



A BOOK REVIEW

*COLONIAL COUSINS: A SURPRISING HISTORY OF CONNECTIONS
BETWEEN INDIA AND AUSTRALIA*

Wakefield Press, Australia, 2010; 451 pages.

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Joyce Westrip and Peggy Holroyde look back over an early formative experience in India and a settled life in Australia to write about a different kind of passage from the country. Though Westrip left India in 1947 it clearly shaped her perception of life and remains a vital part of her thinking. In the same way Peggy Holroyde's stay in India in the 1950s was the commencement of a lifelong connection. Both have forebears who spent their lives in the service of the Raj. Like them, the many people whose stories are told in this book had family histories spanning several generations in the sub-continent and crossing over into the ancient land and brand new country to the south that had along with India been part of a supercontinent over a million years ago.

The passage described is actually a triangular pattern of journeys between England, India and Australia, made by officials, administrators, merchants, military personnel and their families. Some of these were the distinguished "India" families of the times and many were of much humbler origin but all sharing the extraordinary opportunity of making their homes in a largely unmapped land.

Through thirteen chapters full of well researched accounts of both personal and political adventures, a full and lively picture of the early settlement days in Australia emerges and of the then very much more sophisticated colonial establishment in India. In comparison to the complex, diverse and old villages and cities of India was "this flat mound, a worn down carapace of Gondwanaland, adrift and surrounded by

a gigantic moat. Gondwanaland, the name given to the ancient southern precursor supercontinent from which both countries broke away eons ago by the Australian scientist Edward Suess, may have been derived somewhat misleadingly from the Gondwana of central India, but it carries some of the sense of elemental vastness that overawed these first settlers. The early chapters of the book describe well the sense of the “oneness” of the two lands that strikes travellers between them. Many similarities in the geological formations, vegetation, environmental factors, seasonal variations and living conditions in the two countries as well as the intriguing similarities and parallels that can be traced in the speech patterns, myths and symbols of the indigenous peoples on both sides, contribute to this sense of affinity. The sense of a natural connection between the two lands shapes the vision of the writers, and is affirmed in several personal testimonies in the work. In the many personal accounts of Australians who made the voyage from the Indian Raj to ‘the Raj Down Under’ there comes the sense of a deep-rooted connection to the land lasting through a whole lifetime.

‘Colonial Cousins’ attempts a great deal more than personal history. Its account of the tremendous struggle faced in the earliest phase of settlement underlines the fact that to survive at all, goods and services from India had to be procured by often desperate strugglers. India was, therefore, Australia’s earliest trading partner, and the writers have researched the development of this trade faithfully. Along with goods, various categories of workers: bricklayers, carpenters, agricultural labour, servants and, shortly, hawkers and small tradesman, followed. The dogged commitment of the earliest immigrant tradesmen impresses one. They had all the grit required to live their lonely, itinerant lives in the Outback, journeying home after long years or dying quietly in some small town. The terrific effort to explore and settle the regions inland required extraordinary effort and innovation. One way was to use camels as transport and to bring in the Pathans, Baluchis, Afghans, Rajasthanis and Panjabis who were their traditional handlers. Out of such necessity were the earliest immigrant communities formed. Westrip and Holroyde emphasise the participation of these early immigrants in the great labour that these early years demanded.

The writers deal as well with the growth of racism in Australia, tracing its intensification in the nineteenth century and its institutionalization in the Immigration

Restriction Act of Federation in 1902. “Despite the unravelling of the White Australia policy since 1950 and Australia’s recent, courageous efforts to create a truly representative and unprejudiced plural society”, they write, “Racism remains, at the very least, latent in Australian society-though it is not the prerogative of white communities alone”.

This brings us very much into the present, for in these times a more virulent form of aggression is evident, complicated by a tendency, at official levels to deny or oversimplify the problem. This book was published too recently, perhaps, for the writers to comment on these incidents, but they seem very much to the point. They observe, fairly, that aggression between social groups is not completely avoidable and that it can be based on race, as in Australia, or caste and community, as in India. Are the persistent attacks on Indians in recent times symptomatic of the tension between a society that sees itself as intrinsically Western and a growing Asian immigrant community that is perceived to be somehow outside that vision?

A similar, deep seated bias has resulted in centuries of opportunity in economic and social contacts between the two former colonies being neglected. That is how Westrip and Holroyde would seem to view matters. The writers argue in favour of a much more extensive economic and cultural association between the two erstwhile colonies, a measure urged by several politicians in the past. Logical connections have failed to develop because of rigidities in the outlook of political leaders as well as society in general. Thus incipient prejudice works both to inhibit development and to make individuals vulnerable in times of economic stress.

Both modern India and Australia have to deal with old antagonisms reappearing with greater force. These include the problems of the disinherited indigenous peoples which have assumed grave proportions. The painful marginalisation of these communities, paralleled in the situation of tribal communities in India does not receive the sustained attention from the authors that the other facets of the colonial encounter do. This is an omission in a work that suggests, at the outset, the presence of intriguing similarities in physiognomy, speech rhythms, cultural symbols, music and myth, as outlined earlier. Any colonial history cannot stray very far from the subject of race and the effect of racial prejudice on individuals and communities.

The painful effect of racial discrimination on the Indian psyche and the violence that followed from it are acknowledged in several of the personal accounts in the novel. They are similar to many other accounts of the 1857 and the events surrounding the partition of the country. Many of them sound strangely matter-of-fact, untouched by a sense of liability or responsibility for the appalling turn of events. This imperviousness to the sensibilities of Indians, a factor in the gradual erosion of the moral standing of the British in India comes through faintly but disagreeably in many of the otherwise stirring accounts of battles and encounters such as those of Henry Kelsall, a doctor: "...we took him with another fellow just caught on the bridge, made them sit side by side on the edge, then their brains were blown out and their bodies kicked into the river..." No authorial comment is provided to indicate that there could have been something wrong with this behaviour or that a bloodstained knife in the possession of the good doctor's descendants is rather a macabre sort of remembrance. Indian readers must make the best of it, and remember, with relief, that in other books, William Dalrymple's two major works, "White Moghals" and "The Last Moghal" for example, these distinctions can be found. Points of view in the anecdotes recounted do seem to jostle against the enclosing narrative, with its awareness of post-colonial realities.

Anglo-Indian readers will find something about themselves in 'The Other Side Of The Raj', a chapter that looks at the origins of the community and tries to present a balanced view of the different kinds of lifestyles and circumstances in which its members were to be found. The writers follow the fortunes of those families that found the dignity and opportunity in Australia that eluded them here in India as well as in post-war Britain. No new ground covered here, really, but it is satisfying to see some of the objectionable attitudes towards Anglo-Indians being clearly labelled. Today Anglo-Indians would find it difficult to believe that there could be separate wards for Anglo-Indians in hospitals or that they would be served after English guests at mixed gatherings, yet this was the reality for previous generations.

No account of the community can avoid a discussion of the social position of Anglo-Indian women and the negative, often calumnious attitudes of the British and other Indians towards them. The toughness that most girls developed in these circumstances can be heard in many of the voices that speak here. These stories

are valuable; they attest to the common experience of several generations, indeed of all mixed races. Happily this book avoids the distasteful stereotypes which still proliferate in contemporary writing on the community.

The latter chapters become looser, more episodic and discursive, even a bit disjointed. They deal somewhat randomly with 'spicy stories and strange happenings'. Some of the familiar characters and situations in the literature of the Raj appear: princes and durbars, princesses and their jewels, an arrogant memsahib or two, snakes and snake charmers, ghosts, spells and curses. As the preface states, the 'bedrock' of the text is its wealth of anecdotal history. Its heart is in these personal testimonies. It is, finally, a book about the Raj, about how many of its people, little-known though they might have been, were privileged by it, and came away from it quite fortuitously, through the passage to Australia.

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