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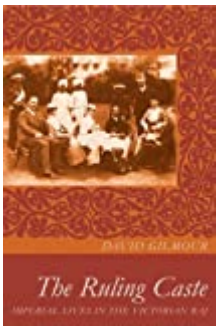

David Gilmour. *The Ruling Caste: Imperial Lives in the Victorian Raj.* New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2005. xxviii + 381 pp. $27.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-374-28354-4.

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The Steel Frame of the Raj

It is a stunning if well-known anomaly of British imperial history that British India–the empire's largest and most valuable possession, with a 1901 population of about 300 million–was administered by a mere 1000 or so civil servants. (Today, the IRS employs 100 times that to collect taxes from a U.S. population of roughly the same size as India's in 1901.) Sprinkled across the subcontinent, members of the tiny Indian Civil Service handled everything from collecting revenue, acting as magistrates, and maintaining roads, to killing wolves, hyenas, and vipers that menaced rural populations. Responsible for the daily business of British rule, ICS men were perhaps the most professional "imperialists" the empire ever had. Yet it is in the nature of dutiful bureaucrats not to attract notice, and few historians have studied their activities and lives.

Following the standard set by his meticulous biographies of Lord Curzon and Rudyard Kipling, David Gilmour's *The Ruling Caste* provides a carefully researched and eminently readable portrait of these men of empire. The book tracks the careers of ICS employees (or Civilians) from recruitment to retirement, along with their social milieux, leisure pursuits, and family affairs. Most of Gilmour's subjects were "competition wallahs," who joined the Indian Civil Service after an entrance examination was introduced in the 1850s. (Entry under the East India Company had been chiefly patronage-based.) At about the age of twenty, with barely two years' university study behind them, the successful few shipped out to India to be immersed in junior administrative duties, language study, a profoundly alien climate, and the rigid protocol of Anglo-Indian communities.

Responsibilities and life-styles within the ICS varied greatly. Many Civilians would climb toward the rank of District Officer, a "pooh-bah" in charge of an entire district of several thousand square miles. Others might move into the judicial branch of the service and become High Court judges (despite their lack of legal training). Civilians with good senses of etiquette, and prowess at cricket or riding, could do well as Residents in the courts of India's quasi-independent princes, where they worked to promote British interests behind the scenes–and sometimes to depose troublesome rulers altogether. Different locations produced challenges and approaches of their

own. The celebrated Lawrence brothers in the 1840s Punjab developed a style of rough-and-ready administration (known as the "Punjab School") that flourished in the frontier region, India's premier military recruiting ground. Civilians on the eastern frontiers of India, meanwhile, contended with rough Anglo-Indian planters and head-hunting Naga tribesmen; three Political Agents were violently killed there in just three years. Officials in Madras had to contend with devastating famine in the mid-1870s while the callous Viceroy Lord Lytton actually cut relief efforts.

But some constants of experience obtained across the service. ICS members often experienced incredible isolation. Civilians spent eight years in India before their first furlough; and even within India, many spent prolonged periods away from other Europeans. ICS men typically did not marry till their early thirties. The expatriate existence–or exile existence, as many saw it–also involved coping with frequent disease and premature death. This was one reason that Britons who could afford it sent their small children to England to be educated, inflicting a traumatic separation on all involved. But perhaps the most poignant commonality among Indian Civil Servants was the experience of retiring, after decades abroad, to a "home" they barely knew. Many Anglo-Indians clustered in enclaves such as Cheltenham and Bayswater, finding solace in the company of others similarly estranged.

The Ruling Caste is an extremely valuable addition to what remains a rather thin scholarly literature on the Victorian British empire. Indeed, probably the best-known picture of Anglo-Indian administrators is fictional: E. M. Forster's *A Passage to India*. Yet Forster, Gilmour reminds us, was not well informed about the workings of British India; his characterizations of the ICS serve mostly to demonstrate contemporary anti-imperial critique. Gilmour does not fully dismiss the snobberies, pettinesses, and prejudices attributed to Anglo-Indians of this period. But as he observes, "British imperialists are among the most stereotyped of extinct breeds" (p. 297)–and British imperial women especially, a portrayal that owes more to colonial misogyny than to post-colonial political correctness. His book offers a refreshing corrective to such well-worn clichÃ©s, and sits comfortably alongside Elizabeth Buettner's recent *Empire Families* (2004) in building a serious new historiography of the Raj.

Equally significant (and also like Buettner), Gilmour is more interested in average experiences than extraordinary ones. Though the Indian Civil Service was of course an "elite" organization, it was also a meritocracy, and its members were mostly middle class. Thus, while this is hardly a history from below–and the field is open for a thorough study of India's "poor whites"–it is squarely a history from the middle, and contributes to an ongoing excavation of bourgeois imperial experience. Gilmour does not run to meditations on the mutually constitutive relationship between empire and social class. But he writes eloquently about the everyday plights of ICS men and their families: boredom, loneliness, displacement in its many forms. In the process, he compellingly achieves that union between domestic and imperial histories that has become a hallmark of the "new imperial history."

Nevertheless, this book will certainly strike some readers as academically or politically conservative. Gilmour is a fundamentally sympathetic biographer, and has no time for post-colonial critique. Most of all, *The Ruling Caste* is unashamedly and explicitly Anglocentric. Gilmour purposely sets out to understand how Anglo-Indian administrators lived, not "how the administration actually *worked*," which "would require a study ? of the hundreds of thousands of Indian subordinates" who assisted the ICS (p. xviii). Indians barely figure in these pages, beyond the odd prince or criminal. At some level this is fair, since–with a few notable exceptions, as Gilmour explains–Indians were more or less kept out of the covenanted ranks of the ICS, not least by the fact that entrance exams were only held in London. (One of the first demands of the Indian National Congress was for ICS exams to be held simultaneously in India.) Still, one could imagine ways of delving more sensitively into the interaction of ICS rulers and the Indians they ruled. Virtually nothing is said about the Indian response to the ICS, and little more on ICS attitudes to Indians. Though Gilmour appropriately sidelines Forster, he might have taken a cue from George Orwell, whose writings on his own ICS experience in the 1920s brilliantly probe exactly these dynamics.

To be sure, much had changed in India in the twenty years between Victoria's death and the arrival of young Orwell in Burma: all-India nationalism was consolidating, and British rule hardening in reactionary ways. By ending his study in 1901, Gilmour is better able to conclude with the positive assessement that the ICS "represented the British Empire at its best and at its most altruistic" (p. 328). This ending point is significant too, since willingly or not, studies of the British Empire these days usually get leashed to current imperial concerns. Gilmour rightly resists the temptation to make such links himself. But there are thought-provoking echoes here

with Niall Ferguson's recent call to American youth to serve the new empire in Iraq and elsewhere. *The Ruling Caste* paints a historical picture of imperial service that could supply present-day recruits with reasons to feel good about such jobs. On the other hand, even leaving moral and political judgments aside, it also makes it hard to envy them.