

# William Wilson Hunter

He is most known for *The Imperial Gazetteer of India* on which he started working in 1869, and which was eventually published in nine volumes in 1881 and later as a twenty-six volume set after his death.

## Early life and education

William Wilson Hunter was born on 15 July 1840 in [Glasgow, Scotland](#), to Andrew Galloway Hunter, a Glasgow manufacturer. He was the second son, among his father's three sons. He started his education in 1854 at the 'Quaker Seminary' at Queenswood, [Hampshire](#), after a year he joined, the [Glasgow Academy](#).

He was educated at [Glasgow University](#) (BA 1860), [Paris](#) and [Bonn](#), acquiring a knowledge of [Sanskrit, LL.D.](#), before passing first in the final examination for the [Indian Civil Service](#) in 1862.

## Career

He reached [Bengal Presidency](#) in November 1862 and was appointed assistant magistrate and collector of [Birbhum](#), in the lower provinces of [Bengal](#), where he began collecting local traditions and records, which formed the materials for his publication, entitled *The Annals of Rural Bengal*, which influenced among others the *historical romance* *Durgeshnandini* of [Bankim Chandra Chatterjee](#).<sup>[2]</sup>

He also compiled *A Comparative Dictionary of the Non-Aryan Languages of India*, a glossary of dialects based mainly upon the collections of [Brian Houghton Hodgson](#), which according to the 1911 *Encyclopaedia Britannica* "testifies to the industry of the writer but contains much immature philological speculation".<sup>[3]</sup>

In 1869 [Lord Mayo](#), the then [governor-general](#), asked Hunter to submit a scheme for a comprehensive statistical survey of India. The work involved the compilation of a number of local gazetteers, in various stages of progress, and their consolidation in a condensed form upon a single and uniform plan. There was unhappiness with the scope and completeness of the earlier surveys conducted by administrators such as [Buchanan](#), and Hunter determined to model his efforts on the *Ain-i-Akbari* and *Description de l'Égypte*. Hunter said that "It was my hope to make a memorial of England's work in India, more lasting, because truer and more complete, than these monuments of Mughal Empire and of French ambition."<sup>[4]</sup>

In response to Mayo's question on 30 May 1871 of whether the Indian Muslims are "bound by their religion to rebel against the Queen" Hunter completed his influential work *The Indian Musalmans* in mid-June 1871 and later published it as a book in mid-August of the same year.<sup>[5][6]</sup>

In 1872 Hunter published his history of [Orissa](#). The [third International Sanitary Conference](#) held at [Constantinople](#) in 1866 declared Hindu and Muslim pilgrimages to be 'the most powerful of all the causes which conduce to the development and propagation of Cholera epidemics'. Hunter echoing the view described the 'squalid pilgrim army of Jagannath' as<sup>[7]</sup>

with its rags and hair and skin freighted with vermin and impregnated with infection, may any year slay thousands of the most talented and beautiful of our age in Vienna, London, or Washington.

He embarked on a series of tours throughout the country,<sup>[4]</sup> and he supervised the *A Statistical Account of Bengal* (20 volumes, 1875-1877)<sup>[8]</sup> and a similar work for [Assam](#) (2 volumes, 1879).<sup>[9]</sup>

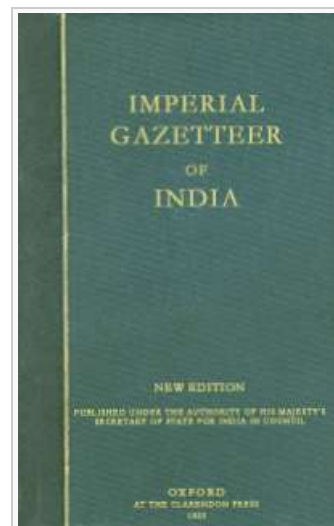
Hunter wrote that

Under this system, the materials for the whole of British India have now been collected, in several Provinces the work of compilation has rapidly advanced, and everywhere it is well in hand. During the same period the first Census of India has been taken, and furnished a vast accession to our knowledge of the people. The materials now amassed form a Statistical Survey of a continent with a population exceeding that of all Europe, Russia excepted."<sup>[10]</sup>

The statistical accounts, covering the 240 administrative districts, comprised 128 volumes and these were condensed into the nine volumes of *The Imperial Gazetteer of India*, which was published in 1881.<sup>[4]</sup> The *Gazetteer* was revised in later series, the second edition comprising 14 volumes published between 1885 and 1887, while the third comprised 26



<b>Born</b>	15 July 1840 <a href="#">Glasgow Scotland, UK</a>
<b>Died</b>	6 February 1900 (aged 59) Oaken Holt, <a href="#">England, UK</a>
<b>Nationality</b>	<a href="#">British</a>
<b>Fields</b>	<a href="#">History</a> , <a href="#">Statistician</a>
<b>Institutions</b>	<a href="#">Indian Civil Service</a> <a href="#">University of Calcutta</a>
<b>Alma mater</b>	<a href="#">University of Glasgow</a>



volumes, including an atlas, and was published in 1908 under the editorship of [Herbert Hope Risley](#), [William Stevenson Meyer](#), [Richard Burn](#) and James Sutherland Cotton.<sup>[11]</sup>

The Imperial Gazetteer of India, William Wilson Hunter's most known work, on which he started working in 1869.

According to the 1911 *Britannica*, Hunter "adopted a [transliteration](#) of vernacular place-names, by which means the correct pronunciation is ordinarily indicated; but hardly sufficient allowance was made for old spellings consecrated by history and long usage."<sup>[3]</sup> Hunter's own article on India was published in 1880 as *A Brief History of the Indian Peoples*, and has been widely translated and utilized in Indian schools. A revised form was issued in 1895, under the title of *The Indian Empire: its People, History and Products*.

Hunter later said that

Nothing is more costly than ignorance. I believe that, in spite of its many defects, this work will provide a memorable episode in the long battle against ignorance; a breakwater against the tide of prejudice and false opinions flowing down upon us from the past, and the foundation for a truer and wider knowledge of India in time to come. Its aim has been not literary graces, nor scientific discovery, nor antiquarian research; but an earnest endeavour to render India better governed, because better understood.<sup>[4]</sup>

In 1882 Hunter, as a member of the governor-general's council, presided over the Commission on Indian Education; in 1886 he was elected vice-chancellor of the [University of Calcutta](#).

In 1887 he retired from the service, was created [KCSI](#), and settled at Oaken Holt, near [Oxford](#).

On 13 March 1889 Philip Lyttelton Gell the then Secretary to the Delegates of the [Clarendon Press](#), wrote to Hunter about a project which has been for some time under the consideration of the Delegates, to publish a series giving the salient features of Indian History in the Biographies of successive Generals and Administrators.<sup>[2]</sup>

Gell arranged the publication of the series by June 1889; with Hunter receiving £75 for each volume, and the author £25. Gell's experience of the earlier unsaleable [Sacred Books of the East](#) and financial constraints forced the *Rulers of India* to end at 28 volumes in spite of Hunter's disappointment about the same.<sup>[2]</sup>

Hunter himself contributed the volumes on [Dalhousie](#) (1890)<sup>[12]</sup> and Mayo (1891)<sup>[13]</sup> to the series.<sup>[2]</sup>

He had previously written an official *Life of Lord Mayo*, which was published on 19 November 1875 in two volumes with a second edition appearing in 1876.<sup>[14]</sup> He also wrote a weekly article on Indian affairs for *The Times*.

But the great task to which he applied himself on his settlement in England was a history upon a large scale of the *British Dominion in India*, two volumes of which only had appeared when he died, carrying the reader barely down to 1700. He was much hindered by the confused state of his materials, a portion of which he arranged and published in 1894 as *Bengal Manuscript Records*, in three volumes.

Hunter dedicated his 1892 work *Bombay 1885 to 1890: A Study in Indian Administration* to [Florence Nightingale](#).<sup>[15]</sup>

His later works include the novel titled *The Old Missionary* (1895, described on the title-page as "revised from *The Contemporary Review*"),<sup>[16]</sup> and *The Thackerays in India* (1897). John F. Riddick describes Hunter's *The Old Missionary* as one of the "three significant works" produced by [Anglo-Indian](#) writers on Indian missionaries along with *The Hosts of the Lord* (1900) by [Flora Annie Steel](#) and *Idolatry* (1909) by Alice Perrin.<sup>[17]</sup>

In the winter of 1898–1899, in consequence of the fatigue incurred in a journey to the Caspian and back, on a visit to the sick-bed of one of his two sons, Hunter was stricken down by a severe attack of [influenza](#), which affected his heart. He died at Oaken Holt on 6 February 1900.

S. C. Mittal believes that Hunter "represented the official mind of the bureaucratic Victorian historians in India", of whom [James Talboys Wheeler](#) and [Alfred Comyn Lyall](#) were other examples.<sup>[18]</sup>

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## See also

- Hunterian transliteration
- Census of India prior to independence

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