



BOREDOM AND THE BRITISH EMPIRE

In “Burmese Days” (1934), George Orwell produced a memorable portrait of the boredom and alienation that characterized colonial life in Burma during the last decades of the British Empire. It was, he wrote, a “bloody hole,” with “tepid” air, “lazy” servants, and nothing to do all day but sit at the whites-only European Club and drink whisky. But when did British India, of which Burma was a part, become such a melancholy and monotonous place, and to what extent was it characteristic of the British Empire more broadly? This paper argues that despite the many and famous tales of glory and adventure, a significant and overlooked feature of the nineteenth-century British imperial experience was boredom and disappointment. All across the empire, from the hill stations of India to the gold mines of South Africa, from the Australian bush to the Malayan jungle, men and women found the landscape monotonous, the physical and psychological distance from home enervating, the routine of everyday life tedious, and their work dull and unfulfilling. This was a product of the increasing bureaucratization of imperial administration; heightened expectations about imperial travel and settlement; decreasing opportunities to explore the unexplored; increasing isolation from indigenous communities; and the lopsidedness and infrequency of imperial warfare. Together, these led to a loss of meaning and purpose that is well documented in private letters and diaries. This paper, therefore, traces the historical emergence of boredom in the imperial context, but is attentive as well to its psychological underpinnings and broader significance.