International Journal of Anglo-Indian Studies

BOOK REVIEW: *ANGLO-INDIA AND THE END OF EMPIRE*

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Charlton-Stevens, Uther (2022). *Anglo-India and the End of Empire*. London: Hurst Publishers / New York: Oxford University Press. 387 pages.

Uther Charlton-Stevens' new book is a vivid and stimulating account of the British empire's dramatic disintegration viewed through the complex perspectives of the Anglo-Indian community. The title emphasises his focus: the foregrounding of this mixed group's evolving concerns about *identity* (collective and individual) and *home* (physical and imaginative) in the context of changing relations between the coloniser and the colonised in the later phase of the British Raj. The historian analyses in detail the hitherto largely neglected role played by these historically 'marginalised' offspring of mixed British/European and Indian alliances in the years before, during and after the two World Wars. In his own words, "racial passing, crossing boundaries and reformulations of identity – usually as a means to elevate the individual or the collective – are persistent themes of the history presented here … in constant tension with this book's predominant narrative - the efforts of the political and intellectual leadership of the mixed-race group to foster internal group solidarity and to forge their claimed constituents into a self-consciously confident and politically unified whole" (p. 9).

At the outset Charlton-Stevens clarifies that since the histories of Anglo-Indians written so far have primarily focused on the origins and formation of this community through the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, he aims to bring the story of 'Anglo-India' towards a conclusion vis-a-vis the sudden post-war collapse of the empire and abrupt British departure. The book, in this sense, takes off from Charlton-Stevens' first one – *Anglo-Indians and Minority Politics in South Asia* – to specifically focus on the story of

'Anglo-India' and Anglo-Indians within the wider context of the emerging forces of Indian decolonization through the first four decades of the twentieth century. It has, in addition to an exhaustive Introduction and a brief Epilogue, five scholarly chapters, supported by annotated pictures, meticulous reference notes, a bibliography and an index.

Charlton-Stevens adopts a novel approach for introducing his core arguments. The striking cover illustration of Merle Oberon as Anne Boleyn, the tragic Tudor queen, in a 1933 film, immediately draws the reader's attention and piques her interest. While referring to his own Anglo-Indian family roots to partially explain the reason for writing this book, he alludes to his grandmother's role in stimulating a growing interest in his 'mixed' past (through childhood stories). He cites a family lore that claims a connection with Merle Oberon, the famous film actor of yore. This provides a context for a long and fascinating discussion of identity reformulations by 'mixed-race' diasporic actors on the global stage. In pursuit of fame and glamour, these Eurasian/Anglo-Indian personages felt compelled to hide their coloured roots and pass themselves off as 'whites.' The curious cases of Merle Oberon, Anne May Wong and Boris Karloff – all international film stars in their heydays – are deftly analysed with the help of substantive credible evidence. The historian further strengthens his argument by critiquing, among others, a comparative study of John Masters' novel *Bhowani Junct*ion and its later film adaptation, as well as Paul Scott's *Alien Sky* and *The Raj Quartet*. The entire narrative is brought alive through carefully annotated photos of several prominent family members, individually and in groups, as well as many other key members of the community.

Charlton-Stevens cites a telling comment made by Malcom Muggeridge (Assistant Editor at the Calcutta *Statesman,* 1934) that the Anglo-Indians were "quite the unhappiest people in the world. Ghosts haunting the British Raj" (p. 4). Why was this so? In the historian's opinion the biographers of Merle Oberon had rightly identified the Anglo-Indian dilemma towards the last phase of the Empire as being "'caught in the middle between Indian nationalism and British imperialism' and facing variable degrees of prejudice from both sides that tended to cast their mixed 'blood' as a source of 'shame'" (p. 4). Tracing the roots of this situation, he takes the reader back to India in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries when a hybrid community was in the

process of being formed in the three Presidencies of the East India Company (EIC) – Bengal, Bombay and Madras. In a bid to gain a stronger foothold in India, the Company's order (1698) gave explicit encouragement by offering financial incentives to inter-racial marriages between its soldiers and 'native' women – Indian, Indo-Portuguese/Dutch/French. This happened in the context of its ongoing commercial cum religious (Protestant vs Catholic) rivalry with other European enterprises. The historian points out that like other rival European traders and colonisers, "at this point the English thought less in colour terms than in religious ones" (p. 37).

However, a hundred years later, EIC was issuing orders to limit opportunities of education in England and employment in its key services for the mixed and their children. Charlton-Stevens meticulously explains this radical change in its policy and its unsettling impact on the rapidly emerging mixed group through the increasingly complex colonial lens of colour prejudices, class and gender distinctions as well as the presumed illegitimacy of the mixed offspring. Based on his detailed discussions of other historians' opinions and bolstered by numerous fascinating tales of the mixed, he arrives at credible conclusions such as "…the mixed-race group were the direct inheritors of an intergenerationally transmitted British cultural package which remained at the core of their home lives and ongoing educational upbringing" (p. 40). Replete with relevant examples, his account of the mixed-race community's position within the highly hierarchical colonial society points out that "even at its high-water mark, c. 1880-1920, colonial British racism remained fundamentally class-inflected, preoccupied with social, moral and economic markers of respectability" (p. 41). This was one of the main reasons why the undercurrents of racial and colour prejudices became deep and lasting through the years of the mid-twentieth century. Concurring with other historians, Charlton-Stevens notes the Indian caste system's insidious influence on the rigid hierarchical distinctions of British colonial society and cites in support the case of Vivien Leigh, the Hollywood star of yesteryears (pp. 65-66). Leigh's father had to resign from the Bengal Club and the Saturday Club (in Calcutta) after marrying her mother, who happened to be the offspring of an Armenian Catholic man and a mixed-race orphan woman, supposedly Irish, because of her fair complexion.

A significant aspect of the historian's analysis of the emerging 'mixed-race' identity is his scrutiny of the deep impact made by the evolving late nineteenth century theory of

'scientific' racism and its offshoot, eugenics. Colonial society's attitudes interfaced with the emerging science of race to deepen prevalent stereotypes and prejudices. Charlton-Stevens draws attention to numerous instances of 'Eurasians' in India being "subjected to the resulting pseudosciences embedded within colonial anthropology which sought to measure and categorise them anthropometrically, by measuring height, nose size and shape, and cranial circumference" (pp. 68-69). The offspring of mixed unions were, therefore, supposedly weak or infertile. The reader, however, learns that a set of contradictory data was already emerging at the time demonstrating the proliferation of a thriving 'mixed' population. Seemingly well-intentioned scholars like Edgar Thurston (Superintendent of the Madras Government Museum, 1909) used their supposedly scientific studies to promote the well-being of the least privileged among them through charity and education (pp. 69-70).

The simultaneous existence and expansion of educational facilities and charitable activities by religious organisations (such as the Anglican Church) with proactive support of the colonial government is astutely attributed by Charlton-Stevens to the so-called "reputational risks of European and Eurasian poverty" (p. 70). Apprehensions that the Imperial/Christian prestige would be undermined in the eyes of the ruled due to rising poverty and lack of education amongst the Anglo-Indians and Eurasians were apparently widely articulated. Consequently, by the first decade of the twentieth century, the phenomenon of Anglo-Indians being increasingly perceived as being loyal (due to ties of blood and kinship) as well as skilled and capable of filling various ranks in key colonial services such as the railways in particular, became well-recognised. In the words of Charlton-Stevens, "the railway colonies … were to provide the bulk of the community's employment and the complacently self-contained world of the new Anglo-India" (p. 77).

While probing the complex nomenclature of the emerging mixed community, Charlton-Stevens argues that the lack of clarity and wider agreement in 'naming' it does not necessarily negate its awareness of a collective group identity. Instead, it only goes to show how, different factions within the community were intensely focused on establishing an inclusive social identity. He proposes that the eventual replacement of 'Eurasian' with 'Anglo-Indian' (officially sanctioned in the 1911 census) could be attributed to the growing desire of the mixed community to appropriate the latter's

association with Britishness (p. 82). Be it the self-proclaimed Domiciled Europeans or Anglo-Indians with diverse colouring – distinction between whom was little, according to widely held contemporary views – there was a common desire to claim European or British descent. The depth of his discussion on this issue is enhanced by the historian's analysis of different perspectives provided by not only the conjoined mixed community and colonial British society but also by contemporary Indians. A lighter skin tone of varying degrees ensured the mixed an equation with Britishness in the eyes of most Indians of early twentieth century. Class-based attitude of either colonial servility or cultural otherness appears to have been widely prevalent amongst them. A riveting literary example cited by Charlton-Stevens to support this analysis is the well-known story, 'The Babus of Nayanjore' by Rabindranath Tagore. One is tempted to detect the remnants of this colonial legacy in today's near obsession of many Indians with a fair/white complexion.

A highlight of the chapter aptly titled 'A New Anglo India' is a detailed discussion of the profound impact of the First World War on the overall status of the newly named Anglo-Indians. The community's rising military aspirations, hitherto stifled by the colonial government, were increasingly recognised by the latter in view of its own war needs. In this context Charlton-Stevens notes the efforts made by John Harold Arnold Abbott, a thriving businessman and president of the Anglo-Indian Empire League, to push for the community's employment opportunities in British regiments and even a separate Anglo-Indian regiment. He contends that this was in keeping with the general political mood of the time when nationalist sentiments as expressed by a diverse cross-section of Indian leaders (Gandhi, Tilak and Annie Besant) were in favour of cooperation with the imperial government by seeking military service for Indians. This is one of the many insightful instances where the historian engages in comparative studies of Anglo-Indian and Indian perspectives.

Charlton-Stevens proposes that the Raj's large volunteer army came into existence due to the widely prevailing Indian faith in the supposedly paternalistic colonial government. In contrast, the mixed community (including Domiciled Europeans) was more directly relying on its 'blood and kinship ties' by claiming to be Britain's 'sons.' He asserts that their support for the war was more 'heartfelt' than that reflected in the "abundant loyalist, imperial monarchist, and martial speeches of Indian rulers,

aristocratic landowners and other well-to-do Indians" (p. 89). The outcome was the simultaneous creation under duress of an Anglo-Indian Force (1916) and considerable enlargement of the Indian Army. Charlton-Stevens clarifies in detail the continued discrimination in terms of pay and armament allocated to both categories of recruits with Indians bearing the brunt of it.

The post-war political context of constitutional changes - in response to nationalist demands - elicited increasing 'Indianisation' of the Railways and other key services that considerably reduced the employment opportunities of the compulsorily demobilised Anglo-Indians. Charlton-Stevens meticulously chronicles this significant multifaceted change with all its contradictions within and beyond the community. The richness of this long discussion is enhanced by an analysis of the fascinating 'highly triangulated' role played by Henry Albert John Gidney, the Anglo-Indian leader, who attempted to promote "a dualistic assertion of loyalty to both their British fatherland and Indian motherland" (p. 26). Of particular interest is the historian's critique of the politics surrounding the Round Table Conferences (in London, 1930-32), wherein Gidney and B. R. Ambedkar, two minority leaders, joined hands to confront Gandhi's opposition to recognizing the Anglo-Indians as well as others like the Depressed classes and Indian Christians as minority communities. Charlton-Stevens' disapproval of the Gandhian position is palpable in statements such as, "… at this point Gandhi's efforts were concentrated on achieving a grand settlement with India's Muslims" (p.128) or "Despite his rhetoric of ostentatious humility, Gandhi's strategy had required supreme self-belief in his own abilities of persuasion" (p. 129).

Charlton-Stevens deftly analyses the challenge of rising post-war unemployment and poverty amongst the mixed-race community by situating it in the context of left-wing politics – Anglo-Indian and Indian nationalist/communalist – during the 1920s and 1930s. He points out that Gidney's teaming up with Kenneth Wallace, the socialist leader, was a pragmatic move to deal with the subtle "glass ceiling extending across Government services … private firms … social relations, [and] even the Church" (p. 137). Earnest promotion of the Anglo-Indian cause with the colonial government was imperative in view of the increasingly communalised allocation of vacancies – especially in the Railways – at the expense of the Anglo-Indians (p. 137).

In a related area Charlton-Stevens focuses on the efforts of the two leaders mentioned above to advise the community members against identifying themselves as Europeans in the census and electoral rolls, because it was counter-productive to the distinctive identity of the Anglo-Indian community. Racial 'passing' as a key feature in the life of mixed-origin communities in the British empire in Asia is a prominent thread running through his entire account in this book. He asserts that passing as a 'strategy of self-elevation' from a group (in this case Anglo-Indian) to which one belongs by birth and heredity, to being identified as European was "far more widespread than has been generally assumed […] The socio-racial dividing lines of the Raj were continuously contested and transgressed" (p. 143). In support of this contention he cites substantive evidence including the high-profile cases of Merle Oberon, Boris Karloff (along with his brothers) and many others, which demonstrate the benefits of successful passing for those of a lighter colouring.

In a significant contribution to his third chapter, Charlton-Stevens presents pan-Eurasianist ideas of Cedric Dover and Kenneth Wallace as a contestation of an emerging Anglo-India as well as nationalist India. It is ironic that while intending to encourage the formation of a wider 'imagined community' consisting of mixed-origin colonised peoples across Asia, they were inspired by the contemporary socialist Zionist model of a national homeland, created at the expense of earlier inhabitants. One could perhaps connect this trend of thought to the increasingly common phenomenon, during the later years of decolonisation, of Anglo-Indians optionally seeking a safe territorial haven not just in mainland India, but also in the Indian Ocean or even beyond. The historian proposes several reasons for this development, prominent among which were "the real dangers of the Anglo-Indian position as the auxiliaries of empire" and their reasonable or imagined anxieties regarding their future socio-economic-political prospects in an independent India, possibly taking on "the menacing complexion of a caste-inflected Hindu Raj" (p. 28).

In an insightful sub-section called 'Anglo-Indian colonisation schemes' in Chapter 4, Charlton-Stevens proceeds to discuss various attempts by the mixed community leaders to create agricultural colonies within India in the pattern of the post-World War One 'canal colonies' in western Punjab. While these were visualised as "sites of individual and collective self-transformation and self-actualisation," the historian

concurs with other recent studies that the grandiose and utopian nature of the schemes caused them to fail. In his view McCluskiegunge in Bihar was the only one that could have been the nucleus of an Anglo-Indian territorial state. He, however, observes that collective emigration and colonisation schemes such as involving the Andaman Islands continued to be proposed right until after independence.

Notwithstanding the dream of overseas colonies, Gidney's consistent efforts to secure the future of Anglo-India in India through constitutional channels in the 1930s is a fascinating section of Charlton-Stevens' account. Here the reader is drawn into the complex web of political exchanges between the Anglo-Indian leader, the colonial government, the British Government (Churchill, Attlee) and Indian nationalist leaders (Gandhi, Jinnah). The historian notes that Gidney expressed his public support for India's constitutional development while reiterating his community's loyalty to the colonial government for "peace, safety and tranquillity of the country" (p. 213). Simultaneously he made attempts to convince his community to be more connected to India, the land of its birth, without forsaking their distinctive way of life. His efforts to secure ongoing reservations for employment in the Government of India Act (1935) succeeded with the support of sympathetic British parliamentarians.

While examining the radical transformation wrought by the Second World War, Charlton-Stevens, with the help of Wallace's biography of Gidney, offers interesting insights into the circumstances leading to the latter's fateful interactions with Sir Stafford Cripps in 1942. His request for a large land grant in India, at the existing 'McCluskiegunge' colony for the formation of an Anglo-Indian state, was rejected by Cripps, who saw no place for Anglo-Indians in his constitutional proposals for India (p. 217). Although the negotiations between Cripps, Congress and the Muslim League failed thereafter, Gidney felt it to be only a temporary reprieve. According to Charlton-Stevens, this was a "devastating blow … most likely hastening his early death" (p. 29).

Continuing with his chronicle of the transformative impact of the Second World War, Charlton-Stevens notes the regeneration of Anglo-Indian loyalties to the empire and stronger identity with Britishness through the vastly expanded employment opportunities in the military and various other services such as railways, nursing stations, telegraph offices and wireless telephone exchanges. This does not discount,

however, the continuation of discrimination based on racism and colourism in recruitment and opportunities of promotion. He points out that there were often individual cases of passing for entry into more prestigious and better-paid services. Some individuals even travelled to Britain for the same reasons. In a striking contrast to this trend the historian presents in detail the extraordinary case of Captain Cyril John Stracey, who became a colonel in the Japanese-backed Indian National Army led by Subhash Chandra Bose (pp.226-231).

In the last part of his narrative Charlton-Stevens raises a final issue: whether the British withdrawal from India at the end of the War also signalled the end of Anglo-India. His assertion that it was the "death of the colonial Anglo-India" is quite plausible, given the in-depth analysis he presents of the contentious political negotiations of the time involving Frank Anthony (the successor to Gidney), Cripps and the nationalist leaders like Gandhi, Nehru and Jinnah. Charlton-Stevens' examination of Anthony's pivotal role in trying to reinvent the Anglo-Indian identity as a part of the emerging Indian nation despite the exodus of pro-British emigrants to Britain and Australia, is indeed a significant contribution. He proposes that by building a personal relationship with the Congress leaders - Gandhi, Nehru and particularly Vallabhbhai Patel - Anthony succeeded in convincing them of the Indianness of the Anglo-Indians and therefore retention of the provisions for them in the Constitution. In contrast, the historian explores the difficulties faced by the dwindling Anglo-Indian community in West and East Pakistan. It is a saga tinged with sadness and despair.

Charlton-Stevens' monumental account is essentially a rational yet deeply empathetic enquiry, enriched as it is by detailed and fascinating evidence culled from a very wide range of primary and secondary sources. As a diasporic Anglo-Indian with familial roots in Bangalore, he adds an insider's intriguing trivia and anecdotes to embellish his narrative. It certainly makes for an absorbing and compelling read for erudite scholars and interested general readers alike. Students of modern Indian history need to study and comprehend the significant wide-angled role played by Anglo-Indians in India's colonial past.

The book assumes special significance in view of the recent (January 2020) constitutional changes leading to the abolition of reserved seats for Anglo-Indians in

the Indian Parliament and state Assemblies. In effect they have been divested of the special provisions included in the Government of India Act (1935) and the Constitution of India (1949-1950). The identity of Anglo-Indians as a minority community with a right to democratic representation is once again contested.

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