

Introduction

This book begins with a family that does not fit. Pollie Keen was born to a Buckinghamshire washerwoman. She spent her teenage years as a servant, married a farm laborer-turned-soldier, and lived out her late twenties as a lady of leisure, flitting between tea parties, carriage rides, and dances that lasted into the early hours of the morning. In 1889, Pollie, her three children, and her husband Dick, by then a sergeant with the Royal Horse Artillery, went to India. It was once the family had settled in Sialkot in Punjab that Pollie's social status and material world changed so dramatically. Dick wrote to his brother that the family was enjoying the "fine country" and enumerated the servants at their disposal. "I am same [*sic*] like gentleman. We are both in bed when the cook comes in to light the fire, lay the breakfast and all ready before we get up, and the barber taps at the door to shave me and man is waiting to clean the boots and clothes for all of us."¹ Having fires laid, shoes polished, breakfast made, and a barber at the ready were luxuries Dick and Pollie could never reasonably have hoped for in Britain. Pollie bragged to her mother that, after a lifetime of domestic labor, her only duties were dusting and changing the bed linens.²

For the Keens and many families like them, India was indeed a fine country. Racial hierarchies, combined with the vast supply of native labor, allowed members of the British working class to live in relative leisure and to hold management positions that would have been inaccessible in Britain. But the Keens were still officially classified among the enlisted men and camp followers, they were subject to weekly inspection of their quarters, and their children attended the inadequate schools provided for the offspring of soldiers. Moreover, once the family returned to England, they lost the lofty status and material comforts they enjoyed in India. The Keen family's precipitous climb up, and unstable position upon, the social ladder was a product of Britain's imperialism.

¹ Dick Keen to Arthur Keen, December 22, 1889, IOR MSS Eur. F528/8. ² Ibid.

2 Introduction

The Keens' story was not unusual, though it is one that is seldom told in the histories of both empire and the British working class.

Starting at the end of the Indian Rebellion in 1858 and extending into the early twentieth century, *Working-Class Raj* uncovers the histories of individuals and families like the Keens to make three major, interconnected arguments. First, the Victorian British working class should be understood as a global population. By the end of the nineteenth century, British non-elites made up half of the British residents of India, 75,000 of 150,000 total.³ Most of this population was drawn from the British working classes at home, and the vast majority came to India with the Army. Some came to build and manage the railways that began to carve up the Subcontinent in the middle of the nineteenth century. Men came to India because they were weary of life in factories or mines or unable to find employment in Britain. They joined the Army because military service was one of the few avenues for adventure available to men of their class. Most of these men came to India on their own. Some brought wives and children with them; others met and married or formed alliances with British, Indian, or Eurasian women while in India. Once there, they joined communities in which the class structure of Britain was at once replicated and refracted by race.

Second, though the British working class in India lived within the spaces of British imperialism and was governed by its institutions, they were neither successfully regulated nor contained by them. In the aftermath of the Indian Rebellion, military and civilian leaders increased the numbers of British soldiers and workers in India, hoping to create loyal, easy-to-manage fighting and labor forces. Civil servants, military officials, and reforming elites put some of the same techniques used to contain and manage a native population to work corralling a large and potentially unruly subordinate British working class. Presidency governments conducted large-scale population surveys to quantify and define the poor European population. Private charity schools, funded in part by government grants, struggled to determine what combination of racial make-up, class background, and education could produce a salvageable British subject. Military cantonments placed strict controls on where, with whom, and under what conditions people could live.

And yet, none of these plans managed the people brought in to prop up British rule or anticipated the effects of decades lived in India on this

³ David Arnold, who was the first to call for a larger study of the non-elite population of India, estimated this population at 75,000 in 1900. "European Orphans and Vagrants in India in the Nineteenth Century," *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 7, no. 2 (1979): 104.

population. Demographers despaired of accurately distinguishing between the poor white and mixed-race populations. Schools turned out students trained for jobs that existed only in England. Military regulation of intimate life in cantonments limited certain types of sexual immorality while creating the conditions for others to flourish. In response to these failures of official imagination, British non-elites created their own social worlds within the institutions of British imperialism. With no rubric to understand the changes in social status produced by the intersection of race and class in empire, imperial administrators governed India without ever finding a way of successfully managing the population they had helped to create.

Third, this study asks how members of the British working class understood themselves in empire and argues that family histories are key to answering that question. The Raj's working-class subjects did not sever their roots in Britain once in India. They frequently left extended families at home and spent a great deal of time, energy, and money corresponding, exchanging material goods, and anticipating reunions with their friends and relations. As a result, being part of the British working class meant being part of global networks. These networks spread information and helped those embedded within them to maintain affective ties. It was through these networks that the Raj's working-class British residents passed, disseminated, and managed information about empire and social mobility. Families at home eagerly awaited "exotic" tales of Indian life. Along with the anticipated accounts of wild animals and Mughal palaces came stories of Indian servants, leisurely afternoons with nothing to do, and summers in the hills. Imagery that has been both historically and historiographically associated with British elites also formed part of the working-class world. These stories linked Britain and India while providing first-hand evidence of just how malleable status could be. For working-class Britons in India, class and status in India were fluid categories, fluctuating to allow for shifts in place, occupation, family, race, and knowledge. By surveying the archival records and remnants these people left behind, we see that class in the British Empire was neither given nor static, but instead informed by British preoccupations, constructed and constantly renegotiated on the ground in global sites.

Working-Class Raj unites histories of the soldier with histories of the family and the British working class in empire. The men and women of working-class origin who went to India came from a wide range of occupational backgrounds and from locations spanning the British Isles. Once in India, however, they fell into two primary occupation groups, which overlapped at times – the Army and the railways. Most

4 Introduction

of the non-elite British population of India was connected with the British Army at some point in their lives. Fully one-third of all troops enlisted in the British Army passed through India during their term of service, making Indian service a characteristic, rather than extraordinary, component of a military career.⁴ Military service was an element of many working-class lives – it was one of a number of avenues working-class men pursued in a search for employment, mobility, and adventure. While the enlisted men of the British Army came almost exclusively from working-class or rural backgrounds, they have occupied a peripheral role in working-class histories. Nick Mansfield's *Soldiers as Workers* has challenged this narrative, writing the enlisted men of the East India Company armies into the labor history of the British working class.⁵ Carolyn Steedman's account of a British soldier's Indian political awakening likewise understands soldiers' histories to form part of working-class histories.⁶ In the Indian context, Philippa Levine and Erica Wald have analyzed the ways in which elite concerns over working-class morality shaped imperial policy.⁷ And Robert Bickers has traced the social rise and fall of a British soldier-turned-Shanghai police officer.⁸ Building on this previous scholarship, *Working-Class Raj* treats imperial soldiering as a particular and disputed type of labor and considers its place in a post-Rebellion, largely peacetime India. Rethinking soldiering as work and soldiers as part of an expansive British working class helps to bring together the histories of the British working class in empire and at home.

Family and domestic culture became central to British identity in the Victorian era, with a well-run nuclear family defining what it meant to be middle class and, in the empire, what it meant to be British.⁹ Families acted as information networks to spread information about Indian

⁴ T. A. Heathcote, *The Military in British India: The Development of British Land Forces in South Asia, 1600–1947* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995), 127.

⁵ Nick Mansfield, *Soldiers as Workers: Class, Employment, Conflict and the Nineteenth-Century Military* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

⁶ Carolyn Steedman, *The Radical Soldier's Tale John Pearman 1819–1908* (London: Routledge, 1988).

⁷ Philippa Levine, *Prostitution, Race, and Politics: Policing Venereal Disease in the British Empire* (New York: Routledge, 2003); Erica Wald, *Vice in the Barracks: Medicine, the Military and the Making of Colonial India, 1780–1868* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).

⁸ Robert A. Bickers, *Empire Made Me: An Englishman Adrift in Shanghai* (Columbia University Press, 2003).

⁹ Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall, *Family Fortunes: Men and Women of the English Middle Class, 1780–1850* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991); Anna Clark, *The Struggle for the Breeches: Gender and the Making of the British Working Class* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995) on the working class. This familial view of class has not been universally convincing – Dror Wahrman argues that changing political formations at the turn of the eighteenth century shaped class and made middle-class

experiences. They changed in structure in response to absences, money gained and lost, and relationships broken as a result of Indian military service and employment. And they were subject to critique and regulation from above. This book builds on recent studies that have unsettled the middle-class subject as the logical point from which to start thinking about empire and instead argues for the family as a useful category of analysis.¹⁰ Scholars studying the connections between race and identity argue that imperial policy played a major role in shaping what family meant on the ground in empire.¹¹ These histories demonstrate the significance of family formation to the empire and the role empire played in shaping British family life in colony and metropole. In a metropolitan context, scholars studying working-class families have returned to classic questions of social history through a cultural lens, delving into the histories of working-class fathers, the lives of illegitimate children, the family wage, and the history of the marital bed to better understand working-class marriages and families.¹² Historians are likewise embracing genealogical methods to tell working-class histories through Census records, passenger lists, and enlistment papers.¹³ *Working-Class Raj* seeks

identity the British default. *Imagining the Middle Class: The Political Representation of Class in Britain, c.1780–1840* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

- ¹⁰ Margot Finn, “The Barlow Bastards: Romance Comes Home from the Empire,” in Margot Finn, Michael Lobban, and Jenny Bourne Taylor, eds., *Legitimacy and Illegitimacy in Nineteenth-Century Law, Literature and History* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 25–47; Catherine Hall, *Macaulay and Son: Architects of Imperial Britain* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012); Emma Rothschild, *The Inner Life of Empires: An Eighteenth-Century History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011); and Erika Rappaport, “The Bombay Debt: Letter Writing, Domestic Economies and Family Conflict in Colonial India,” *Gender & History* 16, no. 2 (August 2004): 223–60.
- ¹¹ Durba Ghosh, *Sex and the Family in Colonial India: The Making of Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006); Elizabeth Buettner, *Empire Families: Britons and Late Imperial India* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004); Esme Cleall, *Missionary Discourse: Negotiating Difference in the British Empire, c. 1840–95* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012); Ann Laura Stoler, *Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power: Race and the Intimate in Colonial Rule* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002).
- ¹² Julie-Marie Strange, *Fatherhood and the British Working Class, 1865–1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015); Ginger S. Frost, *Illegitimacy in English Law and Society, 1860–1930* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016); Emma Griffin, *Bread Winner: An Intimate History of the Victorian Economy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2020); Vicky Holmes, *In Bed with the Victorians: The Life-Cycle of Working-Class Marriage* (London: Springer, 2017).
- ¹³ Alison Light uses this technique to moving effect in both a history of her own family *Common People: In Pursuit of My Ancestors* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015) and *Mrs. Woolf and the Servants: An Intimate History of Domestic Life in Bloomsbury* (London: Penguin, 2007).

6 Introduction

to draw together these types of studies, bringing the insights of working-class histories of family to bear on family histories of empire.¹⁴

The question of how the British working class came to learn about, understand, and incorporate empire into their own worldviews has prompted plentiful historical work. John MacKenzie's *Studies in Imperialism* Series first grappled with the question of how the British came to understand and be affected by their own empire in the mid-1980s and continues, now under the editorship of Andrew Thompson, to argue for the essential role of empire in British history and vice versa.¹⁵ Bernard Porter's *Absent-Minded Imperialists* took on a contrary position.¹⁶ While that book inspired lengthy debates and plentiful critiques, Porter's dismissal of empire as a relevant part of British working-class experience was not prominent among them. It has been easy to ignore the working class as imperial actors because of the relatively small number of men and women who lived in imperial space. But doing so perpetuates the notion that once in India, members of the British working class ceased to have any connections to the working class in Britain and became solely imperial instead. What has seemed to some historians to be a working-class indifference to empire is, *Working-Class Raj* argues, an assimilation of it into everyday life.

Through working-class correspondence, we can reframe these questions to ask how being a part of empire became such an unexceptional part of life for working-class British families and communities. Empire mattered; it was not peripheral, nor did it only capture attention in moments of great violence or drama. Though working-class experiences of British imperialism might be fraught with anxiety or families separated by imperial distances struggle to maintain connections, these affective responses were an ordinary part of what it meant to be working class in the second half of the nineteenth century. The effects of a single letter, material object, social connection, or shared experience reached far.

¹⁴ Among many others, John MacKenzie and the historians of the Manchester Studies in Imperialism Series, Frederick Cooper and Ann Laura Stoler, eds., *Tensions of Empire: Colonial Cultures in a Bourgeois World* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), Tony Ballantyne and Antoinette M. Burton, eds., *Moving Subjects: Gender, Mobility, and Intimacy in an Age of Global Empire* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2009) and *Empires and the Reach of the Global, 1870–1945* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2012).

¹⁵ *Propaganda and Empire* inaugurated the collection, which now runs to hundreds of volumes. John M. MacKenzie, *Propaganda and Empire: The Manipulation of British Public Opinion, 1880–1960* (1986; repr., Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003).

¹⁶ Bernard Porter, *The Absent-Minded Imperialists: Empire, Society, and Culture in Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

Much like their elite counterparts, the numerically insignificant proportion of British working-class men and women who directly participated in the Raj had an outsized effect on life in British India and their working-class communities of origin.

Where Do Their Stories Come From?

At the core of this book are the textual remnants that working-class correspondents and memoirists left behind. This written record not only preserved histories of the working-class Raj for the present day but also formed the sinews that bound together communities across great distances. Correspondence between far-flung members of working-class families and friend groups is scattered throughout the India Office Collections at the British Library and the National Libraries of Scotland and Ireland. These papers reveal not only individual correspondents' subjectivities but also how they managed, and sometimes damaged, family relationships through the act of writing.

Working-Class Raj focuses primarily on the correspondence of those who came from Britain to India. Domiciled Europeans, who spent generations in the country, and Eurasians, of European and Indian descent, likewise formed a part of this imperial Indian non-elite, but they tended to maintain correspondence links with British friends and family less. How people communicated across physical and experiential distance, why that communication lapsed, and how those lapses affect knowledge and memory of Indian experience in Britain are among the central questions this book seeks to answer. Because non-elites in India had no choice but to write to one another to communicate, they produced a significant volume of correspondence. Soldiers paid penny post rates to send mail to Britain, suggesting that correspondence was both accessible to enlisted men and their families and understood as important across classes by elite officials.¹⁷ Those who could not write themselves enlisted friends or family members or paid an amanuensis to write for them.¹⁸ And because working-class correspondence across empire was bound up in systems of colonial governance, it was more likely to be

¹⁷ Nigel Hall, "The Materiality of Letter Writing: A Nineteenth Century Perspective," in David Barton and Nigel Hall, eds., *Letter Writing as a Social Practice* (Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 1999), 88.

¹⁸ In the 1860s, the English literacy rate hovered around 60 percent according to David Vincent's calculations in *Literacy and Popular Culture: England 1750–1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 24–25. The rate for working-class women was slightly lower; see Robert Woods, *The Demography of Victorian England and Wales* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 148.

8 Introduction

preserved for the archive than were the letters of a working-class family in Britain. Combining these papers with elite accounts – including the official reports of the India Office Records held at the British Library, the records of charity schools in India and elite institutions in England, the papers of anti-prostitution investigators, and the British Indian press – allows me to access the perspectives of working-class Britons.

The British Library contains the private papers of hundreds of non-elites who were involved with the military, railways, charity schools, and civil service in some way. Among these scores of letter collections, some, like the letters of Jim Jones of the 1st Bengal Light Cavalry, comprised only two letters, an inquiry from a friend and Jim's response, still unsent when he died.¹⁹ Others, like the Keen family papers, span decades and contain correspondence, photographs, sketches, family jokes, and family arguments shared between India and Britain. Many of these papers came through family donations, but many more arrived at the archive through a combination of happenstance and exhaustive imperial record-keeping. The collections that came to the archive by chance provide something closer to a view of non-elite life unfiltered by archival bias.

These documents of working-class life in empire likewise appear concealed in projects asking a different set of questions. The interview subjects of the "Family Life and Work Experience before 1918" oral history collection, for example, recalled fathers in imperial service and early childhoods spent in India. The interviewers, looking for evidence of social and political change in Britain, did little to follow up on these empire stories.²⁰ Though ex-soldiers' memoirs focus primarily on histories of military service, they also contain tales of life before and after joining the Army. These writers reveal the motivations that led them to travel across the globe, the economic pressures that shaped their decisions, and what they made of their lives in Britain after decades abroad. Radio 4's *Plain Tales from the Raj* series, first broadcast in the 1970s, helped kick-start Britain's imperial nostalgia culture industry with first-hand accounts of life in India. The interview subjects came from a wide range of backgrounds. Many of the interviewees recalled working-class childhoods and the novelty of improved material conditions and social standing in India. These individual stories were broadcast with audio clips spliced together, homogenizing the speakers and creating the impression of an elite Raj. By returning to the raw material of the oral interviews, a more granular view of British Indian life comes into view.

¹⁹ James Jones collection, 1860, IOR MSS Eur. F133/83.

²⁰ Family Life and Work Experience before 1918, C707.

The most notable of the correspondence collections are filed under IOR Mss Eur F133, originating in the files of India House and now housed in the British Library. The letters in this collection came to the archive by a haphazard route. The circumstances of their survival can tell us as much about how working-class imperial experience was valued and remembered as the letters can about the lives and emotional worlds of their authors. These papers are what is left of the estates of East Indian Railway Company workers and members of the Indian Medical Service who died in India.²¹ When a soldier or worker died, his personal effects were gathered together and sold, with the proceeds going to pay off any debts and the remainder going to his next of kin. Items of no monetary value should have been returned to the next of kin, but the papers in this collection were never returned, either because family could not be located or because the papers themselves were lost. Their journey to the archive was born out of the missed connections and miscommunications endemic to working-class lives – unstable housing, poor access to administrative or legal aid, and indifference from people in power.

Any texts that have made their way into the archive have already gone through a selection process that is both biased and arbitrary, subject as much to structures of power as to chance.²² This selection process has not only preserved elite histories in far greater numbers but also made them more visible and available. Working-class letters are infrequently found in the archives, then, not because they were infrequently written but because there was no real archival interest in retaining the histories of such an obscure population until it was too late to preserve them in large numbers.²³ Because the letters in the F133 collection came to the archive by historical accident, rather than through purposeful donation, they

²¹ Collections information from catalog note, Oliver Wooller, September 1995, MSS Eur. F133. The Indian Medical Service (or Establishment) was a civilian service that provided surgeons and other medical officers attached to the military to India. Though the Indian Railways have been known as a key employer for India's Eurasian population, in the first decades of their operation, they imported a significant proportion of their labor from Britain.

²² Ann Laura Stoler and Antoinette Burton have looked at the archive in a specifically colonial context, while Carolyn Steedman has examined the archive and the histories it produces in the context of modernity. See Ann Laura Stoler, *Along the Archival Grain: Epistemic Anxieties and Colonial Common Sense* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009); Antoinette M. Burton, *Archive Stories: Facts, Fictions, and the Writing of History* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005) and *Dwelling in the Archive: Women Writing House, Home, and History in Late Colonial India* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003); and Carolyn Steedman, *Dust: The Archive and Cultural History* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2002).

²³ For example, the interviews in the British Library's British in India Oral Archive were not conducted until the mid-1970s, prompted by a new interest in the experiences of ordinary people during the late years of the empire and decolonization.

10 Introduction

sidestep this archival tendency. The F133 collection contains a much higher proportion of letters from poor and uneducated correspondents, and from correspondents whose experience in empire ended abruptly in displacement and loss.

Gender plays a role in the ways in which imperial experiences were recorded and entered into the archive. In the case of the F133 letters, this is an artifact of their history; men who died in India would have their wives' and sisters' letters in their possession rather than their own. But even in the case of donated collections, women's letters, written as events unfolded, predominate. Men, spurred by the late-century popularity of military memoirs, tended to record their experiences once they returned to Britain and after the fact.²⁴ This gender division in writing style can give us insight into the ways in which working-class correspondents transmitted information about India to their respective audiences. Women were the bearers of class in Victorian thought and, entangled in that role, maintainers of moral standards.²⁵ Because men were loath to write about their own sexual experiences, dominant ideas about what was moral, how society was or should be structured in British India, and the role of the Army in shaping family life and social relationships can be read in accounts about and by women.

These letters have much in common with immigrant correspondence – one of the few types of archival materials produced by non-elites that have been preserved in large numbers. These commonalities are more than just stylistic; they reveal the continuities between these groups. Drawing for the most part from the holdings of North American archives, historians like Laura Ishiguro and David Gerber have discussed the effects of form and style on settler and migrant epistolary practices in the Canadian and US contexts, respectively.²⁶ The similarities between working-class imperial and migrant letters are striking – and for good

²⁴ Edward Gosling, "'A Soldier's Life Is a Merry One', or, 'A Certain Cure for Gout and Rheumatism': The Shift in Popular Perceptions of the Common Soldier in Late Victorian Britain, 1870–c.1910," in Kevin Linch and Matthew Lord, eds., *Redcoats to Tommies: The Experience of the British Soldier from the Eighteenth Century* (Boydell & Brewer, 2021), 187.

²⁵ Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall make the argument that women create and bear middle-class status. Davidoff and Hall, *Family Fortunes*, 30.

²⁶ Laura Ishiguro, *Nothing to Write Home About: British Family Correspondence and the Settler Colonial Everyday in British Columbia* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2019); David A. Gerber, *Authors of Their Lives: The Personal Correspondence of British Immigrants to North America in the Nineteenth Century* (New York: New York University Press, 2008). Marina Carter has shown similar community-making tendencies in the even scarcer traces left by forced migrants in the Indian Ocean world. Marina Carter, *Voices from Indenture: Experiences of Indian Migrants in the British Empire* (London: Leicester University Press, 1996).