Having taken over from the discredited Law as Magistrate of Etawah, Perry was expected to exceed his predecessor’s efforts and succeed in apprehending the murderers who infested the roads of the district. Between 1808 and 1809, a total of 67 bodies had been found in wells and along the high roads in Etawah, and in the first three months of 1810, 11 more bodies were found between Mainpuri and Agra. By making inquiries with zamindars and other ‘respectable persons’ Perry found that the offenders were not ‘a barbarous and savage race living in ravines and jungles’ as previously thought, but said to be inhabitants of the district and protected by ‘mercenary individuals’. In view of this Perry offered a reward of Rs 1000 – a vast sum at the time – for information that could lead to the apprehension of the perpetrators. This strategy paid off and in March 1810 the daroghas of Shekohabad arrested eight suspected thugs, one of whom agreed to testify against his accomplices in return for a pardon.

This prisoner was the 16-year-old Ghulam Hussain and though reluctant to disclose too much, he recounted several instances of murders committed by their gang. Hussain was by his own account a mere novice and had only been affiliated with the thugs for six months, but Perry nevertheless attached a great weight to his testimony and, accordingly, requested that he be pardoned in the hope that the information thereby obtained would eventually lead to the suppression of the offence. The pardon for Hussain was immediately granted, but Perry was still concerned about the poor prospects of getting any of the prisoners convicted. Since the crime in question was carried out with much secrecy, there seemed little chance of ever obtaining circumstantial
evidence against the thugs and so the convictions had to rest on the
doubtful testimony of accomplices. Even though the law demanded
solid evidence, it was Perry’s firm conviction that the prisoners should
not be allowed to go free merely by providing security for their future
good behaviour – that would, he claimed, be an act of cruelty against the
public.6

Once pardoned, Hussain readily disclosed what he knew, beginning
with his own background when as a child he had been adopted by the
thugs who had killed his father and uncle.7 He had not been brought up
as a thug, though, but left his adoptive father when he got older and
held various menial positions, before he was enticed to rejoin the thugs.
Hussain claimed to have been on only one expedition, but did provide
more general information, such as the existence of 1500 thugs suppos-
edly living in Etawah, and who went on expeditions as far away as
Lucknow, Jaipur and Bundelkhand. He also explained how the thugs
committed their murders: ‘The professed ones strangle with any part of
their cloth and afterwards inflict wounds with a knife. They do not use
the cords for fear of detection. Mere novices in the art administer the
seeds of Dutoora which deprives their object of his senses when they
plunder him.’8

That Perry should place so much faith in the testimony of a 16-year-old,
who by his own admission had only very limited knowledge of thuggee,
reflects the desperation of the authorities in obtaining information on
thuggee. It was, however, the first time a thug informed extensively
against his accomplices and, moreover, provided an account of thuggee
as a wide-ranging phenomenon. Perry shortly afterwards obtained the
depositions of the remaining seven prisoners who had been caught along
with Hussain.9 Only one acknowledged having committed crimes within
the Company’s territories, but they all admitted being guilty of robbery
and murder in foreign states. Yet Perry did not commit them for trial
immediately, and he felt compelled to solicit the instructions of the
Government with respect to the mode of prosecution which ultimately
should be conducted against them. The prisoners recounted how they
had been able to pay for their release when arrested by indigenous author-
ities and this, Perry argued, proved the necessity for the enactment of a
special law for their exemplary punishment. The Government expressed
its satisfaction with Perry’s exertions, but rejected the idea of special legal
provisions being adopted for the conviction of thugs – a position worth
noticing in light of later events.10

On the basis of the information gathered from Hussain, the other pris-
oners and local zamindars, Perry issued warrants for a number of people