field Rennie," The Royal College of Surgeons of Edinburgh, 1848, <https://archiveandlibrary.rcsed.ac.uk/surgeon/3763975-david-field-rennie>.

⁸ Newbigging, President of the Royal College of Surgeons of Edinburgh (RCSE) from 1814–16, was knighted by Queen Victoria in 1838. Other examiners included Francis Farquharson, former RCSE president (1834–35); William Brown; and former RCSE president (1840–42) Richard Huie).

⁹ Scottish pathologist Sir William Aitken wrote the *Handbook of the Science and Practice of Medicine*.

That same year, 1848, Rennie was awarded an MD from the University of St. Andrews, an institution marred by allegations of selling degrees of minimal academic rigor.¹⁰ The medical degree was, in principle, awarded on the basis of a thesis and letters of recommendation, but the St. Andrew's degree was popular "among the large proportion of British doctors who served in the army or navy for whom there was otherwise no way of self-improvement."¹¹ Contemporary critics were outraged that a university with "no clinical teaching and no hospital should award a medical diploma" and which "did not require [the graduate] to spend any period in study at the university granting the degree." Respected medical publications accused the school of cheapening medical qualifications for financial gain. The *Edinburgh Review* (1845, p. 257) stated it "is well known in Scotland that rejected candidates, or despairing students of Edinburgh and other schools, meet with a ready outlet at St. Andrews."

Rennie's medical career began with his appointment as Assistant Surgeon in the Royal Artillery, part of the Ordnance Medical Department. In July 1849, during the worst cholera outbreak in London's history, *The Times* informed readers that:

Owing to the alarming aspect of matters within the fortress [the Tower of London] on Monday, the authorities at Woolwich instantly sent up from headquarters Assistant Surgeon Rennie, MD, of the Royal Artillery, to take medical charge of the military and civil departments of the Ordnance resident within the Tower.¹²

¹⁰ The *Medical Times* in 1845 recorded "St. Andrews, the notorious St. Andrews, now drives so very thriving a diploma trade."

¹¹ Shepherd JA. Medical teaching in St. Andrews University 1413–1972. *Br Med J.* 1972, Jul 1;3(5817):39.

¹² The Health of London During the Week: The Tower, *The Times*, July 25, 1849, p. 7.

After serving at Woolwich for a year, Rennie journeyed to South America and Africa, writing extensively about disease patterns in colonial settings.¹³

He returned to the Military Hospital at Woolwich in the summer of 1850 and then to the “dreary place”¹⁴ of Shoeburyness. *The Army List* places Rennie in this position from January to June in Woolwich - the home of the Royal Artillery - and after spending the winter there, Rennie “became more dissatisfied than ever with the results of [his] treatment” as cases occurred for which he “could offer no satisfactory explanation.”¹⁵ Both his reflective dissatisfaction and observations were interrupted by a period of excitement following his appointment, in February 1851, to the medical charge of the Royal Sappers and Miners employed at the Great Exhibition. He was honoured in the summer of 1851 with an invitation to Queen Victoria's birthday party, in recognition of his contributions.

On September 19, 1853, the *Army List* records that he was “on passage to Australia.” On arrival at the new penal colony of

¹³ David Field Rennie, “Observations on the Connection Between Internal Disease, and irregularities in the modes of termination of Fevers in general, with the view of elucidating the prevailing ‘influenza,’” *The Perth Gazette*, December 9, 1853.

¹⁴ Patrick Barry describes the town as “a dreary place; ... Seaward, from the margin, stretch the broadest and most sterile foreshore perhaps in England,” in *Shoeburyness and the Guns: A Philosophical Discourse* (1865). Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, famous for creating Sherlock Holmes, described Woolwich in “The Straggler of ‘15” (*Black and White Magazine*, March 21, 1891) thusly: “It was a dull October morning, and heavy, rolling fog-wreaths lay low over the wet grey roofs of the Woolwich houses. Down in the long, brick-lined streets all was sodden and greasy and cheerless...There were few folk in the streets, for the toilers had all been absorbed since break of day by the huge smoke-spouting monster, which sucked in the manhood of the town, to belch it forth weary and work-stained every night.”

¹⁵ Rennie, Observations on the Connection Between Internal Disease, *The Perth Gazette*, December 9, 1853.

Western Australia, Rennie began to write prolifically on public health concerns.¹⁶

He became an outspoken critic of established medical theories regarding the spread of disease.¹⁷ Published on November 25th, 1853, in the *Perth Gazette and Independent Journal of Politics and News*, Rennie wrote “A few observations on intermittent Fever with the view of elucidating the prevailing ‘Influenza’ or ‘Epidemic’.” The editorial remarks on the nature and treatment of influenza, and comments on the “great numbers, both in Perth and Fremantle [that] are at the present moment suffering.” He notes futile attempts to squash the progressive disease and “useless” treatment options. Calling to attention his “considerable experience in its treatment” and status as surgeon to the “largest Military and Civil Departments in the colony,” his writing claimed authority, while espousing unconventional medical theories on disease transmission.¹⁸ This series of articles continues from December through February of 1853, expounding theories “which, if correct, must tend greatly to alter all our previous ideas on the nature and treatment of internal disease.”¹⁹ Following the

¹⁶ Arsenal, Dial Square to North London, <https://www.arsenal.com/history/laying-the-foundations/laying-the-foundations-overview>.

¹⁷ Two prevailing theories regarding the spread of disease were contagion and miasma (“bad air”). The former proved to be correct (in part due to the work of John Snow during the London cholera epidemic) while Rennie outspokenly supported the latter.

¹⁸ He was, however, also a medical innovator. On August 19, 1853, the *Perth Gazette* reported “On Tuesday last a surgical operation was performed in the Convict Establishment, Fremantle, under the influence of chloroform. The operation, which was amputation of the leg above the knee, was ably performed by Dr Rennie, the surgeon to the Establishment; the limb being removed without the patient experiencing the slightest pain.” At that time, the use of chloroform was in its infancy, and some physicians questioned whether it caused too many deaths. Queen Victoria’s use of chloroform when her eighth child, Prince Leopold, was born on April 7th, 1853, ended the debate.

¹⁹ He asserts that these theories have all been proved in Hong Kong, Batavia, and Woolwich, “all notoriously unhealthy and celebrated for the prevalence of Intermittent and Remittent Fevers.”

November edition of the papers, the Colonial Surgeon addressed Rennie's speculative theories stating that, were Rennie correct and had disproven the present system of medicine, "he [the Colonel Surgeon] should give the subject his careful attention."²⁰ The implication being that Rennie was *not* correct.

Rennie's outspokenness and criticisms of existing colonial health policies led to tensions with military and administrative leaders, as the "zealous doctor has a most thorough contempt for all preconceived theories of the healing art, and that he alone, is [...] to be, considered the oracle to be consulted [...] with the comprehensive science of medicine."²¹

His defiance of conventional medical wisdom and policies placed himself in opposition to the established medical authorities, who bit back accordingly:

I am clearly of opinion that they are altogether devoid of interest and perspicuity, and that the columns of a newspaper ought not to have been used for the purpose of forcing into notoriety a pamphlet of very dubious character.²²

His writings were rejected by well-known medical experts, however, who "could not agree in the conclusions of the author, who did not appear to be a careful observer."²³

Rennie later gave medical evidence in a murder trial and even sat as one of the judges on the first court martial in Australia.

²⁰ Rennie awaits careful attention from a seemingly uninterested authority figure.

²¹ Letter from "An Old Colonist" *The Perth Gazette and Independent Journal of Politics and News*, December 21st, 1854.

²² *The Perth Gazette and Independent Journal of Politics and News*, March 15, 1854. It also notes Dr. Rennie's impressive talent "when speaking of himself."

²³ Dr. William Baly, later appointed "Physician Extraordinary to the Queen." The Baly Medal of the Royal College of Physicians is named in his honour.

This is ironic, as he soon faced his own court martial, the third ever in the Penal Colony: He was formally charged in 1859 with insubordination following extensive defamatory remarks about Brevet Major Edmund Yeamans Walcott Henderson, the inaugural “Comptroller General of Convicts.”²⁴ Rennie retracted his statements to avoid a formal court martial but then retracted his retractions. He sent the Lieutenant Colonel Commanding a seven-page letter requesting that the “Court Martial should proceed.”²⁵ The *Extra Government Gazette*, on August 24, 1859, documents that “this letter, taken in connection with all Docter [sic] Rennie's previous communications, leads the Lieutenant Colonel to think that that Officer is more a subject for a Medical Board than for a Court Martial.” Rennie was sent to England to stand trial, but soon after arrival formally retracted his allegations to avoid sentencing. Soon after, he was posted to China.²⁶

By May 14th, 1861, Dr. Rennie, newly promoted to Staff Surgeon, had proceeded to Peking (Beijing) to Her Majesty's Embassy as surgeon of the 31st Regiment.²⁷ He did, however, gain first-hand experience of the fighting that took place.²⁸

²⁴ His arrest was mentioned in the *South Australian Register*, the *Adelaide Observer*, *The Empire*, *The Age*, *The Sydney Morning Herald*, and the *Portland Guardian and Normanby Advertiser*. The last of these, under the heading “Western Australia” mentions that Rennie “had been placed under arrest on a charge of calumniating an officer of the Royal Engineers.”

²⁵ Western Australia, Commandant's Office, General Order, *Extra Government Gazette*, August 24, 1859.

²⁶ “He will not return to duty in this colony.” Commandant's Office, 1859.

²⁷ This relocation occurred during the Second Opium War (1856–1860). The Ordnance Medical Department was subsumed into the Army Medical Department at the outbreak of the Crimean War in 1853, thus Rennie could be assigned to other regiments, not just the Royal Artillery. The 31st Regiment of Foot was the Huntingdonshire Regiment.

²⁸ He was “mentioned in despatches” during the capture of Kahding. “I trust that the excellent conduct of the troops, under very tempting circumstances and the very arduous nature of the service, will be favourably considered. I wish to mention for favourable notice...Dr. Rennie, 31st Regiment, Senior Medical Officer.” Letter from Brigadier-General Staveley to Sir G C Lewis regarding Kahding. Reported in *Events in the Taiping Rebellion* fn, p. 2, 1891.

Soon after, he published a slim volume of his controversial medical writings.²⁹ During his time in Beijing, he was exposed to traditional Chinese medicine, which influenced his later works, the two-volume *British Arms in North China and Japan* (1864) and *Peking and the Pekingese* (1865).³⁰ While documenting his experiences, Rennie developed a controversial smallpox treatment that he claimed superseded vaccination. The *Edinburgh Medical Journal* discounted the theory, noting its “careless and ungrammatical manner” and that it “scarcely requires serious criticism to show that Dr. Rennie’s facts are worthless, and his theory preposterous.”³¹ Though the anti-vaccine smallpox theory earned criticism in the medical profession, it nonetheless gained traction in the public eye and was championed in two popular anti-vaccination publications.³² The *London and China Telegraph News* reviewed his 1864 book *British Arms in North China and Japan*, stating that “it would be difficult to find a man more competent to inform us on the subject named in his title-page.” Rennie’s successes in treating troops gained the confidence of the (Eighth) Earl of Elgin, for whom he travelled to India in 1865 and was stationed with the 20th Hussars.³³

²⁹ D. F. Rennie *Views on the nature and treatment of various diseases* (Military Department Press, Calcutta), 1862.

³⁰ *British Arms in North China and Japan* (1864) is printed with the byline: “Senior Medical Officer of the Force in the North of China; Late Surgeon to Her Majesty’s Legation, and to the Legation of his Majesty the Emperor of the French at Peking.

³¹ “A Correspondent, *Edinburgh Medical Journal*, November 1862, p. 479. “Dr. Rennie’s Theory of Small-Pox”. While deemed preposterous, it is worth noting his theory is mentioned as a footnote in US book *The medical and surgical history of the war of the rebellion* (1861–65). His smallpox cure was also reported by the *Medical Times and Gazette*, and *The Pharmaceutical Journal*.

³² *The Vaccination Inquirer and Health Review: The Organ of the London Society for the Abolition of Compulsory Vaccination* (1880); and *The Story of a Great Delusion* (1885).

³³ Before his arrival, however, Dr. Rennie’s distinguished patron had succumbed to the exhaustion of the climate and his office. The 20th Hussars were formerly the 2nd Bengal European Cavalry.

Rennie served in the Duar or Second Anglo-Bhutan War (1864–65) as a medical officer during the British military campaign. Following detailed observations on diseases and health conditions among soldiers in Bhutan, he compiled his travel experiences, medical insights, and analysis of the war's causes into *Bhotan and the Story of the Dooar War* (1866). While declining health in 1867 limited his activities, he continued his medical duties until early 1868. On April 4, 1868, Rennie succumbed in Campbellpore (Attock, Pakistan) from liver complications. *The Indian Medical Gazette* reported his death in a touching tribute:

Last night, at about 8 p.m., Surgeon D. F. Rennie (well known to the public by several cleverly written articles on Military Reform, &c., lately published in a distinguished magazine, breathed his last. He had been suffering a long time with a liver complaint. This somewhat sudden event has cast a gloom over our little station. Doctor Rennie was very popular among the regiments in general, had earned the good will and affection of his brother officers by his genial disposition and warmth of heart, and gained the respect and humble friendship of his immediate subordinates by his gentlemanly deportment and readiness at all times to attend to their interests.³⁴

His death was widely reported in medical and military publications, with obituaries referencing both his contributions and the controversies that followed him throughout his career. Today, Rennie's life and work serve as a compelling case study in the history of colonial and military medicine, as his contested writings continue to be referenced in discussions on nineteenth-century medical practices. While Rennie's accounts are subject to scrutiny and debate, they remain a crucial, but contested, source of information regarding the Duar War.

³⁴ Campbellpore, *Indian Medical Gazette*, April 12, 1868, p. 112.

Bhotan and the Story of the Dooar War

John Murray and Sons³⁵ - the publisher of Lord Byron's poetry and of Charles Darwin's famous *On the Origin of Species* - published *Bhotan and the Story of the Dooar War* in the first week of January, 1866. Printed by Spottiswoode and Co.³⁶, the book had been advertised by John Murray in the preceding weeks under a different title. Advertisements in *The Spectator*³⁷ and elsewhere at the close of 1865 refers to the forthcoming publication as *The Story of the Bhotan War*. The late title change, one may speculate, might be because John Murray - who published a number of travel-related books - might have decided that the recent peace treaty might dampen interest, and thus sales, in a book about the war. Sales might be better were *Dooar* marketed as a story of geographical exploration or ethnography, rather than as a work of military history³⁸. The subtitle, "including sketches of three months' residence in the Himalayas, and narrative of a visit to Bhotan in May 1865" certainly appeals more to those with a reading interest in far-away places than to those concerned with military matters. The eventual title, though, was far more accurate. Though the book has 408 numbered pages, the fraction devoted to the conflict itself is small, some 120 pages.

One early review of the book provides evidence that public interest in Bhutan was waning: The magazine *London Society*³⁹, in its round-up review "Books of the Season," astutely observed:

³⁵ At the time of Rennie's publication, the family-run publishing company was headed by John Murray III.

³⁶ A major printer based in London, by 1871 they had grown to 650 employees. George Spottiswoode, master printer, was in charge of the company.

³⁷ *The Spectator*, December 30, 1865, p. 1479.

³⁸ John Murray had published two previous works by Rennie, *Peking and the Pekingese* and also *British Arms in North China and Japan*, as well as Samuel Turner's book *Account of an Embassy to the Court of the Teshoo Lama in Tibet; Containing a Narrative of a Journey Through Bootan, and a Part of Tibet* (John Murray, 1800).

³⁹ *London Society: A Monthly Magazine*, 10(55), p 16-17. This is a joint review with Rennie's *Peking and the Pekingese*.

Dr. Rennie, however, had seen enough of Bhotan to justify him in writing a book about it, as books are now written. If the war had gone on the book would have been a book of the season; but as the war has collapsed, we do not feel much interest about Bhotan until the war breaks out again. When that event - probably not far distant - takes place, we shall again take down Dr. Rennie's book from the shelf.⁴⁰

The book was certainly up to date. Rennie had written it, based on his notes, while aboard the Troop Ship *Rinaldo*⁴¹, beginning the writing in the Bay of Bengal and ending in the Azores. The preface was dated October 11, 1865 - predating the signing of the Treaty of Sinchula by precisely one month. Rennie added a postscript on December 18, 1865, a mere two weeks before the book was printed. As Rennie pointed out, this enabled him to "append a note containing a brief summary of our relations with Bhotan up to the latest date; which renders the work more complete than it otherwise would be."

Peking and the Pekingese identified the author as "D. F. Rennie, MD, Staff surgeon on Special Service under the Government of India."⁴² His other volume with John Murray, *British Arms in North China and Japan*, describes Rennie as "Senior Medical Officer of the force in the North of China, Late Surgeon to Her Majesty's Legation, and to the legation of His Majesty the Emperor of the French at Peking." For *Dooar*, though, he became "Surgeon Rennie, M.D., 20th Hussars, author of *British Arms in North China and Japan* and *Peking and the Pekingese*." While it is common for publishers to identify new authors by their professional accomplishments, and authors of previously successful books by the title of those works, it remains unclear

⁴⁰ The phrase "as books are now written" is a mildly derogatory comment, pointing out the significant increase in the number of books being published at that time.

⁴¹ Probably HMS *Rinaldo*, a Camelion class wooden sloop, commissioned in 1860.

⁴² The book spine, in addition to the title, has only "F. Rennie" stamped on it, rather than "DF Rennie, MD."

why he went from “D. F. Rennie” to “Surgeon Rennie,” since the former provides consistency and more information, while the latter – as his brother Duncan Robertson Rennie was also a surgeon serving with the Army in India – could cause confusion.

As is common with popular books published today, the front matter contained praise for his two other books with John Murray. To add to the visual appeal of *Dooar*, which would also increase sales potential, Rennie included woodcuts from “Dr. Hooker’s journal of his visit to the Sikkim Himalayas.”⁴³ To aid the British reader, a guide to the pronunciation of local place names was included. Both of these actions, as well as the title change, suggest a strong effort to attract travel-book readers.

Bhotan and the Story of the Dooar War was dedicated to Colonel Hawkes⁴⁴ and the officers of the 80th regiment “in recollection of mutual good feeling and of much kindness received by the author during the period he served with the corps on the north-eastern frontier of India.” Such dedications were commonplace in that era, and similar dedications were included with his two other works published by John Murray.^{45,46}

⁴³ This is Dr. Joseph Dalton Hooker, and the woodcuts are from his book *Himalayan Journals*, published by the Calcutta Trigonometrical Survey Office in 1854. The book was dedicated to Charles Darwin, with whom Hooker was close friends.

⁴⁴ In an age when commissions in the British Army could be purchased, Colonel Robert Hawkes was, instead, promoted repeatedly based on merit. “80th Foot: Robert Hawkes to be Lieutenant-Colonel, without purchase... Dated 4th May, 1859.” As per *Bulletins and Other State Intelligences* (1862) p. 1733. The 80th Regiment of Foot was the Staffordshire Regiment.

⁴⁵ *Peking and the Pekingese* was dedicated to “the Hon. Sir F. W. A. Bruce, G.C.B., late Her Majesty’s Envoy Extraordinary and Minister Plenipotentiary at the Court of Peking”, while *British Arms in North China and Japan* was inscribed to “Lieut-Col. Edward St. John Neale, C.B., Knight of San Fernando, Formerly Secretary of Legation at Peking and latterly Her Majesty’s Chargé d’Affaires in Japan.”

⁴⁶ In terms of military precedent, the 20th Hussars, as a cavalry regiment, takes precedence over an infantry regiment, the 80th Regiment of Foot. It is uncertain whether dedicating the book to the 80th regiment was

Murray announced its publication to the book trade, and notices ran not only among British but also American and German booksellers.⁴⁷ *Dooar* was promoted in the backmatter of other books published by Murray, including such diverse works as novelist Edward Bulwer-Lytton's collection of short stories *The Lost Tales of Miletus*; Darwin's *Variations of Animals and Plants under Domestication*; and Mary Somerville's *On Molecular and Macroscopic Science*.⁴⁸ Printed in a post octavo (post 8vo) format, close to a modern standard size for books in the United States (5" x 8"),⁴⁹ *Dooar* was priced at 12 shillings.⁵⁰

Murray's promotional efforts resemble those made for an earlier work on Bhutan, which they also published. But whereas Turner's *Account of an Embassy* resulted in several printings, translations into other languages,⁵¹ and a separate republication of Surgeon Saunders' botanical and medical observations during the embassy,⁵² *Dooar* struggled. There is no evidence to suggest subsequent printings by Murray other than the first, nor any signs of translation. The print reviews were uniformly critical.

Rennie's *Bhotan and the Story of the Dooar War* was the only detailed account of the conflict available to the British public, and its reception was largely negative regardless of the

regarded as a snub of the 20th Hussars, or whether it was regarded as perfectly acceptable.

⁴⁷ Julius Petzholtz (ed.) *Neuer anzeiger für bibliographie und bibliothekwissenschaft*, 1866, p. 29.

⁴⁸ Somerville College, Oxford—founded as an all-women's college—was named in her honour.

⁴⁹ In metric units, the approximate dimensions are 13 cm x 20 cm.

⁵⁰ This is the same format that Murray used for Darwin's *Origin of the Species*, though Darwin's book was priced higher, at 14 shillings. Inflation calculators suggest this price is about 60 UK pounds today, \$75 dollars, or 6400 BTN.

⁵¹ Trevor Lipscombe "The First British Book about Bhutan: A Publishing History of Turner's *Account of an Embassy*", *Journal of Bhutan Studies*, 25, (2016), pp. 1–19.

⁵² Valancius, Lindsey & Lipscombe, Trevor, Healing in the Himalayas: Robert Saunders, Surgeon, and the Embassy to Bhutan and Tibet of 1783, *Journal of Bhutan Studies*, 42, Summer (2020), 44–62.

exclusivity of the book's content. Critics across multiple publications expressed disappointment with the writings, and their assessments reveal a pattern of concerns that suggest the book itself was a misstep for Rennie, a writer otherwise known for his travel narratives.

The book's own preface hints at the underlying problem of purpose, as Rennie admits his aim was to "partly beguile the tediousness of a four months' voyage [...] partly in the hope of furnishing some information about a country almost altogether unwritten about." This admission of writing to stave off boredom undermines the seriousness of the endeavor. Writing to avoid boredom suggests that the book was conceived as a diversion rather than a true literary or historical project. Additionally, Rennie's stated intent - to provide details about the country, rather than the conflict itself - left those readers expecting a war narrative largely disappointed.

The *Calcutta Review* noted the absence of other accounts from members of the mission, stating: "It is somewhat curious that in these days of scribbling no popular narrative of the late mission to Bhotan has been given to the public by any of its members... Dr. Rennie has stolen a march upon them."⁵³ Yet this advantage was undercut by the book's lack of depth and focus. The *Review* continued, "It is unfortunate that the want of interest in this book is not even compensated by its artificial graces."

This lack of clear purpose may explain why the book lacks the immersive, observational richness of his earlier works on China and Japan.⁵⁴ Even the more favorable *Examiner* review tempered its praise: "We do not like this book as well as Dr. Rennie's last work, but the fault is more in the subject than in

⁵³ Short Notices, *The Calcutta Review*, 43 (1886) p. 259.

⁵⁴ "We do not like this book as well as Dr. Rennie's last work, but the fault is more in the subject than in the writer: for the poor, paltry, and barbarous principality of Bhotan, of course, can bear no comparison in interest with the great civilised empires of China and Japan."

the writer.”⁵⁵ This suggests that while Rennie may have had a competent style in other contexts, he failed to elevate the material for *Dooar*. The *London and China Telegraph* praised his travel writing, noting his “habits of close observation,” but this praise was limited to specific sections and did not extend to the book as a whole.⁵⁶ His previous successes as a travel writer did not translate sufficiently to a narrative that required political and military insight.

Critics were nearly unanimous in their condemnation of *Dooar*’s compositional style. The *Calcutta Review* was blunt: “The style, we regret to say, is radically bad, often ungrammatical, rarely elegant.” The implication is not just poor writing, but poor editing and a lack of literary polish. The *Review* went so far as to categorize the book as “scribbling,” not writing - a damning distinction suggesting a complete lack of refinement for a published writer.

The *London Society* echoed this sentiment, pointing further to a lack of originality in the writing.⁵⁷ The *Westminster and Foreign Quarterly Review* similarly added that the book was “overloaded with insipid strictures on matters concerning which few would feel inclined to accept him as an authority.”⁵⁸

The issues with Rennie’s writing abilities were not unknown to John Murray. This was Rennie’s third book with them and, from reports from their archives, Anne Peale notes that his manuscript for *British Arms* resulted in an editing bill of £59 12s, far in excess of the usual £10–£20 payment that the editor William Milton received. This fee is not surprising, as Milton had cut the manuscript from 2,000 pages down to one third of that, resulting in a book of some 408 printed pages. Peale also

⁵⁵ The Literary Examiner, *The Examiner*, February 24, 1866. pp. 117–118.

⁵⁶ Literature, *London and China Telegraph*, January 29, 1866, pp. 49–50.

⁵⁷ One half of it is made up from public documents, and betrays the mustiness of old newspapers, *London Society*, July 1866, “Books of the Season”, p. 16.

⁵⁸ Contemporary Literature, *Westminster and Foreign Quarterly Review*, January 4, 1866, pp. 544–545.

documents that the initial print run for all Rennie's books had been 1,000 copies, and that the revenue split had been 50–50.⁵⁹

Rennie's credibility regarding the conflict was repeatedly questioned at the time, as media outlets concluded that he was not sufficiently informed to offer insights. The *Calcutta Review* accused him of “shamelessly borrowing” from the reports of Mr. Eden and others, and criticized his tendency to challenge “undisputed facts of history” with “crude and undigested opinions.”⁶⁰ The *London Review of Politics* noted that Rennie's work contained “no great amount of information derived from personal experience touching the little-known people against whom our army was suddenly sent.”⁶¹ They also noted the inclusion of materials that resulted in “a condensation of the official documents and reports” that lacked depth and firsthand observation.⁶² While the *Westminster and Foreign Quarterly Review* grant Rennie credit for the “industry and care” with which he gathered the materials, they echo the criticisms toward his commentary itself. The author sufficiently compiled sources on his subject, but his own additions “only make up a small part of the present volume” and fail to impress readers.⁶³ Reviews insist that his authority as a commentator on the war was undermined by borrowing sources and by his limited engagement with the events.

Reviewers also took issue with Rennie's portrayals of key figures and the Bhutanese people during the conflict. The *London Society* criticized Rennie's sympathetic description of

⁵⁹ Anne E. Peale “Works of travel in a publishing empire: John Murray III and domestic markets for the far away, circa 1860–1892” doctoral thesis, University of Edinburgh, 2017.

⁶⁰ Short Notices of New Books, *The Calcutta Review*, Volume 43 (1886) p. 259. This is slightly unfair, in that Rennie states that he has “drawn freely on the official records having latest reference to the subject.” (*Dooar*, p. viii).

⁶¹ *Supplement to the London Review of Politics*, January 5, 1867. “The Literary Year, 1866”, pp. 29–30.

⁶² *Ibid.*

⁶³ *The Westminster and Foreign Quarterly Review*, January 4, 1866, p. 344.

Tongso Penlow, whom Sir Ashley Eden had vilified.⁶⁴ They wrote: “Dr. Rennie naturally devotes his attention to whitewashing and ‘rehabilitating’ him, and presenting him in the aspect of an agreeable and merry-hearted old gentleman.” The *Athenaeum* more explicitly criticizes his portrayals that do their “best to discover all that can possibly be said in favour of the native authorities” as well as “the savages themselves.”⁶⁵ His sympathetic view of the Bhutanese ultimately reinforced British doubts about his reliability.

Such reviews add weight to the hypothesis that Rennie was, or had become, a far better travel writer than a shrewd political observer or, indeed, medical practitioner. The *United Service Magazine* observes that Rennie’s “narrative of his three months’ residence in the Himalayas tells us little that we did not know before, but his visit to Bhotan has some novel information, and may give the English public a few clear ideas about a country that is likely to engage attention for some time to come.”⁶⁶ Reviews of his two other books on China and Japan are, likewise, far more positive about his literary sketches of those countries than the current events that Rennie often describes.

Dooar, in addition to its summation of British reasons for declaring war, also contained a great number of medical observations. These, too, received a mixed reception. Florence Nightingale, famous as the founder of modern nursing, wrote a letter in January 1866 to the statistician and epidemiologist William Farr. She referenced Rennie’s critique of his medical classifications, asking:

By the way, have you seen Surgeon Rennie’s attack upon you in “Story of the Bhotan War” p.235 - upon your “Nosology” - “sun-stroke” F.N.”

⁶⁴ “Mr. Eden has held up one Tongso Penlow as the very villain and vulture of Bhotan.”

⁶⁵ Literature, *The Athenæum*, February 17, 1866, p. 230.

⁶⁶ “Critical Notices” *United Service Magazine*, February 1866, p. 292.

While her tone remains playful, it presents her skepticism about Rennie's authority in the medical domain and his attacks on an established medical figure.⁶⁷

The Lancet, Britain's leading medical publication, latched on to one observation of Rennie regarding the death of Lieutenant Urquhart that might be used to save lives in combat. They observe⁶⁸

He illustrates this need by the death of Lieutenant Urquhart who, early in the attack on Dewangiri, had his femoral artery severed by a jingal bullet. He fell into the arms of one of his men and bled to death before surgical aid could be procured, the sapper not knowing that by tying a handkerchief around the leg immediately above the wound...the bleeding might have been arrested and the lieutenant's life spared.

They highlighted his description of the Lieutenant's death as valuable, although tragic, as a case study in battlefield medicine. In a book criticized for its lack of originality and authority, this moment of practical insight stands out. Even Rennie's linguistic observations were not spared and his etymological ideas on the name "Bhotan" were dismissed:

We are inclined to think the derivation in Wilson's *Sanskrit Dictionary* more likely to be the correct one, Bhotan from Bhot, and angah, "country."⁶⁹

⁶⁷ Rennie spent a couple of paragraphs complaining that "heat apoplexy must continue to be heat stroke because Dr. Farr has willed it so." *Dooar*, p. 236.

⁶⁸ "Medical Helps" *The Lancet*, March 17, 1866. This retells Rennie's account of the incident on page 196, where Rennie refers to him as Urquart [sic]. This is independently confirmed by *The Gentleman's Magazine* of April 1865, which says: "January 29th, Killed in the defence of the Fort of Dewangiri, Bhutan, aged 23, John Henry Urquhart, esq., Lieut. R.E., second son of the late Adam Urquhart, esq., sheriff of Wigtown."

⁶⁹ *The Athenaeum*, February 17th, 1866, p. 230.

His rendering of the Bhutanese greeting *kuzuzangpo* as “Is your body in health?” was described by Karma Ura as “delightfully amusing.”⁷⁰

Dooar failed to meet the expectations of readers as either a war narrative or reliable travelogue. Ultimately, his attempts to engage with multiple genres resulted in a subpar work that satisfied the requirements of neither. Critical receptions reflect the apparent disconnect between his strengths as an author and the demands of his Bhutanese subject. The account revealed his limitations as both a war commentator and medical observer.

Other Accounts of the War, and Comparison with Rennie’s

Rennie produced the only book-length account of the Duar War, but he did not provide the *only* account. British newspapers and the international press reported on it, particularly the attack on Dalingkot⁷¹ and the taking and retaking of Dewangiri by British forces. At these events, along with the capture of the Bala Pass, Rennie was a bystander. While the 80th regiment was ordered to Darjeeling in support of the troops and Rennie went with them, he did not see action. The notes on the war that he used to compose his narrative presumably came either from accounts of those soldiers who did take part, or else from the newspapers themselves. *Dooar* is consequently *not* a first-hand account of the war, but rather a narrative reliant on second-hand reports. Given their importance, the “Disaster at Dewangiri” and its recapture; the capture of the Buxa fort; and events at Dalingkot were documented not only by Rennie but by other writers at that time. Comparing Rennie’s descriptions with these first-hand accounts reveal some striking discrepancies, raising questions regarding his trustworthiness.

One such contrasting account is that of Captain F.G.E. Warren of the Royal Artillery, who served in the campaign and

⁷⁰ A polite way of noting its inaccuracy, (Rennie, 1866/ 2009, p. 336).

⁷¹ Modern-day Kalimpong.

published his journal in 1867. His writings offer vivid and personal details of his time in Bhutan - including a “fold-out map of Bhootan, the Dooars, and Assam” and specific details about the deaths of Griffin, Waller, and Anderson at Dalingkot.⁷² These human-interest stories - such as the fish he caught in a river while awaiting action at Dewangiri, and his sketches of the Bhutanese defences that had to be overcome by the British - stem from his personal involvement in the military operation, something that Rennie’s account lacks. Warren corrected popular misconceptions, noting that the guns abandoned at Dewangiri were not Armstrong guns⁷³ (as widely reported in newspapers) but - at 3 cwt each - more the type “identical with those employed for boat service in the Royal Navy.”⁷⁴ He reports that, in the retaking of Dewangiri, “nearly 150 Bhooteas were here killed or taken prisoners.”⁷⁵ But in the taking of the fort at the Bala Pass, Warren - a witness to the events - asserts “Once inside, no resistance was offered by the Bhooteas, who, I regret to say, were killed to a man.”⁷⁶

Rennie also asserts a massacre but claims that it occurred after the retaking of Dewangiri, on or about April 2nd, and not at the Bala Pass. If Warren is correct, then Rennie may have misattributed the location of the massacre, or perhaps there were two massacres. Rennie writes of Dewangiri:

The native troops now poured into the stockade, and an indiscriminate slaughter of its inmates commenced; in

⁷² Warren, F.G.E. (1867), pp. 116–161. A Captain at the time of writing, Falkland George Edgeworth Warren (1834–1908) rose to the rank of Colonel. He was present at Bissen Sing, the forcing of the Bala Pass, the capture of Tassagong, and at Buxar.

⁷³ Armstrong guns were relatively new; the Royal Arsenal having begun to manufacture them in 1855. These were breech loaded and the barrel was rifled, which increased accuracy. They were used extensively by the British in the Second Opium War. Rennie, in *Dooar*, p. 171, refers to them as Armstrong guns. Warren documents them as 12 pounder Howitzers (p 125). Prichard, p. 32, describes them as Armstrong Mountain Train guns.

⁷⁴ Warren, F.G.E. (1867).

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p.160.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p.154.

which, the storming party that had been discomfited on the right, joined. The British officers did what they could to arrest the wholesale butchery going on, but their efforts were not attended with much success ; as nearly the whole of the Bhotanese within the stockade, about 120 in number, were put to death: many of those who were lying on the ground wounded, being included in the massacre.

If Rennie's claim is accurate, then two atrocities occurred - one at Bala, one at Dewangiri. But Warren was not present at Dewangiri, and Rennie was not present at Bala. This ambiguity deepens the reliability question.

Beyond the question of massacres, discrepancies also appear in accounts of individual casualties. Iltudus Thomas Prichard⁷⁷ also summarised the war as part of his two-volume work *The Administration of India from 1859 to 1868: The First Ten Years of Administration under the Crown*. He devotes 45 pages, the entirety of Chapter XIV, to the war, but heavily echoes Rennie's book for his summary of events. Both list three officers of the Royal Artillery being killed when munitions exploded, though the *Gentleman's Magazine* reports only two fatalities.⁷⁸ Allen's *Indian Mail*, January 21, 1865, reporting immediately after Dalingkot, includes the deaths in action of Griffin, Anderson, and Waller ("blown to atoms") and "seven artillerymen,"

⁷⁷ Prichard (1826–1874) served in the Bengal Army. He was a lawyer and a Fellow of the Royal Geographical Society. He was author of a spoof on colonial life, *The Chronicles of Budgepore or, Sketches of Life in Upper India*. While explicitly a work of fiction, it does have a scene involving a court martial.

⁷⁸ "Deaths" *The Gentleman's Magazine*, March 1865, p. 386. "Dec. 6. Killed in action at Dhalimkote, Bhootan, India, aged 31, Maj. Fredk. Cockburn Griffin, R.A. Also, aged 23, Lieut. Edward Albert Anderson, of the Bengal Artillery, sixth son of the late John Anderson, esq., E.I.C.C.S., and of Stroquhan and Dunesslin, Dumfriesshire." Lieut. Edmund Waller, Royal Artillery, aged 23, was killed at the taking of Dhalinkote Fort, son of the late Rev. William Waller, of Castletown, Limerick. His death was reported in the *Army List*, 1865 (Jan.–March) p. 333.

whereas Prichard and Rennie both have seven members of the RAs in total.⁷⁹

When documenting the events at Dalingkot, Rennie reports that Captain Griffin died “while weighing the charges out” during the explosion. Prichard, summarizing the war in *The Administration of India* (1868), disagrees with Rennie regarding Griffin’s death:

No doubt that was his particular duty at the time, but I am assured on the authority of an officer who was present, that the moment before the explosion took place he was leisurely sitting on a barrel of gunpowder, smoking a pipe with that contempt for danger which is the invariable result of familiarity with it. (Prichard, p. 33)

Details diverge here, as Allen’s *Indian Mail* (Jan. 21, 1865) reports:

Griffin, Anderson, and Waller (‘blown to pieces’) and seven artillerymen... upwards of fifty men were wounded, Lieut. Collins, R.E., having had both his legs broken by the explosion... Macgregor, the General’s Brigade Major, slightly wounded on the scalp by a gunshot, and Loughnan, of the 18th Native Infantry, wounded by an arrow through the right arm.

While these injuries are echoed in Rennie’s account, there are discrepancies between the three that suggest a reliance on imperfect and conflicting sources.⁸⁰ He reports that Captain Macgregor was wounded by a matchlock shot while Lieutenant Loughman [sic] was shot by an arrow.

In another account, by (later) General Sir John Adye (1895, p. 233), Griffin is killed along with both his lieutenants and six

⁷⁹ “Summary and Review” *Allen’s Indian Mail and Official Gazette* 23 (London: Wm H Allen and Co., 1865, p.47).

⁸⁰ *Dooar*, pp. 171-172.

gunners. These lieutenants are given as Walker (sic) and Anderson.

The largest discrepancy concerns the recapture of Dewangiri. Rennie insists that following the storming of the stockade, "...nearly the whole of the Bhotanese within the stockade, about 120 in number, were put to death: many of those who were lying on the ground wounded, being included in the massacre."⁸¹ Prichard echoes this claim, adding moral condemnation in his commentary:

The amiable sentiments and really good behaviour of the chivalrous Bhotan barbarian were, however, but poorly returned by our own people, who on the capture of the place indiscriminately slaughtered 120 Bhotanese they found there, many of whom were lying on the ground wounded.⁸²

Contemporary newspapers contradict this account, as *The Examiner* reports "Every man in the stockade was killed or taken prisoner. About 180 taken prisoners; amongst them two men of note."⁸³ *The Times* (1865, p.11) agrees, stating "At least 120 were killed and 29 taken prisoner."

Although it was published some three decades later, in 1895, James Howard Thornton - who rose to become Deputy Surgeon General and who during the war was assigned to the 44th Native Infantry - actually *was* present at the retaking of Dewangiri and provided a personal account of the events in his memoirs. Thornton, seemingly unlike Rennie, volunteered for service on the front lines.⁸⁴ In contrast to Prichard, Thornton made no such remarks of massacre. Indeed, he claims that the stockade fell easily:

⁸¹ *Dooar*, p. 293.

⁸² Prichard, I. T. (1869, p. 40).

⁸³ *The Examiner* May 13, 1865, p. 296. The contents of the telegram were covered by many local newspapers in Britain and in India.

⁸⁴ Thornton (1895).

A column of attack was now formed to storm the principal stockade; it advanced up the mountain, surrounded the enemy's stronghold, and in a few minutes carried it by escalade with slight loss. The other stockades were also taken after feeble resistance, and the remains of the enemy's army fled from the scene of action, escaping without difficulty in the surrounding jungle.⁸⁵

To make matters more complex, the Victoria Cross citation for Captain Trevor and Lieutenant Dundas - awarded for their heroism at Dewangiri - states that Dundas "convinced the 200 to surrender."⁸⁶ Rennie reports that the alleged slaughter took place even though the officers "did what they could to arrest the wholesale butchery going on; but their efforts were not attended with much success."⁸⁷ The newspapers and the British authorities, then, generally concur that about 200 people surrendered that day.⁸⁸ Only Rennie (and Thomas, perhaps echoing Rennie's book) claim that an atrocity followed, and Rennie adds that "the Bhotanese inside the stockade at this time appeared to have become panic stricken and made no

⁸⁵ Thornton (1895, p. 141).

⁸⁶ Captain William Spottiswoode Trevor and Lieutenant James Dundas, though, were jointly awarded the Victoria Cross for their actions that day, the highest medal for valour in the British Army#. The citation reads: "Major-General Tombs states that on speaking to the Sikh soldiers around him, and telling them in Hindoostani to swarm up the wall, none of them responded to the call, until these two Officers had shewn them the way, when they followed with the greatest alacrity. Both of them were wounded. Dundas fought on despite his wounds and convinced the 200 to surrender."

⁸⁷ This echoes the structure of many reports concerning Bhutan. As per British newspapers, therefore, the "disaster at Dewangiri" was due to the Sepoys, who acted in spite of their British officers, who did everything they could to prevent it. To borrow a line from the movie *Zulu*, any other story "looks bad in the newspapers and upsets civilians at their breakfast." Likewise, any slaughter following the retaking of Dewangiri, as per Rennie and Thomas, is also reported as due to the Native troops acting in spite of their British officers.

⁸⁸ This account reflects a trope common in colonial narratives, one that casts British officers as noble leaders striving to prevent unnecessary violence. This framing, however, minimizes any responsibility they may have had in any massacre, and is therefore questionable.

resistance,” which is at odds with General Tombs’s report that “the enemy fought hard until the key of their position fell.”⁸⁹

While an argument from silence is weak, the fact that none of the book reviewers for the newspapers or magazines commented on a massacre explicitly, or denied that it took place, does suggest that, perhaps, it did indeed occur. After all, as Rennie’s book was criticized heavily for several reasons, it would be easy to confront him additionally in a review about false accusations regarding a massacre. Rennie, having already faced one court martial, might conceivably have been subject to another, were what he alleged not true. He was, at that time, in his forties, with many years ahead of him as a surgeon, and with a reputation to protect. Misrepresenting events in his book would not have furthered his military career.

Conclusion

Bhotan and the Story of the Dooar War has stood as the definitive, and almost sole, narrative of the Second Anglo-Bhutan War. While it reflects a distinctly British colonial perspective, it has remained widely unchallenged and unquestioned for more than a century. The silence of Bhutanese sources and lack of British accounts have allowed David Field Rennie’s version of events to shape historical memory.

As a surgeon, Rennie creates medical theories that are widely rejected in the medical literature. As an author, his writing style is roundly criticized, as is the content of what he has written. Our examination of Rennie’s personal life, career, and writings sought to interrogate his authority and narration. Doubts about the precision of his account are raised by his

⁸⁹ “The force under my command re-occupied Dewangiri to-day by half-past twelve. Not a Bbootea is left on the plateau. Our loss not heavy. Lieut. Weldon, of the police, severely wounded, and three or four officers slightly wounded. About twenty men killed and wounded. The enemy fought hard until the key of their position fell. Every man in the stockade was killed or taken prisoner. About 180 taken prisoners; amongst them two men of note.” “India” *The Examiner*, May 13, 1865, p. 296.

reputation for embellishment and by his not being present at the actions described in *Dooar*. By comparing his account of the war with other contemporary writings, such as British newspapers of the time, those facts that we can check are mostly consistent with other sources. However, our research uncovered a troublesome inconsistency in accounts of wartime atrocities with the “two massacres” problem. He outspokenly claims that British troops massacred Bhutanese soldiers who had surrendered at Dewangiri, which is also attested to by Prichard’s account. It is nowhere contradicted in reviews of the book. It is troubling, though, that Warren reports a similar massacre at the Bala Pass, to which he himself was witness, but says no such thing about the retaking of Dewangiri. Likewise, Prichard contradicts Rennie’s account of Macgregor’s death at Dalingkot.

It is possible to read *Dooar* as an attempt at writing a travel book that went awry. By departing from the formula of people, places, and things, Rennie engaged in political expression that was not well-received. Reviews were harsh, but was this antipathy driven primarily by his critique of Britain and its expansionist policies for its Empire? He proposes that Ashley Eden should take some of the blame for the events that transpired. His narration possesses a sympathy toward the Bhutanese people that sets him apart from his contemporaries, risking censure to publish a strikingly humane perspective.

Do these factors define Rennie as an unreliable narrator? Mixed evidence can neither fully confirm nor wholly deny the accuracy of his account. So, as Bhutanese sources are absent, perhaps Rennie provides the most even-handed, or most pro-Bhutanese, account of the Duar war that a nineteenth-century British officer could reasonably have composed. Criticized in reviews for his sympathetic portrayals of the Bhutanese people and his pointed remarks of the British elite, he dares to suggest that British forces engaged in a massacre, an accusation that might easily have resulted in disciplinary action. In the Scottish legal parlance of the time, the verdict on Rennie’s reliability as a narrator remains “not proven.” His narrative

lacks definitive accuracy, yet remains indispensable to any attempt to reconstruct the war's history. A product of both the Empire and an internal critique of it, the account provides an unmatched, albeit somewhat flawed, perspective.

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