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**English Anti-Imperialism and the  
Varied Lights of Willie Pearson**

**Anil Nauriya**



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## English Anti-Imperialism and the Varied Lights of Willie Pearson\*

Anil Nauriya\*\*

British colonial rule in India did not enjoy universal support among the English people. Percy Bysshe Shelley (1792–1822), for example, expressed his reservations in “An Address to the Irish People”; so did Ernest Jones (1819–1869), the Chartist leader, and the Positivist, Richard Congreve (1818–1899).<sup>1</sup> Critical observers like Henry W. Nevinson (1856–1941) did point to a contradiction that was becoming increasingly obvious in the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century : “...Nationalism was one of the strongest motive forces of the nineteenth century. In many cases it prevailed, and on the whole it was favoured by British statesmanship and popular feeling, unless our own supposed interests were very closely involved”.<sup>2</sup> Although the dissident traditions

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<sup>1</sup> On Shelley, see Ramesh Chandra Sharma, “Shelley and the Colonial Question”, in *Nineteenth Century Studies : Essays Presented to Professor Amalendu Bose*, Calcutta, The World Press Private Ltd, 1973, pp. 41–54. Regarding Ernest Jones’ response to Indian events in 1857 see D.K. Barua, “The British Response to the Indian Mutiny : The Literary Evidence”, *The Visva-Bharati Quarterly*, Vol. 44, Nos 3 and 4, 1978–9, pp. 211–37, at 233–4; see also *India’s Struggle for Freedom*, Department of Information & Cultural Affairs, Government of West Bengal, [Kolkata], 1987, p. 5, p. 32 and p. 37. On Richard Congreve’s position see G.H. Forbes, *Positivism in Bengal : A Case Study in the Transmission and Assimilation of an Ideology*, Calcutta, Minerva Associates, 1975, pp. 19–25.

<sup>2</sup> Henry W. Nevinson, *The Growth of Freedom*, London, T.C. & E.C. Jack., (n.d.) p. 76.

did not die, by the early 20<sup>th</sup> century the dominant English consensus sought to uphold the Empire.<sup>3</sup> There would be a few important exceptions to this. One such exception to the prevailing attitudes at this time is provided by aspects of the life and work of William ('Willie') Winstanley Pearson (1881–1923). Pearson's name, when referred to in historical literature, is usually twinned with that of C.F. Andrews (1871–1940). There were other Englishmen as well, such as Benjamin Guy Horniman (1873–1948), to name only one, who came to be associated, like Andrews and Pearson, with a commitment to Indian freedom. Horniman was a journalist based in India from 1906 onwards. He was closer in age to C.F. Andrews and nearly a decade older than Pearson. Horniman, like Pearson, came out to India to work in the first decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It is tempting to draw parallels between them because both developed a deep involvement with Indian nationalism and both would be deported, Pearson from China in 1918 and Horniman from India in the next year after his protests following the massacre at Jallianwala Bagh, Amritsar.<sup>4</sup> We will not pursue the comparison as Horniman requires a study in his own right, as indeed do the trajectories of Gandhi's two early English companions in South Africa, Lewis Walter Ritch (1870–1964) and Henry Polak (1882–1959).

Another Englishman, Henry Noel Brailsford (1873–1958), though of the same age as Horniman, came to prominence in the Indian context somewhat later, from 1931 onwards.<sup>5</sup> Brailsford was not based in India, though he came passionately to be interested in Indian freedom. His work earned high praise from Tagore.<sup>6</sup> But "India notwithstanding",

<sup>3</sup> For a brief survey of some of these attitudes even among the more liberal sections of English opinion, see Hiren Mukerjee, *India and Parliament*, New Delhi, People's Publishing House, 1962, pp. 74–95.

<sup>4</sup> For his critique of the Colonial administration of India, see B.G. Horniman, *Amritsar and Our Duty to India*, London, T. Fisher Unwin Ltd, 1920.

<sup>5</sup> F.M. Leventhal, *The Last Dissenter : H.N. Brailsford and His World*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1985, pp. 217–23.

<sup>6</sup> Of one of Brailsford's books Tagore wrote in 1933 : "'Rebel India' is an eminently honest book which can only be written by a type of Englishman with whom we are least familiar in India". Tagore was contrasting Brailsford with Englishmen who came to India in "pursuit of

writes Brailsford's biographer, "it was Europe and the breakdown of the post-war settlement that remained his principal concern..."<sup>7</sup>

Among the many English men and women who set out for India in the imperial era, and especially in the first decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, few have been as disconnected with the project of Empire as was the Liverpool-born Pearson. In a short span of a decade from 1907 onwards, his ideas evolved still further into an active dissidence. He stands out also because of the Englishmen mentioned in the previous paragraphs, Pearson was, at least to begin with, perhaps the least overtly political. What went into the making of this extraordinary man is of abiding interest; yet when (later Sir) David Petrie (1879–1961), the ace British Intelligence official, prepared a report on Pearson in China in March 1918 he prefaced it by saying "(f)ull particulars of the early career of W.W. Pearson are not available..."<sup>8</sup> In post-independence India there has not been enough historical work on the life and work of Pearson as compared with that on, for example, his senior associate, C.F. Andrews. That he should be so overshadowed is not surprising as Pearson's life was cut short early and his influence is largely of a "subaltern" nature as compared with Andrews whose work, though also focused largely on the subordinated, involved, unlike Pearson, continual engagement with the highest imperial functionaries in India, South Africa, England and elsewhere.<sup>9</sup> Two noteworthy scholars who have, however, interested themselves in the subject of Pearson's life and work are Tarasankar Banerjee and Pranati Mukhopadhyaya.<sup>10</sup>

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personal gain or administration of the country". See Sisir Kumar Das (ed.), *The English Writings of Rabindranath Tagore, Volume Three : A Miscellany*, New Delhi, Sahitya Akademi, 1996, p. 882.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. 223.

<sup>8</sup> D. Petrie's note "W.W. Pearson", datelined *Shanghai*, 16 March 1918, National Archives of India, New Delhi, Home (Poll)-Deposit-July 1918-Proceedings, No 40.

<sup>9</sup> For some of C.F. Andrews' interactions with imperial functionaries, especially in India, in attempts to influence their policies, see Hugh Tinker, "Race, Empire and Commonwealth : The Vision of C.F. Andrews", *The Visva-Bharati Quarterly*, Vol. 40, No. 1, 1974–5, pp.18–56.

<sup>10</sup> See Pranati Mukhopadhyaya, (i) "W.W. Pearson", *Tagore Studies*, 1972–3, pp. 49–60 and (ii) *William Winstanley Pearson*, Kolkata, Tagore

We know from these writings and from earlier articles by C.F. Andrews that Willie Pearson was nurtured in Manchester.<sup>11</sup> A long-standing centre of intellectual dissidence in England, Manchester was also an industrial town derided by John Morley as the “home of mean ambitions”.<sup>12</sup> Willie’s father, Samuel Pearson, was a Non-Conformist and Congregationalist minister who had served in Birmingham, Liverpool and Manchester; a hundred years later, proceedings relating to a church with which he had been associated, described him : “...its best loved minister (Samuel Pearson, 1892–1907) was a passive resister, with a Liberal MP for a father-in-law, a pioneer pacifist for a son-in-law, an early associate of Gandhi for one son and a public school headmaster for another”.<sup>13</sup> Samuel Pearson’s ideas were an immense influence on his son.<sup>14</sup> Willie’s mother, Mrs Bertha Pearson, belonged to an important Quaker family of London.

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Research Institute, 1984 and Tarasankar Banerjee, (i) “W.W. Pearson on Indian Nationalism and National Movement”, *The Quarterly Review of Historical Studies*, Vol. XXVII, No. 3, October–December 1987, pp. 4–14, (ii) “W.W. Pearson and Santiniketan”, *Indo-British Review*, Vol. XIII, No. 2, July–December 1987, pp. 51–62 and (iii) “W.W. Pearson and Santiniketan: Some Select Correspondence”, *The Visva-Bharati Quarterly*, May 1982–April 1983, Vol. 48, Nos 1–4 (Pulinbihari Sen Memorial Number), pp. 94–129.

<sup>11</sup> For C.F. Andrews’ writings on Pearson see (i) “W.W. Pearson : A Memoir”, *The Visva-Bharati Quarterly*, (Old Series), October 1924, pp. 229–239 and (ii) “W.W. Pearson”, *The Visha-Bharati Quarterly*, May 1939, pp. 33–40. In the last article, Andrews, nearing the end of his own extraordinary life, has the year of Pearson’s death as 1924 rather than 1923.

<sup>12</sup> Patrick Joyce, *Work, Society and Politics: The Culture of the Factory in Later Victorian England*, London, Methuen & Co, 1982, p. 39.

<sup>13</sup> *The Archaeological Journal* (Journal of the Royal Archaeological Institute, England), Vol. 144, 1987–1988, p. 29. We are concerned in the present paper with the son described as an “early associate of Gandhi”.

The son-in-law referred to as “a pioneer pacifist” was Leyton Richards.  
<sup>14</sup> Dr. Samuel Pearson had, on behalf of the Free Churches of Manchester, addressed the Quaker Conference held at Manchester in November 1895, saying he was “thankful” that the Quakers, were “compelled, with the members of the Free Churches, to face the questions of social change, biblical enquiry and scientific thought...”. [See Hope Hay Hewison, *Hedge of Wild Almonds : South Africa, the Pro-Boers & the Quaker Conscience 1890–1910*, London, James Currey, 1989, p. 45].

After completing his studies at Cambridge<sup>15</sup> and Oxford, majoring in the natural sciences and producing a thesis on theories of evolution,<sup>16</sup> Willie Pearson joined the London Missionary Society (LMS). That led to his 1907–1911 stint in Calcutta during a seminally eventful period in Bengal. In the course of this he was Lecturer in Botany with the LMS Institution in Bhowanipur, Kolkata.<sup>17</sup> He had reached Kolkata in December 1907. It was 50 years since 1857; the Partition of Bengal had only recently occurred and the Swadeshi movement was in full swing. While Pearson was in Kolkata, Aravinda [Aurobindo] Ghosh (1872–1950), who incidentally had himself as a young child lived in and been tutored in Manchester in the household of a Congregational priest between 1879 and 1884, was arrested on 3 May 1908, “being implicated in a conspiracy to provide rifles and dynamite for revolutionary purposes”.<sup>18</sup>

Aurobindo was put on trial not far from where the LMS Institution was located. Pearson wrote within the next 10 days to LMS authorities asking permission to attend a “sandwich course” of a secular variety.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Emmanuel College. See brief life sketch of Pearson in *Indian Opinion*, 7 January 1914,

<sup>16</sup> W.W. Pearson’s B.Sc thesis was on “The Theory of Evolution in Science, Ethics and Religion, with special reference to its Teleological nature, Tracing the Development of the Theory in question from Lamarck to our own Day”, Oxford, 1907 [see the bibliography in James R. Moore, *The Post-Darwinian Controversies*, Cambridge, The University Press, 1979].

<sup>17</sup> He is described as “the first Professor of Botany” at the LMS institution from 1910 in A.K. Ghosh and R.M. Dutta, “History of the Teaching of Botany in Bengal, (including Bihar and Orissa) (1800–1918)”, *Journal of the Asiatic Society*, Vol. XVIII, Nos 1–4, 1976, p. 34. Pearson appears to have taught classes up to the Intermediate standard.

<sup>18</sup> H.W. Nevins, *The New Spirit in India*, (first published 1908), Indian Reprint, Delhi, Metropolitan Book Co. 1975, p. 228n. On Aurobindo’s life in Manchester, see A.B. Purani, *Sri Aurobindo in England*, Pondicherry, Sri Aurobindo Ashram, 1956, particularly pp. 4–7. On Aurobindo’s life till 1909 and also the bomb case before the Sessions Court, see Jitendra Lal Bannerji, “Aravinda Ghosh—A Study”, *Modern Review*, Vol. VI, No. 5, November 1909, pp. 476–87.

<sup>19</sup> Hugh Tinker, *The Ordeal of Love: C.F. Andrews and India*, Delhi : Oxford University Press, 1979, p. 46.

He attended a Bengali language course, in Shimla and appears already to have had some contact with C.F. Andrews.<sup>20</sup> In June 1911 Pearson decided to return home to England ostensibly for health reasons. Even so, India remained on his mind and by February 1912 he had decided “to work among Indian students along his own lines, as an independent worker”.<sup>21</sup> Pearson served for a while as an assistant to the educational adviser to Indian students in London.<sup>22</sup> Hugh Tinker has referred to Pearson’s correspondence with the London Missionary Society.<sup>23</sup> It was characteristic of Pearson that though he charted his own course, his relation with the London Missionary Society appears to have remained cordial.

The writings of Joseph Mazzini (1805–1872) had caught the attention and even the imagination of many Indian nationalists. In the surcharged atmosphere of the Bengal of 1907–11, Willie Pearson made his first public intellectual intervention with the publication by him of what he described as a “cheap edition” of Joseph Mazzini’s *Duties of Man*.<sup>24</sup> It was edited and accompanied with a preface and biographical introduction by Pearson; the book was published by S.K. Lahiri & Co., a College Street publisher. At the time of its appearance, Pearson was still Lecturer in Botany at the LMS Institution in Calcutta. Nobody reading the preface or the introduction could, however, be left with any doubt that Pearson’s was a political mind :

When the idea of bringing out a cheap edition of Mazzini’s ‘*Duties of Man*’ had occurred to me some months ago, neither I nor Mr Lahiri, who so kindly undertook its publication, imagined that it would be necessary to preface it with an

<sup>20</sup> Idem. When Andrews called on Romain Rolland on 16 September 1928 he appears to have told the latter that his first meeting with Pearson was in 1908. See extract from Romain Rolland’s diary for that day in *Romain Rolland and Gandhi : Correspondence*, New Delhi, Publications Division, Government of India, 1976, p. 125.

<sup>21</sup> Tinker, *The Ordeal*, p. 46 and p. 53 n27.

<sup>22</sup> *Indian Opinion*, 7 January 1914.

<sup>23</sup> Tinker, *The Ordeal...*, p. 318.

<sup>24</sup> Joseph Mazzini (W.W. Pearson, ed.), *Duties of Man*, Calcutta, S.K. Lahiri & Co. (n.d.; published not later than 1909).



assurance that it was not intended to encourage disaffection towards the established Government of India.

Pearson goes on to emphasise a distinction between Mazzini the idealist and Mazzini the man who “plotted to obtain his country’s rights”.

The keynote of Mazzini’s teaching, according to Pearson, is in the proposition that : The sole origin of every right is in a duty fulfilled. “Duty” in Mazzini relates to the duty to improve, the duty of educating oneself and the duty of being of service to humanity. So Pearson hopes in his preface that the readers of Mazzini’s inspiring essay “may derive from it a fresh impetus to the more constructive side of their political ideals”.

It is significant also that this formulation is emphasized here by the son of Samuel Pearson, the Nonconformist Congregationalist author of the work: *The Duty of Disobedience : A Defence of Passive Resistance* which had appeared in England in 1903. The Non-conformists had taken to passive resistance and refused to pay the education rate on the ground that it amounted to taxation for the benefit of a particular denomination. This movement, whose most prominent spokesman was John Clifford (1836–1923),<sup>25</sup> had some influence on Gandhi in South Africa, as did the Suffragette Movement.<sup>26</sup> [The Constitution of India now interdicts such taxation].

In fact what is at work here is clearly a subversive dialectic.

Mazzini was not new to Bengal or to India as a whole. In Bengal the life of Mazzini had been written about by Jogendranath Vidyabhushan in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>27</sup> Surendranath Banerjea had also been speaking

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<sup>25</sup> For John Clifford and the passive resistance in connection with the education rate, see J.R.H. Weaver (ed.) *The Dictionary of National Biography : 1922–1930*, London, Oxford University Press, 1937, pp. 188–190.

<sup>26</sup> M.K. Gandhi (Valji Govindji Desai, Tr.), *Satyagraha in South Africa*, Ahmedabad, Navajivan Publishing House, (first published, 1928), second edition, 1950, p. 104.

<sup>27</sup> A.C. Guha, *First Spark of Revolution*, Bombay, Orient Longman, 1971, p. 65.

about Mazzini and Garibaldi.<sup>28</sup> Aurobindo himself had repeatedly invoked Mazzini and others.<sup>29</sup>

In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, Lajpat Rai had written a booklet on the life of Mazzini.<sup>30</sup> The political juncture of 1907 had a special significance. The 10<sup>th</sup> of May of 1907, the year in which Pearson arrived in Kolkata, had marked the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Rebellion of 1857. On 9 May 1907 Lala Lajpat Rai was arrested to be deported to Mandalay.<sup>31</sup> What was particularly remarkable about Willie Pearson's intervention was that it was now an Englishman in India who was putting forth an interpretation of Mazzini. The work attracted attention. Annie Besant (1847–1933) reviewed Pearson's edition of Mazzini's work, *Duties of Man* in 1909.<sup>32</sup> Mrs Besant agrees with and endorses Pearson's view that "The keynote of Mazzini's teaching is found in his words : 'The sole origin of every right is a duty fulfilled'". She finds the biographical sketch of Mazzini done by Pearson to be "short and interesting", describes Mazzini as the "Prophet of the Ideal", and says of Mazzini's work that "Nothing nobler has been written in political strife than this essay...".<sup>33</sup> The view of Mazzini that Gandhi puts across in *Hind Swaraj* is similar to that of Pearson's inasmuch as Mazzini is seen in terms of his ideals. Whether Pearson's book reached Gandhi is not clear. Gandhi's work was serialized in *Indian Opinion* in December 1909. The duties-rights formulation would be adopted by Gandhi and is referred to in his response to Julian Huxley in 1947.<sup>34</sup>

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., p. 73.

<sup>29</sup> See Giuseppe Flora, "The Changing Perception of Mazzini within the Indian National Movement", Research-in-Progress Papers, Second Series, Centre for Contemporary Studies, Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, New Delhi, 1993, pp. 27–9.

<sup>30</sup> Lajpat Rai, *Giuseppe Mazzini: A Biography*, Lahore, 1896 (original in Urdu). For extracts see B.R. Nanda (ed.), *The Collected Works of Lala Lajpat Rai*, Vol. 1, New Delhi, Manohar, 2003, pp. 283–309.

<sup>31</sup> Ganda Singh (ed.), *History of the Freedom Movement in the Punjab (Volume IV) : Deportation of Lala Lajpat Rai and Sardar Ajit Singh*, Patiala, Punjabi University, 1978, p. viii.

<sup>32</sup> *The Theosophist*, Vol. 30, 1909, p. 510. The review is signed "A.B." and is with reference specifically to the edition prepared by W.W. Pearson and published by S.K. Lahiri & Co. of College Street, Calcutta.

<sup>33</sup> Idem.

<sup>34</sup> Gandhi to Julian Huxley, 25 May 1947, *CWMG*, Vol. 95 (Supplementary Volume 5), pp. 141–2.

As for the Colonial Government, Mazzini was to it a red rag. The revolutionary Jugantar group in Bengal has also been compared with Mazzini's Young Italy group.<sup>35</sup> The official attitude was summed up by Sir Herbert Risley while introducing the new Press Bill in the Legislative Council on 4 February 1910:

We are at the present moment confronted with a murderous conspiracy, whose aim it is to subvert the Government of the country and to make British rule impossible by establishing general terrorism. Their organization is effective and far-reaching; their numbers are believed to be considerable; the leaders work in secret and are blindly obeyed by their youthful followers. The method they favour at present is political assassination; the method of Mazzini in his worst moods.<sup>36</sup>

It is not surprising therefore that with his strong Non-Conformist and Quaker influences, and his definite political outlook, Willie Pearson soon left the London Missionary Society to chart his own course. Nor is it very surprising that there does not appear to be much overt reference in the intervening years to Pearson's Mazzini book in Shantiniketan circles. It is later, in the non-co-operation context of 1922, that the book re-surfaces when a new edition is published by S. Ganesan from Madras.

Yet, characteristically, as we have seen, the strain in Pearson's relations with the London Missionary Society probably did not evolve from separation onward into an antagonistic breach. In 1914 we find him writing from Hazaribagh to Nagendranath Ganguli after doing "quite a lot of botanizing round about in tanks and jungles and on rocky hills": "I shall be in Calcutta on Tuesday or Wednesday of next week and intend to visit the London Mission College to try and get a list of their Botanical apparatus. We must get one or two simple dissecting microscopes which are most useful things".<sup>37</sup> Such interests, connected

<sup>35</sup> A.C. Guha, *op. cit.*, p. 107.

<sup>36</sup> Vincent A. Smith, *India in the British Period [Being Part III of the Oxford History of India]*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1920, p. 780.

<sup>37</sup> Rabindra Bhavan, Pearson Papers, File 287 (v), W.W. Pearson to Nagendranath Ganguli, 24 October 1914.

as these were also with his earlier work on evolution, Willie appears to have pursued as and when he found the time.<sup>38</sup> In the following year he published a paper which seemed to introduce, if not summarise, ideas from some of his earlier research.<sup>39</sup> And a few weeks later, while on a visit to Ramgarh in the Almora Hills, an article on the significance of the science of forestry in which he wrote presciently : “The reckless destruction of forests has in many cases changed the climate and destroyed the prosperity of a nation, and the recognition of this fact has made the question of forest conservation one of vital importance to the progress of a country in material wealth and national health”.<sup>40</sup> According to him, Spain had lost its prosperity primarily because of “the failure of her agriculture”; her “climate has been destroyed by the drought which has followed upon the reckless cutting down of her forests”, as a result of which the “centre of Spain is almost treeless”.<sup>41</sup> He noticed that in the Himalayan station where he was staying. “a whole hillside was long ago denuded of its oak trees in order to obtain their money value” and that they “have never been replaced”.<sup>42</sup>

After returning to England in 1911, Willie Pearson had met Tagore in London in 1912. Pearson was connected to the circle that was present at the reading by W.B. (Willie) Yeats of translations from Tagore’s poetry (mainly from ‘*Gitanjali*’) in London in mid-1912.<sup>43</sup> On his own journey from Bombay to London in April 1912 (on which he had as companions his friends Sushil Kumar Rudra and Rai Bahadur

<sup>38</sup> A book by him, intitled *Botanical Plants*, is listed in the catalogue of the Visva-Bharati Central Library, though I have been unable so far to find a copy in that or in any other library.

<sup>39</sup> W.W. Pearson, “The Purpose of Evolution”, *Modern Review*, April 1915, pp. 401–10.

<sup>40</sup> W.W. Pearson, “The Importance of Forestry”, *Modern Review*, June 1915, pp. 692–6.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 694.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 696.

<sup>43</sup> See C.F. Andrews, “An Evening with Rabindra”, *Modern Review*, Vol. XII, No. 2, August 1912, pp. 225–8. According to Tarasankar Banerjee, in “W.W. Pearson and Santiniketan”, *Indo-British Review*, Vol. XIII, No. 2, July–December 1987, p. 54, the *Gitanjali* reading event in London at which Tagore, Andrews and Pearson were together took place on 30 June 1912.

Sultan Singh), C.F. Andrews had already raised the possibility of Pearson being engaged as a tutor to Rai Bahadur Sultan Singh's son, Raghubir. In the last quarter of 1912 Pearson took up that assignment in Delhi, while arranging in due course to move to Shantiniketan. While in Delhi, Pearson "also took up work at the local Bengali school and continued his Bengali studies for greater efficiency in his work".<sup>44</sup>

In Delhi, as in Calcutta earlier, Pearson found himself in the vortex of political events. The incident of bomb-throwing on Lord Hardinge and his entourage occurred in Delhi in December 1912, within days of Pearson's return to Delhi after having made a short visit to Shantiniketan.<sup>45</sup> By 17 December, Pearson had been sufficiently established in Kashmere Gate, Delhi to write dreamily to Tagore comparing Bengal to a tank in which Shantiniketan was a lotus.<sup>46</sup> Six days later came the attack on the Viceroy and his procession. The main tutor to Rai Bahadur Sultan Singh's son, Raghubir, was Master Amir Chand (who had taught at St. Stephen's School) and who, shortly afterwards was implicated in the Hardinge Bomb Case and hanged some months later on 8 May 1915. The alleged conspiracy took some time to unravel. But it is not entirely surprising that many succeeding days in 1913 seem to have been spent by Willie and his pupil in the cooler climes of the hills north of Delhi.<sup>47</sup>

In the unfolding scenario even Andrews and S.K. Rudra, Principal of St. Stephen's College, were viewed with suspicion by the colonial

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<sup>44</sup> *Indian Opinion*, 7 January 1914.

<sup>45</sup> Tarasankar Banerjee, "W.W. Pearson and Santiniketan", *Indo-British Review*, Vol. XIII, No. 2, July–December 1987, p. 55 and Pranati Mukhopadhyay, "W.W. Pearson", *Tagore Studies*, 1972–3, pp. 49–60 at p. 51.

<sup>46</sup> Pearson to Rabindranath Tagore, 17 December 1912, Pearson Papers, File 287 (ii), Rabindra Bhavan, Shantiniketan.

<sup>47</sup> See Syeda Saiyidain Hameed, "Letters from Father to Son", in Khushwant Singh and Syeda Saiyidain Hameed (eds), *A Dream Turns Seventy Five : The Modern School : 1920–1995*, New Delhi, Allied Publishers, 1995, pp. 10–19.

establishment.<sup>48</sup> D. Petrie, the British police officer who investigated the Hardinge Bomb Case, formed a deep prejudice against Andrews which would later be transferred to one against Pearson in a still more virulent form. Petrie was a high flier in the British intelligence service whose career culminated as Director-General of MI 5 during the years 1940–46.<sup>49</sup>

The episode serves also as a practical demonstration of the greyness of political struggles. The same Lord Hardinge who was the object of the 1912 attack was also the Colonial functionary who would, albeit in the face of the pressure of Indian public opinion, put the weight of the Government of India behind the struggle for civic rights launched by Indians in South Africa. In this very positive role of Hardinge it was Andrews who would be his motivator.

A trip to South Africa materialized rather unexpectedly for Willie Pearson towards the end of 1913. He accompanied C.F. Andrews reaching there in early 1914 by which time Gandhi and many other passive resisters had been released.<sup>50</sup> Andrews was sent by Indian statesman Gopal Krishna Gokhale (1866–1915) who had become anxious with Gandhi having been arrested and this having been followed by the harassment and unexpected arrest of Albert West, then editor

<sup>48</sup> On Master Amir Chand's allegedly "close connection" with "Mr. Rudra, the Principal of the College, and Mr. Andrews", see letter dated 17 December 1914 from W.M. Hailey (Chief Commissioner of Delhi) to H. Sharp, [Secretary to the Government of India (Education Department)], Archives of the National Capital Territory of Delhi, F. No 30/1914/ B, Home Confidential, [Delhi Conspiracy Case : Question of the grant to St. Stephen's College, Delhi].

<sup>49</sup> Richard J. Popplewell, *Intelligence and Imperial Defence : British Intelligence and the Defence of the Indian Empire, 1904–1924*, London, Frank Cass, 1995, p. 81.

<sup>50</sup> Gandhi recalled in 1924 : "It was when almost all the leaders were arrested that Mr Gokhale .... sent Mr Andrews and Mr Pearson. Whilst their help was invaluable, it was not necessary to keep the sacrificial fire going. They were useful for conducting negotiations". Interview to *The Hindu*, 15 April 1924, CWMG, Vol. 23, p. 441.



of Gandhi's *Indian Opinion*.<sup>51</sup> Gandhi would recall :

Mr West was in charge of the English section of *Indian Opinion* and of the cable correspondence with Gokhale. At a time like the present, when the situation assumed a new aspect every moment, correspondence by post was out of the question. Cablegrams had to be dispatched, no shorter in length than letters, and the delicate responsibility regarding them was shouldered by Mr West.<sup>52</sup>

That was the reason why

(a)s soon as the news of the arrest of West was cabled to Gokhale, he initiated the policy of sending out able men from India.... No sooner, therefore, did he hear of West's arrest, than he inquired of Andrews by wire if he was ready to proceed to South Africa at once....His beloved friend Pearson also got ready to go the same moment, and the two friends left India for South Africa by the first available steamer.<sup>53</sup>

Interestingly, according to Gandhi's journal, before leaving for South Africa, Pearson had already been "the spokesman for the European community at the great Delhi demonstration, addressed recently by the Hon. Mr Gokhale, against the ill-treatment of Indians in South Africa".<sup>54</sup> Not surprisingly, therefore, it was actually S.K. Rudra who suggested that Pearson accompany Andrews on the tour; the two then visited Tagore to secure his blessings before going

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<sup>51</sup> See Pranati Mukhopadhyay, "Africa and C.F. Andrews", in Somendranath Bose (ed.), *Deenabandhu Andrews Centenary Volume*, 1972, Calcutta, Deenabandhu Andrews Centenary Committee, 1972, pp. 152-71 at pp. 154-5.

<sup>52</sup> M.K. Gandhi (Valji Govindji Desai, Tr.), *Satyagraha in South Africa*, Ahmedabad, Navajivan Publishing House, (first published 1928), second edition, 1950, p. 290.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 291.

<sup>54</sup> *Indian Opinion*, 7 January 1914.

to South Africa.<sup>55</sup> A farewell meeting was held for them and Tagore wrote : “Along with Mr Gandhi and others, you are fighting for our cause”.<sup>56</sup> The Nobel Prize for Tagore had also come in late 1913, making the Poet’s work, and *Gitanjali* in particular, widely known. Andrews and Pearson sailed from Calcutta via Madras.

Although in his pursuits Pearson seldom suffers from a lack of self-belief, he tends, especially in periods of solitude or on long voyages to indulge an exaggerated sense of his own vulnerabilities. From the ship he writes to Tagore: “The very thought that I go to South Africa as a messenger... will strengthen me and help me to herd the broken threads of my life’s purposes in that service of love”.<sup>57</sup> In spite of this self-deprecating tendency, Pearson’s cheery temperament ensured that his company was sought after especially on long journeys during which he would tend to liven things up at least for others.<sup>58</sup>

During the sea voyage, there is also indirect criticism of functionaries of the church : “Our time with the Bishop of Madras was very helpful. He is taking such a firm uncompromising stand on the South African question... . He seems to me very unlike most Bishops!”<sup>59</sup>

Pearson spent the bulk of his time in South Africa studying the labour conditions in the sugarcane plantations in Natal.<sup>60</sup> He was at the Phoenix Settlement itself for no more than two or three weeks. In

<sup>55</sup> Probhat Kumar Mukherji (Sisir Kumar Ghosh, Tr.), *Life of Tagore*, New Delhi, Indian Book Company, 1975, p.118.

<sup>56</sup> Idem.

<sup>57</sup> Pearson to Rabindranath Tagore, 14 December 1913, Pearson Papers, Rabindra Bhavan, Shantiniketan.

<sup>58</sup> Among attributes that Pearson valued highly are those expressed in R.L. Stevenson’s prayer which he cites in a letter to Tagore : “Give us courage, gaiety and a quiet mind”; he would, he writes, like to begin each day with it : Pearson to Rabindranath Tagore, 6 May 1913, Pearson Papers, Rabindra Bhavan, Shantiniketan.

<sup>59</sup> Pearson to Rabindranath Tagore, 14 December 1913, Pearson Papers, Rabindra Bhavan, Shantiniketan.

<sup>60</sup> Benarsidas Chaturvedi and Marjorie Sykes, *Charles Freer Andrews*, [first published, 1949], Indian Reprint: New Delhi, Publications Division, Government of India, 1982, p. 106.



the short period that Pearson spent at Phoenix, writes one inmate of the settlement, Pearson “became one with the children”.<sup>61</sup> Prabhudas Gandhi writes: “While Mr Andrews spent his time discussing political problems with Gandhiji, Mr Pearson studied the life of the people. He walked for most of the day around Phoenix and saw how Indian indentured labourers lived. He also visited Africans’ homes and found out what their problems were”.<sup>62</sup> At the end of January 1914, Pearson gave evidence before the Inquiry Commission that had been set up in South Africa to go into Indian grievances with the culmination of the famous 1913 agitation and strike led by Gandhi and his colleagues.<sup>63</sup> In his evidence Pearson sought the removal of the £ 3 tax which, he told the Commission, was levied unfairly and lacked justification.<sup>64</sup>

Pearson’s report on his visit to South Africa deals substantially with the question of indentured labour in Natal. It is a sophisticated work containing insights that are all the more remarkable for the fact that Pearson spent no more than two months in that country.<sup>65</sup> In his report Pearson drew attention to several defects of the indenture system, the law and the administrative machinery. A couple of these may be mentioned here. Of the Office of “Protector of Indian Immigrants”, Pearson remarked : “He seems to interpret the principles of British justice in a way that assumes all Indians to be guilty until they are proved to be innocent, and all the employers of Indians innocent until they are proved to be guilty”.<sup>66</sup> If the indentured labourer

has complaints against the employer and manages to pass the barrier of the interpreters, and thus reach the Protector himself, he has this initial prejudice to overcome, and then,

<sup>61</sup> Prabhudas Gandhi, *My Childhood With Gandhi*, Ahmedabad, Navajivan Publishing House, 1957, p. 178.

<sup>62</sup> Idem.

<sup>63</sup> These events and Gandhi’s role in them have been written about by Pearson in “A Character Study of M.K. Gandhi”, an essay included in W.W. Pearson, *The Dawn of a New Age and other Essays*, Madras, S. Ganesan, 1922, pp. 55–73.

<sup>64</sup> *Indian Opinion*, 4 February 1914.

<sup>65</sup> W.W. Pearson, ‘Report on my visit to South Africa’, *Modern Review*, Vol. XV, No. 6, June 1914, pp. 629–42.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 632.



if he manages to convince his official guardian that there is justification for his complaint, he is ordered to go back to his employer pending inquiry and, if he refuses, he is handed over to the police for being absent without leave from his employer. This means that he is brought before the Magistrate, who is bound by law either heavily to fine the culprit or to send the unfortunate man to gaol for seven days with or without hard labour for a first offence, fourteen days with hard labour for a second offence, and up to thirty days with hard labour for any subsequent offence.<sup>67</sup>

Under the curious provisions of the law, absence would be punishable even if the complaint was justified and successful :

When all or a large number of the Indian immigrants employed upon any estate or property shall absent themselves from their employment without leave for the purpose or on the pretence of making any complaint against their employer, such Indians or any number of them shall be liable to be brought before any court and, on conviction, to be punished by fine not exceeding £ 2 Sterling or by imprisonment for any period not exceeding two months, with or without hard labour, whether such complaint shall or shall not be adjudged to be groundless or frivolous and *notwithstanding that such complaint may be successful*.<sup>68</sup>

For the condition of indentured labour, Pearson placed the primary blame on the Colonial Government of India.<sup>69</sup> He appealed for mutual understanding between the communities. Having attended, along with other passive resisters, the funeral of Hurbat Singh, an Indian worker who had died in jail, Pearson recorded his impressions:

A short time after my arrival in Durban, I was walking behind the hearse of an old Indian labourer who died in gaol as a passive resister, at the age of 70. As we passed through the streets of Durban during luncheon hour, I was struck with the way in which hundreds of Europeans showed their respect

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<sup>67</sup> Ibid., p. 633.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., p. 636.

<sup>69</sup> "Mr Pearson's Impressions", *Indian Opinion*, 4 March 1914.

for the dead body by removing their hats as the hearse passed. It seemed to me strange that this old man who, as a labourer, had for 40 years served this country, had to wait for death to claim his body before he could win the respect of the Christian public.<sup>70</sup>

While in South Africa, Pearson made known his support for the promotion of racial equality and the fostering of social and political protest in that country. Phoenix was situated in the midst of a Zulu area. On one occasion Raojibhai M. Patel, who was also at Phoenix, accompanied Willie Pearson to meet the African educationist and leader John Langalibalele Dube (1871–1946), whose Ohlange Institute in Inanda was situated close to the Phoenix settlement. In January 1912 Dube had been chosen as the first President of the African National Congress (then known as the South African Native National Congress). Gandhi was well acquainted with Dube.<sup>71</sup> He had referred appreciatively to Dube as early as in 1905.<sup>72</sup> Until Dube's paper, *Ilange lase Natal*, acquired a press of its own it was printed in the *Indian Opinion* press.<sup>73</sup>

In November 1912 Gandhi had taken Gopal Krishna Gokhale, then on a tour of South Africa, to Dube's institution where the visiting leader was given a rousing reception. The significance of Dube in African history may be gauged by the fact that when democracy and freedom were restored to South Africa in the 1990s, Nelson Mandela chose to cast his vote in Ohlange, Inanda expressly recalling the memory and legacy of John Dube.

One may obtain a sense of Willie Pearson's extraordinary character and commitment to racial equality that on his visit to John Dube, he asked whether the Africans were ready to emulate the kind of passive

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<sup>70</sup> *Idem*.

<sup>71</sup> See my article, "Gandhi and Some Contemporary African leaders from KwaZulu-Natal", *Natalia*, No. 42, December 2012, pp. 45–64.

<sup>72</sup> *Indian Opinion*, 2 September 1905, *Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, [CWMG], Vol. 5, p. 55.

<sup>73</sup> E.S. Reddy, *Gandhiji's Vision of a Free South Africa*, New Delhi, Sanchar Publishing House, 1995, p. 49.

resistance struggles launched by Indians. John Dube's reply to Willie Pearson, as recorded by Raojibhai Patel, indicated admiration for the Indian struggle under Gandhi's leadership and the endurance shown by even the unlettered among the Indians; he was doubtful, however, whether the struggle could be emulated by Africans without bringing forth severe retaliation from the ruling dispensation.<sup>74</sup>

On his return journey to India, Pearson spent 10 days in Mozambique. He has provided us with a rare account of Indians living in Mozambique at the time.<sup>75</sup> Keenly observant, he makes tell-tale comparisons between the treatment of Indians in South Africa and the treatment they receive in Portuguese-administered Mozambique. As a Britisher, he found it "humiliating" that "the treatment which British Indians receive at the hands of the Portuguese is so much better than that which they receive in British Colonies".<sup>76</sup> He was pleasantly surprised to find a Portuguese boy strike up a conversation with Pearson's Indian friends when they were traveling together on the railway, an experience which "was such a complete contrast to the behaviour of most European boys in South Africa towards Indians".<sup>77</sup> The Portuguese, Pearson went on to record in the article, "seem to mix freely even with the natives of the country, especially in the interior". He analysed the reason for the contrast between South Africa and Mozambique as regards the Indians and concluded that "(t)here is amongst the Portuguese very little insularity or colour prejudice".<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> Ibid., pp. 23–6.

<sup>75</sup> W.W. Pearson, "British Indians in Portuguese East Africa", *Modern Review*, July 1914, pp. 45–6. See also report of Pearson's letter from Beira, Mozambique to Rustomjee in South Africa, *Indian Opinion*, 22 April 1914.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid., p. 45.

<sup>77</sup> Idem.

<sup>78</sup> Interestingly, another keen observer recorded a similar lack of racial feeling in mainland France of the 1920s: See K.M. Panikkar, *An Autobiography*, Madras, Oxford University Press, 1977, p. 61. Panikkar wrote: "Only in Paris do we find a complete absence of colour bar. Everyone knows that the British look down on coloured people. The reverse was true of Paris." Both the Portuguese attitudes noticed by Pearson and the French noticed by Panikkar would, however, come under strain in subsequent decades.

Pearson did notice, however, that the “Goanese element being largely Roman Catholic and consisting of Portuguese subjects helps to form a connecting link between British Indians and Portuguese”. Along with his growing association with Indian nationalist tendencies, Pearson’s experiences in South Africa and Mozambique had enabled him to cross many lines and several borders.

Soon after returning to India, Pearson joined the staff at Shantiniketan. He would play a crucial role in some events that immediately followed. Having left South Africa in July 1914, Gandhi went on to England before returning to India in January 1915. In February and March 1915, Gandhi would visit Shantiniketan. The Phoenix boys had reached India earlier and had been accommodated at Shantiniketan until Gandhi returned to India and set up his own place (*ashram*). Pearson wrote from Bolpur to Gandhi in England in November 1914 with news about how the Phoenix party had settled in at Shantiniketan : “I am quite sure that the influence of the Phoenix boys has already begun to make itself felt and will more and more do so as other boys in the asram follow their example in the matter of hard manual work and simple food”.<sup>79</sup>

On Gandhi’s first visit to Shantiniketan in February 1915, Tagore happened to be absent and Gandhi was received by Tagore’s eldest brother, Dwijendranath, known as *Borodada*. This visit was cut short by the news of Gokhale’s death. When Gandhi returned to Shantiniketan in March, he suggested the introduction of measures towards self-reliance. A programme on these lines was launched with Tagore’s permission on 10 March 1915.

Gandhi also remonstrated with Tagore about some caste distinctions that were till then tolerated at Shantiniketan. The Tagore biographer, Krishna Kripalani writes :

Before Gandhi left Santiniketan he placed his finger on one more weak spot and spoke frankly to Tagore about it. He had noticed that in the asrama refectory separate seats were

<sup>79</sup> Pearson to Gandhi, 12 November 1914, Gandhi Papers, Vol. 10 (S.N. 6063), National Gandhi Museum, New Delhi.

provided for Brahmin boys. That Tagore, who had spared no sarcasm against the curse of Brahminism, should himself tolerate its snobbery in his own sanctuary shocked Gandhi and he remonstrated against it—rightly. The practice was in fact a relic of that phase of social conservatism or reaction in Tagore’s spiritual development during the period when he had founded the asrama on the monastic ideals of the ancient forest hermitages. That this was so is proved by the fact that the practice was abolished later and is no longer tolerated in Santiniketan. But at the time when Gandhi spoke of it to Tagore, the latter had either not realized the anomaly of it or was unwilling to admit his own limitation, for he justified the practice by saying that he did not believe in forcing others to do anything against their wishes. If the Brahmin pupils willingly sat at the same table with the others he would be happy, but he would not compel them to do so.<sup>80</sup>

It is possible that some caste distinctions continued for some time permissively to be tolerated, though not encouraged, even after Gandhi had taken up the matter with Tagore in 1915. In a book on Shantiniketan, published in the following year, Pearson would record: “The boys are of all castes and it is expressly stated when they are admitted that they are to be allowed to exercise their own discretion in the matter of the observation or non-observation of caste distinctions. Serving at the meals is undertaken by all the boys in turn which lightens the burden of the kitchen service”.<sup>81</sup>

In a letter to his friend, H. Kallenbach, Gandhi wrote : “Extraordinary changes have been made in the Santiniketan school. Andrews and Pearson rose to the occasion and Pearson and I, whilst we were working away at sanitation reform, thought of you—how you would have thrown yourself into the work”.<sup>82</sup> An interesting and

<sup>80</sup> Krishna Kripalani, *Rabindranath Tagore : A Biography*, London, Oxford University Press, 1962, p. 247.

<sup>81</sup> W.W. Pearson, *Shantiniketan: The Bolpur School of Rabindranath Tagore*, New York, The Macmillan Company, 1916, p. 51. The book was published in England in the following year and reviewed widely in the British Press.

<sup>82</sup> Letter to Kallenbach, 13 March 1915, *CWMG*, Supplementary Volume 6, p. 205.

somewhat amusing narrative of this incident is available in the memoirs of Kaka (Dattatreya Balkrishna) Kalelkar who was then on the Faculty at Shantiniketan.<sup>83</sup> He writes about how a group of Shantiniketan students sought to liven up with Sitar music the drudgery involved in the practice of cleaning utensils that was initiated at Gandhi's instance. Pearson, with whom Kalelkar had established a close friendship, participated in the self-help and cleaning efforts with enthusiasm. However, he doubted whether the practice would continue beyond the current academic term, even though Tagore had consented to and blessed the new arrangements. According to Kalelkar, the experiment did not last beyond the vacations. He attributed this to the fact that *bhadra* culture had not yet imbibed a sense of the importance of the discipline of labour which was required to remove social inequalities. Years later, Gandhi would recall that Pearson "was the first at Shantiniketan to volunteer his services for cleaning the drains of its kitchen and the scavengers' quarters".<sup>84</sup> On 16 March 1915 Tagore, who had clearly been affected by the events surrounding Gandhi's visit, wrote to Willie's mother, Mrs Bertha Pearson, about "the deep joy it gave me to read a beautiful sermon preached after the death of your husband about his life and personality. It came to my hand on a day when I was sorely troubled. It helped me and led me to that depth of my being where difficulties can be cut at their roots".

Later in the year, Pearson joined C.F. Andrews on an inquiry into the condition of Indian indentured labour in Fiji. Before going, Andrews and Pearson met Gandhi in Bombay and Ahmedabad.<sup>85</sup> On his way to the islands, Pearson kept up a stream of letters to Rabindranath

<sup>83</sup> Kaka Kalelkar, *Kaka Kalelkar Granthavali*, Panchva Khand, New Delhi, Gandhi Hindustani Sahitya Sabha, 1994, pp. 445–51. See also Madho Prasad, *A Gandhian Patriarch : A Political and Spiritual Biography of Kaka Kalelkar*, Bombay, Popular Prakashan, 1963, pp. 141–7. Pearson's account of Gandhi's visit to Shantiniketan is recorded by Romain Rolland in his diary after Pearson's visit to him in September 1923. [*Romain Rolland and Gandhi : Correspondence*, op. cit., pp. 15–17]. A later account of these developments at Shantiniketan is available in Sankar Ghose, *Mahatma Gandhi*, New Delhi, Allied Publishers, 1991, p. 104.

<sup>84</sup> *Young India*, 2 October 1924, *CWMG*, Vol. 25, pp. 191–2 .

<sup>85</sup> Gandhi to Kallenbach, 24 September 1915, *CWMG*, Vol. 96 (Supplementary Volume 6), p. 224. See also C.B. Dalal, *Gandhi : 1915–*

Tagore. In September 1915 he wrote to Tagore about “a great sorrow that has suddenly come upon me” with news that “my dearest friend has been killed in the Dardanelles. You met him once I know for I took him to see you in Hampstead”.<sup>86</sup> Pearson wrote to Tagore again from Australia just before beginning the investigations in Fiji.<sup>87</sup> The Andrews-Pearson Report was published in 1916 and created an international stir over conditions which it brought to light.<sup>88</sup> In a subsequent report published in 1918 about a later trip to Fiji that he did without W.W. Pearson, C.F. Andrews writes about how much he had missed Willie’s company. It was Pearson’s natural curiosity and independent corrective judgement that Andrews missed most. Writing about the fact that there had been little admixture of races in Fiji, Andrews recalled how Pearson had found the solitary exception to this rule. “There has been no race mixture. Mr W.W. Pearson came across one family of Fiji Indian half-castes in the course of a walk across the main Island. This family was living in isolation far in the interior. But I have not heard of any other case, though doubtless some few may exist”.<sup>89</sup> Later, C.F. Andrews would again recall of the trip he had made with Pearson :

My friend, Mr W.W. Pearson, accompanied me and checked all the evidence. Later on, the Women’s Associations in Australia invited Miss Garnham, of the London Missionary Society, to make an independent inquiry into the facts with regard to this indentured labor in Fiji. Her inquiry led to an

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*1948 : A Detailed Chronology*, New Delhi, Gandhi Peace Foundation, 1971, p. 5. According to the chronology, Gandhi went to Bombay on 20 September 1915 to receive Andrews and Pearson, and brought them over to Ahmedabad on the next day for a short visit.

<sup>86</sup> Pearson to Rabindranath Tagore, 27 September 1915, Pearson Papers, File 287 (ii) Rabindra Bhavan, Shantiniketan.

<sup>87</sup> Pearson to Rabindranath Tagore, 19 October 1915, Pearson Papers, File 287 (ii) Rabindra Bhavan, Shantiniketan.

<sup>88</sup> See C.F. Andrews and W.W. Pearson, ‘Report on Indentured Labour in Fiji’, published in *Modern Review*, March 1916, 333–9 April 1916, pp. 392–402, May 1916 pp. 514–25 and June 1916, pp. 615–24.

<sup>89</sup> C.F. Andrews, “Indian Labour in Fiji”, *Modern Review*, Vol. XXIII, No. 6, June 1918, p. 592. See also for C.F. Andrews report on Indian Labour in Fiji, the *Modern Review* issues for September 1918, pp. 267–75 and December 1918, pp. 622–30.



even more severe condemnation of the system than we ourselves had made in our report. In the end, indentured labour was abolished between the years 1917 and 1920. On January 1, 1920, those who were still finishing their indenture were voluntarily set free.<sup>90</sup>

Along with Andrews, Pearson and the artist Mukul Dey, Tagore left for Japan in May 1916. On Tagore's birthday, 7 May, the ship reached Rangoon harbour. The Poet dedicated *Balaka*, his book of poems, to Willie Pearson.<sup>91</sup> The group reached Japan on 29 May. This was Tagore's first visit to Japan. He would go there again in 1924 and 1929. It has been suggested that Tagore's visit had "a tremendous impact on the Japanese attitude towards the Indian revolutionaries" based in that country and limited British ability to restrict them; consequently when "Tagore and Pearson left Japan for America on 2<sup>nd</sup> September 1916..." they left the Indian revolutionaries there with a greater sense of security than previously.<sup>92</sup> The visit also helped to establish and to renew contacts with Japan's intellectuals and thinkers and to remember some old friends who had passed away. Kakuzo Okakura (1862–1913) was one such figure, associated with the ideal of Asian unity, who had visited India and was known especially in Bengal where he could startle people with sudden questions like: "What are you thinking of doing for your country?" Interestingly, in October 1922, when Gandhi was in prison, Pearson wrote in a somewhat similar vein: "What am I to do to serve India?"<sup>93</sup> The article emphasised,

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<sup>90</sup> C.F. Andrews, "India's Emigration Problem", *Foreign Affairs*, 1929, Vol. 8, pp. 430–41, at p. 434. For more on Florence Garnham's inquiry see C.F. Andrews' introduction to *Fiji Bulletin*, 1923, reproduced in *Indian Annual Register*, 1923, Vol. 2, pp. 464–5. The facts relating to the abolition of indentured labour in Natal, Fiji and elsewhere are dealt with exhaustively in Hugh Tinker, *A New System of Slavery : The Export of Indian Labour Overseas, 1830–1920*, London, Oxford University Press, 1974.

<sup>91</sup> Probhat Kumar Mukherji, op. cit., p. 126.

<sup>92</sup> T.R. Sareen, *Indian Revolutionaries, Japan and British Imperialism*, New Delhi, Anmol Publications, 1993, p. 34.

<sup>93</sup> W.W. Pearson, "What am I to do to serve India?", *Young India*, 26 October 1922. The title is based on a question posed in the Irish novel, *Benedict Kavanagh* in which an eponymous character asks : "How am I to serve Ireland?"

utilising Irish experiences, the travails one has to go through honestly to serve one's country and especially the working people.

Humayun Kabir has noted that "Tagore had been greatly impressed by Okakura's message of the unity of Asia".<sup>94</sup> Three years after Okakura's death, Pearson wrote about him while staying at Okakura's seaside residence along with Tagore.<sup>95</sup>

After the American tour which followed, Tagore's party, including Pearson, set sail from San Francisco in January 1917, returning to Japan at the end of the month. After staying in Japan for about a month, Tagore proceeded to India with Mukul Dey, Pearson having stayed back in Japan.<sup>96</sup> It had been a hectic tour.<sup>97</sup> Pearson's main contact in Japan appears to have been Paul Richard, who was married to Mirra Richard, later known as The Mother (of Aurobindo Ashram, Pondicherry).<sup>98</sup> It is possible that his other Japanese contacts were

<sup>94</sup> Humayun Kabir, *Rabindranath Tagore*, Delhi, Pankaj Publications International, 1987, p. 33.

<sup>95</sup> W.W. Pearson, "To the Memory of Mr K. Okakura", *Modern Review*, November 1916, pp. 541–42.

<sup>96</sup> According to British intelligence, Pearson made a short trip to India via Hongkong and Singapore before returning to Japan through Sri Lanka in May 1917. [D. Petrie's note dated 16 March 1918 on Pearson in National Archives of India, Home (Poll)-Deposit-July 1918-Proceedings, No. 40, (Issue of an Order of Deportation to England against the British subject, Mr W.W. Pearson, under the China (War Powers) Order in Council, 1917), p. 10.]

<sup>97</sup> For details of the itinerary of Tagore and his party, see *Rabindranath Tagore, 1861–1961 : A Centenary Volume*, New Delhi, Sahitya Akademi, 1961, pp. 472–3.

<sup>98</sup> The following biographical note on Paul Richard is available in the annotations to the Autobiographical Notes of Aurobindo: "Paul Richard (1874–1967) was a French lawyer and writer. He came to Pondicherry in 1910 seeking election to the French Chamber of Deputies, but found that the ticket he had been promised had been given to someone else. Before returning to France... friends arranged a meeting between him and Sri Aurobindo. During the next four years, he and Sri Aurobindo remained in touch by letter. In 1914, Richard returned to Pondicherry to stand for election. This time he was accompanied by his wife Mirra (1878–1973), who later became known as the Mother. Richard was defeated, but he and

mainly through Paul Richard. It is while he was in Japan that Pearson wrote the series of articles which were together published under the title *For India*.<sup>99</sup> The work carried an introduction dated 25 July 1917 by Richard. British intelligence sources based in the Far East linked Pearson with the Japanese nationalist Shumei Okawa (1886–1957).<sup>100</sup> Pearson's book had been published by the Asiatic Association which, according to British Intelligence, "is synonymous with the Pan-Asiatic Society inaugurated in Japan by Okawa, mainly with the object of extending Japanese influence in the East at the expense of British interests".<sup>101</sup> In *For India* Pearson sought to refute arguments against Home Rule for India. He clearly interpreted Home Rule to mean independence, writing in the opening article :

That India is far away from England is all the more reason why she should be self-governing. That her people are coloured makes her claim for independence infinitely stronger, for no one, except an ignorant and stupid bureaucrat, can suppose that the Anglo-Saxon race is better able to understand the temperament of the Indian people than the Indian people themselves.<sup>102</sup>

He referred to the experience of Indians in places like South Africa and praised the work of Gopal Krishna Gokhale and M.K.Gandhi.

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Mirra remained in India until February 1915, when Paul was ordered to join his regiment. The Richards remained in France until March 1916, when they departed for Japan. After a four-year stay in that country, they returned to Pondicherry in April 1920." [Sri Aurobindo, *Autobiographical Notes and Other Writings of Historical Interest*, Pondicherry, Sri Aurobindo Ashram, 2006, p. 585.]

<sup>99</sup> W.W. Pearson, *For India*, Tokio, The Asiatic Association of Japan, 1917.

<sup>100</sup> After the Second World War, Okawa would be made an accused in the Tokyo Trials but let off as mentally incompetent. [Herbert P. Bix, *Hirohito and the Making of Modern Japan*, New York, Perennial (Harper Collins), 2001, p. 593.]

<sup>101</sup> D. Petrie's note dated 16 March 1918, National Archives of India, Home (Poll)-Deposit-July 1918-Proceedings, No. 40, (Issue of an Order of Deportation to England against the British subject, Mr W.W. Pearson, under the China (War Powers) Order in Council, 1917), pp. 10–11.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3.

Pearson protested in his book against the way “hundreds of young men are being put in prison without trial, and numbers of newspapers are being forfeited under the Press Act”.<sup>103</sup> He directly challenged the British Indian bureaucracy:

While Indian newspapers are forfeited under the Press Act, papers published by Englishmen, which daily print articles calculated to increase race hatred and discontent, are allowed to continue publication without protest from the Government. Those who are directly responsible for this new feature in the life of India are the bureaucrats of the type of Lord Curzon, Lord Sydenham, Sir Valentine Chirol and Mr Lionel Curtis and all those English officials whose acts have been calculated to spread disaffection and discontent amongst the people of India.<sup>104</sup>

Pearson wrote to Tagore on 27 September 1917:

My writing of ‘*For India*’ was merely an incident in which I seemed under a compulsion directly contrary to my real nature which is interested not in political questions or national problems so much as in personal relationships. Just as my part in the work Andrews took up in South Africa and Fiji as a humanitarian was really supplementary to my real mission in life, so also the writing of ‘*For India*’ was an expression of one phase of my nature which was nourished from childhood in an atmosphere of liberty. I find in all such pieces of work that when once I have completed them they fall away like autumn leaves, and I am no longer interested them or their results. For instance, I have no curiosity to see the reviews in the English journals about “Shantiniketan”.... and I am not particularly eager to know how “*For India*” has been received in America. If this were a result of a constant effort to achieve the ideal of “nishkam karma” I should feel satisfaction but it seems more a kind of mental indifference to the results of my own work. Sometimes I feel the same about other people’s opinions about me, and

<sup>103</sup> W.W. Pearson, *For India*, Tokio, The Asiatic Association of Japan, 1917, p. 42.

<sup>104</sup> Idem.



even the misunderstanding of my own brothers and sisters towards my present attitude to life leave me unmoved.... I suppose all people are alike for it is human nature to believe always that one is in the right!<sup>105</sup>

Pearson's activities and work in support of Indian freedom attracted the unfriendly attention of British intelligence and colonial authorities, leading to some extraordinary legal processes being invoked against him in a manner which provides us with some insights into the working and concerns of the colonial intelligence apparatus.

The times were tense and British officialdom was displaying considerable exasperation and nervousness across the world.

Meanwhile, in Africa, Lewis Walter Ritch, Gandhi's South Africa-based associate and trustee of his settlement at Phoenix who had been active also in British East Africa, was deported from there because he was suspected of having fomented a strike among employees of the Uganda Railway. The General Officer Commanding in the Mombasa area reported on 9 October 1915 : "A further insight gained into the machinations of Mr Ritch's Indian friends only shows against what a formidable conspiracy we have had to work and how fortunate it was that the deportation of Mr Ritch served for some months to check and modify the activities of these conspirators."<sup>106</sup> The prevailing atmosphere at the time may be sensed from the fact that in England the erstwhile consular official, Roger Casement (1864–1916), who had been arrested in April 1916, was tried for "high treason" in connection with his Irish nationalist activities, and executed by August 1916.<sup>107</sup>

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<sup>105</sup> Pearson to Rabindranath Tagore, 27 September 1917, Pearson Papers, Rabindra Bhavan, Shantiniketan.

<sup>106</sup> West Bengal State Archives, [Shakespeare Sarani, Kolkata] Bundle No. 3: IB Serial No 25/1916; File No 715/16; Criminal Intelligence Office, Government of India, Circular No 2 (Poll.) of 1916 dated Simla, 15 May 1916, "Sedition among Indians in British East Africa", pp. 2–3.

<sup>107</sup> H.W.C. Davis and J.R.H. Weaver (eds) *The Dictionary of National Biography : 1912–1921*, London, Oxford University Press, 1927, pp. 95–7.

In India restrictions were imposed on Annie Besant in June 1917 under the Defence of India (Consolidation) Rules, 1915 as a result of which she was interned for three months.<sup>108</sup> On 16 October 1917, Pearson's book *For India* was proscribed under the Sea Customs Act. The notification issued under S 19 of the Sea Customs Act, 1878 (VIII of 1878) prohibited the bringing by sea or by land into British India of any copy of the pamphlet *For India* published by W.W. Pearson.<sup>109</sup> Although it was thus proscribed in India, a copy of *For India* appears to have reached M.N. Roy, the Indian radical, in the Americas. The book was cited by Roy in a work *La Voz de la India* which was published in 1918 in Mexico.<sup>110</sup> Roy relied on Pearson in his critique of the Railways in India as being intended primarily "to defend the British empire" and "to serve British interests". Lajpat Rai reviewed the book in *The New Republic* on 3 September 1919, appreciating Pearson's "impartiality and breadth of view, worthy of the best traditions of English public life".<sup>111</sup>

According to the British Intelligence functionary, D. Petrie, the book was "seized upon by Okawa and his party in Japan" and was quoted in support of attacks on Great Britain.<sup>112</sup> Contrary to a claim by a couple of scholars, Pearson remained unrepentant about the writing of *For India*. On 23 December 1917 Pearson wrote to Tagore from Kyoto, Japan :

I long inexpressibly to be back, but everything seems to indicate that I ought to stay here sometime longer. I fear too,

<sup>108</sup> *Indian Review*, June 1917, p. 439; see also Sri Prakasa, *Annie Besant: As Woman and as Leader*, Bombay, Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, 1969, p. 200.

<sup>109</sup> National Archives of India, Home-Poll-Deposit, April 1919, No. 34. See "Diary of Events, 1917", p. 8.

<sup>110</sup> Sibnarayan Ray, *In Freedom's Quest : A Study of the Life and Works of M.N. Roy (1887-1954)*, Vol 1 : 1887-1922, Minerva Associates (Publications), Pvt. Ltd., Calcutta, 1998, pp. 58-9, p. 75.

<sup>111</sup> *The Collected Works of Lala Lajpat Rai*, Vol. 8, New Delhi, Manohar, 2006, pp. 243-5.

<sup>112</sup> Note dated 16 March 1918, National Archives of India, Home (Poll)-Deposit- July 1918-Proceedings, No. 40, (Issue of an Order of Deportation to England against the British subject, Mr W.W. Pearson, under the China (War Powers) Order in Council, 1917), p. 12.

now that my booklet has been proscribed, that I might be regarded as rather a dangerous person to be teaching in the asram during the present time when the political atmosphere is so disturbed. Just at present governments dislike truthful people especially when they express brutal truths in brutally frank language!.<sup>113</sup>

Pearson reminded Tagore of a curious irony :“It is amusing to think how I was regarded as an agent of the British government when I arrived with you in Japan.”<sup>114</sup>

It is significant that *For India* appeared two years prior to the turn in Indian politics that followed the events of 1919 and the colonial repression in Punjab in that year. As we shall see, Gandhi noticed the book, writing about it to a friend in June 1918.<sup>115</sup> He would recall some years later : “Let it be remembered, however, that whilst in Japan Pearson wrote his furious indictment against British exploitation and dominance which brought him trouble which he never minded.”<sup>116</sup>

Tagore’s Japanese connections and the references to the resurgence of Asia and to China, India and Japan leading the world, to which both C.F. Andrews and Pearson were prone, were somewhat of an irritant to the Colonial regime. One impact of such talk, however, was a change in the attitude of the Japanese regime towards Indian revolutionaries in Japan. British intelligence circles accused Pearson in particular of links with networks of subversion. D. Petrie, the Director, Central Intelligence in India recalled in an official report on 15 May 1925 that “Mr Pearson was in Japan, where he ran off the rails by associating with disloyal Indians and publishing at least one highly offensive pamphlet. He happened to cross over to China where I then was, and I felt impelled to advise His Majesty’s Minister at Peking to arrest him

<sup>113</sup> Pearson to Rabindranath Tagore, 23 December 1917, Pearson Papers, Rabindra Bhavan, Shantiniketan.

<sup>114</sup> Idem.

<sup>115</sup> Gandhi to Millie Polak, 17 June 1918, *CWMG*, Supplementary Volume 6, p. 261.

<sup>116</sup> *Young India*, 2 October 1924, *CWMG*, Vol. 25, p. 192.

and deport him from China under the War Powers Order in Council, on the ground that his activities brought him within the purview of that measure". Petrie claimed that "by the time he got to Singapore, Pearson admitted to the General Officer Commanding that the action taken against him was fully justified". Linkages were also alleged in 1918 between Pearson and Mitsuru Toyama (1855–1944), "the protector of Rash Behari Bose alias P.N. Thakur and other revolutionaries in Japan".<sup>117</sup> This allegation was based on a letter from Pearson to the *Modern Review*, Calcutta, "with which he enclosed for publication an article eulogizing Mitsuru Toyama".<sup>118</sup>

Suspicious were rampant. The San Francisco Trial [of men who had supposedly entered into a conspiracy, "a revolutionary intrigue against the British Government", allegedly to bring about a revolution in India with the aid of German funds] was on between November 1917 and 23 April 1918. An attempt was even made to implicate Tagore in the affair which led him to write to President Woodrow Wilson on 9 May 1918.<sup>119</sup>

David Petrie had, on 18 March 1918, addressed the British minister in Peking about Pearson : "That he is, quite apart from the question of motive and intention, extremely mischievous, there can be no doubt whatever. There are more than sufficient reasons for holding that he has acted and will act in a manner prejudicial to the defence, peace and security of His Majesty's dominions and that he should be deported

<sup>117</sup> D. Petrie's note "W.W. Pearson", datelined *Shanghai*, 16 March 1918, National Archives of India, New Delhi, Home (Poll)-Deposit-July 1918-Proceedings, No. 40, p. 12.

<sup>118</sup> *Idem*.

<sup>119</sup> Tagore to Woodrow Wilson, 9 May 1918, in Krishna Dutta and Andrew Robinson (eds), *Selected Letters of Rabindranath Tagore*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1997, pp. 198–9. Dutta and Robinson attribute the trial to the "wartime atmosphere prevalent in the USA-"; even so it is acknowledged by them that it was on British advice that Woodrow Wilson declined the request "through Macmillan", to permit Tagore's work, *Nationalism*, to be dedicated to Wilson. The British role in the events leading to the San Francisco prosecutions is, however, expressly acknowledged in, for example, Krishna Dutta and Andrew Robinson, *Rabindranath Tagore: The Myriad-Minded Man*, London, Bloomsbury, 1995, p. 212.



from China”.<sup>120</sup> The evils existing in South Africa and Fiji have according to Petrie, been exaggerated by the section of Indians with which Andrews and Pearson were prone to associate... In Yokohama, Pearson visited an “old school fellow, whom he greatly shocked by the violence of his language on the British administration of India. This was in July 1916”.<sup>121</sup> About a year later Pearson repeated his visit and, according to British intelligence, was thrown out of the house and the matter reported to the British Vice Consul. Petrie quoted the British Ambassador in Tokyo as having written about Pearson before the end of June 1917 that “there is no doubt that he is disloyal and a warm if secret partisan of revolution in India”.<sup>122</sup>

Accordingly, action was planned to call Pearson to order. The Judge of His Britannic Majesty’s Supreme Court in Shanghai informed the British Minister in Peking on 17 April 1918 that an order of deportation had been made against Pearson by the Supreme Court on the basis of a certificate by the Minister under the China (War Powers) Order in Council 1917.<sup>123</sup> In April 1918 Willie was arrested, deported and transported to England, the main desideratum presumably being his writing of the pro-Indian nationalist book and events surrounding its publication. He left Shanghai by ship on 23 April 1918.

Pearson’s arrest in China reflected a considerable degree of fear, suspicion and intolerance in the British Colonial Police and Intelligence apparatus which had been taking much interest in the San Francisco affair. Petrie wrote from Shanghai to the British representative in Peking : “The San Francisco trial has put temporarily out of action a number

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<sup>120</sup> National Archives of India, Home (Poll)-Deposit-July 1918-Proceedings, No. 40, [Issue of an Order of Deportation to England against the British subject, Mr W.W. Pearson, under the China (War Powers) Order in Council, 1917], p. 5.

<sup>121</sup> Ibid., p. 8.

<sup>122</sup> Ibid., p. 10.

<sup>123</sup> This court had been established on the principle of “extra-territoriality”, viz., that subjects of imperial powers like Britain, France, Italy and the United States, were “to be considered answerable only to the judicial systems of their home countries while living and working in China”. Simon Winchester, *The Man Who Loved China*, New York, Harper Collins, 2008, p. 72n.

of the worst Indian plotters in America”; but he complained that their sentences were “ludicrously light, the longest being only about 22 months and some much shorter” and feared that Shanghai “especially” which “has been a fruitful recruiting field for the *Ghadr* movement”, and “has been used in the past as a safe rendezvous for parties of conspirators returning to India”, required “safeguard against the relapse of many Indians in Shanghai and elsewhere into active revolutionary plotting”.<sup>124</sup> In India, the Rowlatt Committee proposals for changes in the law were still under consideration and the determined Petrie sought extension of powers: “As in India, so in China the need for the special existing executive powers will not disappear after the war and therefore the only prudent course is to perpetuate them”.<sup>125</sup> Judge Havilland de Sausmarez, Judge of the British Supreme Court in China later conceded in a memorandum that the issuance of a warrant as a matter of course by the Supreme Court was in fact an excessive measure that could not ordinarily be justified. “The power to deport in its present form is open to the grave objection that it practically deprives the Supreme Court of discretion”.<sup>126</sup> Even as late as 1918, the intelligence apparatus had little information about Pearson’s early life.

On 12 May 1918, three days after writing to United States President Woodrow Wilson, Tagore sent a copy of his letter to Chelmsford, the Viceroy, and also pleaded with him for Pearson, assuring him of Pearson’s probity, and nobleness : “A man of his type, full of generous impulses is liable to lend himself to misunderstandings and to come to grief in troublous times like the present one.... I am sure that he is incapable of doing anything underhand or dishonourable”.<sup>127</sup> Dutta and Robinson have suggested in a note that

<sup>124</sup> D. Petrie, *Shanghai*, 14 September 1918, National Archives of India, Home-(Poll), Branch B, March 1919, No. 165, containing “Papers relating to Indian Sedition in China”.

<sup>125</sup> *Idem*.

<sup>126</sup> H.W. de Sausmarez, “*Indian Sedition in China*”, *Shanghai*, 5 December 1918; National Archives of India, Home-(Poll), Branch B, March 1919, No. 165.

<sup>127</sup> Krishna Dutta and Andrew Robinson (eds), *Selected Letters of Rabindranath Tagore*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1997, pp. 202–3.

Tagore “was aware that Pearson had mixed feelings” about the writing of *For India*.<sup>128</sup> This assertion is apparently based on Pearson’s remark in his letter to Tagore on 27 September 1917 that, when writing *For India*, “I seemed under a compulsion directly contrary to my real nature which is interested not in political questions or national problems so much as personal relationships”. However, the claim that this involved “mixed feelings” about the work itself is in no way borne out by the contents of the 27 September 1917 letter or by Pearson’s subsequent conduct and initiatives, including, most importantly, Pearson’s letter of 23 December 1917 to Tagore. Both letters have been quoted above.

In the course of being transported back to England, Pearson wrote on 20 May 1918 to Tagore from aboard his ship as it neared Colombo : “I have since my unceremonious departure from Peking, been through a bewildering variety of experiences ranging from that of the Captive Czar of all the Russias to that of the ascetic in a monastic cell. But I seem to have the incorrigible inability to sustain an experience for any prolonged period”.<sup>129</sup> Opinion in India and in Bengal in particular was disturbed by news of Pearson’s arrest. Gandhi, who had a fair understanding of Pearson’s strength of character, advised calm. On learning of the arrest, Gandhi wrote to Andrews : “Some must be content to be imprisoned for their views or actions. What is necessary is to correspond with Willie. He will fight his way to freedom, if he needs it. To be anxious about him is to do him injustice. I feel sure that he is happy where he is”.<sup>130</sup> The Great War was still on and to Millie Polak, an old English associate from his South Africa days, Gandhi wrote :

Pearson has written a book which is undoubtedly seditious in the sense that he desires separation, not home rule within the Empire. I have not read the book but that is what I am told. The book is prohibited. There is nothing wrong in Pearson’s activity if he believes in it. And it must be conceded that there is nothing wrong in the Government trying to crush

<sup>128</sup> Ibid., p. 203 n5.

<sup>129</sup> Pearson to Rabindranath Tagore, 20 May 1918, Pearson Papers, Rabindra Bhavan, Shantiniketan.

<sup>130</sup> Letter to C.F. Andrews, 23 May 1918, *CWMG*, Vol 14, p. 403.

the rebellious spirit. P was in China. This gave the Government an easy way of getting hold of P. They have got him and now he is probably on his way to England where I suppose he will be comparatively free to preach separation. From what I hear he is quite happy and almost expected the result.<sup>131</sup>

The *Modern Review* referred to Pearson's arrest in its next issue: "It was with great pain that we learned that Mr W.W. Pearson had been arrested by the British authorities in Peking for some 'political offence' and escorted to Shanghai, and there probably thrown into prison".<sup>132</sup> The journal was stupefied. Why and how was he arrested in China? "His arrest in China raises questions of international importance. The Chinese are an independent sovereign people. How could the British authorities arrest him in Chinese territory?"<sup>133</sup>

As we have seen, Tagore was worried enough to write to the Viceroy. Pearson wrote to Tagore on 27 August 1918: "It touched me deeply to learn from Andrews how you had been ready and eager to leave Calcutta on my behalf at a time when your daughter was near death and when you yourself were so unwell".<sup>134</sup> In England itself there does not appear to have been much public awareness of the action against Pearson. The reference in Pearson's letter dated 27 September, 1917 to the lack of understanding or empathy for his activities from some of his family may have some significance. One scholar wrote, albeit more than half a century later, that when she contacted three members of the Pearson family, they maintained that they "had never heard" of Pearson's arrest or deportation.<sup>135</sup> By September 1918

<sup>131</sup> Gandhi to Millie Graham Polak, 7 June 1918, *CWMG*, Vol. 96 (Supplementary Volume 6), p. 261.

<sup>132</sup> *Modern Review*, Calcutta, June 1918, p. 680.

<sup>133</sup> *Idem*.

<sup>134</sup> Pearson to Rabindranath Tagore, 27 August 1918, Pearson Papers, Rabindra Bhavan, Shantiniketan.

<sup>135</sup> Mary M. Lago (ed.), *Imperfect Encounter: Letters of William Rothenstein and Rabindranath Tagore, 1911–1941*, Cambridge, Massachusetts, Harvard University Press, 1972, p. 247. Lago does not mention the names of the family members in question; allowance must admittedly be made also for the long lapse of time.

instructions had come from the authorities about how Pearson was to be dealt with in England. He wrote to Tagore on 15 September 1918 that he had received;

Definite instructions from the authorities with regard to my restrictions and at the same time a request to take up a piece of really needed work in one or two of the large military hospitals close to my own home. Although the instructions restricted me very definitely to a limit of five miles from home I felt like a man suddenly liberated for I knew at last exactly where I was and also felt that I could be of use somewhere in spite of the restrictions placed on me....<sup>136</sup>

The atmosphere was such that even poetry could be subversive: Pearson wrote to Tagore about tutorial and educational activities he was planning in his area: "I had thought of taking classes on the subject 'The Growth of the Idea of Democracy in English Poetry' but as the talking of politics is forbidden I have dropped that suggestion and have offered Elementary Conversation in French in its place! I think my French friends would smile at my presumption...."<sup>137</sup>

Pearson seems to have been engaged at this stage in a back and forth with the authorities, offering to "throw myself into the maelstrom .... in my desire to share to the utmost of my power in the lives of those who are bearing the physical burden of the war", but with the reservation that he would not "bear arms in India"; settling finally for helping not as a combatant soldier but in the medical corps..., which training, he wrote to Tagore, "shall be of use to you at the Asram as an extra Hospital assistant!"<sup>138</sup>

But the war was ending. Willie wrote to Tagore on 16 October 1918 : "The very first day I was in a soldiers uniform the German reply to President Wilson's note was published and the little boys in the street came up to me and said : 'The war's over, Mister, and there's

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<sup>136</sup> Pearson to Rabindranath Tagore, 15 September 1918, Pearson Papers, Rabindra Bhavan, Shantiniketan.

<sup>137</sup> Idem.

<sup>138</sup> Pearson to Rabindranath Tagore, 15 September 1918 and 16 October 1918, Pearson Papers, Rabindra Bhavan, Shantiniketan.

no more need for soldiers now’.”<sup>139</sup> Eight days later Pearson wrote again to Tagore from Blackpool : “Oct 12<sup>th</sup> was the day I joined the Army!! Of course it was also the day on which the German Govt sent its peace note to President Wilson....”<sup>140</sup>

Events in India were about to take a turn for the worse, with the political situation becoming tense after the Rowlatt legislation which would be introduced within a few months and the repression in Punjab, including the massacre that took place on 13 April 1919 at Jallianwala Bagh, Amritsar. News filtered out slowly. Pearson wrote to Tagore at the end of the month : “... I am convinced that no power on earth will be able to keep me away when the right time comes for me to work once more in the land I love”.<sup>141</sup> And in the following week, on 7 May, Willie wrote : “But perhaps it is as well that I have not been in India during these last few months. I have not yet acquired sufficient self-control to make it possible for me to keep my indignation within reasonable limits”.<sup>142</sup> It was Tagore’s birthday—also Pearson’s—and Willie did not forget in those tense days to send “twenty rupees to be used to give the Santal night school boys a feast. Thus they will celebrate our birthdays”.<sup>143</sup> Reading in mid-June about Tagore’s protest against the Punjab events and the renunciation of the Knighthood, Pearson wrote : “Your photograph which appeared in yesterday’s paper, with the news of your dignified protest made me realize afresh how I long to be with you once more...”.<sup>144</sup> Willie correctly read the bloody events as an indication that change was coming : “All the hatred of race prejudice and unrest of nations are but the signs that the old order is passing away to give place to a new.”<sup>145</sup>

<sup>139</sup> Pearson to Rabindranath Tagore, 16 October 1918, Pearson Papers, Rabindra Bhavan, Shantiniketan.

<sup>140</sup> Pearson to Rabindranath Tagore, 24 October 1918, Pearson Papers, Rabindra Bhavan, Shantiniketan.

<sup>141</sup> Pearson to Rabindranath Tagore, 30 April 1919, Pearson Papers, Rabindra Bhavan, Shantiniketan.

<sup>142</sup> Pearson to Rabindranath Tagore, 7 May 1919, Pearson Papers, Rabindra Bhavan, Shantiniketan.

<sup>143</sup> *Idem.*

<sup>144</sup> Pearson to Rabindranath Tagore, 18 June 1919, Pearson Papers, Rabindra Bhavan, Shantiniketan.

<sup>145</sup> *Idem.*

Before long Pearson emerged from the rough and restrictive days he had been living through. His health too had improved. On 15 May 1920 Tagore had sailed for England, reaching Plymouth on 5 June where Pearson received him.<sup>146</sup> There followed a tour with Tagore of the European continent which took him also to France, Holland and Belgium. About a meeting in Holland, Pearson wrote to Andrews in September : “ Yesterday at Utrecht the square before the University had quite a crowd of the ordinary people waiting.... And the sight of their patient waiting moved me very deeply. It was like Japan all over again with the same restraint and depth of feeling....Here there is the touch of the human heart and the contrast with England is very striking”.<sup>147</sup> There followed a tour of the United States, where the reception was relatively cold, as it had earlier been in England.<sup>148</sup> There was another European tour on the conclusion of which Tagore returned to India.

Just how advanced Pearson’s position on India had been even over Andrews may be gauged from the fact that it was sometime in 1920 that the latter declared himself to be in favour of Indian Independence.<sup>149</sup> Non-co-operation had marked a watershed in Indian history. As Kabir notes, the “Non-co-operation Movement deeply stirred the Indian national consciousness and affected all social classes

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<sup>146</sup> *Rabindranath Tagore, 1861–1961: A Centenary Volume*, New Delhi, Sahitya Akademi, 1961, p. 476.

<sup>147</sup> Pearson to Andrews, 29 September 1920, Andrews Papers, File No. 23, Rabindra Bhavan, Shantiniketan.

<sup>148</sup> In England Tagore had encountered “‘studied aloofness’ on the part of several English friends who seemed to resent his outspoken comments on the character of the British rule in India and the renunciation of his Knighthood”. And in the United States, “(p)owerful interests (British propaganda) seem ranged against him to foil his attempt to incline American opinion in favour of his institution”. For these two quotes see *Rabindranath Tagore, 1861–1961: A Centenary Volume*, op. cit., p. 476 and p. 477 respectively.

<sup>149</sup> A letter by C.F. Andrews was published by the *Indian Daily News* on 19 September 1920. In this letter Andrews wrote that independence was the only way for India to regain its self-respect. See Anil Samarth, “C.F. Andrews” Letters to Rabindra Nath Tagore, *The Indian Archives*, Vol. XXII, Nos 1–2, January–December 1973, p. 69.

and groups”.<sup>150</sup> A change had thus occurred in the political atmosphere of the country on account of the philosophy of self-reliance and the widespread loss of fear of prison. The change is noted by C.F. Andrews in letters to Pearson. On 12 November 1920, Andrews placed his hope on the mobilization of the peasantry and not on what he saw as the de-nationalised elite : “The rate at which things are moving in India is almost incredible and Mr Gandhi has found out the secret viz : that while the *English*-educated have become morally degenerate and decadent the peasantry have not. They have still the finest qualities in the world .... It is the English-educated who lack courage, just as the Roman-educated Britons lacked courage in our own Island when the Anglo-Saxon invaders came”.<sup>151</sup> A few months later, on 22 February 1921, Andrews wrote :

I think that the full claim to complete independence on the part of India can now be made by anyone, without being regarded in any way as an infringement of the law. When I declared my own position, some six months ago, stating that India must go outside the Empire and could not be a partner in any imperialism, I did not know what would happen; and I thought that it was quite likely, that I shall be served with an order, but this was not done.<sup>152</sup>

In June 1921 Pearson’s article, “Practical Swaraj” appeared in *Modern Review*.<sup>153</sup> The article begins : “It is now no longer necessary to discuss whether Swaraj is attainable or not in India. Our observation tells us that it is already in being. Wherever a man or a woman refuses to be enslaved, wherever inner freedom and self-mastery are highly

<sup>150</sup> Humayun Kabir, *Studies in Bengali Poetry*, Bombay, Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, 1962, pp. 112–13.

<sup>151</sup> Andrews to Pearson, 12 November 1920, Andrews Papers, File No. 23, Rabindra Bhavan, Shantiniketan. It is not definitely clear whether this letter was written in 1920 or 1921. From the language and contents of the letter I prefer 1920 as by November 1921 Pearson was himself in India.

<sup>152</sup> Andrews to Pearson, 22 February 1921, Andrews Papers, File No. 23, Rabindra Bhavan, Shantiniketan.

<sup>153</sup> W.W. Pearson, “Practical Swaraj”, *Modern Review*, June 1921, pp. 721–8.



valued, there we have true Swaraj.” He was affirming the sea change in spirit that had noticeably occurred and of which C.F. Andrews had written to him in February.

Interestingly, it was in 1921 that the debate between Gandhi and Tagore on, inter alia, the question of non-co-operation reached its climax. Pearson figured in this debate as well, though in a somewhat unexpected manner. Apparently, while Pearson was in England there had been an incident in London in which some Indian students had heckled Pearson and “made it impossible for him to speak”.<sup>154</sup> This had been reported to Tagore who associated the students’ behaviour with the policy of non-co-operation. Rejecting the connection, Gandhi replied to Tagore:

The Poet was naturally incensed to find that certain students in London would not give a hearing to Mr Pearson, one of the truest of Englishmen....How much better it would have been if he had not imputed the rudeness of the students to non-co-operation, and had remembered that non-co-operators worship Andrews, honour Stokes, and gave a most respectful hearing to Messr Wedgwood, Ben Spoor and Holford Knight at Nagpur...<sup>155</sup>

Yet Pearson himself had formed an impression of non-co-operation quite different from Tagore’s. In the last week of September 1921 Pearson returned to Shantiniketan.<sup>156</sup> Again his health suffered and he would soon return again to England and Europe to recoup. Before leaving India he visited Aurobindo’s settlement in Pondicherry on 17 April 1923.<sup>157</sup> It may be presumed they met.

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<sup>154</sup> Iqbal Singh, *The Indian National Congress : A Reconstruction*, Volume Two : 1919–1923, Delhi, Manohar, 1988, pp. 240–1.

<sup>155</sup> *Young India*, 1 June 1921, *CWMG*, Vol. 20, p. 158.

<sup>156</sup> S.P. Sen (ed.), *Dictionary of National Biography*, Volume III, Calcutta, Institute of Historical Studies, 1974, p. 347.

<sup>157</sup> A.B. Purani, *The Life of Sri Aurobindo*, Pondicherry, Sri Aurobindo Ashram, 1978, p. 185. Purani records : “W.W. Pearson came from Shantiniketan. Talk about Shantiniketan.”

Pearson expressed satisfaction with the results of non-cooperation. This was significant also as he belonged to Manchester which had borne a major brunt of the boycott. He suggested also and endorsed work towards a constructive programme.

In January 1922, Gandhi wrote, citing a message from Pearson :

The readers of *Young India* are not unfamiliar with Mr W.W. Pearson's name. He has been associated with Dr Tagore's work at Shantiniketan for several years. He was deported for having written a pro-nationalist book on India. He has recently been permitted to return to his work at Shantiniketan from where he sent through Mr Andrews the following message during the Congress week. After a personal reference he wrote :

'I want also to add something of a more public nature which may be used publicly or not at the Congress...It is this: ....Your work has borne its fruit for India is already free....

But at the same time, although complete and unconditional swaraj is assured, I would urge the adoption of some practical constructive programme of social service....The Irish Agricultural Organisation Society will, I am convinced, be the firm foundation on which the structure of Irish freedom can be built. India also will need such a basis on which can be constructed a free and independent State and for this an immediate programme of practical swaraj is an essential condition.'

I share Mr Pearson's view that 'India is already free'. She became free when Lalaji, Pandit Nehru, Chitta Ranjan Das and Maulana Abul Kalam Azad were arrested. She became free as soon as it became clear that repression had fallen flat and that people were not to be deterred from forming associations and holding public meetings even though they were assaulted and flogged. Freedom was ours when we were ready to pay the price for it.<sup>158</sup>

<sup>158</sup> *Young India*, 12 January 1922, CWMG, Vol. 22, p. 159.

In the following month, Gandhi's journal published Pearson's articles criticizing the British Indian Government's efforts "to try to suppress the facts of the Punjab atrocities for eight months".<sup>159</sup> Pressing his points home, Willie pointed out that wherever "the governments of the Past are trying to preserve the old methods of governing the people, we find that the forces of freedom are proving too strong for them".<sup>160</sup>

Taken together, Willie Pearson was defining his position on non-co-operation independently of Tagore's.<sup>161</sup> In fact Pearson's understanding of the movement and its impact seems closer to that of Dwijendranath Tagore, Barodada, the eldest brother of Rabindranath Tagore.<sup>162</sup> By the following year, Pearson appears to have given his consent to the re-publication of his edition of Mazzini's *Duties of Man*. This was now published in 1922 by S. Ganesan from Madras "edited and with biographical introduction by W.W. Pearson".<sup>163</sup> In the same year S. Ganesan also published a collection of articles by Pearson under the title *The Dawn of a New Age and Other Essays*.<sup>164</sup> In this collection, Pearson's article on Gandhi not only endorses but serves also to expound the logic of non-co-operation.<sup>165</sup> Shantiniketan continued to be seen by the Colonial Government as a possible centre of subversive activities.<sup>166</sup>

<sup>159</sup> W.W. Pearson, "The Dawn of the New Age", *Young India*, 9 February 1922.

<sup>160</sup> Idem.

<sup>161</sup> For Tagore's reservations on non-co-operation see Sachin Sen, *The Political Thought of Tagore*, Calcutta, General Printers & Publishers, 1947, p. 24, p. 104, pp. 231–2 and p. 282.

<sup>162</sup> See "Letters from Barodada", *Tagore Studies*, 1969, pp. 55–69, including also Dwijendranath's article in support of non-co-operation, published in *Young India*, 22 September 1920.

<sup>163</sup> This edition, published in 1922 from Madras does not appear, however, to carry the "Preface" by Pearson which is included in the S.K. Lahiri & Co. edition published in the first decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

<sup>164</sup> This work, referred to above, included also some articles by Pearson which had been published earlier.

<sup>165</sup> 'A Character Study of M.K. Gandhi', in W.W. Pearson, *The Dawn*, op. cit., especially p. 66 ff.

<sup>166</sup> See I.B. Roy, "Tagore, Santiniketan and Police Surveillance", *The Indian Archives*, Volume XXIII, Nos 1–2, January–December 1974, pp. 73–80 and Sanat Kumar Bagchi, 'The Poet and the Raj', *The Visva-Bharati Quarterly*, Vol. 50, Nos 1–4, May 1984–April 1985, pp. 94–122.

Educational concerns were central to Pearson's life, for it is to the vocation of the educationist that he repeatedly returns, it is the thread which connects his international activities. This is a concern that comes to him from, or is reinforced through, his earlier work on Mazzini. It is this vocation that had brought him to Calcutta in 1907. It was this that engaged him in London and then induced him to take up an assignment as a private tutor in Delhi in 1912. In the years he spent in England after his enforced return from Japan and subsequent release, after the war, from the restrictions that had been imposed on him, he sought out educational assignments and experimental educational institutions where he could be involved.<sup>167</sup> In 1919 Pearson wrote to Tagore from England about a sanatorium in Colchester where he had been working a little earlier : "I am an idle oyster. What can be done to make me open out once more? When I was amongst the children I seemed to blossom again but as soon as I leave them I close up. I am returning to the children's sanatorium at the end of the month, and I hope to find amongst them a vent for my returning vigour."<sup>168</sup> During his American tour as well, Willie had made it a point to visit the famous "Starr Commonwealth for Boys" in Michigan, an institution started by Floyd Starr in 1913 for homeless, neglected and "delinquent" children, and observed carefully the educational methods there.<sup>169</sup> Tagore had also visited the institution; the Starr experience, built up around the idea that the child must be trusted rather than disciplined or punished, is described by Pearson in an article included in the collection *The Dawn of a New Age and Other Essays*, referred to above.<sup>170</sup>

Earlier, in Delhi, Pearson had had an immense influence on his pupil, Raghubir, who later went on, with the guidance and assistance of his father Sultan Singh, to establish the Modern School in Delhi in 1920.<sup>171</sup> Education, for Pearson, included being responsive to one's

<sup>167</sup> See letters dated 28 July 1919, 3 September 1919, 24 January 1920, from Pearson to Rabindranath Tagore, Pearson Papers, File 287 (ii), Rabindra Bhavan, Shantiniketan.

<sup>168</sup> Pearson to Rabindranath Tagore, 3 September 1919, Pearson Papers, File 287 (ii), Rabindra Bhavan, Shantiniketan.

<sup>169</sup> Pearson to Andrews, 15 May 1921, Andrews Papers, File 23 (ii), Rabindra Bhavan, Shantiniketan.

<sup>170</sup> "Educating by Love", in Pearson, *The Dawn*, op. cit., pp. 34–45.

<sup>171</sup> See Syeda Saiyidain Hameed, op. cit., p. 11 and p. 15.

surroundings. On 2 November 1921, at a time when there was a threat of floods and famine in north Bengal, Willie wrote to his former pupil for assistance:

I want you to help me in a plan I have of distributing relief in North Bengal.... I propose to go in the middle of January and want to be able to take some substantial help with me in the way of clothing and as I feel specially for the children, I intend to buy *khaddar* cloth for boys and girls which I can distribute personally during my tour. I therefore want you to collect through the children of your school (and in any other ways if you can) as large a sum as possible which I can spend in this way...I think such a project is likely to appeal to the children of your school, and if you yourself were able to accompany me on this visit, it would be all the better.<sup>172</sup>

Willie Pearson believed that true Swaraj was possible only through drastic educational reform.<sup>173</sup> Influenced considerably also by Maria Montessori, Pearson wrote in an article published in the month in which he died :

Freedom for India is the wish of all those who love her. But how can we liberate a nation unless we first liberate her children? Even in Europe we find that nations are in reality not free simply because education has, in the past, been of such a nature that the minds of the children have been enslaved. All the efforts of those educationalists in the West who believe in the coming of a new age, are directed towards freeing the mind and soul of the child from the fetters of convention and tradition.<sup>174</sup>

Pearson sees the teacher only as an “adviser” or “guide”. He commends the work and educational experiments of individuals like Norman MacMunn of Tiptree Hall, Essex. MacMunn had recently, in 1921, published *The Child’s Path to Freedom* which came to be

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<sup>172</sup> Ibid., p. 17.

<sup>173</sup> W.W. Pearson, “Swaraj Through Education”, *Modern Review*, Vol. XXXIV, No. 3, September, 1923 pp. 275–80.

<sup>174</sup> Ibid., p. 275.

widely read. In Pearson's view there was an additional reason for supporting non-co-operation in education, apart from the political reasons which too he endorsed. This was that Government schools and colleges were tied to educational methods which he considered wrong and outmoded.

At Shantiniketan, Pearson had been involved, apart from teaching, in at least three other activities—dramatics,<sup>175</sup> translating some of Tagore's works<sup>176</sup> and extension work in a tribal Santal village adjoining Shantiniketan.<sup>177</sup> Tagore himself respected Pearson enough to dedicate, as we have seen, the original Bengali edition of *Balaka* ("A Flight of Swans") to Pearson.<sup>178</sup> The dedication seems to point to Pearson's self-effacing nature : Thy nature is to forget thyself; / but we remember thee. / Thou shinest in self-concealment / revealed by our love. / Thou lendest light from thine own soul / to those that are obscure. / Thou seekest neither love nor fame; / Love discovers thee.<sup>179</sup> Among the various works by Tagore that Pearson translated into English is *Gora*, a classic of Indian literature set in the 1880s which has been compared, in certain respects, with Tolstoy's *War and Peace*. Given the theme,

<sup>175</sup> Rathindranath Tagore, "Looking Back", in *Rabindranath Tagore, 1861–1961 : Centenary Number*, New Delhi, Sangeet Natak Akademi, 1961, p. 49 and photograph in "A Phalguni Group, 1916" including Rabindranath, Willie Pearson, Gaganendra, Samarendra and Abanindra. See also the text of the play "The Clown" written and translated jointly by Pearson and his pupils at Shantiniketan; text reproduced in *William Winstanley Pearson*, Kolkata, Tagore Research Institute, 1984.

<sup>176</sup> For example, "Guptadhan" ("The Hidden Treasure").

<sup>177</sup> On Pearson's work among the Santals see a "Preface" dated October 1928 by C.F. Andrews, republished in Sisir Kumar Das (ed.), *The English Writings of Rabindranath Tagore, Volume Three : A Miscellany*, New Delhi, Sahitya Akademi, p. 220.

<sup>178</sup> See Tagore, (Tr. Aurobindo Bose), *A Flight of Swans*, John Murray, 1955. Sisirkumar Ghose writes : "Referring to *Balaka*, Nolinikanta Gupta once observed that it marked the climax of Tagorean poetry." [Sisirkumar Ghose, *The Later Poems of Tagore*, Asia Publishing House, Bombay, 1961, p. 212].

<sup>179</sup> Sisir Kumar Das (ed.), *The English Writings of Rabindranath Tagore: Volume One : Poems*, New Delhi, Sahitya Akademi, 1994, p. 322; see also p. 644.

one may wonder why Tagore passed on the task of translating *Gora* to Pearson. The matter is resolved by Pearson himself when he asks Tagore if the central character (presumably given Gora's non-Indian origin and enthusiasm for things Hindu), was not inspired by Sister Nivedita, the Irish-born Margaret Noble, not known for being particularly close to Tagore.<sup>180</sup> The Poet had once related the story in outline to Sister Nivedita and later changed it somewhat after seeing her adverse reaction to Gora's overtures in the novel being rejected on account of his foreign origin.<sup>181</sup> But the real twist in the story is with Gora, who is earlier passionate about Hinduism, learning towards the end that he is a foundling of Irish parents and has no place in Hindu society. This feeling of rejection is resolved for Gora by being turned on its head : with the freedom arising from the knowledge that he was no longer bound by religious denomination or by caste, Gora had learnt what it meant to be an unshackled Indian.

There were issues about the quality of the translation. Pearson did not put himself forward as one with a flawless command over the Bengali language. In fact the translation is preceded by a note from Pearson: "My thanks are due to Mr Surendranath Tagore, who very kindly made the final corrections and revisions for this translation. Any merits it possesses are due to his painstaking efforts to rectify my mistakes".<sup>182</sup> A sensitive observer of aesthetics and of cultural differences, Pearson, in his article, "From Kyoto to Peking", makes, on the basis of his visit to these countries, some perceptive and insightful comparisons between Japan and China and their respective peoples as also between these cultures and the West.<sup>183</sup> When he visited the Chinese consulate in Japan for a visa to China, the vice-consul "seemed astonished that an Englishman should ask for one and was evidently not accustomed to

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<sup>180</sup> Nityapriya Ghosh, *Rabindranath Tagore : A Pictorial Biography*, New Delhi, Niyogi Books, 2011, pp. 143–4.

<sup>181</sup> Idem. See also Sabyasachi Bhattacharya, *Rabindranath Tagore : An Interpretation*, New Delhi, Penguin (Viking), 2011, pp. 126–7.

<sup>182</sup> See *Rabindranath Tagore Omnibus*, Volume 1, New Delhi, Rupa & Co., Paperback edition, 2003, p. 213.

<sup>183</sup> W.W. Pearson, "From Kyoto to Peking", *Modern Review*, January 1922, pp. 41–4.

such consideration for his country”.<sup>184</sup> Citing these musings and reminiscences by Pearson, a prominent scholar speculated that these may have “stimulated” Tagore’s “growing curiosity” about China.<sup>185</sup>

C.F. Andrews has described Pearson as one with “a bewildering variety of talents” who “had genius of a very high order”; according to him, “Willie Pearson had something of a volcano in him, which he found difficult beyond words to control”.<sup>186</sup> Even so, at the end of it all, Pearson is hardly conscious of the significance of his own work and achievements; “I am nearing forty”, he writes to Andrews on 25 October 1920, “and have so far done nothing definite or consecutive in life”.<sup>187</sup> Pearson’s commitment to Indian freedom remains unwavering, writing as he does to Andrews a few days later, on 16 November, from New York, :

... Mrs Moody brought Padraic Colum, the Irish poet in to dinner and we had a very quiet happy time together, the only moment I felt sad being when Padraic Colum said that Ireland would be free in three years. I told him that was too long a time and I wanted India to be free long before that and am building all my hopes on the expectation that she will be free before I return next autumn with Gurudev!<sup>188</sup>

Pearson’s sympathies are entirely with the struggle that was on at the time : “It really is so terrible to think of the present situation continuing much longer and I cannot believe that we shall really have to wait much longer for India to be free. I am so grateful to Gandhi for his strong stand and wish that you would give him my message of love and my wish for his success”.<sup>189</sup>

<sup>184</sup> Ibid., p. 43.

<sup>185</sup> Stephen N. Hay, *Asian Ideas of East and West*, Cambridge, Massachusetts, Oxford University Press, p. 135 and p. 365 n36.

<sup>186</sup> C.F. Andrews, “W.W. Pearson : A Memoir”, *The Visva-Bharati Quarterly*, October 1924, pp. 229–38; the quotes are respectively from pages 233, 235 and 237.

<sup>187</sup> Pearson to Andrews, 25 October 1920, Andrews Papers, File No. 23, Rabindra Bhavan, Shantiniketan.

<sup>188</sup> Pearson to Andrews, 16 November 1920, Andrews Papers, File No. 23, Rabindra Bhavan, Shantiniketan.

<sup>189</sup> Idem.



In September 1923, Pearson visited Romain Rolland in Villeneuve, Switzerland.<sup>190</sup> They discussed Tagore, Shantiniketan, Gandhi and also matters concerning publication rights and how these were to be looked after, with Pearson suggesting that Gandhi's old associate, Henry Polak, who was practicing law in England, be enlisted for this purpose.<sup>191</sup> Rolland detected a tragic sadness about Pearson : "He gave me the impression of a man who, despite his relatively young age (he was only 43), was physically exhausted and grown prematurely old due to some hidden sorrow and also a climate to which his British constitution could never adapt....".<sup>192</sup>

Two days after his meeting with Romain Rolland, Pearson was traveling by train in Italy on 18 September 1923 when he was severely injured in a train-related incident. He died a week later in Pistoia. Not yet 43, he was relatively young.

The incident occurred when Pearson was traveling from Milan to Florence with an old Cambridge friend. According to an account furnished by Pearson's sister Dorothy, who had been with Willie on an earlier segment of his European tour, Willie and his friend were talking together when the friend went to the corridor window to look at the view. They had been alone in the compartment : at a station just before Pistoia (21 miles north of Florence) a passenger jumped into their carriage after the doors had been shut by officials.<sup>193</sup> It is suggested that he was not familiar with the latching system on the doors of Italian trains and leaned against a door in a moving train.

What followed is not entirely clear. It is understood that Pearson fell out, was very seriously injured, and then found by workmen who took him to a nearby mansion belonging to a Count Corsini who gave him first aid, brought him to consciousness and arranged for an

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<sup>190</sup> *Romain Rolland and Gandhi : Correspondence*, op. cit., pp. 15–17.

<sup>191</sup> Chinmoy Guha (ed.), *Romain Rolland—Kalidas Nag Correspondence: The Tower and the Sea*, Calcutta, Papyrus, 1996, p. 64.

<sup>192</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 69 [Romain Rolland to Kalidas Nag, 29 October 1923].

<sup>193</sup> Based on a printed account circulated by the brothers and sisters of Willie Pearson. See Pearson Papers, File 287 (viii), Rabindra Bhavan, Shantiniketan.

ambulance to take him to a hospital in Pistoia where he died on 25 September. Apparently he was still occasionally in a position to speak to some members of his family who arrived while he was still struggling in hospital. Of Pearson's last hours Gandhi has written that "(w)hilst he was lying on his death-bed, he dictated a will in which he did not forget a boy in Shantiniketan whom he loved as dearly as his own son".<sup>194</sup> Willie Pearson was cremated on the next day and his ashes were to be taken to England for being placed near his parents' graves. However, they were left behind in Pistoia pending a decision by the family on their ultimate resting place. A year after his death the ashes were taken and buried in Pistoia in what is known as a "permanent grave" (though even this is "permanent" only till 2048).<sup>195</sup>

The records of the cremation organization (there was only one in Pistoia at the time), show Pearson's place of birth as Liverpool, and mention the dates of his death and cremation and the fact that the ashes were held for a year after which they were handed over to Mr. Chiapella for burial on 24 September 1924. The help received by Willie Pearson and the Pearson family from Professor Chiapella (and his English wife who was also a trained medical hand and nurse) is mentioned also in Dorothy Pearson's typed account dated 26 September 1923, the day of Pearson's cremation, which had been sent to Tagore. The burial thus took place a year later in the "cimitero comunale", that is, the Pistoia Town Council cemetery. This too was arranged by Mr Chiapella. It appears that at some point a Star of

<sup>194</sup> *Young India*, 2 October 1924, *CWMG*, Vol. 25, p.192. There is no reference, however, to such a will in either the typed letter dated 26 September 1923 from Dorothy Pearson to Tagore or in the printed account of Pearson's death later circulated by the Pearson family, of which some copies were enclosed also with Dorothy Pearson's letter dated 1 November 1923 addressed to Tagore. Willie Pearson's nurse is quoted in Dorothy Pearson's letter of 26 September as having heard Willie speak of "My one and only love,—India". The printed note was also extracted in *Modern Review*, November 1923, pp. 626–7 by C.F. Andrews.

<sup>195</sup> Information obtained from the Pistoia Comune in September 2012. I thank Ms Francesca Cecconi for her initiative and help in tracing some of the medical records and the cremation register and in locating Pearson's grave in Pistoia where his ashes are still interred.



David came to be placed on the grave and we can only speculate as to what led to this mis-identification of Willie Pearson as a Jew.

Fascism was on the rise in Italy at the time of Pearson's visit in 1923.<sup>196</sup> The victims of Mussolini's forces (as of the Nazis) were often from among minorities and one may interpret the Star of David in this context as a badge of Anti-Fascist Solidarity with one who died in the manner he did. While Willie's death was, from the available accounts, accidental, it had occurred in an Italy in which, in the context of the rise of fascism, politically sensitive deaths, especially while the victims were in transit, were not unknown.

Tagore said of him: "We seldom met with anyone whose love of humanity was so completely real."<sup>197</sup> Romain Rolland wrote to Kalidas Nag on learning of Pearson's death : "When I look at his beautiful photograph of 1913 with Andrews and Gandhi, what a youthful ardour and faith, what fire in his eyes! The Pearson I met in 1923 already looked like a hero on whom the melancholy of life's strains had left a mark."<sup>198</sup> Gandhi too recalled not only Pearson's "noble features", but, like Rolland, the "frank, benign and bewitching expression in his eyes"; like Tagore, Gandhi too wanted a memorial built in India for Pearson.<sup>199</sup> On 27 November 1923 *The Manchester Guardian* had carried an appeal by Tagore to Pearson's friends and admirers to assist in the construction of a proposed hospital at Shantiniketan in Willie's memory.<sup>200</sup> Tagore had appealed for funds and Andrews took much interest in the matter of the memorial and in the establishment of the

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<sup>196</sup> For political events in Italy during this period, see G.D.H. Cole, *Communism and Social Democracy, 1914–1931*, London, Macmillan, 1958, pp. 367–403.

<sup>197</sup> Asha Sharma, *An American in Khadi : The Definitive Biography of Satyanand Stokes*, New Delhi, Penguin Books, 1999, p. 358n, citing Norman Goodall, *A History of the London Missionary Society, 1895–1945*, p. 37.

<sup>198</sup> Chinmoy Guha (ed.), op. cit., p. 70.

<sup>199</sup> *Young India*, 2 October 1924, *CWMG*, Vol. 25, pp.191–2.

<sup>200</sup> Kalyan Kundu, Sakti Bhattacharya and Kalyan Sircar (eds), *Imagining Tagore : Rabindranath and the British Press (1912–1941)*, Calcutta, Shishu Sahitya Samsad, 2000, pp. 377–8.

Pearson Hospital in Shantiniketan. Evidently, the response to the appeal for funds was not very encouraging. Referring to this, Gandhi had not only lent the weight of his support but also joined in the appeal for funds.<sup>201</sup> There is now a hospital named after Pearson at Shantiniketan, but no adequate memorial whether in Shantiniketan or elsewhere. Pearson was mourned by those who had known him but perhaps since his name was not as familiar to later generations of Indians as it might have been had he lived longer, he and his work have remained largely unacknowledged.

The *Manchester Guardian* editorially described Pearson as “the best loved Englishman in India”.<sup>202</sup> The paper’s commentary was couched in generalities and did not refer to the various activities which had made Pearson, a ‘mischievous’ man to British Colonial Intelligence, so well-beloved in the subcontinent. The distinguished British publication, the *Dictionary of National Biography*, appears also to have remained without an entry on Pearson. Tagore visited Italy in early 1925, a year and a few months after Pearson’s death and again in 1926.<sup>203</sup> Florence was on Tagore’s itinerary but there seems to be no record of his having visited nearby Pistoia, where Pearson’s ashes still lie, presumably because Tagore was under the impression, earlier conveyed by Pearson’s family, that the remains were likely to be taken to England.<sup>204</sup>

Pearson’s may have represented an individual’s quest but it is a quest which enables us to obtain entry into multiple themes across five continents. He sprung from Non-Conformist traditions and his extraordinary openness and universalism bring to mind a Non-Conformist [Methodist] prayer which might also serve, *mutatis mutandis*, as a Historians’ Oath : “... lead us beyond the truth by which we stand, each for his own, into that wider land where rival truths go hand in hand”.

<sup>201</sup> *Young India*, 2 October 1924, *CWMG*, Vol. 25, pp.191–2.

<sup>202</sup> “A Great Englishman”, *Manchester Guardian*, 30 November 1923.

<sup>203</sup> *Rabindranath Tagore, 1861–1961 : A Centenary Volume*, New Delhi, Sahitya Akademi, 1961, pp. 483–6.

<sup>204</sup> Dorothy Pearson to Rabindranath Tagore, 26 September 1923, Pearson Papers, File 287 (iii), Rabindra Bhavan, Shantiniketan.

The multiple linkages that Willie Pearson may be seen to have reflected include those between Tagore and Gandhi, between the latter's struggle in South Africa and his subsequent strivings in India, and between Indian and some Japanese thinkers and opinion-makers. Though Willie Pearson's short life is overshadowed in the historical literature by that of C.F. Andrews, with whom much of his work in South Africa, India, Fiji and elsewhere overlapped, it is clear that Willie was no mere acolyte, being quite his own man. Edmond Privat, an exponent of Polish and Indian freedom, once noted of Tagore that "Europe had made much of his disagreements with Gandhiji..."<sup>205</sup> Even in the Tagore–Gandhi universe, Willie Pearson mapped his own position which did not necessarily conform to those of either of these two colossi at any given point or juncture. Tracing his path provides us also with an interesting reading of, and several possible insights into, the Gandhi–Tagore interface. At home in the literary and artistic world of Shantiniketan, he was not out of place either in the constructive work activities of Gandhi as evidenced at the time of the latter's visit to Shantiniketan in 1915. Pearson positioned himself in favour of complete Indian freedom well before many in India, including Gandhi himself, had come to a declaration of that position. He endorsed Gandhi's non-co-operation movement when Tagore had reservations. Yet he moved with ease in the Gandhi–Tagore universe, at home with both and valued by both.

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<sup>205</sup> Edmond Privat, Untitled Note, *The Visva-Bharati Quarterly*, Tagore Centenary Number, Vol. XXVI, Nos 3 & 4, p. 350.