The years between 1815 and 1920 were ones of profound change in Britain, in China, and in the relationship between them. As the three generations of one family at the centre of this book knew only too well, the recently established British presence in China became increasingly involved in the politics, economics and finances of China’s faltering imperial regime. The British presence and consequence peaked during the Boxer crisis, but was eclipsed within decades by the rising force of Chinese nationalism.

Andrew Hillier’s book covers this remarkable period of change in the relations between China and Britain, but is also a welcome addition to the literature on empire and the family. In this book, family emerges as something greater than the sum of its parts – as a body of knowledge and, in the context of British informal empire in East Asia, of ‘best practice’; an interface between Britain and China, public and private, interests and ideals, and commerce, faith and diplomacy. In the case of the Medhurst/Hillier family, that interface worked to promote three traits in particular: evangelism (and its ‘underlying tenets of commitment and diligence’); an aptitude for the Chinese language; and what the author terms ‘the development of a cultural sensitivity towards China’. As Hillier explains, these particular family traits (just as much as family connections) – acquired and relayed through experiences and
Memories proved to be particularly conducive to getting on amidst the compromises and veiled sovereignty of informal empire and the treaty port world.

At the same time, Mediating Empire makes it plain that the relationship between family and empire was never instrumental, and seldom neat, tidy or convenient. It could invite accusations of nepotism, and closed minds. Family is about building connections (the author offers us glimpses of the role of ‘calling’ in deepening and extending family networks), but it is also about the drawing up of lines – most obviously, in this case, between Britons and Chinese. And empire could be brutal to families: separating couples, exacerbating risks, refusing permission for a diplomat and brother to travel to console a bereaved sister, instructing a husband to cut short attempts to resolve a failing marriage, and even, at the end, exacerbating sibling rivalries. We can only really get at the variety and significance of these tensions through close, detailed studies such as this one – and this is Hillier’s signal achievement. As such, it forms part of the ongoing work of historians of imperialism to connect that obtuse, effervescent concept of an ‘official mind’ – a concept Hillier still finds useful – to a better understanding of empire’s lived realities on the ground.

In exploring this history, Hillier makes effective use of a great variety of sources, including the rich private materials now dispersed among the family – and arranged by genealogists in the past. As this book’s author reveals, the Hillier Collection contains within it many previous attempts to give shape, form and order to the messiness of people’s lives, careers and relationships, whether Eliza Hillier’s black-ribbon notebook, cuttings books, Eleanor Hillier’s journal, or a ‘Kiplingesque’ collection of illustrated reminiscences: each of them replete with their own narratives, recollections, euphemisms and acts of commemoration. As such, Mediating Empire is not merely a contribution to the important literature on family and empire and on Britain’s changing position in a changing China. Although it is not the primary aim of this book, it also challenges us to think about the evolving relationship between the development of family archives and the writing of imperial history today.

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