T. Harry Williams Center of Oral History

Tape 893 Finding Aid

INTERVIEWEE NAME: Roy Metcalf

COLLECTION: 4700.0611 Tape 893 (Tape 1 of 2)

IDENTIFICATION: Briton in Pre-Independence India

INTERVIEWERS: Frank de Caro, Rosan Jordan

SERIES: British Voices from South Asia

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TOTAL PLAYING TIME: 1 hour, 33 minutes

OTHER MATERIALS: None

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Tape 893, Side A
Metcalf (Part 1 of 3)
004 basic reason for going to India was family connections; grandfather was in the Bengal Civil Service (which would later become the Indian Civil Service); his father was born there
011 after the incentive of being a soldier was the incentive of money; received more money in the Indian army than in the British army, along with faster promotions
020 went to a British regiment your first year in India to give you a chance to change your mind
024 he had an idea of India through his family, but he had never been there before; it seemed to be familiar once he got into India; nothing ever seemed to be unfamiliar
032 father was a sailor
037 one the first trip out, they ran into a huge storm; troops were in the lower decks and became terribly seasick
050 troopers [ships] had funny rules: even if you were married, you could not share a room with your wife aboard one; women were on one side, men were on the other
057 you were on the trooper when you were being sent or being transferred with your regiment; you could ask to get a trooper passage when you were going on leave because it was cheaper
on the troopers, there was military organization
you asked to join a regiment, and usually you went there
had to make your own arrangements when you got off the train; a man in a tweed suit
walking around the station in the hottest area of India at four or five in the afternoon
British regiments would usually move every three to five years; after about twenty years,
they would change regiments and go back to England
in the British regiment, you controlled a platoon immediately and took over the duties that
they were doing; you could have been sent out on a local campaign
when you got to an Indian regiment, you were second-in-command of a company for a
short while, and then you would be placed in charge of a company
there were roughly four platoons to a company
after being there for a year, he chose an Indian regiment that was in Hong Kong; was in
Hong Kong for a little less than a year
the garrison in Hong Kong was comprised of three British regiments
at that time, the Hong Kong police were all Indian; it hasn’t altered since he has left; the
actual area of Hong Kong could not be altered to any great extent because it was already
built up
would provide piracy guards from Hong Kong to Singapore and from Hong Kong to
Shanghai because there were many Chinese pirates; any boat of any consequence would
have a section of British or Indian troops, sometimes more if the boat was larger
there were a number of instances with the pirates; ship officers would all carry guns in their
pockets; there was a large grill that separated the first and second class passengers from the
Chinese, because most of them were pirates just waiting on their boats
piracy trips were fun; the pre-war life of a British soldier was very nice life, but it’s not the
same now
went to Bombay for a few months; left the regiment in Bombay and went out on his own;
regiment came back to central India; went to frontier post
Indian regiment went for two years in the frontier stations and four years of the frontier
supposedly
he enjoyed the change; in the old days, an Indian regiment would always stay in the same
place
everyone would go to the military tailor and have one set of drill uniforms made properly;
when they reached India, they would let the Indian tailors copy it because it was cheaper
and they would do it properly
didn’t buy a topi until he got out there because they were not normally sold in England;
there were topees that were part of the military uniform that were sold in England
“old hands” would have some type of protection from the sun; those soldiers just coming
out would be out there without any protection and it didn’t bother them; never realized how
hot it could be until you got out there
remembers thinking of the Mediterranean as cool and lovely, and everyone else was
gasping at the heat
there was a notice that officers going ashore could not carry revolvers; it was a silly notice
because if you strayed off the main streets in Malta, you had a good chance of being killed;
never stopped at Aden, unlike most
weather wasn’t so bad because it was March; there is a nice breeze in Bombay in March
had a strong impression about Bombay: it didn’t seem like a strange town at all; it never
seemed strange to him, but maybe to others it did; it had its drawbacks; they worked hard,
but also had a good time
depending on where you were, you did many different things while on leave; went big
game shooting a lot when in the middle of the central Indian jungles
jungles were thick with noticeable tracks through them, not like the ones of the Amazon;
trees were mostly tea trees; very little undergrowth; might stretch 800 miles back
once was a political officer in central India; tribe called [Bhil?] that still used bows and
arrows; [Gonds?] were known for their fast movement through the jungles; one state in
central India still had square wheels
can remember giving cigarettes and matches to the natives that were helping them on their
shoot; they knew what to do with it, but they had never really seen one before
that part of India had very nice climate; on a plateau about 3000 feet; never really gets hot
the eastern Bengal side was compatibly backward back then; think it may be because they
were left behind by the army, who had swept through it and continued onto the northwest
frontier
military expansion in India created the advancement as it went along because of its
demands
most bungalows were pre-mutiny in Sagar; just outside his mess, there was an elephant
mounting stone; had a large archway to allow the elephants to come in
didn’t have elephants then, but they used to; the elephants would carry the artillery
[bivekhana?] was where the old Europeans would have their Indian ladies
up to the mutiny, the Europeans and Indians mixed very freely; the mutiny ended the
mingling, which was the biggest angle of the Anglo-Indian community; this made the
mutiny a great tragedy
talks about novel *Tom Brown’s School Days*; he believes it is very accurate
talks about the different musical instruments that were used by the different regiments; his
regiment had a proper pipe band;
favorite time to go shooting was during Christmas and New Years in things called
Christmas camps; had a party of about twelve to fifteen; would frequently go out for
Saturday and Sunday, sometimes for a week; he would go out with the assistant police
officer and the assistant district officer
many would come to Sagar from northern India and go shooting for three weeks
plenty of tigers; a few of them were man eaters
assistant police officer was out in his district around the month of May; was sleeping on the
ground outside his tent; awoke to see tiger standing right over him, but didn’t move
because he was scared stiff; turned his hair white
he was sitting on the ground, underneath a tree on a tiger hunting trip when he saw a tiger
staring straight at him; finally, the tiger turned his head and he shot him in the neck
when he was younger, he did a lot of crazy things; talks about the tiger shoot and the
panther hunts; he wouldn’t do those things now
would go out about three miles from their mess in the evenings and shot a couple of things
for dinner
Sagar was not a large station: it was just them and an old cavalry school; the school may
have had up to fifty students each year; had many people coming through
there would be a week in March that you had to entertain people passing through for a
week; there was a polo tournament; people would come from all over; would have racing
and dances
Bina Junction was halfway between Bombay and Delhi
Gorkhas were used all over India to keep law and order around the time of Partition
station life was a bit confined, but he was lucky to go off into different areas of instruction,
so he was able to have a change
tells the story about him and John Cotton: he met John on the way to Delhi to pick up his
new orders, and John told him that he was going to Aden. Once in Delhi, Metcalf learns he
was supposed to go to Aden and John was supposed to be going to the Persian Gulf.
Metcalf ends up going to the Persian Gulf
Metcalf did his own astrological chart, which told him he would be spending a large
amount of your life connected with sea and oil
when “T” got to Aden, he was a member of the Eighth Cavalry, which were the governor’s guards
was in the army five years before going into politics; colonel suggested getting a job
outside the regiment
staff captains performed civil administration tasks
Colonel suggested going into politics and offered to call a friend of his in Delhi for
Metcalf; that’s how he got into politics

Tape 893, Side B
Metcalf (Part 3 of 3)
there were many eccentric English; India was marvelous country for eccentric people
because it was so “do as you like” for the English, the ruling class
one resident Metcalf had would go riding around in the morning and when he saw someone
sleeping in their gardens, he would ride his horse over their fence, through their beds and
back out again
first time he met him officially, Metcalf was his under-secretary; the secretary would go in,
in the morning, and discuss the issues that needed to be discussed and then it would be
Metcalf’s turn
one day, Metcalf went in, and he was sitting underneath his desk, carving a wooden boat
one or two senior officers would do yoga every afternoon, but not many
provided you stayed within the law, no one would say anything about you
even the large British communities in India were small compared to places like London
and New York; looked at the Punjab as a province of England with its own government;
when looking at the annual budget, it was a large country, larger than some of those in
Europe; didn’t think much about it then
there was a great difference between India and the Persian Gulf; there was less government
and more commercial
Persian Gulf Arabs were more of a Bedouin stock; very nice to deal with
first went to south Persia, where there was a council general for some Muslim country in
the Persian Gulf, as a personal assistant to learn about the work he would be doing; then
sent to [Bharat?] as an assistant political agent; was about 1935
at the time, there was an American oil company in Saudi Arabia that wanted to either put
up a refinery or set up a piping system to [Bharat?]; Metcalf sent a letter highly advising the
establishing of a pipeline; during the rest of the war, the English had control over the Saudi
Arabian oil
there are 20,000 Englishmen working in Saudi Arabia; English always seem to drift east,
possibly for the money; French are mainly in the Mediterranean
one reason for not staying in the gulf long was because members of the Indian service were
always being transferred; at the time, he also had to think about his personal career
124 went back to eastern India during the Burma War
127 they tried to get him back into the army when the war broke out, but there were several of
130 them that were not allowed to go
132 political agent’s job was just about anything in the Indian states.
133 there were two types of Indian states: very large ones that were wealthy and powerful
136 outright, with their own armies and proper civil services; relations there were more
diplomatic
137 the other type of states were the smaller states; some were under direct management
139 because the maharajah’s had “misbehaved themselves”; if not under direct management,
you were still closely supervised
143 in most of the areas, there was a large station inside the state; it was like a British district so
150 the agents, along with the other duties, were responsible for it too
153 they all had district training in a province; there were a lot of mixed duties; did his training
158 in [Rahl Penda?] in 1937, after getting back from the Gulf
159 have to pass the Indian Service Exam in law, administration, etc.
163 once sentenced an Englishman to death, although he didn’t like it; didn’t hang English back
then, so he had to spend around twenty to thirty years in a jail in Bombay
165 even for jobs like that, there was a consulate court
167 one of his first jobs in India was being in charge of opium; once a week, would give out
172 servings to the addicts
184 went to [Pandar?] after district training; maharajah wasn’t allowed to rule, but he was
191 allowed to stay there
193 life in a large Indian state was very nice; mixed more freely with the Indians in Indian
199 states than in British India
200 in Indore, there weren’t very many Europeans; there was a little club with three tennis
205 courts; had a school for the maharajah’s sons; nice bungalows and gardens; climate was
207 moderate all year long
213 had interesting visitors
225 in those days, after you had been in India for a while, you seemed to know someone
232 anywhere you went; if you were going somewhere, you would map out who you would
237 stay with at night
243 had nice, large bungalows; there were hardly any hotels, except for in the larger areas like
249 Bombay; that’s why you were always being put up by someone
255 had [dak?] bungalows; they were two or three room wooden bungalows around the main
260 roads; they had a regular Indian cook in charge; would frequently find someone else there;
266 were used often when touring: it would become your temporary headquarters
272 they were expected to be out touring at least one-third of the year, if not more
278 you had local administrators that addressed the problems
285 Indians didn’t mind how inefficient you were, as long as they could see you, know you, and
292 you had been there for some time because they didn’t like you moving around
299 by moving around, people would see you out; they didn’t know you personally, but they
306 knew who you were; have always moved around; being seen is being normal; when going
307 around, would spend money at the local bazaar, which was always liked by the local people
314 ordinary peasants would always go into someone’s garden or office and would make a
321 request for work
328 they got to know the lower country far better than someone from the ICS, who came out to
India when they were twenty-five of so, because they were mixing so young.

people going into politics from the military seemed to do just as well, if not better than, those that came from the ICS; because of early training, they had more practical approach; didn’t trust the Indians as much either

all lower classes of the world cannot help but live by natural cunning because, if they don’t, they will be swept away

type of person that thinks too much did not adapt well at all to India; as a whole, India was a young man’s place; fifty was normal retiring age

the problem with where he is now is that people think too much; in India, you just did it; problems in England stem from inability to make up one’s mind, thinking too much

sometimes India could be unpleasant physically; for married people with children, there is the difficulty of education and the separation of families; one had to remember to take more precautions than normal, like disinfecting the water and remembering mosquito nets;

life was hazardous, but it was not difficult financially; everyone was adequately paid; there were certain guarantees of being promoted, provided you avoided getting into trouble

many of the difficulties in England did not happen in India

English businessmen that went to India on their own seemed to have more trouble financially

there was always malaria and dysentery around; people, especially in Northern India, were perhaps the healthiest people in the world; there was not much disease around

from the European point of view, it was a young man’s country, so you did not come across many people over fifty-five or sixty with many ailments because they were all back in England

India was nothing like West Africa; English had controlled malaria and dysentery a good bit; there were no cholera epidemics after they got it under control; went to great lengths to control TB, which was spread easily by the dust in the dry season

liked a lot of India, but there were parts he disliked; sometimes disliked the lack of social contact; disliked the extreme heat; disliked the general attitude of the government never being wrong, which was even said to him by a senior district officer

one of the differences between the military political and the civil service political was that the military political was automatically anti-government and hardly ever agreed with the government

as you got to know the countryside better, you realized the Hindu-Brahman people were very intelligent and cultured, but also very devious underneath

the way of life was similar to the British Edwardian lifestyle; has been told there’s no difference now from back then

would like to go back in a way; would like to go for about six months, but he can’t seem to find the time

was married while in India; believes his wife liked it as well; she was a friend of his aunt and uncle; her family was also connected with India, but she had never been there before

India may have been dull for the ladies sometimes because there weren’t a great number of activities to do

one seemed to work more and sleep less in India; seemed to have more energy, despite the heat

had a lot of contact with Eurasians; some are very nice, but as a whole they seem to inherent the worst qualities of each side

while in central India, he had a descendent of Napoleon Bonaparte that still received a
pension from the French government; part of Metcalf’s duties was to pay him this pension every month

maharajah of the area of the square wheel was thought to allow thirteen murders in last few years; somehow they got rid of him; tells about the wedding ceremony he attended, when the groom had his mistress at his feet; used to play bicycle polo in the courtyard of the palace every afternoon

old custom of shooting guns the first night of a honeymoon to symbolize penetration

left maharajah in his state because he was not a nuisance politically; would cook marvelously

although they are eccentric, there is still a part of them that is uncivilized deep within; very few have any real depth of civilization; given the chance, they would be very despotic

one of Metcalf’s chief jobs was to keep them from getting a chance; tried to keep certain amount of normalcy

there was always some amount of bribing going on; they tried to stop a lot of it; would be sent baskets of fruits with rings at the bottom; he would send the ring back, but they were allowed to keep the fruit

end of tape