'Dear Annie & Flo': tracing changes in attitude to Empire in a sequence of letters from the Burma front in the Second World War

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Letters can provide granular detail to supplement more official records. Harry Walker came from Middlesbrough in the North-East of England, a town of incomers who migrated there during nineteenth-century booms, severely affected by unemployment in the 1920s. Harry joined the Royal Army Medical Corps after qualifying as a doctor and arrived in India in December 1943. He was posted to a mobile surgical unit and treated battle casualties from Kohima and Imphal. His unit followed the fighting front during the recapture of Burma by the Allied Fourteenth Army. He was in Singapore during the Japanese surrender and then Java during the Indonesian revolution.

A sequence of letters has survived which trace Harry's evolving views of Empire. He is a tourist at first, telling Annie and Flo about interesting sights. He reads Nehru's books and criticizes Britain's behaviour as an Imperial power. As the campaign against the Japanese continues, his letters reflect the perception by servicemen in the Far East that they are a 'forgotten army' and comments appear on current domestic politics. The 1945 General Election gave a Labour landslide and Harry is one of many servicemen who now want fundamental change at home. His bitterest critique of imperialism comes in letters from Java. The bombardment of Surabaya and associated street fighting led to many civilian casualties. He writes: 'It is quite simple, our method of "pacifying" a country – we merely blow the town to bits with bombs & shells & kill the inhabitants by thousands until they decide they have had enough. […] We have fought for 6 years for the rights of small nations, to remove foreign aggression, and for the principle of self-determination, – but these benefits seem only to be conferred upon those whom it suits us – Indians, Indochinese and Indonesians seem to be excluded.'

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