

*Agrarian Conditions in Northern India. Volume I. The United Provinces under British Rule, 1860-1900.* By Elizabeth Whitcombe. University of California Press, Berkeley, 1972. xii, 330 pp. U.S. price: \$12.00.

'CANALS, ROADS, railways, telegraph lines; Secretariats and Residences; law courts and jails; the civil lines of bungalows . . . the offices and barracks of the cantonments': the symbols of what Dr Elizabeth Whitcombe calls the 'sheer system' of British rule are still readily apparent in India. In this study Dr Whitcombe seeks to understand what canals, roads, railways and the like actually meant to the inhabitants of the rural areas of that part of India which, in the post-Mutiny years of the nineteenth century, was known as the North-Western Provinces and Oudh. Her basic conclusion is that the 'cost of innovation' was very considerable — at times, in fact, disastrous.

It should be made clear at once that this is not another anti-imperialist tract; the time for those is past, in the field of South Asian history, anyway. Dr Whitcombe's book is a mature and highly sophisticated piece of scholarship, which will have to be taken very seriously indeed. It is true that she cannot resist quoting in one place a report which, because of a misprint, 'obligingly' speaks of a '*pox Britannica*'. But the prevailing tone is one of essential sympathy with the predicament of all — Englishmen and Indians, *zamindars* and petty peasants — entangled in events which at times appear to have had about them something of the inevitability of ancient tragedy. (One recalls that Dr Whitcombe began her academic career in New Zealand as a classicist.)

Dr Whitcombe insists in her preface that she wishes primarily to let the record speak for itself. 'Relevant monographs', she says, 'are cited only where it seemed necessary to draw attention to a theoretical issue.' One searches in vain in text, footnotes and bibliography for explicit references to the work of such scholars in the field of North Indian agrarian history as Bernard Cohn and Thomas Metcalf. Hence, perhaps, the startling freshness of some of Dr Whitcombe's conclusions. Certainly the book administers — if still entirely by implication — a series of rebukes to Professor Walter Neale, the author of *Economic Change in Rural India: Land Tenure and Reform in Uttar Pradesh, 1800-1955* (Yale University Press, 1962). For Neale, the troubles of Northern India stem to a considerable extent from indigenous socio-religious hindrances to the development of a full-blown 'market' economy. Some 'slovenly' cultivators there were, undoubtedly, in the North-Western Provinces, but Dr Whitcombe shows that they were often to be found on poor, light soils. The ordinary Indian peasant, she believes, was not normally overly-extravagant in expenditure upon weddings and other ceremonial objects. Dr Whitcombe appears to endorse the opinions of those British officials (probably a minority) who saw Indian cultivators as basically 'skilful' in 'extracting a varied livelihood from the soil in the face of obstacles posed by their frequent hostile environment'.

The most original sections of this book are undoubtedly those concerned with the ecological consequences of the British impact. The assumption of a number of those (including the present reviewer) who have written in more recent years on Indian agrarian history in the nineteenth century has tended to be that the clearing of the forest which took place in that century, the reduction in the area under fallow, and, most important, perhaps, the increase in double-cropping, are all normally signs of at least a certain

amount of economic growth. After all, this was generally the case in European history. Dr Whitcombe shows at what cost in soil erosion and soil exhaustion these changes were purchased in many parts of Northern India. She has, furthermore, an extraordinary appreciation of the proper uses of water: one is reminded of the work of the Israeli scientist, settler and historian Michael Evenari. The rapid extension of irrigation in the North-Western Provinces, she tells us, led to the neglect of wells, and to new drainage problems and hence the increase of malaria. The encouragement of flush irrigation by the revenue-producing Canal Department resulted in the growth of salination and the grey desolate areas of *usar*. In many ways this was, as Sir Edward Buck said at the time, a 'vicious system' — although it is as well to remember that the British came new in India to many of the technical problems of irrigation.

Dr Whitcombe writes perceptively, if perhaps, of necessity, with slightly less originality, on the essential conflict in the aims of the British in Northern India. Like Professor Neale today, the British desired a 'market' economy — but they felt that they could not afford to take their economic policies to their logical conclusion. For a 'capitalist succession' on the land would have meant, the British thought, the virtual disappearance of the very groups upon which, after the Mutiny, they had decided to rely: the conservative larger landholders. Dr Whitcombe is erudite on the problems which resulted from the (increasingly half-hearted) implementation of English law, especially the English law of indebtedness, in her area. She examines the difficulties of distinguishing 'agricultural' and 'non-agricultural' classes; she is inclined to believe that much of the land transfer which took place in later nineteenth-century Northern India was within established agricultural groups. At least some of those who were legally 'dispossessed' were not actually removed from the land; rather the result was, to quote a great Settlement Officer, W. C. Benett, 'the creation of a number of concurrent interests in the same soil'. In coming to such conclusions Dr Whitcombe provides some corroboration — merely implicit again — of the recent 'revisionist' work of Cohn and Eric Stokes on parts of Northern India in a somewhat earlier period. But Dr Whitcombe comes to older and more orthodox conclusions on the introduction of cash crops. 'The burden of the small farmer's dependence on his superiors', she asserts, 'could in no way be relieved by an increase in "valuable" crops.' It is perhaps on this point that Dr Whitcombe will be challenged first by future 'revisionists'.

But future 'revisionists', to be convincing, may well have to adopt Dr Whitcombe's extraordinarily rigorous attitude to nineteenth-century Indian statistics. Dr Whitcombe feels that the 'generalizations' of British officials who were close to the people for long periods of time, such as Settlement Officers, can often be trusted. But she believes that the statistics which were concocted in district offices and in secretariats in the normal course of business, or in response to hastily called special enquiries, were derived so often merely from the work of ill-paid and by no means disinterested village *patwaris* that they cannot be used with any confidence. Consequently, the 'exact measure' of the 'increase' which resulted from the introduction of canals 'remains out of reach'; between the 1860s and the 1890s 'the number of farmers and their dependants had risen — at what rate it is impossible to say on the available statistics'.

The only snag about this sort of argument is that one is liable to be left with little more than a series of impressions. Dr Whitcombe's picture is by

no means merely impressionistic; her evaluation of her Settlement Officers' reports involves, as it should, a thorough-going analysis of the personalities involved. Here, especially, she reveals herself as the superb historian she is. But she may still be open to correction here and there. The 'revisionists' of the future may no longer be considering the North-Western Provinces as a whole (let alone, of course, all of India). They will probably be working in India rather than on the India Office records in London. They may well be looking very closely at a single district, or even merely at a couple of villages. Meerut district — where, Dr Whitcombe appears to admit, there was 'general prosperity', to some extent as a result of the extension of irrigation — might prove an interesting starting-point. But there are many other districts to the east of the hardly typical Meerut which, if investigated as closely as the records in India permit, will probably bear out most of Dr Whitcombe's conclusions. We must be grateful to her for providing us with such an eloquent and stimulating major work.

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*Squatter, Selector, and Storekeeper. A History of the Darling Downs, 1859-93.* By D. B. Waterson. Sydney University Press, 1968. 310 pp. N.Z. price: \$6.30.

*A Biographical Register of the Queensland Parliament 1860-1929.* By D. B. Waterson. Australian National University Press, Canberra, 1972. xvii, 205 pp. N.Z. price: \$4.33.

EXPATRIATE New Zealanders are manifold in Australia, but Duncan Waterson is unique for a continuing second shift, insofar as he lectures at Monash University in Victoria but principally writes of Queensland, as far from Melbourne as Auckland is from Sydney.

Whatever the merits and demerits of this double translation Waterson's books show that he has gained from comparative studies. He first became interested in the achievements of pastoralists and agriculturalists in the Darling Downs region of Queensland from his work in New Zealand, and comparisons enter his books both implicitly and explicitly. Illumination is given by his comparisons: for instance he writes on pp. 3-4 of *Squatter* that the 'despised squatters were the ones who had established the basis of western civilization and its expanding technology on the Downs. Furthermore, as in New Zealand, it was this increasingly efficient and diverse technology which saved the farmers from a life of hopeless subsistence and even economic extinction.' His very choice of the Darling Downs, where squatting was to be succeeded by farming, reflects his earlier interests in parallel New Zealand areas.

Queenslanders should be grateful for his intervention for as he rightly claims in both books Queensland history has been neglected and his work must be preliminary on many points. Far too often, Queensland has been relegated to the footnotes while New South Wales and Victoria have monopolised the text (*Squatter*, p. 1). He admits that in his second book as a pioneer work 'many errors and omissions are bound to occur' (p. viii).

His work on the Darling Downs has rightly become and will remain a