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## Feeding the Imperial Appetite: Imperial Knowledge and Anglo-Indian Discourse

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### Abstract

Beginning in the late nineteenth century, a spate of cookbooks and household management guides appeared that were intended to assist British women in running their households in India. In this article, the author argues that these texts constructed a new approach to imperial domesticity. Rather than mimicking the labor-intensive approach to household management common in the metropole, British women in India adopted a "hands-off" approach to housekeeping that allowed them to devote their attentions to other pursuits, including the work of empire.

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## FEEDING THE IMPERIAL APPETITE

### *Imperial Knowledge and Anglo-Indian Domesticity*

Mary Prociida

*Beginning in the late nineteenth century, a spate of cookbooks and household management guides appeared that were intended to assist British women in running their households in India. In this article, the author argues that these texts constructed a new approach to imperial domesticity. Rather than mimicking the labor-intensive approach to household management common in the metropole, British women in India adopted a "hands-off" approach to housekeeping that allowed them to devote their attentions to other pursuits, including the work of empire.*

"[T]hanks to Flora Annie Steel's *Complete Indian Housekeeper and Cook* [I got on] very well" with housekeeping, remembered Eileen Sanders, an Anglo-Indian woman explaining how she had managed her household in British India during the 1920s and 1930s.<sup>1</sup> Her devotion to this classic work by Steel and her co-author Grace Gardiner, which incorporated household hints, advice on domestic finances and management, and a wealth of recipes—all crafted specifically for the unique living conditions the British community in India faced—was undoubtedly shared by many other Anglo-Indian women who lived in the Raj from 1888, when the volume was first published, through Indian independence in 1947. Steel, a best-selling fiction writer, rated her "cookery book" as having done more good for her readers than any of her popular novels or short stories. "I have had letters without end, thanking me for it from would-be housekeepers, gardeners, cow-keepers, and chicken rearers," she wrote in 1927.<sup>2</sup> Her book's wide appeal and obvious utility help explain why it went through ten editions, making it one of the most popular and well-known of the many similar volumes published from the mid-to-late nineteenth century onward.<sup>3</sup> The large size of this body of Anglo-Indian domestic literature, its continued appeal over the course of a century, its relative homogeneity and, most significantly, its importance in the lived experiences of Anglo-Indians indicate that the modes of domesticity advocated in these texts resonated with the realities of imperial life rather than serving merely as the presentation of a chimerical ideal.

Anglo-Indian women and men focused their attention on the empire and avoided cooking and the petty supervision of kitchen management; nonetheless, they still had to eat. Someone had to plan menus, organize and maintain the kitchen and its equipment, purchase food, supervise meal preparation, and, of course, actually cook several meals each day. By dis-

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