

# Britain's bored imperialists

From the viceroys of India drowning in tedious paperwork to soldiers with no one to fight, **Jeffrey Auerbach** describes the ennui that gripped Britons on the frontline of empire in the 19th century

GETTY IMAGES

The British empire was the largest in the history of the world – one on which the sun never set. It was also a place of widespread and at times crushing monotony, as the

empire grew larger and more bureaucratic with fewer opportunities to discover the unknown or interact with indigenous people.

Not everyone found the empire boring, nor was it boring all the time. It would also be a stretch to suggest that the millions of people over whom the British ruled found the empire boring, although the novelist Jamaica Kincaid claimed in *A Small Place* (1988), her moving portrait of postcolonial Antigua, that: “Every native everywhere lives a life of overwhelming and crushing banality and boredom.” Still, the Aboriginal experience with British settlers was a story of great violence and hardship, and for many Indians and Africans the empire was devastating and dehumanising.

For the British, however, boredom was increasingly how they experienced the empire, whether it was the Marquess of Hastings complaining that his journey up the Ganges in 1815 was “extremely tedious”, to gold diggers in Australia who grouched about “the monotony of bush life”. These feelings of boredom had very real consequences, from soldiers who succumbed to alcoholism, to émigrés who returned home, to officials who quit the imperial service. The early empire may have been about wonder and marvel but, as the following eight examples prove, the 19th-century empire was far less exciting.

## OCEAN TRAVEL

### Tedium on the high seas

Throughout the 18th century, voyages to India were exciting and at times harrowing. Ships were small; navigation was primitive; the risk of being shipwrecked was constant; and rations were limited, necessitating stops at islands like St Helena for fresh water and to enjoy some sightseeing. By the mid-19th century, however, as ships took on paying passengers who were not involved in work onboard, attitudes had shifted. As Henry Keene declared in 1897, looking back on his years in the East India Company: “Nothing can be duller than a long sea-voyage.”

Fanny Parkes, who sailed to India in 1822, felt the same way. Although she was bursting with enthusiasm when her voyage began, her ship was soon mired in a “a dead calm”. She pleaded: “Give me any day a storm and a half in preference! It was so miserable.” Near the Cape, she saw some whales, but was “disappointed” by their small size. The Indian Ocean brought terrible heat, and they were again becalmed, this time for 18 days. Despite her best efforts, there was no avoiding “the tedium of the voyage”.

The journey to Australia was even more arduous, lasting 120 days. The Great Circle Route (around the Cape of Good Hope and across the Southern Ocean), mapped out in the 1840s, shortened the voyage by a month, but required passengers to sail out of sight of land almost the entire time. It was “Monotonous in the extreme”, one emigrant grumbled in 1864. Although steamships would quicken the journey, during the middle decades of the 19th century numerous passengers complained that they had “nothing to do”.



Passengers on a P&O liner, c1890. “Nothing worth mentioning except sky and water and water and sky,” noted one traveller en route to Tasmania



British artillery officers in India, c1860–80. “Months passed without producing an event worth noticing,” wrote one soldier in the 1840s

## THE MILITARY

### A drab uniformity

There were many reasons why soldiers were bored. Top of the list, according to Julius Jeffreys, staff surgeon in Cawnpore in the 1830s, was “the dull routine of barrack imprisonment”. Soldiers, especially in India, frequently commented on the heat that confined them to their tents for hours a day with nothing to do.

For some, it was the work itself. John Mercier MacMullen of the 13th Light Infantry recalled the “uniform sameness” of his daily routine in the 1840s when he was stationed in Sukkur. Every day he rose at the same time and went to regimental headquarters, where he sat in “the same chair and the same side of the table”, and where his work was “nearly ever of the same character”. He added: “Months passed away without producing an

event worth noticing”.

Many soldiers went decades without fighting a single skirmish. The 10th (North Lincolnshire) Regiment of Foot, after serving in India from 1846–58, did not do battle again until it was sent to Malaya in 1875. And the 22nd (Cheshire) Regiment of Foot, which fought in the Second Sikh War of 1848–49, was essentially at rest until it went to Burma in the late 1880s.

These lengthy periods of inaction led Lieutenant-Colonel George Hennessy to complain about “the same sameness day after day” while serving in Kandahar in 1879. The well-known saying that war consists of “months of boredom punctuated by moments of terror” had its origins in the 19th-century British empire.

BRIDGEMAN

## BUSH LIFE

### Prisoners of the outback

Few occupations have been as celebrated in Australian history as the squatter (a settler or former convict). The reality, however, was very different from the mythology. As Edward Curr wrote in *Recollections of Squatting in Victoria* (1883), “One journey with sheep across a country is so like

another.” Curr, who sailed to Australia in 1842 to take over the management of his father’s estate near Melbourne, felt unfulfilled by the “little household jobs” that took up most of his days. Every morning he rose with the sun and “the monotonous routine of the previous day recommenced”.

Aside from reading, Curr’s only means of passing the time was to pace back and forth in front of the hut like a caged animal, an evocative indication of how bored he must have been. He wrote about the many “intervals of solitude”, one of which lasted three weeks, during which time he did not see a single person. He felt like “a prisoner with nothing to occupy me”.

For John Henderson, who emigrated to New South Wales in 1838 at the age of 19, every day in the bush was “a repetition of the one that went before it”. The same was true for gold diggers, who even at the height of the Gold Rush in the 1850s complained about their “monotonous work”.

**Edward Curr’s only means of passing the time was to pace back and forth in front of the hut like a caged animal**



A c1847 depiction of a squatter in the Australian bush, where men could go weeks without encountering another human being

MARY EVANS/BRIDGEMAN



Explorer Mary Kingsley compared life in Africa to being “shut up in a library”

**EXPLORATION**

## The “dreary” continent

Britain’s imperial expansion gave explorers unprecedented opportunities to venture into uncharted lands. Henry Morton Stanley crisscrossed Africa’s interior, Charles Sturt journeyed deep into Australia’s deserts, and Mary Kingsley hacked her way through the Congo with great aplomb. Yet even these intrepid men and women got bored.

Stanley himself wrote of the challenges of “enduring deadly monotony” and complained about the “endless occupations” during his journey “through the Dark Continent”. Not the least of these was his obsessive accounting for each piece of equipment, an impossible task given the amount of it, the length of the journey and the frequency of theft.

For Sturt, who made two epic journeys through southern Australia from 1828–31, it was the landscape itself that was boring. Sturt described the terrain as “dreary” far more than he characterised it as “picturesque”.

And Mary Kingsley complained about having to eat the same kind of fish every night when what she really wanted was “strange fish”. But that was Africa all over, she grumbled, “presenting one with familiar objects when one least requires them”. It was like “being shut up in a library, whose books you cannot read, all the while tormented, terrified and bored”.



Crows gatecrash a tennis party in India, as depicted in an engraving from 1891

**WOMEN**

## Ladies who lunched... and little else

There were many reasons why women were bored, especially in India. As Flora Annie Steel wrote in her autobiography, *The Garden of Fidelity* (1929), “The majority of European women in India have nothing to do... few companions of [their] own sex... and above all, in many cases, an empty nursery.”

The sheer number of servants that Anglo-Indian households employed meant that British women in India had few domestic duties. Whereas the wife of an assistant under-secretary in Whitehall might have enjoyed the services of four servants, in India she would have employed about 40.

Women could enjoy familiar rituals such as morning calls and garden parties, but the small size of the European community meant that social life in India was limited, with few opportunities to meet new people. Because Anglo-Indian society was so insular, the same women met day after day to eat the same meals and

exchange the same banal pleasantries.

British women generally learned little about India while they were there, and rarely spoke an Indian language apart from a few words of ‘kitchen Hindustani’. Reading was a possibility, but books and magazines were in short supply. By the late 19th century women were enjoying tennis and archery, but in hot weather even these activities came to a standstill.

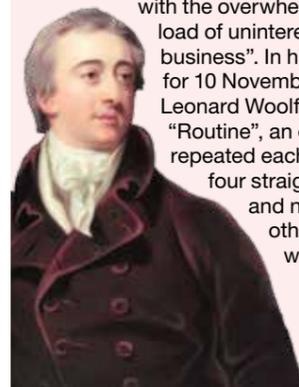
**The same women met day after day to eat the same meals and exchange the same banal pleasantries**

BRIDGEMAN

**BUREAUCRACY**

## Purgatory for pen-pushers

As the administration of the empire became more bureaucratic during the 19th century, imperial officials at all levels found themselves increasingly disenchanted with their work. William Bentinck (pictured), governor-general in India from 1828–35, complained of “boredom with the overwhelming load of uninteresting business”. In his diary for 10 November 1908, Leonard Woolf wrote “Routine”, an entry he repeated each day for four straight days and numerous other times while



servicing a three-year appointment as a civil servant in Ceylon.

Part of the problem was the increase in regulations and paperwork, which made a governor’s day repetitive and trivial. “Dullness is the central characteristic of an Indian viceroy’s life,” Lord Dufferin complained. He found his work “very uninteresting”, and resigned a year before his term was up.

Lord Lytton, another viceroy, wrote that India was “one incessant official grind from morning to night”. This was true even in Simla, the summer capital of the Raj, where the work carried on just as it did in Calcutta. Lytton wrote that it could take “the whole day and most of the night” to read and answer correspondence. He described the government of India as “a despotism of office-boxes”.

**TOURISTS**

## Nothing to write home about

By the early 1800s, thousands of Britons were embarking on sightseeing tours of imperial outposts. And, thanks to a proliferation of travelogues and the widespread circulation of engravings and paintings showing the empire’s natural and cultural wonders, these travellers had high expectations of what awaited them.

In the eyes of many British tourists, however, imperial sites often paled in comparison to the glowing treatment they received at the hands of well-compensated artists whose careers depended on making India, South Africa and Australia as attractive as possible. Even the most picturesque places were rarely as spectacular in

person as when portrayed in art.

Travellers also became so focused on seeing the popular sights, such as the Taj Mahal, that they paid less attention to what lay in between.

Numerous artists described how travelling across India in search of the picturesque could be “tedious”. Robert Smith, an army captain who had taken art lessons from George Chinnery, was a talented painter who produced a two-volume *Pictorial Journal of Travels in Hindustan from 1828 to 1833*, now stored in the Victoria & Albert Museum, that he obviously intended to publish. Yet almost every time Smith left a city, he complained that the scenery was “uninteresting”.

**A southern African landscape, as depicted in the 19th century. The empire’s natural treasures didn’t always live up to tourists’ expectations**



“Man of action” Lord Curzon with his wife, Mary, and a slain tiger

**HUNTING**

## Bored to death

Big-game hunting was part of the lore of empire, but the pursuit of trophies was often tedious and disappointing. Lord Curzon, Viceroy of India from 1899 to 1905, loved to hunt, and a picture of him standing over a dead tiger (above) helped cement his reputation as a man of action who could tame the natural world – and presumably India as well. Tiger hunting, however, was rarely so successful. On one occasion, Curzon sat in a tree for hours and saw nothing bigger than a frog. On another eight-day expedition he fired his rifle only once.

Nor was this unusual. A century earlier, Lord Hastings complained that on several occasions he had gone looking for tigers, but that despite his best efforts, he did not find any. Emily Eden reported that her brother George, Lord Auckland, who served as governor-general from 1836–42, had gone out tiger-hunting several times but “never had a glimpse of a tiger, though here and there... saw the footprints of one”.

Frank Swettenham had a similar experience in Malaya in the 1870s. He went on several hunting expeditions “but to very little avail”, even though the region was “much frequented by elephants, tigers, rhinoceros, and wild buffaloes”. On one excursion he saw nothing more exciting than a pig and some jungle fowl before rain forced him back.

Although there were numerous books about big-game hunting in Africa, the reality, at least in Asia, was rather more boring than the fantasy. **11**

Jeffrey Auerbach is professor of history at California State University, Northridge. His latest book is *Imperial Boredom: Monotony and the British Empire* (Oxford University Press, 2018)

**DISCOVER MORE**

**WEBSITE**

► You’ll find more on the **British empire** on *BBC History Magazine’s* website: [historyextra.com/tag/the-british-empire](http://historyextra.com/tag/the-british-empire)