

*John Lang*



# *John Lang*

Wanderer of Hindoostan  
Slanderer in Hindoostanee  
Lawyer for the Ranee

*Amit Ranjan*



**NIYOGI  
BOOKS**

Published by

**NIYOGI BOOKS**

Block D, Building No. 77,

Okhla Industrial Area, Phase-I,

New Delhi-110 020, INDIA

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Email: [niyogibooks@gmail.com](mailto:niyogibooks@gmail.com)

Website: [www.niyogibooksindia.com](http://www.niyogibooksindia.com)

Text © Amit Ranjan

Editor: Vibha Chakravarty Kumar

Design: Shashi Bhushan Prasad

Cover design: Sadhvi Jawa

ISBN: 978-93-91125-05-9

Publication: 2021

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Printed at: Niyogi Offset Pvt. Ltd., New Delhi, India

*To Mom...*

*And to Alice, whose name rhymes with 'gallus'.*



## *Praise for the Book:*

Amit Ranjan's page-turning chronicle of the life and times of John Lang—an obscure Australian lawyer and writer who made his career in India, representing the Rani of Jhansi—presents readers with a diversion that is, in equal parts, history and literary delight.

*Prof. Kama Maclean  
History Chair, South Asia Institute, University of Heidelberg, Germany*

Amit Ranjan has written a remarkable book. At once a history of literature and an expedition into the culture and politics of a forgotten 19th century India, it is also, in a way, a song to the process of literary criticism and the potential it holds for self-discovery, threaded through by Dr Ranjan's eye for coincidence and rhyme in history and language. The fascinating John Lang took his own fiction's inspiration from Boccaccio's meta-stories; here Amit Ranjan turns Lang's life into another intertextual metanarrative, a journey across novels and plays, newspapers and court depositions, that traces a winding trail from Lang's world into ours. It deserves the attention of any reader interested in the connected histories of world literature.

*Dr Carlos Grenier,  
Florida International University, Miami, USA*

Amit Ranjan's relentless pursuit of the intriguing John Lang has culminated in a most valuable book for those seeking to better understand the *longue duree* of Australia's Asian context. Further, the work highlights the powerful witness of an Australian who, through his own colonial background, was uniquely positioned to cast a critical gaze upon British colonialism and its legacies during a momentous period in Indian history.

*Prof. Sean Brawley  
Professor of History, Macquarie University, Sydney, Australia*

Ranjan writes with a quirky intelligence playfully moving between archival documentation, oral tradition, anecdote and his own storytelling skills. He places the personage of Lang center stage in the world in which he moved—India, Australia, Britain—and assesses his legacy. He speaks with an affectionately critical eye and articulates fresh and nuanced perspectives on the collusion and collision of race and gender, colonial politics, the legal system, and the literary world. Ultimately, the joy of reading comes from the spirited narration that tests shifting boundaries of visions of truth and ethics, history and fiction.

*Prof. Stephanos Stephanides,  
Founding faculty of University of Cyprus*



# Epigraph

*Pablo Picasso could draw Realistic portraits very well. But then, he chose a form of his own.*

—Dr Saugata Bhaduri, who apart from being an astute academic, is also the famous actor who essayed the role of Fooko in the famous play *The True Story of Fooko, Shoe Kriya and Fooko in Just Three Acts, Mind the Commas, Please*. In a private conversation, over something from Malibu.

New Delhi, April 2011

*I have fallen in love with India. I have even worked on the sets of a Bollywood film. The best thing is that Indians speak English so well. I have had some amazing conversations, but I miss out on something. The punch line in an Indian-English conversation is always in Hindi.*

—Ida Hattermer-Higgins, famous German-American writer, at a conversation at the Haseraghatta Bar, under the evening star.

Bengaluru, December 2010

*O Jhansi-ki-rani-ka-lawyer-ka-scholar! What if someone steals your mad ideas? That person will be called Jhansi-ki-rani-ka-lawyer-ka-scholar-ka-chor.*

—Anahita Mukherjee, super reporter, at the Pyrmont Bridge.

Sydney, May 2010

*Catherine Tekakwitha, who are you? Are you (1656–1680)? Is that enough? Are you Iroquois Virgin? Are you the Lily of the Shores of the Mohawk River? Can I love you in my own way? I am an old scholar, better-looking now than when I was young. That's what sitting on your ass does to your face.*

—Mr Leonard Cohen, in *Beautiful Losers*. Almost two score years ago.

*Time present and time past. Are both perhaps present in time future. And time future contained in time past.*

—T.S. Eliot, in 'Burnt Norton', *Four Quartets* (1941).



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## FOREWORD

One would think this is a book only about John Lang, the 19th century Australian-turned-Indian, barrister-cum-author-cum-maverick. The John Lang who was born in Sydney in 1816, studied in England from 1837 to 1841 to become a barrister, and sailed off to Calcutta in 1842 to practise law there till 1845. The John Lang who also started the remarkable journal *The Mofussilite*; who relocated—along with his journal—to Ambala in 1846; to Meerut thereafter; then to Agra in 1857 and back to Meerut in 1859, and died in Mussoorie in 1864. The John Lang who is buried in a rather difficult-to-find grave in Camel's Back Road cemetery in Landour, Mussoorie.

The John Lang who, in his short life of 48 years, produced no less than 23 novels or serialised volumes of fiction, one travelogue, some plays, and five volumes of poetry—apart from numerous other pieces in journals and periodicals, making him practically the first substantial author in Australian literature. The John Lang who routinely published anti-East India Company tracts in his journal, fought as a lawyer against the Company on several occasions—including, most famously, for Laxmi Bai, the Rani of Jhansi, thus making him a notable player in India's own (post) colonial history.

The John Lang who, thus, ought to be a major figure in the chequered histories of British imperialism and a pioneer in Indo-Australian political and cultural relations, and yet languishes in obscurity—generally overlooked by official historiography. A Lang in need of a language of re-inscription in public memory.

Well, that this book, for sure, minimally is.

It is indeed a meticulously researched work on John Lang—his life, his exploits, and his literary output. Amit Ranjan spent nearly a decade chasing this elusive and yet so important figure down dusty archives and dusty by-lanes, through ghostly cemeteries and ghastly bureaucratic tangles, across India and Australia. In that chase, Ranjan has collected an incredible corpus of material and anecdotes, which is presented here to piece together the complex jigsaw puzzle that John Lang seemingly is. All this has been buttressed with several fellowships to visit Australia and the US for conducting this research—a full-fledged doctoral dissertation emerging out of the process, and numerous publications and media appearances on the subject.

While Ruskin Bond was indeed the first to have attempted to bring John Lang out of the bushes in 1964—by discovering his shrubbery-ridden grave in Mussoorie a century after his death, and writing about him and his stories—Lang was still to remain in utter obscurity for four more decades. It was only in late 2002, when Rory Medcalf, the then spokesperson of the Australian High Commission in India, started researching on Lang in collaboration with Australian scholar Victor Crittenden—resulting in a book by Crittenden on John Lang in 2005. There was also the unveiling of a plaque at Christ Church, Mussoorie, on 15 August 2005 by the Australian High Commission in memory of the ‘barrister, writer, journalist, wanderer, and editor of *The Mofussilite*, the first Australian-born novelist...a brilliant and restless soul’.

Amit Ranjan began his research on John Lang around this time. It will not be an exaggeration to say that, while the couple of efforts mentioned above may have sown early seeds of Lang revival, it is Amit’s sustained enterprise over the years that has brought Lang to greater public attention. There is a plethora of academic events and publications blossoming on Lang now.

This book does indeed bear out the toils and the fruits of such singular pathbreaking research: the almost mystical pursuit by a

young Indian scholar, for nearly a decade, of the elusive and yet most brilliantly colourful and historically significant persona of John Lang.

And yet, this book is much more than just that. Amit's search for Alice Richman—beyond the local Pune lore about a suicidal white woman in love with a local lad, and whose ghost still haunts the campus—led him on a track that would eventually take him to John Lang, veritably though mostly unknown, the most prominent of the Australians living in 19th century India.

This book could thus be more properly described as fundamentally stemming from a quest for Alice, and incidentally leading on to John Lang. He does not come alone in this book, but is accompanied by a most curious cast of characters. More interestingly, this book also leads us to encounter some major figures of India's first war of independence in 1857—the Rani of Jhansi who, as mentioned earlier, employed Lang as her lawyer against the Company; and the noted rebel Nana Sahib, whose image was curiously replaced by that of Lala Jotee Persaud—a contractor and supplier of provisions to the East India Company—in the official records of the Company. These, and numerous such trivia involving the motley of Lang's lived universe—brigands, forgers, charlatans, detectives, phrenologists, occultists and the like—paint a most vibrant picture of the complex networks of mid-19th century colonial India. Something no traditional historiography can provide.

Far from being just another piece of sound academic literary-historical work and a well-researched biography of a lesser-known author who needs to be repatriated to the canon, this book is an exuberant exercise in passion—a passion that could set one off on a late night foray into the unknown just to look up some obscure tomb, or to pick up some obscure discursive thread. Amit's is an exercise that demonstrates how variegated, yet connected, our little histories are.

In fact, this book is not on a John Lang, but on a lone *jang* (a lonely battle) fought by Amit Ranjan as he struggled not just through the accumulated debris of the past to ferret out little known but interesting