‘On Fort Duty’, Rudyard Kipling - Pick a particular narrative of colonialism and analyse its effects as a narrative

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Rudyard Kipling’s ‘On Fort Duty’ (Kipling, 1884) written in 1884 at just nineteen years old, serves as an insightful yet ominous elegy which narrates the thoughts and experiences of a young soldier engaging in routine garrison fort duties amidst the unrest in regions such as the Khyber Pass and Ali Khey. Kipling's work is known to be the ‘only literary picture that we possess of the nineteenth-century Anglo-India’ (McClure, 1981, p.1) therefore this poem is not only a reflection of the realities of colonial military life but also gives insight into the broader ideological forces which shaped Kipling's writing. As published in the United Services College Chronicle, (Kipling, 1884) a publication edited by Kipling and now preserved in Haileybury College’s archives, this poem was likely seen by Kipling as a reflection of the colonial mindset of his time. In this context, colonialism is understood as the practice of domination, which includes the subjugation and exploitation from one group to another, and the narration is the role that the poem takes in shaping the way colonialism is perceived by the reader. However, central to the exploration of this narrative is Kipling's age and education; influenced by an imperial ideology during his time at the Imperial Services College and now merged to become Haileybury Imperial Services College. ‘On Fort Duty’ ultimately describes colonialism through its themes of detachment and justification, illustrating how Kipling, even at a young age, wrote in a normalised and romanticised manner regarding the violence and ideology behind colonialism; framing it as an inevitable and heroic mission, rather than questioning its moral implications. This idealization of empire highlights the wider psychological and emotional detachment of the colonizer, offering insight to how colonialism was not only justified but ingrained through cultural and institutional narratives.

Kipling's 'On Fort Duty' serves to justify British colonial rule by portraying imperial expansion and the subjugation of local populations as a necessary response to their perceived violence, framing British dominance as an act of self-defence rather than aggression. The soldier describes how the 'Maliks' are 'at it tooth and nail', presenting the inhabitants as inherently aggressive by using vivid, animalistic imagery to describe their defence. This suggests a primal, almost instinctive ferocity, implying that the Pashtun tribes engage in violence with unrestrained savagery. This dehumanisation aligns with colonial justifications for British intervention, reinforcing the idea that the tribes are disorderly and are in need of imperial control. Kipling's choice of phrasing strips the conflict of any political or defensive motivations on part of the inhabitants, characterising them instead as naturally violent aggressors. However, Kipling's perceived justification of colonialism was shaped by his early experiences and ingrained imperial ideology; he and his sister were 'sent home to England' at the age of only five so they wouldn't be 'contaminated spiritually or physically by India' (McClure, 1981, p.10), reflecting the deep rooted belief that British superiority had to be preserved through separation from the colonised population. This racial and cultural distancing reinforces the justification of colonial rule as a civilising mission: if British children were thought to require protection from India's supposed moral and physical dangers, then British governance over India was established as not only beneficial but necessary.

The notion that military violence and a colonialist stance was ingrained into British minds, even from a young age, is presented through the seamless use of jargon, with Kipling utilising casual references to weaponry such as 'stolen British carbine' and 'long Kohat jezail' to demonstrate how colonial violence was routine. By operating military terminology without explanation, Kipling assumes familiarity with the language of the empire, highlighting how embedded colonial warfare was in British consciousness. The use of the adjective 'stolen' reinforces the colonial perspective by framing local populations as thieves rather than legitimate resistors, subtly justify British military presence.

During Kipling's first years at public school they 'taught not open-mindedness and generosity, but authoritarian ridgidy, respect for power, and love of domination', (McClure, 1981, p.9) revealing that Kipling's formative education played a crucial role in shaping his views on colonialism. The observation that Kipling's education fostered a 'love of domination' helps explain the normalisation and justification for colonial violence in Kipling's writing as to him, violence wasn't an anomaly, but a natural extension of the empire's moral and military mission. This ideological conditioning was not limited to individual experiences but was institutionalised in the schools which shaped future colonial administrators and military officers. Haileybury, originally founded as the East India College in 1806, was central to this process, training men to govern the empire and instilling in them a worldview that framed colonial dominance as both necessary and natural. Even after its closure in 1858 and

transformation into Haileybury College, the institution's imperial legacy endured, particularly through its later merger with the Imperial Service College, where Kipling was educated. This idea of instilled colonialism in young minds from a young age is seen in Kipling's other work such as ‘Gentleman-Rankers’, (Kipling, Rudyard, 1892) published in 1892; ‘And the measure of our torment is the measure of our youth… we knew the worst too young!’, implying that soldiers were exposed to the brutalities of colonialism and war at an impressionable age, reinforcing colonial violence as an unavoidable duty.

This is demonstrated by the personification of the British cannons; ‘Where the cannons grin arow!’, transforming deadly weapons of war into animated objects. The imagery of the canons ‘grinning’ suggests an absence of remorse or moral conflict, framing the violence they represent as an inevitable and almost celebratory part of imperial power, therefore normalising the brutality of colonialism and presenting it as an unquestioned aspect of British military presence. In this context, the British justified their military interventions in Afghanistan as defensive measures against Russian influence. Beginning in 1879, the Great Survey of India became increasingly intertwined with espionage, aligning with what British frontiersmen termed the ‘Great Game’, which the poem alludes to through its seemingly playful personification of the cannons. British agents, often disguised as Bhuddiest monks, ventured into uncharted territories beyond Kashmir and the Khyber Pass, gathering intelligence under the guise of exploration (Feguson, 2002, p.174-175). This warfare shaped perceptions of colonialism, revealing it as a ruthless yet adventurous enterprise justified under strategic necessity and therefore indicates why such violence displayed in the poem is regarded in a normalised manner. Through its portrayal of military duty, embedded imperial ideology and justifying colonial violence as routine and necessity, ‘On Fort Duty’ constructs a narrative in which British expansion is depicted as an inevitable response to the disorder of the local inhabitants, rather than an act of aggression.

Kipling explores the psychologically detached colonial mindset, both from the local population and the harsh realities of war, reinforcing the psychological alienation of the colonizer and the colonized. Achieved through the metaphorical presentation of the proximity between the soldier in the poem and the distance from the ongoing violence, the narrator, aware of the conflict, describes how there is ‘tumult in the Kyber’. With reference to the Khyber Pass, a significant military route that allowed for the rapid deployment of trips and supplies during the conflict and the frequent brawls between the British forces and the Pashtun tribes, inferred by ‘Maliks’. Rather than engaging in this ‘feud’, the soldier is removed from the action, stuck on monotonous ‘Fort-Duty’. The expressed frustration is not targeted towards the violence, but instead at his own lack of participation, as he exclaims; ‘But alas! I cannot go’, evoking a sense of romanticisation as he longs for the perceived glory

of the battle rather than questioning the brutality of colonial warfare. This romanticisation reflects a broader imperial mindset, where military service is framed as an adventure rather than an instrument of oppression. This introduces the poem's presentation of the conflict between the privilege of being stationed away from the violence and the simultaneous privilege of questioning his own lack of participation. The soldier describes how he is ‘sent upon ‘Fort-Duty’ by this pestilent Ravi’, referring to a commanding officer, which presents a sense of entitlement, as he perhaps believes he deserves more ‘exciting’ duties. The use of the adjective ‘pestilent’ highlights the disillusionment of young soldiers who viewed war as an adventure, who were instead ‘sent’ to perform dull garrison duties, as the potential sparing of their lives is viewed as an obstacle to desired military glory. The soldiers' lack of participation can be seen as a consequence of the expanding of the British army to native Indians. By 1881, the Indian army comprised 69,647 British troops and 125,000 native soldiers, accounting for over half of the total manpower in all British garrisons across the empire. W.E. Forster, a Liberal politician, complained in 1878 that the government was relying ‘not upon the patriotism and spirit of our own people’ but getting ‘Gurkhas and Sikhs and Mussulmen to fight for us’. (Ferguson, 2002, p. 171) This reliance on native trips for colonial campaigns left many British officers, such as the soldier in the poem, frustrated by their lack of direct participation in the violence of the war. Although authoritative figures such as politicians argued that this goes against Britain’s ‘patriotism’, the perspective of the disproportionate use of Indian soldiers in imperial conflicts is manipulated by the lens of nineteen year old Kipling, instead suggesting that the true frustration lies not with the morality of imperialism, but with the lack of adventure and glory in the soldier's own experience. Kipling's portrayal of the soldiers' disillusionment reflects the detached and romanticised view of war, where the personal desire for military distinction overshadows the ethical implications of exploiting native forces for imperial gain.

In the last stanza, Kipling intensifies the theme of detachment by juxtaposing the soldiers' isolation at the frontier with his idealised vision of England, highlighting the emotional and psychological distance from both the violence of colonialism and his own responsibilities. The soldier looks ‘across the ramparts to the river broad and grey’, leading him to think of ‘merry England’. Kipling metaphorically links the physical distance between the fighting and his home to his lack of moral engagement with the ideology of colonialism. This highlights the soldier's boredom and emotional detachment, as rather than being motivated by patriotic fervor or a sense of duty, he longs to return to the comfort of England ‘where the festive Horse Guards play’. This idealisation of England reflects a naive, almost child-like perspective on colonialism, showing how the soldier is psychologically removed from the harsh realities of imperial expansion and lacks any real connection to the colonial mission. To bolster this perspective, a letter written from Kipling to Cornell Price, the headmaster of

the United Services College, on February 19th 1884 (Pinney, 1990, p.57) displays how the poem was ‘written at the parents rather more than the boys’, further indicating that the boys perhaps have less of an interest in the effects of colonial expansion and fighting than the parents would, illustrating that Kipling was aware of the disconnection between young soldiers and the realities of imperialism. He goes on to write how it ‘may please some of the parents and specially those who have been in this land’, suggesting that the topic of colonialism would resonate more with the older generation who had more knowledge and experience rather than the boys within the school.

However, in comparison to Kipling’s later work such as ‘The White Man's Burden’, ‘On Fort Duty’ can be seen as a less effective narrative of the realities of colonialism, regarding the way it presents the oppression of minorities and the conflict of morality which soldiers faced. As ‘On Fort Duty’ was written by Kipling when he was only nineteen years old, it significantly impacts his perception and experiences of colonialism, perhaps shaped more by youthful idealism and romanticisation. In contrast, as Kipling matured and wrote ‘The White Man’s Burden’ (Kipling, 1899) , it is evident that the narration of colonialism with it shifted, as he gained more experience and authority. In 1888, just four years after the publication of the poem ‘On Fort Duty’, the Third Battery of the First Brigade, Scottish Division Garrison Artillery R.A., and a detachment of the Royal Northumberland Fusiliers were stationed at Fort Lahore. During his time as a journalist in Lahore, Kipling formed friendships with a number of soldiers, both officers and privates, an experience he later recalls in Something of Myself, p. 55: ‘I got to meet the soldiery of those days in visits to Fort Lahore and, in a less degree, at Mian Mir Cantonments’ (Kipling, 1937) , demonstrating Kipling’s direct interaction with military personnel, giving him first hand exposure to the colonial forces stationed in India, thus demonstrating how Kipling’s own experiences in colonial India played a crucial role in shaping his narrations of colonialism.

The lasting effects of colonialism continue to cast a shadow over institutions such as Haileybury, serving as a reminder of the ideological forces that shaped the British Empire and its legacy. ‘On Fort Duty’ is not merely a relic of Kipling's early literacy development; is it a testament to the ways in which imperial rule was justified, normalised and even romanticised through narrative. The poem constructs an image of colonial violence as routine, framing British expansion not as an act of aggression but almost an inevitable response to perceived disorder. Yet, in doing so, it also reveals the psychological detachment of those enforcing colonial rule, soldiers who viewed military service less as an ethical dilemma and more as a personal adventure, disconnected from the realities of subjugation. Although the poem provides insight into the ways colonialism was justified at the time, it forces us to confront if such justifications persist today. As a product of the

Imperial Services College, Kipling's perceptions of colonialism were shaped by his experiences during his time as a student, therefore, Haileybury today faces the challenge of coming to terms with its historical role in empire-building. While some dismiss Kipling's connections to Haileybury as 'distant', 'non-existent' and 'tenuous', (Haileybury, 2012, p.29) this ignores the crucial detail that Haileybury amalgamated with the Imperial Service College, in which Kipling attended as a student. For those who attend Haileybury today, 'On Fort Duty' is more than just a poetic archive; it is a confrontation of the past and a vestige of colonial impacts. It forces us to question not only how colonialism was justified but how its legacies endure. As a modern society, we should not distance ourselves from this history but engage with it critically - to recognise the ways in which literature, education and power fuelled colonialist history and how such narratives are no longer ideologically accepted.

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Primary source:

Kipling, Rudyard, *On Fort Duty* (United Services College Chronicle, March 28, 1884)
Original copy of poem in Haileybury archives:
Followed by manuscript of content below:

After this he distributed printed lists of the Members, and Museum Notices. He also reminded the Society of the approach of the season, and expressed a hope that the members would evince sufficient energy to enable them to show something for their work at the end of it.

A paper was then read by Machell on Sharks, and a discussion was afterwards held on these monsters.

A vote of thanks to Machell was proposed, and carried unanimously.

There were present on this occasion 3 Honorary Members, 14 Ordinary Members, and 6 Visitors.

Meeting held March 1st, 1884.

The President announced the following first notices for the Botanical Section.

The President	3
F. B. Hinchliff	2
H. M. Hinchliff	2
R. T. Morris	2

Mr. Price then took the chair while the President read a highly interesting and amusing paper on "Things relating to Natural History in general."

A vote of thanks to the President was proposed and carried unanimonsly.

After this a short discussion on Botany followed between Mr. Price and the President, and P. M. Bauer brought forward two motions which were rejected.

There were present on this occasion 3 Honorary Members, 16 Ordinary Mem[illegible] and 13 Visitors.

Marriage.

On Jan. 7th, inst., at Emmanuel Church, West Dulwich, by the Rev. E. Rae, assisted by the Rev. H. C. Stevens, the Rev. G. Welles, M.A., Oxon., to Alice Fitz-James, 5th surviving daughter of Vice-Admiral E. P. Charlewood, of Porthill, Bideford.

On Fort Duty.

An O. U. S. C. singeth sorrowfully:—

There's tumult in the Khyber,
There's feud at Ali Kheyl;
For the *Mal/ks* of the Khyber
Are at it tooth and nail—
With the stolen British carbine
And the long Kohat *jezail*.

And I look across the ramparts
To the northward and the snow—
To the far Cherat cantonments;
But alas! I cannot go
From the dusty, dreary ramparts
Where the cannons grin arow.

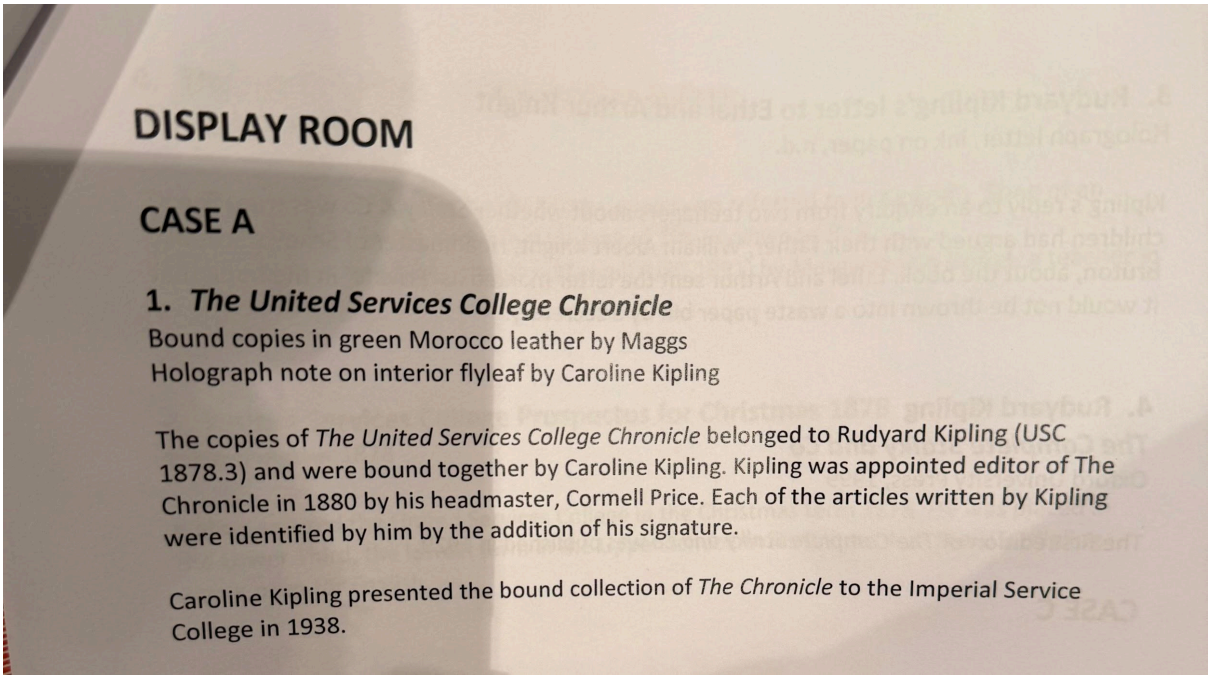
There's fighting in the Khyber,
But it isn't meant for me
Who am sent upon "fort duty,"
By this pestilent Ravee,
With just one other subaltern,
And not a soul to see.

Oh! it's everlasting gundrill,
And eight o'clock parades,
It's cleaning-up of mortars,
(Likewise of carronades)
While the passes ring with rifles
And the noise of Affghan raids.

And I look across the ramparts
To the river broad and gray,
And I think of merry England
Where the festive Horse Guards play—
Oh! take the *senior* grades for this
And spare the young R. A.!

Z. 54. R. A.

R Kipling



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