

Non-Fiction

Rebels Against the Raj – the westerners in India who fought for independence

Ramachandra Guha's fascinating account of seven foreigners who helped in the struggle for self-rule, at personal cost



Mahatma Gandhi, centre, at an agricultural fair in England in 1931. Madeleine Slade, an Englishwoman who became his de facto daughter, is second from right © Gamma-Keystone via Getty Images

Victor Mallet YESTERDAY

In an age of bigotry and narrow nationalisms, Ramachandra Guha's new book is a welcome reminder that people's opinions, passions and life's work do not have to be dictated by their ethnic identities or their countries of birth.

In *Rebels Against the Raj*, the biographer of Mahatma Gandhi and historian of India has chosen to tell the colourful life stories of seven white foreigners — originally British and American — who endured jail, deportation and other privations in their efforts to help the struggle for Indian independence from British rule.

The author is explicit about the purpose of what he calls his "morality tale". In the prologue he writes: "This is a world governed by paranoia and nationalist xenophobia, with the rise of jingoism in country after country, and a corresponding contempt for ideas and individuals that emanate from outside the borders of one's nation."

Guha goes on to call out India's Narendra Modi, China's Xi Jinping, Donald Trump and white supremacists in the US, and Boris Johnson and Brexiters in England. They see themselves, he says, as "uniquely blessed by history and by God" and wrongly

The best known outside India are probably two women. Annie Besant, a Theosophist who left for a six-week tour of Ceylon and India in 1892 and stayed for 40 years, became the first woman to be elected president of the Indian National Congress. Then there was Madeleine Slade, an English naval officer's daughter and piano player who devoted her life to Gandhi from the time she moved to his ashram in 1925, when she was in her early 30s.

Renamed by Gandhi as Mira, she was appointed his de facto daughter, and “wanted to be the one to take out his spinning wheel, the one to peel his fruit and pour his goats’ milk into a tumbler, the one to keep track of his blood pressure and his bowel movements”. From retirement in Austria, she was also an important contributor to Richard Attenborough’s influential 1982 film *Gandhi*.

Relations were not always smooth — Besant ended up criticising Gandhi because she regarded his civil disobedience movement as too extreme; Gandhi often found Mira’s solicitousness suffocating — but these seven foreigners played important roles in the development of Indian newspapers, academic institutions and political and social movements. They were also, in many cases, prophetic about the environmental disasters and political tensions that would come to plague independent India.

Among the things the seven had in common, apart from a connection to Gandhi, were a sense of shock at the casual racism of British colonists and some American missionaries. There was also a shared tendency to dress and eat simply like their Indian friends and families and shun the privileges of their white colleagues.

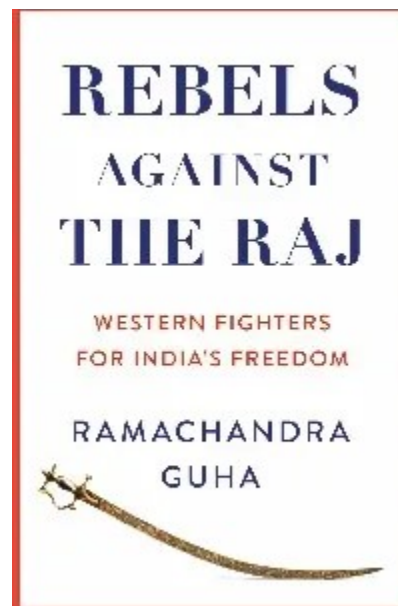
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BG (Benjamin) Horniman, who was obliged to hide his homosexuality given the social conventions of the time, moved from journalism in Portsmouth and London to become a campaigning newspaper editor in Bombay. He could have enjoyed the comfortable lifestyle at *The Statesman*, the establishment newspaper in Calcutta, “writing sonorous editorials in the mornings before going to the races in the afternoon and to the Bengal Club for drinks and dinner”, but opted to write about rural distress and

married the daughter of a Tamil communist and became an active journalist and writer who eventually ended up a liberal.

Dick Keithahn, who started as an American missionary, worked to educate and provide healthcare for villagers in south India, while Catherine Mary Heilemann — renamed Sarala — set up a girls' school and was a pioneering environmentalist campaigner in north India.

We are reminded in passing that this was not a binary struggle between a ruthless British empire and a heroic Indian populace. Well before independence in 1947 there was great diversity of opinion in the west about the future of India and the other colonies.



Yet it is about the state of contemporary India that Guha is most aggrieved. He has been a vocal critic of Modi and his Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party and laments the rise of nativism and xenophobia in recent decades. At the end of the book, he accuses the Hindu fundamentalists of arrogantly assuming they are destined to be the gurus for the rest of humanity and have “nothing to learn from or gain from the world in return”.

In his tribute to international solidarity, Guha reaches back to the great Indian

The Ganges and India's future

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