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IRIS Award – Summer 2022

In June of 2022, I used my IRIS grant to travel to the U.K. and conduct archival research for my Master's Thesis. Broadly, my work focuses on the history of science and empire in India during the nineteenth century. I am interested in questions about colonial constructions of space and landscape through natural history studies and scientific illustration—as well as how these constructions were deeply enmeshed with imperial violence and war. During previous archival work, I had come across fragments of an extensively illustrated survey on the Deccan plateau region completed in the 1820s by two East India Company officers. From these excerpts, I gleaned that the survey had attempted to catalogue an immense amount of natural historical information that spanned botanical, zoological, geological, agricultural, and meteorological subjects. I also knew that parts of the survey had been disaggregated and re-published as smaller articles in major natural history journals throughout the early to mid-nineteenth century. My goal for this archival trip was to collect the survey notes and illustrations in their entirety, along with other Company records, travelogues, and surveys completed within the same region.

The funds I received allowed me to carry out archival work for three weeks in London. I started my research in Kensington at the Natural History Museum, London. The museum is not only a repository for assortments of natural history objects like ornithological specimens and fossils (in addition to being a popular school field trip destination) but also houses a vast collection of documents that range from institutional correspondence to accounts from surveys like the one I was studying. I spent two weeks photographing and analyzing the twenty-one volumes of the original survey, which included copious fieldnotes (the first volume being about six hundred pages long) as well as all of the original watercolor paintings that constituted a large part of the survey materials.

I then travelled slightly north of Kensington and spent the remainder of my research period at the British Library. There, I found the final version of the survey report that was formally submitted to the East India Company, as well as private correspondence between the primary surveyor and the British Governor of Bombay at the time. For the rest of my time at the British Library, I also delved into the India Office Record for other reports and surveys pertaining to the same region in the early 1800s.

This research trip was not only critical for gathering documents for my work, but also helped me think through some of my fundamental research questions. Initially, I was intending to focus especially on the zoological elements of the survey. However, once I started working in the archive, I realized that overall, the report was far more focused on geology and agriculture (the latter very clearly motivated by the extractive possibilities of economic botany). For my MA, I intend to use these aspects of the survey as a window into broader questions about constructions of the vertical or subterranean landscape as well as how soil and agricultural studies were a crucial part of histories of colonial extraction.