

John Lang, our forgotten Indian envoy

Rory Medcalf

The Spectator (Australia)

31 March 2010

Amid the controversy about crimes against Indian students in recent months, Australia's good name desperately needs more advocates in India. One man who might suit the brief has been keeping a low profile for far too long. If John George Lang (1816-1864) knew of the besmirching his homeland has received of late in the Indian media, he would be rolling in his grave. Which is a pity, not least because it is such a singularly beautiful resting place under the wild deodar trees near Mussoorie, a hill station in the western Himalayas.

His soul rests in India, yet he is Australian: important, forgotten and one of ours. John Lang was the first novelist born in this country. He was neither a great writer nor a bad one. He was also a lawyer, linguist and traveller, a pioneer of the Indian press, and a celebrity known for wit, rich living and brashness.

Lang was a friend and student of India, its cultures and people, at a time when this was hardly a fashionable stance among white colonial gentleman. He stood out in British India by standing up for Indians — including one of the icons of the 1857 uprising, the warrior queen known as the Rani of Jhansi. He was a nuisance to the power of the day, the East India Company, whose rule he damned in print as 'despotic and arbitrary', and whose authority he shook in a historic courtroom victory. In all of this, there was something intrinsically Australian about Lang's democratic, contrarian spirit.

Not that he went to India with a political agenda. The trail from his Sydney birthplace was rather one of misadventure.

Lang was a second generation Australian. His grandfather was an emancipated First Fleet convict of Jewish origin, transported essentially for stealing spoons. As for the young Lang, he was smart, audacious and a beneficiary of the colony's efforts to transcend its convict beginnings. Like his role model and sometime patron William Charles Wentworth, he saw journalism and the law as his roads to influence. Matriculating from Sydney's first grammar school, where he excelled in Latin and Greek, he went on to law at Cambridge. Within months he was expelled for 'Botany Bay tricks, not gentleman's tricks'. His exploits included blasphemy, drunkenness, capping a college spire with a chamber pot, and — most unforgivably — appearing on stage.

Lang finished his studies elsewhere, and in 1841 returned to Sydney with his wife and daughter to begin his career. But within six months his youthful conceit had made him the barrister no one wanted to brief, though that is another story.

India promised a fresh start. Lang's brother-in-law had a legal practice in Calcutta, and gave him work. But John Lang soon sensed grander horizons. He mastered Hindustani and Persian. Then he wandered, a cultural chameleon, a vagabond with style, often a guest of local nobility, sometimes spending months 'associating only with the natives of India'. And he wrote, prolifically: fiction, journalism, poetry, translations. He became one of the finest chroniclers of mid-19th century India, including as correspondent for Charles Dickens' popular magazines. His work foreshadowed that of Rudyard Kipling, who may even have pinched a few of his ideas.

In 1845 Lang established a newspaper, the Mofussilite (Mofussil meaning something like 'outback'). It became an enduring vehicle for scandal, gossip, and satire. Lang used it, along with a stint as an editor in London, to advocate equal employment rights for Indians as well as to expose the East India Company's callous incompetence in the years leading up to the uprising of 1857.

Occasionally, Lang dusted off his legal skills. In 1851 he won a landmark case for Jottee Prasad, an Indian businessman contracted to provision British forces in the Sikh wars. When

Prasad had tried to claim the fortune he was owed, the Company charged him with fraud. The wronged man turned to Lang.

The Australian's tenacious and flamboyant defence caught the Company off-guard. He dismembered the prosecution case, which his summing-up — described by a contemporary as 'one of the most impudent perorations ever delivered before a British tribunal' — likened to the stench of a slaughtered pig. The corruption and illegality of the Company's actions was made plain to the press and the public in India and Britain. The Company was compelled to honour its debts. Prasad was carried by a cheering Indian crowd from the Agra courthouse, and showered Lang with gifts and wealth.

But the Company was unforgiving. It found grounds to sue Lang — a defamatory misstep in his newspaper — and jailed him for two months in Calcutta. Yet before long Lang was fighting the Company again, representing the Rani of Jhansi in 1854 in a failed attempt to keep her lands from seizure under a ruthless 'doctrine of lapse'.

For the next five years, Lang was mostly in London, attempting to regain his health and to make the Dickens-Thackeray league as a novelist. He failed at both. He also missed being on the spot in 1857 for the biggest Indian news story of his life.

The India he returned to must have been numb from rebellion and even bloodier retribution. Almost the entire roll-call of his friends and acquaintances on both sides — including the Rani — was dead. He moved to the tranquillity of Mussoorie, to live quietly as a writer. His family life, meanwhile, had become complicated — including divorce and second marriage — but that, too, is another story.

At 47, he was dead. Officially, it was bronchitis; no doubt hard drinking and the travails of the tropics had not helped. Opinion about him was divided. To one obituarist he was a 'great spirit', to another a 'melancholy example'.

Today, Lang's grave is honoured by Mussoorie's small community of scribes — Indian writer Ruskin Bond having rediscovered the site in 1964 — and tended by a local church committee. In Australia, just a handful of scholars probably know much about him at all. Author Nancy Keesing uncovered a little of the Lang story in the 1970s. A Canberra-based private scholar, the indefatigable 84-year-old Victor Crittenden, has researched Lang for decades and self-published a wealth of material, including the only Lang biography. My own investigations began when I was a diplomat in India seven years ago. We are a lonely bunch.

John Lang deserves a wider audience. But what can his story do to help ease today's media-fed estrangement between the countries he called home?

Lang never claimed to be a peacemaker. Like his heirs today in India's fourth estate, he would never hesitate to make a stir when there was the promise of attention and circulation figures. He loved to differ. He craved an audience. He savoured a sensation. Like good journalists everywhere, he saw part of his calling as comforting the afflicted and afflicting the comfortable.

But he also believed in due process and the rule of law. His Australian notion of a fair go would be sorely strained by the generalisations that have tarnished the debate over alleged racism against Indian students in Australia.

Perhaps the point that matters most is the simplest: here was an Australian who loved India. Of course, Lang was still a man of his time. His writings about India, while generally sympathetic, can also contain passages which one's post-colonial, multicultural sensibilities might prefer to wish away. Yet the sum of his many parts makes him someone who, in the vibrant, muddled, democratic work-in-progress that is today's India, would feel quite at home. May he not, entirely, rest.

Rory Medcalf is a program director at the Lowy Institute and a former diplomat.

