



*POOR RELATIONS: THE MAKING OF A EURASIAN COMMUNITY IN
BRITISH INDIA 1773-1833* BY C.J. HAWES.

Reviewed by Gillian Tindall.

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One of the ironies of history that have followed the British colonial period in India has been the disappearance from public view of its most permanent legacy. While descriptions of Raj life have settled into the collective consciousness like a fantasy memory, the more secretive world of the Anglo-Indians has been little explored. John Masters (whose own family harboured never-mentioned Indian blood) gave us the classic Anglo-Indian railway colony of the later Raj in his *Bhowani Junction*, but the community was far older than that. Its foundations were laid in the days when its members were variously known, according to their individual circumstances, as Eurasian, Indo-British, "country-born" or Portugese; the very fact that no one, from the beginning, could decide how they should be treated, tells its own story.

From the earliest days of the India trade, when European men went there on their own, mixed race progeny were inevitable, though the long-term implications of this were never squarely faced. C. J. Hawes takes us ably through the period when Anglo-Indian dynasties, such as the Skinners, the Palmers, the Metcalfs and the Kyds, had their origins. In the relaxed and entrepreneurial eighteenth century, a man who brought up his dark-complexioned sons as Englishmen could hope to install them in their turn in Company service or the armed forces, while he had little difficulty in marrying off his daughters to the next generation of unaccompanied young officers and merchants. Hawes identifies many ostensible Britishers of this date who were in fact country-born, and provides a useful biographical reference

section; he makes it clear that money and prestige counted more than skin colour. This, however, was no help to the majority of Eurasians, who were the children of common soldiers and those Indian women who were prepared to form alliances with them. In other words, then as later class rather than race was the true determinant of Anglo-Indian identity; though it also follows that once the Cornwallis Acts of the end of the century set official limits on the openings available to the country-born, class is predetermined, and the congenitally frustrated Anglo-Indian clerk became a fixture.

This book takes us from the first moves of official discrimination to the Charter Act of 1833, which, while giving Anglo-Indians certain rights, it confirmed them as a separate people: It was not "the coming of the white memmsahibs" in the new steamships that abruptly destroyed the egalitarian idyl of the native companion; the matter had been debated for a good fifty years before that, and the changing attitude that consigned a whole section of colonial society to the lower middle class was part of the socio-religious evolution of society at home. Hawes clearly knows this, but I wish he could have demonstrated it more fully. His account, which weaves back and forth in time, is dense with valuable information and references, but its perspective is not always as clear as it might be. For instance, although he points out that in the early days Company attitudes to its servants' country born progeny were "pragmatic and reactive", he goes on to write as if the rejection of a certain Turing in 1771 had been planned in advance. Had he quoted the Company's own letter from London on the subject, we would have been able to appreciate the tone of disarray in the remark that, though Mr Turing seemed an amiable and well-educated young man "he does appear to be a native of the country". Mendel had yet to be born; there had been an optimistic idea that colour was merely the result of the sun.

What surfaces throughout the book but is only once made explicit, is the fact that much of the Eurasians' problem originally stemmed from their own understandable reluctance to stand up and be counted. Attempts at cohesive action over rights foundered in the desire of the more successful members of the community not to jeopardize their position by being seen to associate with the deprived and the supposedly deprived. Acute class consciousness ruled within the community as well as without.

Since Indian independence, Anglo-Indian achievement can be largely measured by the paradox of their seamless disappearance into British, Canadian or Australian society: the old dream fulfilled. Those who have not wanted to fulfil it, or have not been able to, have had no real option but to merge in the other direction, back into the embrace of India. By a final irony, the brutal laissez-faire attitude of Munro, Governor of Madras in the 1820s, who thought that poor Eurasians should be left to find their own level in Indian society without a charitable British safety net, has finally become the reality.

The reviewer needs to update her knowledge about the Anglo-Indians, we have not yet merged into our host societies. Anglo-Indian identity and culture is experiencing a rebirth. Further, Anglo-Indians have always been supportive of each other and have been a remarkably cohesive group given the problems of prejudice and discrimination (see the article by Prof. Wright in this issue) - Editor's note.

For a copy of the book get in touch with Curzon Press Ltd., 15 The Quadrant, Richmond, Surrey, TW9 1BP England.