

T. Harry Williams Center of Oral History

Tape 891 Finding Aid

INTERVIEWEE NAME: Lieutenant Colonel John Masters

COLLECTION: 4700.0610 Tape 891 (Tape 1 of 2)

IDENTIFICATION: Briton in Pre-Independence India

INTERVIEWERS: Frank de Caro, Rosan Jordan

SERIES: British Voices from South Asia

INTERVIEW DATE: 5/18/72

TOTAL PLAYING TIME: 1 hour, 33 minutes

OTHER MATERIALS: None

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Tape 891, Side A

Masters (Part 1 of 3)

- 001 discusses the history of the Masters family, made by his great uncle; discusses people in pictures
- 012 discusses book he wrote; one volume is complete, the second volume has been sent to the publishers
- 024 wrote two technical writings in *India United Services Journal*; wrote an article about infantry dress; wrote about his experience with a tiger, published by the British magazine *The Field*
- 037 has always liked writing; wrote a 240 page paper while at Sandhurst; writing comes easily because of the good English teachers
- 048 has a one track mind: it never struck him to write except to further his military career
- 052 last job in the army was GHQM-01, which dealt with foreign policies; wrote papers on the partition of India from the military's stand point
- 062 expected to become an executive at a large company, preferably with the railroad, but never imagined a writing career; believed experiences in the military would be useful as an executive
- 078 when the opportunity arose to become a writer, it didn't surprise him because it fulfilled what he thought would lead to a successful and complete life

- 084 didn't buy or sell well; could not farm; was a terrible mechanic; writing offered a lot of opportunity if it worked, and it was just as likely work as any of the other things; could always go back to England if things didn't work out
- 092 focused on conflicts of the Indian history because a book must have tension or something that grows; the perfect novel would put two Christs against each other with different purposes in life: you would sympathize with both of them and realize they would struggle until one's idea would defeat the other's
- 102 tried to do short stories, but realized it was a difficult form of writing and the lack of a place for it in the marketplace; made 270 dollars his first year
- 110 agent suggested writing a novel
- 119 focused on a family in his novels so he could have a link between books because they could go to any occupation; nothing else ever came to mind; one reason is to give hereditary traits from one generation to another and establish continuity; another reason is because the family had to bear the same relation to India as the British did
- 139 don't think of books as a family saga; meant to be a broad canvas of India during the British occupation
- 153 never deliberately worked in his family history; would have liked to bring out George White Masters, but the Masters were too boring in his opinion
- 166 there is a Savage in every novel
- 178 wanted a name that would have some force, so chose the name "Savage"
- 186 tried to write so the reader could feel like it was 1620; the character had to be young man of wonder that wasn't chained down to a desk
- 201 wanted to paint a world of magic and needed a romantic young man; Jason represents a spirit of wonder
- 220 mutiny is a powerful subject; talks of the mutiny that took place in the Indian army
- 273 reason British-Indian literature is good literature is because of the inherent tension and conflict between the British and Indians; should be hard to write a bad book about it
- 287 Masters is considered to be Anglo-Indian writer; Indo-Anglian writer is Indian writer that writes about English; if read alternately, one will get a good, but confusing picture of India, as it should be according to Masters
- 297 doesn't think *Passage to India* is a good book because it is too clear cut; it clarifies and exaggerates
- 311 phone call
- 312 *Kim* is good book because of its atmosphere: you could read it carefully, go to India and know India without understanding much
- 319 India is too big and too complex to completely understand in just one book
- 320 one of Kipling's few books that he doesn't show a mean streak and want to hurt someone; there is an emotional warmth to everyone in the book
- 327 thinks *Passage to India* oversimplifies things
- 331 hasn't read many fictional works about India; has read less and less since he has started writing
- 345 he only does two things: write and walk; does very little reading because of the stress from writing
- 354 in *The Deceivers*, the underlying thought comes from research of the interrogations and their relationships to Christian ceremonies
- 370 has a low-tolerance for yoga and meditation, especially when people associate a higher-spirituality with non-American or non-English things; there are spiritual secrets that

the Indians know and we don't
 383 all he knows about the Indians are that they are warm, generous and murderous at times,
 just like everyone else
 399 talk about the ending of his latest novel
 402 the individual characters he created had to bear some relationship to the overall British
 emotion towards India, that of possessiveness, scorn and great affection
 420 you don't know what racism is unless you were born English; recalls the horrors of lying in
 bed and thinking about if he was born French, German, or anything else
 425 famous story of coal heaver who took his son on a day trip; brings attention to France as
 where niggers begin
 439 recommends reading *Old Soldiers Never Die* by Frank Richards; the British troops abused
 the Indian troops; talks about the threads he tries to place in his characters
 480 British were as good of colonial governors as they could have been, but you can't govern
 Indians like you govern others
 494 personal environments forced the British to form a certain type of thinking; district
 commissioners were perfect example: they could rule in India, but did not fit in anywhere
 else
 508 the pension of the ICS members never changed, despite advancements; as the ICS evolved,
 it was great instrument for the government
 530 when in the Indian army, you were on the "unattached list"; would be with the British
 battalion for a year to learn administrative tasks in India
 549 every soldier had a bearer, all of whom spoke English; when first joined the army, you
 were not allowed to hire an English-speaking bearer, you had to speak Hindustani
 558 did not promote soldiers who spoke English because they were separating themselves from
 their own class
 567 as a rule, the government was unhappy with the missionaries because they were always
 causing trouble; they were part of the reason for the Indian mutiny because they tried to
 change things
 581 anyone that wasn't too narrow-minded would fit in well in India; if you served with the
 Indians, you considered India home
 616 discussion of the institutions in India
 629 Side A ends

Tape 891, Side B

Masters (Part 3 of 3)

004 three companies ran Burma, and they all did the same thing
 010 friend John [Henley?] went and met with the head of Bombay Burma in London; they liked
 him so they signed him as a probation for a year and sent him to Rangoon, then as assistant
 in the upper country
 018 life was wonderful until you got married and had children
 020 all the jobs available to people all around the world were removed in one swoop
 026 would have liked to get to know the jungle people, but he never had time or opportunity; he
 has been in central India though
 037 has not researched the histories as a historian, but has checked to ensure his facts were
 correct; usually does it after he writes the books; has charts of the crops, moon phases, and
 who was who and where; if runs into problems with a particular person, he makes the
 character imaginary

049 works every day, six days a week; from eight to twelve is creative work, then starts again at
four to do non-creative work until six

062 his son and daughter were both born in India, but neither has been back since they left;
they've been aware of India, but it does not mean very much to them; they are American
because they lived in America and went to America

087 having a mixture of roots is good

088 talk about a book from his book shelf

093 when he went back, he thought India was a mess, except for the Indian army; there is not as
large of a mess when compared to central Africa; believes Pakistan is worse than India
because of dictatorships

107 by now, the Eurasian and Anglo-Indian issues have been settled; their problems came
when the British quit in 1948; in the next few years, they had to make up their minds as to
what they were and what they were going to do about it

112 tells about his father's Anglo-Indian helper named George, who said he was going to be
English; his children would marry English and migrate back into England

118 Anglo-Indians in India could not leave India because of financial reasons; then the British
government made it more difficult for everyone with the Citizenship Act of 1947

121 before 1947, everyone was only a British subject; the Canadians decided to have thing
called Canadian citizenship to allow the hiring of Canadian workers, and it required a
citizenship law

128 there was the British subject (for everyone), then either the United Kingdom citizenship or
Indian citizenship

131 would not give him a United Kingdom passport in India because he couldn't prove he was
from Britain

141 situation of Anglo-Indians in India is considerably different because they have developed a
sense of identity; there were close to 100,000 of them working in key positions, especially
with the railroads and in positions left open for them; government put a stop to it

151 they are Christians, mostly Catholic except in the north; strong inner taboos: the
community will vanish unless everyone marries inside the community

160 they became part of the India

161 tells story about the Chief of the Indian Air Force, an army commander and divisional
commander that were killed in a helicopter crash

168 changed the title of his first book; they were words that addresses the soldiers and their
actions

186 officers of any given regiment would become highly involved in the culture because it was
the tradition of the Indian army

191 British and American officers were amazed at the extreme freedom and strong discipline of
the Indian army

193 in the early days, there was large separation between the British officer and the lower
Indian recruit; one could never become the other

198 you could relax because never had to worry about the other guy taking advantage of you

200 you were not expected to marry before age thirty because you devoted those years to being
around the men; twice a week, he would go and have drinks with the soldiers or officers

208 the next morning, there would not be a trace of the previous night's jokes on any of the
officers' faces, even though they were there the night before laughing with them

213 tells story about the guy who made fun of the officer and his horse; soldier stopped, saluted,
and ran back into the ranks

226 heard about the “Lie Books” in the different regiments: anyone’s extravagant statements
 were recorded in the books; his regiment never had one
 231 his regiment had a complaint book; wrote down anything you didn’t like and the president
 of the Mess Committee would write his answers, normally smart, cutting ones
 239 felt after a time as if you were a member of a closed society that the others didn’t know; it
 started with the language and built up with the knowledge of the land; stories of the famous
 characters of the Indian army or of India
 257 tells about the ICS commissioner that had a very high position, but would never become a
 governor because he was an alcoholic; would drink a tumbler of gin in the morning and
 was constantly drunk, but no one in the department would move without him noticing
 266 tells the story of Bill Bailey, the “great sex pot”
 270 everyone knew the ghost stories from the Indian mutiny; were very common
 284 there was definitely Indian folklore;
 285 British-Indian society was so small that, within five to ten years, there was not a person you
 did not know his name and reputation
 290 tells of the woman known as the “passionate haystack”
 292 there were 800 ICS officers, and the total strength of the Indian army officers was 2,000;
 add 500 forest officers, who they rarely saw
 310 the town was so small, there was no privacy; everyone knew everyone else’s business
 315 the regiments that were between ten and seventeen were considered to be the best, but it
 was largely myth; lists the regiments and their numbers; Indian cavalry was the same, but
 the numbers varied; most of these were largely myths; when the regiments went to fight in
 World War I, the ones that were looked down upon the most seemed to do as well as
 everyone else
 340 after the mutiny was over and the exterior enemies had been defeated, it appeared the only
 enemies were Russia and the tribes from the northwest frontier; India also seemed to be
 separated into the marshaled people of the north and the non-marshaled people
 363 after 1818, the Indian army consisted of ninety percent people from the Punjab and ten
 percent from the rest of India; this imbalance meant that when war broke out, the majority
 of the casualties were hardest on the Punjab; after World War II, they began creating other
 regiments to make up for this imbalance
 379 social status clung to the marshaled tribe people; when it became “crunch time”, the people
 that did as well as all the others were not them; socially speaking, there was some
 difference, but not much in the cavalry
 400 unless they had close family connections, people would normally want to go to the frontier
 force and guides
 412 prestige was based in terms of the reputation of the Indian troops
 417 went back to England in 1946 and had looked forward to seeing the England he knew as a
 boy, but as a man, he found it mentally enclosing; felt a closing in of ideas and not free to
 think his own thoughts, and is part of the reason why he could not write in England; never
 really felt the need to go back because both England and he had changed
 481 couldn’t live in Spain because he is not Spanish; he is at home now
 505 decided to move because the area they were living in was becoming too urban; talk about
 the reasons why they didn’t settle anywhere else
 569 Indian society had its rules, but many of them did not apply to the British officers because
 there was no one there to arrest you; tells about cigar-smoking friend that ran track
 638 end of tape