Nineteenth-Century Memsahibs in India

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About two months after she arrived in Calcutta in 1836, Emily Eden, sister of Governor-General Lord Auckland, recorded her reactions to India. "It certainly is tiresome," she wrote, "not being able to speak the language of the country one lives in, but as for attempting to learn their gibberish I can't. I get such horrible fits at times (particularly when I am driving out) of thinking that we are gone back to an entirely savage state, and are at least 3000 years behind the rest of the world. I take all the naked black creatures squatting at the doors of their huts in such aversion, and what with the paroquets, and the jackals, and the vultures, which settle in crowds on the dead bodies that are thrown on the banks of the river, and what with the climate and the strange trees and shrubs, I feel all Robinson Crusoe-ish. I cannot abide India, and that is the truth."  

Robinson Crusoe was, of course, an adventurer—but a strange kind of adventurer, whose chief accomplishment was to recreate on an alien shore an economy and culture that resembled as far as possible the world he had left behind in England. Emily’s reference to Crusoe was entirely fitting. In the nineteenth century, English men went to India to recreate a culture they had left behind. The English women who accompanied them saw India chiefly as “not England”—not home—and they worked hard to correct that fault. As a result, they observed remarkably little of the land they lived in, except as it added romance to their lives or impeded their efforts to live a virtuous and comfortable life.

The core of Robinson Crusoe’s strength of character was his belief in the merits of “due and regular conduct” as a means to salvation. And due and
regular conduct was the touchstone of British aspirations in India. For the men
this meant work—hard work. "The people work like horses, year in and year out," wrote Fitzjames Stephens in 1869. "It is certainly the most masculine middle-aged busy society that I ever saw." For their wives, proper conduct found
concrete expression as they furnished and supervised households to make their
men's lives as far removed as possible from exotic interruptions. This, as we shall
see, they took to be the challenge of their wifely role in India.

The lives of British civilians in India, as recorded in their memoirs, consisted
almost entirely of administrative work punctuated by the occasional adventure of
a tiger hunt. The lives of the memsahibs were taken up with running the
household—providing food and clothing for the family, furnishing their home,
overseeing the servants, and raising the children. In all these the circumstances
were exotic to them, but their standards and goals, and even the concrete items
with which they worked, remained remarkably fixed. Take, for example, the food
they served.

Lilian Ashby, who was born in India, as were her mother and grandmother,
wrote that at the end of the nineteenth century, "British families, even after
several generations of Indian residence, persisted in having the same courses
which might have been served in any London home: soup, roast, and pudding.
Native dishes were seldom included, although indigenous vegetables and
fruits—plaintains, mangoes, and others—found their places." Honoria Lawrence
commented as early as 1837 that "the cooking differs little from our own,
except in the regular curries and mulligatanes. ... I was surprised to find so
many English articles of food in India. All kinds of preserves, jams and dried
fruits. Sauces, potted meat, and fish, cheese, and biscuits are to be seen in every
house. Soda water, which in this climate is largely used" was also ubiquitous. The
local vegetables, she comments, were tasteless, and the fruits generally dis-
agreeable, except for that novelty, the alligator pear.

Tinned and bottled amenities from home were not only available in the cities
and main towns; they went with the British on tour. Lady Wilson, traveling with
her husband through the Punjab in 1889, remarked, "We carry with us our own
groceries, which come out from England—or rather, as far as we are concerned,
from the Army and Navy stores at Bombay—packed in tins. We also have our
filter [all drinking water was filtered through charcoal], and our supply of soda-
water and wine with us." While on tour, she continued, "We kill our own sheep
and chickens, have our own cows, and make our own bread and butter. We get
our vegetables, cabbages, and cauliflowers, turnips, and peas from the [nearest]
public gardens." Only the Indians traveling with the Wilson entourage—who
cooked for themselves, because of caste rules—and the animals depended for
their diet on the resources of the countryside.

For those at the very top of Anglo-Indian society, the illusion of a trans-
planted world was nearly perfect. In the 1840s, when the governor-general and
his household moved from Calcutta to their weekend retreat at Barrackpore and
back each week, all was "very well managed," wrote Emily Eden. "Our whole
household is with us so entirely that our rooms at Calcutta are locked up when we
come away, and yet, ten minutes after we arrive at Government House, every-
thing is in its place. A hot breakfast (more like a dinner) for eighteen people is on the table, and the servants are as quiet and composed as ever." That evening a formal dinner for forty-four people would be produced without incident by the Indian staff.7

Lady Wilson, fifty years later, was equally complacent about the ability of her staff to fend off the unexpected while they were traveling. "I have not yet ceased to be pleasantly surprised by the clock-work regularity with which everything is done. A wizened old genius of the tents and Akbar, the bearer, are responsible for everything, and there is never a hitch. As for the cook, all that he seems to need is two bricks or a hole in the ground... and [he] gives us a dinner as good as he ever prepared in his kitchen at home."8

But memsahibs further down the social scale were not so isolated from the problems of serving British food in a British manner far from home. Take the experience of the newlywed wife of an agricultural inspector in south India. She was enjoying breakfast with her husband in their bungalow when she stepped out on the verandah to see if more toast was ready. She found that "beside a clear charcoal fire, ideal for making toast, a busy servant was squatted rather awk-wardly, one foot stuck out sideways, the better to serve for a toast-rack, and three bits of toast, ready for our breakfast, were standing in it already!" Perhaps because she was new to India, she lost her composure. "I took up a bit of toast... [and] threw it at him... For this impulsive action on my part my husband had to pay some £12, the expenses of purification ceremonies entailed on the man. He bore me no malice, nor even minded very much; but he, a man, had been hit by a woman, in the presence of others."9 It is worth noting that Mrs. Hendley ascribed the need for purification to a sexual insult, not a pollution in violation of caste law. This both coincided with her own understanding of social structure, and avoided the necessity of coming to terms with the idea of caste. In fact, said this same lady, "the network of caste is too intricate to be understood by Western minds."10

Another Englishwoman in south India was even more squeamish about the servants who handled her food before she ate it. She wrote in her memoirs that she always picked her own berries because, she said, "there is something in the idea of gentlemen who never wear any clothes picking the fruit you eat which is not at all appetizing."11

"Gentlemen who never wear any clothes"—what a description of the alien, the untouchable, to the English memsahib! And, in fact, appropriate clothing was a central concern in the world the British created for themselves in India. At the periphery of this world were the undifferentiated masses, mostly naked, as suited their savage or childish natures. They formed a picturesque panorama quite separate from the real world. "We went through the native part of town," wrote Emily Eden, "where the people are so thronged that it is difficult to drive through them. Such odd groups squatting at the doors of the huts, and sometimes such handsome wild countenances; then every now and then a Chinese, with his twinkling eyes and yellow face and satin dress, stalking amongst those black naked creatures. I believe this whole country and our being here, and everything about it, is a dream."12 Nineteenth-century landscapes of India—watercolors
India

and pastel sketches—do have a dreamlike quality, and the people in them are picturesque figures in the landscape, types, not individuals.

The Indians that were more involved in the British world—the servants and sepoys—were, of course, dressed up to create constantly changing exotic and beautiful tableaux, an extension into daily life of the theatrical soirees that formed the favorite amusement of Anglo-Indian society. Turbaned servants attended at dinner parties and grand balls. At one such ball, "all the halls were lighted up; the steps of the portico leading to them were covered with all the turbaned attendants in their white muslin dresses, the native guards galloping before us, and this enormous building looking more like . . . a palace in the 'Arabian nights' than anything I have been able to dream on the subject," writes Fanny Eden, Emily's sister. "It seems to me that we are acting a long opera."13

When Indians demurred at being merely exotic set-pieces in British dramatic productions, the issue they seized on was often one of costume. And perhaps because the British felt themselves constantly to be dressing up for a part, they tended to mock Indian men who assumed British costume. "The great shoe question makes a great heart-burning in society," writes our ever-colorful Emily Eden. "Sir C. Metcalfe never allowed the natives to come with their shoes on. There is a large class here, who say the natives are now sufficiently well-informed to feel the degradation very sensibly, and who wish the natives to adopt European manners as much as possible. George [Lord Auckland] has taken up that opinion, and the charm of being allowed to come before the Governor-General in shoes brought an immense concourse together—such quantities of new stiff European shoes, and many of the men seemed to find it difficult to walk in them." Then, lest anyone think the natives thereby fully civilized, she added, "There were some splendid dresses among them, and some beautiful turbans."14

In these circumstances, the women in society were caught up in an overwhelming preoccupation with their clothes, and their concern with fashion became a subject of derision among newcomers to India and observers throughout the nineteenth century. The latest styles were copied avidly from eagerly awaited magazines that arrived with every ship from Europe. The family tailors squatting in the verandah altered old gowns to suit new fashions, or created new gowns from fabrics and ribbons imported from Europe. Fine Indian fabrics were virtually unobtainable in the marketplace,15 and Chinese silk was scorned. "To appear in one of these silks would make all the Calcutta ladies fall down in separate fainting fits," wrote Fanny Eden, "because being in Asia, they think it incumbent upon them to wear only what comes from Europe."16 Fashion symbolized for the memsahibs their ability to maintain their standards under adversity.

At the upper levels of society, among women with firm roots in English society, fashion could be treated as a pastime, a subject in which to stay au courant, just as they kept up with the latest novels from America. At lower levels, where social status was not so secure, the subject of fashion gathered to itself greater anxieties. Mrs. Marryat, the wife of a military officer in south India, was very conscious that she ranked lower than the civilian wives, and was anxious to maintain her own credentials in society—in a precise scale of values wonderfully
explicit in its Anglocentrism. “Many officers’ wives in India,” she wrote, “come from Australia, the Cape, or the Mauritius, and an attempted amalgamation with them invariably ends in failure; they are always so very certain that whatever part of the world they sprang from is the most fashionable and important; and as they have never seen England, any subject which bears upon it, or its customs, falls flat, and is generally received as a species of personal affront.”

Mrs. Marryat reveals herself to have been a prig and a bore, and she took as a personal affront any compromise of her own standards of dress. “I called at one house in Bangalore,” she recalled, “where I was received by the whole family without stockings; in they came, as if it was the most natural thing in the world to go barefooted in the hot season, and dressed in the most astonishing of costumes, with their hair done ‘anyhow.’” Other women at her station told her she was putting on airs. “They prophesied that what they were pleased to call my fastidiousness would come down before I left the country; but I am happy to say it never did.”

But her extreme case is illuminating of the generality, for the maintenance of propriety of some sort was important to these women faced with maintaining civilization in the face of what? It is not hard to guess. Women in India, says our army wife, were idle, and could receive gentleman visitors freely. They were thus thought to be more “careless and reckless” than the women back home in England. “Where a pretty woman has one temptation to be thoughtless in England she has fifty in India: . . . she is compelled by climate to lead a life of so much idleness that any excitement comes to her as a relief; . . . in many cases she is left alone and unprotected for months and even years, whilst her husband is away on foreign service.”

The threat, we should note, was invariably seen to come from romances with European men, not forwardness from Indians. In fact, English women in India seem never to have feared either death or a fate worse than death from Indian men—except when rumors of a new Great Mutiny rose to the surface to threaten all Europeans. Typical are the comments of Mrs. Duncan, traveling alone with her Indian servants in the Himalayan foothills in 1904: “At first I felt slightly alarmed when I was in a lonely place and men hurried after me or waited for me and then walked along close to me, but as they smiled and salaamed and tried to talk I soon ceased to have any fear.”

No, the threat was from temptations within their own society, and the dangers were those of the hill stations and mofussil towns so vividly chronicled by Rudyard Kipling. The antidote to these dangers was the power of domesticity. The family was the center of the virtuous life; and those who abandoned their husbands to stay in the hills in the hot weather or in the towns while their men were on tour could be led astray.

One strong association with the virtuous life was surely the material setting of a “normal” family life. It was difficult to recreate in India the atmosphere of a cozy English cottage or elegant London townhouse—difficult to live “normally” in the bungalow with high ceilings, divided by the screens and punkahs, furnished with mosquito-netted beds and ever-present servants underfoot or just outside the door, and no hearth around which the family could spend its evening. But some women devoted extraordinary energy and ingenuity to maintaining a familiar
setting, even while traveling. Photographs of afternoon tea served before a tent in
the jungle or on a barren mountainside, in china cups, with linen napkins laid
across the laps of ladies and gentlemen seated in folding chairs—these spring
easily to mind. But some families who could afford it went much further.
Lady Wilson, touring the Punjab with her husband in 1889, describes their
camp to a friend:

> Anything cosier than our tent looks at this moment you could not imagine. We are sitting in our deck-chairs before the stove, with our feet on a wooden fender; the lamp behind us is hooked to the central pole of the tent. Jim is reading the papers, while I am writing to you. A bowl of Gloire de Dijon roses on the table beside me is a delight to my eyes; beyond is a little bookcase filled with our favorite books, and on the top of it is the guitar, the poor ill-used guitar! We have pictures on our walls, comfortable chairs, tables and rugs, and in short, we are as snug as snug can be.

This camp, mind you, was moved every two or three days.

> We have three tents—two for living in, and one for Jim’s office-work. While we are using one, the other goes ahead, and is pitched at our next halting-place. We generally move on every second or third day; but this is not so unsettling as you might think, for the next tent is a duplicate of the one we left, with everything in its place, our baggage having gone on before us. So the evening drive is only a little longer than usual, covering a distance of ten or twelve miles, and the daily routine is not interrupted.

The maintenance of serene domesticity depended, it becomes clear, on successful management of the servants. Lady Wilson commented that “servants differ greatly in different parts of the country, and their employers’ opinions of them as a class vary as widely, ranging from enthusiasm to despair.” Servants’ opinions of the memsahibs probably varied just as widely, for the skill and patience of the British inevitably varied enormously. Each coped according to her energy and talents.

It is generally agreed that Indian servants had to be closely supervised. Either the memsahib had to do this herself, or if she was lucky, she had a trusted bearer or ayah who would manage the household for her. Most women learned enough of an Indian language to communicate with the servants—indeed, said one woman, “most of us ... knew somewhat more of the language than we owned to, finding it to be a good plan on the whole, though we did not always relish what we caught.” What they caught was presumably some of the very colorful language of personal insult the Indian servants used in their daily dealings with one another. Our priggish army wife says she was, in fact, forbidden by her husband to learn an Indian language. “I have been told that the conversation of the natives, as a rule, is too filthy to be imagined.” This not only kept her from learning their language, but gave her a “great horror of permitting [her]
children to pick up the Tamil language from their ayahs. So she hired only English-speaking governesses.

This lady was apparently one of those women who were satisfied to leave the supervision of the housework to the servants, and were thus impelled into the idle and rather bored lives that Kipling has indelibly stamped on our minds. And we have a number of anecdotes illustrating how the servants manipulated and outwitted those memsahibs who, without knowing either language or customs very well, tried to interfere too closely in the servants' way of doing things. Most women concluded, with Mrs. Handley, that it was best to leave the other servants in charge of the major-domo, and to trust him with the daily accounts as well as the supervision of the work. "The butler might, perhaps, take toll himself, but he could at any rate be trusted to see that no one else did"—or at least that the others stayed within limits.

But other women were more energetic, and insisted on keeping firm control of their households. Lady Wilson, who had thirteen servants, wrote that she herself had to "look after the [water] filter, see to the milk, the feeding of the cows, sheep and poultry, the making of butter, bread, cakes, to the trimming of the lamps, to the dusting of books, pictures, furniture, to the tinning of pots and pans, to the way the cook uses his dishes or his dusters." And, as she wrote a friend, "if you saw our clothes and house-linen when they are returned by the washerman after being beaten with a stick on a board and then dried on thorny bushes, you would recognize that there was work to be done, not to speak of curtains, blinds, and sixteen dozen dusters to be hemmed; . . . letters that want to be answered, books and newspapers to be read"—enough to keep any woman out of mischief. And she was only talking about life in a well-organized official's camp.

Other women led really isolated lives, and managed like pioneer women everywhere. Lilian Ashby tells of her grandmother, daughter of the senior overseer of an indigo plantation, who was married to a planter and entrepreneur about 1850, at the age of sixteen. She grew into a formidable woman. "Tall, muscular, jungle-bred, thoroughly self-assured, Grandmother was always an early riser. She maintained strict discipline and her justice was little tempered by tolerance, which she considered mawkish. Burra-memsahib was at one and the same time the object of [the servants'] affectionate worship and their greatest terror." She supervised the operations of a large estate, since her husband was often away, and she raised her granddaughter to be equally self-reliant. Lilian herself knew Hindustani long before she knew English, and was fluent in the banter, the personally descriptive insults, that were the lubricant of relationships among the servants. Even so, she relied heavily on her childrens' ayah to keep order in her household. The servants, she said, lacked initiative, and had "to be trailed and supervised in the performance of even routine operations."

This was a relationship with servants very unlike the master-servant relationship in England. The Englishwoman who, like Mrs. Ashby's grandmother, grew up in India and became "mother and father" to her servants built up a long-term tie to them on the traditional Indian pattern. Those who tried to establish an upstairs/downstairs relationship on the English pattern met only with frustra-
tion. As Honoria Lawrence wrote in the 1830s, "At home, every conscientious person feels responsible to a certain degree for the moral conduct and religious instruction... of his domestics as well as the duty of consulting their comfort. Here the difference of religion does away with the first, and the habits of life in a great measure obviate the second, and it is difficult for the master and mistress to recollect that their servants are responsible immortal beings."31 It was no wonder that she felt isolated. After seven years in India, she wrote, "I feel... how absolutely ignorant we are of the minds, thoughts, motives, domestic habits of those around us. We get accustomed to look at this people merely in their relations to ourselves and are apt to forget that they have any existence beyond."32

This isolation was compounded by the fact that most women had little or no opportunity to associate with upper-class Indian families. Indian women of good breeding did not, until very late in the nineteenth century, mix socially with the British—and then only if they were very modern. English women were occasionally invited by Indian women to visit in their separate quarters, but although the memsahibs appreciated the warm good feeling with which they were welcomed, they found little of common interest, and very few real friendships developed.33

One might have thought that raising children in the same country would have brought the two peoples together, but this was not so. There were no schools that both Indian and European children attended other than the few Roman Catholic schools centered at Loreto House in Calcutta.34 The alternatives for British children were boarding schools in the hills or back in England. Many English families chose the latter alternative, even though it meant years of separation from their children. "The real calamity of life" in India, wrote Emily Eden, "is the separation from home and friends. It feels like death, and all the poor mothers here who have to part with their children from five years old to seventeen are more to be pitied than it is possible to say."35

The usual reason given for sending the children away was health. The death rates of very young British children in India was appalling. Over a quarter of the children born to army families in the early 1870s—one of the few vital statistics available for the British in India—died within six months. One-fifth of those who lived a full year were dead six months later. But those who survived to school age were very tough indeed; if they remained in India, their death rate thereafter was less than ten per thousand, less than half the rate for adults.36 So health was not the main reason for removing eight- and nine-year-olds from their families—and their Indian playmates.

Most important, the English in India wanted their children to be thoroughly English, and to have English values. Lilian Ashby, that resourceful woman who grew up on her grandmother’s plantation, raised her own children in the wilds of Central India. She taught them reading and writing when they were small. But, she wrote, "the problem of their elementary schooling was easier to solve than that of finding suitable playmates. Because of the cramped living conditions of the poorer families in India, an undesirably complete knowledge of sex relations is acquired almost in infancy. Under these circumstances childish curiosity all too often leads to experimentation and to unfortunate eventualities."37
And so the circle was completed. The children were withdrawn from the stage setting that their parents had created—at what cost to their own happiness—and went to boarding schools where they could be thoroughly acculturated to their parents' heritage. Even Kim, Little Friend of All the World, met this fate—but only after he had become well educated in the ways of India. Kim was a romantic ideal of the child able to move between two worlds, which few if any real British children were ever permitted to achieve.

In 1930, in his pioneering study of the social history of the British in India, Percival Spear wrote an indictment of British women in India that has remained the accepted stereotype ever since: when British "women went out in large numbers," he wrote, "they brought with them their insular whims and prejudices, which no official contact with Indians or iron compulsion of loneliness ever tempted them to abandon. Too insular in most cases to interest themselves in alien culture... for... its own sake, they found society among their own people, or in the last resort returned single and disconsolate to Europe."  

As we have seen, it was not so simple. British women went to India to help the men re-create there the life they would have liked to aspire to back home. To a surprising degree they succeeded, and like Robinson Crusoe, the English returned to England with their values and way of life little changed by their sojourn in a foreign land.
Notes

32. *Journals of Honoria Lawrence*, p. 149.
33. See for example Ashby, *My India*, pp. 86-87.