

Howell, Evelyn Berkeley, Sir

By [Gajendra Singh](#)



Evelyn Berkeley Howell (1877-1971)

During the First World War Evelyn Berkeley Howell was Chief Censor of Indian military correspondence in France.

Stoneman, Walter: Sir Evelyn Berkeley Howell, bromide print, n.p., 1936; source: © National Portrait Gallery, London, NPG x168445,
<http://www.npg.org.uk/collections/search/portrait/mw226545/Sir-Evelyn-Berkeley-Howell?LinkID=mp130752&role=sit&rNo=0>.

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Howell, *Evelyn* Berkeley

(E.B. Howell)

Colonial official; Chief Censor of Indian military correspondence in France

Born 12 February 1877 in Calcutta, India

Died 23 October 1971 in Cambridge, United Kingdom

Summary

Evelyn Berkeley Howell was appointed Chief Censor of Indian military correspondence in France in the winter of 1914. The thousands of letters that he and his staff translated and transcribed constitute the largest single compilation of colonial Indian soldiers' testimonies. The article explores why these letters were recorded, explains who Howell was and what he

made of the letters he was asked to censor.

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During World War I

Evelyn Berkeley Howell (1877-1971) had a remarkable war-time career. He rose rapidly from a Second Lieutenant “serving in France as an interpreter attached to a regiment of Indian Cavalry,”¹ to Major and recipient of the Companion of the Order of the Indian Empire in January 1916 and eventually Revenue Secretary in British-occupied Mesopotamia in December 1918.² The reason for Howell’s sudden rise in position and prospects was his tenure as Chief Censor of Indian Mails in [France](#) from the winter of 1914 to December 1915 (after which Indian infantry divisions in France were diverted to Mesopotamia and only [cavalry](#) remained). Howell was the solution to a problem – a man with a long history of service in [British India](#) who could soothe fears that introducing Indian soldiers into Europe would fatally disrupt hierarchies of race and colonial military discipline. He was tasked with authoring fortnightly, supra-regimental digests of [soldiers’ correspondence](#) and an appraisal of *sipahis*’ (Indian soldiers) fears and concerns.

The appointment of Evelyn Howell as Chief Censor of private military correspondence was not by design. The decision to transport an Indian Corps (composed initially of two infantry divisions and two cavalry brigades) to a European theatre of war was planned from 1913. However, no contingency was ever made for the monitoring of [Indian soldiers’ correspondence](#) – beyond the ordinary unit-level censorship of a VCO (Viceroy’s Commissioned Officer or an Indian subaltern roughly equivalent to a Warrant Officer) reading out soldiers’ letters to a British Officer. The decision to implement and organize the special [censorship](#) of Indian military correspondence was taken hurriedly at the end of September 1914 after information was received that revolutionary Indian [nationalists](#) were trying to suborn Indian *sipahis*. Howell was charged with subjecting personal correspondence sent to soldiers to “systematic examination” in order to preserve the integrity of Indian battalions abroad from the wiles of “Indian agitators.”³ Howell was well qualified for the task. He had

spent fifteen years serving on the North-West Frontier Province (the site of constant low-intensity conflict and intermittent pacification campaigns) and was unusually proficient (by the standard of British colonial officials) in Pashto and Urdu.⁴ And yet, Howell's career as Chief Censor was one marked by perpetual frustration. Within a matter of weeks the purpose of his task had changed. Correspondence sent from soldiers was found to be far more dangerous. Letters sent from the trenches to India had rapidly increased in number and in length from January 1915 and were said to collectively emanate a chill of "fatalistic resignation" or "mental disquietude" even when any "hint of resentment or anti-British feeling" was absent.⁵ The Censor and his small staff tailored their operations to try to better comprehend soldiers' letters. They brokered extra funds, tried to find trustworthy translators for any scripts in which *sipahis* were literate⁶ and strived to convince *La Poste* – the French Postal Service – to re-direct to his office in Boulogne any mail that may have been posted by Indians using civilian post offices.⁷

Replacement of Howell

It proved a futile task. Howell soon complained that it was "far beyond" his "powers" to examine even a small portion of the total letters passing through his office, let alone analyze them "in detail."⁸ Letters were passed on without any changes because of the reluctance of British censors to excise letters that may have been "the last will and testament" of the writer⁹ and the difficulty in deciphering inscrutable nature of Oriental turns of phrase.¹⁰ Howell continued his work until he was replaced in the last weeks of 1915 but without his earlier energy and enthusiasm. His reports bitterly remarked that only a work of history or "some other book" could make sense of the letters his staff had collated.¹¹ Howell's advice was heeded in part. When [Rudyard Kipling \(1865-1936\)](#) was approached to author [propaganda](#) pieces for "neutrals at home" in the [United States of America](#) by Brigadier [George Cockerill \(1867-1957\)](#), Director of Special Intelligence to the British General Staff, he was first handed transcriptions of Indian soldiers' letters, proceeded to read through them, and then promptly decided to write his own fictional versions of the letters as they ought to be.¹²

After the War

Howell nonetheless remains a significant figure. It is due to Howell that a substantive record exists (now housed in the British Library) of thousands of letters to and from Indian soldiers in the First World War. It remains one of the few preserved insights into the realities of war as experienced by colonial soldiers, even though many are cropped, badly translated and poorly

transcribed. This has become the point of departure for a burgeoning number of historians trying to craft social histories of the colonial Indian Army.

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Notes

1. Howell, Captain E.B.: Report on Twelve Months' Writing of the Indian Mail Censorship, 7 November 1915; Reports of the Censor of Indian Mails in France, 1914-1918; Military Department Papers, Asia and Africa Collection, British Library, L/MIL/5/828, Part 1. [↑](#)
2. See the India Office List for a summary of Howell's career. In December 1915, Howell was replaced as Chief Censor by Captain George Alfred Tweedy. [↑](#)
3. "While the force was in transit [in September] a member of the Indian Revolutionary Party, if it may be so called, was arrested in Toulouse, and upon examination his pockets were found to be stuffed with seditious literature intended for dissemination among Indian soldiery. The authorities, thus set upon their guard, decided that, at least during the stay of the Indian troops in Europe, their correspondence must be subjected to systematic examination, [...]." Howell, Report on Twelve Months' Writing 1915. The reference to the "Indian Revolutionary Party" and the "seditious literature" is a reference to Ghadar literature being disseminated by Madame Bhikhaiji Cama (1861-1936) and her contacts in France. See Sethna, Khorshed Adi: Madame Bhikhaiji Rustom Cama. New Delhi 1987 and Yadav, B.D.: Madam Cama: A True Nationalist, New Delhi 1992. [↑](#)
4. So much so that Howell later translated and co-authored a collection of the poetry of Khushal Khan Khattak (1613-1689), the famed 17th century Pashto poet: The Poems of Khushal Khan Khatak; with English Verse translations by Evelyn Howell and Olaf Caroe; and an introduction by Maulana Abdul Qadir, Peshawar 1963. [↑](#)
5. Howell, 23 January 1915; Reports of the Censor of Indian Mails in France, 1914-1915; Military Department Papers, Asia and Africa Collection, British Library, L/MIL/5/825, Part 1. [↑](#)
6. Some of the original staff assigned to the Chief Censor's office at Boulogne never appeared and Howell had particular difficulty translating Punjabi in Gurumukhi script. [↑](#)
7. It took until 14 November 1917 before absolutely every letter was redirected to the Censor's office. Reports of the Censor of Indian Mails in France, 1917- 1918; Military Department Papers, Asia and Africa Collection, British Library, L/MIL/5/827, Part 5. [↑](#)
8. Howell, 4 February 1915; Censor of Indian Mails, 1914-1915, Part 1. [↑](#)
9. "It was felt that it would be quite unfair to withhold the whole of a long letter containing as often as not what the writer believed to be his last will and testament, simply

because here and there through the letter advice was given to younger relatives to stay at home or not to leave the village, or to be guided by the direction of so and so, or not to join the army." Howell, 28 August 1915; Censor of Indian Mails, 1914-1915, Part 5. ↑

10. "The first extract illustrates how almost impossible it is for any censorship of Oriental correspondence to be effective as a barrier. Orientals excel in the art of conveying information without saying anything definite. When they have a meaning to convey in this way, they are apt to use the phrase "Think this over till you understand it", or some equivalent, to the reader. [...] It naturally follows that the news conveyed is extremely vague, and gives rise to wild rumours." Howell, 15 February 1915; Censor of Indian Mails 1914-1915, Part 1. ↑
11. Howell, Report on Twelve Months' Writing 1915. ↑
12. The fictional letters were serialized in the American Saturday Evening Post between May and June 1917, and then later published in the "Sussex Edition" and then as "Eyes of Asia." ↑

Selected Bibliography

- [Kipling, Rudyard: **The eyes of Asia**, in: American Saturday Evening Post, 1917.](#)
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External Links

- [Badsey, Stephen: News from the front \(British Library\) \(Article\)](#)
- [Collection of WWI India Office records, sepoy letters, British Library \(Europeana 1914-1918\) \(Database\)](#)
- [Excerpt from letter from Abdul Rahim to Fatah Muhammad Syal, June 1915 \(British Library\) \(Primary Source\)](#)
- [Excerpt from letter from Mohammed Agim \(crossed out\) to Subedar Major Firoz Khan \(crossed out\), 28 May 1915 \(British Library\) \(Primary Source\)](#)
- [Excerpt from letter from Pay Havildar Shadma Khan to Gunner Hafis Nawat Khan, 25 May 1915 \(British Library\) \(Primary Source\)](#)
- [Excerpt from letter from Ram Sing to his father Subadar Madhun Sing, May 1915 \(British Library\) \(Primary Source\)](#)
- [Kipling, Rudyard: The Eyes of Asia, New York 1918 \(Internet Archive\) \(Book\)](#)
- [Letter by E B Howell, Censor of Indian Mail, regarding a Christian prayer, 15 January 1915 \(British Library\) \(Primary Source\)](#)
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