

Martyr or Murderer: Mewa Singh and the Assassination of William C. Hopkinson

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This paper investigates the role of subjectivity in historical writing by highlighting the ambiguities, lacunae, and incommensurable accounts found in the archival records of a case from early twentieth-century British Columbia: the assassination of immigration agent William C. Hopkinson by Sikh Vancouverite Mewa Singh in the aftermath of the Komagata Maru incident of 1914. Emerging from within a period of extreme anti-Asian agitation in British Columbia, the archival documents surrounding Hopkinson's assassination are racially charged and bifurcated along the lines of the concurrent antagonism between the Sikh community and government officials in Vancouver. Through these documents, Mewa Singh can be cast as either a cold-blooded murderer or a martyr standing up for the dignity of his community. As an exercise in critical reflexivity, this paper holds open a space for the ambiguity of the past and argues for the social significance of historians as self-aware storytellers and meaning-makers.

Abbreviations Used:

BCA (BC Archives)

CRIB (Central Registry of the Immigration Branch)

CVA (City of Vancouver Archives)

HHSFC (Henry Herbert Steven Fonds Collection)

KMF (Komagata Maru File)

LAC (Library and Archives Canada)

HJKMRC (Hugh Johnston Komagata Maru Research Collection)

SFUUC (Simon Fraser University Digitized Collections)

Introduction

Just after ten o'clock on the morning of October 21, 1914, Bhai Mewa Singh Lopoke Ji¹ entered the Vancouver courthouse at 800

¹ Regarding Sikh names, Khalsa Sikhs are required to take the last name Singh, if male, and Kaur, if female. For further specification, an individual's place of birth is sometimes listed following Singh/Kaur. Bhai, meaning "brother," often occurs in front of the name to indicate a high level of participation in the gurdwara (a Sikh temple). Ji is an honorific.

Hornby Street and fatally shot immigration official William C. Hopkinson. Hopkinson's death was the apex in a series of clashes between the authorities, their informants, and Vancouver's Sikh community following the forced departure of the *Komagata Maru*—a vessel carrying 356 British subjects who were denied immigration to Canada on the grounds of their racialized identity as South Asians. There are many gaps in the history of these clashes due to both the conflicting interpretations found within racially-charged primary sources and a lack of documentation regarding the covert actions behind these clashes. Many of the historians who have approached the topic have felt the need to fill in these gaps, revealing a collective discomfort with historical ambiguity.² Inevitably, their personal backgrounds and biases shape the history they choose to write.³

This article resists a conclusive narrative, focusing instead on the conflicting versions of the event provided in both primary sources and the existing body of historical writing about the Sikh experience in early twentieth-century British Columbia. The court transcript from Mewa Singh's trial has been an indispensable resource. Mewa's written statement will be contrasted with contemporary news reports, the testimony of witnesses, and several letters between Canadian authorities. By bringing attention to these incommensurable accounts, I attempt to sit with the ambiguity of the events rather than banish it through narrative imposition. It is my ambition to generate a history that compels

² For examples, see Hugh J. M. Johnston, "Assassination," in *The Voyage of the Komagata Maru: The Sikh Challenge to Canada's Colour Bar* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2014), 189–207,

<http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/uvic/detail.action?docID=3412927>; Norman Buchignani, Doreen M. Indra, and Ram Srivastava, *Continuous Journey: A Social History of South Asians in Canada* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1985), 58–63; and Richard J. Popplewell, "North America, 1905–14," in *Intelligence and Imperial Defence: British Intelligence and the Defence of the Indian Empire, 1904–1924* (Portland, OR: Frank Cass, 1995), 147–64.

³ In this regard, I feel it is pertinent to disclose some basic information about myself in order to allow the reader to gauge how I might approach this topic. I am a settler of British decent born on the territories of the Haudenosaunee and the Mississaugas of New Credit. I have admittedly socialist tendencies and a penchant for decolonization politics. I was baptized Protestant but have adopted an agnostic view of religion. I am from a working-class background and am of the first generation in my family to attend university. These various facets of my identity shape my worldview and inevitably influence my choice in topic for historical research and the stories I tell.

critical thinking on the part of its readers, opening more doors than it closes and revealing the subjective nature of all historiographical practice.

It All Began With a—Bang!

On the day of Mewa Singh's trial, October 30, 1914, the courtroom was tightly packed. According to one report, all seats were taken well before the proceedings commenced, and as many as two thousand would-be spectators had to be turned away.⁴ Just four South Asians were permitted in the crowded courtroom—and only after submitting to a thorough search by court security.⁵ Another reporter declared that no South Asians were present.⁶ Those in attendance heard the testimonies of several witnesses to the crime, which had been committed only nine days before in the corridor outside the same courtroom. Like Hopkinson, most of the witnesses had been at the courthouse on the day of the murder to testify at the trial of Bela Singh, a Sikh with whom Mewa was well acquainted.

W. A. Campbell, who had accompanied his brother-in-law to the courthouse for an unrelated hearing that morning, was sitting in the witness room when the shooting occurred. His testimony recounts the assassination as follows: Hopkinson had been standing to one side of the witness room entrance when Campbell saw Mewa Singh walking down the corridor with his hands in his pockets. As Mewa reached Hopkinson, he drew two pistols and fired “a shot or two.” Hopkinson stepped out into the corridor and began to grapple with Mewa. A third shot brought Hopkinson to his knees. From there, Campbell said, Hopkinson attempted to get up, grabbing at Mewa's thighs before the latter brought the butt of one pistol down upon Hopkinson's head. At this point, Mewa

⁴ *Vancouver World*, “Murderer of Inspector Found Guilty,” 29 Oct 1914, LAC, HJKMRC, SFUDC, <http://digital.lib.sfu.ca/km-5116/newsclipping-vancouver-world-muder-inspector-found-guilty>.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Sun*, “Mewa Singh Says Crime Justifiable,” Oct 1914, BCA, CRIB, GR-1547.60, vol. 561, file 808722, mflm. B01235, part 2.

used the second pistol to fire several more shots into Hopkinson, who had collapsed on the floor.⁷

Paul Caldwell, a mechanic and friend of the deceased, was standing next to Hopkinson that morning but had been looking in the opposite direction when he heard gun shots. Turning around, he saw Mewa Singh firing directly into Hopkinson.⁸ One newspaper reported that Caldwell had seen Mewa jumping around like a “fiend” while shooting Hopkinson; however, this detail is not present in Caldwell’s testimony.⁹ The next time Caldwell saw his friend, Hopkinson was dead. The post-mortem performed that afternoon revealed bullet wounds to Hopkinson’s lower left thigh, the left side of his back, and two fatal shots that penetrated his right lung and heart.¹⁰

James McCann, the head janitor at the courthouse, had been working elsewhere in the building when he heard the gunshots. As he headed in the direction of the commotion, McCann saw “a number of Hindus” coming down the steps and shouted for someone to arrest them.¹¹ The newspapers made much of this group of men fleeing the gunshots. While many others had also fled from the danger, the press and McCann declared these particular men suspicious, with repeated emphasis placed on their ethnicity.¹² As McCann entered the corridor he saw “a Hindoo with two revolvers” standing over the body. As McCann approached, he noted that the assailant appeared “dazed” but quickly

⁷ Rex v Mewa Singh, 30 Oct 1914, In the court of Oyer & Terminer & General Gaol Delivery, Vancouver Fall Assizes, Vancouver, BC [proceedings at trial], *Komagata Maru: Continuing the Journey*, 1–4, <http://komagatamarujourney.ca/node/10326>.

⁸ Rex v Mewa Singh, 30 Oct 1914, 12–13.

⁹ “Jury Charges Hopkinson’s Death to Mewa,” 23 Oct 1914 [unidentified news clipping], CVA, HHSFC, SFUDC, <http://digital.lib.sfu.ca/km-10797/newsclippings-lawyer-warned-he-be-killed-jury-charges-hopkinsons-death-mewa>.

¹⁰ Rex v Mewa Singh, 30 Oct 1914, 9–11.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 5.

¹² *Express* (Woodstock, ON), “Immigration Agent Shot Dead by Hindu,” 29 Oct 1914, BCA, CRIB, GR-1547.60, vol. 561, file 808722, mflm. B01235, part 2; *Vancouver World*, “Murderer of Inspector Found Guilty,” 29 Oct 1914; *Province*, “W.C. Hopkinson was Killed by Hindu this Morning,” 21 Oct 1914, LAC, HJCMRC, SFUDC, <http://digital.lib.sfu.ca/km-5107/newsclipping-vancouver-daily-province-w-c-hopkinson-was-killed-hindu-morning>; *Vancouver World*, “Inspector Hopkinson Shot Dead in Court House Corridor by Hindoo,” 21 Oct 1914, LAC, HJCMRC, SFUDC, <http://digital.lib.sfu.ca/km-5383/newsclipping-vancouver-world-inspector-hopkinson-shot-dead-court-house-corridor-hindoo>.

pointed a gun at McCann's chest when the latter took hold of him. According to McCann, he immediately knocked one pistol out of Mewa's hand. At this point, Mewa surrendered and handed McCann the other gun, saying, "I shoot, I go to station."¹³

McCann's testimony admits that Mewa was stunned and gave himself over to the authorities, however, Mewa's demeanor, words, and actions after shooting Hopkinson vary widely in reports of the murder. Some claimed that Mewa struggled intensely with McCann to flee after the shooting.¹⁴ Vancouver's *Daily Province* reported that the "assassin attempted to escape but he, as well as other Hindus in the corridor, were arrested." Mewa is described as struggling and attempting to kill McCann, shouting: "I shoot, I don't care."¹⁵ Another article in *Vancouver World* reported that "the murderer and his companions immediately attempted to rush from the building," and that when McCann confronted him, Mewa tried to pull the trigger but upon realizing the "fruitless nature of the struggle, said 'All right, I go with you'."¹⁶ More sympathetic accounts wrote that Mewa dropped his weapons and surrendered immediately after the shooting.¹⁷

The disparity between these different accounts of the shooting were not interrogated during Mewa's trial. After hearing the testimonies of five witnesses, the Crown prosecutor observed that the defence had neglected to cross-examine any of the witnesses. Mewa Singh's lawyer, E. M. N. Woods, explained to the court that his client had instructed him that, in lieu of a defence, Woods should read a statement prepared by Mewa. Reporters described Mewa's statement as "rambling";¹⁸ however, it contains a wealth of valuable information regarding the unorthodox methods employed by Hopkinson and his team of informers.

¹³ Rex v Mewa Singh, 30 Oct 1914, 6.

¹⁴ *Express*, "Immigration Agent Shot Dead by Hindu," 29 Oct 1914; M. R. J. Reid to W. D. Scott, 22 Oct 1914, BCA, CRIB, GR-1547.60, vol. 561, file 808722, mflm. B01235, part 2.

¹⁵ *Province*, "W.C. Hopkinson was Killed by Hindu this Morning," 21 Oct 1914.

¹⁶ *Vancouver World*, "Inspector Hopkinson Shot Dead," 21 Oct 1914.

¹⁷ Satnam Singh Sangra, "Shaheed Bhai Mewa Singh," *Khalsa Diwan Society Vancouver*, <http://kdsross.com/about/history/shaheed-bhai-mewa-singh/>;
Sohan Singh Pooni, "Bhai Mewa Singh Lopoke: The Immortal Martyr of Canada," *Global Sikh Studies*, <http://www.globalsikhstudies.net/pdf/stockeng/sohan1.pdf>.

¹⁸ *Vancouver World*, "Murderer of Inspector Found Guilty," 29 Oct 1914.

Surveillance and Intimidation

Immigration inspector and intelligence agent Charles W. Hopkinson was a well-known and controversial figure in Vancouver during this period. Speaking of Hopkinson after his death, contemporary newspapers and officials stated that he was born in London, omitting the detail that his mother was Indian and of the Brahmin caste.¹⁹ Recent biographies cite his actual birthplace as Allahabad, attributing the confusion to Hopkinson's wilful denial of his Anglo-Indian heritage.²⁰ Hopkinson's British father had been killed in Kabul while acting as an escort to Sir Pierre Louis Napoleon Cavagnari, a military administrator for the British East India Company.²¹ Shortly after his arrival in Canada, Hopkinson was appointed to Vancouver's Immigration Branch in 1909. Around the same time, he was recruited by the RCMP for the special commission of surveilling South Asian immigrants.²² It was believed that anti-British radicals of the Ghadar Party had infiltrated and corrupted the Sikhs of Vancouver.²³

In his statement, Mewa professed that most of the meetings held at the gurdwara concerned the Sikh community's frustration with racist immigration policies.²⁴ At that time, the wives and children of South Asian immigrants were being refused entry to Canada due to race-based exclusion laws. On April 10, 1908, Canada's *Immigration Act* had been amended to include a continuous passage clause, barring entry to "any immigrants who have come to Canada otherwise than by continuous journey from the country of which they are natives or citizens."²⁵ The amendment was introduced to placate the panic of white British

¹⁹ *Province*, "W.C. Hopkinson was Killed by Hindu this Morning," 21 Oct 1914.

²⁰ "Hopkinson, William Charles (1880–1914)," *Komagata Maru: Continuing the Journey*, <http://komagatamarujourney.ca/node/14691>.

²¹ Popplewell, "North America, 1905–14," 151.

²² Popplewell, "North America, 1905–14," 151; "Hopkinson, William Charles (1880–1914)."

²³ The Ghadar Party was an anticolonial revolutionary organization of the Indian independence movement, active from 1913 to 1948.

²⁴ *Rex v Mewa Singh*, 30 Oct 1914, 25.

²⁵ Canada, Act to Amend the Immigration Act, *Statutes of Canada* 1908, ch. 33, p. 357, LAC, accessed via *Canadian Museum of Immigration at Pier 21*, <https://pier21.ca/research/immigration-history/continuous-journey-regulation-1908>.

Columbians over what was frequently referred to in contemporary reports as the “Asian invasion” (an increase in South Asian immigrants to the province between 1906 and 1908).²⁶ With no direct sailings available from India to Canada, the amendment deprived South Asian British subjects of their right to free travel throughout the British Empire.²⁷ Paired with Hopkinson’s surveillance, the continuous journey clause incensed the Sikh’s of Vancouver and generated an atmosphere of increasing antagonism between the Immigration Branch and the Sikh community.

By 1914, Hopkinson had recruited several informers from within Vancouver’s South Asian community and extended his surveillance network down the coast into the United States.²⁸ As a result of Hopkinson’s efforts, the Sikh community had become split into two factions, with one side working with the immigration officials to spy on the other. Mewa’s testimony reveals that Hopkinson and his men employed dubious tactics to incriminate their targets: forging letters, bribing officials, and issuing death threats to those who resisted their plots.²⁹ The press and Hopkinson’s consorts at the Immigration Branch praised his dedication to his work. One article described him as fearless, “one of the few men in Vancouver who understand the character of the East Indian people and knew how they should be handled.” The article continues, “his death undoubtedly will confirm the people of British Columbia in their determination to end the immigration of these people to this country.”³⁰ This quote reveals the extent to which Hopkinson’s work supported and was, in turn, emboldened by the anti-Asian sentiment that dominated Vancouver during this period.³¹

²⁶ Reg Whitaker, Gregory S. Kealey, and Andrew Parnaby, “You Drive Us Hindus out of Canada and We Will Drive Every White Man out of India!” in *Secret Service: Political Policing in Canada from the Fenians to Fortress America* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2012), 39–41.

²⁷ Buchignani, Indra, and Srivastava, *Continuous Journey*, 26–32.

²⁸ Popplewell, “North America, 1905–13,” 153.

²⁹ *Rex v Mewa Singh*, 30 Oct 1914, 16–25.

³⁰ *Vancouver World*, “Inspector Hopkinson Shot Dead,” 21 Oct 1914.

³¹ For a discussion of Vancouver’s racially charged atmosphere in the early twentieth century, see Erika Lee, “Hemispheric Orientalism and the 1907 Pacific Coast Race Riots,” *Amerasia Journal* 33, no. 2 (2007): 19–47, <https://doi.org/10.17953/amer.33.2.y263745731125524>; and Gillian Creese,

The judges and juries of British Columbia's courts were far from immune to this pervasive racism. Moreover, Hopkinson appears to have had a suspicious degree of influence over the outcomes of any trials concerning his friends and enemies. "I can hardly recall a case, whether civil or criminal, in which I did not find Mr. Hopkinson and Mr. Reid taking part on the opposite side," reflected Woods.³² In response to this suspected corruption, Mewa Singh lost faith in the court's ability to serve justice and resolved to take matters into his own hands.³³ In the statement read at his trial, Mewa outlined the series of events leading up to the assassination. It was his conviction that the deadly vendettas that had been playing out on the streets of Vancouver could be traced back to the Immigration Branch's favouritism and patronage.³⁴ Association with Hopkinson granted virtual legal immunity and special privileges. In return, Hopkinson furthered his surveillance activities by extracting favours from his those he protected.³⁵ Mewa had nearly been taken in by this mechanism himself.

On July 16, 1914, Mewa Singh had crossed the Canada-United States border alongside Balwant Singh Khurdpur, Bhag Singh Bhikiwind, and Harnam Singh Kahri Sahri. Once in the United States, they purchased several firearms from a hardware store in Sumas, Washington. Depending on the source, this was either for their personal use or for the passengers of the *Komagata Maru* to use in revolt against the British.³⁶ Mewa Singh was arrested while trying to re-enter Canada the following day and was found to be concealing a pistol and several

"Exclusion or Solidarity? Vancouver Workers Confront the 'Oriental Problem'," *BC Studies*, no. 80 (Winter 1988–89): 24–51, <https://doi.org/10.14288/bcs.v0i80.1295>.

³² E. M. N. Woods to C. J. Doherty, 24 Dec 1914, LAC, HJKMRC, RG13, vol. 1467, SFUDC, <http://digital.lib.sfu.ca/km-4801/e-m-n-woods-lawyer-woods-downie-counsel-mewa-singh-charles-j-doherty-minister-justice-page-1>.

³³ *Rex v Mewa Singh*, 30 Oct 1914, 24–25.

³⁴ E. M. N. Woods to C. J. Doherty, 24 Dec 1914.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ M. R. J. Reid to W. D. Scott, 22 Oct 1914; "Serious Charge Against Hindus," 23 Oct 1914 [unidentified news clipping], CVA, HHSFC, SFUDC, <http://digital.lib.sfu.ca/km-10803/newsclippings-serious-charge-against-hindus-charge-murder-laid-against-hindu-hindu-sues>; "Statement of Mewa Singh, son of Nand Singh, Village of Lopoke, District of Amritsar, India," Aug 1914, CVA, HHSFC, SFUDC, <http://digital.lib.sfu.ca/km-5209/statement-mewa-singh-son-nand-singh-village-lopoke-district-amritsar-india-page-1>.

rounds of ammunition.³⁷ In Mewa's account of what transpired, Hopkinson, Bela Singh (Hopkinson's foremost informant), and Malcolm Reid (the head of the Vancouver Immigration Branch) explained that he could either go to jail for several years or pay a small fee of fifty dollars. The choice was his conditionally: "I will get you off free if you say that Bhag Singh, Balwant Singh, and Harnam [Singh Kahri Sahri] have given you these pistols to give to [Husain] Rahim," Hopkinson allegedly offered.³⁸ Hopkinson had been eager to apprehend these members of the Shore Committee, a group that had been advocating on behalf of the passengers stranded for two months aboard the *Komagata Maru* since it arrived in Vancouver's harbour on May 23 to challenge the continuous journey regulation.

It is clear from the letters between authorities that Hopkinson played some part in securing Mewa's acquittal; Mewa's reaction to the proposal, however, remains unclear.³⁹ By some accounts, Mewa betrayed his comrades and expressed his immense gratitude to Hopkinson for the intervention.⁴⁰ According to Mewa, he refused to comply, insinuating that the unsigned statement presented by Hopkinson and Reid to their superiors was a fabrication.⁴¹ In a letter to W. D. Scott, the Superintendent of Immigration, Reid confessed that "Mewa Singh had intimated he would be willing to tell a correct story, which we thought might possibly involve some of the local agitators among the Hindus. The story as given is not entirely satisfactory . . . I think it just probable that he may give us still further information."⁴² This was not to be Mewa's last encounter with the immigration authorities.

An article published just after Hopkinson's assassination claimed that "a plot has been uncovered through the discovery of a letter on the person of a Hindu which had in its ramifications the removal of

³⁷ M. R. J. Reid to W. D. Scott, 22 Oct 1914.

³⁸ Rex v Mewa Singh, 30 Oct 1914, 18.

³⁹ E. B. Robertson to C. J. Doherty, 4 Jan 1915, BCA, CRIB, GR-1547.60, vol. 561, file 808722, mflm. B01235, part 2; M. R. J. Reid to W. D. Scott, 22 Oct 1914.

⁴⁰ E. B. Robertson to C. J. Doherty, 4 Jan 1915; *Province*, "W.C. Hopkinson was Killed by Hindu this Morning," 21 Oct 1914.

⁴¹ Rex v Mewa Singh, 30 Oct 1914, 18–21; "Statement of Mewa Singh," Aug 1914.

⁴² M. R. J. Reid to W. D. Scott, 8 Aug 1914, CVA, HHSFC, KMF, p. 647, SFUDC, <http://digital.lib.sfu.ca/km-10771/copy-letter-reid-w-d-scott-re-hindus-detained-sumas-and-enclosing-statement-mewa-singh>.

not only inspector Hopkinson, but others as well, including several Sikhs, who were believed to have told the authorities of seditious meetings and doctrines.”⁴³ The Sikhs referred to here are Arjan Singh and Harnam Singh Furio, both informers to Hopkinson that had been killed in the months preceding the assassination. On August 31, Harnam’s body was found along the train tracks in the Kitsilano area with his throat slit and a turban wrapped around his feet.⁴⁴ Less than a week later, Arjan died of a bullet wound to his neck after being shot by Ghadarite Ram Singh in what the jury ruled to be an accident.⁴⁵ The media and Canadian authorities seized these two deaths as proof that Hopkinson and his supporters were marked men in the books of an extremist Sikh faction seeking retribution for the *Komagata Maru* incident.⁴⁶

The memorial ceremony for Arjan Singh was held at the local gurdwara on September 5, 1914. Shortly after the service began, Bela Singh arrived and began shooting at the mourners, fatally wounding Bhai Bhag Singh Bhikiwind and Bhai Battan Singh. This act of violence is interpreted multifariously in the sources. One newspaper reported that Bela simply pointed “his revolver at certain other Hindus in the auditorium” and that the charge of murder was a “conspiracy to have Bela Singh arrested and possibly discredited by his employers.”⁴⁷ In the version of events provided by all of the wounded men, Bela began shooting unprovoked.⁴⁸ Bela’s claim that he was acting in self-defence was eventually accepted by the jury. His acquittal shocked many in the Sikh community. Both Mewa Singh and his lawyer, Woods, reported that when asked by the police constable about his motives for killing Bhag and Battan, Bela Singh replied: “Hopkinson and Reid, they know,

⁴³ “Three More Hindus,” 24 Oct 1914 [unidentified news clipping], CVA, HHSFC, SFUDC, <http://digital.lib.sfu.ca/km-10803/newsclippings-serious-charge-against-hindus-charge-murder-laid-against-hindu-hindu-sues>; In my research I failed to come across any evidence of such a letter existing.

⁴⁴ Johnston, “Assassination,” 126.

⁴⁵ “Ram Singh Held Guilty by Jury,” Sep 1914 [unidentified news clipping], CVA, HHSFC, SFUDC, <http://digital.lib.sfu.ca/km-10809/newsclippings-jagat-singh-pay-death-penalty-mewa-singh-be-tried-friday-ram-singh-held>.

⁴⁶ *Citizen*, “Hindu Question,” 23 Oct 1914.

⁴⁷ “Serious Charge Against Hindus,” 23 Oct 1914.

⁴⁸ Johnston, “Assassination.” 194–95.

go and ask them.”⁴⁹ Woods also mentioned that the deceased men were shot in the back and were men who had openly disapproved of the methods of Bela and Hopkinson.⁵⁰

Mewa Singh was present during the shooting at the gurdwara. In his statement, Mewa identified this as the tipping point that led to his decision to remove Hopkinson. Such a desecration of sacred space and killing of innocents enraged Mewa. To add insult to injury, Hopkinson had approached Mewa after the shooting and ordered him to give testimony favorable to Bela as payment for Hopkinson’s intervention on Mewa’s behalf during the pistol-smuggling fiasco. Mewa claimed to have rebuffed repeated attempts by Hopkinson and his informant Baboo Singh Lithur to pressure Mewa into lying for Bela’s benefit, at which point his life was threatened.⁵¹

“A Man of High Ideals”

Bhai Mewa Singh was born in 1880 in Lopoke, a village in the Amritsar district of Punjab. He migrated to Canada in 1906 along with a few thousand other Punjabi Sikhs in pursuit of work. Taking a job at the Fraser Mills in New Westminster, Mewa spent his spare time acting as a Granthi at the Vancouver gurdwara.⁵² Some contemporary accounts describe Mewa as “a very devout man [who] never attended any political meetings . . . [and] would only go to the temple to pray”⁵³ and as a “religious man and a man of high ideals . . . who had the highest conception with regard to the sacredness of the precincts of the Sikh Temple.”⁵⁴ By contrast, the immigration agents painted him as a man of

⁴⁹ E. M. N. Woods to C. J. Doherty, 24 Dec 1914; Rex v Mewa Singh, 30 Oct 1914, 16.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Rex v Mewa Singh, 30 Oct 1914, 24.

⁵² Pooni, “Bhai Mewa Singh Lopoke,” 1–2; Verne A. Dusenbery, “On the Moral Sensitivities of Sikhs in North America,” in *Divine Passions: The Social Construction of Emotion in India*, ed. Owen M. Lynch (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 240, <http://ark.cdlib.org/ark:/13030/ft296nb18c/>; In several sources Granthi is translated as “priest,” which does not accurately represent the less authoritative role of Granthi, a ceremonial reader of the Guru Granth Sahib at the gurdwara. The intentional lack of priestly authority in the gurdwara is a definitive element of the Sikh religion.

⁵³ *Province* (Vancouver), “Sohan Lal Says He is a Victim,” 4 Dec 1914, BCA, CRIB, GR-1547.60, vol. 561, file 808722, mflm. B01235, part 2.

⁵⁴ E. M. N. Woods to C. J. Doherty, 24 Dec 1914.

so weak a mind that he was susceptible to influence from anyone around him.⁵⁵

During his first years in Canada, Mewa would have witnessed severe anti-Asian discrimination. This included the 1906 race riots in Vancouver, the 1907 disenfranchisement of South Asians, and the implementation of the “continuous journey” order-in-council.⁵⁶ During the *Komagata Maru* incident of 1914, Mewa had been a member of the Shore Committee, providing support to the passengers.⁵⁷

Mewa’s statement at his trial reveals that he had become fixated on the disgrace heaped upon him and his community through the underhanded methods wielded by Hopkinson and his men:

All night long it haunted me that here I am, a man that says my prayers, and those men harass me like this with these wrong statements and trying to disgrace me. . . . these people have disgraced us altogether; they think we are nothing. Sikhs are nothing; there is nothing left of us, we are walked on.⁵⁸

As a devout Sikh, Mewa found grievous complaint with Hopkinson’s double-dealing; he called the agent a “blood sucker” and accused him of taking bribes and cheating both the government and the Sikhs.⁵⁹ His repulsion to Hopkinson’s behavior was inspired by one of the main tenets of Sikhism: one’s living should be earned through honest means.⁶⁰ Mewa felt justified in his actions: “I know my prayers have been accepted, and God knows between the right and the wrong. In our prayers it says that we must see right done. We cannot shut our eyes and see wrong done.”⁶¹ Sikhism has a long tradition of martyrs who have followed Guru Gobind Singh’s instruction to “uphold the right in every place, to destroy sin and evil,” and that “when all other means have

⁵⁵ E. B. Robertson to C. J. Doherty, 4 Jan 1915.

⁵⁶ Buchignani, Indra, and Srivastava, *Continuous Journey*, 26, 32.

⁵⁷ For an extensive study of this event, see Johnston, *The Voyage of the Komagata Maru*.

⁵⁸ Rex v Mewa Singh, 30 Oct 1914, 22–24.

⁵⁹ Rex v Mewa Singh, 30 Oct 1914, 24.

⁶⁰ Gurcharn S. Basran and B. Singh Bolaria, *The Sikhs in Canada: Migration, Race, Class, and Gender* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2003), 23.

⁶¹ Rex v Mewa Singh, 30 Oct 1914, 17.

failed, it is permissible to draw the sword.”⁶² Mewa Singh decided to kill Hopkinson and, in so doing, sacrifice his own life to stop the injustice and restore honour to himself and his community.⁶³

Heads Will Roll

After hearing Mewa’s statement, the jury deliberated for less than ten minutes and returned with a guilty verdict. Unaffected by Mewa’s words, they proceeded to recommend “that both Dominion and provincial authorities formulate some plan for the better protection of those brave officers whose duties call upon them to risk their persons in defence of law and order. We further recommend that special attention be paid to watching Hindoos and other foreigners.”⁶⁴ The jury’s sentiments reflected those found in the press. Hopkinson’s death had incited a wave of intensified hatred and suspicion against all South Asians in Vancouver.⁶⁵ The most extreme expression of this sentiment came from Conservative parliamentarian H. H. Stevens. In a rushed telegram to Prime Minister Robert Borden on the day of the murder, Stevens suggested that “local officers be instructed to arrest and deport every Hindu known to be connection with recent meeting Sikh temple.”⁶⁶ The calls for vigilance and retribution were endorsed by the Vancouver’s mayor, Truman S. Baxter. Upon hearing of Hopkinson’s death, Baxter is reported to have exclaimed, “This thing must stop . . . it is bad enough having these Hindus kill their fellow countrymen but when they shoot our citizens, it has come to the limit of our endurance.”⁶⁷ In the aftermath of the shooting, the authorities detained

⁶² A. H. Burton, “Free Translation From the 'Khalsa Shancher' of Stockton, California,” Feb 1915, LAC, HJKMRC, SFUDC, <http://digital.lib.sfu.ca/km-4825/free-translation-khalsa-shancher-stockton-california-mr-h-burton-h-burton-interpretor-copy>;

Basran and Bolaria, *The Sikhs in Canada*, 18–19.

⁶³ See *Rex v Mewa Singh*, 30 Oct 1914, 26.

⁶⁴ “Jury Charges Hopkinson's Death to Mewa,” 23 Oct 1914.

⁶⁵ This is evident from the racially-charged and fear-mongering rhetoric found throughout the majority of news articles published in the aftermath of the assassination, as cited in the bibliography below.

⁶⁶ H. H. Stevens to R. Borden, 21 Oct 1914, BCA, CRIB, GR-1547.60, vol. 561, file 808722, mflm. B01235, part 2.

⁶⁷ “Serious Charge Against Hindus,” 23 Oct 1914.

any South Asians they deemed suspicious and conducted mass interrogations and searches.⁶⁸

Although Mewa declared that he had acted on his own, neither the press, the public, nor the immigration officials could accept that Hopkinson's death was not part of a larger anticolonial conspiracy by the Ghadarites.⁶⁹ As one paper reported, "it is the opinion of the police that the murder of inspector Hopkinson is the outcome of a meeting of a certain element of Hindoos held yesterday or the day before . . . [where] a drawing took place and the fateful lot fell to the murderer."⁷⁰ The assumed leaders of the anticolonial faction were quickly arrested and charged with inciting the murder. Husain Rahim, Sohan Lal Aulakh, Balwant Singh Khurdpur, and Kartar Singh Chand Nawan were put on trial as the masterminds behind the assassination.⁷¹ These four men had also been members of the Shore Committee during the *Komagata Maru* incident. All the accused were acquitted due to lack of evidence.⁷²

Vancouver's press appears to have been appalled and confused by Mewa's apparent peace of mind after the murder. His composure was interpreted as proof of either insanity or that he was nothing more than a cold-blooded murderer: "Pacing up and down his cell with a cynical smile on his face, the murderer is apparently as happy as can be."⁷³ In the weeks preceding his execution, Mewa Singh's lawyer defied his wishes and wrote in desperation to Charles J. Doherty, the Minister of Justice, to request an inquiry into his client's mental health. He felt that Mewa's "pure religious fanaticism" had inspired him to feel righteous in killing Hopkinson. As a result of this petition from Woods, the superintendent of the New Westminster Insane Asylum conducted an inquiry on January 3. Superintendent J. G. Mackay concluded in his

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Rex v Mewa Singh, 30 Oct 1914, 25; E. B. Robertson to C. J. Doherty, 4 Jan 1915; M. R. J. Reid to W. D. Scott, 22 Oct 1914; *Saturday Sunset*, "Death of Officer and its Causes," 23 Oct 1914.

⁷⁰ *Vancouver World*, "Inspector Hopkinson Shot Dead," 21 Oct 1914.

⁷¹ "Serious Charge Against Hindus," 23 Oct 1914; *Province* (Vancouver), "Rahim Suggested the Murders Say Witnesses," n.d., BCA, CRIB, GR-1547.60, vol. 561, file 808722, mflm. B01235, part 2.

⁷² W. D. Scott to W. W. Cory, 7 Dec 1914, BCA, CRIB, GR-1547.60, vol. 561, file 808722, mflm. B01235, part 2.

⁷³ M. R. J. Reid to W. D. Scott, 22 Oct 1914; *Vancouver World*, "Inspector Hopkinson Shot Dead," 21 Oct 1914.

letter to Doherty that, “although a devoted follower of his own creed,” Mewa Singh was very much of sound mind.⁷⁴

According to all accounts, Mewa Singh had appeared indifferent upon hearing Justice Morrison announce the death sentence. On January 11, 1915, Mewa Singh was taken from his cell at the New Westminster jail and hanged for his crime.⁷⁵ Before ascending the scaffold, Mewa is reported to have avowed: “I cheerfully face that death, of which the world is afraid. By death do we come to a knowledge of God.”⁷⁶ Several hundred Sikhs attended the execution. After receiving Mewa’s body, those present took part in a funeral procession to the site of his cremation near Fraser Mills.⁷⁷ In the Sikh community, Mewa Singh has earned the title of *Shaheed*, martyr; his death continues to be commemorated each year in gurdwaras along the Pacific coast.⁷⁸

Concluding Remarks

The racial tensions between Sikh and white Vancouverites during the early twentieth century is embodied by the ambiguous historical figure of Bhai Mewa Singh Lopoke Ji. This paper has attempted to engage the reader in a joint endeavour to tease apart the surface details of Hopkinson’s assassination, revealing the connections to broader mechanisms of British colonialism and race-relations in British Columbia’s early history. In so doing, we find that the accounts of Mewa Singh’s character, his assassination of William C. Hopkinson, and the events leading up to that day vary widely from source to source, presenting a challenge to any historian looking to extract the so-called

⁷⁴ C. J. Doherty to Superintendent, Insane Asylum, New Westminster, 3 Jan 1915. [telegram] LAC, HJKMRC, RG13, vol. 1467, SFUDC, <http://digital.lib.sfu.ca/km-10353/charles-j-doherty-minister-justice-superintendent-insane-asylum-new-westminster-re-mental>; J. G. Mackay to C. J. Doherty, 5 Jan 1915, [telegram] LAC, HJKMRC, RG13, vol. 1467, SFUDC, <http://digital.lib.sfu.ca/km-10354/j-g-mackay-acting-superintendent-insane-asylum-new-westminster-charles-j-doherty-minister>.

⁷⁵ E. M. N. Woods to C. J. Doherty, 24 Dec 1914.

⁷⁶ Burton, “Free Translation From the 'Khalsa Shancher'.”

⁷⁷ Melanie Hardbattle, “Mewa Singh’s Funeral 1915,” *Asian Pacific Post*, 22 Apr 2014, <http://www.asianpacificpost.com/article/6103-mewa-singh%E2%80%99s-funeral-1915.html>; *Vancouver World*, “Mewa Singh Goes to Gallows,” 11 Jan 1915.

⁷⁸ Sangra, “Shaheed Bhai Mewa Singh.”; Burton, “Free Translation From the 'Khalsa Shancher'”; Dusenbery, “On the Moral Sensitivities of Sikhs in North America,” 240–41.

facts of the matter. As such, the case of Mewa Singh serves as a potent reminder that the process of writing history is one steeped in subjectivity.

With that in mind, we ask ourselves: was Mewa Singh a murderer or a martyr? His story has been and continues to be told from both perspectives. The historian is a storyteller. We craft narratives through a selective process that generates cohesion and meaning from the archival scraps left in the wake of human lives that are often messy, nuanced, and far from self-evident in their didactic value. The selective and subjective nature of this process, rather than detracting from the value of history, is the heart of its role in society. As Walter Benjamin wrote, every real story “contains, openly or covertly, something useful. . . . In every case the storyteller is a [person] who has counsel for [their] readers.”⁷⁹ The historian, as storyteller, renders past experiences communicable. In writing a history, we pick and choose what is included and excluded from our source material, responding to the contemporary needs of ourselves and our communities. It must be emphasized that the making of meaning is not an abhorrent contamination of a mythically objective science of history. Indeed, our subjectivity only becomes dangerous when we seek to deny or obscure it through a pretense of pure fact. With this in mind, I ask you to make what you will of this particular story—to find meaning in it—but always with the awareness that to do so ethically requires a commitment to transparency in your subjective position and intention. The story can never be divorced from the teller. Was Mewa Singh a martyr or a murderer? The answer is in the telling.

⁷⁹ Walter Benjamin, “The Storyteller,” in *Illuminations* (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), 86.

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