



The Memsahibs: The Women of Victorian India

Pat Barr

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Thousands of British women lived in India during Victorian times. They first went out as wives, mothers, sisters; others followed as teachers, doctors, missionaries. What they did and how they responded to their strange environment were seldom thought worthy of record, and writers have handed down to us a fictional image of the typical 'memsahib' as a frivolous, snobbish and selfish creature flitting from bridge to tennis parties 'in the hills'. For the most part, these clichés bear little resemblance to the truth; many women loyally and stoically accepted their share of the responsibility with endurance, courage and resilience.

This story is developed around a number of women who wrote in an entertaining and intelligent fashion about their Indian experiences, starting with the arrival on the scene of one of the wittiest and cleverest of them all - Emily Eden, sister of Lord Auckland who was Governor-General from 1836 to 1842. It ends with Maud Diver, who maintained that the random assertion made by Kipling about the 'lower tone of social morality' in India was unjust and untrue. The *dramatis personae* of the book include Vicereines, wives of Civil Servants and missionaries struggling to break down the subservience of women throughout the vast sub-continent. Through women's eyes we witness the principal historic events at the time - the Afghan conflicts, the Mutiny - as well as the daily routines in very different cantonments and some of the British personalities who made their mark on nineteenth-century India - Honoria Lawrence, Flora Steel, Lady Sale. In this vivid account, Pat Barr evokes the sights and smells of Victorian India, its teeming masses, its problems so impossible, it seemed, for Englishwomen to solve.

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