Section 5
Company families and identities

Writing history today

Thanks to the twenty-first-century efflorescence of family and local history, the proliferation of digital copies of archival materials, the success of the heritage industry in popularizing the country house as a site of belonging and the vibrant contemporary market (both online and at auction houses) for the surviving material objects of empire, writing the history of the East India Company (EIC) is an occupation that extends far beyond the walls of the academy. In this section, each chapter is an exercise in family history inspired by a sense of connection – through lineage, marriage, surviving documents, treasured objects or built environments – with past men and women whose lives were caught up in the Company’s imperial networks. Family histories, these chapters remind us, are powerful narratives, animated by emotive recollections and (no less emotive) processes of forgetting, refusal and denial.¹

Penelope Farmer’s chapter on her ancestor, William Gamul Farmer (1746–97), details William’s employment as a Company servant in Bombay and the contribution of his wealth to his family at home in Britain. Farmer’s efforts to extract a fortune from his labours for the EIC are framed in this chapter by his family’s private letters: his mother’s laments for her lonely separation from her children and his own complaints to his brother about the Company’s treatment provide a backdrop against which we view his struggles to accumulate wealth on the subcontinent. Home and an affluent retirement in Britain proved elusive goals, for William Gamul Farmer (like so many Company men before and after him) died before reaching British shores. In contrast to William, his brother Sam remained in Britain and ran a successful dye manufactory; purchasing Nonsuch Park in Surrey, possibly with the assistance of
William’s imperial wealth (which he inherited upon his brother’s death), Sam rather than William was elected an MP. The contrasting fortunes of William and Sam Farmer resonate in their descendant’s narrative with gendered histories of inclusion and exclusion from the family’s private archives (and thus its family histories) in the twentieth century.

David Williams’s chapter also examines how Company families engaged with and used the possibilities offered by imperial service to further their fortunes and opportunities. It focuses on the Melvill family, Border Scots who established a Company connection in Bengal in 1777 and expanded this initial base over several succeeding generations. Reconstructing the story of his wife’s five-times great grandparents, David Williams uses family letters and Company archives to piece together the chains of association which bound eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Scots to the British empire. Like the other chapters in this section, his study of the Melvills demonstrates the powerful pull of family histories of empire, which continue to capture the historical imaginations of current generations. As twenty-first-century Britons exploit new access to primary materials (whether in public repositories or digitized collections of documents) as part of burgeoning research undertaken by historical communities located outside academia, they dwell on local stories entangled with global and imperial processes. Family history, once synonymous with the personal and the parochial, is increasingly written as connected history, a British history that extends beyond British shores.

Sir John Sykes’s chapter delineates a family story that stretches from Britain to Bengal and from the nabob era to the present. Focusing on his ancestor, Sir Francis Sykes (1730–1804), Sir John begins with a familiar narrative in which one man’s Company service resulted in the accumulation of a huge fortune which, upon retirement home to Britain, allowed the purchase of country houses and landed estates. Basildon Park in Berkshire, the estate among his many purchases which Sir Francis chose as his family seat, fits easily within the paradigms explored in the third section of this volume. A Palladian stately home financed with Indian capital, it betrays today few external signs of Company commerce as exhibited by the National Trust, but its especially fine collection of Chinese armorial porcelain nestled comfortably in Berkshire’s eighteenth-century ‘English Hindoostan’. The Sykes chapter, moreover, reminds us that Company fortunes were accrued not only by English officials such as Sir Francis – employed in Bengal as Resident and then Governor of the trading factory at Cossimbazar – but also by Indian merchants such as Sykes’s banian (or man of business), Krishna Kanta Nandy (c.1720–94). Nandy’s
commercial skills were crucial to Sykes's exploitation of the private trading privileges he enjoyed as a Company servant. Working for Sykes also had advantages for Nandy, who was an able trader in his own right and further benefitted from access to Sykes’s Company contacts and power. Skill, connections and power allowed both Sykes and Nandy to accumulate wealth. Although Sir Francis’s great wealth did not long survive him, and his descendants’ excessive expenditure led to the sale of Basildon Park in 1838, Nandy’s wealth persisted for generations and ensured the continued growth and prosperity of his family. Told through the biography of a Persian business seal shared by Sir Francis and his banian, this chapter illustrates the ability of objects passed through the generations to connect British and Indian histories in the twenty-first century.