Mad Dogs and Scotsmen: A Plain Tale from the Military Collections of the India Office Records Section of the British Library

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The 20,000-odd files that make the military collections of the India Office Records section of the British Library are now available as the L/MIL/7 digital catalogue on the A2A website.1 They record the day-to-day work of the military department of the London-based India Office, which between 1858 and 1947 functioned as the administrative link between the British government of India in India and the ‘home’ British government in Britain. Consisting for the most part of letters, memoranda, telegram transcripts, lists and despatches, the military collections detail every aspect of military business in British-run India, and the countries and regions east of Suez that came within the Raj’s sphere of action and interest.

These files are a more wide-ranging historical resource than the term ‘military’ might suggest because, one way or another, the majority of the British in India were army people, and army people included cooks, blacksmiths, bandmasters, dairy managers, storekeepers, chaplains, doctors, engineers and schoolmasters as well as combatant soldiers. Besides the Indian Army with its ‘native’ Indian soldiers (sepoys) and British officers, one-third of the British Army – at least 65,000 men – was routinely stationed in India. While this very substantial proportion of the regular army was stationed on the Subcontinent, it was transported, paid, fed, trained, entertained, housed, equipped and clothed out of revenues raised in India. It was the job of the India Office’s military departmental officials to record the provision of everything from sun helmets to surgical implements, and to execute every change in the mind-boggling array of regulations governing British soldiers’ pay, pensions, special allowances, promotion and grants of leave.

When it came to ‘India’s liability’ – a recurring phrase of the military collections – no item of expenditure was left to chance or immune to scrutiny. The result is an astonishingly comprehensive, at times astonishingly petty, cost and quality control exercise, revealing the backroom of the British Empire in its heyday. All the major themes of the period are touched upon; all the usual suspects appear. Indeed, if the romantic and racist stereotypes of the Raj did not already exist, they could be reconstructed on the basis of the India Office’s military collections.

More surprisingly, the collections are rich in material on the experiences of those natives of England, Scotland and Ireland who made up the rank and file of the British Army. At a time (the second half of the 19th century) when soldiers’ pay could compete only with the lowest paid civilian occupations, these men were increasingly hard to recruit. Since serious pay increases were unacceptable to all governments, the army sought to improve conditions of service, reducing the number of stoppages from pay, abolishing flogging, providing better food, clothes, housing, training, travel allowances and medical care.

1 http://www.a2a.org.uk/
Special hazards obtained for British soldiers on their Indian tours of duty: sunstroke, malaria, cholera, typhus, venereal diseases, rabies and a plethora of conditions that we might now file under depression, alcoholism and stress. Of all these afflictions, rabies or hydrophobia was the most terrifying. Besides his dreadful symptoms – a raging thirst accompanied by a fear of water – a man bitten by a rabid dog, or jackal, faced the prospect of almost certain death. For victims with ready access to medical treatment, morphia ‘in heroic doses’ offered the only relief. (In rural France, victims were sometimes subjected to mercy killings by being smothered between mattresses.) Between 1888 and 1897, twenty-three British soldiers in India died of rabies. But 1888 was also the year of the foundation in Paris of the Pasteur Institute, an exemplary new clinic, funded by charitable donations and international subscriptions, which offered post-exposure protection from rabies. At the Pasteur Institute, patients underwent a course of prophylaxis: a series of inoculations with infected material over a period of several weeks, which in thousands of pioneering cases successfully pre-empted the onset of rabies. Once news spread of the efficacy of this treatment, people came from all over the world to be vaccinated. Early success stories included children from England and America, and a party of Russians from Smolensk, bitten more than two weeks before their arrival in Paris by a rabid wolf. And among the Pasteur Institute’s early patients were several parties of British soldiers bitten by mad dogs in India (fig. 1).

Fig. 1. A posed photograph of an Indian servant waiting on a European man, 1870s. From an album of views of India, Burma, the Andaman Islands and Egypt by Willoughby Wallace Hooper. BL, OIOC Photo 447/3(58); Images Online record no. 8290.

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3 Ibid.
Military Collection 166 (L/MIL/7/7363-7381) deals with questions arising from the anti-rabies treatment of officers and men in Paris in the 1890s. The soldiers were transported by steamship from Bombay to Brindisi, then on by rail to the French capital. In Paris, Thomas Cook & Son were authorized to handle the practical and financial arrangements, including payment of the recommended ‘gratuity’ of £1 per patient to the Pasteur Institute. In the case of Corporal Brady of the Dublin Fusiliers, a coat ‘of good tweed’ and ‘two pairs of merino drawers’ were acceptable expenses, but Messrs Cook & Son were reprimanded for letting him run up a pocket-money bill ‘considerably in excess of the amount usually paid to these soldiers’.4

But Corporal Brady was on his own, unlike the foursome of Gordon Highlanders who arrived in Paris in the summer of 1896. Although all four of the Scotsmen had been bitten by a mad dog – presumably the same dog – in India, it seems they were well enough to flout the rules pertaining to their unexpected sojourn in gay Paris. While undergoing treatment at the Institute, patients were expected to abstain from alcohol but to the consternation of their Paris landlady, the Scotsmen partied on cognac. In a letter to the War Office, Messrs Thos. Cook & Son explained the resulting bill for damage to carpets, bedding and crockery. The Proprietoress of the Hotel de l’Univers is an English woman and would not exaggerate the case; on the contrary she did all she could for the soldiers and on the day of their arrival she sent a letter advising us not to advance them any money, and soon afterwards came herself to inform us of their disgraceful behaviour, their being drunk, not able to sit at table, and on one occasion letting a plate of soup fall on the floor, having to be carried upstairs, etc. We may say that the English lady in question, Mme. Voiry, has been to the Embassy to lodge a complaint against these men, in case any further enquiries are made later on. As these men will call upon you in due course for the balance of their ticket London to Aldershot (but their treatment at the Institute is not yet finished) they may possibly tell you the same as they told us when they called to complain, that they were sleeping two in a bed which is entirely against the Army Regulations. This was immediately enquired into and found it was entirely false. Each man had a separate room to himself, though one night one of the four, rather than go up a floor higher preferred to sleep with one of his companions. This he was not compelled to do. We may say that when the men called about the alleged incident they were not sober, and were inclined to be insolent. We have no reason to disbelieve the hotel people, having known them for the past ten years. They are conscientious people and would not bring trouble on any of the men of Her Majesty’s service.5

On the morning after, the Gordon Highlanders transferred themselves to the Hôtel de L’Institut Pasteur. According to the file on their ‘misconduct’, this hotel was, despite its name, ‘in no way connected with the Pasteur Institute’. Its inmates were encouraged to partake of intoxicating liquors, ‘of course at their own expense, this being quite contrary to the regulations of the Pasteur Institute’. Eventually, the long arm of the military authorities caught up with the Gordon Highlanders at Aldershot, where each of them had five shillings (approximately one day’s pay) docked from his wages.

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4 British Library, India Office Records, Ms L/MIL/7/7373 (Collection 166/file 11).
5 British Library, India Office Records, Ms L/MIL/7/7375 (Collection 166/file 13).
Three years later, in 1899, the Secretary of State for India was embarrassed by a Parliamentary Question – triggered by an article in the *Daily Mail* – about the anti-rabies treatment of British soldiers in Paris. What was the evidence in the possession of the Government showing that the dogs which had bitten these men were rabid; under what official supervision were these men sent from India to Paris; was it true that, as stated by the director of the Pasteur Institute, these men arrived in Paris without any credentials or anything showing when or where they had been bitten? The Secretary of State replied that no complaint or representation on the subject had been received from the director of the Paris Institute. Besides, ‘I should have thought the men themselves would have been capable of explaining to the authorities of the Institute when and where they had been bitten’. Nevertheless, it was ordained that no more soldiers would be sent for anti-rabies treatment without a translated questionnaire specifying the ‘bark’ (voix) and ‘temper’ (caractère) of the offending dog. By then, however, it was no longer necessary to send men at risk from rabies to Paris. Within a decade of the pioneering Pasteur Institute’s foundation, Pasteur institutes and laboratories for the preparation and administration of vaccines against smallpox and rabies were up and running all over the world.

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*British Library, India Office Records, Ms L./MIL./7/7380 (Collection 166/file 18).*