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Andrew Muldoon. *Empire, Politics and the Creation of the 1935 India Act.* Farnham: Ashgate, 2009. viii + 278 pp. $99.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7546-6705-6.

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Wishful Thinking

In May 1930, the Indian government's foreign secretary, Evelyn Howell, authored a report on the nationalist uprising that had recently broken out in India's North-West Frontier Province. Howell's central concern was why the local administration had been so completely unaware of the depth of nationalist feeling in the months preceding the uprising. After studying scores of fortnightly reports he came to a simple conclusion: wishful thinking. Despite growing evidence for a powerful and well-organized nationalist movement, the local administration, sure that they knew the "real India" had shown "a marked tendency towards optimism whenever any favourable circumstance occurs, and to drift on, clutching at straws."[1]

Andrew Muldoon's fascinating new study of the 1935 India Act, *Empire, Politics, and the Creation of the 1935 India Act: Last Act of the Raj*, demonstrates that this tendency towards wishful thinking was not confined to the frontier but was in fact endemic to the entire British administration in India and its masters in London. As past studies by R. J. Moore and Carl Bridge have shown, the 1935 India Act was designed to, in the words of the viceroy of India, Lord Linlithgow, "hold India to the Empire."[2] Through fully responsible elected ministries in provincial governments, communal electorates, and the involvement of the princes in a federal structure with ample British "safeguards" on matters of defense and fiscal policy, the British government hoped to strengthen the hand of Indian "moderates" and weaken the Indian National Congress. The act failed to stem Indian nationalism, however, and Congress went from strength to strength, ramping up electoral victories in six of eleven provinces. Meanwhile, the federal scheme at the center was never realized. Muldoon's basic question is why, despite the clear strength of India's nationalist movement, did the men who ruled India ever believe that the act would succeed in crippling Congress and maintaining British dominion in India?

The answer, Muldoon argues, lies in the colonial administration's continued adherence to an outdated and essentialized vision of India. Muldoon contends that the India of Rudyard Kipling was still very much alive in the minds of British administrators. Even in the 1930s officials continued to maintain that the Indian peasant had no interest in politics, that India was hopelessly divided by caste, religion, and region, and that Congress was still–at heart–the preserve of "semi-educated" urban clerks. This view of India and its inhabitants was reinforced by intelligence failures. Many of the viceroy's chief advisors within India were remote from the day-to-day experience of the districts. Lord Irwin's chief advisor, Malcolm Hailey, the governor of the United Provinces, had last served in a district in 1907. The Indian civil servants who *were* on the local level were flawed as well. Muldoon maintains that many knew little of their districts, moving from post to post with startling rapidity and, in order to demonstrate their administrative ability, tended to paint a rosy picture of political conditions in their districts. This dearth of information was further exacerbated by an overreliance on "local newspapers" rather than "native informants" (p. 34). Finally, the Raj was plagued by a massive, unorganized, and understaffed intelligence apparatus drowning in a sea of paper. The vast colonial archive that is such a boon to the historical researcher was a nightmare for those charged with tabulating and assessing its significance in real time. Hobbled by an inadequate intelligence system in the face of a growing nationalist movement, policymakers "latched" on to what they believed to be the "real" and eternal India (p. 36).

The volume begins with a summary of the Raj's information problem before moving on to its first case study: Lord Irwin's viceroyalty (1926-31). Muldoon argues that Irwin actually did have a good deal of reliable intelligence

on Indian nationalism, yet based on their preconceived notions of the Indian "character," Irwin and his advisors consistently underestimated the appeal and scope of the nationalist movement. Irwin was convinced that Indian grievances were "more psychological than real" (p. 60) and that Congress's real goal was enhanced status for its leadership rather than an eventual transfer of power. For Irwin, the answer to the nationalist problem lay in reforms and in bolstering "moderate" Indian liberals such as T. B. Sapru and M. R. Jayakar through these reforms. With this mindset, Irwin initiated the political process that led to the 1935 India Act.

The next two chapters address how this wishful vision of India–"featuring haggling princes, timid and grasping politicians, stolid peasants, and warring castes"–helped to shape the federal system envisioned in the 1935 act (p. 122). Muldoon handles the issues in this period, from the increasingly fraught financial relationship between India and Britain, to the politics of untouchability, to the growth of princely intransigence, with a deft touch. Again and again Muldoon demonstrates the British propensity to cherry-pick intelligence to fit their preconceived notions of nationalist weakness.

Muldoon then shifts to his secondary argument: that India remained an important concern to the Conservative Party and that these concerns helped shape the deeply cautious nature of the 1935 act. Muldoon recounts how the Conservative secretary of state for India, Sir Samuel Hoare, managed the numerous hurdles to Indian reform from within his own political party. Success lay in duplicating his policy in India–attempt to draw in the moderates. This was decidedly more successful in Lancashire than Bombay. With the help of the prime minister, Stanley Baldwin, Hoare also couched Indian reform in terms that made questioning it tantamount to a challenge to the party leadership. With these strategies Hoare managed–if not to strangle the diehards in their cribs, then to at least arrest dissent in its adolescence–as the tantrums of Winston Churchill and Lord Salisbury demonstrate.

The book wraps up with the fate of the 1935 act and the two fundamental problems that quickly beset the best-laid schemes of Hoare and his associates. The first was the continued reluctance of the princes, Britain's supposed conservative bulwark at the center, to joining a federal system. The second was the immense success that Congress had in the 1937 provincial elections in areas as diverse as the North-West Frontier and Madras. Designed to undermine the nationalists, the legislation instead gave Congress a golden opportunity to demonstrate its governing abilities.

Muldoon presents a convincing and well-researched case for why the British maintained such a surprisingly sanguine view on the future of their Indian empire in the 1930s. At times, however, his argument may be overstated. Irwin, for instance, may have imbibed Anglo-Indian attitudes about Congress and Indians, but his actions also accorded with a marked tendency throughout his career to believe that he could find common ground with his political enemies. Much of the same arrogance and wishful thinking that was seen in India was mirrored by the same men–Irwin (Halifax), Hoare, and Simon–when dealing with Hitler a few years later. Personality as well as ideology surely played a role in British policies in India. This quibble aside, Muldoon has written an excellent volume that should be read by historians of India, Britain, and British imperialism. In using cultural scholarship to ask innovative questions about the India Act, Muldoon provides a new understanding for the context of the 1935 reforms and illustrates the gross inadequacies of the colonial state in this period. Ultimately, this study sheds important new light on the role of culture and perception in governing late imperial India.

Notes

[1]. Note by E. B. Howell, May 24, 1930, HOME (POL.) F. 206/1930, National Archives of India.

[2]. See Carl Bridge, *Holding India to the Empire: The British Conservative Party and the 1935 Constitution* (New York: Envoy Press, 1986), iii; R. J. Moore, *The Crisis of Indian Unity, 1917-1940* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1974).

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