

Imperialism in India under a microscope

BOOK REVIEW

The British in India: A Social History of the Raj
By David Gilmour. Illustrated. 618 pp.
Farrar, Straus & Giroux. \$35.

BY ISAAC CHOTINER

The United Kingdom's still-roiling Brexit controversy, with the referendum's most fervent supporters boasting of an unleashed Britain recapturing imperial-era glory, has tended to leave the messier, bloodier details of colonialism unexamined. From this distance, and with rose-tinted glasses, the British Empire — especially as it extended to India — can be viewed as an example of a selfless commitment to civilizing the world while standing atop it. And yet, as David Gilmour writes of the British mind-set during the imperial heyday, "It was as if the British, at almost every level of society, were proud to have India as their jewel but did not want to spend much time admiring the object: It was just nice to know that it was in the bank and to be able to boast about it." Even a couple of centuries ago, applying a microscope to British rule in India — let alone learning about Indians themselves — was inevitably a more complex, and fraught, undertaking than most Britons had any wish to engage in.

With "The British in India: A Social History of the Raj," Gilmour, metaphorical microscope in hand, has written a broad-ranging but precise and intimate examination of the British men and women who served and lived on the subcontinent. A historian of Italy and Britain, a biographer of Kipling and of the onetime viceroy of India, Lord Curzon, as well as a prolific essayist, he is ideally suited to the task. But this is not a book about the evils of colonialism; the devil is not in these details. What interests him, in this book at least, are not the larger questions of politics, or economics, or the global position of Britain — all of them factors that helped determine the country's imperial stance — but instead the often gritty, colorfully distinct stories that constituted the



A British family celebrating Christmas in India around 1900.

RISCHGITZ/GETTY IMAGES

individual British experience. He is also fascinated by the social relations among and within classes, and how mores changed over a vast era that ended with independence, partition and the birth of Pakistan in 1947. It is a finely wrought history of the British in India that does not really examine what the British did to India — or to Indians.

"The British in India" actually begins in the period before the formation of the British Raj in 1858, which was a direct response to the Indian rebellion of the previous year against the East India Company. That entity, created in 1600, really only came into great prominence in the middle of the 18th century. (The British edition's subtitle, "Three Centuries of Ambition and Experience," is both better and more accurate than "A Social History of the Raj.") Over these years, the "mental journey" of the British, as one writer quoted by Gilmour characterized it, could be charted as "Greed, Scorn, Fear and Indifference," in precisely that order. Gilmour's narrative doesn't really unfold in this chronological fashion, but a consistent theme is how a relatively few Britons ruled a vast territory, and how lonely and isolated their experiences could be. They were a cross section of people, soldiers and civil servants, often the black sheep of

The British were proud to have India as their jewel, but they didn't want to spend time thinking about it.

their families, sometimes criminals seeking a clean slate and, especially at first, men simply out to make a quick buck. "India's chief allure for Europeans of the 18th century," Gilmour writes, "was its wealth and the chance of getting their hands on some of it." Gilmour is particularly good on the Indian Civil Service — a subject he has previously written about — which presided over India during the 90 years of formal Raj rule. It did so with a seriousness of purpose — and with an increasing number of Indians in its ranks — that was lacking in earlier periods.

Part of the pleasure of this book is that Gilmour has clearly spent eons scouring archives for diaries and letters, and has a real feel for domestic life. Some of the best sections concern relations between the sexes. In the years of the East India Company, British men tended to live with Indian women, who were often referred to as "bibis." Gilmour shows how these relationships were often meaningful, despite the obvious power imbalances and inherent injustice involved, and also explains the significance of how they came to an end. "The eclipse of the Indian mistress has traditionally been blamed on the arrival — in large numbers — of British women," he writes, going on to explain that as

travel became easier over the years, women were more willing to make the long, and occasionally harrowing, journey from the British Isles. "As an obvious consequence, the British came to know and understand India very much less well. The old Company officers with their bibis had lived at least partly in another culture, imbibing, even passively, the scents and sounds of other peoples and other religions; they were bound to learn not only the grammar of their lovers' language but also some of its nuances."

Gilmour does not offer much in the way of assistance to people who may be unfamiliar with the workings of the British administration in India, or the contours of Indian history, but he is so wide-ranging and diligent that it almost doesn't matter. Trying to capture the British psychology and experience is a worthy endeavor, as is a willingness to paint the conquerors with more than one brush (though Gilmour does take the conventional view that British society in India was what he calls "phillistine"). But some of the gaps in his story eventually become glaring.

"I have not tried to put forward a thesis or make a particular argument: This book is a social history rather than a political one, and it is about individuals rather than institutions," he writes in the conclusion. This is under-

mined, however, by a quasidefense of the British project, or at least an attack on its modern-day opponents. He calls the current debate on the subject "smug" and adds, "Imperialism, which usually means the conquest and exploitation of one people by another, involves deaths and injustices, but that does not mean that it did nothing positive during its 3,000-year history." This is a straw man, and about as convincing as several of his comparisons between British imperialists and modern NGOs. Gilmour, who beautifully shows the mixed motives of the individuals who inhabit his book, is surely aware that the purpose of many of the institutions staffed by those individuals was specifically to enrich Britain at the expense of India. Good people fight in bad wars; evil regimes can make the trains run on time. It will not do merely to observe that human beings are complicated. A quick glance at, say, the looming Brexit catastrophe shows that it was brought about through a mixture of motives and miscalculations. Such was the case with British imperialism, but our understanding of the complexities of the men (and it was mostly men) behind it need not blind us to its horrors.

Isaac Chotiner is a staff writer at *The New Yorker*.