

FREEDOM AT MIDNIGHT

I. UNGOVERNABLE INDIA

Wavell

When Linlithgow went, Field-Marshal Viscount Wavell replaced him.

A kind, generous man, with real humor – and a real talent for losing...

the general who presided over the collapse of British power in the Far East during the war

the general who very nearly lost the Middle East to Rommel.

and DID lose Greece and Crete

Putting him in charge of India seemed inspired.

At least it would keep him out of some command that would lose England the war!

Wavell had many fine qualities.

He'd written a good scholarly biography of General Allenby.

He had lectured at Cambridge.

He knew plenty of English verse by heart, and he wrote parody poetry.

There was no vanity in him, no hogging of glory, no bullying of

subordinates.¹

Much clearer than the Conservatives running things back in London, he saw that independence **MUST** come.

All a Viceroy could do was ease the way.

But that easing was far beyond his skills, or anyone's.

Congress insisted that it spoke for all India and must rule the whole subcontinent.

In fact, it spoke for the Hindus, nobody else – and the thought of Hindu control scared Moslems more than ever.

They listened to Mohammed Ali Jinnah, who with his linen suits and monocle might have been a proper English gent, and was the most adamant of all Moslems.

What he wanted was a separate state for the 90 million Muslims.

It would be named for the provinces that ought to belong to it:

P for the Punjab

A for the Afghan areas along the northwestern frontiers

¹ Jan Morris, *Farewell the Trumpets*, 480.

K for Kashmir
S for the Sind
... Pakistan.

And “PAK”, in religion, meant pure – the perfect name for an imperfect new Dominion.²

Gandhi argued that India should be made independent, and Pakistan could come into being after that –

which Jinnah didn't fall for, not for a minute.

The moment the Hindus had their run of the house, they'd lock all the doors and keep the Muslims from getting out.

He wanted India partitioned first, and made independent next.

But there were other tanglements in all directions.

Sikhs talked about a state all their own, Sikhistan.

The 595 princes of petty states didn't want to go into some big, conglomerated country called India.

They had got along very well with a British overlord, and wanted to stay that way.³

Besides, if Hindus and Moslems made Dominions all their own, what would happen to the Moslem prince of a Hindu Domain – like Hyderabad? Or a Hindu prince over a Moslem domain – like Kashmir?

² Jan Morris, *Farewell the Trumpets*, 482.

³ Jan Morris, *Farewell the Trumpets*, 482.

The war ended, and the wrangling went on, year after year.

And as it did, Wavell could feel British power slip-sliding away.

By 1946, the Indian army was so close to mutiny that it no longer could be used to put down unrest.

The Indian Navy actually did mutiny.

Recruiting back in Britain for the civil service or the police had stopped in wartime.

Now all those institutions were hollow shells – or machinery running on chewing gum and rubber bands.

You couldn't trust the Indian constabulary any more.

As Hindu and Moslem started killing each other,
Moslem cops weren't going to arrest Moslems

Hindu cops would just as soon turn guns on
Moslem victims as Hindu rioters.

There were strikes and riots – and not a thing could be done to stop them.

India was drifting towards crisis.

“We shall have India divided or we shall have India destroyed,”
Jinnah wrote, who added that Pakistan was worth
taking 10 million Muslim lives.⁴

“I tell the British, give us chaos!” Gandhi pleaded.⁵

He should have been satisfied.

In August 1946, Calcutta got a taste of just what chaos
meant. Religious riots between Hindus and Moslems
killed five thousand people in one day –

and any hopes of a unified state where Muslim and
Hindu could live together.

Wavell worked, more and more desperately.

⁴ Lawrence James, **Raj**, 607.

⁵ Jan Morris, *Farewell the Trumpets*, 483.

Could power be handed over to India, one province at a time?⁶

Could some gradual surrender of certain functions let power slip peaceably?

Or was the only solution to GIVE India chaos – to just pick up and get out, lock, stock and Union Jack?

Nothing seemed to work.

In the end, the new Labour government back home gave him his walking-papers.

Mountbatten

⁶ Lawrence James, **Raj**, 606-07. The plan would be to have a phased withdrawal from India, starting at the southern end. This would leave the Congress party in control of Hindustan, states with a Hindu majority. British control would stay alive and well in the northern and eastern areas, where Moslems predominated. In essence, this was the same as partition – with British rule over Pakistan and those parts of India where Moslem and Hindu so mixed that you couldn't separate them without ethnic cleansing.

Trust to the party of the working class to choose a peer of the bluest blood in Wavell's place.

For the Earl of Mountbatten had a pedigree even Derby winners would envy.

Victoria's great-grandson

Second cousin to George VI

born a Battenberg (they changed the name to something less German during World War I)⁷

He was a distinctly upper-class act.

When he married, the Prince of Wales was his best man.

The Sunday papers had pictures of him ...

playing polo

waterskiing,

or accepting a trophy

or attending the theater along with Noel Coward

⁷ His ancestors and relatives therefore included Czar Nicholas II, Alfonso XIII of Spain, Ferdinand I of Romania, Gustav VI of Sweden, Constantine I of Greece, Haakon VII of Norway, and Alexander I of Yugoslavia – not to mention Kaiser Wilhelm II. See Larry Collins and Dominique LaPierre, *Freedom At Midnight*, 46.

Truly the Playboy of the Western World.

But at the same time, a talented naval officer.

The wireless radio manual the Navy used, he had written.

... the first of its kind

He found the best anti-aircraft gun in the world, the one surest to stop Stuka dive-bombers –

and after months of pushing, got the Royal Navy to use it.

He even designed a better polo stick.

And wrote a textbook about the game.

When his ship, the *Kelly*, was torpedoed under him, and went down in minutes, he stood at the bridge, till the hulk rolled over, and then swam through oil-covered waters to the life-raft, keeping up the survivors' spirits by choruses of "Roll Out the Barrel."

(Noel Coward turned it into the most popular British movie of the war, *In Which We Serve* – with himself as the Mountbatten character).⁸

Supreme commander of South East Asia in the war, one of the greatest generals of the last year of fighting⁹

⁸ Larry Collins and Dominique LaPierre, *Freedom At Midnight*, 49-50.

⁹ Larry Collins and Dominique LaPierre, *Freedom At Midnight*, 47-51.

... and, but for the grace of the Atomic Bomb, the leader of a planned Southeast Asian D-Day, Operation Zipper, where a quarter million men would land on the Malayan peninsula and take it back.

And, better still, he was friendly to the Labour party's notions. On Empire, he was far from Churchillian.

He was openly sympathetic to nationalist movements in southeastern Asia.

And when Britain handed countries back, he meant to be darned sure that they were handed back to the people, not to the landowners and industrialists.

By the time he came to India, he had tried out what worked and what didn't, in Burma.

There, he had backed one of the anti-colonial leaders

Aung Sun by name – whose hatred of the empire made him into an ally of the Japanese during the war, and then, when the Japanese started treating Burma like a colony of their own, turned into a fighter against Japan.

British colonial officials were appalled.

– back a Quisling, a collaborator?

But the home authorities backed up Mountbatten, and Burma got not just the chance to rule itself, but the chance to leave the Commonwealth entirely.

As a result, when Burma wanted to write up a new constitution, it looked to the Dominions Office to offer it models to draw on.

It was a smooth transition – couldn't have been smoother – except, of course, for the assassination of the entire Burmese Cabinet, Aung Sung included, three months before Burma came into its own.

He came to India with special powers to settle matters.

And with a timetable. The Prime Minister had agreed that the Raj must end by June 1948 – one way or another.

“All this is yours,” he told Gandhi, when Gandhi asked him one day if he could take a stroll through the Viceregal gardens.

“We are only trustees. We have come to make it over to you.”¹⁰

Clearly, the British had thrown their bargaining power away.

Both sides could dig in their heels till the deadline expired.

That gave Mountbatten a certain trustiness.

¹⁰ Jan Morris, *Farewell the Trumpets*, 485.

Whatever Hindu and Muslim thought, they couldn't imagine that his real aim was PREVENT them coming to a deal, so that Britain would have the excuse for sticking around.

What did the Earl want?

- an India that would stay in the Commonwealth, if he could
- and that meant an India with no reason to take offense at the deal that Britain offered her
- ideally, a united India, with Hindus and Moslems sharing power

But if he couldn't get that, then what he wanted was as peaceful a division as possible.

In his first two months in India, Mountbatten held 133 interviews with India's leaders, and always with the same frankness and readiness to accommodate.

He did something no Viceroy ever did. Instead of summoning leaders into his presence, he went calling –

stepping into the midst of a garden party and shaking hands.

To get both sides in a brighter mood, he even committed an atrocity: painting the dark, rich woodwork of his office with a light-colored paint!¹¹

¹¹ Larry Collins and Dominique LaPierre, *Freedom At Midnight*, 93-94.

In the end, though, only four men really counted:

Mountbatten
Gandhi
Mohammed Ali Jinnah
Gandhi's fellow-worker, Nehru.¹²

Mountbatten found the first two of them pretty exasperating.

He could see the awe for Gandhi, all right – and appreciate the saintly qualities.

But there were so many times when it became plain
why the one thing most folks want to do with
saints is make them into martyrs.

The old man's ideas of what must be done ranged
between metaphysics and fantasy.

Jinnah was flinty and unyielding.

Mountbatten didn't know – nobody did – that he was
in great pain. He had tuberculosis. His doctor
gave him only months – perhaps a year or two

¹² Jan Morris, *Farewell the Trumpets*, 485-86.

– to live.¹³

He wanted a separate country, his Pakistan, and would have it.

To get it, he only had to keep talking till the deadline came and there was no Raj left to stop him.¹⁴

There was no reasoning with him, and no argument he would listen to. The Muslim League would have a nation all its own, if it had to be the deserts of Sind and nothing beyond.

In time, Mountbatten saw what had been obvious for years

¹³ Larry Collins and Dominique LaPierre, *Freedom at Midnight*, 124-26.

¹⁴ Larry Collins and Dominique LaPierre, *Freedom At Midnight*, 117-20.

(to everybody but Gandhi):¹⁵

No united country was possible.

Partition would happen – peacefully, perhaps, with a war, perhaps –
but it would happen.

Every day, the British army in India fell further apart.

The police found themselves less and less able to keep
order

British officials were slipping away, knowing their time was
just about up.

The Raj couldn't last even till mid-1948.

Any deal must happen soon. In fact, it must happen NOW.

Two Dominions would be set up.

They would be independent immediately.

No interim government would tide them over.

The Sind and Baluchistan were Moslem, and would become
western Pakistan.¹⁶

¹⁵ Gandhi, indeed, assured Mountbatten that he could get the Congress party to agree to an unpartitioned India, with a share of the power for Jinnah. To his sorrow, he found that he couldn't deliver. Nehru, too, wanted a united India, but not iff it meant power for Jinnah. And Gandhi, wisely, saw that partition would mean violence. Nehru refused to think it certain. Larry Collins and Dominique LaPierre, *Freedom At Midnight*, 112-114.

¹⁶ Jan Morris, *Farewell the Trumpets*, 487-88.

But the Punjab and Bengal had as many Hindus as Moslems.

Both of those provinces would be split up, and the Moslem part of Bengal would become east Pakistan, separated from its fellow-countrymen by a thousand miles of Subcontinent.

Princely states would have the option of joining either of the new Dominions.

Whatever assets British India had – army, treasury, stamps in the Post Office – would be split up fairly.

Both Congress and the Muslim League accepted the settlement, and Mountbatten announced the final day: August 15th, 1947... 73 days away.¹⁷

(and, not by chance, the second anniversary of the Japanese surrender.)

¹⁷ Larry Collins and Dominique LaPierre, *Freedom at Midnight*, 201-02. Mountbatten had forgotten to consult the astrologers, who had great clout in India, and they were furious. Fridays were bad days in general, and this one was so bad, they warned, that rather than accept it, the people of India should accept British rule.

Under some calculations, August 15th lay under the Zodiac sign for Capricorn. That sign was known for its hostility to all centrifugal – pulling-apart – forces. Therefore, it was the worst possible day to do a partition. And on that day, India would be passing through the influence of Saturn, a very unlucky and unfriendly planet. Larry Collins and Dominique LaPierre, *Freedom at Midnight*, 202-04.

II. PARTITION

A. “Plan Balkan”

Mountbatten’s setting the day hustled Parliament into action.

It rushed an India Independence bill through, in just one week.

All claim to sovereignty there was relinquished.

All the hundreds of treaties with princely states were
wiped away at a pen stroke.

A boundary commission drew the map anew ...
setting down new frontiers, advised by an English lawyer, fresh to
India.¹⁸

The Great divorce

Everything got split up. There were just 73 days to make the settlement.

Congress got the most valuable asset – the name “India,” instead of “Hindustan”

A bitter quarrel over the debt. Britain owed five billion dollars to the people of
India – how much for each country?

¹⁸ Larry Collins and Dominique LaPierre, *Freedom at Midnight*, 127-28, 159-63, 182-86, 237-39.

And how to divvy the liquid assets, the cash in state banks,
the gold ingots in the vault of the Bank of India
the postage stamps in the district commissioner's
petty cash-box?

Government offices divided their assets – 80% for India, 20% for Pakistan.
80% of the brooms – of the desks – tables – chairs

And in every office, a count had to be made.
... Even of the chamber pots.

Department heads would hide the best typewriters or substitute
broken desks for the new ones assigned to the other side.

Savage arguments over dishes, silverware and portraits in
state residences.¹⁹

The one place there was no trouble: wine cellars. Hindus got them all.

Moslems were given credit for what they had, to use in demanding
something else.

Often, there was intense pettiness.

Dividing the instruments in the police band –
a flute for Pakistan

¹⁹ Larry Collins and Dominique LaPierre, *Freedom at Midnight*, 206-07.

a drum for India
a trumpet for Pakistan
a pair of cymbals for India.

It worked in Lahore, until they got to one instrument left – a single trombone. Whereupon two deputies got into a fistfight over which side would get that one.²⁰

Long arguments: who would pay the pensions for widows?

Who would pay off the widows of sailors lost at sea?

Would all Moslem widows have to be paid by Pakistan, no matter where they happened to be living?

²⁰ Larry Collins and Dominique LaPierre, *Freedom at Midnight*, 207.

Would India pay all Hindu widows living in Pakistan?²¹

And how do you divide up roads?

Pakistan would have 4,913 miles.

India would have 18,077 miles of roads.

What do you do – use bulldozers and shovels and wheelbarrows to make up the difference, giving India fewer than 80% and Pakistan more than 20%, to pay off the unfair amount of roads that one side had?²²

Or should you say, each side gets the same percentage of wheelbarrows and shovels as it has roads?

India's libraries turned nasty.

Dividing up sets of *Encyclopedia Britannica*...
each dominion got an alternate volume.

Dictionaries .. ripped in half with A to K going to India, the rest to Pakistan.

²¹ Larry Collins and Dominique LaPierre, *Freedom at Midnight*, 207.

²² Larry Collins and Dominique LaPierre, *Freedom at Midnight*, 207.

Bitter quarrels over who gets WUTHERING HEIGHTS and
ALICE IN WONDERLAND.²³

The Kennel Club's assets stayed with India – much to its members' relief.

But the Viceroy's own white train was allotted to Pakistan.

Some things just couldn't be divided. For instance, the printing press able to print postage stamps and money.

There was only one on the whole subcontinent.

The Hindus insisted on keeping it.

So the only way to make money that Pakistan would have was to take Indian rupees and stamp them with a rubber stamp, worded, "Pakistan."²⁴

And no split suited the fanatics on either side.

Moslems wanted the Taj Mahal taken apart, and shipped to Pakistan. A Moghul had built it, remember.

Hindus declared that the Indus River was theirs, and should be, because their sacred Vedas had been written along its banks.

... in spite of it flowing through the heart of Moslem India.²⁵

²³ Larry Collins and Dominique LaPierre, *Freedom at Midnight*, 207.

²⁴ Larry Collins and Dominique LaPierre, *Freedom at Midnight*, 207-08.

A much more terrible division came among the human beings –
by the hundreds of thousands.

Members of the public service – railroad presidents ..
sweepers ... errand boys ... bearers ... babus...

All got the choice of who to serve, and were shipped to one
domain or the other.

And the same goes for the Indian army, Britain's proudest creation.

1.2 million members strong.

Yet here it was, having to be divided – in spite of Mountbatten
begging that it not happen for an extra year, as a way to
keep the peace.

Jinnah would hear no pleas. An army was the essential sign
of a nation's sovereignty.

And he insisted, by August 15th, Pakistan must have
its army in being.

²⁵ Larry Collins and Dominique LaPierre, *Freedom at Midnight*, 208.

In July 1947 a mimeograph note went to each Indian officer, asking him to choose his allegiance.²⁶

Hindu and Sikh officers had no difficulty – and they weren't welcome in Jinnah's Pakistani army anyhow.

But it was a wrench for many a Moslem officer, whose family home would be in India after partition.

To move was to lose their ancestral homes and families.

B. I am Become Death, Destroyer of Worlds

The great error of partition was Jinnah's and Nehru's.

They thought it would cool sectarian hates.

Instead, it inflamed them.

They saw people behaving reasonably – which was pure fantasy.

²⁶ Larry Collins and Dominique LaPierre, *Freedom at Midnight*, 210-16.

Because by the time Mountbatten got to India, the killing was already breaking out.

In Amritsar, there was another massacre, but not a British soldier was involved.

4000 shops and businesses, burned down.

The victims: Muslims by the dozens.

And in the Punjab, they paid back, in spades.

Whole villages, put to the sword.

Retired army officers sometimes leading the way.

You talk your hundreds killed by British guns at Amritsar?

Now, count your three thousand Hindus and Sikhs, dead.

... and your 40,000 made homeless, and huddling for their safety in refugee camps that the British had built.²⁷

The gun-running was just beginning. The stockpiling of arms, just started.

The one person who DID see the danger was Gandhi.

²⁷ I. A. Talbot, "Mountbatten and the Partition of India: a Rejoinder," *History*, 69 (February 1984): 31.

“We shall tear ourselves asunder in the womb of the mother who bears us.”

Mountbatten had seen it, too. By 1947, he wasn't just scared of British officials being kicked out or overthrown.

He was afraid of a full-scale civil war, that England would be helpless to do a thing about.

.... one where English people would be on the sidelines.

THEY weren't even important enough to be the villains any more.

Could things have turned out better if England had delayed its leave-taking?

Maybe. But it is just as likely that things would have been worse, not better.

The reports were coming in from all over that British authorities were at their last gasp.

They had given their very last ounce of strength in riots in March 1947.

They couldn't quell it any more.

The riots near New Delhi – over 50 villages destroyed.

And how much force could Britain send?

All it had: 365 soldiers.²⁸

And next time – they knew there'd be a next time – it would be more serious.

What they'd seen, and what Mountbatten had seen, was a change.

Till early 1947, when Sikh and Moslem and Hindu went on killing sprees, they stuck to good old clubs and swords ... the old fashioned way.

Now they were using guns.

India was in the middle of an arms race... and it wasn't arming to kill British officials.

It was to kill each other.

Every day that India stayed under British rule, the arms race would build further, faster – the guns would stockpile higher.

²⁸ I. A. Talbot, "Mountbatten and the Partition of India: a Rejoinder," *History*, 69 (February 1984): 31.

What's worse, the killings weren't confined to the towns any more.

There, at least, authorities could blow whistles, call out cops.

Now the butchery was in the wide open countryside, where England hadn't the troops – NEVER had the troops – to quell it.

India was like a ship, full of ammunition, its
decks on fire, in the middle of the ocean.

Would things have worked out better, if England had stayed longer?

Say, till June 1948, as originally planned?

That depends: did England have anything to put the fire out with?

And how do you keep idiots from landing more ammunition on the
boat and striking more matches?

If you can't – and you definitely can't – then a captain
doesn't go down with his ship.

He gets into the nearest lifeboat, and anybody that
wants to come along is welcome.²⁹

²⁹ I. A. Talbot, "Mountbatten and the Partition of India: a Rejoinder," *History*, 69 (February 1984): 29-35.

III. THE AGONY OF LIBERTY

A. Passage from India

So the English withdrawal happened.

Unwilling to see their polo ponies end up as beasts of burden,
Many army officers had them put down.

The same went with the packs of hounds in the hunt at the Staff College at Quetta

– a hundred strong.

There was no one to give them homes.

They could not take the portraits of Clive and Hastings with them...

Not the silverware or the seals or the uniforms of the Raj

All were ordered to be left to India and Pakistan, to do what they would
with.

B. Out of One, Many

“At the stroke of the midnight hour,” Nehru said in a speech on the night of
August 14th, “India will awake to life and freedom.”

Freedom, perhaps. But what it awoke to was death.

And to understand that, we have to remember what a mixed commonwealth
had just come into being.

And this is the India that came into being in 1947 as a new nation.

275 million Hindus
50 million Moslems
7 million Christians
6 million Sikhs
100,000 Parsis

Fifteen official languages and 845 dialects. The only common tongue, English.

When Madrasi nodded their heads it meant yes.
When northern Aryans did so, it meant no.

A leper population the size of Switzerland

As many priests as the total population of Belgium.

Enough beggars to fill Holland with.

Ten million nomads, acting as fortunetellers, jugglers, well diggers,
magicians and herb vendors

And every day 38,000 more people were born in India.

Half would die before they were five years old.

90% of the people could not read or write.

Per capita income averaged five cents a day.

C. Massacres

In one Indian town, twenty thousand Moslems left their home within an hour.

They were given no choice.

The Hindus marched them to the station, drums beating.

In other towns, the Hindus were more generous.

They gave Moslems 24 hours to pack and get out of town.

But when they assembled at dawn on the parade ground with their belongings, everything they had was taken away except the clothes on their backs and one blanket apiece.

At tuberculosis sanatoriums, Hindu doctors emptied the beds of Moslems and sent them walking.

Some had only one lung.

Others were recovering from surgery.³⁰

Awful migrations – ten and a half million people from the Punjab were on the road that fall.

³⁰ Larry Collins and Dominique LaPierre, *Freedom at Midnight*, 351.

Think of a line of people from Calcutta to New York city – which is what it would amount to.

That's ten times as many people as the creation of the state of Israel turned into refugees.

Roads were crammed with refugees.

They clung to the sides of trains or sat on the roofs.

They died of heat and exhaustion and cholera along the way.

And with it, all the frustrations and angers of a century came out.

And greed, as well – get rid of the Moslems in your midst, and their lands and properties are yours.

Later we would call this “ethnic cleansing” – the dirtiest cleaning job on earth.

Communities were butchered, to the last person.

Children were slaughtered.

Crowds of Hindus were rounded up in Pakistan and herded into the mosque and told to convert or die –

after which they were forced to eat a cow, slaughtered just for the occasion, as a test of whether they meant it.

In Amritsar, where the death of 400 had shocked, now thousands died – and it wasn't news.... just religion.³¹

In Lyallpur, the irrigation canal was choked full of hundreds of Sikh and Hindu corpses.

Trains became “trains of death,” in the Punjab.

Each one was stopped, raided, and killings went on.

Moslems would throw Sikhs out the windows, and others waited on the platforms to beat the victims to death.

... in one case with hockey sticks.

Engineers would drive their trains onto a siding and go off to water the engine. That was so that Sikhs would have a chance to board the trains and kill everyone on them.

Then the trains would head on, as if nothing happened, on to Lahore, to another siding, where the bodies were taken off.

³¹ Larry Collins and Dominique LaPierre, *Freedom at Midnight*, 309-10, 341-42.

You could tell what happened, long before you spotted the dead.

As they arrived, those trains were misty in a cloud of
flies – swarms of them.

Sometimes there would be two thousand bodies taken off
at a time.

There were stretches of time – four or five in a row where not a single
train reached Lahore or Amritsar without its dead and wounded.

Blood seeping out from under the doors of its compartments
and dripping onto the tracks.

Sikhs ambushed trains around Amritsar.

And sent relief workers through the train after it, to kill
whoever they had missed the first time around.³²

One BBC journalist, to save what few he could, carried his portable recorder
with him in his jeep, and when he came on a massacre happening –
and he came on a lot – would lift up his microphone and say, “The
BBC is watching you,” and the killing would stop – for the moment.

Babies roasted like piglets on spits ...

Every Punjabi family lost a relative in the slaughters there.

³² Larry Collins and Dominique LaPierre, *Freedom at Midnight*, 354-58.

A New York *Times* reporter:

“I have never been as shaken by anything, even by the piled up bodies on the beach head of Tarawa. In India today blood flows oftener than rain falls. I have seen dead by the hundreds, and worst of all, thousands of Indians without eyes, feet or hands. Death by shooting is merciful and uncommon. Men, women, and children are commonly beaten to death with clubs and stones and left to die, their death agony intensified by heat and flies.”

How many died? Nobody knows; nobody made a list.

In the Punjab, it may have been half a million killed.

At the very least, a quarter million.³³

D. The Princes Pass On

What of the princes?

– 565 of them in all, with an average of...

³³ Larry Collins and Dominique LaPierre, *Freedom at Midnight*, 399.

11 titles
5.8 wives
12.6 children
9.2 elephants
2.8 private railway cars
3.4 Rolls-Royces
22.9 tigers killed?³⁴

They were told, in 1946, that when Britain left, all its powers would vanish with it.

No longer would the Raj have paramountcy.

That sounds good – sounds as if every prince would be independent.

But it wasn't. It meant that each of them would be as independent as he had been before the British.

And that hadn't been very independent at all.

They didn't have the armies to fend for themselves.

They had no influence, no muscle.

All the princes had was a choice: pick your overlord – India or Pakistan. Or make a deal with THEM about how independent

³⁴ Larry Collins and Dominique LaPierre, *Freedom at Midnight*, 166.

you're going to be.³⁵

The Earl of Mountbatten wasn't a very sympathetic listener when the princes complained. A "bunch of nitwits," he called them.³⁶

We should feel more sympathetic.

Here they'd done their bit for the Empire.

300,000 volunteers served from their states in World War II

They had bought fighter aircraft

And supplied field ambulances

And paid for squadrons of warplanes.

They had bought 180 million rupees of war bonds.

... all of this out of their own wealth, and all freely given
without being asked.³⁷

³⁵ Lawrence James, *Raj*, 624-28.

³⁶ Lawrence James, *Raj: The Making and Unmaking of British India*, 626.

³⁷ Lawrence James, *Raj*, 624.

And here they were being evicted from the thrones of their
ancestors, so that their property could be handed over
to the very people who, if they had had their way, would
have taken India out of the war and let the Japanese win!

It was monstrously unfair. It was betrayal.

The princes, without British backing, melted away.

Most of them were permitted to keep their palaces
their private fortunes

Some got pensions.

They were allowed their gun salutes...
some household troops
Protection from being arrested on civil or criminal
charges

and their own distinctive flags.

Those who had Swiss bank accounts could live high and fancy.

Some of them put money into movies..

mining...
machine tools

One or two made their palaces into hotels for
American tourists to enjoy.

But they were men without a country.³⁸

Only two exceptions: Hyderabad and Kashmir.

³⁸ Or, rather, they were men without their own country. The surprise is how well the princes did manage to survive, who stayed around India. Between 1957 and 1960, you can find that 43 members of the princely families sought state or national seats; in 1961-66 the figure is 51; and in 1967-70 the figure is 75. *Ahhhhhhh ... but did it do them any good?* Wasn't it more like the Bourbons hoping in the 1930s to be called back to the throne in a France that didn't have any throne?

Well, hem, no. The success rate was about 85% of those who sought. Some became party leaders. Others went into the cabinets of state governments, others actually headed state governments.

And this isn't surprising. New parties needed somebody with a big bankroll, with experience, with drawing power and name recognition. The princely families had all those. See William Richter, "Princes in Indian Politics," *Economic and Political Weekly*, Feb. 27, 1971, 537, cited in Ian Copland, "The Further Shores of Partition: Ethnic Cleansing in Rajasthan," **Past & Present**, 160 (August 1998): 236.

The Nizam of Hyderabad was one of a kind, with a name as large as his realm:

Rustum-i-Dauran, Arustu-i-Zeman, Wal
Mamalik, Asif Jah, Nawab Mir Osman, Alikhar
Banadur, MaSAFRUL Mulk Nizam Al-Mulk,
Sipah Solar, Fateh Jang, His Exalted Highness,
Most Faithful Ally of the British Crown.

It was bigger than he was: 90 pounds, five foot three.

And it was in better condition than his teeth, long since rotted to brownish fangs by chewing betel nuts.

Behind him, everywhere, came his food taster, to share his cream, sweets, fruits, and bowl of opium.

He was the richest man in the world, and the only Prince called “His Exalted Highness.”

He got that for a campaign contribution – to the military campaign in World War I

(\$100 million worth).³⁹

Richest of the rich – cheapest of the cheap.

³⁹ Larry Collins and Dominique LaPierre, *Freedom at Midnight*, 179.

A magnificent gold service, fit to sit down a hundred to dine.
But he ate off a tin plate.

He wore the same fez for 35 years, and a mangy one it was.

Guests were welcome to smoke cigarettes when they visited.

The Nizam liked it. When they were gone, he would pick out
the butts, and smoke what was left!

When the Resident came calling, every Sunday after church, the Nizam
showed him true hospitality:

a cup of tea

a biscuit

a cigarette (no more).⁴⁰

His health wasn't very good, though even his doctor didn't know how bad it
was.

He came to the palace, bringing an electro-cardiogram machine and
couldn't get a reading on the Nizam's heart.

It turned out that his Exalted Highness had turned down the
electrical current for the palace, so there wasn't enough
juice to make the machine work.⁴¹

But say what you will, he was a meticulous man.

He had his waste-baskets emptied once a year,

⁴⁰ Larry Collins and Dominique LaPierre, *Freedom at Midnight*, 179.

⁴¹ Larry Collins and Dominique LaPierre, *Freedom at Midnight*, 180.

regular as clockwork, on his birthday.

And in one drawer, the old miser had the Jacob diamond, about the size of a lime, 280 carats. Tremendously valuable.

The Nizam wrapped it in an old newspaper, and used it for a paperweight.

His collection of jewels was enormous.

Pearls alone, they said, would be enough to cover the sidewalks of Piccadilly circus.

He had over \$10 million in cash in his palace, and he wrapped them in old newspapers and kept them in corners of his attic and basement.

(Nobody got use of them except the rats, who ate through some and made nests of a lot of the rest).⁴²

What does a guy like this do for a good time? Well, as a matter of fact, he had the biggest collection of pornographic photographs in India.

And he got a lot of it on the cheap, as with everything else.

Guests didn't know that there were secret cameras in the walls and ceilings of their bedrooms, that worked automatically.

⁴² Larry Collins and Dominique LaPierre, *Freedom at Midnight*, 180.

Whatever they did was put on film.

There were cameras over the toilet, too.⁴³

(The British Resident was very concerned that the Nizam's son might not ... well, might not like women.

⁴³ Larry Collins and Dominique LaPierre, *Freedom at Midnight*, 188. And yet, once again, here is where Collins and LaPierre are so exasperating. They are terrific for the sensationalism. But they never ask the obvious question: was the Nizam a good ruler of his people? Never mind how he refused to pamper himself: what kind of king was he?

There, his family remembers quite a different side. His choice of administrators was very good, and his own talent for administration was quite good. He was, in fact, not oppressive or cruel. He was a kind man, entirely tolerant on religious and other matters. And if he ate very cheap food himself, the food the rest of the palace got was sumptuous. On Christmas Eve, he would go to the local Catholic mission with his harem and retainers, to take in midnight mass – it was a way of showing respect. There the Nizam would be, in the front row, and on leaving, he would give a handsome donation to the Sisters. Because many of his people were Hindu, he attended the Hindu celebrations as well, and would show up at the temples as well. See Charles Allen and Sharada Dwivedi, *Lives of the Indian Princes* (New York: Crown Publishers, Inc. 1984), 267-68.

This wouldn't be good in a future Nizam, and he told His Exalted Highness so.

The Nizam summoned the heir apparent before them both, and an extremely pretty woman.

And said: Okay. Show the Resident he's wrong.⁴⁴)

The Nizam was Moslem.
His people were Hindu.

At first, he tried to hold the line and stay independent.

But India surrounded it on all sides, and could starve it out.

There was no one to look to for help.

The Indian army marched in, and the state was absorbed.

Rending the Vale of Kashmir

As for Kashmir, the ruler was Hindu, and most of his people were Moslems.

He was a poignant man, the Maharajah.

⁴⁴ Larry Collins and Dominique LaPierre, *Freedom at Midnight*, 188.

He was paying enormous blackmail to a gang that had caught him in flagrante delicto with somebody else's wife.

– a deliberate set-up.

– in the press, he was referred to as “Mr. A,” but everybody knew who he was.

The payments only ended when the husband went to court.

After all, he had supplied the wife.

Shouldn't he get the biggest share of the money?

So he sued the other blackmailers.

The Maharajah never made that mistake again.

From then on, he stuck to boys and young men.⁴⁵

But he wasn't a bad king. He didn't hurt his people, or oppress them or burden them with taxes. He chose administrators carefully, and they were men known for their honesty and talent, and then he let them alone to do their jobs.

⁴⁵ Larry Collins and Dominique LaPierre, *Freedom at Midnight*, 187-88, relying on the overheated descriptions in John Lord, *The Maharajahs*, 174-81. A much kinder view is taken in Charles Allen and Sharada Dwivedi, *Lives of the Indian Princes* (New York: Crown Publishers, Inc. 1984), 288.

His country bordered on India and Pakistan, and he could
have aligned himself either way.

And both sides wanted him.
Kashmir's as big as Ireland.

It's refreshingly cool – the ideal vacation spot.
(And that's how thousands on
thousands of Indians use it)

Plenty of cool lakes and clear streams.

Very popular with Nehru himself; his family came
from there, and he loved going back
there for a rest.

The Maharajah in the end decided not to listen to what his people
wanted. He handed the country over to India.

It was accepted – again without asking what the people
there thought.

You couldn't have drawn up a better scenario for war.

There was a guerrilla uprising of Pakistanis immediately...
sent in to rouse a revolt.

Nehru sent in the army to fight back.

Pakistan gave semi-official help to the rebels.

The two arms of the old Indian army – still in the same kind of uniforms – were on the point of fighting each other.

Where was the Empire, now that it was needed?

In the good old days, the whole dispute would have gone to the Privy council. It would have given both sides a hearing, and made a judgment.

It had done so before, when Canada and Newfoundland argued over who got the rights to Labrador.

Or, if not the Council, then an Imperial Conference would have settled it.

But this wasn't a Commonwealth like in the old days.

It wasn't to be settled that way.

Nobody even thought about such an idea.

They went to the United Nations, instead, for some settlement.

The Pakistani Stillbirth

Out of the destruction of the Punjab and the Bengal as united provinces –

out of the hitching of the two in unhappy marriage came one of the great disasters of South Asian history.

It was a terrible solution. It meant a Pakistan made of two people – Bengalis and Punjabis, with nothing in common but their religion.

Bengalis were short and dark, and very Asian.

Punjabis had the blood of the Central Steppes in them, Aryans, Turks, Persians, Russians.

Their languages were not the same, nor their cultures. This was a new Pakistan doomed to divide and fail.⁴⁶

To divide Bengal was to smother a culture and a kingdom kept together from ancient times.

All its trade flowed into Calcutta.

All its railroads ran into Calcutta.

All its roads –

All its communications –

And that was where the industry lay.

But Calcutta would go with the Hindu part of Bengal – cutting off the business and

⁴⁶ Larry Collins and Dominique LaPierre, *Freedom At Midnight*, 121.

commerce of the Moslem parts.

Just about all the jute in the world grew in eastern
Bengal, Moslem Bengal.

But the factories that made it into rope and
sack and cloth were in Hindu
Bengal, in Calcutta.

Almost all the rice that Bengal grew, the Hindu parts
of the west grew; and Moslem Bengal grew
just about none.

There would be famine, as the price of
partition.

What had been created would be, as Bengal's last
British governor predicted,

“the greatest rural slum in history.”⁴⁷

CODA: THE MARTYR'S REWARD

And Gandhi? In all this bloody crisis, no one could have been more appalled.

It was his work – and the blood was on him, whether he would or no.

He was no official. He had taken no office.

⁴⁷ Larry Collins and Dominique LaPierre, *Freedom At Midnight*, 122-23.

His life had been given to nonviolence and peace.

Now, his success had brought on the worst carnage in his life.

He set to work preaching, fasting, and praying for peace.

No one else could have made that work.

But it did. In Bengal, the massacres were not anywhere so bad as
in the Punjab – and Gandhi's hunger strike was why.

His voice was raised against the caste system
and against religious bigotry.

There was much he could have done. But not enough.

On January 30, 1948, a Brahman extremist, intolerant of anyone who preached
tolerance of the Muslims, shot him.

Gandhi fell and died instantly.

Mountbatten had one last heroic gesture in him.

From the crowd a man shouted, "It was a Moslem who did it."

Mountbatten had no way of knowing the killer, but he knew the
start of a massacre when he saw it.

“You fool!” he shouted. “don’t you know it was a Hindu?”

There was no massacre, and – as it turned out – he was right.⁴⁸

Gandhi’s death, Mountbatten’s quick thinking, ended the massacres.

The shock of the assassination was enough to make the people of India see the horrors they were about to inflict upon themselves.

Nine months later, Jinnah died, too, from heart failure.

There would never be another leader in Pakistan with so much talent, so much will.

⁴⁸ Jan Morris, *Farewell the Trumpets*, 493-94.