
*Libraries, Schoolrooms, and Mud Gadowns: Formal
Scenes of Reading at East India Company Stations
in India, c. 1819–1835*

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Abstract

The East India Company began to establish lending libraries for soldiers at its stations in India from about 1801 and, by the early 1830s, the majority of those responsible for the day-to-day operation of these institutions were keen to stress their beneficial effect upon the readers who frequented them. In a series of reports that were written at this time station chaplains and commanding officers emphasised that reading was having a positive effect upon the men's behaviour. What also emerges from these reports is evidence of a contemporary belief that the 'setting' in which reading took place determined the degree to which the activity was beneficial.

The East India Company began to establish lending libraries for soldiers at its stations in India from about 1819 and, by the early 1830s, the majority of those responsible for the day-to-day operation of these institutions were keen to stress their beneficial effect upon the readers who frequented them.¹ In a series of reports that were written at this time, station chaplains and commanding officers emphasised not only that the libraries were much appreciated by the soldiers but also that the reading that they facilitated was having a positive effect upon the men's behaviour. Remarking upon the library at Dinapore in 1832, for instance, the unnamed chaplain at the station remarked:

I should say generally that the minds of those soldiers who use the Library are better regulated and their conduct more becoming them as men and as Christians than [*sic*] it would have been had they been left to their own Resources, and their very limited means of finding useful occupation for the many leisure hours which the European Soldier in India has at his own disposal.

¹Probably the earliest list of books in relation to the libraries dates from 1819. See Military letter to Bengal [extract], 22 August 1821, containing extract from letter of 24 December 1819 entitled "List of Books sent to Bengal", IOR/L/MIL/5/384, Collection 85A, f. 277. Dora Lockyer produced ground-breaking work in the late 1970s on the East India Company's involvement with libraries, while historians Linda Colley and Peter Stanley have more recently commented upon the reading of soldiers: see Dora Lockyer, "The Provision of Books and Libraries by the East India Company in India, 1611–1858" (thesis submitted for Fellowship of the Library Association, 1977); Linda Colley, *Captives: Britain, Empire and the World 1600–1850* (New York, 2002), p. 345; Peter Stanley, *White Mutiny: British Military Culture in India, 1825–1875* (London, 1998), especially pp. 36–63. For my analysis of the early history of the libraries, particularly in relation to their contents, see 'Imperial Reading?: the East India Company's Lending Libraries for Soldiers, c. 1819–1834' in *Book History* 12 (2009), pp. 74–99.

Significantly, the chaplain continued that he had been in charge of the library since October 1829, and “chiefly attribute[d]” the improved circulation and, implicitly, effect of books since that time “to my having permitted the Books to be taken by the soldiers into their Barracks”.²

The link made here between (the site of) reading and the consequent behaviour of readers is important for many reasons, not least because it is reflective of several of the key convictions that were held about the reading process at this period. As Gary Kelly has remarked, reading in the early nineteenth century was perceived as an activity that worked “through the subjectivity of the reader, transforming the individual from within”, and so the conviction grew that readers would have to be carefully supervised to control the ideological consequences of this process.³ One of the consequences of such thinking was that the actual site for reading came to be viewed as problematic; certain places were identified as being ‘unsuitable’ for reading – such as in bed, for example – and as sites where such activity should be discouraged. This had the result that, over time, reading itself came to be “carefully presented as a privileged activity”, which had “to be guarded by protectors and modulated by codes of conduct”.⁴ The chaplain’s observations in relation to the station library at Dinapore are thus significant because they simultaneously acknowledge *and* interrogate one of the prevailing views of reading in the early nineteenth century: specifically, the notion that little good could come of reading that was carried on in “inappropriate places”.⁵ Indeed, his account of the success of the library at Dinapore is informed by a very particular and contrary suggestion: namely, that the behaviour of the reading soldiers at the station positively improved once rules relating to the site of reading were relaxed, and soldiers were allowed to take books to their barracks.

This suggestion, this article will show, is to be traced in many of the reports that were returned in relation to the libraries during the late 1820s and early 1830s, wherein both chaplains and commanding officers manifested a marked determination to defend their decision to allow greater reading freedom to soldiers. In the very early days of the libraries, it is clear, the East India Company attempted to regulate scenes of reading at their stations in India by issuing a series of rules that stressed the privileged nature of the institutions. Although the Company does not appear to have directed explicitly that books could not be removed from the libraries, this seems to have been the initial conclusion – or conviction – of those responsible for their operation who dictated that men should only read in rooms that were under the supervision of persons such as chaplains, schoolmasters, or librarians. The impractical nature of this policy however became increasingly more evident as the years went by, while those responsible for the libraries appear to have become convinced that this policy did not take sufficient account of the peculiar nature of military service upon

²“Report upon the Soldiers Libraries, and recommendation that they should be formed into Regimental, instead of Station, Libraries, and that the number of Books be increased”, F/4/1486/58611, Collection No. 4, f. 43 (hereafter “Report upon the Soldiers Libraries”). As Richard Holmes points out, nineteenth-century India was “a world where almost all Europeans had time on their hands”, and where “there was a constant need for “entertainment”; see his *Sahib: The British Soldier in India, 1750–1914* (London, 2005), p. 157.

³Gary Kelly, *Women, Writing, and Revolution, 1790–1827* (Oxford, 1993), p. 184.

⁴James Raven, “From promotion to proscription: arrangements for reading and eighteenth-century libraries”, in *The Practice and Representation of Reading in England*, (eds.) James Raven, Helen Small, and Naomi Tadmor (Cambridge, 1996), pp. 179–181.

⁵*Ibid.*, p. 180.

the subcontinent. This realisation in due course caused chaplains and commanding officers to modify their attitude in relation to the removal of books to barracks, a decision they subsequently laboured to explain to their superiors in a series of late 1820s and early 1830s reports. The first part of this article will therefore be devoted to an examination of the reasons why the East India Company – and its agents – initially tried to regulate (formal) scenes of reading at military stations in early nineteenth-century India; the second to the way in which rules governing (formal) reading at the stations evolved to take account of the peculiarities of the Indian environment and military service. Informing both parts of the discussion will be a determination to illuminate scenes of military reading in India in the 1820s and 1830s and, thereby, to illustrate some of the physical and geographical “determinants . . . that helped to shape the . . . reading life” of the early-nineteenth-century Indian soldier.⁶

The history of the East India Company’s lending libraries for soldiers is a somewhat complicated one, for records make clear that their establishment took place at different times in the three presidencies.⁷ What the records also reveal is that the Company’s policy in relation to the physical nature of the libraries evolved slowly, and there was an initial indecision as to whether books should, or could, be housed in already existing buildings, or whether it would be necessary to provide new spaces. Overwhelmingly, the evidence suggests, libraries were originally established in a somewhat ad hoc fashion, and where books were housed depended very much on circumstances at the different presidencies and/or stations. A minute from Bengal from the early 1820s simply suggests that books should be sent out to the different stations and kept in the charge of the chaplain and clerk upon their arrival; issues such as where the books should actually be read, it remarks, can be sorted out at a later stage.⁸ By the late 1820s and early 1830s, however, attitudes were obviously shifting, and more attention was being paid to the need to house the libraries properly at the different stations. It was in this context that the Military Board in Fort St George was for its part instructed in 1830 to ascertain whether existing “Public buildings . . . could be wholly or in part appropriated” for this purpose and, if not, to obtain estimates for providing new space.⁹ It is also why the 1834 report upon libraries in Bengal both commented upon the East India Company’s former generosity in relation to the establishment of such institutions and suggested how they might be placed on a more secure physical footing:

Before the [?] practice of economy had been so rigidly enforced as it now is, Government had sanctioned the purchase of Buildings for the reception of Books at . . . nine different stations

⁶Stephen Colclough, “Readers: Books and Biography”, in *A Companion to the History of the Book*, (eds.) Simon Eliot and Jonathan Rose (Malden, MA., Oxford and Carlton, Australia, 2007), p. 59. Records relating to the libraries make it very clear that the institutions were intended for ‘European’ soldiers, and I have so far found no explicit mention of the vast number of native troops upon which the power of the British army in India so crucially depended. Holmes points out that there were some 232,000 Indians in the army by the time of the Mutiny in 1857, as opposed to a figure of 45,000 Europeans. This figure, he suggests, was probably roughly the same in 1835 (*Sahib*, p. 81). On the composition of the East India Company army, see also John Keay, *The Honourable Company: A History of the English East India Company* (London, 1995), especially pp. 271–295; Raymond Callahan, *The East India Company and Army Reform, 1783–1798* (Cambridge, MA., 1972).

⁷The Company’s three presidencies were Bombay, Madras, and Calcutta. For accounts of their establishment and development, see Philip Lawson, *The East India Company: A History* (London and New York, 1993), pp. 46–48; Colley, *Captives*, pp. 246–248.

⁸Minute by the President, IOR/L/Mil/5/384, Collection 85A, f. 283.

⁹Military Letter from Fort St George [extract], 15 June 1830, F/4/1272/51087.

already enumerated. These buildings . . . might now be sold, and with the proceeds of the sale a room might be added to every Regimental School House, large enough for a Library.¹⁰

The nature of the early history of the libraries is worth noting, as the evidence suggests it had a direct impact upon the early reading experiences of soldiers. In the first place this was true because those responsible for the day-to-day operation of the libraries evidently experienced real anxiety in relation to the books that were in their charge, and interpreted regulations laid down by the East India Company to mean that they should not allow soldiers to take books away and read them in their barracks. That this should have been the case is hardly surprising, for the net effect of the rules promulgated in relation to libraries was to emphasise the valuable nature of the books that were being supplied to the stations in India; to stress that *everyone* involved should take careful steps to ensure that books were neither damaged nor lost. To illustrate the several issues at stake here, it is useful in the first instance to focus upon rules that were promulgated in 1822 in relation to the establishment of libraries at “seven principal military stations” in Bombay, which manifested an overwhelming preoccupation with issues relating to both the preservation of books and reader supervision. Thus it is that the first of these “Rules for Stationery [*sic*] Libraries” directed a station’s library “to be under the immediate direction of the Chaplain at the Station, and under him in charge of an [*sic*] European Soldier”, and underlined that the hours of the institution were to be “fixed by the Chaplain . . . [who] may make any Regulations for [its] management . . . with the consent of the Commanding Officers”. Rule two ordered that a library “Register” had to be kept, wherein should be recorded to “whom, and, on what day, [a] volume was lent, and on what day returned”, while the third rule declared that any volume borrowed needed to be returned by the borrower “within fourteen days, but may be reissued to him at the direction of the chaplain”. Rules four and five directed that volumes were not to “be transferred from one Person to another, nor shall any person except under special circumstances have more than one Book at a time”, and that “No Book shall be alienable under any circumstances whatever, and every Book admitted into the Library shall contain these rules on the inside”.¹¹

The objective of such rules was obviously to impress upon readers the special nature of the libraries and their contents, and this was made even more explicit by regulations that were issued in August 1829 in relation to envisaged libraries at twelve stations in the Madras presidency. Among other issues, these decreed that the institutions were “to be under the care and superintendence of Committees composed of the Commandants of Stations, Military Chaplains, and Principle Station and Staff Officers”, and that the books supplied were “to be deposited in Locked Book-Cases in the Station School Rooms, and placed under the immediate charge of the School Masters, who will each be allowed five Rupees per [mensem?], for dusting the Books, and keeping a correct Register of the volumes, and an Account of those lent”. Books lent from the library were

on no account to be transferred, but every Book is to be brought back the week after it has been received, when it may be either returned the following day to the borrower for further perusal,

¹⁰“Report upon the Soldiers Libraries”, f. 25.

¹¹IOR/L/Mil/5/384, Collection 85A, f. 278, 281.

or exchanged for another. . . . In the event of any Book being wantonly injured, the Person by whom it was borrowed, [is] to be subject to such penalty as the [Library] Committee at the Station may see fit to impose.¹²

Again, there is a marked emphasis here upon the need to ensure the physical preservation of books, and the evidence suggests that this hugely affected the initial attitude that commanding officers and chaplains adopted in relation to sites of reading at the East India Company stations. What the late 1820s and early 1830s reports suggest is that these individuals insisted that soldiers had to do their reading in the environment where the books were kept: that is, in rooms that were either specifically set aside for that purpose, or which were shared with schoolmasters or chaplains. In part, this policy was probably the result of a perception that such a (centralised) system of storage and access would facilitate the physical preservation of books, for, as Albert Hervey's account of the depredations of white ants in India makes clear, librarians on the East India Company stations experienced challenges in this regard that their counterparts in England never faced:

The best way to keep them [that is, the ants] from attacking clothes, books or papers, or indeed anything, is to get *paetrolium* [*sic*] (it is procurable almost everywhere in India), or tar, should the former not be within reach; and rub the legs of chairs and tables or the bottoms of boxes and trunks, and the backs of pictures, &c. &c. as well as to keep a bright look out against their incursions, having the carpets and mats frequently taken up, the floors well swept and sprinkled with wood ashes; all the incipient passages destroyed, and a little *paetrolium* poured into every opening. Your whole property must undergo a constant watchfulness and examination, and there is a probability of your keeping them off; but if not, one night will be the ruin of you.¹³

The anxieties experienced by those responsible for the books is variously expressed in records relating to the libraries. Referring to the rule directing that books should be placed in locked bookcases in schoolrooms, for instance, the Committee at Trichinopoly anxiously observed that there was no schoolroom at the station, and remarked that they had "requested the Reverend Joseph Wright would have the kindness to take charge of the Books until the pleasure of the Government is known".¹⁴

A further factor plainly informed the decision to confine reading to the places where books were stored, and this related to the nature of the readers who used the books at the different stations. As I have shown in detail elsewhere, the lending libraries that were established by the East India Company were primarily intended for, and used by, lower-class soldiers, and those responsible for the institutions from the very first manifested the conviction that such readers would have to be subjected to both "good regulations and a watchful superintendence"; in other words, that their reading would have to be carefully controlled.¹⁵ It was clearly in this context that those responsible for the libraries at first refused soldiers permission to take

¹²Extract from Fort St George Military Correspondence, 18 August 1829, IOR/F/4/1243/40911, f. 13–17.

¹³Captain Albert Hervey, *A Soldier of the Company: Life of an Indian Ensign, 1833–43*, (ed.) Charles Allen (London, 1988), p. 164.

¹⁴"Proceedings of the Committee assembled . . . for the purpose of balancing the Books intended to be purchased for the use of the Station Library", Madras Military Collection No. 20, F/4/1272/51087, f. 29.

¹⁵Military letter from Bombay [extract], 29 January 1823, IOR/L/MIL/5/384, Collection 85A, f. 274. For more on this, see "Imperial Reading: the East India Company's Lending Libraries for Soldiers, c. 1819–1834" in *Book History* 12 (2009), pp. 74–99.

books away with them to their barracks and insisted instead that reading had to be carried on in spaces that were properly regulated by persons appointed by supervising committees, chaplains, and/or commanding officers. What the reports also suggest however, is that these individuals quickly realised that this policy did not make sufficient allowance for the realities of military life in India; in the first place, it failed to appreciate the very real difficulties that could result from providing spaces that encouraged “Soldiers of different Corps [to congregate] together”.¹⁶ As an 1834 report upon the libraries concluded:

[W]hen out of sight of their own Non-Commissioned Officers, [soldiers] are apt to get into mischief, and it is difficult to believe that the Librarian, who is generally some quiet sort of person, selected by the Chaplain for his piety, would be able to restrain or over-awe a few half drunk soldiers. Besides it may be deemed objectionable that the men should have so ready an excuse to quit their lines, as going a mile and a half to the Library for a Book.¹⁷

Factors relating to discipline, therefore, played a key role part in persuading those responsible for the libraries to allow the removal of books to barracks, but so too did the realisation that this policy could contribute greatly to the physical safety and comfort of soldiers. As Colonel Faithfull remarked in relation to larger stations such as Cawnpore, travel to and from libraries was often a difficult business, and could involve readers having to cover “immense” distances under a blazing sun. By allowing books to be read outside of the libraries, chaplains and/or commanding officers decreased the amount of physical exertion soldiers had to make in order to read texts, and also limited their vulnerability to physical conditions such as “exposure”.¹⁸ At the same time as this, the granting of permission to soldiers to read in barracks meant that they had to spend less time in the libraries themselves, which was obviously a good thing when they were in a similar state to that at Agra. Commenting upon the “generally . . . unserviceable and dilapidated state” of the books in the library at this station in 1832, Colonel R.H. Sale pointed out that

beneficial results [have been] derived from the Establishment even in its present cramped state. It affords amusement and occupation for men who of necessity must have idle time on their hands and that too in a climate where sedentary habits much prevail.

“[S]ince the destruction by fire of the Building appropriated for the Station Library”, he continued, “no eligible place appears to have been allotted for that purpose. The hovel now occupied, (a mud Gadown¹⁹ containing two appartments [*sic*] 12 feet square outward walls 7 feet high) being quite inadequate and uninhabitable”.²⁰ Things were apparently in a better state at Trichinopoly in 1833, for the committee appointed to report upon the library there observed that it was housed in “a detached building, the Librarian lives there altogether, and

¹⁶Brigadier Murray at Cawnpore was acutely conscious of these difficulties, stoutly declaring his opinion “that more harm than advantage accrues from such institutions”; see “Report upon the Soldiers Libraries”, f. 57.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, f. 24.

¹⁸It was the danger of too-long exposure to the sun’s rays that caused the colonel to favour the formation of Regimental Libraries over the further development of station libraries, “as from the immense size of Cawnpore and other larger stations, the expected benefit would in a great measure be counteracted by the exposure and other inconvenience attendant on quitting their own lines”; see “Report upon the Soldiers Libraries”, f. 59.

¹⁹A “Godown” was “A Warehouse for goods and stores; an outbuilding used for stores; a store-room”. See Henry Yule and A.C. Burnell, *Hobson-Jobson: The Anglo-Indian Dictionary* (1886; Ware, Hertfordshire, 1996), p. 381.

²⁰“Report upon the Soldiers Libraries”, f. 86–87.

is thereby always present to give books". Notwithstanding this, the committee begged leave to voice a major concern: namely, "that there is no allowance of oil for the use of the Library. . . . [T]he Quarter Master of the Regiment cannot spare any for the use of the Library and the Committee recommends a small quantity being allowed for this purpose, sufficient for one light all night".²¹ This emphasis upon the need for a light "all night" provides an evocative image of the night-reading that was obviously carried on at the station, presumably because the heat then was less intense.²²

One of the main factors that persuaded chaplains and commanding officers to relax their attitude in relation to where reading could be permitted to take place clearly derived from a dawning perception that greater leniency in this regard would have the effect of introducing books to a wider audience.²³ In the first place, and as officers such as Colonel Piper observed, the decision to allow men to take books back to their barracks facilitated "the participation which those men who cannot read have in the advantage of the Library, by getting their Comrades to read aloud to them which could not be permitted in a reading room".²⁴ Colonel Shelton elaborated upon this point, remarking that books read in this way afforded "Amusement to each as can read and through them to their Comrades who cannot, it is but fair therefore to infer that the hours spent thus, both by readers and listeners, have been advantageously stolen from the time that might possibly have been spent in riot and drunkenness".²⁵ Significantly, Reverend White advanced a very particular argument to justify the 1829 decision to extend the "privilege" of reading at Cawnpore, insisting it went hand in hand with the introduction of regulations that were designed to ensure both the preservation of books *and* a wider reading audience at the station. From this date, he observed, soldiers were not only "permitted to take the Books to their own Quarters", but also new "duties were imposed by the Chaplains upon the Librarians"; these required the men both to "extract the value of a lost Book from the Loser", for example, and also to "convey weekly supplies of suitable Works to the sick in Hospital, and to the Prisoners in Solitary Confinement". Reverend White stressed that he considered the "latter duty . . . [to be] of great importance", but remarked that "unhappily the limited number of the books in the Library[,] particularly of a religious character[,] . . . prevented the Librarian from fulfilling it to the extent desired".²⁶

What these comments reveal, of course, is that the facilitation of further reading at stations like Cawnpore was intended by those in authority to increase and morally to improve the particular military audience exposed to the books that were supplied on an official level to India; in other words, a modification of the original attitude to scenes of

²¹"Report on Soldiers Libraries and Indent for Books", Madras Military Collection No. 1, IOR/F/4/1428/56391, f. 25.

²²Other practical concerns raised by those responsible for the day-to-day running of the libraries include the difficulties of procuring paper for the use of the librarians, and the costs involved in attempting to repair or preserve books. At Bellary in 1833, for instance, the library committee wondered whether the costs of repairing books in future might be charged to a "contingent Bill", while those similarly concerned at Secunderabad suggest "that the whole of the Books be covered with coarse red cloth for preservation which can be done at trifling Expense". See "Report on Soldiers Libraries and Indent for Books", f. 18, 27.

²³Robert Darnton, *The Kiss of Lamourette: Reflections in Cultural History* (London and Boston, 1990), p. 167.

²⁴"Report upon the Soldiers Libraries", f. 47.

²⁵*Ibid.*, f. 61.

²⁶*Ibid.*, f. 62-63.

reading at the military stations was sanctioned in the hopes of producing more – and better – actively reading soldiers within the subcontinent. Significantly, the chaplain was keen to underline that this was precisely what happened at Cawnpore, proving the wisdom of the East India Company's initial decision to provide libraries for military men:

[the] allurements the Library holds forth has excited a taste for reading in many men who never before exhibited it, and, if that allurements be sustained and increased by the supply of additional Books, I confidently believe a taste for reading will become universal. With respect to the moral benefits that have accrued from *this* Institution, I am of opinion that if in some of the Readers the strength of immoral habits unhappily has prevailed against the influence of newly acquired knowledge, still if inquiry be instituted, it will be found that a very large proportion of the Readers have made a moral advancement, which in its progress towards perfection has already put the sound policy and true philanthropy of Government in the Establishment of Military Libraries beyond all controversy and doubt.²⁷

Pointedly, the Reverend White moved immediately to the observation that other classes of readers could benefit from the libraries in India, emphasising that women, for example, might be improved morally if they were admitted to spaces originally intended purely for soldiers. His comments upon the success of the “Western Reading Room” at Cawnpore in this regard thus provide further insight into how attitudes to official reading spaces at the stations evolved upon the subcontinent:

[it] has afforded to the Chaplains an unobjectionable place for assembling one Evening in every week, the Women of His Majesty's 44th Regiment, for the purpose of reading or lecturing on some interesting article of Female Biography. – The minds of many have thus been awakened to the importance of those Family and Religious Duties so generally and so fearfully violated by Females of this class in India.²⁸

The comments of men like White are therefore important because they demonstrate the efficacy of the argument that “placing the reader in his setting can provide [vital] hints about the nature of his experience”.²⁹ As we have seen, the reading that was facilitated by the East India Company's establishment of lending libraries for soldiers in early nineteenth-century India was at first greatly affected by contemporary attitudes in relation to reading: in particular, by the notion that both the reader *and* his or her environment should be carefully controlled. It was for this reason that those responsible for the day-to-day operation of the libraries at first insisted that soldiers could only read in the places where the books were stored: that is, in spaces under the careful supervision of chaplains, commanding officers, schoolmasters, or librarians. This policy was obviously at least partly the result of a recognition that such a centralised system would facilitate the preservation of books but it was also to some extent informed by a conviction that soldiers' barracks were ‘unsuitable’ – because less controllable – reading spaces. As the years went by, those responsible for this policy came to understand that it did not take sufficient account of a variety of factors peculiar to the realities of military life in India, including the fact that frequent travel to and from station

²⁷ *Ibid.*, f. 64.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, f. 65.

²⁹ Darnton, *The Kiss of Lamourette*, p. 167.

libraries could imperil the health, safety, and discipline of soldiers. They also obviously began to appreciate the less-than-ideal state of many of the libraries themselves, and realised that men might actually be more comfortable – and better able to read – in their barracks. A further factor plainly informing the decision to relax rules relating to the ‘where’ of reading at the stations in India was the recognition that the influence of books was greatly curtailed if men’s reading spaces were too carefully controlled. After all, barely literate or illiterate soldiers were hardly likely to find supervised libraries particularly appealing, and the reading aloud of books was not facilitated by such an environment. It was for some or all of these reasons that those responsible for the operation of lending libraries for soldiers in India modified their attitude to the site of reading at the stations and, as East India Company records suggest, the experience of literate soldiers – and of their illiterate comrades – was consequently transformed.

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