

Book Review: Stephens, Julia. *Worldly Afterlives: Tracing Family Trails Between India and Empire*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2025) 1+241. Hardcover, \$35.00.

Worldly Afterlives by Julia Stephens is not a classic history monograph in most senses of the word. Rather, it is a sprawling collection of microhistories, artifacts, and conceptualizations packaged together under the generalized heading of diaspora studies. The resulting book is much like its cover—a richly colored tapestry of stories about families circling the globe, building material cultures, and making connections that span generations and continents. Stephens wants to renegotiate diasporic histories by placing an emphasis on maternal contributions, material artifacts, and the circular paths that many of these families take. Rather than a journey from point A (the periphery) to point B (the metropole), many diaspora families see themselves as part of a larger global population, citizens of the world rather than a hyphenated dual identity. As one Instagram poster put it, “I am diaspora.” (p.6.) Fractured identities form the heart of *Worldly Afterlives*, but these fractures are not necessarily the site of pain and disconnect, but instead the foundations of new kinds of identities, formed through genealogy and travel. Diaspora itself becomes the identity for many whose families have spent generations traveling around the various sites of the former British Empire. The book is divided into four loosely connected investigations into specific histories of families who have made these journeys. Stephens begins with the death and burial of Tamil leader and entrepreneur Thamboosamy Pillai in 1902 and ends with a mysterious sailor, Jan Mohamed, who had multiple nationalities and perhaps multiple identities. In each of these stories, Stephens reads against the grain of primary source to highlight the importance of women in family histories. To build her narratives, Stephens must confront the elephant in the room—genealogists. While many professional historians ignore the amateur genealogists working alongside them in the archives, Stephens welcomes their work and their

research methods, no matter how unusual they might be to academics in the field. By the end of *Worldly Afterlives*, it is clear that Stephens' main argument is less about specific historical debates and more a clarion call for historians to embrace family history, no matter how many laughs it might get from colleagues.

Historians are not automatons who create their works without influence from their own lives, but that does not mean we all agree on how much of ourselves to explicitly interject into our research. Stephens' book is many ways not just a collection of microhistories; it is also a field report of her work collecting these stories. She speaks very specifically about the various ethical dilemmas that she faced handling the stories of people's relatives. She also writes at length about how her own personal story led her to this work. She married into a diaspora family from South Asia, and her own family was part of the Jewish diaspora from Europe to escape persecution. These personal histories informed her understanding of how diaspora family histories worked, but also why she wanted to 'rescue' family history from the margins of professional history. It can be jarring for a reader used to only a brief personalized note in the acknowledgments to have the author repeatedly interject herself into the history she writes. The process of using traditional archives, genealogy sites, and social media to build family histories is certainly unorthodox, but in some cases is quite effective in building bridges across time and space.

Stephens writes that she wants this book to reach beyond academic circles and write a book that the descendants of her subjects can appreciate. There are places in *Worldly Afterlives* where she accomplishes that goal, but of course she is writing in academic prose which can leave some lay readers confused. What emerges is a hybrid—a book that straddles the line between monograph and popular history in interesting and sometimes frustrating ways. Some historians

will be turned off by the digressions into life under Covid lockdown while other readers may not appreciate the larger academic conversations Stephens is writing into. *Worldly Afterlives* may be attempting to be too many things to too many people, but Stephens is ultimately successful in making the case for the importance of family history in academic spaces. In the end, we can all learn from our pasts, and every reader can appreciate an understanding of identity that is not strictly bound by national or religious ties.

Dr. Amanda Ford
Associate Professor of History
Carson-Newman University