F.R.H.
DU BOULAY

SERVANTS of EMPIRE

An Imperial Memoir of a British Family

I.B.TAURIS

Francis Robin Houssemayne Du Boulay (1920–2008) was one of the most distinguished medievalists of his time. He was Professor of Medieval History at the University of London and was elected a Fellow of the British Academy in 1980. His publications include *The Lordship of Canterbury*, *Germany in the Later Middle Ages*, *An Age of Ambition* and *The England of Piers Plowman*.

1. The author, Robin Du Boulay (1926–2008).
Drawing by J. Dixon-Payne, 2008.

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I.B. TAURIS
LONDON · NEW YORK

Published in 2011 by I.B.Tauris & Co. Ltd
6 Salem Road, London W2 4BU
175 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10010
www.ibtauris.com

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ISBN: 978 1 84885 571 7

A full CIP record for this book is available from the British Library
A full CIP record for this book is available from the Library of Congress

Library of Congress catalog card: available

Typeset in Perpetua by A. & D. Worthington, Newmarket, Suffolk
Printed and bound in Great Britain by CPI Antony Rowe, Chippenham

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Acknowledgements

Bringing Robin's last work to publication has only been made possible through the generous help of his fellow historians and members of the Du Boulay family. My thanks are especially owed to Professor Francis Robinson, who first read the text and recommended it to the publisher, and to Professor Hugh Lawrence, Robin's friend and colleague for over 40 years, who wrote the Foreword and throughout provided invaluable advice and support as did Professor Caroline Barron. Professor Tony Stockwell provided us with the historical background.

Mr Giles H. du Boulay's archive of the whole Du Boulay family since *c*.1600 enabled him to produce the simplified family tree, together with detailed cvs of the Reverend James Du Boulay, his wife Alice Cornish and each of their 13 children. They give much added clarity to the narrative for which I am most grateful. Mr James Du Boulay provided remarkable photographs of his great-grandfather's time in India a century ago and for this I offer him my sincere thanks. Mrs Jackie Dixon-Payne has kindly allowed us to print her fine sketch of Robin in his last year.

Lastly, grateful acknowledgement is made to the administrators of the Isobel Thornley Trust who have been good enough to provide a subvention in aid of this publication.

Margaret Du Boulay

Foreword

The author of this book, Robin Du Boulay, was for 35 years a teacher and writer of medieval history, of which he was Professor at Bedford College in the University of London. His family traced its descent from a French Huguenot family, whose thoroughly anglicized descendants came to include a number of divines and dons as well as some outstanding servants of the British Empire.

Robin Du Boulay belonged to that generation of the family whose education was interrupted, and enlarged, by the Second World War. After winning a scholarship to read History at Balliol College, Oxford, he spent his first year in college, but then volunteered for the army, and served as an artillery officer in the fierce fighting in the Netherlands and north Germany with which the war ended. He returned to Oxford in 1945 to complete his degree, in which he was awarded First Class Honours. The many articles and books he wrote during his professorial career all display his extraordinary gifts as a scholar and a writer of limpid and elegant English. Among these, his *Lordship of Canterbury*, a study of the estates of the see and their occupants from the eleventh century to the Reformation, stands out as a major contribution to our understanding of medieval society; and the same can be said of his book *Germany in the Later Middle Ages*. But I would single out his later works, especially *The England of Piers Plowman*, as those that most strongly exemplify his fine gifts as a writer: his deep empathy with medieval people and his ability to bring to life the world of the distant past.

Du Boulay tells us in the first chapter of this book how it came

to be written. It is the product of a rich family archive, comprising hundreds of letters exchanged between his grandfather, who was a housemaster at Winchester, and his 13 children, who together formed an extraordinary 'network of affection' extending over much of the world. The writers of these letters, the father, uncles and aunts of the author, made their careers and achieved eminence as soldiers, administrators, farmers and missionaries in the old lands of the British Empire, and they wrote home describing their work, adventures, hopes and fears. It was this remarkable cache of documents that, when it came into Du Boulay's hands, moved him in retirement to embark upon a book which is at once a family history and a vivid literary memorial of a past society. It was completed before his death in 2008.

As the author says, it is not a history of the later British Empire. It is a collection of biographies; but despite this disclaimer, it offers an important and fascinating contribution to our understanding of our imperial history. The letters on which it is based open windows upon the lifestyle, affections, political thinking and social assumptions of those who served the British Raj at ministerial level in its last days. The society of those who worked for the empire at this level has been explored by modern novelists such as Paul Scott. Here its inner history is brilliantly told from the *ipsissima verba* of some who formed its last generation.

C.H. Lawrence
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Historical Background

The Reverend James Du Boulay and his wife Alice had 13 children born between 1860 and 1883. James was not affluent but, as a housemaster at Winchester College, he ensured that his seven sons and six daughters received a good education. The girls might be expected to marry (though only two did) and the eldest boy became a surgeon, but, at a time of poor prospects at home and widening opportunities in the empire, the others looked overseas.

This was not unusual in families like the Du Boulays. Benjamin Jowett, Master of Balliol, would readily recommend imperial service to the sons of such families who asked: 'What line of life should I choose, with no calling to take orders and no taste for the Bar and no connexions to put me forward in life?'[1] Thus, Noel Du Boulay joined the army and served in Egypt, the Sudan, the Far East and Mauritius. George entered the church and later became a missionary in Africa. James made a career in the Indian Civil Service. Ralph and Philip worked in Egypt. Dick and Mary, who were joined for a time by Philip and Phyllis, struggled to make ends meet in the Transvaal. Drawing upon a rich family archive, the late Professor Robin Du Boulay has vividly described the imperial lives of his father, uncles and aunts. Ever judicious in his assessments of their actions and attitudes, he has placed them in the context of their time of which they were as much the products as we are of ours.

As the Du Boulay family scattered, so the siblings led separate

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1. Quoted in Anthony Kirk-Greene, *Britain's Imperial Administrators, 1858–1966* (Basingstoke, 2000), p 16.

lives and approached imperial problems from different angles. They disagreed, for example, on self-determination for subject peoples. They even quarrelled from time to time, though they were 'too well-bred to shout'. Yet the solidarity of what Kipling referred to in his own case as 'the family square' was never broken by the tyranny of distance. Mutual support was refreshed by home leave and occasionally by family encounters while overseas. Of special importance for sustaining contact between siblings and parents were their letters which Ralph collected and disseminated round the family. Home thoughts from abroad colour this correspondence. Although a sense of exile tore some families apart, with women and children being particularly hard hit,[2] for the Du Boulays the remembrance of home strengthened their resolve abroad. Winchester remained their point of reference since Winchester, and particularly the College, had set them on course for work overseas.

In the 1860s, soon after the arrival of James Du Boulay *père*, Winchester College underwent reform under Dr George Ridding, headmaster and James's close friend. Ridding was at the forefront of the creation of the late Victorian public-school system which had been triggered by the report of the Clarendon commission of inquiry (1861–64) into nine leading schools including Winchester. These 'Clarendon Schools' were soon joined in the Headmasters' Conference by a growing number of others which were either recent or revived foundations. Such schools were neither run by the state nor accessible to all, and were public only insofar as they were open to the fee-paying public and were dedicated to public service. Much has been written, some of it sentimental, about their educational ideals, but the connection between public-school education and the preparation of 'prefects' or 'Platonic guardians' to run the expanding empire is clear.[3]

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2. See Elizabeth Buettner, *Empire Families: Britons and Late Imperial India* (Oxford, 2004).

3. See, for example, Rupert Wilkinson, *The Prefects: British Leadership and the Public School Tradition* (London, 1964); Kirk-Greene, *Britain's Imperial Administrators*.

2. The Masters of Winchester College, 1884. Centre: Rev. James T. Du Boulay and Dr George Ridding, Headmaster.

Unlike Haileybury under the East India Company, late Victorian public schools did not instruct boys for imperial service by imparting technical knowledge or vocational skills. Rather they aimed to inculcate qualities for ruling. Thus Noel would acquire his professional training elsewhere, at the Royal Military Academy; Philip would teach himself Arabic after he arrived in Egypt; Dick would pick up farming in South Africa by trial and error. Public-school education, by contrast, rested on the humanities (especially the classics) and team sports. It was intended to foster health, character and the gentlemanly virtues of self-discipline, loyalty, team spirit and fair play. It produced 'generalists', such as Jim who, after Balliol, was ideally suited to the Indian Civil Service. By and large public-school boys were encouraged to choose a public career, however few its material rewards, rather than one in commerce or industry. They tended to be as mistrustful of businessmen who did well out of the empire as they were of popular jingoists. When the sons of the Reverend James

Du Boulay left school, they had what Professor Du Boulay has called 'Winchester-bred mentalities': reserve, a commitment to work and acceptance that a life devoted to the public good should be its own reward.

Winchester College was a seedbed for imperial servants. It supplied more recruits to the pre-1914 Indian Civil Service than any school (other than St Paul's and Clifton), more to the later Colonial Administrative Service (other than Marlborough) and 50 per cent more than any other school to the Sudan Political Service. This book shows how the 'the world of Winchester reached out for its own', passing on news or offering a helping hand. Indeed, 'old boys … seem to have been encountered at every turn'. Phil met Winchester contemporaries at Port Sudan, Aden and the Dardanelles. Noel ran into Wykehamists throughout his time in the army. As commandant of the Summer Palace in Peking after the Boxer rising, he was assisted in the task of listing its valuables by another former pupil, Edmund Backhouse, the sinologist who years later would be exposed as a fraudster. A connection through the College with Lord Selborne assured Dick much needed sponsorship as he started farming in the Transvaal, though it failed to end Phil's unemployment in Egypt at a time when jobs were being reserved for locals. The Wykehamist circle by no means cut them off from others. A notable example of a new friendship was that between Noel and the anglophile Colonel Shiba Gorō at the time of the Sino-Japanese War of 1894–95. It outlasted Noel's posting in the Far East. Shiba later became military attaché to Great Britain, was decorated by King Edward VII and died following a suicide attempt after Emperor Hirohito's surrender in August 1945.

The Wykehamist network spread across an empire which itself was sometimes little more than a web of influence. Although the British Empire expanded to its greatest extent during the period covered by this book, it was neither monolithic nor centralized. Rather it was a ragbag of territories varying in size, wealth, ethnic composition, culture, political development and economic and strategic significance. They ranged from India, which was an empire

in itself, to micro-states such as the fortress colonies of Gibraltar, Malta, Aden and Hong Kong, or the penurious islands of the Caribbean, Pacific and Indian Ocean. They included crown colonies where Britain was the sovereign power, protected states where the British were supposed to act merely in an advisory capacity, and dominions of white settlement which were already self-governing. In some of these dependencies the British presence was centuries old; in others it was recent and short lived. The exercise of British power depended on collaboration with local communities. It also became a matter for international negotiation, as in the partition of Africa, the government of Egypt (which was never formally part of the empire) and the 'opening' of China or rather its division into spheres of influence. By the end of the First World War Britain's resources were overstretched by its global commitments.

In common with similarly placed families, the Du Boulays' personal experience of this empire turned out to be relatively short lived. Du Boulays had not been pioneers and 'bushwhackers', or *boxwallahs* and *taipans.* While they had an ingrained sense of public service, they had no tradition of serving overseas, as had, for example, the Lawrences of India or the Maxwells of Malaya. Moreover, apart from Jim who had a term as private secretary to the viceroy, Du Boulays did not move in the highest circles, although they closely observed the captains and the kings. They were professional, conscientious and attentive to their surroundings without immersing themselves in local cultures. Nevertheless, the period of 'high imperialism' from the mid-1880s to the end of the First World War proved to be their 'imperial moment' when members of a single generation participated in campaigns in the Sudan and Middle East, in the administration of the Raj and of Egypt, and in education and farming in South Africa. And George moved beyond the British sphere altogether to become a missionary in German East Africa.

George, Professor Du Boulay has written, 'is perhaps the greatest absentee from these pages'. None of his letters from Africa to Winchester has survived. They would surely have illuminated the nature of the missionary project during the European 'scramble' and

3. The Rev. George Du Boulay (1866–95).
Missioner to Africa with the UMCA.

its relationship with late Victorian imperialism. A few of the letters he sent to the vicar of his former parish in Nottingham are, however, preserved in the archive of the Universities Mission to Central Africa (UMCA), and these, together with recent scholarship on missionaries, help to fill the void.[4]

The UMCA was launched in 1859 in response to David Livingstone's campaign to redeem 'the dark continent' at a time when missionary endeavour had begun to flag. Its founders were high-church Anglicans committed to the conversion of Africans, the extirpation of slavery and the promotion of 'civilized commerce'. Missionaries in the field, however, questioned the equation of Christianity with commerce and civilization. They made a virtue of close collaboration with Africans and were generally more sensitive than were missionaries of other organizations to indigenous customs and beliefs. By the late nineteenth century recruits to the UMCA were increasingly motivated by the desire to protect Africans against the spiritual and cultural despoliation which they associated with rampant commercialism and which they had experienced in Britain's deprived urban parishes.

In 1893 the Reverend George Du Boulay left the populous parish of Sneinton in Nottingham for Zanzibar. He was later transferred to the mainland to be priest in charge of Misozwe, a satellite of the mission's station at nearby Magila, some 35 miles inland from the port of Tanga and about 65 miles north-east of Zanzibar. Situated in wooded hills and well watered, the region reminded George of Switzerland. Magila had flourished under the leadership of John Farler (1875–87), and Africans had come to the station for its protection, hospital and boarding school. George's principal task at Misozwe was to build up its school but progress was hampered by meagre

4. Letters from Reverend G.H. Du Boulay to J.E. Nugee, UMCA, A (VI) B, Rhodes House Library, Oxford. See also Andrew Porter, *Religion versus Empire? British Protestant Missionaries and Overseas Expansion, 1700–1914* (Manchester, 2004); Justin Willis, 'The makings of a tribe: Bondei identities and histories', *Journal of African History*, 33 (1992), pp 191–208; Willis, 'The nature of a mission community: the Universities' Mission to Central Africa in Bonde', *Past & Present*, 140 (August 1993), pp 127–54.

resources, famine and pestilence. The death toll amongst servants of the UMCA was heavy. In 1895 alone Bishop Chauncy Maples was drowned in a storm on Lake Nyasa, the Reverend George Atlay was murdered by a raiding party and Herbert Ley de Ros, 'a young medical man of great promise', succumbed to 'the fatal African fever' at Magila. George himself was rarely free of fever and shortly before Easter 1895 he was brought to the hospital at Magila. He died on 1 April, his 29th birthday, and was buried alongside the graves of two other missionaries. George was unmarried – celibacy was a mission ideal – but, as Professor Du Boulay has recorded, he was surrounded by his flock and 'his altar prayer-book is inscribed in his hand with the names of Africans he had baptized'.

A.J. Stockwell
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Preface

These memoirs are of my grandfather's family, which needs to be put in its setting.

We have been English since the eighteenth century but derive, with our complicated name, from Alençon in Normandy. In that community of French Calvinists (Huguenots) our large family called itself Houssemaine and practised various trades and professions as 'bourgeois d'Alençon'.

The first to become English was Benjamin François (1724–65). He is described in parish records as Sieur du Boullay, which is not easily translatable but means in effect 'Mr du Boullay' and denotes the place or district he came from. Benjamin François studied theology at the University of Leiden, qualified for admission to the ministry, went to Amsterdam, and from there was invited by the elders (*consistoire*) of the French church in Threadneedle Street to serve as their pastor in London. On arrival he altered his name to Houssemayne Du Boulay, which has endured to this day, with or without a capital D.

By the time Benjamin François came to England the French Protestants there were assimilating at varying speeds to English ways.[1] Some congregations, including Threadneedle Street, conformed to the Anglican Church. Benjamin himself was ordained in the Temple Church by Bishop Thomas Sherlock of London, as deacon in 1751, priest in 1753. He served as pastor in various churches in Spitalfields,

1. For all this see Robin Gwynn, *Huguenot Heritage* (Brighton: Sussex Academic Press, 2nd ed, 2001).

married Louise La Motte in 1756, lived with his growing family at 12 Fournier Street, and died at a relatively young age in 1765. His survivors were taken in and looked after by relatives in Wanstead, Essex.

It is not surprising that the vigorous family he began should be clearly Anglican. His grandson, the Reverend James H. Du Boulay (1801–36), became rector of Heddington in Wiltshire. His great-grandson – also the Reverend James Thomas H. Du Boulay (1832–1915) – married Alice Mead Cornish and founded and ran a 'Tutor's House' at Winchester College from 1862 to 1893. They had 13 children, some of whose letters are the subject of this memoir, and one of whom was the father of the present writer.

Authors who have been given permission to use copyright material or who have been helped in some way to knock their book into shape usually acknowledge such kindnesses at the outset. In the present instance my principal acknowledgements must be to my uncles and aunts and to my own father for the actual materials of this book.

First in time are the letters home by Lieutenant Noel Houssemayne Du Boulay, Royal Artillery, while he was taking part in the Nile Expedition of 1884–85 in the famous but vain attempt to relieve General Gordon besieged in Khartoum. The letters, written mostly in indelible pencil on coarse writing paper, still remain in the brown paper parcel among the files and boxes of my long-lived family.

The same subject-matter was covered, more cursorily but with some added detail, in Uncle Noel's field diary, a green thick exercise book half-filled with his own ink handwriting. This peters out on 13 February 1885, but there was evidently another diary which he lost on the return march at a moment when he was (unusually for him) feeling unwell. Just before getting back to Wadi Halfa in July they stopped for the night at Gemai, on the borders of Egypt and the Sudan,

> and to my horror I discovered I had left my writing-case behind. I had felt very seedy and had pulled it out of my saddle-bags to raise my pillow a bit, and when we started in the morning in the dark I left the packing-up entirely to my servant and lay flat on my back till the last moment. I asked him if he had put it in, but he misunderstood

> me, and as it was not usual for me to have it out, he hadn't expected it and didn't notice it, and so it was left behind.
>
> When I discovered its absence I borrowed a trolley from the railway station, hooked on behind a train, and with 3 men went back to the exact spot, but found it gone, and then had to work back the seven miles in time to start on the march to Halfa. I have lost my diary in the writing-case, which is my chief regret.

The exactness of this account and of Noel's efforts to recover his writings is a good sign of his natural practicality and care for detail. Luckily most of the lost information was incorporated in his regular letters home. The surviving bit of diary shows that. The letters were also so spontaneous that Colonel H.S. Hearn, who later read everything Noel had written, thought they were the best basis for any account of the battles.

The letters and the surviving diary enabled Noel to write a more formal report entitled 'Reminiscences of the Sudan Campaign, 1884–5', which he did in 1926 at the request of the 20th Light Battery, the successor of his own original unit, the 1/1 Southern. The 20th Light made a copy and returned the handwritten original which is in my possession.

Noel's little private store of papers also included letters concerned with his time in Japan and north China as a staff officer attached to the Japanese Army at war in China (1894–95) and as commandant of the Summer Palace in Peking after the Boxer risings in 1900. He had an opposite number and special friend, artillery colonel and sometime Japanese military attaché in London, Shiba Gorō, four of whose letters he preserved all his life. To these fragments should be added Noel's important lecture to the Royal Artillery Institution at Woolwich in 1896.[2]

What happened to all the other letters home of this dutiful correspondent is unfortunately unknown, but the Nile correspondence must have cried out at the time to be preserved, and in fact it formed the model of the systematic family collection from which the

2. Captain N.W.H. Du Boulay, *Proceedings of the Sino-Japanese War*.

following chapters are written.

If Noel was the pioneer in a family of foreign correspondents, he was unique as a pictorial illustrator of his life. Among his effects now in my brother's keeping is a collection of some 55 watercolours and 65 pencil sketches made on his travels around the world between 1879 and 1935. The pictures are mostly small, often exquisite and always concerned with detail. In many cases they are dated and enable one to reconstruct a life which moved between England, the Mediterranean, Egypt and the Nile, the Punjab, China, Japan and the Rocky Mountains.

The original credit for keeping the Nile letters belongs to the main recipients, his father and mother and my grandparents, the Reverend J.T.H. and Mrs Du Boulay. When Alice Du Boulay was widowed in 1915 she took a lease of 26 St Thomas Street, Winchester, where she reserved an apartment for Noel between his retirement and her own death, that is, from 1922 to 1925. The papers were then kept by Noel in his bachelor lodgings at the Bridge Hotel, Shawford, until they passed on his death in 1949 to his youngest brother (and my father) Philip, and thence to the keeping of my brother George and me.

The habit of circulating the other brothers and sisters with the letters each of them wrote home from abroad grew up as several of them departed from England one by one to earn their highly various livings. In this way we have eyewitness commentaries between about 1908 and 1917 from the soldier in Mauritius and France, from the Indian Civil Servant at the centre of Indian government, from the tenant-farmer and his sister the school inspector in the Transvaal, and from the manager on the spot of Egyptian irrigation and salt production. They come and go, occasionally meet but always write, and depended with deep family feeling upon receiving news.

The circulation of typewritten copies became formalized from London by Uncle Ralph from 1908 after he had returned from Cairo to represent the Egyptian Salt and Soda Company in their London office in Fetter Lane, and to bring up his children in England. Ralph, almost absent from the correspondence itself, deserves special acknowledgement for his full and faithful copy-extracting as well as

the quiet advice and practical help he so often gave his brothers and sisters abroad. Surviving autograph letters can be compared with their typescript copies to show how little of interest was left out. Family members did not use harsh words of each other but occasionally expressed doubts or hopes destined only for the recipient, and these would be omitted in the circulated draft. The letters also provide evidence that Ralph's services were appreciated. Dick, for example, was amused in September 1913 by getting one of his own letters back from Ralph, sent to the Transvaal in typed form, and wrote at once and eagerly that he enjoyed receiving the family letters and was grateful for them.

There should therefore have been several sets of this correspondence. I can only say that a single set came down to me and my brother on our parents' deaths, which exists in three files arranged in chronological order, and numbering some 800 letters in all.

It is not hard to see why it peters out in the middle of the Great War. Grandfather, who always wanted to know the factual details of his children's working lives, died in October 1915. Noel became a middle-aged staff officer in England after 1916 and had neither time nor the liberty to say very much. James and family returned from India with their retiring viceroy, Lord Hardinge, in 1916. My father withdrew into domestic life in 1917. In fact, the brothers and sisters went on working but the copying of letters faded out, and those written later and preserved by chance are mostly about private routine matters.

That these memoirs are put together by a historian might raise the expectation that they would be worked into some historical treatment of the British Empire's last days, but any such intention would be beyond a medievalist and in any case irrelevant to the purpose, which is to record the actual lives and interplaying personalities of a family. References to published works have occasionally been made, simply to clarify who or what the letters were talking about. The names of political and military leaders sometimes crop up because they entered the lives of these uncles and aunts, and sometimes they were friends and acquaintances as well as superiors. They help to frame the dramas

in which the letter-writers were acting, but friendship is precious in its own right, irrespective of rank.

That said, these memorials are presented as eyewitness reports of lesser servants of empire, at a period of crucial change, taken from a level somewhat nearer the ground than that of commanders-in-chief, high commissioners and the like, and thus sharp in ground detail. It is their book, not mine, nor that of the top brass, and it is them I acknowledge.

Robin Du Boulay

4. George (aged four) and Robin (aged six) Du Boulay,
Alexandria, Christmas 1926.

5. Professor Robin Du Boulay, FBA, and Professor George Du Boulay,
CBE, at Robin's 85th birthday, 19 December 2005.

CHAPTER 1

A Letter-Writing Family

My grandfather was an incessant letter-writer and always knew the times when the mails went out and came in. Both he and Alice, my grandmother, wrote weekly to those of their many children who were out in the world, and he expected the same of them. He could be 'furious' even with those not of his own family who did not reply promptly to letters.

There was more to this correspondence than the formless talkativeness now catered for by the telephone. On his 70th birthday grandfather wrote to his youngest son, my father, not without a trace of self-pity, that he now lived upon memories rather than 'any actual joys except the interest of the lives of our scattered sons and daughters'. When he died in 1915 his eldest son observed that the old man had never really had any hobbies; but the collection of letters which lies before me makes it clear that the interest in his children and their doings was paramount in his life.

All this sounds patriarchal, the more so as the letters which have been carefully preserved were mostly written from distant parts of the world to the family home in Winchester. They are addressed turn and turn about to 'father' and 'mother' (never jointly) and signed always, with the Victorian formality, 'Your loving son' (or daughter), followed by initials and surname.

But the family and its collective mind was by no means a one-sided patriarchy. The children looked demandingly for their letters from home, to be delivered regularly whether to desert column on campaign, to a Transvaal farmhouse or to the frantic activity of the