



Plain Tales from the Raj

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The memoirs of some 70 British men and women whose lives followed the course of Anglo-India through its last 50 years.

Plain Tales from the Raj Details

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From Reader Review Plain Tales from the Raj for online ebook

Molshri says

There is so much we don't know. It's really interesting to read the perspectives of the ordinary British soldiers, the government officers and the businessmen who came to India. A must read for all Indians to understand the other side of the British Raj.

Also gives a fair and unbiased account of racism and the attitude of the British towards the locals and the reason behind it. At the same time, also highlights the huge contribution of the British in India and the dedication with which with many of them served the nation.

These are first hand accounts of the British in the British Raj at the turn of the 20th century all the way up to Indian independence...

Loved it and so give it it a full 5 stars.

Sadaf says

An interesting book to read if you are from the sub-continent. On the one hand colonialism raises its controversial head but on the other hand many things feel so uncannily familiar. Even after 66 years, most Pakistani institutions follow the same patterns laid down in the British Raj, especially in the military and civil services. Most large cities still have a Cantonment area, a Civil Lines and various clubs. Also the British attitude towards the natives has been transferred to the local ruling elite who now dominate those lower down the social hierarchy. Overall, a good read with a strong dose of nostalgia.

Clare Flynn says

Fascinating pot pourri of different voices recalling incidents from their personal histories in colonial India - marred by the lack of context which means you need to constantly flip to the back of the book to ascertain the geography, rough period and role of the speaker. As the voices talked of experiences from the late 19thC to 1947 it was hard to see how they had evolved. Also very little representation from South India. That aside a wonderful picture of a now lost world - imagine all of them dead now.

Wendy Jackson says

Engaging book that provides yet more airtime to those who already have strong voices in Indian/British history. It all seems horribly anachronistic now, but the reality is that at the time, people believed they were doing the right thing. Makes me grateful that we have (mostly) progressed. Would be good to balance this out with some material from Indian historians documenting their experience of the Raj.

P.D.R. Lindsay says

This book is the written account of the BBC radio programme of the same name.

If you want to know what it was like to be a member of the military or civil service in the Indian Raj in the last years (1900 -1947) of the Indian Empire then this is a marvellous source of people's remembrances.

Well put together, lovely paintings of the time by people who were there, and an excellent read as well as a fascinating source of first hand research material.

•Karen• says

A March day of a book: some sunny periods with laugh out loud moments, such as how one poor soldier imprudently found release from the pressure of pent up physical desire with a sacred cow from the temple. This could not be disregarded by Hindus, and the young man was duly prosecuted. The officer representing the Crown opened the case: "On the day of the alleged offence my client was grazing contentedly in the field." The case was apparently dismissed when it was pointed out that the cow had been cited in a previous case. The slag.

More sunny moments: the utter absurdity of some of those iron rules of etiquette, for example whether a lady should wear evening gloves in the jungle (so important), the rigidity of seating arrangements strictly according to a ranking system as finely stratified as the Grand Canyon. Ironical, when these people at the same time condemned the arbitrariness of the caste system. Then there were gusty March squalls when reading of the poignant fate of children, and their ayahs, or shenanigans in Simla but I'm afraid there were also some dull, grey periods of repetitive and plodding narrative.

The interviews with those last guardians of colonial rule are divided up into thematic chapters that blend the experiences of people in various localities and at various times, a structure that flattens out the contours of a whole continent into a single entity that is India under the British yoke. That's quite an achievement, to turn such diversity into a monolith. I suppose that's what a colonizing force does.

Lyn Elliott says

I read this book soon after it was first published and have just re-read it in an illustrated 1985 edition , which is not available as an option on goodreads that I can see.

Charles Allen has compiled a collective memoir of 'Survivors', as he calls them, of the last decades of the British Raj in India, from the late nineteenth century up to the catastrophic partition in 1947. This is a rare chance to hear the voices of English men and women speak about their lives, their relationship to the country, the class structure within which they lived in India and which they imposed upon it (in addition to the highly complex Indian caste structure) and perceptions of cultural and political change within India.

The interviews were used in a television series produced for the BBC, and this book skilfully combines the

voice of the writer/narrator with the multiple voices of the interviewed 'Survivors' to give us vivid pictures of life in all aspects: Childhood, the domestic world, the place of women, sport and recreations, life in the army and in the civil service in hot and cold weather, warfare on the North-West Frontier and the violence that accompanied partition.

It is eminently readable and its interest is heightened by the illustrations in this edition.

Peveril says

Excellent picture of life in the late period of the British rule in India, compiled from interviews for a BBC radios series in 1974 and presented in themed chapters - The Club, The Hot Weather, The Frontier, Order of Precedence, etc

Fascinating and very readable. Follows on from my recent reading if and about Kipling in India.

Michael says

This book is a non-fictional account of life in the Raj (the name given when India was governed by Britain as part of the British Empire). I enjoyed this book as it takes many quotes and stories of the lives of those who actually lived there at that time. In fact I much preferred it to Rudyard Kipling's "Plain Tales From the Hills" which I had read at an earlier time. The dedication of the people (both British and Indian) to their work and way of life, the place of woman as it was then, the loneliness for many in isolated areas, the grieving for the children who were torn from the family to attend boarding school in Britain from the age of 5, the misunderstandings, the climate, the housing, and the dangers facing everyone all contribute to a worthwhile picture of Europeans and Indians living in the late 19th Century and early 20th Century India.

John Mosman says

I read the Raj Quartet by Paul Scott and watched Jewel in the Crown series some years ago. I have always harbored a fantasy of living in the time in India as part of the British Raj. There is certainly a legitimate debate about the British Empire and the subjugation of the indigenous populations ruled. But my fantasy is just that, a fantasy.

What was it actually like to live in that time as part of the Raj. Plain Tales from the Raj provides a wonderful narrative particularly during the Raj of the 20th century. The book gives a good background about the structure of the Raj from the civil services to the armed forces.

The book was first published in 1971 and is filled with the stories gleaned from interviews with the British who lived and worked there up until independence in 1947. These people exhibited a sense of duty to India

and Britain. They worried more about governance than to the poor conditions of the average Indian while in the same breath feeling they were doing good for India.

The individual stories are personal, amazing and indicative of life as lived by those ruling India in the first half of the 20th century. The stories cover officials in the Raj, their wives and children. Plain Tales from the Raj provide on the ground stories of how life for the Raj.

Arun Nair says

As an Indian, I find the book repulsive because of the book's patronizing attitude towards the "Raj" and **contempt of everything Indian thinly disguised under the veil of "various accounts"**. Proponents of the Raj will certainly enjoy the book as it evokes nostalgia of a time when Indians were nothing more than accessories and slaves.

The book ends with the following paragraph ...

"The coast of England was green and white and the most beautiful sight I've ever seen in my life; little villages nestling in the folds of the hills, the white of the cliffs and, after being without color for so long, the green of the grass - and to cap it all, when we got to Southampton it was snowing (a reference to the fact that India was hot and humid)"

Ali says

Many - possibly all the participants in Charles Allen's oral history will now be dead, and yet their voices come through clearly, full of reminiscence of a bygone age. This is a very readable and compelling book and quite poignant as it recreates life during a time which has often been romanticised. The truth of course is quite different, and although there were privileges there were also hardships, and life was not always easy. There was also a terrible snobbery, and the conventions and traditions of various sections of society were petty and suffocating.

Edgar says

This book is contained in 'Plain Tales From the British Empire' a trilogy of books, all comprising reminiscences of Britons during colonial times – the other two books focusing on Africa and the Far East. And what a feast of reminiscences, which will appeal especially to former expatriates who spent time in far flung stations in the developing world. Many people have fallen in love with India. But it was the pull of the third world, whether there or Africa or other such like places. You dealt with transparent people, less plastic than us. We were spoiled and pampered and looked up to – as I certainly was when working in Africa years

ago. And we exercised so much more responsibility than we would have back home. As a former officer in the Raj, Philip Mason, says in the introduction 'most of us....had far more responsible jobs than we could have expected at our age anywhere else in the world...'.

But reading much of this book left me uneasy and I felt uncomfortable with the snobbery and riches of the Raj community which coexisted with extreme poverty though the latter is not the book's focus. The cover of the book shows a young lady, dressed for a ball, in a dandy, a two wheeled vehicle, powered by four coolies, two in front and two behind. It could have been in Simla, one of the hill stations which many of the Raj families retired to during the extreme heat. There the only vehicles were human drawn. As one recalls: 'The memory that sticks in my mind is of these coolies pulling and humping terribly heavy loads on their back up hill slopes. I felt the same repugnance when travelling around in a rickshaw'. But for others there were no such pangs of conscience. For many, Simla and other such hill station was one big party. One lady recounts, as a teenager, 'my record was 26 nights dancing running, at the end of which I could hardly keep awake'. Extreme pomp and ceremony dominated the higher circles of the British Raj. 'The Prince of Wales reportedly said that he never realized what royalty really was until he stayed at Government House, Bombay, in 1921. Protocol and hierarchy was evident at all levels - to a ridiculous degree - though it had its roots as much in Hindu and Muslim culture as in the British. An order of precedence list existed, variously known as the Blue, Green or even Red Book, which showed the relative precedence of various jobs. 'If you wanted to know whether an Inspector of Smoke Nuisance was a bit higher than a Junior Settlement Officer' you consulted this book. Armed with this book, the seating plan for a burra khana (big dinner) could be arranged with confidence. If slip-ups did occur it was usually the memsahibs who objected. 'Women have a way of being more vocal about these matters' observed one lady.

The Army and the ICS - Indian Civil Service - comprised the inner circle of the British Raj, though there was enmity between different regiments and between the British Army and Indian Army - all British officers of course. Both groups considered themselves superior to the box wallahs - those engaged in commerce. But even within this group, those involved in 'trade' were considered socially inferior. One Edwin Pratt worked with Army and Navy Stores which placed him firmly in trade and he was affected by this way of thinking. In his opinion it was a division 'greatly accentuated and maintained by the wives, who insisted that the social groups remained apart'.

Women in the Raj were in an invidious situation because they had no role. They had little or no work to do and many left everything to the servants. 'The morning consultation with the cook, the refilling of the canisters and cigarette boxes brought by the bearer, the issuing of clean dusters, these and similar routines did not take very long.....After about eleven o'clock in the morning there was nothing to do except have people come to bridge or to coffee - and then the gossip started; scandal, gossip and conjecture'. For the army wife, life was perhaps the worst. As one army wife remarked 'the life itself was excessively boring, trivial, claustrophobic, confined and totally male oriented. The army wife was not expected to do anything except a decorative chattel or appendage of her husband.' Nor was it possible to mix much with Indian women because they for the most part - Hindu and Muslim alike - lived in purdah. It's not surprising therefore that the typical lifestyle turned many women into rather unpleasant creatures - George Orwell's portrayal of them in *Burmese Days* seems no caricature. 'Most of them started out as perfectly reasonable, decent English girls, and many of them in the course of time developed into what I can only describe as the most awful haridans'. The author states that his book was not intended to pass judgment on the rights and wrongs of the British presence in India. But 'here let it be said only that the British found in the Mogul vacuum "chaos and anarchy and the degradation of morals and standards, which they filled in time with a common language and legal system, a civil and administrative machine of rare quality....the Pax Britannica did indeed bring uninterrupted peace...within India's borders'. 'It's true to say the administration of the Raj was as honest as it gets 'probably the most incorruptible ever known.....a source of great amazement to many Indians..'. There were many there who suffered privations for long durations to for the benefit, as they saw it, of the local population. But the bottom line for most was to earn a living. 'The routine life of the office-wallahwas often tedious and certainly not much fun - but it was undoubtedly the most common experience of a

working life in the Raj. In the end when independence was given, many (as always) regretted that it came too suddenly and too soon. In commerce for instance, it was said that there was always a lack of suitable Indians for senior managerial posts 'unlike the young Britisher who was prepared to take responsibility and was prepared to take his coat off and get on with the job'. Fast forward to the present and witness parts of the British motor industry (Jaguar Landrover) and the British steel industry under Indian ownership !

Liz says

'Plain Tales from the Raj' depicts life in 'British India' during the early 20th Century. It's assembled from radio interviews, recorded by the BBC in the 70's. Interesting anecdotes and funny stories draw a vivid picture of life as a colonial sahib/memsahib; (illustrating the good, the bad and the ugly...).

Most of those interviewed are dead now; this book has captured their memories and kept them alive. Fascinating.

Rajiv Chopra says

As a child growing up, we studied all about Indian History, of course, and the tales of how people like Robert Clive entered and slowly conquered India. History books have not generally been kind to the British rulers, and certainly they have much to account for. Yet, there are precious few books that have done good service to unsung English people. John Keay's "Into India" is one such book, as is his "The Great Arc."

This is another such book. Of course, it covers much ground beyond India, South East Asia as well as Africa. These lands, and the times, through the voices of English people who lived during those times brings history to life. These tales bring those times to life, and give us a very good insight into how the English lived their lives in our countries, how they interacted with the local people, their hopes and ambitions, and finally, their thoughts when they departed.

This is an excellent book, and to be read by anyone who wants to get a glimpse into the British Empire beyond the tales of swashbuckling Generals, battles fought and treaties negotiated.
