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‘This book’, writes Jeffrey A. Auerbach in his Introduction to Imperial Boredom, ‘is very much about how people felt’ [his italics]. As such, it takes its place in a growing body of scholarship that explores through individual lives the mind-set that underpinned the empire project, both individually and on a collective level. Whilst there has long been an ample literature on the ‘Victorian frame of mind’ – the title of Walter E. Houghton’s seminal examination of the topic, first published in 1957 – it has only featured recently in post-colonial studies. Catherine Hall has argued, for example, that understanding the mind of Thomas Babington Macaulay is fundamental to an understanding of imperialism and its development.[1] Closely connected to the history of emotions, the subject presents particular methodological challenges: how should the feelings of individuals be assessed and measured; how much weight should be placed on what they wrote in their diaries and journals, given the different ways in which people perceived and used language to record their feelings; how can the results be brought together within a framework that yields meaningful conclusions as opposed to simply a collection of interesting anecdotes?

Focussing on the British Empire from the early 19th century until its demise, Auerbach has chosen an ambitious canvas on which to address these issues and has produced an engaging and highly readable study of a complex subject. If it does not wholly succeed, it is not for lack of material – the work is carefully-researched and, packed with examples gleaned from a mass of published and un-published sources, it covers a wide spectrum, albeit with some surprising omissions. However, whilst he demonstrates that much of empire life was monotonous (as indicated by the book’s sub-title), to my mind, he is too quick to infer that this monotony necessarily gave rise to feelings of ‘imperial boredom’, properly so-called. He also too easily assumes that, where people were bored, this could only operate in a negative way and, whilst he may be right in concluding that, ultimately, ‘the British were, quite simply bored by their empire’, he fails to draw the evidence together to explore what impact imperial boredom had on the development of empire, for better or worse, during the long 19th century.

Precision in language and terminology is essential and Auerbach begins by setting out what he means by boredom. Adopting Patricia Meyer Spacks’ approach, he points out that the term first came into use in the mid-18th century. This does not mean that nobody previously suffered from boredom, but that, with the Enlightenment’s emphasis on the individual, this was when the feeling first became conceptualised. Like Spacks, he distinguishes boredom from 19th-century ‘ennui’ or existential world-weariness and also from monotony, which has a much longer history. Whilst a monotonous activity or experience may generate a feeling of boredom, it will not necessarily do so. The two terms must, therefore, not be equated. Significantly, in a footnote, Auerbach cites a passage from Fanny Burney, in which an individual is described as ‘monotonous and tiresome’ but, as he emphasises, ‘not boring’. To prevent confusion, the term ‘boring’ is best avoided when describing an
activity or experience because this is to beg the question as to whether it
does in fact generate feelings of boredom in a particular person.
How then should this state of mind be assessed and what should be seen
as the symptoms of imperial boredom? As Auerbach acknowledges,
boredom ‘is not a simple emotion, but rather a complex constellation of
reactions’. Building on that approach, he says ‘imperial boredom’
reflected ‘a sense of dissatisfaction and disenchantment with the
immediate and the particular, and at times with the enterprise of empire
more broadly’. If this tends to mix cause and effect, the idea of
dissatisfaction and disenchantment essentially mirrors Spacks’ definition
of the symptoms of boredom, namely, ‘the incapacity to engage fully: with
people, with action, with one’s own ideas’. ‘Imperial boredom’, therefore,
was more than a fleeting moment of irritation with a particular situation
or person and reflected a mind-set that derived from, and in turn, further
contributed to, a sense of disillusionment with the overall project.
It stemmed, so Auerbach argues, from the marked contrast between how
empire was represented and how it turned out to be, between ‘the
fantasy and the reality’. ‘Empire was constructed as a place of adventure,
excitement and picturesque beauty’ but too often lacked these features.
Nowhere is this better described than in George Orwell’s Burmese Days,
in which the promising young John Flory has become ‘yellow, thin,
drunken almost middle-aged’. Beginning with this illustration, Auerbach
argues that historians have too often overlooked this essential aspect of
empire and sets out to discover the extent to which it was characteristic
of what Flory called the ‘Pox Britannica’ more generally.
Whilst Voyages, the subject of the opening chapter, may be the logical
starting-point, it presents particular problems. They may have been
monotonous, but it is unlikely that they would have engendered feelings
of disenchantment and disillusion at the outset of an empire life or
career. Auerbach begins with the somewhat surprising assertion that ‘not
until the first half of the 19th century did long-distance ocean travel
become truly monotonous’, arguing that this was because, until then, the
weather had been ‘a source of danger and discomfort’ whereas, by the
mid-19th century, ‘it was barely worth mentioning’. Leaving aside the
obvious difficulties with that approach – many 19th-century travellers,
assuming they survived, described enduring terrifying typhoons in the
Indian Ocean and South China Sea – voyages certainly could be
monotonous, particularly, when steam replaced sail.
However, his assertion that this ‘helped to produce feelings of boredom
that had never been felt before’ is more questionable. For example,
whilst Sir Edmund Fremantle (1836–1929) wrote in his memoirs that,
although the sea passages were ‘monotonous’, ‘it never occurred to [him]
to be bored’, Auerbach suggests that, ‘in several places his memories
[sic] belie his claims’, in that they refer to the ‘the monotony’ of various
experiences, including cruising out of harbour under steam rather than
under sail, which ‘always possessed some interest’. But, this not only
contradicts what Fremantle wrote but also equates boredom with
monotony and, thus, deprives it of any proper meaning. Similarly,
because the Royal Naval Surgeon, Edward Cree (1814–1901) recorded
his passing the time ‘reading, drawing, walking on deck, eating drinking and sleeping’, Auerbach concludes that ‘almost every leg of his 1839 journey to the East was boring or disappointing’. However, he omits the opening words of this journal entry which reads, ‘making but slow progress towards China. Weather intolerably hot ... The time passes pleasantly enough on board’ [my italics]’, which suggests he was certainly not bored.[2] Much of this chapter is not concerned with monotony but with how ‘dreadful’ sea voyages could be, particularly, for travellers to Australia, most of all transported convicts, who, as he shows, had to endure the most brutal conditions. But they had no expectations of empire and this seems to add little to the understanding of imperial boredom.

It may well be that, because voyages were so unpleasant, travellers became all the more expectant and thus disappointed, when, on arriving, they found, as Auerbach argues in the next chapter, that much of the landscape was dreary and uninteresting. Moreover, many could not decide whether they were in search of a landscape that was picturesque and exotic or ‘normalised’ by reproducing English architecture, gardens and surroundings. This dichotomy generated further disenchantment. If Auerbach dwells too long on obscure painters who often had little success in making these imperial landscapes picturesque, there is no doubt that many of them were monotonous, not least the vast tracts of Australian out-back. Consequently, whilst ‘the early empire may have been about wonder and marvel, the 19th century was a far less exciting and satisfying project’ and this contributed to feelings of boredom. The next chapter, ‘Governors’, essentially covers the administration of the empire. Here, there was also a lot of monotony, although Auerbach wavers between whether this was caused by having too much or too little work to do. Either way, it leads to the assertion that ‘throughout the nineteenth century and into the twentieth, British imperial administrators at all levels were bored by their experience, serving king or queen and country’. However, this is qualified in the next paragraph, in which he cites the Marquess of Hastings, who served in India in the early 1800s, and Lord Curzon, who served as Viceroy at the end of the century, neither of whom, he says, suffered from boredom. It was ‘during the middle decades, that imperial service was far less stimulating’ but he does not explain why it should have been limited to this particular phase. Indeed, in terms of the staggering quantity of paper generated by the ICS, the problem stretched back to the early 18th century.

Whilst it is fruitless to exchange examples of officials who did and did not find government service boring, some of those chosen by Auerbach are not convincing. James Pope Hennessy, for example, the eccentric Irishman who delighted in antagonising the colonials and endearing himself to the indigenous people with his unconventional views on racial equality, certainly found the European life-style monotonous but, as a result, made sure he kept ceaselessly active. In the words of his biographer, ‘the chief impression [he] made on British and Orientals alike was one of superlative vitality. “He would do better”, wrote Sir Harry Parkes “if he had less life”’. [3] Coming from Parkes, that arch-
imperialist, who allegedly died from over-work and could never have been bored, the comment is telling.

Whilst these officials may have become disenchanted, it is unclear what sort of mind-set they had when they started out: according to Auerbach, ‘they may well have entered imperial service out of a sense of duty, or perhaps looking forward to a colonial sinecure that offered status and adventure as well as a generous salary, but instead found themselves inundated by a volume of paperwork and official obligations that they had never anticipated, and which they found to be, quite frankly boring’. As a result, they were ‘eager to escape the tedium of the empire they had built’. Whilst this suggests that, as a result, they threw up their empire careers, the example of Sir Frank Swettenham does not seem to fit the picture. He may have found life from time to time ‘extraordinarily dull’, but he continued as a government official in the Malay States for thirty years, before retiring in 1901. His belief in the imperial cause seems to have overcome the dullness and trumped any possible disenchantment.

Turning to Soldiers, Auerbach concedes that ‘the link between military service and boredom can be traced at least to the mid-eighteenth century’. However, he argues, what was different in the 19th century was that boredom was no longer simply ‘incidental or ‘peripheral;’ it was ‘omnipresent’ and this was ‘a function of unmet expectations’, namely, the unsatisfied thirst for action and bloody combat as the ‘small wars’ of the Victorian age became shorter and fewer. However, citing Maeland and Brunstad’s *Enduring Military Boredom*, he concedes that this omnipresent boredom is a ‘condition that persists to the present day, especially among enlisted men’. This, therefore, divests it of any imperial character and suggests that it was, and remains a feature of modern military service. Nonetheless, it would have been interesting to know how this boredom affected the performance of the military in the context of empire. Certainly, it gave rise to some of its more unsavoury aspects, with drunken soldiers brawling and beating up the locals and spending much of their time in the local brothels. According to Richard Holmes, by 1899, there was ‘a real crisis’ in the infection rates of venereal disease of British soldiers in the Indian Army: ‘for every genteel bungalow on the cantonment … there were a dozen young men, denizens of a wholly different world, crossing the cultural divide every night’. Here was imperial boredom in the raw and urgent measures had to be taken to abate its consequences.[4]

Although the final chapter is entitled ‘Settlers’, it encompasses a much broader category of imperial agents, including women, who until this point have been little-mentioned, and, in particular, women in India ‘most of whom went there in their early twenties to work (or to accompany their husbands who were working) and then typically left by the time they reached their fifties to retire in Britain’. It is unclear why these women and, indeed the whole topic of women in empire, should be subsumed under this chapter heading, given their importance in the empire project and the attention given to them in post-colonial scholarship.
As Helen Callaway has shown, empire women have been frequently misrepresented and lampooned in the literature, including the novels of E. M. Forster and George Orwell and ‘all too often reincarnated as representing the worst side of the ruling group - its racism, petty snobbishness and pervading aura of superiority’ and shown as ‘shallow, self-centred and pre-occupied with maintaining the hierarchy of their narrow social worlds’. Whilst she does not use the term, they have invariably been portrayed as both bored and boring.[5] Despite citing Callaway in the bibliography, Auerbach effectively reiterates the trope which her work challenges, by including a clichéd illustration of a female, reclining aimlessly on a chaise longue (1863), conjuring up the familiar image of ‘the same women [who] met day after day to eat the same meals and exchange the same banal pleasantries’ and concluding that ‘it was not only in India that women were bored, which suggests that the phenomenon was not a localised one, but a broader imperial one’. Of course many western women did find life in empire monotonous and suffered from boredom, if not depression, and no doubt many were insufferable, as were their husbands, but there is an alternative image and the analysis is so generalised that their contribution is, once again, in danger of being dismissed out of hand. A more nuanced approach would have examined ways in which women overcame their boredom by pursuing activities in which they were anything but bored, including, most obviously, the missions, a category which, despite its importance, does not feature, save for one cursory comment to the effect that, ‘even missionary women, whose sense of purpose presumably kept them inspired, could find themselves bored’. The example given is that of Elizabeth Lees Price, who, at one point during her eventful life, had to help run three schools for 30,000 pupils. But, just because her diary recorded ‘with increasing frequency’ the comment ‘nothing has happened’, it seems a stretch to infer, as Auerbach does, that ‘not even missionary work was enough to stave off the boredom that afflicted women all across the empire’. This insistence on the all-pervasiveness of imperial boredom seems to be over-stated and undermines the otherwise plausible argument that the empire was over-sold in the literature, and was frequently far less exciting and fulfilling in reality and that this could lead to profound disillusion, particularly where other aspects of life were also unsatisfactory. There were, thus, many Conradian figures, holed up, with or without their wives and children in remote out-stations, who had long since given up believing in the imperial cause and become disenchanted and bored with the whole exercise. However, it would have been interesting to have had more information on how they did or did not cope and how this affected the development of empire more generally. Plagued by ill-health, some fell into eccentric habits, alcoholism and treating ‘the natives’ in a high-handed fashion. Their work may also have suffered, leading to wider repercussions. But many others were able to withstand the monotony and, for some, boredom or, more accurately, the fear of boredom, could be a force for good.
Quoting Bertrand Russell’s observation that boredom has been ‘one of the great motive powers throughout the historical epoch’, Spacks refers to the anthropologist, Ralph Linton, who hypothesised that ‘the human capacity for being bored ... lies at the root of man’s cultural advance’. Seeing the empire in these terms suggests that administrators may have created the vast paper bureaucracy that they did as a way of staving off boredom. As official papers in the National Archives amply demonstrate, many imperial officials revelled in drafting and transmitting voluminous reports to London. And for those who found such deskwork insufficient solace, there was the opportunity to explore, the archives of the Royal Geographical Society being filled with the journals, diaries and photographs of ‘ordinary’ men and women, who avoided boredom with their ceaseless trekking, surveying, mapping and recording in ways which undoubtedly contributed to the shaping of empire.

Whilst many individuals may have found life monotonous and debilitating, this may only have become a significant collective problem when those sorts of outlet became inadequate. As imperial rivalry intensified towards the end of the century, so did the quest for new ways of staving off boredom, not only for men in the British Empire but also for those in the other European empires, and war was one of the most obvious solutions. As Jorg Kustermans and Erik Ringmar have argued, what they were seeking was ‘everything the nineteenth century, in its drawn-out tedium, had denied them. War was going to empower them [and] restore a sense of agency to their limbs and lives’. Auerbach refers to what Graham Dawson has called ‘the pleasure culture of war’, citing the example of Adrian de Wiart who, serving in the Boer War, knew ‘once and for all, that war was in my blood. I was determined to fight and I didn’t mind who or what’. But he does not explore the consequences of this mood further, other than to say that these adventurers also ‘ended up bored ... and disillusioned’. But, the implications were, arguably, much more far-reaching. Even if it was not directly causative, this mood was ‘permissive’ of the more direct causes and certainly formed part of the background against which Europe went to war in 1914. It may be thought that it did so in a fit of imperial boredom.

Whatever the merits of this argument, it highlights the significance of this study, which, for all my reservations, is stimulating and thought-provoking and raises issues that need to be explored further. The concept of imperial boredom provides a novel and illuminating lens through which to examine the mind-set of men and women working and living in empire, how it was that, despite the crushing monotony, so many persisted in the endeavour and what this tells us about the empire project more generally.

Notes
Author's Response

Andrew Hillier’s main concern about my book – which he otherwise finds to be ‘engaging’, ‘readable’, ‘carefully-researched’, ‘stimulating’, ‘thought-provoking’, and ‘illuminating’ – seems to be that I was ‘too quick to infer that … monotonity necessarily gave rise to feelings of “imperial boredom”’. Readers of the book will have to judge for themselves, but when, for example, Henry Keene, a longtime East India Company official, recalls in his memoirs that ‘Nothing can be duller than a long sea-voyage’, or when Anna Maria Falconbridge writes that ‘The novelty of a ship plowing the trackless ocean, in a few days became quite familiar to me; there was such a sameness in everything… that I found the voyage tiresome’, it’s pretty clear they felt bored. Likewise for comments such as the following from mid-19th century emigrants to Australia, who suffered terrible boredom on their 100-day ocean odyssey: ‘Monotony and dullness’, ‘Monotonous in the extreme;’ ‘Nothing worth mentioning except sky and water and water and sky’. Or, as Anna Cook put it in 1883 in one of her letters en route to Rockhampton, ‘Every day is pretty much the same … All the women say the time hangs so heavily on their hands – they have nothing to do’. I feel very comfortable asserting that these travelers were bored.

As for governors and imperial officials, they too were clearly bored, from William Bentinck, who said so explicitly – ‘Boredom with the overwhelming load of uninteresting business’ – to Lord Dufferin, who said as much without using that exact word when he declared, ‘Dulness [sic] is the central characteristic of an Indian viceroy’s life’. Other bored administrators included General Wolseley, who wrote to his wife about ‘the dullness of each day’, to William Denison who in 1863 complained, ‘My life here [in India] is monotonous’. As to why imperial service became more boring during the middle decades of the 19th century, there were many reasons, but my book is very clear that imperial administration became considerably more bureaucratic during this period. Whereas the early-19th century Colonial Office was tiny, by 1871 there were 67 men working there, of whom one-quarter were copyists; the previous year the office sent or received some 26,000 dispatches, letters, and telegrams. Still, I take to heart Hillier’s concern that just because someone says their work was monotonous does not necessarily mean that they were bored, although when Meadows Taylor, who served as Superintendent of Bazaars near Hyderabad in the 1840s, regulating
grain prices, inspecting meat, and making daily reports, blurted out, ‘Of course it was monotonous. What Indian staff appointment, with a daily routine of work, is not?’ it seems pretty clear that he was bored, at least with that aspect of his life.

Hillier also criticizes my decision not to devote an entire chapter to the experiences of women, and claims that up until the last chapter women are ‘little-mentioned’. In fact, the experiences of women on board ships figures prominently in the chapter on voyages, and the obvious reason why I did not include women in the chapters on governors and soldiers is that women did not serve as governors or soldiers! As for why women did not receive an entire chapter of their own, one of the arguments of my book is that when it comes to imperial boredom, the experiences of men and women were substantially the same. In addition, Hillier accuses me of reiterating the trope of the bored and boring memsahib, suggesting that ‘a more nuanced approach would have examined ways in which women overcame their boredom by pursuing activities in which they were anything but bored’. Indeed, I do just that in my discussion of Julia Maitland, who, with her husband helped run a Christian school for boys and was involved in famine relief, and Lady Dufferin, who founded the National Association for Supplying Female Medical Aid to the Women of India, later known as the Countess of Dufferin Fund, to recruit and train female doctors, nurses, and midwives.

But the evidence overwhelmingly suggests that women were bored all across the empire, from Emily Eden in India who complained about the ‘dull’ and ‘fatiguing’ days that became so endless she eventually lost track of time, to Emily Innes in the Malay States who recalled that ‘There were ... many hours during which we either had nothing to do or could do nothing’, to Mary Mowle, an Australian settler who wrote in her diary in 1850, ‘The same old story... the same routine... What a life to lead, what a waste of existence’, to Emmeline Lott, who was employed as the governess to Isma’il Pasha’s son in Egypt and grumbled about the ‘irksome monotony’ of her ‘daily life’ which ‘produced a most unpleasant feeling’ in her mind, to Ethel Berry who followed her husband to the British Yukon and wrote about how ‘There was nothing, absolutely nothing to do’ except sit at home and stare out the window, day after day. While Hillier is correct in observing that imperial writers only occasionally used the term ‘boredom’ – although some did – my book demonstrates quite clearly that during the 19th century a rhetoric of boredom developed to describe what increasing numbers of men and women were feeling, and that words such as ‘dull’, ‘tedious’, ‘uninteresting’, and ‘monotonous’ not only expressed dissatisfaction with present circumstances, but were in fact veiled confessions of discontent with the empire itself. Moreover, this widespread and pervasive boredom had very real consequences, from drunkenness, desertion, and suicide among soldiers who could go decades without being involved in a single skirmish; to administrators who took earlier retirement or requested transfers from out-of-the-way locations where they felt lonely or isolated; to the tens of thousands of would-be emigrants who were so dissatisfied – in many cases, bored – with their lives overseas that they returned to
Britain; to the numerous men and women whose boredom led them to confess their loss of faith in the imperial mission. The empire’s early years may have been about wonder and marvel, but the Victorian Empire was a far less exciting project, with implications not just for our understanding of the British Empire, but for how we think about boredom, one of the quintessential modern emotions.