

# Women and the Indian Mutiny: Framing the Mutiny in a *Punch* Cartoon and a Lucknow Diary

Anna Matei

## Abstract

Artefacts and news coverage created in Britain during the Indian mutiny represented and interpreted that conflict, creating meaning for the public and the victims of the mutiny. Tenniel's *Punch* cartoon 'The British Lion's Vengeance on the Bengal Tiger' and Katherine Bartrum's Lucknow diary constructed meaning through dialogue with national and sectional culture. Both wanted to be understood, and so used and linked elements of British and narrower community tradition to create their representations. In the process, they constructed women's place in the mutiny too, but while one focused on women as symbolic victims, the other represented their real, personal suffering.

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The Indian mutiny, 1857-58, was interpreted and defined in contemporary Britain through public discourse built to a large extent by men around the symbol of woman as victim, but also shaped by women as active creators of news and interpretation.<sup>1</sup> Literature on the subject of women in the mutiny tends to focus on their function in the national debate as rallying points – defenceless victims whose deaths served the British as cause and justification for violent retribution. The importance of this function, and women's self-characterisation, to British empire-building in the later nineteenth century is also highlighted.<sup>2</sup> This article shall focus on the way the collective conversation around the mutiny led to the framing of women's experience in India in a way that was, in fact, more complex than the literature suggests. From comparative analysis of Tenniel's 'The British Lion's Vengeance on the Bengal Tiger', a *Punch* cartoon from August 1857, and Katherine Bartrum's *A Widow's Reminiscences of the Siege of Lucknow*, a mutiny diary published in 1858, it will appear that the mutiny discourse in Britain was multi-faceted and made up of elements that could be constructed in a way that conveyed new meaning and function by re-appropriating elements of Victorian culture.<sup>3</sup> Generally accepted and understood national tropes were used as part of collective discourse on a national level, but they could also become creators of a more sectional, community-specific framework for the mutiny. As it shall emerge from analysis of the framing of women's presence in the mutiny, around the events of Lucknow a tradition was created that was specific to the survivors of the siege, and was designed to contain their experiences by expressing death in Lucknow in terms that matched contemporary British concepts of death. Parallel to this discourse, a collective one that framed women as victims of the mutiny also existed, much stronger in 1857, but still influential in 1859.<sup>4</sup>

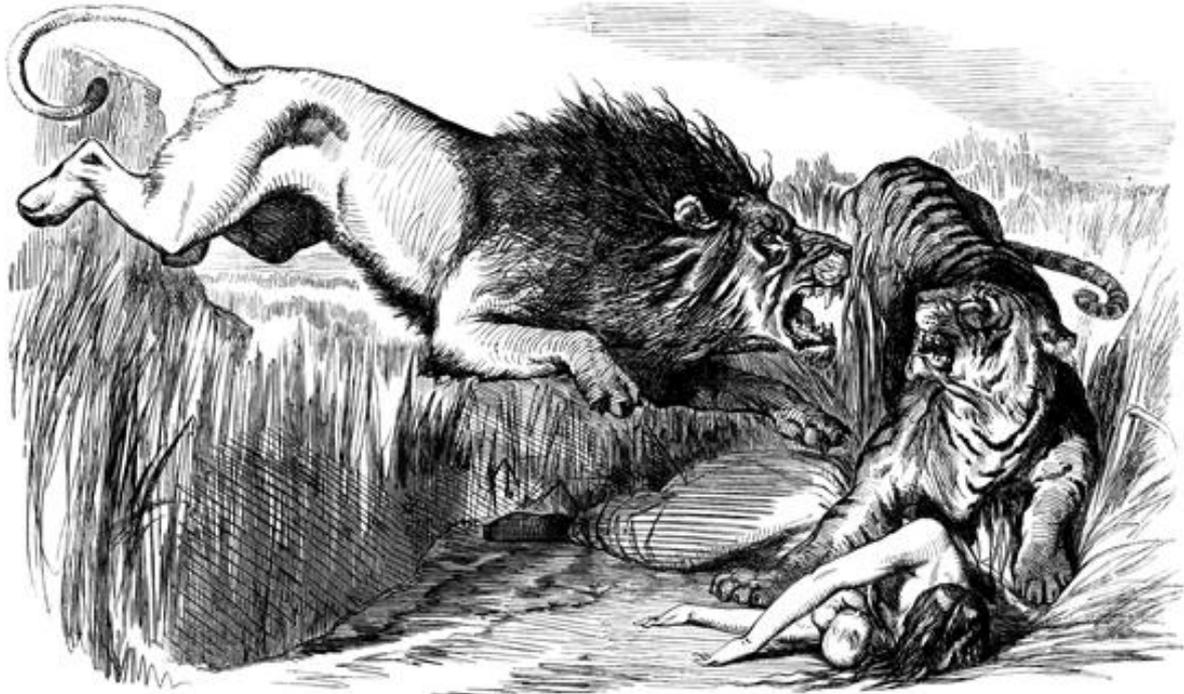
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<sup>1</sup> This article shall refer to the events of 1857-58 as the Indian mutiny, not the Indian *rebellion* or first war of independence, for simplicity and consistency, as it focuses on nineteenth-century British attitudes to 1857, in the context of which *mutiny* is the most appropriate label. It shall also refer to British, not English, attitudes, as most of those studied spoke of British rule in India, although the artefacts compared in this article were produced in England.

<sup>2</sup> See, for instance, Alison Blunt, 'Embodying War, British Women and Domestic Defilement in the Indian 'Mutiny', 1857-8', *Journal of Historical Geography*, v. 26.3 (2000), pp. 403-428; and Lydia Murdoch, "'Suppressed Grief", Mourning the Death of British Children and the Memory of the 1857 Indian Rebellion', *Journal of British Studies*, v. 51.2 (2012), pp. 364-392. Murdoch's text also contains a concise and useful overview of most other writing on British women's roles in the imperial struggle in India.

<sup>3</sup> John Tenniel, 'The British Lion's Vengeance on the Bengal Tiger', *Punch*, v.33.84, 22 August 1857, pp. 76-77; Katherine Bartrum, *A Widow's Reminiscences of the Siege of Lucknow* (London: Nisbet, 1858) [in future references, Bartrum].

<sup>4</sup> Blunt, pp. 414-418.



THE BRITISH LION'S VENGEANCE ON THE BENGAL TIGER.

**Figure 1. John Tenniel, 'The British Lion's Vengeance on the Bengal Tiger',**  
*Punch*, v.33.84, 22 August 1857, pp. 76-77. © *Punch*.

Tenniel's 'The British Lion's Vengeance on the Bengal Tiger' is the first representation by *Punch* of women as the victims of the Indian mutiny, and so is an important expression of the prevailing British attitude to the mutiny in its early months.<sup>5</sup> We know from Patrick Leary's work that the creation of the Large Cut was a process geared towards achieving a topical, easy-to-understand representation of the week's chosen theme.<sup>6</sup> This one shows a woman holding a child, attacked by a tiger, which in turn is being attacked by the British Lion. With the caption this shows that the message is British vengeance on India for the murder (and potentially rape) of women. But so much is taken for granted about British anxiety over the deaths of women by August 1857 that few studies stop to wonder why Tenniel chose to include the British Lion and the Bengal Tiger to represent the mutiny as a whole, and why this became such a resonant metaphor for the process as the British saw it.<sup>7</sup> To understand that, we need to deconstruct the cartoon and re-build our grasp of why each one of its components was chosen.

Of the key visual components the most obvious trope is the British Lion. *Punch* used it regularly, alongside Britannia and John Bull, as an embodiment of Britain.<sup>8</sup> Thus, the British Lion was easily recognised by readers of the magazine as a metaphor for Britain. But cartoons also had to be topical, and in the context of contemporary press attitudes to the mutiny this one was, as a result of the appearance of the Lion: its representation mid-leap suggests strength, showing powerful British reaction to the conflict. As Leary

<sup>5</sup> For references to the cartoon along these lines see Patrick Leary, *The Punch Brotherhood, Table Talk and Print Culture in Mid-Victorian London* (London: The British Library Board, 2010), p. 36; and Frankie Morris, *Artist of Wonderland, The Life, Political Cartoons, and Illustrations of Tenniel* (Charlottesville, VA: Lutterworth, 2005), p. 63.

<sup>6</sup> Leary, pp. 40-44.

<sup>7</sup> The first issue of *Punch* to visually represent the mutiny is that of 25 July 1857, through the half-page cartoon of Sir Colin Campbell, 'Every Inch a Soldier'.

<sup>8</sup> Leary, p. 35.

has shown, the Large Cut tended to be based on the leader in *The Times* published the Wednesday before the publication, on a Saturday, of *Punch*.<sup>9</sup> In this case, that leader focused on American attitudes to the Indian mutiny, and emphasised certainty across the Atlantic in firm British action: 'it is understood [...] that the more serious undertaking of reducing the revolted Sepoys is only a question of time and of expense'.<sup>10</sup> The Lion looks muscular, healthy, and through its position in the foreground much larger than tiger, or woman and child. It bares its teeth and is mid-leap, mane standing on edge, and we see one of its eyes fixed on the Bengal Tiger. All of this suggests strength, and the gaze also makes it the only active component of the cartoon. However, representing the British Lion as strong and active contradicts Issue 83 of *Punch*, published just one week before this cartoon, where the British Lion voices a complaint against being overused as a decorative motif in London, saying 'It is well bekown that old I'm grown – ain't the Lion as I used to be'.<sup>11</sup> That the representation in Tenniel's Cut is new shows that the artist was choosing to illustrate a growing element of collective discourse, the need for vengeance, and this required deviation from the more recent use of the trope in *Punch*.

The visual element of Bengal Tiger over unconscious or dead woman and child is also taken from contemporary collective discourse, and shows *Punch*'s participation in it with this cartoon. Mark Lemon, publisher of *Punch* at the time, called this Cut a 'fighting' one; indicating that it appealed to contemporary patriotism.<sup>12</sup> This has a lot to do with the context of this visual component, and its message of violent British action against India – vengeance. The Bengal Tiger appears above its victims, but forced to retreat by the arrival of the British Lion. Its gaze is on the Lion, but its eye is barely visible, and it appears smaller than the Lion, all suggesting its subjugation and defeat. To contemporaries, this would have recalled but also reversed the imagery of *Tippoo's Tiger*, the mechanical organ once belonging to Tipu Sultan, held at the time by the East India Company.<sup>13</sup> Tipu's organ shows a Bengal tiger in the process of devouring a European, most likely British soldier.<sup>14</sup> The tiger is over its victim, victorious. The reversal of this representation by the Tenniel cartoon, suggesting that now the British will be successful in their violent action, is likely to have been understood by contemporary readers, as during its stay in the East India House and Museum, 1808-58, *Tippoo's Tiger* was firmly in the public eye.<sup>15</sup> But Tenniel's image is also the creation of a new trope, linking this message of British success to the earlier Victorian public meaning of Bengal tigers as symbols of a dangerous India: in the early nineteenth century tiger attacks were the most feared cause of death in India, and news of one such British death was likely to have inspired even *Tippoo's Tiger*.<sup>16</sup> Therefore, the Bengal Tiger is also an understandable symbol of the mutiny in India, implying at once the imminent British victory over the mutiny and the threat of the conflict. That this representation worked to rally the British, and firmly entered public discourse, is evident from the afterlife of the cartoon: already a week after its first publication it appeared as the banner of an army recruited for India in a *Punch* cartoon.<sup>17</sup>

The key message of the *Punch* cartoon was imminent British success in repelling the real threat of the Indian mutiny, through necessary firm action amounting to revenge. This message was conveyed through careful presentation using visual tools that were rooted in contemporary culture relevant to the relationship between Britain and India, but those visual tools were also given a new meaning for contemporary culture, one that made the cartoon 'fighting'. This use and re-shaping of elements of the cultural context is also

<sup>9</sup> Leary, p. 45.

<sup>10</sup> 'While the Unemployed Politicians of Paris Are', *The Times*, 19 August 1857, p. 9.

<sup>11</sup> 'The Humble Petition of the British Lion To Mr. Punch', *Punch*, v. 33.83, 15 August 1857, p. 63.

<sup>12</sup> Leary, p. 43.

<sup>13</sup> *Tippoo's Tiger*, Victoria and Albert Museum, made c. 1793.

<sup>14</sup> Mildred Archer, *Tippoo's Tiger* (London: Victoria and Albert Museum, 1959), p. 8.

<sup>15</sup> *Tippoo's Tiger*, p. 4, describes the contemporary complaints against the large number of daily visitors the Tiger received.

<sup>16</sup> *Tippoo's Tiger*, p. 11.

<sup>17</sup> 'Willing Hands for India', *Punch*, v. 33.85, 29 August 1857, pp. 88-89.

apparent in Katherine Bartrum's writing about the Lucknow events of the Indian mutiny. In the process that leads from personal diary to published account Bartrum framed her experience based on and for the British collective tradition. But her framing of the Lucknow events was not taken up by those outside the circle of Lucknow survivors, and it was not taken solely from discourse on the mutiny. *A Widow's Reminiscences of the Siege of Lucknow* appeared in 1858, and on top of the mutiny diary contained a Dedication, Preface, Bartrum's letters home, and the letters of her husband. As part of the publication process the diary went from a handwritten, increasingly messy account in a school exercise book with pages filled from top to bottom, to a blue octavo volume with a cover stamped with a geometrical pattern and carrying its title in gilt letters surrounded by gilt floral scrolls.<sup>18</sup> This in itself shows the attempt to contain the events of the mutiny.

The framing of Bartrum's Lucknow narrative continues with the dedication, where Bartrum offers her text to the sacred memory of her husband and child:

Sacred to the Memory of  
Robert Henry Bartrum;  
Bengal Medical Service,  
Born August 16th, 1831,  
Killed at the Relief of Lucknow,  
September 26th, 1857:  
Also of  
Robert Spilsbury Bartrum,  
Only Child of the Above  
Robert Henry Bartrum and Katherine Mary,  
His Wife,  
Born February 17th, 1856, Died February 11th 1858.

"Is it well with thy Husband?  
Is it well with thy Child?  
And she answered, it is well."  
2 Kings, iv. 26.<sup>19</sup>

The visual presentation and language of the dedication link it to Victorian expressions of Christian grief: it looks like and uses the language of contemporary gravestones, and the Biblical quotation reinforces this link to Christian expressions of grief. In the context of Lucknow, this is important, as Bartrum and all other survivors witnessed and had to come to terms with a lot of death, and the accounts of other women show that they all struggled to experience and present this in the Christian tradition. In her published account as well as the manuscript Bartrum records a large number of deaths and after each she attempts to provide a Christian framework by using Biblical language: 'I sat beside him and gazed upon his [her child's] happy countenance, I could not weep for my little lamb, safely in-gathered into that fold where he "shall hunger no more, neither thirst any more"'.<sup>20</sup> The letters of Reverend Polehampton written in Lucknow show that attempts to take comfort from belief in an afterlife were common at Lucknow: 'Poor Captain Wildig [...] died a few days after I wrote. [...] I have a good hope that he has entered into "rest"'.<sup>21</sup> Both writers are using the collective British narrative of Christian grief to come to terms with their own experiences. Bartrum also shows the attempt to maintain Christian rituals for making the events of the mutiny comprehensible through

<sup>18</sup> The volume, held by the British Library, is largely damaged, but the original cover has been preserved and still shows fine detail.

<sup>19</sup> Bartrum, dedication page.

<sup>20</sup> 'Manuscript Copy of a Diary Kept between 7 June 1857 and 12 February 1858 by Mrs Katherine Bartrum', London, British Library, India Office Library European Manuscript, Eur. MSS A.69, 1857-58 [in future references 'Manuscript Copy of a Diary'], and Bartrum, p. 71. See also pp. 27-40, pp. 52-53.

<sup>21</sup> Polehampton, Henry S., *A Memoir, Letters and Diary*, ed. by Edward Polehampton & Thomas Stedman Polehampton (London: Bentley, 1858), p. 213.

the burial of her child. After his 'good death' account, as part of which his peaceful sleeping looks, showing his acceptance by God, are recorded, the child is buried in a Christian ceremony at Calcutta.<sup>22</sup> Again, this framing of death in the Lucknow circle is shared by the Polehamptons; after the eldest child's death 'Emmie' Polehampton places flowers on his grave and arranges them in the shape of a cross.<sup>23</sup> The peaceful looks of the Bartrum child are a key part of the contemporary narrative of good, that is to say Christian, death. But Bartrum's repeated emphasis on Christian deaths also shows something more specific to the Lucknow context: to counter the increasing disruption of normal, British, life in Lucknow, the survivors created their own discourse on the siege in which Christian expressions of grief that were normative in the metropole played a key role.

The two extant contemporary reviews of Bartrum's text show that Lucknow narratives had a cultural afterlife in the collective discourse about the mutiny, but not along the same lines as Bartrum and other survivors entered it. Both reviews date to 1859, and are brief commentaries in the contemporary press. The first one, published in *Athenaeum* 2 April 1859, describes Bartrum's account as the saddest of 'all the tales of suffering and sorrow relating to the Indian revolt'.<sup>24</sup> This presents *A Widow's Reminiscences* as an account of victimhood. The second review echoes the sentiment, calling it a 'sad story, simply told'.<sup>25</sup> The authors of both emphasise female authorship, one stating that the text was written in 'simple but appropriate' language, which nevertheless did not take away from its 'pathos'.<sup>26</sup> This comment suggests that simplicity is something male reviewers associate with women who join the collective discourse on women's experiences in Lucknow, suggested by 'simply told' in the second review, too. Despite the criticism, these reviews show that public debate around the Bartrum narrative accepted women's contributions to it. But they also show that outside the circle of Lucknow survivors the Christian grief language was not continued, with the reviews instead returning to the collective trope of women as victims of the mutiny – as sufferers of sad tales.

Both artefacts show that the representation of women was an important element of collective conversation about the mutiny. In Tenniel's Large Cut, this representation is, on the first level, placing an unconscious or dead woman holding a child under the Bengal Tiger. And yet, the pairing cannot simply be explained based on already existing traditions. If the Cut had wanted simply to reverse the message of *Tippoo's Tiger*, it could have shown a British soldier attacked. Because it shows a woman and child instead, studies of women's roles in the Indian mutiny use it to represent British fears and anger after news of the Cawnpore massacre of women (and children) on 15 July 1857.<sup>27</sup> However, although the massacre had taken place by the time Tenniel's cartoon was published, news of it had not yet been confirmed in Britain: *The Times*, used by *Punch* as reference point for news of the mutiny, only published a detailed account of the massacre at Cawnpore on 29 August 1857, and referred only to the killing of those leaving Hugh Wheeler's entrenchment before 15 July.<sup>28</sup> Therefore, it is unlikely that Tenniel represented women as victims as a result of the events at Cawnpore, or that Cawnpore made the female form an easily understandable metaphor. And yet, the representation of women made the cartoon extremely powerful. In December 1857 it was reproduced in the pantomime of the Standard Theatre, as well as being used as a banner in the cartoon in *Punch*, as discussed above.<sup>29</sup>

The source of this element of the cartoon is the increasing amount of news of atrocities against women and children circulating in Britain from August 1857. Tenniel's work

<sup>22</sup> Bartrum, p. 72. On 'good death' see "'Suppressed Grief'", p. 367 and pp. 380-387.

<sup>23</sup> Polehampton, p. 195.

<sup>24</sup> 'A Widow's Reminiscences of the Siege of Lucknow. (Nisbet)', *Athenaeum*, no. 1640, 2 April 1859, p. 449.

<sup>25</sup> 'A Widow's Reminiscences of the Siege of Lucknow', *Tait's Edinburgh Magazine*, May 1859, p. 307.

<sup>26</sup> 'A Widow's Reminiscences', *Athenaeum*.

<sup>27</sup> See for example Morris, p. 63.

<sup>28</sup> 'The Mutinies in India', *The Times*, 29 August 1857, p. 8.

<sup>29</sup> Morris, p. 63, and 'Willing Hands for India'.

translates news into a metaphor for every fear associated with the mutiny, which shows how a political cartoon could construct, as well as rely on, collective discourse. Women participated in producing the news on which *Punch* could rely: on 7 August 1857, for instance, a woman wrote a letter to the editor of *The Times* discussing the destruction of British houses during the mutiny.<sup>30</sup> To modern readers this might not suggest an attack on women, but to contemporaries the home was the woman's domain, and, as Alison Blunt has illustrated, such attacks on British houses created fears for the 'defenceless white wife and mother'.<sup>31</sup> Katherine Bartrum's published diary shows that Anglo-Indian women published their male relatives' letters, too: her husband's correspondence with his mother, included in Bartrum's published account, indicate that vengeance after attacks on women was perhaps first thought of in India: 'All prisoners are deliberately shot or hung', and 'At first I loathed the idea, but now [...] I feel pleasure in seeing those creatures revenged upon'.<sup>32</sup> This letter is part of a much larger set written by men as eyewitnesses, also framing the British discourse through the mediation of newspapers such as *The Times*: 'our ladies have been dragged naked through the streets by the rabble of Delhi'.<sup>33</sup> This, then, is what made the placement of a woman (and child) as the victim of the Bengal Tiger topical and rallying in Tenniel's mutiny cartoon, but the cartoon also turned a very specific issue at the early stages of the mutiny into a symbol of British emotions throughout the conflict.

The way Tenniel's cartoon represents women removed the agency real women showed in writing letters and publishing diaries. This is evident in the visual clue of the woman's face being invisible. This taking away of agency from women also appears from the fate of Katherine Bartrum's published text, two years after Tenniel created his cartoon. Although she carefully edited it, updating its language and structure, her reviews dubbed her text 'simple', and focused on her 'sad story', as we have seen above. One of the reviewers even reduced the text simply to a 'record of the anxieties and sufferings of a mother and wife', reinforcing the role of woman as victim, and as general symbol, moving from one specific woman to universal womanhood.<sup>34</sup> This links Bartrum's fate directly to the kind of news that was present in the British press in 1857, and shows the lasting effect of the early representation of woman as the symbol of the victimisation of innocents. It also completely overlooks Bartrum's inclusion of letters in her published account that are not about her own fate, but about her husband.<sup>35</sup> Bartrum shows that she is conscious of her position as a woman publishing a previously private account in her Preface: 'It is not the wish of the writer of this little Volume, [...] to draw, [...] a picture of sights and scenes through which it has been her lot to pass'; she makes her account available 'at the desire of her friends'.<sup>36</sup> Other women writing about Lucknow also chose to use the request of friends as their justification for daring to publish their diaries. Georgina Harris wrote 'As no lady's diary has hitherto been given to the public, the friends of the writer have thought that it might interest others'.<sup>37</sup> Maria Germon's sister also felt the need to defend this diarist: 'You ask about the "Diary of Lucknow". My sister never intended publishing them [*sic*] – but she was so continually pressed to do so by a few friends'.<sup>38</sup> This framing device places agency for publishing with the 'friends'. Of course, even if there were real friends behind women's published diaries, the references to them also become linguistic tropes of the Lucknow discourse, constructing publication as an involuntary act.

<sup>30</sup> 'The Indian Mutinies', *The Times*, 7 August 1857, p. 12.

<sup>31</sup> Blunt, p. 407.

<sup>32</sup> Bartrum, p. 86.

<sup>33</sup> 'The Indian Mutinies', *The Times*, 8 August 1857, p. 12. See also Blunt, p. 408.

<sup>34</sup> 'A Widow's Reminiscences', *Tait's*.

<sup>35</sup> Bartrum, pp. 66-87.

<sup>36</sup> Bartrum, Preface.

<sup>37</sup> Georgina Harris, *A Lady's Diary of the Siege of Lucknow, Written for the Perusal of Friends* (London: Murray, 1858), p. iii.

<sup>38</sup> Letter of M. A. Garratt to her cousin, Maria Germon, *A Diary Kept by Mrs R. C. Germon, At Lucknow, Between the Months of May and December, 1857* (London: Waterlow and Sons, 1870) Gutenberg e-book, front endpaper of the original volume.

In reality, Bartrum's participation in the discourse was not involuntary, shown by the serious editing of her text. She added the framing devices of the dedication and Preface, filled in gaps in the story of the mutiny by adding letters, and edited her account to include judgement of certain events. The entry for 25 December stands out. In the manuscript, Bartrum writes 'How sad a Christmas for all. They will be thinking of me at home'.<sup>39</sup> In the published account, this becomes 'How they will be thinking of us at home to-day. It is such a sad Christmas: so different to all that have gone before'.<sup>40</sup> This implies interpretation of the events of Lucknow, and self-awareness of the author's experience as a 'sad story'. That we can tell changes were the result of a process of editing is vital as it shows that Bartrum was publishing in the context of an already suppressed mutiny, and as a survivor, naturally inclined to evaluate her experiences. But the sections she updated also show elements of women's victimhood, the kind of suffering the national discourse focused on in 1857, such as the lack of proper homes. She was influenced by and part of the collective discourse that had by now established its presentation of 'woman'.

Representing the Indian mutiny was a complicated matter in the wake of the conflict and for those who lived through it. There were emotional issues to portray and address; here, these were fears around atrocities against women and children, and grief over the death of loved ones. But meaning also had to be created, in a national and sectional context. In the case of Tenniel's cartoon this involved combining the visual traditions of *Punch* with newly emerging national preoccupations that did not yet have a definitive visual representation. For Katherine Bartrum, the attempt to create meaning was a more personal one, and was part of the shared experience of those survivors of Lucknow who witnessed the deaths of their loved ones. But Bartrum, as other Lucknow women (and men), and as Tenniel, also used Victorian British tradition to create meaning, relying on the language of Christian grief and death. National discourse did not adopt this framing of Lucknow by its survivors as it did the symbolic use of woman as mutiny victim. Nevertheless, Bartrum was influenced by the national discourse, editing into her account the public perception of women in India as victims. Her editorial work on her diary also shows that women could have agency in the process of representing the mutiny, although, as in 1857 so in 1858-59 that agency was contained by male commentary.

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<sup>39</sup> 'Manuscript Copy of a Diary'.

<sup>40</sup> Bartrum, p. 62.

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