

## T. Harry Williams Center for Oral History Collection

### Tape 859 Finding Aid

**INTERVIEWEE NAMES:**

Major General R.C.A. Edge, Mrs. Patricia Edge, Reverend John Debrett, Mrs. Diana Debrett

**COLLECTION:** 4700.0587 Tape 859 (Tape 1 of 3)

**IDENTIFICATION:** Britons in Pre-Independence India

**INTERVIEWERS:** Frank de Caro, Rosan Jordan

**SERIES:** British Voices from South Asia

**INTERVIEW DATES:** 3/31/1978

**TOTAL PLAYING TIME:** 1 hour, 33 minutes

**OTHER MATERIALS:** None

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### INDEX

#### Tape 859, Side A

#### Edges and Debretts (Part 1 of 5)

- 001 remembers sitting on the deck and seeing a fat man sitting in a deck chair sliding across the deck; then a large wave came and drenched them all with sea water
- 006 when they went below, they realized the porthole in one of the cabins had been broken and there was a large stream of water and glass flowing in; the partition had been bashed into the front door
- 011 the owners of the cabin, having left the baby in the cabin, came back to find the baby playing happily in his crib with a large chunk of glass
- 014 they then got stuck in the Suez Canal, causing some to speculate that the captain was drunk
- 018 he remembers the voyage home as one of the highlights of his life; he went out again when he was much older and took much less time
- 022 boats full of Italian soldiers were lined in the Suez Canal, and they would yell obscenities at them
- 024 at the Indian Office Library, there are a number of good books to read; they talk about the book *Diary of a Pilgrim in Search of a Picturesque*

031 after the war, the library of the [Oriental Cloud?] in London was destroyed; their friend was  
asked to rebuild it

039 when Ferguson's father retired from being governor of Burma, he came back and thought  
he should realize as many of his assets as he could for cash; took his full-dress uniform to  
Moss Bluff's and they said it was not very often that they get requests for the full-dress  
uniform for the governor of Burma and, therefore, could not offer him very much for it; he  
took the money they offered him and went home

050 two months later, an envelope with the royal household seal came, saying her majesty  
commanded him to attend an occasion of him handing over his duties as the governor of  
Burma; he went back to the store, only to have to pay the same amount he sold the dress for  
in order to hire it out

068 Ferguson was there for a long time; he stayed on in Pakistan, then to West Africa

074 when he went back to India as a soldier, the ships were very crowded because there was a  
crisis, but they were not crowded like ships in war; it was an anchor line that had been  
converted to a troop ship for that particular crisis

084 the boat was not a good troop ship because of the uncomfortable accommodations; they  
had to develop different schemes to get air down into the lower decks

087 the troops were not allowed to drink with the exception of a limited amount of beer; they  
had to sleep in hammocks; space was very short; spent all their time playing "housey,  
housey" otherwise known as bingo

099 in those days, you always went by troop ship; there was always a certain number that  
belonged to the troop ship;

102 the ship's padre pointed out everything on their journey

108 it was very enjoyable, but also very dramatic when approaching India by sea from the  
West; when coming from Calcutta, you did not see much until you arrived because it was  
all land

113 coming into Bombay, you would see a line of hills

115 trains in India were not of high value in those days because they moved very slowly;  
however, it allowed you the time to see the country

132 one's first journey was magnificent because the sun was setting in the west and you saw it  
lighting the Western Ghats as it set; Edge remembers sitting the entrance of the door, which  
was open, to admire the scenery with his legs hanging out of the train

142 arrived in the moonlight, which was very bright in India

154 one of the great things about India is that you received responsibilities very early, which  
was one of the attractions of the army; the first priority from day one was to learn the  
language

162 you were required to take two tests to check your ability to understand the language: the  
low test and the high test; you received an incentive after each test you passed; after the  
high test, you were considered to have enough understanding; for Edge, passing of the high  
test was mandatory before he could take command

167 even the women had to learn the language, because you missed too much if you did not

175 Edge would always say that learning a new language is very tedious work and the test of a  
good moonshee was that he did not fall asleep at the same moment that you did

180 children seemed to pick up the language quicker than the adults; they learned their nursery  
rhymes in the language

189 Oruro was the language you learned; it was written the wrong way (right to left)  
191 if a regiment was made mostly of Hindus, you learned Hindi, which went from left to right;  
most officers learned Oruro, which was read the opposite way  
211 sappers were complicated because, at the time, there were no purely Indian engineering  
units; there were three corps of sappers and all the troops were Indians while all the officers  
were British  
220 when they began to Indianize the Indian Army, they sent a certain number of Indians; there  
were two schools that trained officers  
228 the responsibility of defense was once broken down into two divisions: the Board of  
Ordinance, which ran one department, and the Commander and Chief, who ran everything  
else  
233 the Board of Ordinance dealt with such things as explosives, guns, bridges, roads, etc.  
236 after certain training regiment, the top people became sappers and the rest became gunners;  
no everyone preferred to be gunners, but you generally had to pass fairly high in order to  
become a sapper  
245 after training, you could apply to various postings; if you applied for India, you would  
receive British pay and be a British servant, but the unity was the Indian army  
255 looking at pictures  
272 they had a drawing room, bedroom, and bathroom; there was a brick floor and fireplace in  
the main room; each tent was a different room; there were brick standings, so you could  
pass from one tent to another and they were all attached  
290 when Edge was on the frontier, he was in the [?] Operation at the beginning of the war; it  
was name for the group of people that were becoming a problem  
296 discuss some of their pictures; discuss the different people in them  
312 Edge's wife was not born in India; her father was born in Burma, along with the rest of his  
family  
319 in her father's time, every regiment had one battalion abroad, like Egypt, China, or India,  
and one battalion in Britain  
323 practically anyone who had served time had been to India; the funny thing was that so  
much of the Hindustani was in the troops language; talk about the different Hindustani  
words and what they meant; they don't speak Hindustani much anymore because of the  
times  
344 she was in India because her father was stationed there; she went home and never went out  
with her parents again  
350 she tried to learn Arabic when she was in Aden, now South Yemen; had lived in the desert  
while in Aden in grass huts; she helped in some of the medical facilities on the lines  
378 in 1935, she rode with the Poona hunt when she was out there with her father; it was a big  
part of social life when it was in season, which lasted from June to about September; the  
governor would come up from Bombay and everything started then with dances and  
receptions  
410 there was not a large number of unmarried girls; if you had an unmarried daughter that was  
around marriage age, you were asked to all the social events at the governor's house  
424 the girls that came out from home for the season were known as the fishing fleet; all the  
men were suffering from frustration due to the lack of females; they would come out, stay a  
while, then go back home without husbands

- 435 when you came out, it was common undertaking for the girls to be married within a week;  
Edge once had to sign a form saying he would undertake having his sister married within a  
week, and if she was not, she would be sent back home
- 444 you were not allowed to be a “floating female” with no visible signs of support  
447 they knew nothing about Mrs. Simpson stuff; they were not even allowed to see some  
movies
- 465 the King died while they were in India; she remembers how awful it was having to wear  
black in the heat; it was the last half of January
- 492 there is a graveyard in [Arden?] that is full of the corpses of the company that took Aden  
for the East India Company
- 507 one of her tasks in India was collecting cemetery lists; the headstones were often very sad;  
the cemeteries were scattered throughout the country
- 518 the Arabs were using the cemetery in Aden as a latrine; when she returned home, she wrote  
to the governor, who was glad that someone else had taken a notice, and said he would do  
what he could to correct the mess
- 529 talk about the book *Two Monsoons*
- 540 in Poona at the end of the season was the cold, and all the soldiers and officers went into  
camp, leaving no one but the sick; in the cinema, which was a very popular place to go, was  
row and rows of “abandoned women”
- 552 one of the women shared her home with another abandoned wife;  
557 Edge’s parents lived in a haunted house; they all, independently, saw a ghost resembling a  
man with a striped blazer walking through the wall
- 581 one of the children they knew would always talk about the really nice black man that would  
come and talk to her, he was a ghost; children would take ghosts very normally
- 588 if you believed in things like ghosts, the best place to see them was the areas that played a  
specific role in the mutiny
- 603 in a little hill station about seven miles outside of Shimla produced a man . . .  
616 end of side A

### **Tape 859, Side B**

#### **Edges and Debretts (Part 3 of 5)**

- 001 relics are very respected because India loves its past; they have tried to get rid of the Queen  
Victoria statues, but they cannot because the locals will not let them
- 007 Anna Owens’s from “The King and I”, husband is supposedly buried at the Garrison  
Church in Poona
- 010 when she went to the church, she and her mother were amazed at young ages of the  
deceased; there were girls that were dying during child birth or soon after their babies died
- 015 India had become much more hygienic by the time they arrived; Egypt was far more  
unhealthy
- 020 you caught all kinds of things in Egypt; you could not even scratch yourself without getting  
some sort of infection or disease
- 021 they do not remember getting sick at all in India
- 022 the cold weather was very enjoyable and you did not mind being outside; the hot weather  
was terrible
- 031 there were always a certain number of suicides in the rainy season

032 they would sometimes get twelve inches of rain in one weekend, and everything would  
steam and become mildewed; servant would hang all of you leather possessions around the  
charcoal fireplace because it would have green mold

041 everything would become moldy very fast; if you did not use your riding boots on Saturday  
or Sunday, they would be full of mold on Monday

044 terrible insects

047 everything seems so much nicer in retrospect; one would say it really is not as nice as you  
think; for most people, it was nice

051 Edge went back for a short time in 1968; got stomach flu; all hotels in India are  
indescribable now

062 she never remembers loathing India, nor for Egypt

066 the urban areas are much bigger now; out in the country, everything is still the same; there  
are noticeably more people in the country now though

072 Edge noticed that the educated Indian woman was much more liberated; women were  
going to cocktails on his visit in 1968, which was unheard of the time before

079 [Parses?] took the name of their trade; gives examples

087 [cotwallas?] were always trying to get an English husband; they would go to the races  
wearing either strong colors or pale colors, which were very beautiful; they would group  
together, a mother and two others; otherwise known as the “three graces”

097 Edge thought that pure Indians, on the whole, were very beautiful; Parses were more  
Persian, but not pure Persian

109 they all owned mongooses; some were not interested in killing snakes

118 Edge owned a cat that would kill the snakes

122 if you were bitten by a krait and received a full dose, you were expected to live for fifteen  
minutes; it has an antidote now

125 watched a cobra being charmed out of some type of enclosing; snake charming actually  
does work; snake charmer would come to the compound with his flute and charm the  
snakes out of the houses

132 snake charmers never killed the snakes because they were essential for their jobs; would  
carry the snakes around in baskets and make them perform

144 around your bungalow was gravel; they would build snake-proof runways outside for your  
bathrooms

155 cobras were considered to be the sociable snakes and still are; they liked to give you  
company

156 Nanny got into bed one night, only to realize there was a cobra in there with her; she laid  
there until the cobra found itself out

165 Nanny was subject to sleep walking

177 ceilings were burlap-like, stretched very tightly and white washed; one the first night of the  
monsoon, you have to go around with cans and buckets trying to catch the dripping water;  
you could see the footprints of whatever had walked across the ceiling

182 the mongoose would sleep on the ceiling and come down in the evenings; she would go  
crazy for a piece of chocolate; she would hide under the side board and scare the servants  
on their way to serve the food; was not interested in snakes because she was so well fed

210 a mongoose looks like a large, grey weasel; very intelligent

212 servants were not too keen on idea of mongoose constantly biting them on their heels

- 217 talk about snakes
- 227 Edge had deer as a child; it wondered around the garden; it was always best to not catch and tame a wild animal
- 238 in the mountains, there was always a panther scare
- 246 the escorts that were meant to be protection from the panthers disappeared when a black shape jumped from behind a wall, it was her dog
- 254 in [Peranda?], they were instructed not to go on certain paths because of the increased risks of running into a panther
- 263 getting back to Nanny sleepwalking; they woke in camp one morning and Nanny could only find one of her slippers. They went down to the river where they normally went and found the other slipper underneath a rock. Nanny had gone to kill the tiger that was known to be in that area to protect them
- 291 one of the servants used to have a baby panther; during the monsoon, the panther would hide in the tall grass and stalk you as you walked; it would play with the dogs; they were forced to get rid of it after it clawed the face of a sergeant's greyhound
- 313 it is said that you cannot trust a panther
- 322 talk about women being given guns, sometimes by strangers
- 361 India was the safest place you could be; no one ever locked their doors
- 387 Indians were very honest people
- 390 during the early part of the war, Edge was walking towards his office one morning when he heard a man running up behind him; the man was running to return Edge's wallet after it had fell out of his pocket; there were 200 rupees in his wallet
- 421 Spanish were the same way; some of their friends had went into Spain, and after switching drivers, realized they had lost their wallet with everything in it; to drop your wallet was a misfortune and you were able to get it back; however, if you left your wallet and locked the door, it would have been stolen
- 434 Indian standards of honesty were different
- 435 Edge's bearer would take the loose change Edge would put on the table when he would go to change clothes; the bearer would hide the change under a handkerchief to avoid it being stolen; after a few days of leaving change on the counter, he would pull it out of his pocket and tell Edge to be more careful; at the third stage, the bearer would tell Edge that India was full of dishonest people and to be very careful
- 486 You would ask your cook to do all the shopping for you; one man's long-time servant was adding charges to the bills in order to make more money. When confronted, the man told the servant to estimate how much money the servant would make and the man would increase his pay by that much. As the weeks progressed, the servant became more and more sad. When the man asked what was wrong, the servant asked for a decrease in pay because it was not fun and there was no more interest.
- 531 talk about the one Indian that they watched coming home from a bazaar with the supplies to make chokers and then sell them
- 546 everyone's honesty has a certain level
- 581 talk about someone's boyfriend, who is old enough to be her father
- 609 talk about the channel BBC
- 614 end of tape