An India House clerk in the early nineteenth century wrote this amusing little poem about the idleness of his daily routine:

From ten to eleven, ate a breakfast at seven;  
From eleven to noon, to begin ’twas too soon;  
From twelve to one, asked “What’s to be done?”  
From one to two, found nothing to do;  
From two to three, began to foresee  
That from three to four would be a damned bore.¹

The historian might be tempted to dismiss as unrepresentative or overly comical this lethargic and indifferent approach to the imperial mission, were the clerk’s attitude and sentiments not so pervasive. “Boredom with the overwhelming load of uninteresting business,” complained William Bentinck, governor-general of India from 1828 to 1835.² “Routine,” wrote Leonard Woolf in his diary for November 10, 1908, an entry he repeated for four days straight (and numerous other times during his three-year appointment as assistant government agent of the Hambantota district in Ceylon).³ “Dull and uninteresting,” concluded a


twenty-one-year-old Winston Churchill after only a month in India. Throughout the nineteenth century and into the twentieth, British imperial administrators at all levels were bored by their experience traveling and working in the service of king or queen and country.

Yet in the public mind, the British empire was thrilling—full of novelty, danger, and adventure, as explorers, missionaries, and settlers sailed the globe in search of new lands, potential converts, and untold riches. The first compendium of British exploration, Richard Hakluyt's *Principal Navigations* (1589), was a paean to risk taking in the national interest. By the nineteenth century, Stanley's search for Livingstone was front-page news; explorers such as John Franklin, who died searching for the Northwest Passage, inspired hagiographical biographies; generals such as Charles Gordon, who defiantly held off Sudanese rebels at Khartoum, were lionized in popular engravings; and larger-than-life viceroys such as Lord Curzon, who presided over celebrations like the 1903 coronation durbar, personified the power and pageantry of the British empire.

Late-nineteenth-century popular fiction likewise portrayed the empire as exciting and exotic. In Rider Haggard's *King Solomon's Mines* (1885) and *She* (1887), intrepid adventurers like Allan Quartermain undertake perilous journeys through scorching deserts and over freezing mountains in search of hidden treasures, fighting ferocious warriors (both male and female) along the way, emerging triumphant in the end. In Rudyard Kipling's *Kim* (1901), the Great Trunk Road is the “highway of all humanity,” where merchants, soldiers, pilgrims, and spies of various religions participate in the Great Game, the epic struggle between Britain and Russia for control of Central Asia. Even *The Moonstone* (1868) by Wilkie Collins, now generally regarded as a veiled critique of imperialism, is nonetheless a conglomeration of nineteenth-century English fantasies about the exotic and the Oriental.

5. This is not to suggest that there was at any point a monolithic, unified public, nor to suggest that there were no critics of empire, but rather to generalize about how British men and women viewed and supported, either actively or tacitly, their empire. Scholars have made abundantly clear that class, gender, race, and region all influenced attitudes toward empire, which also changed over time. For a useful overview and bibliography covering the nineteenth century, see John M. MacKenzie, “Empire and Metropolitan Cultures,” in vol. 3 of *Oxford History of the British Empire*, ed. Andrew Porter (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 270–93.
Scholars have by and large perpetuated this glamorous view of the empire, portraying imperial men either as heroic adventurers who charted new lands and carried “the white man’s burden” to the farthest reaches of the planet or as aggressors who imposed culturally bound norms and values on indigenous peoples and their ways of life.⁸ James Morris’s Pax Britannica (1968), for example, glorified a number of renowned imperialists, “the giants,” who were still alive at the time of Victoria’s Diamond Jubilee. These included Henry Stanley—“deliverer of Livingstone, impresario of Africa, namer of lakes and discoverer of mountains”—who rose from the poverty of a Welsh childhood workhouse to a “life of staggering adventure” that made him “an imperial monument in himself,” and Herbert Kitchener, “huge in stature” and famous for a series of “romantically mysterious adventures among the Arabs.”⁹

At the other extreme, Lytton Strachey’s witty but deflating account of General Gordon’s death at Khartoum redescribes the British hero as a pathetic and “unassuming figure,” sanctimoniously holding a Bible, retreating to his tent when the attack began. Gordon’s campaign ended, Strachey wrote sarcastically, “in a glorious slaughter of 20,000 Arabs [and] a vast addition to the British Empire.”¹⁰ This revisionist response, however,

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while demythologizing many of the same men that the hagiographic approach exalted, has nonetheless taken for granted that these were influential men who lived exciting lives and had an enormous impact on the empire, even if they are famous largely for the destruction they wrought. Only when it comes to women have scholars described the boredom of life and travel in the empire, explaining, for example, women’s predilection for painting as a means to escape the stultifying monotony of government life under the Raj.11

Scholars have overlooked the pervasiveness of imperial boredom because they have depended too much on official biographies, best-selling novels, and articles in the popular press, all of them akin to imperial propaganda. It is largely when reading against the grain of published memoirs and travel logs, supplemented by private diaries and letters that were in all likelihood never intended for publication, that the extent to which monotony and melancholy characterized imperial service emerges. There is, in essence, a gap between private confessions and public propaganda that an analysis of some representative figures of the nineteenth-century British empire reveals. These include Garnet Wolseley, governor of Natal and the Transvaal (1879–80), who was immortalized as the “modern major general” in Gilbert and Sullivan’s *Pirates of Penzance*; William Denison, lieutenant-governor of Van Diemen’s Land (1846–64) and subsequently governor of New South Wales (1854–61) and of Madras (1861–66); the marquess of Hastings and Lord Auckland, who served as governors of Bengal from 1813–23 and 1835–41, respectively; and Richard Burton, the explorer, soldier, and linguist, known equally for his translations of the *Kama Sutra* and *Arabian Nights* as for his discovery (with John Speke) of the source of the Nile. Each of these men played an important role in one or more of the most important regions of the empire (India, Australia, South Africa); their careers span the nineteenth century, thus illustrating how the experience of empire changed over time; they all reflected upon and wrote about their travels and travails as they struggled against the monotony of imperial service; and historians have regarded their lives in heroic terms.

Boredom is a relatively modern affliction, expressed in literature most famously by mid-nineteenth-century French authors such as Baudelaire and Flaubert, but also by British writers including Johnson, Austen, and Dickens. Patricia Meyer Spacks has argued persuasively that if people felt bored before the mid–eighteenth century, they did not know it, and that the evolution of the idea and experience of boredom had its roots in the heightened expectations for variety and diversion engendered by the rapidly expanding capitalist economy

of eighteenth-century Britain. But by the nineteenth century, a constellation of additional and more concrete socioeconomic and technological changes had combined to undermine the sense of excitement and adventure that had characterized overseas travel and exploration in the early modern period. These changes include, ironically, improvements in navigation and oceanic travel; the rise of tourism; the proliferation of guidebooks about distant lands which heightened expectations about the beauty of imperial landscapes and the grandeur of imperial cities and ruins; the increasingly bureaucratic and ceremonial nature of the British empire; and new definitions of work and leisure. Together, these developments transformed the British empire from a place of wonder and marvel to one of monotony and boredom.

**Garnet Wolseley**

Vying for the title of most famous and distinguished imperial figure in the late nineteenth century was Garnet Wolseley, commander in chief of the British army. At the time of Victoria's jubilee in 1897, Wolseley had been fighting small wars, on and off, for forty-five years. “All other pleasures pale,” he once wrote, “before the intense, the maddening delight of leading men into the midst of an enemy, or to the assault of some well-defended place.” The first business of any ambitious young officer, he thought, was to try to get himself killed, and he certainly tried his best, fighting in the Burma War of 1852, the Crimean War, the India Mutiny, the China War of 1860, the Riel Rebellion of 1869, the Ashanti War of 1873, and the Zulu War of 1879. His best-known achievements were his 1882 defeat of Arabi Pasha, which established the British presence in Egypt, and his attempt to relieve General Gordon at Khartoum in 1884–85 (for which Wolseley was made a viscount).13

But if his military service was exciting, Wolseley’s administrative work as governor of Natal was far less engaging, though he had to deal with some important issues. He was sent to Natal against a backdrop of gold and diamond discoveries, an unrestricted influx of indispensable native labor, and a need for constitutional reform to resolve recurrent conflict between the imperial and colonial governments. Wolseley was charged with restoring order, overhauling the administration, and preventing a potential race-war; in short, he was to replicate

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what Lord Canning had accomplished in India following the Mutiny. Wolseley, however, true to form, regarded the Natal problem as essentially military and conducted his mission like a battle campaign. He chose his staff with military tasks or operations chiefly in mind, replaced local officials with his own men, and set out to manipulate the press.14

Wolseley’s tour of duty in Natal began inauspiciously. Of his journey from the Cape, he wrote to his wife: “I shall not weary you by recording the dullness of each day but will reserve anything I have to say for the end of the voyage” (March 25, 1875). Despite his eagerness to turn his governorship into a generalship, his typical day consisted of an executive council meeting in the morning (“a good deal of work,” he wrote, with a hint of frustration), a visit to a hospital or an inspection of a school in the afternoon, and perhaps a ball in the evening (June 10, 1875). On more than one occasion, he groused about having to suffer through “a stupid and very bad dinner” with various colonial officials and their families, many of whom Wolseley found “decidedly dull” (March 20, 1875). Perhaps his most honest assessment came on his forty-second birthday, when he wondered where he would be the following year and hoped that he would be “more actively employed” (June 4, 1875). He was at best resigned: “How the time flies,” he wrote, “notwithstanding the dullness of one’s mode of living” (July 1, 1875). He complained to his wife that “this governorship is no bed of roses,” and when his six months were up, he returned to London as quickly as possible.15

Although there were many occasions on which Wolseley wrote in his diary that “nothing worthy of noting took place”—or some variant, such as “Nothing doing” or “Nothing new” (August 13 and 20, 1875)—he still wrote almost every day. He usually wrote in the morning, though occasionally in a hurried moment during the day, on blue sheets of war office minute-paper, which he would dispatch in weekly bundles to his wife. His Natal diary is especially significant because it was the first mission for which Wolseley kept a complete diary. It also documents the first of his missions whose objectives were purely diplomatic. He may have kept the journal partly to satisfy the fashion of the age, partly as an impressionistic record of his experiences in a distant land, conceivably even as a testimonial to his wife or family that he was engaged in important work, but most likely as a confessional record upon which he could draw for his memoirs. There is an anecdotal quality to his diary, a sharing of experiences, both personal and professional; it is not a precise and balanced recording of all decisions, motives, plans, and policies. Moreover, his claim that there was “nothing doing” or “nothing new” was not, strictly speaking, correct. There were many instances when he referred to important matters, even if the detail he provided did not always

15. Preston, South African Diaries, 130.
conform to the significance of the policy to which he was referring. What the
diary reveals over all is that, for a man of action such as Wolseley, the work of
an imperial administrator—meetings, inspections, dinners, memos—was neither
fulfilling nor even engaging.

Wolseley was aware that his letters and diaries did not make for scintillating
reading. “I often laugh,” he wrote to his wife during the Khartoum Relief Expe-
dition in December 1884, “as I look back a few pages over my journal before it
goes to you, and think how you must yawn over it and hate having to read it.” He
continued: “I always remember your description of how you endeavoured to read
my Narrative of the China War and how you failed to get through more than a
few pages of it. This diary is still duller, for anything that could possibly inter-
est you, I put in my letters to you, and I [am] fully sensible of their monotonous
dullness.”16 Although he was in part deprecating his own literary abilities—he
confessed that his language was “ponderous and pompous,” that he lacked “all
power of describing sentiment”—he was also acknowledging that, even as he was
undertaking what would become one of the most famous rescue missions in his-
tory, the events themselves were matters of monotonous routine.

William Denison

William Denison’s path into the upper echelons of imperial service was fairly
typical for the younger son of a gentry landowner. Unlike to inherit his father’s
Nottingham estate, Denison attended the Royal Military Academy in Wool-
wich and became an engineer. He helped oversee the construction of the Rideau
Canal in Canada from 1827–31, and then returned to England to take charge of
the works at the Woolwich dockyards. In 1846 he was knighted and appointed
lieutenant governor of Van Diemen’s Land, and eight years later was promoted to
the governorship of New South Wales, where he consolidated the colonial system
of public works and education, and where he oversaw the implementation of the
Constitution Act in 1855. In 1861 he became governor of Madras, a position he
held until 1866.

Like all high-level colonial officials, Denison had what he termed “seri-
ous matters” to attend to, though in his diaries he was rarely specific about what
these were, suggesting that his work was so routine as to not merit description
or that the work was not central to his identity. During his time in Hobart, his
stated objective was “to carry out the principle of self-government to the fullest
extent; to introduce the municipal system everywhere it can work effectively.”17

16. Adrian Preston, ed., In Relief of Gordon: Lord Wolseley’s
Campaign Journal of the Khartoum Relief Expedition, 1884–
1885 (London: Hutchinson, 1967), 84.
(London: Longmans, Green, 1870), 1:172.
This was an important assignment, of a sort undertaken throughout the settler colonies, and it certainly kept him busy; he wrote that he had “a vast mass of work” thrust upon him (1:304). Nevertheless, Denison found himself “working steadily against a current” and could admit to making only gradual progress (1:172). Most of his tasks were mundane and gave him little satisfaction. After he was appointed governor-general in Sydney, he found that much of his time was taken up by “ordinary questions which arise day by day” (1:304). A typical task involved reprimanding a judge who had borrowed money and run up the debt for years until his creditor finally demanded repayment and the judge refused, citing judicial immunity from lawsuits. Resolving this problem—Denison was forced to remove the judge—made for “rather a dreary week” (1:73, 1:75).

The banality of Denison’s work is visible to the historian largely by what is absent from, or only hinted at, in his narrative. A trip he took in early 1847 to several convict stations, for example, was “a great treat” in his “every-day routine”; he was sorry only that he had so many things to do that he could not take these sorts of excursions as frequently as he would have liked. He hoped that by the following year, having cleared away many of the urgent tasks at hand, he would “have time to become acquainted with the country and the people” (1:42). Denison, like most diarists, wrote about what was unusual, and it is only by paying attention to the ordinary and the absent—the routine that made a visit to a convict station such a treat; the fact that a year into his post he still felt like a stranger in Van Dieman’s Land—that the historian can understand the dreary life of a colonial governor.

Beyond the apparently endless succession of meetings, Denison’s life consisted of ritualized dinner parties and the occasional dance. Within a few months of his arrival in Hobart, Denison and his wife had established a routine of hosting several large dinner parties a week, though these were often fraught with disputes about protocol. Denison’s wife wrote about how they narrowly avoided a “dreadful fracas” one night over “arranging the matter of precedence” between two legislative councilors (1:33, 1:35). It was not long, however, before the parties became repetitive, and Denison’s wife sought change. As she wrote to his mother: “We are carrying on our winter and town duties, in the way of hospitalities, most briskly” but added that they felt the need “to introduce some little variety into the amusements of the place. One cannot dance always,” she conceded, complaining also about the “dearth of the musical element in society here just at present.” William’s suggestion that they set up “tableau vivants” based on their prints (beginning with Landseer’s Bolton Abbey) only underscores their boredom with life halfway around the world (1:49–51).

The Denisons’ experience in India, a decade later, was not appreciably different; if anything, it was both busier and more tedious. Early in 1863 William wrote that he was laboring on a revenue survey, reorganizing the public works
department, and reforming the army. Later that year he was so preoccupied with the “frontier question” that he was “too busy too write” (2:236, 2:239, 2:292, 2:302). Not long afterward, he admitted: “My life here is monotonous enough.” He got out of bed a bit before six and usually went for a horseback ride around the esplanade, often to look at the racehorses, which were out galloping at that hour. After returning home, he dressed, read, and (if he had any time before breakfast) wrote letters. From ten until five, except for lunch, he was “pretty steadily at work,” though he vowed to manage his workload more efficiently. “At present,” he admitted, “boxes come pouring in upon me at all times, and from all departments.” One of his frustrations was being constantly “interrupted when reading one paper by the advent of another on a different subject altogether.” After finishing work sometime in the afternoon, he would “either walk, ride, or drive” (2:304).

Imperial administration became ever more markedly bureaucratic during the course of the nineteenth century, although it still remained a small-scale operation, especially at the colonial office in London.18 In India, neither the marquess of Hastings, who served as governor of Bengal from 1813–23, nor Lord Auckland, who was governor from 1835–41, had much in the way of desk work; they spent most of their days meeting with princes, surveying troops, and traveling through British-controlled areas.19 Nevertheless, Hastings in particular found being governor extremely tedious. Like Denison, his time was so consumed by public duties that there were few opportunities for “chance occurrences,” and Hastings admitted that there was little point in writing about his public affairs in his private journal because everything of significance was already in the official minutes.20 But whereas for Denison it was the continual stream of paperwork that made his days so dreary, the cause of Hastings’s boredom—at a time when the mail was slower and the bureaucracy less burdensome—was that very often “nothing worthy of notice” would occur at all.21 In short, the emotional response remained much the same from the 1830s to the 1860s, but the cause subtly altered. Earlier in the century, imperial administrators complained


about having not enough (interesting) work; later on, they complained about having too much (uninteresting) work.

As bureaucratic and monotonous as the work was for governors-general, it was even more so for low- and mid-ranking officials. H. G. Keene’s first position in India was as an assistant subcollector, verifying farmers’ claims that bad weather had ruined crops and that they should therefore be excused from paying rent; his job was to examine afflicted tracts and submit a written report on the state of the harvest. Keene complained that “there was really much dullness” in Muttra (Mathura), where he was posted; he described the district as “remote, unfriended, melancholy, [and] slow.” As he recalled, “life in a small sequestered District was almost uneventful. In the hot weather you were left to yourself in your own share of the work. . . . If your family was on the hills, you might spend months without hearing a lady’s voice or speaking your native language” (101–2, 117). The Mutiny drew barely a comment from Keene, and the two subsequent years “passed without any memorable event” (153). Finally, in 1868, Keene, by this time a judge, was transferred to Azimgarh (in Uttar Pradesh, which had been one of the centers of the 1857 mutiny), which he regarded as “a truly ‘penal settlement’” and a “Dismal Hollow.” There were at best 15,000 “miserable inhabitants” of whom some half dozen were European, “mostly disappointed officials, or their still more discontented wives.” The nearest railway station was eighty miles away. With the heat, malaria, and “swarms of venomous serpents,” Azimgarh was “a most undesirable dwelling-place for civilized beings” (253–55).

The frequency and formality of official ceremonies also contributed to feelings of boredom, especially as early- and mid-nineteenth-century durbars were not nearly as compelling as the grand and showy set pieces staged by Lords Lytton and Curzon in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. Both Auckland and Hastings had to meet often with local princes, and the novelty of prescribed pleasantries quickly dissipated. Auckland’s sister, Emily Eden, who accompanied him to India when he became governor-general, kept a detailed and thoughtful journal of their experiences. Describing a visit by a Sikh delegation to their residence in Simla, she wrote that her brother George had to listen to “the most flowery nonsense imaginable. . . . It took a quarter of an hour to satisfy him about the maharajah’s health, and to ascertain that the rose had bloomed in the garden of friendship, and the nightingales had sung in the bowers of affection even sweeter than ever, since the two powers had approached each other.” On another occasion, she noted, more simply, “This has been a day of durbars for G., which is a sad

waste of time.” Similarly, Hastings wrote about holding a durbar “the monotony of which was little relieved by the compliments which the natives were enabled to pay on news just received from Poonah [of a recent British victory].” Whereas the durbars that followed in the wake of the Mutiny and the subsequent Government of India Act were largely symbolic, designed to reestablish political order and mark Indian submission to the British, those that took place during the first third of the century, when Britain’s hold on India was more tenuous, were designed to be much more substantive. They were stylized meetings between high-ranking officials trying to establish peaceful, diplomatic, mutually beneficial relationships. The complaints about monotony suggest that etiquette and formality won out over substance, leaving the governors frustrated in their attempts to conduct serious and important state business. What made them boring was the discrepancy between expectation and actuality.

Being able to tolerate ceremony was indeed an essential component of imperial service. Denison’s wife described what it was like to see William head off in the morning to meet the Hobart council, watching “the little cavalcade from the door,” then hearing “the guns announcing that he was on his way.” She thought it “amusing . . . to be behind the scenes of these little actings of grandeur; to see what a great show may be made with little means, and after all, how much more of show than of reality there is in it.” Every time Hastings and Auckland entered a new city, they had to review the troops, meet the officers, and be saluted, a process that typically went on for days. Occasionally, these vain attempts to keep up appearances became almost laughable. During the fall of their first year in Van Dieman’s Land, Denison and his wife made their headquarters at the government cottage in New Norfolk, and from there made an excursion across the country to Launceston, where they were received “with great form and state.” According to his wife, the scene was “amusing” because “the road was indescribably bad” and had been made worse by “two nights’ continued rain.” “Through the midst of all this ‘pomp and circumstance,’” she wrote, “. . . we went struggling and floundering on.”

Marching from one location to another, whether from city to city on an inspection tour or semiannually to some hill station, was among the least engaging aspects of being a colonial governor or of being in his entourage. Even in India, where there were sights to see, the British described much of the terrain as uninteresting in the extreme. After Hastings left Agra, he noted nothing in his diary for five consecutive days except the number of miles traveled, before summarizing: “None of these marches have produced anything worthy of observa-
tion.” At other times he merely implied that the lands he was passing through lacked interest, as when he wrote, approaching Mynpooree (Mainpuri), “the country has improved considerably” (2:34). Even the Ganges failed to captivate him: “Nothing can be more agreeable in the imagination of those who have not experienced it,” he wrote, “than a voyage up the Ganges. It is, however, an undertaking exceedingly tedious” (2:201).

Emily Eden and her brother George shared Hastings’s view that traveling though India was not as exciting as it was made out to be in the lavishly illustrated travel books. Soon after they began their journey through the upper provinces from Calcutta to Simla, she wrote: “G. is already bored to death with having nothing to do. He has read two novels and cannot swallow any more.” On another occasion, she complained: “We came another ten miles yesterday. . . . All these places are so exactly like each other—a mere sandy plain with a tank and a little mosque near at hand—that I can never make out why they have any names; there is nothing to give a name to” (34). Nor was there much to break the monotony: “We have had two or three most uneventful marches,” she wrote several months later, “and Sergeant H., who goes on the day before, always sends back the same report, ‘Road rough and very dusty,’” or to vary it, “Road very rough and dusty” (342). It may be that the dominance of the picturesque aesthetic ironically made it harder to appreciate the Indian landscape for what it was.

The colonies also lacked excitement because everywhere the British went, they constructed buildings and towns to look as similar as possible to those that they had left behind in England. Doing so helped them create, as Denison put it, “something like a home feeling,” but it also had the effect of concealing the novelty and uniqueness that characterized so many of the colonies and that is such an essential component of a satisfying touristic experience. In Calcutta, for example, there was a church inspired by St.-Martin-in-the-Fields, and government house was a brick copy of Kedleston Hall in Derbyshire. The Indian hill stations in particular were designed to replicate English villages, with gabled Gothic villas and half-timbered Tudor cottages surrounding the ubiquitous Anglican churches. Indeed they were even promoted for their resemblance to

32. Eden, Up the Country, 5.
33. Denison, Varieties of Vice-Regal Life, 1:32.
34. Alain de Botton, The Art of Travel (New York: Pantheon, 2002).
35. Meyer and Brysac, Tournament of Shadows; Thomas R. Metcalf, An Imperial Vision: Indian Architecture and Britain’s Raj (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 3–4. Although Thomas R. Metcalf argues that, “whether public or private, colonial architecture remained always distinct” and was “neither English nor Indian,” he is looking at architecture as part of a larger system of colonial control and thus focusing on public buildings that appropriated stylistic elements from the Indian past as a means of asserting control in the colonial present. Moreover, Metcalf too acknowledges, for example, that “the early colonial buildings transplanted overseas the predominant European mode of the time, that of the classical revival.” See Metcalf, Imperial Vision, 7–9.
English towns and landscapes: an Eastern Bengal State Railway brochure suggested that Shillong was like “parts of Hampshire and Surrey, and an agent for tea planters compared Shillong to “Surrey or Cotswald Hills.”37 But while Lord Lytton, viceroy of India from 1876 to 1880, thought that Shillong’s similarity to England made it “paradise,”38 in a different part of the world, John Henderson of the 78th Highlanders was less impressed by the resemblance of Sydney, Australia, to all that he had left behind:

I confess that, notwithstanding its vast extent and population (considering that it is but fifty-six years since its foundation), I was somewhat disappointed with the appearance of Sydney. It was too like home; I had looked for something foreign and Oriental in its appearance; but I found that, excepting a few verandahs, and the lofty and stately Norfolk Island pine, it coincided with a second or third-class town in England.39

This familiarity helped reassure travelers and immigrants but also made it difficult for them to conceive of themselves as being in a foreign country. Denison’s wife, for example, wrote that she was looking forward to an excursion to a particular valley in Van Dieman’s Land because “the whole air of this place, the streets, the shops, the very gardens, from the many English flowers in them, are so exactly like those of a country town in England, that it is very difficult to realize the fact of being nearly at the antipodes.” The only differences that she had been able to discern abroad were the occasional gang of convicts or team of bullocks passing by and “the greater preponderance of white coats and straw hats among the men.”40

Just as familiarity could breed monotony, too much company could breed loneliness. Being a colonial governor was an isolating experience, ironically made worse by the constant presence of aides-de-camp. It was against etiquette to go out without one, and when Denison went out for a ride, “an escort of cavalry” always followed him. He felt constantly “under watch and ward,” as did Lord Elgin, who

37. From the Hooghly to the Himalayas (Bombay: Times Press, 1913), 47; Hyde Clarke, “The English Stations in the Hill Regions of India: Their Value and Importance, with Some Statistics of Their Products and Trade,” Journal of the Statistical Society 44.3 (September 1881): 532.

38. Lady Betty Balfour, The History of Lord Lytton’s Indian Administration, 1876–1880 (London: Longmans, Green 1899), 220. Lytton explained, “The afternoon was rainy and the road muddy, but such beautiful English rain, such delicious English mud. Imagine Hertfordshire lands, Devonshire downs, Westmoreland lakes, Scotch trout-streams, and Lusitanian views!”


Melbourne also seemed oddly familiar. As one immigrant to Australia wrote in his diary not long after he arrived, “Melbourne is a good town, quite English, you can scarcely fancy yourself 16,000 miles from home. English people, houses, shops and good wide streets, all quite like home. . . . [Out] of town in every direction it looks more strange and foreign.” See J. W. Reeves, Diary on Queen of the West, February 13, 1857, National Library of Australia ms 6442.

shared with Denison that, after being governor, he could imagine what a lunatic felt like (“with his keeper always close to him”) (2:315). From Calcutta, in 1863, Denison wrote about “spending but a lonely Christmas.” He longed to romp with his children; but instead, every time he opened his door, “up start four or five men in scarlet dresses, who are waiting for my commands.” When he moved about the house, “one of them always followed” him. It is not surprising, then, that Denison did not much like Calcutta, and he was very pleased when he was relieved of his post there and could return to Madras, where he could have a bit more freedom. Denison thought Calcutta—“the city of palaces”—woefully misnamed, with “nothing between these so-called palaces, and the river, but a large green plot, on which I can either walk, ride, or drive.” The place, he complained, was pervaded by “villainous smells,” and he “long[ed] for a good hearty laugh to clear his lungs” (2:315–16). Rather than opening up new worlds, being governor in this imperial capital was a stifling experience that left Denison feeling alone, bored, and completely helpless.

Richard Burton

Perhaps the most unlikely victim of imperial boredom was that quintessential imperial man, Richard Burton. Adventurer, explorer, soldier, linguist, scholar, Orientalist, and anthropologist, Burton is best known for being one of the first Westerners to enter Mecca. He translated the Kama Sutra and Arabian Nights and, with his partner John Speke, in 1858 discovered the source of the Nile. If there was anyone who exulted in the excitement of empire, it was Burton, and yet the account he gives of his experiences traveling from Sindh down the west coast of India and then overland to the Ootacamund hill station where he went to recuperate from cholera in 1847 presents a rather different picture.

Burton was hardly alone in finding oceanic travel uninteresting, and he was traveling only a short distance. “From Bombay southwards as far as Goa,” he wrote, “the coast, viewed from the sea, merits little admiration. It is an unbroken succession of gentle rises and slopes, and cannot evade the charge of dullness and uniformity.” He acknowledged that “every now and then some fort or rock juts out into the water breaking the line,” but because the ship was so far from shore, they were unable to distinguish any of its picturesque features.41 Even as Burton drew closer to Goa, the coastal view did not improve. All he saw were an “eternal succession of villages, palaces, villas, houses, cottages, gardens, and cocoa-nut trees.” He therefore decided to skip over these “uninteresting details” and instead provide his reader with “a short historical sketch of the hapless city’s fortunes.”42

42. Burton, Goa, 30.
As dull as this relatively brief jaunt was for Burton, the journey from London to South Africa, India, or Australia was far more tedious. “Nothing can be duller than a long sea-voyage,” H. G. Keene wrote, “except perhaps the description of one by a hand that does not hold the pen of a ready writer.” And when Governor Hastings’s daughter, the marchioness of Bute, edited her father’s journal for publication in 1858, one of the few parts she deleted was that pertaining to the six-month voyage out, explaining that “the details” were “so well known” that they “would be tedious.”43 Prior to the 1850s, it was common for ships sailing to India and Australia to stop en route for water and provisions, and many passengers were thankful for the break at Cape Town. In the 1870s, with the advent of the steamship and the opening of the Suez Canal, the journey not only became shorter, it had to be interrupted for frequent coaling stops. But for most of those traveling during the third quarter of the nineteenth century—and only a minority traveled on the celebrated clipper ships—the voyage was made nonstop and out of view of land for almost the entire distance. For those going all the way to Australia, the average journey took one hundred days.

Additionally, whereas in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries many voyagers had been thrilled to make natural and scientific observations, by the mid–nineteenth century, most of what there was to identify had been identified—and how much more was there to say about the albatross? In short, by the third quarter of the nineteenth century, oceanic travel had become much more monotonous: it was less dangerous, the route was well known, there were few if any stops, land was rarely in sight, and there was little novelty in seeing birds and fish that had been seen and described before.44 This routinization of travel parallels the bureaucratization of work.

Moreover, despite suffering through a long, tedious journey, the first and overpowering feeling many Britons experienced when they arrived at their destination was disappointment. A chasm yawned between the way imperial lands were described in published travel accounts and the way they seemed in person. After noting his disillusionment with Goa, Burton poked fun at the “gentlemen tourists, poetical authors, [and] lady prosers” who, in their quest for the sublime and the beautiful, rhapsodized about the “palm tasseled strand of glowing Ind.” Because each successive writer, according to Burton, felt obliged to “improve upon his predecessors,” by the mid–nineteenth century the Bay of Bombay was commonly believed to outshine even the Bay of Naples. Burton countered sarcastically that, if one wanted to turn the Bay of Naples into the Bay of Bombay, one would first have to “remove Capri, Procida, Ischia, and the other little picturesque localities around them.” Even then, one would need to “level Vesuvius.

and the rocky heights of St. Angelo,” plus “convert bright Naples, with its rows of white palazzi, its romantic-looking forts, its beautiful promenade, and charming background into a low, black, dirty port,” and still “you’ll fail” to equalize the two bays. In short, there was nothing picturesque about the Bay of Bombay, travelers’ accounts notwithstanding.\textsuperscript{45}

Goa disappointed Burton because its sights had become ever more familiar over the centuries, its unique features devalued. When Jan Huygen van Linschoten, a Dutchman, journeyed to Portugese Goa in 1583, he described it as the finest, largest, and most magnificent city in India, with villas that almost merited being termed palaces.\textsuperscript{46} One might be tempted to dismiss as exaggerated Linschoten’s account of the riches and splendor of Goa, were it not corroborated by other travelers in the seventeenth century.\textsuperscript{47} But by the time Alexander Hamilton arrived in the mid–eighteenth century, the political climate in Goa had changed dramatically, with an equivalent shift in foreigners’ perceptions of the place. Hamilton focused on the drunkenness, hypocrisy, bigotry, and poverty of the inhabitants and on the poor state of trade.\textsuperscript{48} Whereas in the sixteenth century Goa had been, in Stephen Greenblatt’s words, a land of “wonder and marvel,” by the mid–eighteenth century, following the collapse of Mughal power, it had fallen into decline, and by the mid–nineteenth century it quite simply had lost its novelty and aura as one of India’s jewels.

Even sightseeing could be dull. Travel guides focus on the interesting and the beautiful, whereas getting from one place to another frequently involves long journeys through uninteresting and unpleasant surroundings. A long succession of “sights” can become tiring, as Burton noted after a nighttime tour of Goa. Although his excursion started out promisingly picturesque—Burton described how “the setting sun was pouring a torrent of crimson light along the Rio as the prow of our canoe bumped against the steps of the wharf”—the more Burton saw of Goa, the more disillusioned he became. He was especially dissatisfied by the “contrast between the moonlit scenery of the distant bay, smiling in all eternal Nature’s loveliness, and the dull gray piles of ruined or desolate habitations, the short-lived labors of man!” Even as he has invoked the sublime in this passage, he has done so in order to depict what was for him a dreary scene. Burton was also

\textsuperscript{45} Burton, Goa, 4. Italy was in fact a frequent reference point for travelers, rendering all those places that suffered by comparison “disappointing.” A tour of churches left Burton unimpressed because “with the exception of some remarkable wood-work, the minor decorations of paintings and statues are inferior to those of any Italian village church” (49).


frustrated by the difference between the way Goa looked in the moonlight from afar—“such places,” he wrote, “should always, in our humble opinion, be visited for the first time by moonlight”—and how it looked upon closer inspection, when “nothing but the foundations of the houses could be traced.” But even sightseeing in the evening had its drawbacks: there were no people around to enliven the city. “For an hour or two,” he complained, he “walked without ever meeting a single human being” until, “at last, fatigued with the monotony of the ruins and the length of the walk,” he retraced his steps and called it a night.49

After Goa, Burton journeyed to Seroda, which he found “uninteresting,” and then to Calicut, which he described with incredulity as “three or four bungalows” with a “stick-like light-house between them” and a “half-dozen tiled and thatched roofs peeping from amongst the trees” (93, 118). From there he proceeded to Malabar and Poonanee, a journey that was “a most uninteresting one.” He found “literally nothing to record, except the ever-recurring annoyances of being ferried over backwaters, riding through hot sand fetlock deep, enduring a glare enough to blind anything by a Mucwa or a wild beast; and at the end of our long rides almost invariably missing the halting place.” Even “a diligent inquiry for any objects of curiosity” produced nothing but “deceit” (170).

There was a direct relationship between disappointment and boredom, or what Burton sometimes referred to as tedium. As Burton drew closer to Ootacamund, he decided “to forsake the uninteresting main line” and take an alternative route that went past the Khaity falls. To his dismay, Khaity was nothing more than “a collection of huts tenanted by the hill people, and in no ways remarkable, except that it has given a name to a cascade [to] which ‘everybody goes.’” From Khaity he traversed “six miles of mountain and valley in rapid and unbroken succession,” which brought him to a little missionary settlement overlooking a deep ravine, where he wondered “why the ‘everybody’ above alluded to takes the trouble of visiting the Khaity falls.” He felt “disappointment,” and as a result of his “depressed and prosy state of mind,” he could do little but “wile away the tedium of the eight long miles” that still separated him from his destination (186).

As for Ootacamund, Burton’s initial reaction was one of “excitement, joy, [and] delight,” and he used the affectionate nickname “Ooty.” He “luxuriated in the cool air,” his appetite improved at the sight of fresh fruit, and he experienced a “strange sensation of pleasure” at being able to pick a daisy for the first time since leaving England. But after a month, he found himself in “a state of mind bordering upon the critical.” The scenery was deficient, the “diminutive ravines” and “the greenness of its mountain-tops” comparing poorly with the “glaciers” and “snow clad summits” of European mountains. The Neilgherries were, he decided, “a tame copy of the Alps and the Pyrenees.” And, in the end, he wondered what

there was to do all day without tennis, hunting, a theater, a concert room, or a racecourse. He led a life that was, in his view, “a perfect anomaly,” dressing “like an Englishman,” and leading “a quiet, gentlemanly life—doing nothing” (198–203). His “routine of life” was broken only by “amusements” such as shooting parties, picnics, grand dinners, and balls (206). Nor was Burton exceptional in finding life at the hill stations tiresome. H. G. Keene, who had commented on the dullness of his oceanic voyage to India, recalled that matters did not improve after he had settled in. He found the Banda hill station both “dull and unhealthy.”

Burton found India altogether disappointing. The well-traveled sights were too familiar from the tourist literature to be exciting, but taking alternative routes, he found, could be even worse. Like many other imperial travelers, Burton also found that the pleasure he might derive from a famous site was greatly diminished by the hours and sometimes days of hot, dusty roads he had to traverse in order to reach it. Even allowing for crankiness and hyperbole (not to mention Burton’s insatiable need for excitement and adventure), traveling in India—“the jewel in the crown”—did precious little for him, perhaps explaining why he subsequently pursued adventures in Africa and Arabia.

Boredom and the Construction of Empire

Boredom is not a simple emotion, but rather a complex constellation of reactions. Whereas ennui implies a judgment on the universe, boredom is a response to the immediate. The boredom that nineteenth-century colonial officials experienced was largely the product of unmet expectations about the landscape, combined with the increasingly bureaucratic and ceremonial nature of imperial service. Both the experience of travel and the governance of empire changed markedly between about 1783, the date often used to mark the end of the “old colonial system,” and 1860, the beginning of the “age of high imperialism.” This was the period, most critically, during which the British established their global hegemony, relying less and less on the support of indigenous rulers, capital, and military personnel, and moving increasingly to establish centralized admin-

50. Keene, Servant, 84.

51. Spacks, Boredom, 12.


istrative rule. Although the colonial office remained a sleepy, humdrum place in the days before the widespread use of the telegraph and typewriter, the volume of paperwork increased enormously during the 1830s and 1840s. Moreover, travel opportunities during this time expanded exponentially, with a corresponding proliferation of tourist literature that encouraged middle- and upper-class men and women to journey overseas in search of picturesque landscapes and ruins, only to find that they were neither as spectacular nor as novel in person as they were in paintings and engravings. These changes made the empire a less enjoyable place to be, with fewer opportunities to explore the unexplored, and with the governance of the empire, especially in India and Australia, becoming more institutionalized and subject to greater accountability.

But if imperial officials were so bored, why did they write about their experiences in the first place? The very fact that they kept diaries seems to imply that they regarded their experiences as interesting and important, not mundane and monotonous. Keeping a diary was, however, a fashion of the age. According to Peter Gay, self-reflective diaries “became almost obligatory companions to a class endowed with a modicum of leisure.” More than simply a way to fill time, however, or a method of record keeping, diaries of this sort may be regarded as a means of “colonial self-fashioning.” They provided a context for saying who one was—what the meaning of one’s life was—a human need, perhaps, that may have been particularly heightened in the colonial context when, as so many scholars have pointed out, identities were being challenged and in flux. Diaries were or

54. Despite the increased size and bureaucratization of the empire, the number of colonial officials remained small. Even in post-Mutiny India, there were perhaps 2,000 European officials overseeing some 200–300 million Indians. Similarly, in Uganda during the 1890s, only twenty-five officials exerted authority over approximately three million people. See Bernard Porter, The Lion’s Share: A Short History of British Imperialism, 1850–1983, 2nd ed. (London: Longman, 1984), 46, and Ronald Hyam, Britain’s Imperial Century, 1815–1914: A Study of Empire and Expansion, 3rd ed. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 310.

55. Young, Colonial Office; Cell, British Colonial Administration.


57. Peter Gay, Education of the Senses, vol. 1 of The Bourgeois Experience, Victoria to Freud (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984), 446–48. Scholars have devoted much more attention to women’s diaries than to men’s, seeing the former as creative outlets and as socially acceptable and private channels for women to explore and express their feelings, even as sanctuaries and confessional.


could be a discourse about the self. They were also a means of imposing order on a disorderly world created by new experiences in unfamiliar places. It is important to acknowledge, however, that the act of writing a diary can constrain as much as it can liberate. A diary begs to be written every day, regardless of what is going on in the author’s world, and its existence implies that there is something worth writing on a daily basis. Yet as the diaries in question reveal, there were many days when nothing worth noting occurred. Thus, keeping a diary forced diarists either to find something to write about or else to acknowledge, in ways that they would not do in a memoir or a travel guide, that there was very little of interest taking place.

Historians have overlooked the extent and significance of imperial boredom because they have focused too much on public records and the popular press and too little on records intended to be private. The press made famous the big game hunts of men like the Prince of Wales (the future Edward VII) when he visited India in 1876; likewise Lord Curzon’s recreational hunts in the early twentieth century.60 But tiger hunting was rarely as glamorous or successful as it was made out to be publicly, however instrumental it may have been in the construction of imperial masculinity.61 Lord Auckland’s sister Emily reported a more typical expedition: “G. has been out tiger-hunting from the two last stations. They never had a glimpse of a tiger, though here and there they saw the footprints of one.”62 Even when scholars consult private records, they can be misled, as all too often editors have excised substantial portions of diaries and letters. Lily Wolpowitz, for example, who compiled The Diaries of John Rose of Cape Town, 1848–1873, admitted to “editorial intrusion,” by which she meant that she had “excluded large sections” that were “far too detailed” and “not related.” She also “cut down” on “the repetitive comments on the weather, ship arrivals and departures as well as the mailing of correspondence.”63 And yet, the weather, the coming and going of ships, and the daily mail were often the most important elements of an imperial life—or rather, the elements most significant in establishing how mundanely such lives were so often lived.

It is by now almost a truism that nations are imagined political communities, their identity and cohesiveness depending not only on the legitimacy of the


62. Eden, Up the Country, 112. See also George Orwell, “Shooting an Elephant” (1936).

government and the apparatus of the state, but also on invented traditions, manufactured myths, and shared perceptions of the social order that are no more than makeshift categories and stereotypes.64 As valid as that generalization may be for a small island nation like Britain, it is even more so for transoceanic conglomerations like the British empire, which scholars have increasingly begun to describe as a culturally constructed entity, as well as a geographically, administratively, economically, and militarily constructed one.65 Still undertheorized in the literature, however, is the question of why the British empire was conceptualized in precisely the way that it was.66 It is well known that the Virginia Company extolled the economic benefits of the early American colonies, most famously in A True Declaration of the Estate of the Colonie in Virginia (1610), which David Quinn has called “the most distinguished piece of propaganda for the colony.”67 Several centuries later, Edward Gibbon Wakefield promoted the systematic colonization of Australia (from his London prison cell) by emphasizing the abundance of land and the shortage of labor in that region of the empire.68 Edward Said famously argued that Europeans “invented” the Orient, representing it as irrational, depraved, fallen, traditional, and childlike in order to justify their imperial domination.69 More recently, and in response to Said, David Cannadine has documented the sociological construction of the British Empire, showing how the British saw themselves as belonging to a hierarchical society of seamless gradations and comprehended the many people of their empire in similar terms.70

The cultural construction of empire as a site of excitement and adventure, however, has been less well explored and explained.71 Even as scholars have scrutinized the claims of the Virginia Company and Edward Wakefield, they have tended to take at face value the image of empire disseminated through the popular novels of Rider Haggard, Rudyard Kipling, and such twentieth-century successors as George MacDonald Fraser (Flashman), Paul Scott (The Raj Quartet),


70. Cannadine, Ornamentalism.

Imperial propaganda—exhibitions, juvenile literature, music hall entertainment, radio, advertising, film, and organizations such as the Boy Scouts—has often been taken literally. The experience of administrators such as William Denison and Garnet Wolseley suggests that hagiographic biographies and self-serving autobiographies should also be thought of as imperial propaganda, constructing the empire as a place of adventure, excitement, picturesque beauty, and noble work, when in fact it so often lacked these very features. The empire’s “civilizing mission” was truly a banal affair of administration, that very terminology helping to make work that was monotonous and dreary seem alluring and gallant.

Given that nineteenth-century fiction and biography are so implicated in promoting the British empire, it is not surprising that the most impressive challenges to the imperial ideal have come from postcolonial writers. Stanlake Samkange’s On Trial for My Country, a historically based examination of the clash between Cecil Rhodes and Matabele King Lobengula, is especially insightful on the subject of imperial boredom. One of Rhodes’s agents in Matabeleland is a lawyer named Maguire who had attended Oxford with Rhodes, earning a “double first” and a fellowship at All Souls. Samkange describes Maguire as erudite, cultured, and meticulous, “more at home in academic circles or passing biscuits and tea in the elegant drawing rooms of England than in the role of a pioneer envoy and diplomat to the fly-infested course of a savage king.” Nevertheless, he was sent, with two other men, “to put in good legal language” any agreement with Lobengula that would enable Rhodes to extend the Cape Colony into central Africa. Their dealings with Lobengula proceeded slowly. As Maguire remembered, “we waited and waited and waited. We went to hunt for game, bathed in the river, played whist, backgammon or chess until we were worn out.” After some

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time, Rhodes’s men tricked Lobengula into signing the infamous Rudd concession, turning over all minerals in his kingdom for £100 per month, 1,000 rifles, and 100,000 rounds of ammunition.\footnote{This phrase is surely poking fun at G. P. Gooch, \textit{Under Six Reigns} (London: Longmans, Green, 1938), who wrote that the empire at its height consisted of “one continent, a hundred peninsulas, five hundred promontories, a thousand lakes, two thousand rivers, ten thousand islands” (123).} For a brief period Lobengula remained on good terms with his British advisers, until a Boer delegation convinced him that he had sold out his country, at which point Maguire and the other remaining adviser found themselves under threat, and Maguire decided that he had had enough. “Bored with his unchanging diet of beef and beer,” Samkange writes, “bored with the company he kept, bored with just doing nothing except smell the stink and stench of the royal kraal, Maguire slipped away from Matabeleland.”\footnote{Stanlake Samkange, \textit{On Trial for My Country} (London: Heinemann, 1966).}

Occasionally, though, even the press got it right. In 1866, the \textit{Daily Telegraph} declared, “Africa is a bore.”\footnote{\textit{Daily Telegraph}, August 17, 1866, quoted in Christine Bolt, \textit{Victorian Attitudes to Race} (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1971), 143. Noel Annan echoed these sentiments when he recalled that although the word \textit{empire} was officially coupled with duty and heritage in the years before and after 1914, “These sentiments were not in fact shared by the country . . . which had always been bored with the Empire.” See Annan, \textit{Our Age: English Intellectuals between the World Wars—A Group Portrait} (New York: Random House, 1990), 32.} But it was less that Africa (or India or Australia) were boring than that British colonial officials were themselves bored. The point is not that the historian sees their lives as dull, though that may be the case, but rather that men like Wolseley, Denison, Hastings, and many others regarded their own lives as uneventful. Life in the colonies was not by definition boring. There were clearly exciting moments, and traveling around the empire offered brushes with the unfamiliar—though not, it seems, as many or as often as men of Burton’s kind would have liked. The reality simply could not live up to the expectations created by newspapers, novels, travel books, and propaganda. As a consequence, notwithstanding some famous exceptions, nineteenth-century colonial officials were deflated by the dreariness of their imperial lives, desperate to ignore or escape the empire they had built.