

Colonial subalterns of Empire: Australians in India during the movement for Swaraj,

1920 - 1939

Richard Gehrman, University of Southern Queensland, Toowoomba¹

I do not think it occurred to any of us that we were in India on sufferance, and we should have felt scandalised if it had been suggested that the Army in India was in fact one of occupation. We were still living in a closed an artificial world and we affected to ignore Indian political aspirations ... Major John Morris.²

Introduction

In about 1983, I was renting a house in inner-city Red Hill, enjoying the Brisbane share house life described so well in the works of Nick Earls and John Birmingham.³ One of the more eccentric old characters who lived next door was known as Old Jimmy. He was a typical elderly neighbour that young university dropouts (as I then was) would seek to avoid – his conversations were rambling, prone to excessive anecdotes and hard to understand. One evening after work I was caught by Jimmy, who began to make disparaging comments about the propensity of the neighbouring family who managed to somehow keep two goats in their small banana patch. He then recounted a tale of his father who before ‘the War’ had served in the police in India, where he had met ‘the richest man in the world’, a miser who had also lived on goat’s milk and bananas. In the inter-war era here was only one person notorious for both his wealth and for his extreme personal economy who would have matched the epithet of the richest man in the world. This was of course the Nizam of Hyderabad.⁴ Without realising it at the time, I had stumbled on a vanished link to the personal dimensions of Australia's forgotten relationship with India.⁵

The Australian military has an Indian history, but in the interwar period Australian viewpoints were conditioned by the assumptions and values of the White Australia Policy⁶

¹ Email: gehrmann@usq.edu.au. I wish to thank Professor David Walker (Deakin University) for constructive comments on an earlier version of this paper.

² John Morris, *Hired to Kill* (Bungay: Richard Clay, 1960), p.205.

³ See Nick Earls, *ZigZag Street* (Sydney: Bantam, 2000) and John Birmingham, *He Died with a Felafel in his Hand* (Sydney: Autopsy, 1995).

⁴ The Nizam of Hyderabad was the ruler of the largest state in India, and he had a controlling influence over the southern India diamond mines. The 25th anniversary of his rule in 1937 achieved the status of a cover of *Time Magazine*, and he was popularly known in the 1930s as the richest in the world. For a recent Australian account of the Nizam’s family, see John Zubrzycki, *The Last Nizam: An Indian Prince in the Australian Outback* (Sydney: Macmillan, 2006).

⁵ In this paper, unless otherwise specified the term India will refer to those territories of the British Empire that were regarded as being part of India in the interwar period. This includes modern day Pakistan, India, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Burma.

⁶ For a full discussion on this, see Andrew Markus, *Fear and Hatred: Purifying Australia and California 1850-1901* (Sydney: Hale and Uremonger, 1978).

and by the Australia's British identity. The founders of White Australia had noted the distinct differences between Australians as citizen-subjects of the empire and Indians as subject citizens.⁷ Yet at a time when Asian settlement in Australia was prohibited throughout the inter-war period and while intermarriage was condemned,⁸ many individual Australians managed to interact with Asians and with Australians of Asian descent in a positive and easy manner.⁹ The Australian attitude towards Asia was multifaceted, and the cultural identity of Australians was still evolving. Prime Minister Stanley Melbourne Bruce¹⁰ might have been ridiculed by his political opponents for his English orientation and affectations, but he still felt comfortable enough to persist with them. Many Australians still felt an Anglo-Australian identity, but were confident that they were worthy of equal treatment from their British counterparts and that their own distinctive Australian nature had been recognized by the British.¹¹ A sense of British identity was felt across class lines,¹² but affinity towards British culture was more significant for aspirational Australians of the middle and upper middle classes who identified with British social values.¹³ Their privileging of these values created a disjuncture between their desire to seek acceptance in British society by aping British mores, and their newfound confidence in their

⁷ This was clearly articulated by future Labour Prime Minister Christian Watson, *Australian House of Representatives Debates* 4 (5 September 1901), p.4634.

⁸ One example of the post Federation hysteria on this issue and on the settlement of a white child in India is the case of Lillie Khan, her husband and children. Margaret Allen, 'Betraying the White Nation: The Case of Lillie Khan,' in *Historicising Whiteness: Transnational Perspectives on The Construction of an Identity* (eds Leigh Boucher, Jane Carey and Katherine Ellinghaus (Melbourne: RMIT Publishing in association with the School of Historical Studies, 2007).

⁹ As an example of this paradoxical relationship, at the height of the White Australian Policy the Australian Rugby Union team of 1938 was more ethnically diverse than the team that won the Rugby World Cup in 1991, and included Australians of Japanese and Indian ancestry who were allowed to be Australians, but who would not have been allowed to immigrate to Australia. Winston Ide's father was Japanese and his mother was European, and Cecil Ramali was of Indian, aboriginal and European ancestry. Both fought in the Australian Army during the Second World War and were captured in Singapore, and Ide subsequently died while a prisoner of the Japanese. See Jack Pollard, *Australian Rugby: The Game and the Players* (Sydney: Pan Macmillan, 1994).

¹⁰ For a new representation of Bruce as a figure who harmonised Australian nationalism, British imperialism and internationalism, see David Lee, *Stanley Melbourne Bruce: Australian Internationalist* (London: Continuum, 2010).

¹¹ For a humorous contemporary British colonial view of the unique and unorthodox character of Australian soldiers, see Claude Jarvis, *Oriental Spotlight* (London: John Murray 1937), pp.137-143.

¹² It has been argued that being British was more pervasive in Australia than in Britain. See Neville Meaney, 'Britishness and Australian identity: The Problem of Nationalism in Australian History and Historiography,' *Australian Historical Studies* 32, 116 (2001), pp.79-82.

¹³ As an illustration of the archetypical Anglo Australian, there is no better example of the career of the long serving Australian Foreign Minister and Governor General, Richard Casey. W.J. Hudson, *Casey* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1986). As well as being a Cambridge educated Anglo-Australian, Casey served as Governor of Bengal between 1944 and 1946. For a travel writer's depiction of Casey in Bengal see Frank Clune, *Song of India* (Sydney: Invincible, 1946), pp.250-263.

Australianness.¹⁴ While many Australian Army officers may have come from a more diverse social background than their British counterparts,¹⁵ the socialisation process of the Royal Military College Duntroon plus the wider socialisation of British imperial mores¹⁶ strengthened their desire to identify with imperial British values.¹⁷ This was the Australian society that shaped several hundred Australian soldiers who would travel to India in the 1920s and 1930s.

The need to consider both an imperial and a national approach in comparative history has been identified by A.G Hopkins,¹⁸ as has the significance of transnational perspectives for Australian history.¹⁹ This paper develops a field of enquiry drawn from the earlier scholarship on the European experience in colonial Asia that followed the BBC radio series *Plain Tales of the Raj* by Charles Allen, and Allen's subsequent eponymous book.²⁰ The nostalgic recollections of those who had lived in India before 1947 heralded a flood of recollections about British India,²¹ and developed academic research interest in the colonial experience.²² This was extended to incorporate the Australian experience of colonial Asia by Jennifer Cushman,²³ Beverley Kingston²⁴ and David Walker.²⁵ This paper further develops

¹⁴ An amusing account of the interplay between unpretentious Australians, and Australians who adhere to 'un-Australian' snobbish British colonial manners is provided in William Hatfield, *Buffalo Jim* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1946), pp.179–187.

¹⁵ While there is a perception that officer selection in the Australian Army was more egalitarian and diverse than the British Army, the British Army was not as exclusive as one might imagine. Holmes notes that at the time of the First World War many 'were only just on the right side of the borders of gentility', and that commissions were easy to obtain once the war began. See Richard Holmes, *Tommy: The British Soldier on the Western Front 1914–1918* (London: Harper, 2005), pp.120–121 and 140–146.

¹⁶ For one account of the impact of imperial ideological influences on the development of Australian society, see Robert Dixon, *Writing the Colonial Adventure: Race, Gender and Nation in Anglo Australian Popular Fiction, 1875 – 1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

¹⁷ Australian soldiers in the future knew they would be marginalised in British military society. In a later generation, the Hong Kong born but Australian raised John Essex-Clark realised that he 'was viewed as an unpolished and brash Australian', and that if he transferred to the British Army he would be marginalised, being seen as 'the CO's (commanding officer's) 'colonial jester' and rugby officer'. John Essex-Clark, *Maverick Soldier: An Infantryman's Story* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1991), p.64.

¹⁸ A.G. Hopkins, 'Back to the Future: From National History to Imperial History', *Past and Present* 164 (1999).

¹⁹ Ann Curthoys and Marilyn Lake, 'Introduction,' in *Connected Worlds: History in Transnational Perspective* (eds Ann Curthoys and Marilyn Lake), (Canberra: Australian University Press, 2006), pp.5–15.

²⁰ Charles Allen (ed.), *Plain Tales from the Raj: Images of British India in the Twentieth Century* (London: Futura, 1976).

²¹ Examples of this include Raleigh Trevelyan, *The Golden Oriole: Childhood, Family and Friends in India* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1987), M. M. Kaye, *Golden Afternoon* (London: Viking 1990) M. M. Kaye, *Enchanted Evening* (London: Viking 1997) and Michael Foss, *Out of India: A Raj Childhood* (London: Michael O'Mara, 2001). This memoir genre has gone beyond the Indian experience, as seen in accounts such as John Nunneley's *Tales from the King's African Rifles* (London: Cassell, 2001).

²² For a study of the colonial community, see John Butcher, *The British in Malaya 1880 – 1941: The Social History of a European Community in Colonial South-East Asia* (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1979). A recent study of Indian experiences is Elizabeth Buettner, *Empire Families: Britons in Late Imperial India* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

²³ Jennifer Cushman, 1986, 'An Australian "Tales from the South China Seas?"', *Asian Studies Review* 9, 3, (1986), and Jennifer Cushman, 1988, 'Dazzled by distant fields: The Australian economic presence in Southeast Asia', *Asian Studies Review* 12, 1 (1988).

²⁴ Beverley Kingston, 'The taste of India', *Australian Cultural History* 9 (1990).

the understanding of the Australian relationship with Asia in the era prior to Asian independence by examining the written recorded experience of Australian soldiers in India.

Reasons for going to India

The Army in India consisted of both British troops and Indian troops.²⁶ Regiments of the all-European British Army were rotated between Britain and the empire, and might be stationed in India for several years at a time. The Indian Army was made up of predominantly Indian soldiers commanded by British officers and Indian warrant officers, although during the 1920s and 30s increasing numbers of Indian commissioned officers were replacing their British counterparts through a gradual process of Indianisation.²⁷ There was a clear racial divide between British officers and non-British soldiers, and Australians were expected to conform to this.

So who were these Australians entering service of an empire under challenge from the forces of modern nationalism? The majority were trainees under what would today be described as an international defence cooperation scheme. The Australian Army after Federation was a hybrid creation based on democratic idealism antithetical to a Prussian-style professional army, and on the more prosaic grounds of economy.²⁸ A small professional core of officers and instructors served as the cadre for a large citizen militia army, based on the Swiss model. Male citizens were obligated to undertake compulsory part-time military training and apart from small units of coastal defence artillery and cadre staff, there were few full-time soldiers to command. This system had begun before the First World War, and after the wartime expansion that created the Australian Imperial Force, there was a reversion to the earlier model in the post-war era. In 1914 there were 3,000 permanent force members and 42,000 militia soldiers, and in 1939 only 1,800 permanent soldiers and 27,000 militia soldiers.²⁹ Australia had also established a four year officer training college to create a pool of young officers, who after intensive training would be consigned to the dull ignominy of depot service in an industrial suburb, waiting for trainees to arrive on a Tuesday night or weekend. These officers needed professional experience

²⁵ David Walker, *Anxious Nation: Australia and the Rise of Asia 1850-1939* (St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1999), and David Walker, 'Survivalist Anxieties: Australian Responses to Asia, 1890s to the Present', *Australian Historical Studies* 120 (2002).

²⁶ See Richard Holmes, *Sahib: The British Soldier in India; 1750 to 1914* (London: Harper and Collins, 2006).

²⁷ Charles Trench, *The Indian Army and the King's Enemies 1900-1947* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1988), pp.116-117. This also occurred in the civil administration - for an examination of the slow Indianization of the Indian Political Service, see Terence Coen, *The Indian Political Service* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1971), pp.37-41.

²⁸ For a detailed examination of the Australian military in this era see John Mordike, *An Army for a Nation: A History of Australian Military Developments 1880-1914* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1992).

²⁹ Gavin Long, *Australia in the War 1939-1945; To Benghazi* (Canberra: Australian War Memorial, 1961), p.24.

with full-time troops if they were to have the practical knowledge to perform their duties to an appropriate professional standard. The solution was to send them to India for attachment to a British or Indian Army unit for one to two years of real soldiering.³⁰ As Australia had such a small professional officer cadre, the experiences of this small group would have a disproportionate impact on both their peers and subordinates in future decades.

A further group of officers seen as potential leaders and managers were selected to attend the Indian Army Staff College in Quetta.³¹ While smaller in numbers, this cohort exercised a significant influence over the entire officer corps of the Australian Army by 1939. At the start of the Second World War, fewer than 40 officers who had attended either the Staff Colleges of Camberley and Quetta were available for service,³² and they formed an elite group of planners and administrators occupying key positions. Their two year course gave selected officers what would today be called a postgraduate study experience, and in the case of some (such as General George Vasey and Major-General Arthur Selby)³³ was followed by attachment to the Army in India, a valuable period of consolidation training.³⁴

The final group of Australians who experienced military life in India during the interwar period were economic opportunists who saw service in India as an escape from the Great Depression. During the Depression the Australian government was unable to offer employment to all its Duntroon graduates, and the imperial army offered well paid jobs with a future.³⁵ There were few opportunities for professional advancement in an Australia which had cancelled compulsory military training to save money, which might have relieved many a young trainee such as Graham McInnes,³⁶ but did nothing to promote professional commitment of future officers. Transfer to imperial service was easy as the self identity of the Australian middle classes was often Anglo Australian rather than narrowly Australia-

³⁰Of the 690 students who graduated between 1914 and 1946, 288 served on one year exchanges overseas, mostly in India. This applied to the majority who graduated in the interwar period. Joseph Lee, *Duntroon: The Royal Military College of Australia, 1911-46* (Canberra: Australian War Memorial, 1952), p.181.

³¹Australia's most noted soldier Field Marshall Sir Thomas Blamey undertook the Quetta Staff course in 1912-1913. For more on the staff college system and its German antecedents see Martin Kitchen, *The German Officer Corps 1890-1914* (Oxford Clarendon Press, 1968), Dennis E. Showalter, 'The Prusso-German RMA, 1840-1871', in *The Dynamics of Military Revolution 1300-2050* (eds McGregor Knox and Williamson Murray), (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001) and David French, 'Officer Education and training in the British Regular Army, 1919-39', in *Military Education: Past, Present and Future* (eds Gregory Kennedy and Keith Neilson), (Westport Conn.: Praeger, 2002).

³²David Horner, *High Command, Australia and Allied Strategy, 1939-1945*, (Sydney: George Allen & Unwin in association with the Australian War Memorial, Canberra, 1982), p.5.

³³For reasons of brevity officers are identified by the rank they held at the end of their career unless otherwise specified.

³⁴David Horner, *General Vasey's War* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1992).

³⁵Godfrey Robinson, *Decades of a Duntroon Bastard*, p.58. By 1939, 27 graduates had transferred to the Indian or British armies. Joseph Lee, *Duntroon: The Royal Military College of Australia, 1911-46* (Canberra: Australian War Memorial, 1952), p.183.

³⁶Graham McInnes, *Humping my Bluey* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1966).

centric, which might explain why the sons of national hero and former commander of the Light Horse General Sir Harry Chauvel could join what now would be regarded as a foreign army. While professional advancement was a motive, another push factor was the cost cutting measure of ordering officers on two weeks unpaid leave each quarter to save money.³⁷ The effects of Depression-era retrenchment on professional soldiers was significant, with permanent force numbers falling to 800 by 1933.³⁸

To understand the motivation of these Australians, it is necessary to consider their desire to seek professional advancement and experience in an Australian context where peace time conditions offered few opportunities to enhance a military career. The same motivation pushes Australians to undertake exchange postings with the British, Canadian and United States armed forces today, and also deploy overseas to Timor, the Solomon Islands, Afghanistan and a variety of United Nations peacekeeping missions.

The interwar military experience was almost entirely a male experience. While hundreds of Australian female military nurses had served in India during the First World War,³⁹ there were no positions for female soldiers in peacetime, and thus no accounts of the Australian female experience of colonial India at this time. The closest we can come to a female military experience is to observe the lives of the small number of Australian military wives. The experiences of wives such as Mary Vasey who conformed to the customs of the Raj contrast sharply those Australian women such as Joan Falkiner and Molly Fink who rebelled against the racial and social conventions of their day by marrying Indians.⁴⁰

Thematic frameworks of the Australian experience of India: negative, neutral and positive

There are key themes that appear in the narratives of the Australian military experience of India. These themes can be arranged in terms of their degree of distance from India and Indians, and fall into categories of negative, neutral and positive.⁴¹ Firstly, the negative theme is a fear of Indians in terms of their threat to Australia by invasion or migration, and

³⁷ Robinson, *Decades of a Duntroon Bastard*, p.57.

³⁸ The militia numbers declined to 27,000 in the same year. Chris Coulthard-Clark, *Duntroon: The Royal Military College of Australia 1911-1986* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1986), p.129.

³⁹ Ruth Rae, 'Reading Between Unwritten Lines: Australian Army Nurses in India, 1916-19', *Journal of the Australian War Memorial* 36 (2002), <http://www.awm.gov.au/journal/j36/nurses.asp>; and Jan Bassett, *Guns and Brooches: Australian Army Nursing from the Boer War to the Gulf War* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1992)

⁴⁰ Suzanne Falkiner, *Joan in India* (Melbourne: Australian Scholarly Publishing, 2008); Edward Duyker and Coralie Younger, *Molly and the Rajah: Race, Romance and the Raj* (Sylvania: Australia Mauritania Books, 1991).

⁴¹ For an examination of the duality of fear and fascination with Asia refer to Alison Broinowski, *The Yellow Lady: Australian Impressions of Asia* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1996).

fear of mutiny or rebellion by Indians.⁴² Allied to this is also the feeling of disgust and horror regarding Indian poverty. Both of these negative themes relate to the broader constructs of Eurocentric racism, and reveal a high degree of distance from India and Indians. The next theme is a neutral experience of India based on the enjoyment of personal economic benefits derived from what is in today's terms an expatriate relationship. Associated with this is a sense of clinical detachment and professionalism, which becomes the dispassionate acceptance of difference between Australians and the Indian world. Finally, the positive theme is a fascination with the exotic Orient,⁴³ and associated with this is concern and disquiet regarding the inequities of British imperialism,⁴⁴ a feeling noted by two interwar Australian travellers who 'as democratic Australians' sympathised with Indian nationalists.⁴⁵

This paper will detail and examine the Australian military experience of India in the interwar era, and describe these life experiences. Did Australians merely mirror British attitudes of the day and feel the same as their British counterparts, or was the Australian experience different? By examining Australian accounts of the Indian experience, the gradual transition to a changing and more positive Australian attitude will be revealed.

Australian experiences in India

Many of the Australians who served in India achieved prominence in their future careers, and had a significant influence both on Australian society and on the Australian military. Among those who served in India were future Chiefs of the General Staff, such as Major-General A.H. Hellstrom (Royal Artillery in India, 1924), Lieutenant-General Sir Ragnar Garratt (Queen's Bays Cavalry, 1923), and Lieutenant-General Sir Thomas Daly (16th/5th Lancers, 1938). A former soldier who achieved prominence in a less public sphere was the future head of the Australian Secret Intelligence Organisation (1950-70) Brigadier Charles Spry, whose time in India between 1935 to 1936 included campaigning on the North-West

⁴² This was not confined to the Indian Rebellion of 1857, as women were also considered vulnerable after that time both in real daily life and also in fiction. See Margaret MacMillan, *Women of the Raj* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1988), pp.103-109 and Walker *Anxious Nation*, pp.26-35. For examples in the literature of colonialism, see Robin Lewis, 'The Literature of the Raj', in *Asia in Western Fiction* (eds. Robin Winks and James Rush), (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1990).

⁴³ This is the Asia that Westerners have taken it upon themselves to define and shape. Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon, 1978), p.3.

⁴⁴ Such a varied range of responses is not only found in Australia. For an account of Canadian attitudes during a similar period, see Paula Hastings, 'Fellow British Subjects or Colonial 'Others'? Race, Empire, and Ambivalence in Canadian Representations of India in the Early Twentieth Century,' *American Review of Canadian Studies* 38, 1 (2008).

⁴⁵ Owen Wright and Edward Wright, *London to Calcutta 1938* (Bedford: Little Hills Press, 1988), p.118.

Frontier.⁴⁶ Australians who attended Staff College at Quetta also subsequently achieved prominence. These included General Sir Vernon Sturdee, who was to accept the Japanese surrender at Rabaul as commander of the First Australian Army (in India from 1922-1923) and General George Vasey (in India 1928-9).

Vasey and his wife Jessie enjoyed the experience of military life in India, and were fortunate to follow this with a two year military exchange to India that begun in October 1933. To ease the rigour of life in imperial India they were accompanied by their nanny Kitty, who was brought with them to look after their son Robert.⁴⁷ Vasey's arrival coincided with terrorist attacks on Europeans and government officials, and when he arrived his brigade was undertaking internal security duties.⁴⁸ But there was more to India than work. A condition of service in the enervating climate of India was the provision of extensive leave granted for European officers and Indian soldiers alike. While Indian soldiers might spend the two months of summer leave working on a family farm,⁴⁹ Europeans relaxed in cooler mountainous areas known as hill stations,⁵⁰ and the Vasey family found themselves in the Himalayas and even climbed some smaller mountains. Although he was to a unit in the North-West Frontier area, Vasey was unable to take an active part in fighting in Waziristan in 1936, but as a staff officer he conducted the operational planning activities associated with this short campaign, giving him a greater exposure to the demands of active military service than most of his contemporaries.⁵¹ Overall, his experiences gave him a far greater understanding of India than most Australians of the 1930s.

Another Australian whose experience of India went beyond attachment to a British unit or training at Staff College was General Sir John Wilton, a future head of the Australian Defence Force.⁵² Wilton had the misfortune to have graduated from the Royal Military College Duntroon in 1930 at the height of the Great Depression when wages were low and promotion chances were poor.⁵³ In 1931 he accepted the offer to join the British Army as an artillery officer, and served in India and Burma until just before the Second

⁴⁶ This is the Australian equivalent of the FBI or MI5.

⁴⁷ This was unusual, as most European children in India had an Indian nursemaid.

⁴⁸ Horner, *General Vasey's War*, p.29.

⁴⁹ Charles Trench, *The Indian Army and the King's Enemies* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1988), p.119.

⁵⁰ See Gillian Wright, *Hill Stations of India* (Hong Kong: Odyssey, 1991), pp.15-27.

⁵¹ Horner, *General Vasey's War*, pp.32-34.

⁵² Wilton was to become Chief of the General Staff (Chief of Army) then Chairman, Chief of Staff's Committee (1966 - 1970), the equivalent to today's Chief of the Defence Force.

⁵³ Promotion for regular army officers was slow at this time, especially in comparison to their part-time counterparts. Perry notes that it was common to remain a Lieutenant for eight years, before becoming a Captain for the next 10 to 12 years, a very slow rate of promotion when compared to those in the militia who in some cases were promoted from Lieutenant to Lieutenant-Colonel in 10 years. In the British Army of 1938 a Lieutenant-Colonel was paid £1,204 a year in comparison to an Australian of the same rank was paid £779 a year. Warren Perry, 'The Australian Staff Corps – its Origins, Duties, Status and Influence from October 1920 to the Outbreak of the War of 1939-45', *Sabretache* 36, 4 (1995), p.37.

World War. His diary paints a picture of a young man who appreciated the opportunities to live and work in India, even more so since this job brought with it extensive periods of leave in Australia.

Wilton was praised in his annual reports in 1935, being described by his commanding officer in 1935 as ‘most capable in his dealings with Indian personnel’ and ‘A thoroughly good officer’.⁵⁴ It was an extremely useful skill to be able to communicate in an Indian language and his report also commended him for his ability to speak Urdu well.⁵⁵ Wilton clearly had made a successful transition to the British Indian world, as the report from the Superior Reporting Officer further states that ‘I have a very high opinion of him and admire the way in which he has overcome the initial handicap of entering the service from a dominion.’⁵⁶ Clearly, if Wilton had any problematic Australian tendencies he had kept them well hidden. By January 1937 he had decided to transfer from the Royal Artillery to the Indian Army Ordnance Corps so he would earn enough money to get married as well as support his widowed stepmother and half sisters in Australia – and because it would be a ‘more satisfying and specialised job’.⁵⁷ Despite enjoying the benefits of service in India, he had made his first enquiries about a permanent return to Australia when on leave in Australia in 1936, and by May 1939 had arranged a transfer back to the Australian Army.

Wilton’s diary details routine career activities of training camps, promotion exams and signalling courses, and transfers to new units and locations. It presents tantalisingly brief entries of life in India with mention of one month’s leave to go with a friend on a mugger (crocodile) shooting trip to the Gora River in October 1933, while highlights of July 1935 were 10 days casual leave in Rangoon, playing in a polo tournament by the Chindwin River and helping to hunt down and kill a tiger at Maymyo.⁵⁸ By 1936 he qualified for 8 months combined leave in Australia which he began with a leisurely twenty-day sea voyage home, travelling through the Indonesian islands. His diary depiction of life in India seems focused around his short work hours, the relaxations of polo, golf and shooting, and his references to his enjoyable life in the officer’s mess, buying cars and the

⁵⁴ ‘Report by Lieutenant Colonel Commanding, 6th Field Brigade, Royal Artillery, Officer’s Immediate Commander, 1 March 1935’, in *Wilton Papers* PR 82/119, (3) 193X folder 1 of 2 (Canberra: Australian War Memorial).

⁵⁵ During his 1961 visit to India, after several days of hearing Urdu being spoken, he instinctively started to speak to one of the servants in fluent Urdu. Wilton Diary (31).

⁵⁶ Report by Colonel H W Wynter, Brigadier Royal Artillery, Eastern Command, 7 March 1935, in *Wilton Papers* PR 82/119, (3), 193X folder 1 of 2 (Canberra: Australian War Memorial).

⁵⁷ John Wilton, *The Diary and Journal of General Sir John G. N. Wilton, Royal Australian Army 1910 - 1977* (Estate of J.G.N. Wilton, 2000).

<http://www.raga.com/generalsirjohnwilton/generalsirjohnwilton.pdf>

⁵⁸ Wilton, *Diary and Journal*, p.4.

pleasure of living in a chummary or share house are typical of the experiences of a British officer at the time.⁵⁹

The young Australian's comments about the weather are balanced and objective, and his complaints about the dust and heat are what would be expected from any European living in this climate and are not placed within any racial framework, in contrast to the climate obsessions of an earlier generation. Many Europeans saw Asia as dirty and dangerous, but such views were not shared by Wilton. When he had bowel trouble at Ferozepore, he blamed it on 'the peculiar water to which the stomach must accommodate itself'⁶⁰ which he regarded as the expected consequence of moving to any new Indian military station – although he did note the effects were more drastic than anything he had experienced before! His diary certainly does not reveal negative attitudes towards India or Indians, and indeed it hardly mentions them, with the only reference of any Indian being a passing aside on the cooking duties of his bearer (servant) Lal Mohamed. India is a place where Wilton works, and the difficulties he faces might stem from being poorly treated by his superiors or dealing with less than competent peers, but there is a notable absence of any comment about wider social and political conditions within India. If he felt India was taking steps towards independence, or if he was aware of the system of limited self-government by the Indian National Congress that had been implemented after the 1937 elections,⁶¹ his diary does not reveal this.

Wilton's final diary entry on 4 May 1939 when leaving India for Australia is telling 'Sailed from Bombay on the 4th May for Australia. Had no regrets at leaving India'.⁶² His neutral, almost passive attitude to India is something he mentioned again more than two decades later when, as a senior officer in the Southeast Asia Treaty Organisation he visited Pakistan. He enjoyed this retrospective visit, although time had placed his youthful experiences in a different perspective.

This was quite a nostalgic visit for me. To be back in what was formerly part of the old India where I had served for eight years in the thirties as a junior officer, living in a military environment with little opportunity (and I must confess, desire) to know and understand very much about the social and political life of the civilian population. On this 20 year later visit as a mature,

⁵⁹ See for example John Masters, *Bugles and a Tiger* (London: Michael Joseph, 1956), Morris, *Hired to Kill* (and Robert Bristow, *Memories of the British Raj: A Soldier in India* (London: Johnson, 1974).

⁶⁰ Wilton, *Diary and Journal*, p.9.

⁶¹ These were the first elections involving widespread voting throughout India, and seven million Indians were allowed to vote. Under the new provincial system some powers (such as education) were given to the provincial assemblies while the Viceroy retained control over finance, foreign affairs and defence. See Andrew Muldoon *Empire, Politics and the Creation of the 1935 India Act: Last Act of the Raj* (London: Ashgate, 2009)

⁶² Wilton also felt the British authorities in India had been very stingy in terms of his severance leave, which might have also shaped this comment. Wilton, *Diary and Journal*, p.12.

experienced, senior officer, I was able to obtain a more comprehensive view of the nation.⁶³

He went on to reflect on how the country needed to take a stand against corruption by means of a strong and efficient government, something he believed that they had when the British ruled India. Yet how would he really know, as by his own admission he had not experienced the full reality of India when he had lived there under British rule?

A more extensive account of the Australian military experience in India comes from the memoirs of Godfrey Robinson. In his colourfully titled *Decades of a Duntroon Bastard*, he presents a far more Australian centric perspective in an account written after his retirement. Like many officers in the Australian military, he did not have an elite background, being the son of a lower middle-class father who spent most of his working life in the army before finally reaching the comparatively lowly rank of Lieutenant. Robinson served in India because the lifestyle was attractive. Like Wilton he had graduated from the Royal Military College during the Great Depression, and he welcomed the opportunity to leave a financially constrained, mostly part-time army to serve in a fully funded professional army in India. Unlike Wilton he remained in India during the Second World War (as did Charles Chauvell's sons), but he eventually returned to the Australian Army in 1947 following Indian independence. There would always be difficulties in making the adjustment from the very large Indian Army to a much smaller Australian Army,⁶⁴ and he became quickly disillusioned with his conditions of service and the resentments of Australian officers, factors that contributed to his premature resignation.

When examining Robinson's account of his life in India, it becomes apparent that the negative themes – those of invasion, fear of Indian migration, fear of rebellion, disgust and horror at poverty, Eurocentric racism - are not particularly significant. This is particularly noteworthy when it is considered that Robinson was an army lieutenant-colonel with nearly 20 years service in a racially structured colonial army, and was a person who in later life was openly sympathetic to the racially based governments of Rhodesia and South Africa. The fact that he could hold such conservative views and yet retain a positive attitude towards India and Indians demonstrates the complexity of Australian attitudes. While he could express horror and disgust at a particularly repellent beggar, the significance was that the beggar was so much more repellent than was normally the case. The problem for Robinson was not the beggar *per se* or beggars in general, the problem was how repellent

⁶³ Wilton, *Diary and Journal*, p.30.

⁶⁴ Lieutenant-Colonel John Masters experienced similar difficulties when serving with the British Army after independence and resigned, moving to America to become highly successful author. See John Clay, *John Masters: A Regimented Life* (London: Michael Joseph, 1992).

this one actually was compared to all the other beggars who were presumably not repellent.⁶⁵ On balance, Robinson's account of India reveals a distinct absence of disgust or fear, and shows that despite service in a colonial army Australians could develop a positive view of India.

Analysis of Robinson's account also shows evidence of the neutral attitude to India. India is seen as a place where the Australian soldier could obtain personal economic benefits as an expatriate, and Robinson's writing often conveys a degree of clinical detachment as a military professional – or even at times a dispassionate acceptance of the differences that are certainly present. Robinson unashamedly went to India to further his professional career, and he certainly enjoyed the lifestyle and having servants.⁶⁶ But his attitude to India was far more complex than any simplistic acceptance of expatriate benefits.

When reading his account, what comes through most strongly is his positive attitude to India. His writing conveys a fascination with an exotic orient, coupled with some disquiet and concern regarding British imperialism. This fascination with the orient seems to permeate Robinson's views of his Indian experience.⁶⁷ On arrival in India, he saw this as a lush landscape, one where jungle odours made one think of sex, and he felt absorbed into an Oriental world of ornate carved temples. He describes being 'ferried ashore to a land of black Cingalee (sic) men so handsome, and of such stature and dignity that one was humbled'⁶⁸ - a positive and affectionate description that is hardly consistent with the ideology of White Australia. He also admired the beauty and the dignity of Indian women, and also felt humbled before them, again not an attitude consistent with crude racist superiority. His recollections were shaped with his expectations of an encounter with an exotic orient - 'a whole new, different and fascinating culture was available to be experienced. A surge of desire flooded through me to explore the magnificently exciting new world I was entering'.⁶⁹

Yet despite this initial euphoria he was astute enough to understand the conditions that framed his own existence. For Robinson, life in a British Indian military officers mess was very insular and hardly encouraged contact with Indians beyond his own servants and soldiers. It was only after a visit to the more racially diverse environment of the British Club in Allahabad that he realised the way of life of a wider India, of

⁶⁵ Robinson, *Decades of a Duntroon Bastard*, p.91.

⁶⁶ Robinson, *Decades of a Duntroon Bastard*, p.65.

⁶⁷ Robinson noted negative attitudes by some British soldiers. For example, he notes the lack of racism in the Indian Army unlike that which 'lingered in the British regiments'. Robinson, *Decades of a Duntroon Bastard*, p.178.

⁶⁸ Robinson, *Decades of a Duntroon Bastard*, p.59.

⁶⁹ Robinson, *Decades of a Duntroon Bastard*, p.61.

crops and water rights, of litigation, of police problems and taxes, of literature and local fetes, of club tennis and entertainments at the Indian and European business community. In short it was about an India that I and my fellow officers never saw, an India where Indians were men and women and families, and where Europeans lived as members of the larger community.⁷⁰

This shows the difference in experience between the cloistered world of a soldier focused on predominantly military affairs, and the more open world of business and government.

A fascination with the exotic orient often is based in history, architecture and cultural forms.⁷¹ Robinson enjoyed learning Indian languages, and loved the Arabic-based calligraphy which he could still remember well enough to write when composing his memoir in his 80s.⁷² He also enjoyed the vibrant colours and activity of the bazaar, which must have been far removed from the dull monotones of his previous existence in 1930s Australia. Robinson felt himself immersed in the history of India and he describes the beauty of an all-stone fort built by the Moguls, and admired an ancient pillar built during the reign of Asoka in 250 BC, covered in inscriptions. In a whimsical moment, the young Australian officer even indulged in esoteric fantasies – ‘I try to imagine I am Asoka, the benign Buddhist ruler of India’.⁷³ He seems to have achieved something of a sense of place that might be derived from romantic imaginings, but is a sense of place despite this.

Robinson also delighted in the vibrant side of Indian community life. Stationed in a fort at the junction of the Jumna and Ganges rivers, surrounded by an Indian community that was swollen by a pilgrimage of over one million orderly citizens, he was moved by the fact that so many people were transiting nearby to conduct spiritual activities, events which were inconceivably remote from suburban Melbourne. He could not imagine this happening in Australia, nor could he imagine Westerners being so well-behaved. Yet this was a world he was automatically excluded from – ‘to my chagrin neither my troops or I seem to matter, or to be involved’.⁷⁴ Despite being a member of the ruling race and despite being an authority figure, he felt marginalised by the immensity of India’s people and the intensity of their religious faith.

While Robinson revelled in the experience of India, this seems to stem both from a fascination with India as well as a sense of discomfort with members of the British ruling class. As a confident young Australian of the 1930s, he was aware of the differences between himself and his British counterparts, and he did not always enjoy their manners and

⁷⁰ Robinson, *Decades of a Duntroon Bastard*, 85. This view was shared by British General Sir Richard Gale. Richard Gale, *Call to Arms: An Autobiography* (London: Hutchinson, 1968), p.81.

⁷¹ See Broinowski, *Yellow Lady*.

⁷² Robinson, *Decades of a Duntroon Bastard*, p.126.

⁷³ Robinson, *Decades of a Duntroon Bastard*, p.87.

⁷⁴ Robinson, *Decades of a Duntroon Bastard*, p.90.

mannerisms. He was not alone in feeling such differences. As oversensitive colonials, Australians may possibly have been quick to notice differences and as the inheritors of a newly established Anzac tradition did not feel the need to accept that the British were superior in military terms – certainly Vasey was not particularly impressed by the standard of command of some British officers, as he noted in a letter to the Australian Director of Military Training in HQ Melbourne.⁷⁵

For Robinson this difference could be expressed in personal terms, as demonstrated in his frank description of two officers with whom he shared a house. He describes one as a professional soldier but a dullard of rigid (and one suspects little) intellect while the second is seen in an even more unflattering guise. ‘The other bore a famous hyphenated English name, and there was something as rat-like about the softness of his inner flanks and stomach, as there was about his dark, narrow face and close set eyes’.⁷⁶ This estimable British officer habitually stole Robinson's whiskey and bilked various moneylenders, before decamping from the town in a manner reminiscent of Lieutenant Verrall in Orwell's *Burmese Days*.⁷⁷ Finally, Robinson seemed attracted to rural India, and in this his view were shared by other British officers, many of whom enjoyed the sporting opportunities that rural areas provided.⁷⁸ While Robinson enjoys the generous leave allocation available to him (two months leave per year and six months leave after thirty three months service) he felt few British officers took real advantage of it.⁷⁹ He felt that he did, and that through his own travel in India he ‘learned to love the simple Indian villager’. For him, ‘village people were generous and tolerant, their instinctive good manners were so apparent and charming, and all this, in spite of the obvious poverty and lack of formal education’, a positive view at odds with the racial attitudes expressed in some other accounts.⁸⁰ As far as his soldiers were concerned, he noted ‘their extreme personal cleanliness’ - and their character inspired him to transfer from the British Army to the Indian Army.⁸¹ Overall, Robinson's representation of India and Indians is warm and positive.

⁷⁵ Horner *General Vasey's War*, p.32.

⁷⁶ Robinson, *Decades of a Duntroon Bastard*, p.63.

⁷⁷ George Orwell, *Burmese Days* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985).

⁷⁸ Hunting was a significant and mandatory activity for the aspiring officer. ‘Unless a subaltern went out shooting it was considered that he lacked some military virtue...’. Bristow, *Memories of the British Raj*, p.73.

⁷⁹ Gale also felt that British officers lacked an interest in India, and British troops did not mix enough with Indian soldiers. Gale, *Call to Arms*, p.80. Spending leave in India could be seen as a punishment - when John Morris joined the 1923 Everest expedition against his Colonel's wishes, he was only allowed to go if he agreed to do so using his ‘home’ leave – something he was more than happy to accede to. Morris, *Hired to Kill*, p.134, 186.

⁸⁰ Orwell, *Burmese Days*.

⁸¹ Robinson, *Decades of a Duntroon Bastard*, pp.68-70.

Conclusion

Accounts such as these present Australians as being relatively comfortable with the dominant British perspective on India. There might be a fascination with the exoticism of India, an experience shared by many of their fellow Australians a generation earlier, but they enjoyed India as expatriates and did not deeply question the imperial structures under which they existed. Prolonged contact with the British, however, seems to have brought out an awareness of their own Australian difference. Yet there appears to be little evidence that the interwar Australian soldiers were concerned about issues such as the movement for independence, increasing communal tension between Muslims and Hindus, the salt marches of 1930 or political changes which culminated in the Indian Congress Party winning eight of 11 provincial legislatures in 1937 as a precursor to self-governing dominion status. The subsequent experience of the far more numerous Australians who would visit and live in India during the Second World War was to reveal an even more critical view of British imperialism, and a greater self-confidence in their own Australian identity.