



Elizabeth Buettner. *Empire Families: Britons and Late Imperial India.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004. 310 S. \$45.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-924907-7.



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Ordinary Imperialists

Touring the south Indian domain of Mysore with her mother and sister in 1800, a thirteen-year-old British girl named Charlotte wrote excitedly in her journal about encountering an Indian man who had served her grandfather as an orderly in the region, some fifty years before. “He was not a little pleased to see us,” she wrote, “and proved his knowledge” of her grandfather “by saying ‘when Lordship think, always put handkerchief in his mouth,’ this habit was well known to his family.”[1] Charlotte’s grandfather was none other than Robert Clive, conqueror of Bengal; her own father Edward Clive was then Governor of Madras. Though Charlotte never knew her grandfather, in India she encountered and perpetuated his memory as the third generation of Clives to live there.

British family ties to India began as early as Britain’s territorial empire in the subcontinent. Sons followed fathers into Indian careers, both military and civilian; daughters of Anglo-Indian (that is, Britons in India) fathers married men employed there. And by the later nineteenth century, family configurations like Charlotte Clive’s—where civilian men working in India came with

their wives and children too—were more the rule than the exception. These British families of the raj form the subject of Elizabeth Buettner’s superb monograph *Empire Families: Britons and Late Imperial India*, an important, innovative, and consistently enlightening contribution to British and imperial history.

Empire Families roughly follows the arc of a human life, beginning with a discussion of British childhoods in India; continuing with investigations of schooling and the separations between parents and children it generally entailed; and concluding with a description of the often-disappointing returns many empire families faced when they retired back “home.” Extending from hill-station boarding schools to the Anglo-Indian enclaves of Cheltenham and Bayswater, *Empire Families* offers up a sweep of stimulating, original research on the rhythms and routines of raj family life. Perhaps the most intriguing material rests in the earlier chapters, which explore the consequences of the terrible double-bind in which British parents in India found themselves. They could opt to keep their children close by, which meant—according to contemporary medical and moral thinking—putting

them in danger of being carried off by disease, or of being corrupted by Indian society. Or they could ship the kids off to Britain, and have them grow up thousands of miles away, in the custody of others, more often than not strangers serving as guardians. It is no wonder that children who were sent to Britain so often remembered their time in India as a pre-lapsarian idyll of sun and warmth: going to Britain meant leaving behind formative emotional relationships with loving parents.

It is also no wonder that adults in India regularly portrayed themselves as “suffering for the empire.” Buettner is at her best when probing the pains experienced by both children and their parents: of wives made to choose between staying with their husbands in India, or shifting to Britain with the children; of mothers and fathers whose only way of chronicling their childrens’ development was to inspect the curves of their handwriting; and of children effectively orphaned by separation. These partings may have been self-imposed, but that made them no less difficult, and had a direct impact on the way that Britons during and after the raj conceived of and represented the imperial experience. Buettner notes that British accounts of decolonization in India take on a “family romance” quality. Surely the tendency to characterize the end of the raj in terms of a family split stemmed in part from the actual family separations which so many Britons in India experienced.

The single greatest contribution of *Empire Families*, however, rests in its careful excavation of the British middle classes in India, whose lives have so often been obscured by flashier profiles of officers and high-ranking civil servants. For no period of British Indian history has the condition of the imperial rank-and-file—common soldiers, minor bureaucrats, planters and merchants—been explored in nearly enough detail. Buettner performs a thorough, and much-needed, task of recovering this substantial tier of British society from historiographical neglect. The middle-class experience of empire differed considerably from that of the privileged top brass. They were hit hardest, for instance, by the dilemma of children’s education—in part because the great expense meant that, even if parents could afford to send children to Britain for school, they probably could not afford to visit them; and in part because schooling choices had a defining impact on sons’ future career options.

But above all, Buettner successfully shows, it was among these families that preoccupations with race and status took palpable, pressing form. There is an old saw that blames racist thinking among the British in India on

the arrival of British women, who supposedly clamped down on their menfolks’ liaisons with Indian women, and asserted firm domestic authority over the Indians around them. Quite aside from its sexist overtones, the argument is also simply untrue: far more British women accompanied their husbands, fathers, and brothers to India in the less racially obsessed, pre-Victorian decades than stereotypes suggest (as a tour through European cemeteries in India will sadly confirm). Buettner implicitly presents a different, and more plausible, argument for the hardening of racial thinking in British India, namely that members of the middle classes, concerned about their relatively unprivileged position within white society, turned to racial segregation as a way of stressing their difference from the uncomfortably close ranks of mixed-race “Anglo-Indians” and upper-class Indians. (These anxieties form probably the most believable aspect of Paul Scott’s novel *The Jewel in the Crown*, in which the distinctly non-elite policeman Ronald Merrick channels his social insecurities into a racist persecution of the public-school-educated Indian, Hari Kumar.)

In its attention to the imperial middle class, its sensitive treatment of family relations and emotions, and its pervasive blending of the history of Britons in India with the history of Britain itself, *Empire Families* stands as a work that any historian interested in race, class, or gender in British India would do well to read. One can hardly ask for more from a monograph. But monographs tend to err toward caution and self-limitation; inevitably, they invite wider questions. One obvious query, in this case, concerns periodization. Though Buettner does a fine job of relating her late imperial histories to post-colonial society, one wonders about the five or more generations of Anglo-Indian families who came before. Granted, earlier decades witnessed a type of empire family—European men with Indian wives and mixed-raced children—that became far less conspicuous by the late Victorian period. But, as the example of the Clive family underscores, British Empire families of the sort Buettner describes could be found in India even in the eighteenth century. Setting Buettner’s late imperial case studies in the context of a longer history of British family life in India would allow for a sharper discussion of how, when, and why the racial and class identifications she describes took shape.

One also can’t help wondering how to relate the Indian case to wider understandings of the British Empire—especially given that the British imperial experience in India followed a unique course, from start to finish. In practice, monographs on “the British Empire” almost al-

ways focus on a single region of imperial endeavor—and *Empire Families* is no exception, though Buettner relates her evidence at various points to parallel examples within the British and other European empires. But what about another kind of empire family: those families whose activities branched out across multiple sites of empire? It may be that imperial history is as elusive a construct as the empire itself was: meaningful as a general label, but fragmenting in the specifics. Nevertheless, if imperial history is to have any substance, then transnational approaches are essential. “Empire families” in the broader, pan-imperial sense, would offer an excellent entry-point into a genuinely imperial history of this kind.

Whether or not British India provides a reliable basis for discussing “the British Empire” as a whole remains an open question. But the particular contours of the British Indian experience may help explain why it is that fascination with the raj continues to thrive so vigorously in Britain today: people are still trying to figure this peculiar creature out. (Strong testament to the appetite for books on the subject lies in the fact that Buettner’s academic monograph has received reviews from such luminaries as David Gilmour in the *The London Review of Books*, Robert McCrum in *The Observer*, and John Keegan in *The Times Literary Supplement*.) In her conclusion on the phenomenon of raj nostalgia, Buettner shows how British India became romanticized partly through the efforts of empire families, eager to clear themselves of accusations levied against them by the first post-colonial generation. Charles Allen, who interviewed numerous

children of empire for his radio series and book *Plain Tales from the Raj*, described himself as defending “good decent people ... [who] were being vilified simply for being part of an historical process over which they had no control” (p. 252).

But what raj nostalgia really points to is an enduring need in Britain to find some way of balancing out the pros and cons of a resolutely non-black-and-white imperial relationship. (Compare with France, where there is little in the way of nostalgic reminiscence about empire in Algeria, and general consensus about its iniquities.) Perhaps this is why Asian British cultural productions have recently become so successful in Britain: Monica Ali’s novel *Brick Lane*, Gurinder Chadha’s movie *Bend it Like Beckham*, the West End musical “Bombay Dreams,” and bhangra-influenced dance club hits. If the legacies of Anglo-Indians in the old sense (Britons living in India) are hard for the politically correct to embrace, Britons today have no problem celebrating this new breed of Anglo-Indians (Asians living in Britain) as the smiling faces of post-colonialism. Elizabeth Buettner’s book provides splendid historical insight into a set of connections between Britain and India that continue to influence British consciousness in unexpectedly enduring ways.

Note

[1]. Diary of Charlotte Clive, British Library, Oriental and India Office Collections, WD 4235, p. 102.

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