

That history has always had an element of myth, and myth an element of history which makes for their different narrative efficacy is an aspect of history and myth (read fact and interpretation) that those who view them as binary oppositions have forgotten.

The fact that there are no simple distinctions to be made between history, story and myth is arguably one of the reasons that specialists of history are hardly agreed about anything, beginning with the historical reasons for our present ethnic conflict. Yet, that practitioners of history seem evenly divided about how to explain our post-colonial ethnic debacle (whether

in terms of the historical animosity between the Sinhala and Tamil, or British *divide et impera*) is not so much cause to despair at history, as cause for recognizing the limits of history, what Borges calls the "modesty of history". More importantly, it makes clear the fact that history cannot and does not in the final analysis provide solutions for present conflicts. What after all, is the relevance of ten centuries of Tamil homelands or the unity of Sinhala-Buddhist identity since the third-century (even if it were true), to finding a solution to the current crisis when such histories have provided fodder for ethnic violence? ■

FAMILY HISTORIES AS POST-COLONIAL TEXTS

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The word 'Australia' summoned up in my mind a single picture, one which I instantly recognised as having come straight out of the *Philip's Atlas* I had used as a schoolboy at Royal. On Philip's map of the world, huge areas of the earth's surface had broken out in the rash of washed-out pink patches which denoted British ownership. To the east of India and the island of Ceylon (also pink), south of Borneo and Sarawak, there Australia had been, a blank pink space shaped like the head of a Scotch terrier with its ears pricked up and its square nose permanently pointed westwards, towards Britain.

That doggy devotion to Britain is something that I, familiar with the colonial traditions of my own family, fully understand the reasons for, even though I do not, of course, personally subscribe to it.

A Change of Skies, 1991.

What the principal narrator of my novel calls a 'doggy devotion to Britain' is an imperial legacy that has long survived the end of the Empire itself. It could surface in surprising ways. Falling in love during a colonial adolescence could often be, for example, a quaint and curious thing. Ours being a very conservative society in pre-independence times, a lot of what we thought of as 'love' had its existence entirely in the mind and in the imagination. Most schoolgirls, for instance, collected pictures of their heroes, and stuck them lovingly into albums. A classmate who sat next to me through Junior and most of Senior school took as the objects of her affection most of the members of the British royal family, which meant that her albums were full of photographs of crowns, medals, dress uniforms and corgis. The rest of us had less elevated desires—our dreams were filled by film actors and sportsmen: indeed, one of my classmates fell passionately in love with the entire Australian cricket team, then visiting Colombo on their way to play Test matches at Lords.

At a different level, this peculiarly colonial devotion may be identified in the sentimental affection that made thousands of West Indians answer the Mother Country's postwar call for assistance in running her extensive transport system, and staffed Britain's National Health Service with highly qualified medical personnel drawn from the Commonwealth nations of five continents. In pre-Thatcher times, it ensured that hundreds of university graduates (of my own generation) from Commonwealth countries travelled to Britain—rather than to the USA or to Europe—for their postgraduate education.

The imperial outlook seems to have affected not only the attitude of ex-colonial nations to Britain, but regulated the relationships of their citizens with one another. In an earlier book, *Relative Merits* (1986), an account of the English-educated Bandaranaike family of Sri Lanka, I drew attention to this phenomenon:

Cultivating English modes of living and thinking, the members of my father's clan had imbibed a very proper English prejudice against Jews, 'frogs', 'Chinks', 'niggers', 'Japs', 'Huns', 'fuzzy-wuzzies', 'wops' and 'wogs' of every description. English upper-class scorn of the lower orders in British society was easily translated, in the context of Ceylon, into a whole-hearted contempt for merchants, trades, members of 'inferior' castes, and even of... Sinhalese families such as their own who were not, unlike their own, 'out of the top drawer'. Tamils, Burghers, Parsis and Muslims were, of course, literally breeds apart: acquaintance with them was possible, friendship rare, and marriage unthinkable.

Relative Merits, p. 100

It was inevitable, I suppose, given the intensive nature of the English education with which upper-class 'colonials' were endowed by generations of teachers drawn from Britain's

public schools, that British prejudices should have influenced the attitudes colonial and, later, Commonwealth nations adopted towards one another. In *A Change of Skies*, I had my principal narrator, a Sri Lankan university academic, reflect on his own ignorance of a Commonwealth country that is geographically located much closer to his own homeland than Britain:

Long before I saw Britain for the second time (as a postgraduate student), I knew London, its Dickensian fogs and its murky river, the Shakespearean Tower in which Richard III had had his nephews murdered, Brooke's church clock at Grantchester which stood for ever more at precisely ten to three. I knew, long before I ever ate one, what muffins tasted like. Where Wordsworth's inward eye had been polished by memory, imagination had burnished mine: upon it flashed like images in a video on fast-forward, not just the skittish daffodils of his description but all the meadow flowers of Chaucer, Spenser, Shakespeare and Keats.

For generations my relatives had been either going to, or returning from, England. And so firmly had their gaze been focused on the metropolitan centre of a pale pink *imperium* that they had never so much as glanced in any other direction. To do so would have seemed the grossest lapse of taste.

A Change of Skies, p. 12

Growing up in post-colonial times has involved, for most thoughtful persons of my generation, cultural re-thinking and, quite often, political realignment. In countries that were once part of empires, British or any other, a gradual but progressive shedding of 'colonial' attitudes has occurred during the latter half of a century that has seen more people on the move-in transit between countries, cultures and languages-than possibly any other period in the history of the world. Some countries, notably the USA, Australia and Canada, have been built on the physical and intellectual labour of generations of immigrants.

The two texts that have, for me, effectively marked off my own world's colonial past from its post-colonial present and future, are V.S. Naipaul's novel, *A House For Mr Biswas* and Derek Walcott's moving poem 'A Far Cry from Africa'. The personal experiences explored in these texts-each so different from the other-and in so many that have come after them, reflect the political and ideological struggles of the former colonies and dominions of the British and other empires as they moved with varying degrees of difficulty towards freedom. But it has never seemed to me that either of these texts was written to a political agenda: I regard them as expressions of human feeling, of small-scale love. The agonizing emotional struggles they depict are instantly recognizable by readers everywhere as recalling similar conflicts in their own experience.

Part of the post-colonial experience, an important part, is the history of exile. It is no accident that Yeats, probably the finest poet of the modern period, and the patron poet of Ireland, chose exile as the theme for the *Dedication* to a book of stories selected from the Irish novelists that he published in 1891.

The following stanzas come from the *Dedication* as Yeats rewrote it in 1924.

Ah, Exiles wandering over lands and seas,
And planning, plotting always that some morrow
May set a stone upon ancestral sorrow!
I also bear a bell-branch full of ease.

I tore it from green boughs winds tore and tossed
Until the sap of summer had grown weary!
I tore it from the barren boughs of Eire,
That country where a man can be so crossed;

Can be so battered, badgered and destroyed
That he's a loveless man: gay bells bring laughter
That shakes a mouldering cobweb from the rafter,
And yet the saddest chimes are best enjoyed.

Gay bells or sad, they bring you memories
Of half-forgotten innocent old places:
We and our bitterness have left no traces
On Munster grass and Connemara skies.

The family histories of post-colonial exiles that seem to me to explore the post-colonial experience are those that, as Yeats knew, combine comedy and tragedy, laughter and loss. The temptation to nostalgia at one end of the scale, and to mere entertainment or bitterness at the other, is ever-present, of course. It has ruined the work of some promising contemporary writers, but part of the discipline of writing is surely the devising of strategies for overcoming such weaknesses and temptations.

For it is not merely aesthetic effect that is at risk, but accuracy, the post-colonial experience being not a simple but a complex one. Paul Scott, in *The Jewel in the Crown* describes the long relationship of Britain and India as an embrace so long-drawn-out and so intense that it had become no longer possible for the participants in that embrace to be certain whether they hated or loved one another. The language in which that relationship is described by contemporary writers is, at its best, correspondingly and appropriately ambiguous. A love story less fraught with politics might be written with simple directness, but a post-colonial love-story calls for something more.

Salman Rushdie refers in *The New Empire in Britain* to a time when half the map of the world blushed a rosy pink as it writhed pleasurably under the weight of the British Empire; and David Dabydeen has stated more recently that The British Empire ... was as much a pornographic as an economic project. The subject demanded a language capable of describing both a lyrical and a corrosive sexuality. This creative ambiguity, by means of which writers are exploring compelling personal and political concerns, is to be found in the great post-colonial texts: and it is one of the qualities that focuses upon them the close attention of today's post-colonial critics.

Writing a family history of my own while working as an academic in the field of post-colonial studies has taught me to

regard sceptically, if not cynically, the belief with which I grew up, and which I held throughout my undergraduate life, that historians-especially-British historians-are the custodians of truth. I now know that the line between what we call 'history' and what we call 'fiction' is so thin as to be almost indistinguishable. This is not only because some eminent historians use figurative language and aural musical effects with the obvious relish that poets do (cf. H.A.L.Fisher's *History of Europe* or Churchill's *History of the English-Speaking Nations*) but because they, like poets and other writers of fictive texts, live and write as men or women in a particular place at a particular point in world history.

It seems to me only natural, indeed inevitable, that given the political situation in which historians (especially Commonwealth historians) compose their 'histories', their view of past events would be coloured by the various aspects of that situation. How objective, how truthful, are some of the eminent and revered historians of the past? How much have they been influenced in what they write by their desire to edit the past so that they produce a work which resembles not what it really was but what it might have been?

However praiseworthy their intentions, however disciplined their methods, are not historians as prone to error and self-deception as other writers?

Family biographies, in which an author seeks to uncover and present the history of his or her own ancestors is a department of historical writing that is surely especially vulnerable to the operation of fraud and fantasy. The English poet William Cowper noted how hard it is for a man engaged in the writing of his own life to write anything who undertake the biographies of their own ancestors of some admired and venerated figure, those people now dead or ageing, to whom their own lives and their outlook on life are inescapably bound.

Some historians, intent on presenting an informative, accurate view of problematic events, cautiously dress their creations as fiction. An outstanding example of this appeared in 1860, in *Max Havelaar*, the classic work in Dutch by Eduard Douwes Dekker, the subtitle of which betrays its real purpose and aspiration: it is a history of "The Coffee Auctions of the Dutch Trading Company". The writing and publication of this book followed Dekker's stormy departure from the Dutch colonial service. It is set in mid-19th century Java, and it aims to tell the world 'what is going on in the East Indies' (modern Indonesia). The novel describes the frustrated career of an idealistic, reform-minded Dutch colonial officer who tries to stop the exploitation of Javanese rural folk by their own local chiefs in association with the ruling Dutch. Havelaar doesn't last long-he is restrained in his attempts at reform by his superiors in the colonial bureaucracy, and it is he, not the larcenous aristocrats, who is replaced. Dekker's wit and his colourful language and imagery have caused his book to be regarded as a classic of Dutch literature. Whether we regard it as history or fiction, it is an important post-colonial text for many reasons, among which are: its theme and subject, its intrinsic literary value, and its role in inspiring the contemporary family history-as novel *This Earth of Mankind*, written in Indonesian by Pramoedya Ananta Toer.

Setting down the facts of my own life for this book, I realize how closely they must resemble and parallel the outlines of other ex-colonial lives in my own generation. I was born in the island once known as Ceylon, and went to school and university there, following this with time spent as a Ph. D. student at Cambridge, and in teaching English Literature at my old University, the University of Ceylon in Peradeniya. The latter is an institution that is located in the heart of the hill country that produced the famous tea with which, from British times to the present day, the island is associated in the world's mind; a parallel instance could, perhaps, be found in the establishment (on the site of a former sugar plantation at the Jamaican centre of 18th-century Britain's slave trade) of the University of the West Indies' Mona campus. I have now lived and taught English Literature in Australia for nearly 20 years, at a University that bears the name of Lachlan Macquarie, a Governor of New South Wales who, as a young officer serving in Ceylon, had received from the defeated Dutch in 1796 the keys of the Fort of Galle.

Such parallels, I find, come naturally to the mind of a post-colonial writer.

Throughout my adolescence in a society that actively discouraged education for girls as socially unnecessary (and, possibly psychologically damaging!), I was writing poetry, stories, and sketches for pleasure rather than for publication. As an undergraduate I began to write articles and reviews for local newspapers, proceeding later to write for overseas journals, edit university magazines and, later still, to develop bibliographical skills by practice rather than by formal training.

From 1956 on, the position in Sri Lanka of English language writers such as myself became very problematic. During a period of feverish nationalist 'resurgence', English was officially down-graded and the indigenous languages of Sinhala and Tamil were elevated in what one must regard, however tragic for the country its consequences, as a well-intentioned attempt to redress earlier inequities. (Not unlike the thinking behind Affirmative Action legislation in the USA in the 1960s, except for the important point that the new regulations in Sri Lanka benefited a powerful ethnic majority of potential voters, and not historically disadvantaged and politically powerless minorities.)

My personal response to this was twofold. I tried, on the one hand, to deepen my linguistic skills and my understanding of my mother-tongue and the culture it supported by translating from classical and modern Sinhala poetry, and drawing images from it into my own writing and publishing, my faith in the English language (in the form in which we spoke and wrote it in Sri Lanka) as a medium capable of accommodating a truly national, indigenous Sri Lankan literature.

In 1970 I established, with the collaboration of a colleague in the Department of Western Classics at the University of Ceylon who originated the idea, a literary journal that we named *New Ceylon Writing*. This little magazine came in time to provide a useful forum for English-language writers in Sri Lanka. In the following year I published my first volume of

poetry, *World Bird Motif*. I felt so strongly about both these projects in that it is likely I would have continued and developed interest vigorously in different ways had I remained in the country. But by 1971 I was not only teaching full-time as an academic, but I had become the mother of two young children. While political unrest in 1971 seriously affected schools and universities and disrupted teaching, offers arrived for my husband and myself of academic positions in Medicine and English literature teaching at Sydney University and Macquarie. We decided to live and work for a while in Australia.

So it was that *The Lizard's Cry*, my second book of poems, was in the nature of a farewell. It was published in the week we left our homeland for a foreign one that, like my fictional narrator in *A Change of Skies*, we had never seen and knew really very little about at the time. There followed a period of comparative silence, during while I wrote no fiction and very little poetry, and published only literary criticism, bibliographical essays, and editions or anthologies of poetry and prose.

Then, in 1981, I was awarded Macquarie University's first degree of Doctor of Letters. My children, having grown up in Australia, knew very little about their Asian background, which includes a family in which there were, and are, a large number of writers, translators and artists. I began work on another book, a history of my father's family. It appeared in print in 1986 with the title of *Relative Merits*.

With hindsight I realize that working in the area of biography and family history gave me a push in the direction, once again, of fiction.

This came about because, in presenting family personalities, I had used some of the techniques of fiction-knowing beforehand from family gossip the patterns of certain incidents, I had been filling out characters, taking as my starting point certain known dates, places and events in their lives, and putting into dramatic form conversations in which family legend asserts that they took part. I also took a long, hard look at the biographies that were being published in Sri Lanka in the 1970s and 1980s. In the Sri Lanka of today, biography-especially of politicians-often becomes a self-serving exercise in flattery and image-building. The biographies that came under my eye were mostly eulogies of politicians. I knew I didn't want to write eulogies. I wanted to create-or recreate-real people for my children to think about, not just waxworks for them to admire (and occasionally dust) or icons for them to worship.

Writing *Relative Merits* gave me practical experience in making characters live and move convincingly. It also helped me to see where I stand in relation to the theories of politics, literature and gender that have become part of today's intellectual atmosphere. These perceptions were sharpened when I was invited to direct Macquarie University's new research centre for Post-colonial Literature and Language studies.

According to some critics working in the field, the term 'post-colonial' covers all the culture affected by the imperial process from the moment of colonization to the present day. According to another school of thought, the term 'post-colonial' relates exclusively to the contemporary culture of independent former colonies. My personal preference is for the first of these definitions. I prefer it because, as a writer of poetry and now of fiction, I am aware that British culture, no less than that of Britain's colonies, has been deeply affected by the experience of colonization and of imperial domination. In *The New Empire in Britain*, Salman Rushdie drew attention to the manner in which the colonial experience has stained and brutalized the English language. Listing in his essay such words as 'coon', 'nigger', and 'fuzzy-wuzzy', Rushdie pointed out that the raw material of literature-language itself has become stained and diseased by the colonial experience to a point at which it is very nearly unusable.

Coming to the writing of fiction in these post-colonial times, I am forced like all my contemporaries, to devise strategies which will allow me to use the stained and diseased language Rushdie describes as medium and raw material for an art that will, if I am fortunate, outlast my own life. My own interest in writing fiction is not, however, subject to a political agenda, post-colonial, feminist or other. I am interested in exploring human relationships as they exist between men and women, parents and children, teachers and students, leaders of society and the persons they lead. I find fascinating as a subject for fiction the human weakness for self-deception. It creates a gap between what people really are and what they pretend to be (to themselves as well as to others).

The hope of exploring that gap as honestly and imaginatively as I can, in the lives of contemporary figures as well as of colonial personalities, is the lure that draws me to the adventure of writing fiction. Having been born in Asia, partly educated in England, having settled in Australia, and visited and taught in the USA and elsewhere, I share my contemporaries' personal histories of exile and expatriation, just as having been born in colonial Ceylon and having lived through Independence in 1948 and the post-Independence years, I share with writers and academic colleagues in all Commonwealth countries the experience of post-colonialism. The raw material for what writers of our times are presenting as fiction is, in fact, our life-experience, and the 'colonial' past they evoke is our own family history.

Notes

1. 'On Not Being Milton: Nigger Talk in England Today', in C. Ricks and L. Michael (eds), *The State of the Language*, 1990, p.3.

