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## **Angel of Empire: The Cawnpore Memorial Well as a British Site of Imperial Remembrance**

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**In lieu of** an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

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*Stephen Heathorn*

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At the centre of the north Indian city of Kanpur sit fifty acres of urban green space. Surrounded by a brightly painted iron railing, this city-owned oasis within the bustling industrial metropolis is Nana Rao Park. Like many civic spaces, it contains a commemorative statue: in this case it is a likeness of the brilliant leader of Sepoy rebels during the 1857 uprising, Tantia Topi. This statue is relatively new, barely fifty years old; the park is much older, first laid out over 145 years ago. The statue is surrounded by four marble frogs, and stands overlooking a large, empty, sandstone circle.<sup>2</sup> Without prior knowledge, a visitor to this park today, and indeed perhaps most of the current residents of the city,<sup>3</sup> would have no inkling that the blank sandstone circle within this pleasant but otherwise non-descript civic oasis was once the most venerated locale of the British raj. Nano Rao Park was, before 1949, the Cawnpore Memorial Gardens, and the sandstone circle overlooked by the Tantia Topi statue is all that is now left of the memorial well monument, built on the site of the final resting place of over 125 British women and children killed in Cawnpore on 15 July 1857, amidst the upheaval of the 1857–58 “Mutiny.”<sup>4</sup>

The well monument was removed, and the site leveled by the British themselves a year after India achieved independence, an act necessitated by the financial and political inability of the British to protect the site from defacement, and the vain – as the subsequent placement of the Tantia Topi statue indicates – attempt to prevent the site from being appropriated by Indian nationalists.<sup>5</sup> This article examines the significance of the memorial well for the British imperial project and the history of the raj, and provides an indication of why, ten years after its demolition, the site retained enough potent symbolism that politicians in the city thought it necessary to erect a nationalist counter monument on what was an essentially empty space. For the Cawnpore memorial well was, for much of its 85 year existence, *the* iconic site of imperial remembrance in the British raj: a site that during the last third of the Nineteenth Century was reportedly more often visited by Europeans in India than was the Taj Mahal.<sup>6</sup>

In his seminal edited collection, *Les Lieux de mémoire*, Pierre Nora

argued that a variety of French objects, places, and concepts have become the fixed, externalized “sites” of what was once an internalized, social memory.<sup>7</sup> The move from “living” collective memory to the deliberate preservation of memory in historical ways – what a number of theorists have suggested as the characteristic project of modernity<sup>8</sup> – developed because spontaneous social memory no longer functions as it once did. Nora’s project was to subject such sites of memory to rigorous analysis, examining them, largely, as self-referential signifiers of French national identity.<sup>9</sup> While the argument pursued here shows that the paradigm of “sites” of memory also works in a colonial context, it also demonstrates that a memorial monument such as that at Cawnpore cannot alone convey transparent expressions of intended (or even accreted) social and political meaning: the object does not, nor ever did, speak for itself. To determine significance we must examine the intermediaries between the social and political worlds and the monumental representation; how observers have perceived and interpreted the meaning of the object and transmitted that perception to others. If, as is suggested by Nora, particular sites become the locus of collective memory, then we should conceptualize not only who keeps that memory – who, in other words, remembers and why – but also how a particular site keeps its association with a particular memory, which is “the result of the interaction among three types of historical factors: the intellectual and cultural traditions that frame all our representations of the past, the memory makers who selectively adopt and manipulate these traditions, and the memory consumers who use, ignore, or transform such artifacts according to their own interests.”<sup>10</sup> Only if we use this “hermeneutical triangle” – a...



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