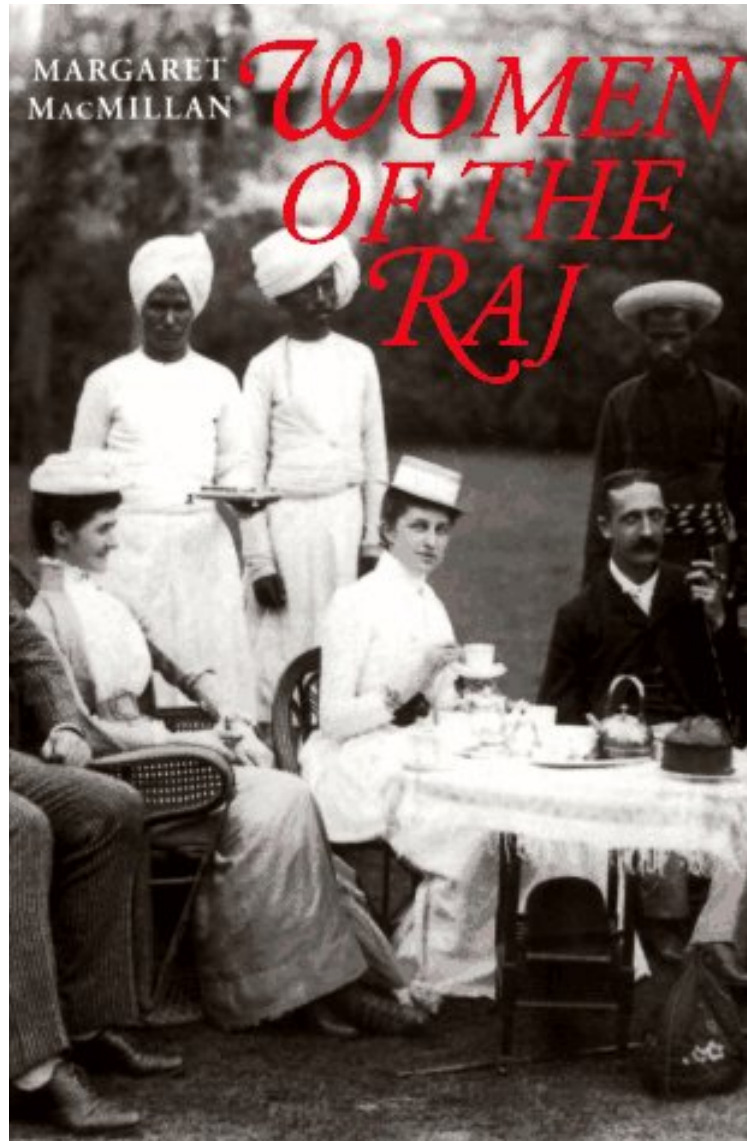


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## Women of the Raj

Margaret MacMillan

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**Margaret MacMillan : Women of the Raj** before purchasing it in order to gauge whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Women of the Raj:

5 of 5 people found the following review helpful. I loved reading this By Susan G. I loved reading this! I never knew what the Raj referred to - England's rule over India. This book explained why Gandhi was quoted as saying, "Your Jesus I love; it's Christians I don't like." Why would he or anyone like Christians when the English who lived in India under the system of the Raj were the farthest thing from accurately representing Christ or authentic Christianity. If

they attended church services they barely tolerated sermons that extended beyond 15-minutes and they looked down on Christian missionaries! The women of the Raj were commoners from England who came to India by way of marriage to soldiers serving in India. They re-created an autocratic social system imitating the higher classes in England pretending to be of them because labor was cheap. None of these women would have had servants in England - they themselves might have been servants in order to survive. The entire system was a mockery and when India was given its freedom from Imperial rule, the women of the Raj had a rude awakening in facing a return to life in England for those who did return. Fascinating read that explained many questions I've had. 17 of 17 people found the following review helpful. *Women of the Raj: The Dream and the Reality* By F. S. L'hoir Margaret MacMillan has penned a book that is as entertaining as it is informative. Focusing on the lives of British women who either accompanied their husbands to India or voyaged to the subcontinent for other purposes--perhaps to find a husband or to become a domestic or do charitable work, the author paints a vivid picture of women's lives from the seventeenth to the twentieth centuries of the British ventures in India, which began with the East India Company and culminated in the Raj. Having been brought up on a diet of Kipling, the Godden sisters, and later, M.M. Kaye, I once had a rather romantic notion of what it must be like to be a memsahib--such thoughts usually came to me as a teenager, cleaning up my messy room, imagining how lovely it would be to have "all those servants." After reading Ms. MacMillan's fascinating account, based upon actual women's letters and memoirs, I can relegate my teenage dreams properly to the realm of misguided fantasy. Women had to cope with unimaginable annoyances. They suffered the tragic loss of children, either to sudden illness or to forced separation by the necessity of sending them Home at an early age for education. The voyage out and the journey to the final destination could be both uncomfortable and dangerous. And the amount of baggage, clothes and other paraphernalia that one had to drag around, especially in the 19th century, was truly astounding (eleven camel-loads were recommended by "The Complete Indian Housekeeper and Cook"); and all those petticoats and corsets, not to mention the stodgy multi-course meals in all that heat, must have been enervating. As for servants, there were so many rules of caste and custom that the woman of the house had to undergo a juggling act to keep up with them and not make dreadful gaffes. Women were not only circumscribed by rigid social mores, but they were also subjected to stultifying boredom (I fear I would have been one of those women who lamentably "let down . . . the Raj and the British Empire" [237]). "Women of the Raj" is a splendid book that gives us a glimpse into the intrepid women who constituted "the Mothers, Wives, and Daughters of the British Empire in India;" the women who dwelt in a fascinating but tenuous bubble that burst with Indian independence. 4 of 4 people found the following review helpful. *A woman's lot throughout the British Raj* By E. A. Ambler Like 'em or loathe 'em, memsahibs played a vital role in the maintaining of the British Raj. This book is packed with first-hand accounts from letters and diaries, that "tell it how it was" - frightening or exhilarating, uncomfortable or exotic, depending on each woman's imagination and strength of character. Quotations (invariably hilarious or naive) from magazines, periodicals or "How to ...." manuals throw further light on the socially complex, often perplexing, but always busy lives that the women of the Raj had to live. My husband was a "child of the Raj" and in reading this to him he is reminded of so much in his early years. The photos add immensely to the author's picture of life then; snaps from family albums - all intimate and particular.

Looking at Britain's involvement in India over three and a half centuries, but particularly the period of empire from the 1850s to 1947, the author recreates the role of the women of the Raj from their own letters and memoirs, from novels, and from interviews with survivors. The text is complemented by a wide-ranging selection of contemporary illustrations.

From *Library Journal* MacMillan's 1988 volume traces the role of British women in India, whose primary purpose seems to have been to replicate Victorian society in the Raj. The book reveals how these women adjusted to the many hardships of living in an alien and often hostile environment. Copyright 1997 Reed Business Information, Inc. About the Author MARGARET MacMILLAN is the renowned author of *Women of the Raj*, *Stephen Leacock* (Extraordinary Canadians series), and the international bestsellers *Nixon in China* and *Paris 1919: Six Months That Changed the World*, which won the 2003 Governor Generals Award and the 2002 Samuel Johnson Prize. She is also the author of *The Uses and Abuses of History*. The past provost of Trinity College at the University of Toronto, she is now the warden of St. Antonys College at Oxford University. Excerpt. Reprinted by permission. All rights reserved. Chapter 1 *The Voyage Out* Englishwomen and Welsh and Scots and Irish women had been going to India for generations by the time the Raj reached its peak in the late nineteenth century. The first to make the voyage may have been a Mrs. Hudson and her maid, Frances Webb, who went in 1617 as companions to an Armenian lady who had been born in India. (Frances had a love affair on the voyage, unwittingly setting the pattern for countless women who came after her.) Over the years, India drew a few women looking for work as milliners, perhaps, or governesses. And some women had a calling to be missionaries. Others simply went because they had been summoned back by their families after an education in Britain. The great majority, however, went to India because their husbands were there or because they hoped to find husbands for themselves. (To keep them chaste for the marriage market, unmarried women

traveled, until well into the twentieth century, under the care of chaperones, usually married women who were making the voyage anyway.) The fishing fleet, as it was known unkindly but accurately by the nineteenth century, arrived in India in the autumn at the start of the cold weather. One lady who came out in 1779 divided what she called the speculative ladies into old maids, of the shrivelled and dry description, and girls, educated merely to cover the surface of their mental deformity. The odds were that their fishing would meet success: throughout the period of British rule in India, European men outnumbered European women by about three to one. Understandably, few British women had cared to come to the unsettled India of the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries; and, what is more, the early charters of the East India Company pointedly forbade women on its posts. Its employees ignored that regulation as they did so many others. They took Indian mistresses; worse, from the point of view of the Company's staunch Protestant directors, they married Catholics, daughters or widows of the Portuguese. To save the souls of its men, the Company, for a time, played matchmaker. In the later part of the seventeenth century it shipped batches of young women from Britain to India. The cargo, divided into gentlewomen and others, were given one set of clothes each and were supported for a year quite long enough, it was thought, for them to find themselves husbands. Some did not; and the Company tried to deny that it had any obligation to look after them further. Most unfairly it also warned them to mind their morals: Whereas some of these women are grown scandalous to our nation, religion and Government interest, said a letter from London to the Deputy Governor of Bombay in 1675, we require you to give them fair warning that they do apply themselves to a more sober and Christian conversation. If that warning did not have the right effect, the women were to be fed on bread and water and shipped back to Britain. The experiment was not a happy one and it must have been with relief that the Company abandoned the practice in the eighteenth century. British women still traveled to India but they came individually. The voyage was a dreadful one. The wooden sailing vessels, tiny by today's standards, were tossed about in every storm and the South Atlantic and the Indian Ocean were famous for their storms. The passengers faced at best being thrown about in their cabins, at worst drowning. The Reverend Hobart Caunter recorded one such storm, which took place off the east coast of India in the 1830s. The weather began to turn foul early one morning. The only lady among us every now and then expressed her fears, when a sudden gust caused the vessel to lurch with an increased momentum, as if the billows were already commencing a fiercer conflict. By late afternoon, they were in the midst of a full-blown hurricane. The ship pitched violently and furniture was torn from its fastenings. More dangerously, a cannon got loose and threatened to batter a hole in the side. Even Caunter, a seasoned traveler, found the noise, coupled with the crashing of waves and the howling of the wind, painful in the extreme. Night came on and the storm increased in fury. As Caunter and the captain were in the main cabin, or cuddy, trying to carry on a conversation, suddenly, a heavy sea struck her astern, but happily on the quarter, and in an instant carried away the quarter-galley on that side, swamping the cabin into which the poor lady before spoken of had retired for the night. The force of the water was so great, that it dashed open the door of the cabin, and its fair occupant was borne head foremost into the cuddy, dripping like a mermaid, her hair hanging about her shoulders in thin strips, when she was rescued by the captain from further mischief. She was drenched to the skin. At its shortest the voyage under sail took under two months; at its longest well over six. Sometimes the winds were so contrary on the west coast of Africa that the ships were blown off course almost to Brazil. The crew and passengers gasped with the heat; then, when they were rounding the Cape of Good Hope, they shivered in the cold. There was the danger of being dashed against the shore by a sudden shift in the winds. Those who survived often ended up in the great slave markets along the east coast of Africa. Occasionally the winds might fail altogether and the unhappy ship would sit becalmed for weeks on end. Accommodations were cramped and dirty and often had to be shared with huge rats which scurried about, boldly eating any food that was left out and nibbling holes in clothing. Women who could afford it had cabins above decks. Otherwise they were housed below, in stuffy cubbyholes, often with walls made of canvas, where they had very little privacy. A bucket of salt water was the closest passengers got to a wash tub; another bucket made do for a toilet. Mrs. Sherwood, later famous as a writer of sentimental children's stories, accompanied her army officer husband out to India at the beginning of the nineteenth century; she had to sleep in a hammock strung above a cannon while filthy water from the bilges ran across the floor beneath. Mrs. Eliza Fay, who lived in India in the late eighteenth century, endured the voyage several times. Fortunately she was a woman who faced difficulties (and she had many from imprisonment by an Indian ruler to her wastrel of a husband) in an optimistic spirit. Her letters to her sister are filled with cheerful gossip and appalling details of shipboard life. On one voyage back to England, she nearly suffocated. The port of my cabin being kept almost constantly shut, and the door opening into the steerage; I had neither light nor air but from a scuttle. On her first voyage the captain was overbearing and insolent and kept his passengers half starved. At meals, Mrs. Fay reported proudly, the longest arm fared best; and you cannot imagine what a good scrambler I am become. When they could, women on the sailing ships escaped from their cabins to the fresh air of the deck, but that depended on both the weather and the mood of the captain. Many of the captains of the East Indiamen were quite charmingly eccentric on dry land; at sea they seemed half mad and one of their more common phobias was women. Ladies were often forced to take their meals in their cabins rather than in the cuddy because the gentlemen drank and swore so dreadfully. Mrs. Sherwood confided to her diary that those who have not been at sea can never conceive the hundredth part of the horrors of a long voyage to a female in a sailing vessel. At the start of the

voyage, there might be the luxury of fresh meat, because many ships carried cows and sheep on deck. Sooner or later, rations would get shorter, the preserved meat tougher and saltier. Water would turn the color of strong tea, with a foul smell and an even fouler taste. Minnie Blane, a happy, sheltered young middle-class girl from Bath, experienced all the unpleasantness of sailing ships when she traveled out to India in 1856 with her husband, an officer in the Indian Army. (They might have taken the shorter route overland via Egypt and enjoyed the relative comfort of steamships but her husband needed to save money.) Minnie, who was pregnant, was sick a good deal of the time and the meals she faced cannot have helped. For weeks on end, after they had rounded the Cape, the only meat was Pork, boiled, roasted, fried, chops, curry (with so much garlic in it, it is quite uneatable), and one leg of mutton, half raw. The butter was thick with salt and sugar had long since run out. Some food was quite rotten. I cannot tell you, wrote Minnie to her mother, how sick it made me one day, on cutting open a fig, to see three or four large white maggots lying comfortably inside! Cautious travelers often took a private stock of food and wine. Many women brought other little comforts along in a brave attempt to make their quarters bearable. They had their own folding chairs, washstands, linen, and even chintz curtains to hang across the door. Soldiers wives had the worst time of all. The Army's own troopships were appalling—leaking, dirty, and cramped—and the transports it sometimes had to hire from private contractors were scarcely better. Since the usual class distinctions were rigidly observed at sea, officers' ladies at least got cabins; wives of other ranks, as the Army described them, were belowdecks, often in a corner of the hold next to the horses. There they endured the voyage, sleeping, eating, and passing their days in a stench which got worse as the voyage dragged on. Unless they were working for an officer's wife, they had little opportunity of getting on deck. The military authorities of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries did not approve of women and their children accompanying the troops—only a few of the families of the ranks were permitted to go so they did little to make them comfortable. The Army gave them a pittance for their subsistence but no advice on what to bring with them. Mrs. Helen Mackenzie, the strong-minded and pious wife of an officer in a Sikh regiment, was horrified on her first voyage to India in the middle of the nineteenth century to discover a soldier's wife eating the scraps from her plate. The unfortunate woman was worse off than a female convict: she did not even have adequate clothing. Gradually the Army was forced to modify its attitude; by the twentieth century wives usually accompanied their husbands abroad and the troopships, while never luxurious, gave them at least decent food and accommodation. After the First World War, conditions were better still; the Army even provided free baby food on board ship. It is not surprising that passengers on those early voyages in sailing ships vented their misery and boredom in violent quarrels with each other. The men threatened each other with duels; the women gossiped viciously and absurdly cut each other dead. Every now and then there were more agreeable moments. If it was calm, the passengers danced on the deck under the stars. They celebrated crossing the line, when male passengers who had never crossed the equator before were ceremonially shaved by Neptune and his court. The biggest sailors played Mrs. Neptune and her daughters. The gentlemen were shaved with a saw and a tar brush and ducked in a tub of salt water while the ladies watched from a safe distance. Mrs. Ashmore, the prim wife of an officer, witnessed the merriment when she traveled out to India in 1840, though the scene soon became of too riotous a nature to admit of our remaining witnesses to it. (She retired to her favorite reading—the works of Bishop Berkeley and Volney's *Ruins of Empire*.) Occasionally (and not always by design) the ships put in briefly to shore. St. Helena in the South Atlantic was a popular spot to pick up provisions and water. The passengers could stretch their legs briefly; if they had time they might make a trip to Napoleon's tomb (at least until the bones were restored to the French in 1840). The Cape of Good Hope was another regular stop. The ships tied up at Simonstown, then a pretty little fishing village, and passengers hired carriages to take them to Constantia, where there were excellent local wines, and to Cape Town with its charming houses set in tidy gardens. The Dutch settlers, various ladies noted approvingly, preserved both the simple ways and the hospitality of their ancestors. There was a much shorter way of getting to India, by boat across the Mediterranean, then by land across the narrow strip of Egypt that divided the Mediterranean from the Red Sea, and finally by boat again across the Indian Ocean. This route was first used in the eighteenth century and was eventually to supplant the one around the Cape. At first it presented as many hazards as the longer route, because Egypt, nominally under the control of the Ottoman Sultan, was quite lawless. Passengers for India gathered in Cairo until they were a large enough party to defy the bandits who lay in wait in the desert. Sometimes they joined forces with Egyptian merchants heading in the same direction. The caravans traveled with an escort of hired Arab soldiers. The men generally rode while the ladies were jolted about in a sort of litter, slung between two camels. In spite of a canopy and blinds, the unfortunate occupants nearly stifled in the heat of the day only to shudder in the sudden chill of the desert night. Mrs. Fay, who traveled in one of these in the 1770s, remembered with particular antipathy the frequent violent jerks, occasioned by one or other of the poles slipping out of its wretched fastening, so as to bring one end of the litter to the ground. In later years, men and women bounced together across the desert in crude horse-drawn vans; later still there was a railway. The journey became much safer and much faster as the nineteenth century wore on. In 1830 the first steamer was put into service between Suez, at the head of the Red Sea, and Bombay. In 1840, the Peninsular and Oriental Steamship Company signed an agreement with the government of India to provide a regular service between Suez and certain Indian ports. The PO was in time to become almost synonymous with the journey to India, but there were other lines: the Anchor and the Clan Lines, which ran between Liverpool and Bombay, the Calcutta Star Line

between Liverpool and Colombo, and (generally considered by the British inferior to all these) the Italian Rubatino Line from Genoa and Naples to Bombay. Steam and the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869 helped to shorten the trip to four weeks and even less and the whole experience became rather enjoyable. The author of *Indian Outfits*, a guide for women published in 1882, was quite rhapsodic. To those who like the sea, the voyage is very pleasant; there are generally many nice people on board, and, if troops are carried, sometimes a band, and on fine nights dancing on deck, or singing, glee parties, and so on; very often amateur theatricals are got up, and come off the night before port is reached. There is usually a library on board, and there is no reason why, with so much that is new to interest and with pleasant society, the time should not pass quickly and agreeably.