

**T. Harry Williams Center for Oral History Collection**

**Tape 874 Finding Aid**

**INTERVIEWEE NAMES:**

Ivan Ellis Jones	4700.0594	Tape 874.1	(Tape 4 of 4)
Mr. Douglas C. Fairbairn and Mrs. Agnes Fairbairn	4700.0595	Tape 874.2	(Tape 2 of 2)
Major Christopher York	4700.0596	Tape 874.3	(Tape 1 of 3)

**IDENTIFICATION:** Britons in Pre-Independence India

**INTERVIEWERS:** Frank de Caro and Rosan Jordan

**SERIES:** British Voices from South Asia

**INTERVIEW DATES:**

Jones: 4/22/1978

Fairbairns: 4/24/1978

York: 4/26/1978

**TOTAL PLAYING TIME:** 1 hour, 34 minutes

Jones: 7 minutes

Fairbairns: 75 minutes

York: 12 minutes

**OTHER MATERIALS:** None

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**Tape 874, Side A**

**Jones (Part 6 of 6) (874.1)**

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The old man began laughing and said, "I just remembered that as I got onto the ship in Bombay in 1907"; Jones told his wife that they were getting out just in time; things kept changing; one of the governors of Bombay was responsible for the improved relationships in the business sector by founding a club; Bombay was full of highly intelligent business people; looking back, it is possible for one to realize that one was more liberal than wished to be; some of the British were a bit more superior, but it depended on their natural adaptability; some were much more adaptable than others; someone would walk into a situation assuming they were the upper class, but it is hard to

make any generalizations; when they would go back to some districts, it would be said how nice it was to have European officers; Jones tells of the police superintendent's wife remarking how nice it was to have a white man as the deputy commissioner instead of a black man while the black man was standing in their presence; the new deputy commissioner (who was the black man) told the superintendent that he did not want to be put into that situation again; no one ever regarded the Punjabis as blacks; Jones's Scottish friend once said that the Irish and Scottish tended to get along better in India than Englishmen because the Englishmen never picked up on the fact that the people never enjoyed being ruled by the English; there was a Scottish boy that went out and met the chief secretary; when asked if he was going to like the life, he said he would like the Punjabis but he had not made up his mind about the British; Jones does dream of India from time to time; he sometimes dreams of being back in the classroom as well; end of Jones interview.

### **Tape 874, Side A cont'd**

#### **Fairbairns (Part 1 of 3) (874.2)**

071 de Caro talks of how he found Fairbairn  
 086 Fairbairn had lived in India for thirty-one years total; from the time he went out as a young man in 1925 until Independence in 1947, they lived under the British raja  
 091 from 1947 until he retired in 1956, it was under the Indian raja; the exception was that all the civil servants were trained under the British Civil Service  
 096 the civil servants were mainly men from places like Cambridge and hardly westernized; these were the men that built up the new India from the Civil Service point of view after Independence  
 102 these two phases presented a tremendous challenge and an entrancing experience and career; he is forever grateful to India and the Indian people for the experience  
 112 it was heart wrenching to see the old India they loved so much change because of Partition  
 118 about 1925, there was a recession in England and the surrounding areas; employment opportunities were not easy to find; Fairbairn became part of Scotland's two exports: whiskey and men  
 125 Fairbairn was appointed to a large firm that was prominent in engineering as an assistant  
 134 he shipped out from Liverpool to Calcutta, which took about thirty days; many passengers were bachelors who were either going out for the first time or going back out to jobs  
 144 the younger men who were married were the most helpful, giving them hints about what to avoid and such  
 156 Fairbairn was met in Calcutta by some of his office men, who looked at him like he should not be wearing that topi  
 160 Fairbairn's introduction into Calcutta's social life was by being pushed into a European-style boarding house where there were many young men; during the winter months, there were many young married couples  
 164 this setting helped break what was a sharp change from the life at home to basically bachelor life; you would eventually make friends and run a [chummery?]  
 171 Fairbairn's first chummery consisted of four men, who were all in different branches of activity; this was part of the system of education where they talked a lot of knowledge and nonsense and learned a lot as well  
 182 they lived a hard work life because there was a great deal of competition; if you did not prove yourself in your first or second year, you were "out on your rear"  
 187 they worked hard, lived hard and had a lot of leisure activities, such as golf or tennis  
 192 they were always on the job, however, trying to do their best

194 there were certain social divisions; the Indian Civil Service regarded themselves as  
relatively supreme beings, which in many cases they were  
199 there were also many others: irrigational engineers, forestry men, along with other  
specialty jobs  
202 men would be stationed for a time in the larger stations and then pushed out towards the  
country; Fairbairn and friends would always go out to the country to visit their friends that  
were posted further out  
205 one of Fairbairn's regrets from the early days was that he did not have a tremendous  
opportunity to go to the historic parts of India  
207 this was tailored by two criteria, one of which was where the nature of your employment  
took you, like Fairbairn having close connections with the tea industry that took him to  
various places  
221 it was important for a young bachelor to call upon the number one of his firm and perhaps  
many people that he had been introduced to  
227 you would leave the card at the house in a small box, leaving two there if you were a  
bachelor so both the husband and wife could have one  
231 the results of this was that, a week later, you would be asked out to dinner; at dinner, you  
would meet more and more people; this gave young men the opportunity of various forms  
of social life that they may not have been able to create themselves  
240 Fairbairn's earlier impressions were that the Europeans (whites) were "thrown together"  
244 at that stage, about 1935, there was a great deal of coming and going in the business world,  
the civil service or branches of the civil service between the Europeans and the Indians  
252 there was a great deal of coming and going as it developed with the highly Westernized  
Indian, most who were educated in United States or the United Kingdom; you would visit  
them but it was superficial because you could not get down to the Indian way of thinking  
260 you would either hob-nob with a rajah, a maharajah, or head of an Indian firm, a huge  
social gap and then the lower class  
266 Fairbairn worried about this somewhat  
268 the normal procedure in the early days was travel by sea because there was no air travel  
271 young men in all walks of life contracted for about four or five years; Fairbairn remembers  
being annoyed when he was kept in his first agreement for five years  
279 they would go home by sea and leave was fairly long, for it took a good three weeks to get  
to Britain  
291 as your seniority increased, the contractual period would shorten to three years or so; when  
air travel arrived, Fairbairn would go home for about a month every year, with the  
exception of during the war  
305 one of the great joys of India to men like Fairbairn was the thrusting of responsibility upon  
you at a relatively young age; looking back, it seems almost ludicrous  
310 one of Fairbairn's friends was sent up as a district officer at the age of thirty-five; he would  
preside over local disputes and dispense justice with limited experience  
317 the funny thing about the system is that it worked  
318 the ICS was incorruptible and respected always by all communities and sections of the  
Indian community; they were known for their rational outlook and the justice they  
dispensed  
325 Fairbairn joined the chamber of commerce after obtaining a degree in English and  
economics as a general assistant  
328 it was a large organization that had about twenty university Europeans who were the

seniors, and about three or four hundred Indian employees, who filled more of the junior ranks; there were about one thousand employees that were outside on the docks measuring cargo and such

338 the Bengal Chamber of Commerce had gathered around a host of organizations and associations; as an employee, you were processed through these

356 you started among the smaller associations, progressing towards the larger ones

361 the Secretary General of the Chamber of Commerce advised the associations and the general membership on their commercial and industrial policy, being the link with the state and central governments

368 the various Chamber of Commerce offices were all linked through the Associated Chambers of Commerce

380 the Bengal Chamber of Commerce had traditionally acted as secretaries to the Associated Chambers; this gave you a tremendous view of all the industries, who were all merged into the Chamber of Commerce

393 apart from visiting the centers to keep in touch, they argue cases with the governments; this gave the job its charm and attractions

401 the Associated Chambers could be similar to the Confederation of British Industries

411 as time progressed, trade unionism began to emerge in India; various negotiations had to take place

421 part of the secretarial function was that every form of legislation that came out in the form of a bill had to be examined

434 in about 1939, with the interruption of the war, were the constitutional discussions that went along a number of years, leading to Independence in 1947

441 they had to give evidence for both British industry and Indian industry

445 with the British (and later Indian) government links, they were always addressed by successive viceroys; they would come annually to address the Associated Chambers

455 the viceroys made important announcements about the commercial, industrial, governmental and constitutional policies

461 in the post-Independence days, they had close contacts with such people as Gandhi; this is one of the things that one treasures in the memory

492 there was great anxiety during World War II; it was an unfortunate period

502 there had to be armed control because there were Indian nationalists, who were very anti-British at the time

513 the men were absorbed into the army and various branches of the Civil Services

523 World War II was a time of great pressure and personal anxiety over families and such

532 the immediate pre-and post-Independence years were also very trying and stressful; Partition was a tragedy

543 it was decided there would be a sudden and complete division of India; six months' notice was given

551 there was then a "holocaust" of Muslim hatred; Fairbairn remembers walking through the street on day and watching a Muslim disappear into a side street, followed by the sounds of him being "knifed"

561 if a Hindu ventured into a Muslim community, he would also be killed

562 the Europeans were very modest in East Bengal

565 end of Side A

**Tape 847, Side B****Fairbairns (Part 3 of 3) (874.2)**

005 many of the British companies were bought out  
 009 Fairbairn was interviewed by a firm in Scotland, who had been asked by the chamber of  
 commerce to look out for young men; Fairbairn went straight into the chamber profession  
 013 the chamber of commerce spoke for English and European commerce and industry in a  
 place where almost of the industries were British owned and developed  
 017 there was tremendous trade between Britain and India  
 022 the Fairbairns were in India in a very interesting time, both before and after Independence  
 023 one difference between the two times was the difference between the Europeans and  
 Indians: they were friendlier to each other; before Independence, Indians were not allowed  
 to become members of British clubs  
 027 there were certain clubs that did not allow for Indian membership, but that was changing;  
 there were also Indian clubs that did not allow for European memberships  
 033 the Fairbairns were once asked over for tea to an Indian's home and the women were  
 terribly shy; they put out a nice spread, full of food that was sickly sweet; you had to eat  
 something  
 044 the thing to do in India was not to pay the original price for anything in the market; you  
 must beat the price down because they are robbers  
 047 Mrs. Fairbairn grew very accustomed to this, but she still felt guilty afterwards  
 054 when trying to bargain, you would walk away after offering a price and they would chase  
 after you  
 068 much of their work is done in missionaries or convents  
 072 neither Mr. nor Mrs. Fairbairn had any family in India prior to going out  
 073 they admire some "shadow embroidery", which receives its name because it is done on the  
 wrong side  
 076 everything is done by hand; a [penwalla?] would go around trying to sell his goods  
 084 Mrs. Fairbairn never went to Kashmir  
 086 when Mrs. Fairbairn first went out, there were no air conditioners; there was so much dust  
 that you would be filthy once you got inside  
 089 after a long spell, the family would need a refresher in the hills  
 093 dysentery was a big problem at the time; fevers were also common, but there was not a  
 great deal of malaria around Calcutta  
 097 everything had to be boiled, from the milk to the water  
 100 one had to be very cautious with children  
 101 after about age five, the children seemed to become very pale and thin so they had to be  
 brought home; until then, children seemed to remain healthy and fine  
 105 no one is really sure why the children's health declined after age five  
 107 another reason to send them home was from the educational standpoint; there were very  
 few schools  
 108 during the war, they tried to organize a school for European children because some of the  
 children were eight or nine but could not go home because of the war  
 115 tone school that is a typical English public school full of Indian boys in Dehradun  
 126 there would also be missionary-type people and others that went out as house mistresses  
 129 there are many people with Indian connections; Mrs. Fairbairn does not really see anyone  
 they knew from India, but they meet people that were there or have ties to India  
 140 many of the business heads were Scottish because of education and training; banks

throughout India were manned almost entirely by Scotsmen  
 158 there were some mills that employed close to 5,000 workers; jute was one of the biggest  
 industries in India, particularly around Dehradun  
 174 Mrs. Fairbairn does not know why that many of the workers in specific industries seemed  
 to come from specific areas on the whole  
 176 the tea planters were recruited from men whose fathers and grandfathers had been farmers;  
 they knew soils and how to grow crops  
 180 the Fairbairn's MP, Allan Smith, had a great grandfather that went out to India during the  
 sailing boat days; they were a well-known family; he is in tea know because his family  
 made a name for themselves during the pioneering days  
 189 indigo attracted many people from England to go out to India; it has been superseded by  
 chemicals  
 196 markets could be down in the floor one day and then way up the next because a crop had  
 materialized or something to that effect  
 204 whiskey was very popular in India; it was so hot that you would fill up most of the glass  
 with soda water; gin was drank mostly in the mornings  
 212 malt whiskeys were also very nice to have  
 229 the Fairbairn's were once at a cocktail party where Mrs. Fairbairn was drinking a very  
 strong martini; she has not been able to drink one since  
 259 there is much better fruit variety in the United States verses England, according to Mrs.  
 Fairbairn; they discuss different types of fruit  
 271 Mrs. Fairbairn does miss the variety of fruit that was available to them in India  
 274 if you treated your servants reasonably, they would do anything for you; Mrs. Fairbairn  
 would get very upset when she would see a European making a fool of one of the servants  
 282 there was one servant that would always open bottles of whiskey; they later learned that he  
 would hide the half-full bottles and only serve out of full bottles  
 290 the caste system is very strong; Mrs. Fairbairn recalls all the "terrible shacks" in Calcutta  
 298 there was a Chinese community in Calcutta  
 301 Fairbairn would go snipe shooting, but you had to go to the out country; the tea plantations  
 would be great places to shoot when Fairbairn would go and pay his regular visit  
 309 the Fairbairn's friend Cameron would go snipe shooting almost every weekend; he was  
 killed trying to protect his Hindu servant from the Muslim mob  
 319 there were two types of tea gardens  
 320 one type of tea garden was on the hills, which was a base type of tea; there was also a  
 common variety of tea elsewhere, which was a heavier-liquoring type of tea and very  
 popular around the world  
 327 some of the tea gardens would extend hundreds of acres; the bushes were trimmed to be flat  
 330 the leaves would come up during the plucking season, which is until about August  
 335 the tea gardens would normally be run mainly by corporations; some were registered in  
 India, but a great many were registered in London; all of the staff would be Scotsmen  
 340 depending on the size, you would have about three or four young European assistants to  
 help the manager; they would manage the labor  
 344 the family would be with the manager, except when the family would be sent home for  
 education  
 347 one was isolated in many tea gardens; there were little clubs within about thirty miles of  
 each tea garden, where they would all go and congregate once a week  
 366 the dancing in Calcutta was beautiful; the women are lovely, with wonderful movements

371 Fairbairn came home in the end of 1945  
 377 it was very difficult to divide the family; it also made it very expensive because you had to  
 maintain two different worlds  
 381 end of Fairbairn interview

**Tape 874, Side B cont'd**

**York (Part 1 of 3) (874.3)**

384 beginning of York interview  
 394 after you are commissioned you are posted; York was commissioned into a line cavalry  
 regiment and received orders  
 403 York remembers there being many trips and many officers on the voyage out; there was  
 trouble getting through the Bay of Biscay  
 409 the orderly had to go up and down the troop decks, with everyone being sick  
 414 they landed in Bombay; everyone in the regiment was sent a bearer to look after them, who  
 met them at the dock  
 421 the trains were staggering: each sleeper had a bunk on each side (two in all) and a  
 bathroom/lavatory  
 425 they started slowly from Bombay to Hyderabad, one of the princely states; it took an  
 overnight trip to get five hundred miles  
 433 the military station was about three or four miles north of Hyderabad; the barracks were  
 large blocks of buildings, one block to each squadron in the cavalry; the officers had a mess  
 and bungalows  
 443 there were married bungalows and single bungalows; there were so many bachelors that  
 they were removed from the bachelor quarters; York was sent into a married bungalow,  
 along with another friend  
 449 their staff included a bearer, a dressing boy and a [chokara?]; the dressing boy would be  
 related to the bearer; the chokara was a little boy that "did all the dirty jobs"  
 458 there was also a night watchman, which was basically a way "to get grand papa a job"; if  
 you did not have a night watchman, you would be burglarized; if you did have a night  
 watchman, you would avoid being burglarized  
 463 there were also gardeners; the same gardeners would work in several people's bungalows,  
 although they never realized it  
 466 the question of Indian servants was a matter of family, for if one servant would be lacking,  
 they would all begin to lack and all be fired; you were looked after by an Indian family,  
 who was normally very good and paid very little  
 479 York's bearer was the highest paid, receiving fifteen rupees a month  
 485 the sweeper would be a low caste Hindu; they emptied the bath water, toilet and such  
 494 in addition to all the servants, there would be two chargers, a polo pony  
 499 York had nine or ten servants in all; the total bill was 100 rupees a month; these people  
 were well off  
 511 York had trouble with his bearer and decided to change him; the family then went broke,  
 living on the money lender  
 518 the money lender charges the English officer two percent per month, "so heaven only  
 knows what he charges his neighbors"  
 524 after changing the bearer, all of the staff changed  
 526 the routine of life, except for the climate, was very pleasant  
 530 an orderly officer would have to up around five in the morning; the officer would have to

turn the guard out at six in the morning; the first parade would be about 6:30 a.m.  
539 you would go and check the horses and stalls around eight or nine, after which you would  
return to breakfast  
543 there were “powerful breakfasts”: eggs, bacon, cold duck (if there was shooting), etc.  
549 after breakfast, there was some type of instruction and then the stables; it was amazing how  
well kept the horses were  
565 if the horses were not kept well in such a hot climate, they quickly deteriorated  
568 the young officers would have about six months of riding school, learning how to ride in  
the proper fashion; it lasted about two hours  
577 end of Side B