In *Mr. Mothercountry*, Keally McBride weaves the family legacy of the Stephen family and the Clapham Sect to the project of British colonialism. She details how conceptions about the rule of law shaped colonial administration and how the British practiced colonial power. McBride provides an excellent account of the interaction between individual bureaucrats and administrators and the broader legal and political trends in the British Empire. The discourse around localized knowledge, codification, and jurisdiction, though particular to the context of the British Empire, is also particularly relevant in contemporary discussions about how to institutionalize the rule of law in post-colonial contexts. But beyond practical concerns about administration, *Mr. Mothercountry* also shows that colonial administrators struggled with the purpose and force of the rule of law, which is a conversation that goes beyond colonialism. The book provides important lessons for those who see the rule of law as a sort of panacea to the abuse of power but also does not entirely give up on the idea of the rule of law.

This balance is illustrated by the comparison between Sir James Stephen, the father, and James Fitzjames Stephen, the son. The twin figures of James Stephen and J.F. Stephen represent two different modes of colonial administration. Whereas James Stephen made an effort to learn about the local legal contexts of the colonies and make judgements that “reconciled overlapping legal precedents” (104), J.F. Stephen sought clarity and codification above all else. What is particularly compelling about this historical account is that the tension between specificity and universalism is present today in the way that the rule of law is practiced. McBride’s analytical task seemed to be on how the rule of law, as an idea, evolved through colonial practice and the shift from James Stephen and J.F. Stephen is illustrative of this shift. But what are we to make of the tension between specificity and universalism and the figures of James Stephen and his son, J.F. Stephen? Which approach to the rule of the law is better?

Although McBride’s project does not necessarily focus on answering this question, it is nonetheless a question that I continually returned to. J.F. Stephen remained doubtful that power could be evacuated from the practice of the law and instead saw the law as regulating and managing power rather than curbing it. This technocratic view was in contrast to James Stephen’s need to balance his moral drive to be a critic of the inequalities and abuses of colonization with his role as a practitioner of law. In other words, the father turned to morality as a guide against the abuse of power while the son saw these abuses as inevitable and so disavowed discussions of morality in legality. McBride is obviously skeptical of the idea that codification and clarity leads to good legal outcomes, as is seen in her analysis of police abuses in India, but her ultimate position on James Stephen, *Mr. Mothercountry* himself, remains unclear. Of course, it is not her place to cast normative judgement but seeing that many contemporary practitioners of law, particularly international law, approximate the ideals of Mr. Mothercountry, it seems important to determine whether his belief that the law can improve the human condition is a good one.

McBride does seem to sympathize with the struggle faced by James Stephen: “thinking of the rule of law as a practice that is never complete and always unsatisfied is more appropriate than invoking the rule of law as a summative judgement” (44). In my own research on the international legal regime governing nuclear weapons, I conceptualize the law as a practice that states use to negotiate their identities and interests. However, whether or not this is a normatively
good thing is open to question. Would it not be more beneficial if the law was clear and enforceable? Or is this goal inherently misguided? But perhaps McBride’s account of the Stephens is powerful precisely because it elicited me to ask the same kinds of questions that James Stephen was asking. The debates over the rule of the law that occurred within colonial administration are still ongoing for both contemporary scholars and practitioners.

McBride’s more abstract discussions about the rule of law are brought to life by her case studies of the founding of Sierra Leone, the Morant Bay Rebellion in Jamaica, and the legacy of police abuse in India. McBride details the way that the Indian Penal Code and the development of policing in India, led to contemporary problems with policing in India. In discussing the role of British colonization on contemporary police brutality, McBride argues that, “While some have argued that policy brutality was a direct result of colonialism, it seems to me that a more plausible argument is that the logic of colonialism provided the dangerous divide between the application and mechanisms of criminal justice. When law and policy follow two different structures, what happens is that the law provides for an authorization of a police force without a check upon its exercise” (138). This distinction is an important one because McBride is positing a more complicated relationship between colonization and also hinting at a possible causal mechanism (in more social science-y language) between colonialism and modern-day India. However, the link between colonization, specifically the colonial criminal code, and police abuse is not entirely clear. Is it possible that law and policy follow different structures in the post-colonial period because of the early policies of independent India? McBride’s analysis points to a complicated causal chain, which can be traced back to colonization but not entirely blamed on it. For instance, the segregation of police from the general population, which was a part of British colonial policy, has contemporary effects on the work conditions of Indian police. But McBride could do more to make explicit connections between the specific policies of colonization and the contemporary effects. How exactly did segregation during colonial times lead to the kind of politics we see playing out in policing?

The lack of specific links was particularly clear in discussions of responsibility. At the very end of Chapter 5, which focuses on contemporary policing in India, McBride notes that “today there is a consistent deferral of responsibility,” similar to the way that British deferred their responsibility. This point is an important one and could be expanded as a way to explicitly link colonization with modern dysfunction and inequity. Just as the British used the rule of law to defer their responsibility as they used colonies to accumulate power, the modern Indian state uses the rule of law to defer responsibility in the treatment of their citizens. McBride notes that “a primary reason for not wanting to reform the penal code was the fact that is was clearly a useful tool for the British in suppressing oppositional movements” (130). But perhaps the lack of reform also becomes a useful tool for the contemporary Indian state. Although it’s set in a different context, Itty Abraham’s book, The Making of the Indian Atomic Bomb, explores how India’s drive to be seen as an advanced and modern state influenced its post-colonial national security practices. A possible similarity between Abraham and McBride’s accounts is that in India’s pursuit to become an independent state, it ends up mimicking the power-seeking strategies of its colonizer. Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru’s policies in consolidating northeast India are yet another example of the Indian state pursuing the logic of colonization even after its break with the British Empire. Sanjib Baruah’s excellent book, Durable Disorder, details the oft-overlooked history of Northeast India.

This is all to suggest that maybe the lasting effect of colonization is that the colonial mindset pervades the way that Indian leadership chose to shape Indian politics and society.
McBride seems to hint at this herself when noting how commissions find over and over again that the Police Code and Indian Evidence Act needs reform but reform does not take place: “Perhaps what this means is that India is indeed achieving maturity as a country where entrenched elites protect their own interests, and the ossification of law has occurred” (153). McBride’s analysis reveals that perhaps the most far-reaching effect of colonization is not necessarily the overt violence of imperialism but the legacies of the rule of law.